Intercultural Rhetoric:

History and Applications in the Contemporary ESL Writing Classroom

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Abstract

Intercultural rhetoric is a discipline concerned with the study of discourse across genres and between individuals from varying cultural backgrounds. Research done in the field of intercultural rhetoric has become increasingly relevant and applicable in today’s multi-cultural writing classrooms. This paper concisely traces the history and development of intercultural rhetoric from its origins in contrastive rhetoric and Robert Kaplan’s “doodles paper”, as well as suggests potential applications of the field’s findings and concepts for today’s Intensive English Program instructor.

*Keywords:* contrastive rhetoric, intercultural rhetoric, second language writing, written discourse, culture
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Introduction

Over the last four decades, the teaching of writing to ESL and EFL students has been positively impacted by studies in cross-cultural writing (Connor, 2004, 2011). Throughout these decades of research, this area of inquiry has been alternately referred to as contrastive rhetoric, cross-cultural rhetoric, discourse linguistics, discourse analysis, and—ever increasingly—intercultural rhetoric (Connor, 2011; Enkvist, 1997). While intercultural rhetoric as an academic discipline has displayed consistency in neither the defining of its concepts nor the elucidation of its pedagogical implications, it is a field that according to linguist Nils Erik Enkvist (1997) “promises meaningful practical applications, at best improving intercultural communication and understanding” (p. 204).

English-language teachers (and their students) would be well-served to consider the concepts and pedagogical applications illuminated through intercultural rhetoric research. The present paper seeks to defend this position by first presenting a concise history of the development and current practices within the field of contrastive or intercultural rhetoric, and second, by encouraging instructors at intensive English programs (IEP) in U.S. universities to thoughtfully consider the field’s conceptual offerings and potential pedagogical applications.

Historical Development

The inception of contrastive rhetoric was catalyzed in 1966 by the publication of Robert Kaplan’s “Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Rhetoric.” In this seminal paper—often referred to as the “doodles paper” (Enkvist, 1997, p. 190)—Kaplan made “provocative observations” (Connor, 2011, p. 2) concerning what he believed to be systematic variations in the written rhetorical patterns of different cultures. He began this discussion by suggesting “a fallacy of some repute and some duration” (1966, p. 3) held by ESL and EFL writing instructors;
namely, that the ability to write skillfully in the native language should equate to the ability to do so in the second or third language. The salience of this misconception—as well as Kaplan’s awareness of the importance of refuting it—arose from Kaplan’s own observations of the teaching of composition to international students in U.S. universities. Accordingly, he investigated the rhetorical patterns of six hundred essays written in English by students from a range of cultural backgrounds. Based on this textual analysis, Kaplan asserted that five distinct organizational patterns existed in these essays, and that these could be grouped more-or-less according to language or language family: Oriental, Semitic, Romance, English and Russian. He suggested that English rhetoric progressed in a more-or-less linear fashion, while other language families were marked by distracting circumlocutions or prolixity. For example, in the rhetoric of romance languages like Spanish or French, Kaplan claimed that there existed “much greater freedom to digress or introduce extraneous material” (1966, p. 12) than in, say, English writing, where writing is expected to be “clear and orderly and to proceed in a straight line” (Enkvist, 1997, p.190). Kaplan’s conception of rhetorical inconsistency across cultures was coined (as a field of inquiry) contrastive rhetoric. Based on his seminal textual analysis, Kaplan (1966) called for instructors’ awareness of culturally-based divergences in written rhetorical patterns, as well as emphasized the importance of making non-native students aware of the conventional rhetorical patterns in English writing.

The ideas presented in that seminal article have been met with an assortment of sentiments, many of which are steeped in criticism. His early work has been censured, for example, for its limited focus on the organizational aspect of rhetoric (Liebman, 1992). It was criticized for ignoring variation in the writing patterns within languages and language families, as well as variation in the writing of a single individual in the same language (Connor, 2002). Furthermore, because cultural differences in rhetorical patterning were initially explained using
the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis—which Kaplan suggested implied that “Logic…which is the basis or rhetoric, is evolved out of a culture” (Kaplan, 1966, p.2)—Kaplan’s assertions were accused of being inherently saturated with racism and essentialism. Kubota and Lehner (2004) have pointed out that traditional contrastive rhetoric discourse has not only supported a dichotomy between English writing as “linear and logical” (p. 9) and that of all other languages as “circular and non-logical” (p. 9), but that it has also upheld the purported superiority of “logical” English rhetoric.

These criticisms and others have been addressed by Kaplan himself, however, and they have served a valuable purpose in catalyzing new veins of inquiry into the conventions and patterns of various rhetorical traditions (Connor, 2011; Enkvist, 1997; Kaplan, 1966, 2001). In 1992, Liebman called for “a new contrastive rhetoric” (p. 141), one that challenged the “paradoxical” (p. 142) nature of Kaplan’s product-oriented work and instead more closely examined writing as process. Connor points out that today’s contrastive rhetoric makes much more use of “sophisticated textual analyses” (2011, p. 4) and examines genres beyond the traditional student essay, such as grant proposals, research articles, and business letters (Connor, 2004). In order for intercultural rhetoric research to be open to a range of genres, its conceptualization of rhetoric has been expanded to represent not only the idea of persuasive acts, but any acts of communication that are deemed contextually effective and appropriate (Connor, 2011). When defined in this way, rhetoric comes to include not only written, but oral communication, as well.

**Incorporating Intercultural Rhetoric into Intensive English Program Classrooms**

As with any academic discipline, criticism within contrastive or intercultural rhetoric persists. Enkvist (1997) acknowledged the instinctual tendency of writing instructors to “regard alien discourse structures as undesirable” (p. 191), as “foreign growths that should be excised in
favour of the normal tissue of discourse” (p. 191). However, the concepts that have surfaced as a result of research within the field—and the accompanying criticism of that research—are irrefutably useful for today’s IEP instructor. While Connor (2011) comments that “contrastive rhetoric was never meant as a method for teaching” (p. 65), its contributions have served to bring to teachers’ awareness the potential for differences in writing and communicative conventions across cultures.

And so, just how can IEP instructors make pedagogical use of concepts from intercultural rhetoric? Considering that intercultural rhetoric considers communicative acts between speakers, writers, and readers alike as they strive for effective communication, teachers can begin incorporating intercultural rhetoric into their classrooms by bringing to their students’ awareness the concepts of purpose, audience and genre in writing (Connor, 2011), along with how these rhetorical concepts determine a writer’s choice of tone, style, and organization for a particular piece of writing. Many students studying at IEPs will go on to pursue undergraduate or graduate degrees at U.S. universities, and in these programs they will inevitably be required to compose pieces in a variety of modes and genres (e.g. reflective blogs, analytic responses, creative writing pieces, business letters, research reports, grant proposals, scholarship applications, and possibly theses or dissertations). The sooner students are made aware of the importance of considering the unique purposes and audiences of these different types of writing, the more opportunities they will have for meaningful compositional practice before they enter university systems.

An additional contribution of intercultural rhetoric relates not to written discourse, but to spoken discourse. Because many students will likely engage in thesis or dissertation writing for which they will work closely with a mentor or advisor, it could serve these students well to discuss the expected nature of communication and relationships between advisors and advisees in U.S academia. This is an area of research that has made salient the pervasiveness of
miscommunication or lack of communication between non-native advisees and their mentors based on culturally-based perceptions and expectations, and researchers such as Krase (2007) and Chen (2010) suggest that non-native speakers can be more successful in completing large writing projects when communication with their advisors flows more effectively.

After raising students’ awareness of potential rhetorical differences between their native language and additional languages, teachers can encourage students to critically compare and contrast the notions of text production and communication conventions between their native language and additional languages (Kubota and Lehner, 2004). This can be done while simultaneously stressing that the conventions of one language or culture are not superior to another, but merely different, with differing contexts in which those conventions may be most appropriate. In this way, we can enable our students to think critically about their rhetorical decisions, and equip them with the ability to discern and decide between the best communicative practices in whatever context or situation they may find themselves in the future.

Of course, it should be pointed out that effectively bringing awareness of these concepts to students requires that teachers make use of the existing intercultural rhetoric research in order to make themselves aware of the discipline’s issues, implications and pedagogical potential. By utilizing this burgeoning body of resources and research, teachers can build and augment their own knowledge of intercultural communicative practices, and thus help empower their students to engage in successful communicative acts.
References


