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Application of Contrastive Rhetoric in the EFL Writing Classroom:
The Impacts of Cultural Awareness in Chinese and English Exposition in an EFL Writing
Classroom

Introduction

Kaplan's 1966 study has had a significant impact on second language writing instruction. The purpose of his study was to find rhetorical differences across language and culture in order to apply the knowledge in the ESL writing classroom. According to the findings, he proposed a hypothesis that speakers of different cultures use different rhetorical patterns and the culture-specific pattern has negative effects on ESL writing. The pedagogical implication of his study is that both teachers and students need to have cultural awareness of rhetorical differences. Though Kaplan's study has been criticized for its overgeneralization of rhetorical patterns, more evidence of cross-cultural rhetorical differences has been found in subsequent studies. Contrastive rhetoric researchers (Matalene, 1985; Gregg, 1985; Cheng, 1985; Shen, 1989; Hinds, 1990; Wang 1992; Eason, 1995; Wu, 1998) have found rhetorical differences in writing produced by Chinese students and American students.

What is noteworthy is that the pedagogical implications of most previous studies in this line of research address again the significance of making both teacher and students aware of the cross-cultural rhetorical differences, as what Kaplan advocated in 1966. However, there is a disconnection between the pedagogical implications repeated in most rhetorical studies (Matalene, 1985; Gregg, 1985; Cheng, 1985; Shen, 1989; Wang 1992; Eason, 1995; Wu, 1998) and a practical application of the contrastive rhetoric knowledge in the current process-oriented writing classroom. On the one hand, contrastive rhetoricians have successfully fostered the cultural awareness of rhetorical differences in students' writing in second-language writing professionals as Kaplan's diagram of five rhetorical patterns along with other contrastive rhetoric findings are published in most ESL writing books for teachers; on the other hand, contrastive rhetoric remains a research tool that is used to find cross-cultural differences in writings by students or professionals, instead of a pedagogical method that writing teachers can apply in the real classroom setting. There is an urgent need to incorporate the contrastive rhetoric knowledge into the practice of ESL/EFL writing.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to apply contrastive rhetoric knowledge in the process-oriented writing classroom by means of cultural awareness raising, and then investigate the effects of cultural awareness in rhetorical differences on Chinese students' English composition. The research questions are as follows:

1. Are students aware of the cross-cultural rhetorical differences between Chinese and English expository essays? What are the rhetorical differences identified by

- college students?
2. What are the effects of the cultural awareness of rhetorical differences on college students' expository writing?
 3. What are students' attitudes toward cultural awareness raising and their perceptions of the effects of contrastive rhetoric knowledge on their English writing?

Literature Review

Cultural awareness plays an important role in contrastive rhetoric. Kaplan (1966) was the first one to point out the importance of fostering the awareness of rhetorical differences across culture and language. At the end of his 1966 article, he advocated that writing teachers must be aware of the differences and make these differences explicit to his students. To him, an explicit instruction in the rhetorical structure of English composition is necessary. Thus, he provided modeling of paragraph structure by scrambling sentences and asked students to rearrange the sentences in logical order. Another device he used was providing topic sentences in logical order (in the form of an outline) for students to supply support for the topic sentences.

Matalene (1985) and Gregg (1985), two Americans teaching English composition in Mainland China, also emphasized the need of increasing teachers' awareness of students' culturally determined writing styles. Matalene reflected upon her experience of teaching the American direct approach to Chinese students who preferred an indirect approach, she realized the cross-cultural rhetoric differences in writing was why her students were reluctant to accept her "American cheese" – a rather direct rhetoric that tastes dry and weird to Chinese. If she had the cultural awareness, she would have known to address students' need, instead of seeing rhetoric differences in students' English writing as problems. Similarly, she suggested American teachers to increase awareness of Chinese students' culture-specific styles before they can encourage students to experiment with the American rhetorical pattern.

Fan Shen (1989) recalled her struggle with English composition in the U.S. as a Chinese doctoral student, revealing that the process of learning how to write English essays would be easier if she was aware that American professors preferred an deductive development of ideas with a thesis up front. To her, it was important to design writing assignments that help students to recognize the ideological and logical differences she experienced and introduce them to students at the beginning of an English composition class. Along similar lines, several doctoral dissertations on rhetorical patterns in Chinese and American students' English writing (Cheng, 1985; Wang, 1992; Eason, 1995; Wu, 1998) concluded their researching finding by offering pedagogical implications that repeated the need for both teachers and students to have the cultural awareness in rhetorical differences.

According to Kaplan and Grabe (1989), students have to be aware of:

1. the need of defining audience before composing.
2. that one can write well in the first language does not mean that one can write well in the target language.
3. strategies to achieve coherence in writing in the target language, especially the use of a thesis statement, logical relationship among ideas.
4. the different writing conventions in the target language and the first language.
5. the fact that they have to bring their world and specialist knowledge to their topic.
6. the basic requirement of syntactic and lexical control in writing (276-277)

This kind of insights into the different rhetorical differences in writing, Leki (1992) commented, are useful to both teachers and students. On the one hand, they may help teachers avoid stereotypes caused by failing to recognize various culturally preferred rhetorical features (p. 102); on the other hand, students may be empowered by some conscious knowledge of contrastive rhetoric and know how to meet the English-speaking readers' rhetorical expectations. He concluded that "writing teachers do have a responsibility to teach the expectations of the English audience to L2 writers and thereby to help them increase the perceived quality of their texts" (103). Similarly, Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) in their *Teaching ESL Composition* (1998) pointed out the need for teachers to raise students' awareness. International students, particularly those who are highly educated and have strong L1 literacy skills, may need some preparatory contrastive rhetoric consciousness-raising (during the modeling phase of the peer response process). They emphasized that "the knowledge that logical patterns of organization differ cross-culturally and cross-linguistically can help both teachers and students understand some of the issues and difficulties faced by L2 writers" (13).

ESL professionals have discussed possible ways to use contrastive rhetoric in the writing classroom in recent years (Connor, 2003). Johnson and Duver (1996), for example, suggest several classroom activities such as using model essays to demonstrate different organizational patterns and journal writing to help student explore cultural differences in L2 writing (Cited in Connor, 219). Panetta's *Contrastive Rhetoric Revisited and Redefined* (2001) includes several chapters about specific implications of contrastive rhetoric for teachers and again emphasizes the importance of making L2 writing conventions explicit to students. Woolever (2001) discuss the use of contrastive rhetoric theory to teaching business writing (Cited in Connor, 219).

In the scarce literature on the application of contrastive knowledge in the classroom, Liebman (1988) was one of the first researchers to make contrastive knowledge visible to her students. She involved her students—both nonnative speakers and native speakers—in an ethnographic research in which students looked for the preferred writing styles of their own cultures. Schlumberger and Manglesdorf (1989) took a different approach. They directly

informed one group of their students of the contrastive rhetoric findings, but the information did not seem to have any effect on students' writing in comparison to that of a control group. However, students still benefited from the insights. For instance, students who had problems with writing in English were finally relieved as the insights helped them to realize that they did not have any individual inadequacies in writing, but affected by culturally-determined rhetorical patterns. Moreover, Kamimura and Oi (1994) in "The Role of Cultural Awareness in Contrastive Rhetoric" found that "students with high English proficiency and high cultural awareness showed letter-writing behavior closest to that of native English speakers, those with low English proficiency and low cultural awareness showed patterns closest to Japanese letter-writing patterns"(abstract). They suggested that language teaching methods and materials be integrated in the cultural and linguistic content.

In retrospect of the scarce literature, we have little doubt that more classroom-based research needs to be conducted to study the application of contrastive rhetoric knowledge in an EFL writing classroom in order to translate the contrastive rhetoric knowledge into the practice of teaching ESL/EFL writing.

Method

This study involved 18 students from Sophomore English Composition classes the teacher-researcher taught in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at a university in central Taiwan. They were involved in a contrastive rhetoric project. Cultural awareness of rhetorical differences were raised through discussions of the following two contrastive rhetoric issues:

- 1) the rhetorical differences/similarities in Chinese and English exposition—Reading passages were selected from "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education" by Kaplan, "Academic Writing and Chinese Students" by Mohan and Lo, and "Comments on Bernard A. Mohan and Winnie Au-Teung Lo's 'Academic Writing and Chinese Students'" by Gregg.
- 2) The writing difficulties and the rhetorical features of Chinese-speaking students—Reading passages were selected from "Contrastive Rhetoric: An American Teacher in China" by Matalene and "The Classroom and the Wider Culture: Identity as a Key to Learning English Composition" by Fan Shen.

Students were then assigned to complete a writing project that required them to compare 1) their own expository writing in Chinese and English, and 2) the exposition sections in Jean Wyrick's *Steps to Writing Well with Additional Readings* with those in Chinese composition books.

The data collection methods include the following sources: 1) a pre-test and a post-test, 2) field notes of class discussions, 3) students' writing projects, 4) questionnaires, and 5) interviews with students.

All students took the pre-tests before the cultural awareness was developed in class and

the post-tests after their awareness was raised through reading and writing. The pre-tests and post-tests were on the same expository writing topic: “Would you rather spend a weekend with your friends or your family? Explain.”

A coding chart was used to examine the textual features of expository writing that have been associated with the indirect approach adopted by Chinese-speaking students. The textual features include 1) delayed introduction of main idea (thesis statement), 2) the typical four-part Chinese organization structure, 3) loosely developed idea, 4) lack of supporting details and examples, 5) lack of transitions that connect sentences and ideas.

A questionnaire was used to examine the participants’ attitudes towards cultural awareness raising and their perceptions of the effects of cultural awareness on their writing.

Results

Rhetorical Differences between Chinese and English Exposition Identified by Students

The following textual features were identified by 16 students in their projects as the differences between Chinese exposition and English exposition:

Chinese expository writing	English expository writing
Inductive development	deductive development
Chi-chen-zhuan-he	introduction, body, conclusion
No thesis statement	thesis statement
No topic sentences	topic sentences
Proverbs, sayings	specific details and examples
No transitional phrases	transitional phrases

14 of them revealed that these differences led to their writing difficulties. However, two students pointed out that Chinese expository writing is similar to English expository writing.

Effects of Cultural Awareness of Rhetorical Differences on Students’ English Writing

The text analysis of the pre-tests and the post-tests showed that cultural awareness raising did have positive effects on college students’ writing in terms of structure, but not necessarily in developing main idea, providing specific details and transitions (See the following chart for the comparison of the pre-tests and the post-tests).

	The pre-tests	The post-tests
Delayed introduction of the main idea	1*	0
Chi-chen-zhuan-he	4	0
Loosely developed idea	13	8
Lack of specific details	16	11
Lack of transitional phrases	13	9

(Note: * indicates the number of students who have the identified textural features.)

Students' Attitudes toward Cultural Awareness Raising and Their Perceptions of Its Effects

The result of the questionnaire showed that most of the participants had positive attitudes towards cultural awareness raising and expressed its positive effects on their writing. In their opinions, raising the cultural awareness of the rhetorical difference enabled them to write better expository writing. What is noteworthy is that half of the students expressed that they were aware of the differences/similarities between Chinese and English expository writing before the issues were brought up in class discussions, whereas the other half expressed that they were unaware of the differences and similarities. The majority of students thought that there were differences between Chinese and English exposition, whereas two of them believed that there were more similarities than differences. All of them expressed that students should be made aware of the rhetorical differences between Chinese and English writing. All but three thought that teachers should design more exercises to help students understand the differences between Chinese and English expository writing. All of the students thought that cultural awareness helped them write better expository essays in terms of thesis statements, topic sentences, better support, and transition. It also helped them to meet reader expectation.

Discussion

The findings show that raising cultural awareness of the rhetorical differences has some positive effects on most students' expository writing in term of essay structures. The awareness enables students to compose expository essays better. Like what have been mentioned in the previous studies (Casanave, 2004; Leki, 1992; Liebman, 1988; Panetta, 2001; Connor, 2003), the insights into the rhetorical differences across language and culture are useful to students. However, according to the text-analysis of the pre-tests and the post-tests, some students still need to work on the development of ideas, detailed support for the main idea, transitions between ideas. This result implies that developing students' language proficiency is as important as fostering their cultural awareness.

The majority of students had positive attitudes toward cultural awareness raising and thought the increased quality of their writing was a direct result of the experiences. The result dovetails with most of the previous studies (Kamimura and Oi, 1994; Liebman, 1988; Schulmberger and Manglesdorf, 1989). They would like teachers to design more exercises to help them develop the contrastive knowledge. What is noteworthy is that half of the students had had the awareness of the rhetorical differences between Chinese and English exposition before the rhetorical issues were discussed in class. This is probably the result of their prior writing instruction on the typical direct approach to English composition. However, there are still half of the students who were unaware of the differences.

The limitation of the study is that more evidence from different sources such as a rater's evaluation of the pre-tests and post-tests in terms of the overall quality of the expository

essays. In addition, a comparison of an experiment group that receives the treatment of cultural awareness raising and a control group would render more reliable results of the effects of cultural awareness raising than the present study.

The study suggests the positive effects of cultural awareness raising. It has shown that teachers can design reading and writing exercises that foster students' awareness of the rhetorical differences across language and culture and this awareness empowered students. However, more carefully designed research need to be conducted to examine the effects of rhetorical awareness raising on the overall writing qualities of student's expository essays.

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Self-evaluation

The researcher spent more time than she expected to conduct the study due to the difficulties of designing suitable contrastive rhetoric pedagogy for EFL students. The findings help both writing teachers and researchers understand the importance of cultural awareness raising in an EFL writing classroom. The results of the study can be presented in writing conferences and published in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*.