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PATTERNS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES THAT AFFECT SECOND-LANGUAGE WRITING

This article sets out to demonstrate that, if applied widely and consistently throughout the curricula, writing would have a profound effect on students' overall communicative competence in a second language. Writing assignments not only strengthen writing skills, but also provoke critical thinking, and above all, enhance cultural interaction among students. In the era of globalization, when we witness the evolution of contemporary societies into intercultural melting pots, it is impossible to ignore all the experiences international students bring to the classroom and make them conform to European American socio-cultural norms.

Teachers in multicultural classrooms must be aware of the linguistic and cultural differences among students and draw on the resources learners bring to the learning process, and reduce the Anglo-American bias in the evaluation of writing. New curricula and teacher training will be important elements in the successful implementation of writing for the development of cross-cultural communicative competence.

The teaching of writing in English to speakers of other languages is a complex and challenging experience for a host of reasons. Students bring very different backgrounds, knowledge, and learning styles to the classroom. When it comes to writing, students draw on various cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences at the sentence, paragraph and content levels. The outcome of these influences manifests itself in all aspects of textual organization: focus and development, coherence and cohesion, sentence structure, and register**.** Until the early part of the twentieth century, the influence of the first language on a person's ability to experience the world was not taken under consideration and consequently language was treated as a neutral medium that did not affect the people who spoke or wrote in it. Language, from this point of view, was merely a tool to convey ideas, rather than a determiner or shaper of those ideas. The 1980s witnessed a rapid development of research examining the relationship between culture and written communication. The research fell into three major categories: social functions of writing, the role of instruction on writing in a given language and culture, and the effect of ESL students' backgrounds on their literacy in a second language. The research findings challenged the conventional approaches

to second-language writing, which may have been appropriate in classrooms consisting of culturally homogenous students, but were now significantly irrelevant for students with vastly different life experiences. In my teaching career I have observed the practical outcome of language use on the organization of ideas by speakers of other languages than English. Even if ESL students are sufficiently skilled to convey meaning linguistically, the logic, organization, and thought patterns reflect those of their native languages.

Since international students demonstrate different ways of presenting their thoughts in a written form, writing instructors need to be sensitive to cultural differences in writing styles, recognizing that many standards constitute a good academic writing, and that it is a misleading assumption to equate students' writing skills with their intellectual potential. Teachers must be aware of a variety of influences on writing in a second language and draw on the resources individual students bring to the classroom.

American applied linguist Robert Kaplan attracted the attention of ESL teachers to cultural and linguistic differences in the writing of ESL students by launching the specialization called contrastive rhetoric. This relatively new field in applied linguistics focuses on how a person's first language and culture influence his or her writing in a second language. It investigates not only the role of the first language conventions of discourse and rhetorical structure on second language usage, but also examines cognitive and cultural aspects of second-language writing. Ulla Connor, a scholar who has extended Kaplan's work to consider patterns of cultural differences when writing language, Ulla Connor, a scholar who extended Kaplan's work to consider patterns of cultural differences when writing language, stresses the critical role of contrastive rhetoric research in teaching second-language writing. According to Connor contrastive rhetoric provides: "(….) recommendations for teaching L2 writing in several ways: evaluating written products of ESL and EFL appreciating influences of L1 literacy acquisition on L2 writing, understanding writing cross-culturally in academic and professional situations, and being sensitive to societal-cultural differences in intellectual traditions and ideologies" (Connor, 1996: 27).

In his article "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education" Kaplan (1966) discusses the discrepancies in organization of paragraphs among people of different languages and cultures. He emphasizes strongly that cultural preferences determine the ways people arrange ideas in specific patterns and communicate with one another. Therefore, it is critical, in order to improve the understanding of the effects of the first language on one's ability to write in a second language, to investigate the following questions:

- How does the knowledge of the native language (at all three basic levels: syntactic, semantic, pragmatic) shape the way in which a person thinks and then puts the ideas on paper?

• Does the first language determine the way in which a person perceives and experiences the world?

Language is not a neutral medium that does not influence the way people perceive and experience the world. This statement is in agreement with Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity presenting the language, in the initial, stronger version, as a determiner of thought, and in the later, weaker version, as a shaper of thought.

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group….. The worlds in which different societies [cultures] live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached….. We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation (Sapir, 1956: 134).

There are numerous variations in vocabulary among languages referring to particular features of the environment or behaviors. One of the examples of vocabulary differences related to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is a huge number of words for camel in Arabic. Conversely, Americans have many words used to refer to various types of cars, which are very important in their environment. Another discrepancy in vocabulary among languages pertains to the number of terms Americans use to describe their personal space. Polish language, for example, has few words used to talk about personal space, because it is not as essential for the Poles as it is for Americans.

One of the distinct linguistic features of English is that it is the only language that capitalizes pronoun "I" in writing. Is this a manifestation of cultural characteristics of the majority of the English-speaking nations whose primary focus in on their individuality and independence? How is this cultural characteristic reflected in writing? Venashri Pillay in her article: "Culture. Exploring the River" presents two metaphorical writing samples which serve as an example of how individualist and communitarian cultural orientations affect the conceptions of self and identity in writing.

> I am a tall tree reaching up toward the sky in all my mighty magnificence. I began as a weak sapling but have now grown tall as the land I stand on is fertile and healthy. It allows me to reach my full potential. I know I can reach for the stars and one day I believe my branches will touch them. I have been cared for by the finest gardeners and have been transplanted in a beautiful forest. I am all that I have, all that I do, and all that I have achieved. I continue to aspire to be the finest and strongest tree in the forest-and dream of the day when star-dust will sparkle on my leaves.
>
> I am a bright, shiny thread in a rainbow blanket. As I weave in and out with other equally bright threads, I stand out for I am a unique color and composition. At the same time I am also subsumed, into this vivid, loud display of color in this magnificent creation that blankets all. My complementary relationship with the other unique threads allows me to be noticed and to be cloaked all at once. We come together in a beautiful, knitted rhythm of patterns and yet

> this very joining is what makes our unique lines and individual patterned routes more visible. I am because we are –in this beautiful rainbow blanket (Pillay, 2006: 36).

The authors of the above pieces ruminated on the concepts of self-awareness and identity. The first metaphor shows the thoughts of the American about himself and his position in American society. The latter depicts Pillay's identity and self-awareness which arise from South African society. The American's description of himself as a tree growing tall on fertile land represents the way European American societies define themselves in terms of personal achievement and self-reliance. An average American believes in the American myth that the United States is the land of unlimited opportunities where his/her potential can be fully developed. His/her identity is formed by the culture promoting achievement, growth and personal fulfillment. The Puritans and the Founding Fathers provided solid basis for the creation of the culture encouraging hard work, commitment, and self-reliance. Although Americans exhibit a community spirit in terms of working together for the benefit of the community, the predominant, national qualities are individuality and independence.

Pillay's rainbow blanket metaphor reveals her South African perspective where the sense of identity and self-awareness are shaped by the interpersonal relations and feature communitarian cultural orientation. The strong sense of belonging to a community makes people feel responsible for their families and friends. The success of the group ensures the well-being of the individual, so that by considering the needs and feelings of others, one actually protects oneself. Communitarianism characterizes most African societies as well. Venashri Pillay discusses a Pan-African term *ubuntu* that means "humanness or personhood". The literal translation of this expression is, "A person being a person through other persons" (Pillay, 2006: 37).

A rich illustration of the variations in syntax among languages also reflects what is important to people who speak a particular language. For example, cultures differ widely when it comes to their conceptions of time. Polychrons perceive time as a flexible dimension which involves simultaneous occurrences of many things and the involvement of many people and continues into infinity. Time is synchronous, parallel and reaches the areas beyond the lifetime and human comprehension. For people operating from the sequential time perspective, time can never be lost because life events are cyclical, integrated within past, present and future. Whorf himself explored the language of polychronic Indians, speaking Uto-Aztecan language and living in northeastern Arizona, called Hopi and provided detailed descriptions of how the grammar of the language influences the perceptions of its users. Hopi do not linguistically refer to time as a fixed point but rather as a movement in the stream of life, it is like a perpetual process where here and now will never arrive, but will always be approaching.

The English language, in contrast, relies on the monochronic perception of time. Time is linear. It is a point on a timeline which is tangible and discrete,

not continuous. Time can be divided not only into past, present, and future, but also into smaller, fixed elements such as seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, and so on. Therefore, tenses are the scaffolding of the English grammar because monochrons have a need to organize events into the neat categories. The Hopi language does not have any tenses because in polychronic cultures emphasis are not put on time, but on human relations, experiences rather than speed and trying to "get things done" in a precisely scheduled time.

Since the language has such an enormous impact on our world perception, we cannot expect students from Saudi Arabia or Poland to see and experience the world in the same way a student who grows up speaking and writing English in the US does.

Culture makes certain patterns of thinking and behaviors more natural, preferable, and legitimate. For example, the westerners are perceived as being individualistic, rationalistic, analytical, and competitive whereas the easterners appear more communitarian, cooperative, contemplative, self-reflective, and inward looking. These cultural attitudes and behaviors are reflected in rhetoric and logic of Western and Eastern languages. According to Kaplan:

> Logic (in the popular rather than the logician's sense of the word) which is the basic of rhetoric, is evolved out of culture; it is not universal. Rhetoric, then, is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture. It is affected by canons of taste within a given culture at a given time (Kaplan, 1966: 2).

Therefore, logical and rhetorical conventions are not only intertwined, but also culture specific and consequently interfere with second-language writing. The structure of a good essay or speech in U.S. English requires the development of a specific theme. The academic essay is often called the five-paragraph essay which consists of the introductory paragraph with the clearly stated thesis statement which is the central organizing idea of the paper. It explicitly identifies the purpose of the essay and summarizes its main points which are developed in the three paragraphs of the main body. The initial sentences of these paragraphs are called topic sentences and express a single idea of each paragraph. All the other sentences in the paragraph support the topic sentence and examples are organized from general to specific (it is a so-called funnel support). The last paragraph features the restatement of the main points and a concluding sentence. The key to good organization is to outline the main points of the paper or speech by subordinating supporting ideas to the main ideas. The organizational pattern preferred in the formal use of U.S English is called linear and holds the speaker/writer responsible for providing the structure and the meaning of the discourse. Prior knowledge of the speaker's intent is not necessary. Although the Western model of discourse draws on principles of Aristotelian cannon of rhetoric, there are still some culture-specific preferences for the elements that constitute "proper" academic writing. For example, in German-speaking countries emphasis in writ-

ing are put more on the content than on the form since German speakers favor digression.

> Digressions from a linear structure are tolerated much more in German-language countries, as are repetitions. The less linear and less formal structure of German (academic) discourse also is evidenced in books and articles in fields such as linguistics and sociology. There one finds digressions, and digressions from digressions – which entail recapitulation and repetitions to stress the main line of argument (Clyne, 1985: 116).

Texts written by a native speaker of German leave an English native speaker with the sense of textual asymmetry and discontinuity in argument. Central European academic writing (e.g. Polish or Czech) differs from Anglo-American writing particularly with regard to the placement of the thesis statement in the paper and the style of writing. Polish or Czech academic writing is characterized by a delayed purpose (the thesis statement is not typically expressed in the introductory paragraph), an ornamental style and a multiplicity of viewpoints. The Czech linguist Světla Čmejrková in her paper, "Academic Writing in Czech and English", quotes the opinions of Czech linguists about stating the purpose of their writing in the beginning of their articles:

> "I do not feel like stating at the beginning what I want to reach in the end."
> "The article should read like a detective story, it has analogical principles. I wish my reader to follow the course of my thought."
> "If I were to formulate the purpose of my article, I would have to repeat my exposition word by word" (Čmejrková, 1994: 18).

The Anglo–American academic writing conventions do not have real equivalents in Oriental or Middle Eastern languages. 'Oriental' writing is indirect so the reader is responsible for constructing the meaning, and usually does so, based on the shared knowledge between the writer and the reader. Studies of Japanese, Korean and Chinese rhetorical styles demonstrate the organization of ideas based on a four-part model, the lack of explicit thesis statement, which is actually buried in the passage, and the indirect implication of the main point of the discourse. Drawing on the variety of the sources Lustig observes that the preferred organization of a Japanese paragraph is often called a 'gyre' or a series of 'stepping stones' that relies on indirection and implication to connect ideas and provide the main points (Lustig M. W., Koester J., 2010: 226, 227). A major rhetorical pattern in Korean writing is called *Ki-Sung-Chon-Kyul* and consists of (1) introduction and loose development, (2) a statement of the main idea, (3) concepts indirectly connected with the argument, and (4) a conclusion of the main theme. Similarly, Chinese rhetoric is based on the four-part pattern of *qi-cheng-jun-he* (*qi* prepares the reader for the topic, *cheng* introduces and develops the topic, *jun* turns to a seemingly unrelated subject, and *he* sums up the essay). This model of discourse is believed to have originated historically in Chinese poetry. Chinese writing is also strongly influenced by the eight-legged essay which draws on

the tradition of writing deriving from classic Chinese books such as the *Four Books* and the *Five Classics* that convey the moral teachings of Confucian. Just like other 'Oriental' styles of writing Chinese is characterized by indirection. Matalene in his article: "Contrastive Rhetoric: An American Writing Teacher in China" quotes the Chinese writer who intends to criticize the inefficiency of the Chinese Department of Agriculture:

> I am not an economic policy maker, but I have a dream of tractors singing in the fields and trucks roaring effortlessly on roads. I am not an agricultural technical program planner, but I have a dream of seeing farmers studying science and technology and working comfortably with machinery (Matalene, 1985: 804).

A powerful principle for the organization of writing in Arabic is the parallelism at sentence and paragraph levels. Such structures are found in the Koran which was composed in the seventh century C.E. In English, subordination is a preferred method of sentence organization, whereas coordination is more frequently used in Arabic to combine sentences. Arabic writing does not follow the principles of the U.S. English paragraph organization (a main idea supported by convincing evidence), but develops paragraphs through a series of positive and negative parallel constructions. "Kaplan relates the parallelism of Arabic prose to parallel constructions used in the King James version of the Old Testament, most of which was translated into English from Hebrew, which, like Arabic, is a Semitic language whose coordinating structure favors rhetorical parallelism" (Connor, 1996: 34, 35).

Another characteristic feature of Arabic prose is the role of repetitions as an argumentative strategy, which, as Al-Jubouri notes, appear at three levels: the morphological level, word level, and 'chunk' (that is, phrases, clauses, and larger discourse sequences). The sociolinguist, Barbara Johnstone, conducted valuable research on the differences between a Middle Eastern argument and a Western argument. She analyzed the factors that changed the 1979 interview between the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci and Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini into an insulting conversation. Johnstone found out that entirely different persuasive styles, used by both interlocutors, lay at the core of the controversy about this conversation. Fallaci used a quasi-logical, Western style of argumentation in which she backed her statements with facts and data. A premise "There is no freedom in Iran" would come from the obvious evidence such as, "People are imprisoned and executed if they express their opinions freely." The basic presumption of the argument was left unstated. The presumption for the above argument could be, for example: "Freedom means being able to express one's opinion freely." Khomeini, however, used Middle Eastern style of argumentation and persuaded through parables from the Koran and analogies such as: "Just as a finger with gangrene should be cut off so that it will not destroy the whole body, so should people who corrupt others be pulled out like weeds so that they will not infect the

whole field." To support his assertions, he appealed to the authority of Islam by saying "because Islam says so." As the above evidence illustrates, the contrastive rhetoric analysis should be expanded beyond the linguistic level and cross-cultural patterns of argument in writing should also be investigated.

Teachers of English as a second language are usually reluctant to teach writing courses or to combine writing with reading, speaking or listening activities, which I empirically experienced in my native country, Poland. The importance of teaching writing, which is a central position of interest among English educators in the United States, is usually astonishing to colleagues outside the country. Writing has become a respectable object of interest and research at U.S universities. Tenured, as well as adjunct faculty, are involved in teaching writing and in the academic inquiry about writing. Several academic journals focus on research about the teaching of writing, for instance *College Composition, Rhetoric Review, Journal of Basic Writing, Journal of Teaching Writing, and Journal of* Second *Language Writing*. Unfortunately, outside the United States, writing has been seen as the "step-child" of the four major skills in foreign language acquisition. Only at the advanced levels, writing is combined with grammar. However, in practice these writing classes are often little more than grammar workshops. ESL teachers rarely focus on developing composition skills in a target language. They are often discouraged by a limited vocabulary and grammar in the target language at the beginning and intermediate levels, and problems with structuring discourse, organizing thoughts, choosing appropriate vocabulary and style inherent in most advanced writing classes. Thus, instead of facilitating the process of foreign language learning, writing becomes an overwhelming and frustrating experience.

My experience, however, indicates that all types of writing (writing-to-learn activities, writing as a support skill, writing for communication, academic and creative writing) improve overall language competence and contribute to the development of cross-cultural awareness. The biggest challenge in teaching intercultural communication and second-language writing in particular is, according to The Russian linguist I. I. Haleeva, the removal of the alien element in the learner's consciousness by "transferring the second language into 'non-foreign' status". Thus, we have our goal to form a 'second language ego', which is able to enter the 'spirit' of the target language, into the 'body' of the target culture" (Haleeva, 1995: 277, 278). Writing in general supports all the elements that constitute the communicative competence model as proposed by Michael Canale: (1) grammar competence, (2) discourse competence (knowledge of the rules that regulate written and oral structures, (3) sociolinguistic competence (language appropriateness according to the context), and (4) strategic competence (ability to communicate meaning) (Canale: 1983).

There is a wide range of opinions on the role of writing in second language acquisition and the extent to which cultural variables influence a student's ability to write in a second language. Variations in words and grammatical structures

across languages remain a key point in the debate on how a native language affects learners' writing in a nonnative language. Each language, with its own unique features, plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining the cultural identity of each nation and shapes the way in which a person perceives and experiences the world. The practical outcome of this phenomenon in writing is reflected in the way international students organize and compose their written work. The words are in English, but the logic, organization, and thought patterns imitate those of their own language. I strongly believe that, if applied widely and consistently throughout the curricula, writing would have a profound effect on students' overall communicative competence in a second language. Writing assignments not only strengthen writing skills, but also provoke critical thinking, and above all, enhance cultural interaction among students. In the era of globalization, when we witness the evolution of contemporary societies into intercultural melting pots, it is impossible to ignore all the experiences international students bring to the classroom and make them conform to European American socio-cultural norms.

Teachers in multicultural classrooms must be aware of the linguistic and cultural differences among students and draw on the resources learners bring to the learning process, as well as reduce the Anglo-American bias in the evaluation of writing. New curricula and teacher training will be important elements in the successful implementation of writing for the development of cross-cultural communicative competence.

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