

Tobias Lee
Independent Study
Fall 2011

In 2008–9, I taught academic writing in an intensive English program (comprised largely of Asian students) at a community college in Seattle for a year. My course, level five writing, was their last before students “graduated” and began their undergraduate program. Receiving a passing grade in my class, however, was not enough to graduate; the students also had to satisfy the college English department. To do this, they compiled their best essays into a portfolio which was reviewed by English department faculty. If they were accepted, they could begin their college career; if not, they had to repeat level five writing. On average, about 30% of portfolios were accepted.

This was a major problem for all parties concerned. The English department faculty, who did not have ESL training, were uncomfortable with ESL students in their classrooms; their non-negotiable prerequisite was near-native fluency and a facility with the basic elements of (American) composition. The students had limited funding and were dismayed by this seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Our department was frustrated by what seemed to be a fickle and mysterious review process and concerned for the welfare and reputation of our program. Every quarter, meetings were held between our faculty and that of the English department to discuss the process. They were despairingly fruitless. At the time I was leaving, they were debating whether to create a sixth level in our program or, on the English department side, a prerequisite course to English 101. With the economy and our enrollment both suffering, it became messy as each department suspected the other was trying to create more courses for its faculty and both sides indirectly questioned the other’s teaching abilities and practices.

It is an issue that for its complexity resists an easy resolution. Distance and hindsight have brought some clarity, however, and, through this independent study, I have come to see this issue in a larger context, as an inevitable flare-up in the process of globalization. I think these difficulties portend a paradigm shift in academia that will reach across cultural boundaries. I see evidence of progress toward acceptance, equality, and pluralism in the work being done in contrastive (or intercultural) rhetoric, and in the work of Richard Nisbett (2003) and the Suarez-Orozcos (2004).

To describe this larger context, I will discuss how as a result of my studies I have had to modify my understanding of the main sources of difficulty that I have seen students struggling with.

Organizational patterns

Most academic writing textbooks for ESL and EFL students are built on traditional essay organizational patterns; they generally include classification, process, comparison, cause and effect, and argumentative essays. I have taught these patterns at institutions of higher education in Seattle, China, and Oman, and in private tutoring to Chinese and Japanese students.

The first, classification, considered the most basic, asks students to identify and organize discrete elements in a body of information. Such practice seemed second nature to me, so I have been surprised to see even my brightest students struggling as if the concept were completely foreign to them. It was therefore an enlightening experience for me to read in the *The Geography of Thought* (Nisbett 2003) that the tendency to perceive the world in terms of fairly immutable objects with essential properties (that can be easily categorized) is a cultural habit deeply rooted in the history of Western civilization. Asians, for instance, are, as Nisbett shows, more inclined to see *relationships* than categories and *substances* in flux rather than permanent objects. It was indeed a foreign and unnatural concept for them.

With regard to this and the other patterns, I understood that I was to facilitate some movement from not-knowing to knowing, and while I felt prepared with a thorough understanding of the textbook and a good deal of experience working with college-level English language learners, I realize now that I did not fully understand the nature of the difficulty they were having, a fact which limited how effective I could be and placed an undue burden on my students.

Another essay pattern that has presented some difficulty for my students is cause and effect. Students seemed to appreciate this structure with simple examples, but struggled to show a causal relationship in their essays. In the past, I have attributed this solely to their young age and limited experience. Both I and my students would have benefited had I designed my approach with an awareness of the concept of field-dependence, a common feature of Eastern cultures. Nisbett (2003) explains how Westerners tend towards a field-independent view of an object, wherein the object is considered in isolation from its environment. Asians, in contrast, asked to consider the same object, would look at it in terms of its relations to the context. Attributing causality, therefore, becomes a much more complicated endeavor as one takes into account the myriad influences and ever-changing nature of all the elements involved. Asking students to ignore so much of what they perceive and emphasize one or two relationships must have seemed a counter-intuitive and perhaps irresponsible oversimplification.

In the world of basic English composition, the argumentative essay is something of a holy grail for native and nonnative speakers alike. I recall as a student struggling to craft well-supported, sound, valid, and original arguments about current issues like the death penalty and abortion. It is a kind of prerequisite for citizenship in our society, a reflection of our cultural values, an exercise of our privilege and our duty to participate in this country's hallowed tradition of lively debate. But though this may be an elementary observation to Americans, we often fail to remember how culturally-rooted this practice and its form in basic composition are when we ask foreign students to participate. Nisbett (2003) offers a number of insights into Asian culture that an ESL/EFL teacher would do well to take into account in the development of an approach to teaching Western academic writing. He shows that, unlike the Greeks, who, as traders and travelers frequently in confrontation with strangers, valued debate and developed a formal system of logic as a framework to support it, the ancient Chinese civilization, with its predominantly agricultural economy, to live in productive cooperation with nature and each other, developed expedients for harmony like the Confucian maxim of knowing one's role and the Taoist "Middle Way." With this and the aforementioned belief in the inherent complexity of the world as their cultural inheritance, the Western traditions of logic and rhetoric might seem unnatural, over-simplified, or distastefully provocative to Asian students.

The ideal of a unique voice expressing an original argument—a principal tenet of the American argumentative essay—is also shown by many (e.g. Nisbett (2003), Cadman (1997), Pennycook (1996), Ramanathan (1999), and Fan (1989)) to be problematic for foreign students. Nisbett (2003) shows how field-dependent Asian students with cultural roots in Taoism and Confucianism will naturally be disinclined to assert themselves as individuals with a unique viewpoint in their writing. Vai Ramanathan and Dwight Atkinson (1999) underscore the peculiarity and difficulty of what we are asking when they refer to "research [that] indicates that a broad range of the world's peoples conventionally adopt models and norms of communication that are almost diametrically opposed to [the Western model], in that they foreground the *subtle, interpretive, interdependent, non-assertive*, and even *nonverbal* character of communicative interaction." They cite growing criticism of the ideal of voice in the Western model and, by quoting the post-structuralist view that "people have, by their very nature, multiple instead of unitary personalities or *subjectivities*," give me further insight into the source of my students' confusion. Kate Cadman (1997) points out that the tradition of instructing students to follow the traditional rule of avoiding "I" does nothing to elucidate the challenge of developing a voice.

Coherence and cohesion

Another area of academic writing the difficulty of which I have learned is rooted in cultural difference involves the notions of coherence and cohesion. Several authors whom I read

looked at how these aspects of writing differed across cultures. In *Contrastive Rhetoric*, Ulla Connor (1996) offers a survey of these research efforts. Particularly striking for me was the section on Japanese writing (research conducted by John Hinds), which is described as “reader-responsible” and “quasi-inductive.” This is in contrast to the writer-responsible, deductive American style which calls for a simpler and more salient structure. Americans reading a Japanese text might feel that it lacks coherence, and Japanese may be confused by or may lose interest (I imagine) in a text that is all laid out like a manual or nutritional label. In the English language classroom, the teacher should be prepared for backgrounds like this which vary so widely from his own.

I found that cohesion is also changed in reader-responsible cultures. Matthew McCool (2009) notes that, while the progression of ideas in a writer-responsible text follows an “ab bc cd” pattern, reader-responsible texts use an “ab cd ef” pattern. This was another startling revelation for me, for I remember teaching students that the feeling of a natural flow of ideas is effected through an “old information → new information” sentence pattern, with the new information becoming the old information of the next sentence. This was the *natural* way, I informed my students. I feel now that such a stance is akin to sympathetic bigotry.

Summary of implications

This shift in my approach, necessitated by the awareness that I have gained in my research, is the main thing that I am taking away from this independent study. I have a clearer idea of the global landscape of academic writing as well as what it means to teach the American version (indeed, that it is a *version*). I think this shift, this contextualization, will have a positive influence on my effort to help students succeed in the current system. Not only will it enable me to come up with lesson plans and assistance tailored more finely to the students’ needs, but re-orienting the curriculum as a local model rather than the only model will go some distance toward removing the unwarranted hierarchical element from the process of learning English, which I believe can have a stymieing effect on progress.

On a larger scale, I hope that the research that I have been learning about is a sign of a similar shift in academia that will shed light on and correct the maligned balance of power that has become institutionalized in our educational system. Globalization, it seems to me, requires openness and learning from others. We need to move toward a paradigm that enshrines multiple writing models by encouraging learners to develop a facility with more than one. To that end, I hope that this kind of awareness can be made more readily available to and sought out by any individual engaged in multicultural exchange.

Bibliography

- Cadman, K. (1997). Thesis writing for international students: A question of identity? *English for Specific Purposes*, 16(1), 3-14.
- Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second language writing*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Connor, U., Nagelhout, E., & Rozycki, W. (Eds.). (2008). *Contrastive rhetoric: Reaching to intercultural rhetoric*. Amsterdam, NLD: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

- Connor, U. (2002). New directions in contrastive rhetoric. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(4), 493–510.
- Joos, M. (1962). *The five clocks*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Kubota, R. & Lehner, A. (2004). Toward critical contrastive rhetoric. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13, 7–27.
- McCool, M. (2009). *Writing around the world: A guide to writing across cultures*. London, GBR: Continuum International Publishing.
- Nisbett, R. (2003). *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently, and why*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Pennycook, A. (1996). Borrowing others' words: Text, ownership, memory, and plagiarism. *TESOL Quarterly*, 30(2), 201–230.
- Ramanathan, V. & Atkinson, D. (1999). Individualism, academic writing, and ESL writers. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 8(1), 45–75.
- Shen, F. (1989). The classroom and the wider culture: Identity as a key to learning English composition. *College Composition and Communication*, 40(4), 459–466.
- Suarez-Orozco, M. (2004). *Globalization: Culture and education in the new millennium*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Swales, J. & Feak, C. (2004). *Academic writing for graduate students: Essential tasks and skills*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.