

## Academic Writing and the International Imperative

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*Internationalization at the university level may be envisioned in various ways. Often, it is considered along the economic dimensions: money in, money out; international fees; and international articulation possibilities for both education and business. Harris (2008) argues for a less economic, more cultural interpretation of internationalization. Otherwise, internationalization is in danger of degenerating (or translating) into instrumentalism and consumerism. This paper focuses on the classroom where so many students themselves are international beings and looks at how faculty might manage, integrate, and learn from this classroom-level reality.*

### Prompt for This Paper

I have worked in the presence of multilingual writers for decades as a teacher of English as a second language and as a teacher educator. I kept my practice fresh, and generally I was satisfied with how the students produced (in many cases, *reproduced*) what was expected of them. Then, I became aware of the field of contrastive rhetoric, which is the study of writing values and conventions and how they may vary across cultures. At the time, I was analyzing autobiographies authored by those who have crossed languages and cultures. These first person accounts underscored the powerful effects of our writing. I began to understand the many implications of these culture-specific writing conventions – textual, contextual, cognitive, emotional, and political. I learned much about what it *feels* like to write in a second

language and what is involved in writing in languages other than English. From a pedagogical perspective, I re-considered what it was that we in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) professional community have been expecting multiliterate students to produce, and how we have been requiring them to suppress a powerful resource – their first language writing knowledge. Why, I began to wonder, did I work so hard to mainstream the written expression of my students when on many occasions their fresh and foreign ‘take’ on a topic startled me into paying attention? Writers from other cultures, “texts, and interpretations can challenge us to recognize our own rhetorical prejudice and to reconceptualize our perspectives on academic discourse – a mutually enriching process” (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. xi).

I began asking bi and multilingual students what it felt like to conform to a new writing style. In addition, I had my graduate students in applied linguistics interview multiliterate writers to collect experiences on writing across languages. I was sobered by their findings. The connections between writing and identity are powerful. And although I teach EAP, which means that writing plays a major role in our class discussions, I believe that anyone working with students from other cultures should consider western academic writing as just one of many possible cultural constructs. I advocate that we in the academic community re-examine why it is that we maintain such a narrow view of what is acceptable in academic writing. I argue that we have a lot to learn by becoming more flexible, open readers/evaluators of texts authored by those who are writing their knowledge in a language other than their first.

## What is Contrastive Rhetoric?

Contrastive rhetoric “is an area of research that has identified problems in composition encountered by second language writers, and by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, attempts to explain them” (Connor, 1996, p.5). Faculty prepare students for the traditional academic genres and language of rhetoric, but should also familiarize themselves with the writing conventions that students bring with them: “A broad range of the world’s people adopt models and norms diametrically opposed [to Western notions of voice]: they foreground subtle, interpretive, interdependent, non-assertive and even non-verbal characteristics of communicative interaction” (Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996, p. 22). International students who write in North American university classrooms will likely continue as commuters among literacy communities (Canagarajah, 2001) and therefore will need a portfolio of writing skills appropriate for their various contexts. Total adaptation to North American academic rhetoric can no longer be a goal of the university.

Some international students come to our

campuses of their own volition; others are actively recruited in the drive to globalize our classrooms, to enrich our understanding of other *worlds*, other *words*. What happens when multiliterate students are asked to write their knowledge in our Canadian classrooms? What happens when a professor or a teaching assistant receives a paper that is shaped in unusual and unexpected ways? The following features (or irregularities, from a Western reader’s point of view) may be present:

- The thesis appears at the end of the text rather than up front.
- The language has more passion than the reader feels comfortable with.
- The progression appears circular or digressive rather than linear.
- The readers are expected (respected?) to draw their own conclusions.
- The writer cites people from the past, perhaps many decades or centuries in the past.
- The authorial voice presents as humble rather than assertive.
- There may be no meta-discourse, no roadmap, telling the reader where the writer is going or reviewing where she/he has been.

How is this work read? *Is* it read? What comments are noted? What suggestions are made (or criticisms leveled)? How welcomed are multiliterate international students and their take on the world into the Western academic community of practice?

Textual conventions – what is enacted, expected, and valued in the writing of a culture – are local and ideological. What native speakers of English in North America (hereafter referred to as the West) consider as logical and clear and effective is only one culture’s notion of logic, clarity, and effectiveness. In 1966, Robert Kaplan, an applied linguist, wrote a seminal, often-cited paper on contrastive rhetoric. He used rough diagrams to represent how some cultures tend to shape their written discourse. For example, English writing was illustrated as linear in organization; Oriental writing as circular; and Semitic writing as a series of parallel constructions that are

more often coordinated than subordinated. Those who came after Kaplan (and Kaplan himself) criticized his 1966 paper and its claims for a variety of reasons: it was simplistic, even essentializing; many languages were omitted from the initial study; distinct language groups were conflated and only organization was studied, not other variables of writing. As well, Kaplan's early work was called ethnocentric; it presented English patterns as the standard and viewed the writing patterns of other cultures as being more *something* than English or less *something* than English.

Since 1966, the field of contrastive rhetoric has expanded dramatically. Panetta's (2001) text, *Contrastive Rhetoric Revisited and Redefined*, broadens contrastive rhetoric to include not only writing conventions and values across language groups, but also writing across geopolitical, gender, sexual orientation, and economic borders. I have recently been examining how contrastive rhetoric can be described from a sociocultural perspective, which views communication as co-constructed, interactive, negotiated, and "dialogic" (Bakhtin, 1981), rather than a series of rules or prescribed moves. Wertsch, a sociocultural theorist, acknowledged the tension that occurs when one uses a new tool, or means to act upon the world. The new mediational means for an international student are the English language and western academic style of writing: "New mediational means transform mediated action" (Wertsch, 1998, p. 25). These dimensions of potential difference in writing include purpose; organization pattern; reader/writer responsibility; evidentials; and authorial voice. Many may have noticed some of these features in their own writing if they are multiliterate.

## Purpose

Writing may be considered a vehicle for individual self-expression, as it is in the West, or as a medium for expressing solidarity and shared social purpose, as it is in Japan, according to Carson (1992).

## Organization pattern

Korean texts seem to be characterized by indirectness

and non-linear development. The four-part pattern of Korean prose is transferred to writing in English (Eggington, 1987). There is a delayed introduction of purpose (Hinds, 1990) and the main topic appears at the end of the text (Connor, 1996). Clyne (1987) described German writing as digressive and propositionally asymmetrical, while longer sentences and greater elaborations are present in texts authored by Spanish writers (Reppen & Grabe, 1993, as cited in Connor, 1996).

## Reader responsibility/writer responsibility

Hinds (1987, 1990) noted that in Chinese writing (as in English writing), the onus is on the writer to make things clear, whereas Japanese writers are more likely to expect the *readers* to make their own sense of the text – the intent being to stimulate the readers rather than to convince them.

## Evidentials

What counts as evidence in writing? Leki (1992) noted that personal experience simply does not count in some cultures: "Quoting famous people is what constitutes evidence" (p. 68). She also observed that conventions of argumentation in English call for facts, statistics and illustrations; other cultures, however, "rely heavily on analogy, intuition, the beauty of the language, and the opinion of the learned of antiquity" (p. 92).

## Authorial voice

Atkinson (2001) defined voice as "the cult and culture of personal opinion" (p. 108). This seems to me to be a particularly Western notion of voice. What happens, I ask, when a person's culture trains him/her to background personal opinions? Is this absence of voice, or a difference in concept of voice, of textual self? Fan Shen (1998), one of many translingual writers who have written moving accounts of indoctrination into English academic writing, pointed out that "the 'I' must be buried in writing in Chinese" (p. 124). He described the lack of sensitivity on the part of Western faculty to understand the enormity of the task.

## Research and First Person Accounts

Research indicates that first language (L1) writing practices and values influence second language (L2) writing (Casanave, 2003; Cumming, 1989; Connor, 1996; Friedlander, 1990). As well, first person accounts like Shen's (above) highlight the dissonance that occurs when writing values collide. Kamani (2000), from Bombay, wrote: "In America I was expected to come clean on information, feelings, ignorance, speculations, judgment – largely taboo in India and considered bizarre" (p. 100). Resistance was Brintrup's (2000) reaction when she came from Chile to be a doctoral student in the United States: "To be more effective and efficient academically I received advice like this: 'Forget everything you learned in the past and start again.' Why this necessity of washing off my mind...? I felt like something had been taken away, like my skin and my verbal conception of the world" (p.15). Canagarajah (2001) wrote of the criticism he received by both of his writing communities as he composed in Tamil and English. When he applied Western academic writing style to a text he wrote for his Sri Lankan academic community, his colleague reacted strongly and negatively. His writing seemed pompous and overconfident. He wrote, "Thanks to my colleagues from Sri Lanka, I have become alert to the contradictions of representing periphery concerns and subjects in a discourse that is so alien to their interests and traditions" (p. 35).

Zamel (1998) expressed concern over the reductionist and formulaic possibilities when teaching/acquiring academic discourse. Students struggle as they "defer to the voice of the academy...and disguise themselves in the weighty imponderable voice of acquired authority ...losing themselves in the process," noted Sommers (as cited in Zamel, 1998, p. 188). Further, Zamel suggested, what is reified as academic discourse is not as well-defined as one thinks.

Additionally, teachers cannot really claim to know what discourse communities they are preparing students for. In five years time, much of the communicating may be in multimodal format or otherwise quite unlike the contexts of the present or past. Leki (2006) examined the accommodations made by professors for ESL students and found they were tol-

erant of mistakes – forgiving errors and giving longer time to write. Leki did not note efforts on their parts to change how they read work. *Wrong not different* seemed to be the message. Perhaps more distinctions could be made between *incorrect* and *different*.

There is a dilemma then. How, and to what extent, should international students be socialized into the Western academic writing community? I argue for a flexible, additive intent rather than a prescriptive, subtractive one. The goal of academic writers today should be to build writing repertoires, "an everchanging portfolios of skills" (Gee, 2003, p. 47) so that as international citizens, they may move among writing cultures easily. Universities are preparing students, and students are preparing themselves to operate in multiple literacy communities. Mao (2004) acknowledges the inevitability of border crossings: "rhetorical borderlands where creative heteroglossia becomes the norm" (p. 54). As globalization flourishes, the likelihood increases that readers of our students' texts will be speakers of other languages, or speakers of English as an additional language. Steinman (2003) writes, "Diverse readership implies diverse notions of what constitutes good writing" (p. 85).

## Multiliteracies and Critical Theory

### Multiliteracies

The New London Group refer to creating meaning as design, and call for using all available designs, sound, distance, gesture, different modalities (not only print), when representing knowledge. The first language writing patterns is one of those designs, I would argue. According to the New London Group: "We are both inheritors of patterns and conventions of meaning while at the same time active designers of meaning," and they argue that "productive diversity...the multiplicity of cultures, experiences, ways of making meaning, and ways of thinking—can be harnessed as an asset" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000, p. 7).

### Critical Theory

Whose knowledge counts and whose does not? Critical theory examines the hegemony involved in deval-

uing someone's form of self-expression and attempting to erase it. According to Dei (2003), "We must be humble when claiming to know." Critical theory meets pedagogy meets contrastive rhetoric in a call for constructivism in the classroom, that is, knowledge being created by all.

Zamel (1998) suggested that "rather than emphasizing what students must change, what they must become in order to accommodate our discourse, we work to sustain and extend the histories and abilities that students bring with them" (p. 299).

Shi (2003) wrote of Chinese writing teachers who returned from training in the west having been sold on Western academic writing and planning to pass this on to their students. Clearly, English and its rhetorical style were viewed as "linguistic capital" to use Bourdieu's (1977) term. There are implications – personal, linguistic, sociocultural, and political. Maya (as cited in Comfort, 2001), a student, explains:

A moth is drawn to the light and ultimately consumed by it. I do not want graduate school to be such an experience for me. The question hovers: How close to the light can I get and not be drawn into destruction? I must be cautious...I must survive, wings and spirit intact." (p. 91)

## Changes in the Classroom

I suggest some implications for practice and I invite readers to add some of their own:

- We become aware of and acknowledge the powerful resource in our classrooms that is first language writing. Multiliteracy, with its respect for multiple sources and multiple (re) presentations, is both a reality and a goal.
- We proceed cautiously and sensitively when commenting on the writing practices of international students. Ballard and Clanchy (1992) found that "when faced with writing that falls out of their own notions of acceptable style and pattern of argument, [teachers]

pepper the margins with 'irrelevant,' 'incoherent,' [and] 'illogical'" (p. 20). Instead, we could ask: "Is the writing disorganized or differently organized. Is it illogical, or differently logical?" (Steinman, 2003, p. 88).

- As students add to their writing repertoires, we in the Western academic community must add to our reading repertoires. Stepping out of our zone of comfort would be good. Can we only shape or are we willing to be shaped?
- We might reconsider the particular demands we make in writing and re-prioritize what really matters with respect to the intelligibility of a text as we become familiar with and appreciate hybridity of texts, and accents in writing.

One way to enable students to find their way in the academy, we believe, is for us to accept wider varieties of expression, to embrace multiple ways of communicating. This is exactly what we are asking students to do. (Zamel & Spack, 1998, p. xi)

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