

# PROBING RHETORICAL STRUCTURES OF ADVANCED LEARNERS' EXPOSITORY PROSE: A DATA-BASED APPROACH

Marcellinus Marcellino

*Atma Jaya Catholic University, Indonesia*

## Abstract

Logic, as the basis of rhetoric, always affects the way ideas, words, and evidence are assembled into one coherent structure. As rhetoric varies from culture to culture, it frequently brings about awkwardness, inappropriateness as well as immaturity of an expository prose if it does not meet the convention of organizational patterns and signals as expected by the readers having that rhetoric. A number of scholars have highlighted the importance and insights of contrastive rhetoric for the teaching of academic writing. This paper describes various rhetorical problems encountered by dozens of advanced Indonesian learners of English taking an academic writing class at AMINEF (American Indonesian Exchange Foundation) who plan to study in the USA. This paper concludes with the caveat that difficulties in adopting English rhetoric is not simply a linguistic problem but includes cultural understanding and awareness of its style. This paper offers insightful writing instructions to cope with the existing problems.

**Keywords:** rhetoric, expository prose, contrastive rhetoric, rhetorical problems, AMINEF

## INTRODUCTION

Contrastive rhetoric is an area of research in second or foreign language acquisition that identifies the second or foreign language writers' problems and their rhetorical strategies in composition and attempts to explain them. Initiated by an American applied linguist, Robert Kaplan, some forty years ago, contrastive rhetoric maintains that language and writing are cultural phenomena. Each language has its own rhetorical conventions unique to it. Therefore, the linguistic and rhetorical conventions

of the first language are claimed to interfere with writing in the second or foreign language (Leki, 1991; Connor, 1996).

Kaplan's article was the first in a new field of ESL that focused on the rhetoric of writing, thus extending the analysis beyond the sentence level. In his article, Kaplan (1996) maintained that logic and rhetoric were interdependent as well as culture specific. He also viewed the relationship between language and thought in the same way: "Sequence of thought and grammar are related in a given language" (p. 4).

Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric is actually inspired by the theories of rhetoricians Christensen and Pitkin, central to which are the discourse bloc and the discourse unit. The former refers to the central idea and the latter its supporting ideas. Kaplan (1972) asserts that language should be understood in a context larger than a sentence; that discourse units, the supporting ideas of a discourse bloc, "constitute those units within a discourse bloc which are related to each other by either coordination, subordination, or superordination" (p. 27). He further finds Pitkin's discourse bloc quite useful as it denotes the central idea of text.

The cornerstone of contrastive rhetoric basically starts from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, also called the Whorfian hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by the inexorable laws of patterns of which s/he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived complicated systematizations of his/her own language. Thus, every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which the forms and categories are culturally ordained. In other words, the Whorfian hypothesis affirms that one's native language influences and controls thought, consequently barring fluent second language acquisition (Connor, 1996).

Kaplan (1966) also claims that each language imposes a world view on its users and that logic and rhetoric are culture specific. In his article *Cultural thought patterns in Intercultural Education*, he states, "Logic which is the basis of rhetoric is evolved out of culture; it is not universal. Rhetoric, then, is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture ..." (Kaplan, p. 400, in Croft, 1980). Thus, a theory of rhetoric is obviously fundamental to contrastive rhetoric. It is interested in assessing the direct or indirect effect of communication on the hearer or reader. Kaplan's first model of contrastive rhetoric was based on Aristotelian rhetoric and logic (Connor, 1996).

In relation to contrastive rhetoric, a theory of applied linguistics provides it with a theory of language transfer from L1 to L2 as in applied linguistics, contrastive rhetoric has been influenced by contrastive analysis. As a result, the theory of second language learning suggests that L1 interferes with L2 acquisition. The dominant model of the contrastive

analysis hypothesis emphasizes the negative, interfering effects of the first language on second language acquisition, which are considered harmful (Connor, 1996, pp. 10-12).

The theory of linguistic relativity affirms that different languages affect perception and thought in different ways. Two versions are related to this theory. The strong version of the hypothesis insists that language controls thought and perception, while the weak version asserts that language influences thought. And, the latter has been regaining the acceptability in linguistics and psychology (Hunt & Agnoli, 1991). It is, therefore, not surprising that the role of transfer from the native language, or cross-linguistic influence, took center stage for some thirty years, from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Contrastive rhetoric, like contrastive analysis, began as an effort to improve pedagogy, and its advocates believed that interference from L1 was the biggest problem in L2 acquisition. Three approaches concerning transfer have dominated: contrastive analysis, error analysis, and its later development, an analysis of the transitional system called "interlanguage" (further readings, see Selinker, Swain, & Dumas, 1975).

Contrastive analysis, originally developed by Fries in 1945 and expanded by Lado in 1957, maintained that mistakes made by L2 learners were caused by the native language (Connor, 1996). The same is true for teachers of ESL and foreign languages who have always been familiar with the negative effects of transfer. They recognize that their students speak the target language with an accent that reflects phonemic characteristics of the students' native language. However, studies on ESL learners conducted by Dulay and Burt (1974) and Bailey, Madden, and Krashen (1974) showed a similar order of acquisition of certain English morphemes between ESL learners and children acquiring English as a first language.

Kaplan's pioneering study (1966) analyzed the organization of paragraph in ESL student essays and indicated that L1 rhetorical structures were evident in the L2 writing of his sample students. In his book *The Anatomy of Rhetoric: Prolegomena to a Functional Theory of Rhetoric* (1972, ix), Kaplan discussed what he considered to be fallacies of linguistic and rhetorical analyses of the 1950s and 1960s. He argued against both Bloomfield's 1933 linguistic premises, which considered a sentence as the basic unit of syntax, and the Aristotelian concept of discourse, "in which the word itself was the basic unit" (Kaplan, 1972, p. 2). These positions resulted in static analyses in rhetoric and sentence-based analyses of linguistics. As an alternative, Kaplan proposed that the paragraph be considered a unit of analysis (see also Connor, 1996).

His work suggested that Anglo-European expository essays follow a linear development. In contrast, paragraph development in Semitic languages is based on a series of parallel coordinate clauses. Essays written in Oriental languages use an indirect approach and come to the point only at the end. In Romance languages and in Russian, essays are permitted a degree of digressiveness and irrelevant or unrelated material that would seem unnecessary to a writer of English. Therefore, Kaplan suggests that ESL students be aware of rhetorical conventions in English as in other languages (see Croft, 1980). Thus, the structure of English exposition has to be linear in that a paragraph in English typically begins with a topic statement supported by examples related to the central theme. Paragraphs in other languages have different typical structures.

### **PROBLEMATIC ISSUES ON CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC**

Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric have been frequently criticized by linguists, sociolinguists, and psychologists. Liebman (1992) argued that Aristotelian rhetoric traditionally involved five elements: invention, memory, arrangement, style, and delivery. He pointed out that Kaplan's (1966; 1972) approach reduced them to one – arrangement or organization. Later on Kaplan adopted a popular but limited view of rhetoric as understood by English speaking countries. His rhetoric classified discourse into description, narration, argumentation, and exposition. Absent from this classification was persuasion, the major component of classical rhetoric, which had been replaced by argumentation.

The same argument is made by Connor (1996) that Kaplan's 1966 article focused on rhetorical differences and associated the writing of Anglo-Americans with the traditions of Western rhetoric as represented in the theories of Aristotle. In this way, Kaplan's interpretation of Aristotelian rhetoric was narrow. He only discussed the organization of writing, in Aristotle's term "arrangement" – one of the three major components in Aristotle's rhetoric. The two other components – rhetorical appeals and persuasive language – were ignored.

Kaplan's "traditional" contrastive rhetoric has been criticized for several reasons: for being too ethnocentric and privileging the writing of native English speakers (Matalene, 1985); for examining only L2 products and ignoring educational and developmental process variables (Mohan & Au-Yeung Lo, 1985); for dismissing linguistic and cultural differences in writing among related languages (Hinds, 1983); and for considering transfer from a first language a negative influence on second language writing (Raimes, 1991).

Further criticisms addressed to Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric state that it is not particularly relevant for the theory of translation since it refers to second language texts only when speculating about first language influence. A model for translation needs to compare texts in both first language, the source language (in which the text was originally written) and the target language (into which the text was translated) (Connor, 1996).

Joshua Fishman (1977), a sociologist of language, discredits the Whorfian hypothesis, citing the large number of bilinguals who in most cases have no problem switching between the grammars and lexica of their languages. Psycholinguists have also maintained that the strongest version of the hypothesis, which states that language controls both thought and perception, has been proven false. Even the weaker form, which states that language merely influences thought, has been considered vague and unprovable (Connor, 1996).

Psychologists Hunt and Agnoli (1991), through a careful review of theories and experiments in linguistics and psychology, claim that the Whorfian hypothesis should be considered a hypothesis about language performance rather than a linguistic hypothesis about language competence. It is asserted that every language is translatable, but there is often a loss involved – an utterance that is completely natural in one language may be completely unmanageable in another. (see also Connor, 1996).

Contrastive rhetoric never entered the next stage, that is the interlanguage analysis. As a result, contrastive rhetoric researchers of ESL have not tried to describe stages in learners' L2 writing acquisition and to explain errors as evidence of the language learning process. Nor has contrastive rhetoric developed a large enough body of ESL data to compare stages of acquisition of linguistic and rhetorical structures. Because a unified methodology has not yet been developed, it has been hard to build a large set of acquisition data. Therefore, an alternative model is needed to account for the complexity of the problems that contrastive rhetoric encounters (Connor, 1996).

New models of second language acquisition and learning emerged, which emphasized the importance of "interlanguage" -- a system that is "distinct from both the native language and the target language." (Selinker, Swain, & Dumas, 1975). Corder (1967) referred to it as "the transitional competence of the L2 learner". These models, such as Krashen's monitor model (1977, 1980), suggested that neither L1 nor L2 be a "bad" influence on second language acquisition.

Apart from the foresaid criticisms, Kaplan's diagram of rhetoric and his hypothesis have been interpreted too simplistically and too literally. It is even more unfortunate that his diagram is taken to mean that a writing

pattern reflects a thinking pattern. In other words, the Chinese write in circles; therefore, they must think in circles. His diagram is too simple a model for the representation of a theory of contrastive rhetoric. Contrastive rhetoric is a large and complex discipline, which is influenced by and influences numerous other theories. It merits many models.

It is frequently said that contrastive rhetoric and contrastive rhetoric methodology are still in their formative stages (Purves, 1988). As a result, contrastive rhetoric has been criticized because it lacks a single methodology and a single research program. (Connor, 1996)

## **INDONESIAN LEARNERS' EXPOSITORY PROSE: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

In order to examine and account for the English writing rhetoric of Indonesian learners, particularly their systematic textual differences in their written English style as compared with that of native speakers of English, this study employs contrastive text analysis in which it deals with the subordination and coordination of sentences as well as the organization of "discourse bloc". Using a variety of methods: teachers' comments, class observations, student assignments, and case-study data collecting techniques combined by some theory of writing, this study analyzed the students' written products as well as the process through which the students learned a new subject matter and linguistic and rhetorical conventions.

Of approximately sixty students under study, research findings reveal that the students' writing strategies can be basically categorized into five major types: (a) find ideas in Indonesian and write them in English, (b) write all ideas directly in English, resulting in long sentences (to avoid the missing ideas in mind), (c) write all ideas directly in English to let out what is in mind, (d) think in Indonesian when searching for ideas, ask friends to formulate them when finding difficulties in translating the ideas, and (e) try to find Indonesian sentences and/or expressions to translate the ideas in English.

As a result of the implementation of such strategies, Indonesian writers' texts of English have been characterized by indirectness and nonlinear development in that the thesis statement of a given topic is normally approached from a variety of indirectly related views. Accordingly, arguments are often delayed and many statements seem unconnected from the main idea. Using Hinds's (1990) argument, the thesis statement is often buried in the passage. This style involves "delayed introduction purpose" with the topic implied, and not stated. Consequently, from the Western perspective, the writers' rhetoric lacks argumentative coherence (Matalene, 1985).

These findings suggest that learning to write requires the ability to integrate procedural with substantive knowledge, in this case, the students' knowledge of appropriate discourse conventions with their developing knowledge of the system and culture of the target language. In other words, writers need to learn the values, practices and language conventions (see Casanave, 1995).

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Kaplan's study of contrastive rhetoric provided a model of writing for a theory of second language teaching that is more useful in some applications than in others. It is indeed also useful in evaluating second language written products, even though a different model is needed to describe differences in composing processes across cultures. Furthermore, his model helps to describe essays written by college students for school purposes (Connor, 1996).

Despite the so many criticisms addressed to contrastive rhetoric, the time has not yet come to dismiss it as a practical and workable theory of second language writing. The increasing recognition of differing speech patterns due to cultural and regional contexts in sociolinguistics results in the renewed interest in the study of writing across cultures. In 1991 two leading ESL composition experts, Ann Raimés and Iłona Leki, each wrote the importance of contrastive rhetoric as a means of raising awareness among teachers of different L1 backgrounds and the effects of these backgrounds on L2 writing. Raimés (1991) calls for a broader definition of contrastive rhetoric in which students' L1 is shown to be an important resource rather than a hindrance in writing. Leki (1991) takes the position of focusing on the benefits of contrastive rhetoric for ESL teaching.

According to Leki (1991), a writing pedagogy that embraces the textual orientation of contrastive rhetoric will actively foster the students' construction of rhetorical schemata which hopefully correspond to those of English speaking readers. Different from the textual orientation, a process orientation would center on the approach taken for the development of the schemata. The textual orientation suggests that schemata be directly taught while a process orientation would induce the construction of schemata indirectly through student contacts with the target language.

Although a textual orientation appears at a first glance to concern itself primarily with the form, the true and ultimate focus of a textual orientation, and of contrastive rhetoric studies, and an appropriate pedagogical agenda of a textual orientation in writing class will not focus on the form but on the audience. Contrastive rhetoric studies then concern

themselves with the social construction of knowledge within discourse communities. In other words, an appropriate textual pedagogy does not construe the audience simplistically as merely a reader or readers with particular preferences or opinions which must be accommodated by the writer, but rather implies an attempt “to tap into the consensual construction” (Rubin, 1988, p. 28 as cited by Leki, 1991, p. 363) of such matters as how, when, and where a point is established and supported in a text within the discourse target community. Similarly, contrastive rhetoric attempts to articulate the parameters of that consensual construction.

When a very comprehensive and detailed type of analysis is required, however, a different contrastive model is needed for the description of cross-cultural writing in academic and professional situations (Connor, 1996). The traditional contrastive rhetoric framework is no longer able to account for all the data, and an expanded framework is needed. A broader definition that considers cognitive and sociocultural variables of writing, in addition to linguistic variables, has to be included as a substitute for a purely linguistic framework interested in structural analyses of products only.

Internal criticisms such as those mentioned earlier have forced contrastive rhetoricians to go beyond the traditional, linguistic parameters of analysis and consider discourse-level features as well as processes of writing. It has also been pointed out that the nature of writing is now to be viewed as inherently interactive and social. It involves more than the generation, organization, and translation of ideas. It is just contrary to most composition research in which cognitive models of writing describe writing as a discursive process of generating, organizing, and translating ideas into text (Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Contrastive rhetoric then has to move from examining only products to studying processes in a variety of writing situations. It also has to consider the whole texts as dynamic entities (Enkvist, 1987; Brown & Yule, 1983; Connor, 1987).

McKay (1993a, 1993b) points out that many L2 writers bring to the classroom many ways of structuring discourse, interacting with audiences, and valuing knowledge that they have learned in their first language, employing some of these social practices as they write in English. ESL / EFL teachers of writing need to learn about these different traditions by studying traditions of writing in other cultures as well as learning through interviews with other student writers. McKay urges that teachers and students seek to understand different assumptions regarding texts, writers, audiences, and the knowledge that writers can have about writing.

This view of writing is highly relevant for contrastive rhetoric and its implications for the teaching of writing. It emphasizes individual and cultural-societal contributions of writers. It helps explain the diversity that



nonnativeness in writing derives from social and cultural traditions imprinted upon each individual whose writing practices contribute variety to the norm. It is time, therefore, to analyze the outcomes of contrastive analyses of expository prose in order to determine its universals as well as its cross-cultural particulars (Connor, 1996).

## REFERENCES

- Bailey, N., Madden, C. & Krashen, S. D. 1974. Is there a 'Natural Sequence' in adult second language learning? *Language Learning*, 24, 235-243.
- Brown, G. & Yule, G. 1983. *Discourse analysis*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Casanave, C. P. 1995. Local interactions: Constructing contexts for composing in a graduate sociology program. In D. Belcher & G. Brainer (Eds.), *Academic writing in a second language: Essays on research and pedagogy* (pp. 83-110). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Connor, U. 1987. Research frontiers in writing analysis. *TESOL Quarterly* 21/4, 677-696.
- Connor, U. 1996. *Contrastive rhetoric*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Corder, S. P. 1967. The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 5, 161-170.
- Croft, K. 1980. *Readings on English as a second language*. Toronto: Little, Brown and Company (Inc.).
- Dulay, H. & Burt, M. 1974. Natural sequences in child second language acquisition. *Language Learning*, 24, 37-53.
- Enkvist, N.E. 1987. Text linguistics for an applier: An introduction. In U. Connor & Robert B. Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 Text* (pp. 19-43). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Flower, L. S., & Hayes, J. R. 1981. A cognitive process theory of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 32/4, 365-387.
- Hinds, J. 1983. Contrastive rhetoric: Japanese and English. *Text* 3/2, 183-195.
- Hinds, J. 1990. Inductive, Deductive, Quasi-inductive: Expository writing in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai. In U. Connor & A. M. Johns (Eds.), *Coherence in writing: Research and pedagogical perspectives* (pp. 87-110). Alexandria, VA: TESOL, 1990.
- Hunt, E. & Agnoli, F. 1991. The Whorfian hypothesis: A cognitive psychology perspective. *Psychological Review*, 98/3, 377-389.
- Kaplan, R. B. 1966. Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 16, 1-20.

- Kaplan, R. B. 1972. *The Anatomy of rhetoric: Prolegomena to a functional theory of rhetoric*. Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development.
- Kaplan, R. B. 1980. Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. In K. Croft (Eds.), *Readings on English as a second language* (pp. 213-221). Toronto: Little, Brown and Company (Inc.).
- Krashen, S. 1977. Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. In M.K. Burt, H.C. Dulay, & M. Finocchiaro (Eds.), *Viewpoints on English as a second language* (pp. 152-161). New York: Regents Publishing.
- Leki, I. 1991. Twenty-five years of contrastive rhetoric: Text analysis and writing pedagogies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25/1, 123-143.
- Liebman, J. D. 1992. Toward a new contrastive rhetoric: Differences between Arabic and Japanese rhetorical instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 1/2, 141-166.
- Matalene, C. 1985. Contrastive rhetoric: An American writing teacher in China. *College English*, 47/8, 789-808.
- McKay, S. L. 1993a. Examining L2 composition ideology: A look at literacy. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2/1, 65-81.
- McKay, S. L. 1993b. *Agendas for second language literacy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mohan, B. A. & Lo, W.A-Y. 1985. Academic writing and Chinese students: Transfer and developmental factors. *TESOL Quarterly*, 19/3, 515-534.
- Purves, A. C. 1988. Introduction. In A.C. Purves (Ed.), *Writing across languages and cultures: Issues in contrastive rhetoric* (pp. 9-21). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Raimes, A. 1991. Out of the woods: Emerging translations in the teaching of writing. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25/3, 407-430.
- Rubin, D. L. 1988. Introduction: Four dimensions of social construction in written composition. In B.A. Rafoth & D.L. Rubin (Eds.), *The social construction of written communication* (pp. 1-33). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Selinker, L., Swain, M. & Dumas, G. 1975. The Interlanguage hypotheses extended to children. *Language Learning*, 25, 139-155.