From Contrastive to Intercultural Rhetoric: Why Studying Intercultural Rhetoric is Important for MA TESL/TEFL Students

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Abstract

Intercultural rhetoric is an important area of inquiry for applied linguistics, particularly for teachers and researchers in training. A brief history of intercultural/contrastive is outlined, with emphasis on the manners in which intercultural/contrastive rhetoric has informed pedagogical practice. It is argued that IR is an essential topic of inquiry for TESL/TEFL graduate students because it will help to empirically, and critically, guide their developing pedagogical and academic identities.

*Keywords*: contrastive rhetoric, intercultural rhetoric, teacher training
Intercultural rhetoric, or contrastive rhetoric, explores the similarities and differences of discourses across and within different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The subject matter of intercultural rhetoric (IR) is vast and varied; research ranges from the study of computer mediated discourse in multilingual populations to more traditional applied linguistic venues, such as the language classroom. Despite its heterogeneity, IR has been profoundly influential to English language pedagogy. IR examines the contextual nature of language; subsequently, applying research knowledge developed from IR can be conducive to the multicultural and multilingual English as a Second or Foreign Language classrooms (ESL/EFL).

Because IR has a myriad of research methodologies and agendas, and because research in IR has had such a profound influence on ESL/EFL pedagogy, exposure to IR is essential for Teaching English as a Second Language/Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TESL/TEFL) graduate students. In the following short paper, I will describe the evolution of IR since its inception in 1966. I will outline the important ways in which IR has influenced ESL/EFL pedagogy. Finally, I will describe the multifarious research avenues novice academics may explore through IR. It is my argument that IR is an essential topic of inquiry for TESL/TEFL graduate students because it will help to empirically, and critically, guide their developing pedagogical and academic identities.

**History of Contrastive Rhetoric**

Contrastive rhetoric began as an inquiry into addressing the needs of non-native English speaking students in English speaking countries, particularly in ESL writing
classes (Kaplan, 2001). Kaplan (1966) posited the notion that writing and rhetorical style are grounded in a cultural context; that is, particular cultures have particular rhetorical preferences that influence an individual’s second language (L2) writing. During the early years, contrastive rhetoric attempted to study and codify the various rhetorical tendencies based on cultural orientation (Connor, 2002). For example, Kaplan (1966) describes English expository writing as direct and linear, whereas writing in the so-called Oriental languages is described as indirect and circular. This line of research informed pedagogical practices in the English language classroom; teachers with students derived from East Asian countries could, in theory, better understand the particular writing challenges experienced by their students (Connor, 2002).

Critics of contrastive rhetoric argue that the assumptions made by Kaplan (1966) and other subsequent researchers are reductionistic, deterministic, and essentialistic (Kubota & Lehner, 2004). That is, researchers in contrastive rhetoric tend to adopt static notions of culture and discourse that do not represent an individual’s experienced reality. Additionally, critics claim that contrastive rhetoric places too much emphasis on cultural difference, following positivistic methodologies, and the English language as a research paradigm (Kubota & Lehner, 2004). While these assertions are certainly valid, particularly for the early years of contrastive rhetoric, they fail to address the fact that the field has continued to evolve both theoretically and methodologically (Connor, 2005).

Cultural theory in contrastive rhetoric, as in any field of social science, has changed significantly in the past several decades. The use of historical definitions of culture, or what Atkinson (2004) describes as received notions of culture, that rely on national boundaries, fixed ideologies and traditions, and homogeneity have been
challenged and critiqued in the field of applied linguistics, and such critiques have trickled down into the discourse of contrastive rhetoric. Post-structuralist and post-modernist view of cultural flux, complexity, and dynamism have greatly influenced the way in which both culture and language are conceptualized in contrastive rhetoric (Atkinson, 2004). For example, Sharp (2010), in a paper concerning the influence of culture on reading comprehension, defines a culture as a “predisposition to think or act along familiar lines and may represent a centralizing tendency in relation to behavioral or linguistic codes” (p. 473). This definition in no way cements an individual’s culture to a particular national or ethnic background; rather, Sharp (2010) demonstrates an open view of cultural practice to account for many small or sub-cultures that may influence individual tendencies.

Similarly, an epistemological shift in what is considered interesting texts for research has significantly expanded the field. In the beginning, contrastive rhetoric primarily compared ESL/EFL academic texts to native English academic texts for the purposes of informing ESL/EFL pedagogy; however, research interest in contrastive rhetoric has expanded to include a wide variety of different texts not dependent solely on written classroom discourse (Connor, 2002). As stated above, research topics in contrastive rhetoric include a multiplicity of differing discourses, from the language of the World Wide Web to intercultural communication in the business world (Connor, 2002). For example, Seargeant and Tagg (2011) investigate non-native English discourse in online encounters. They argue that traditional linguistic and cultural terminology is unsatisfactory to properly explain the various phenomena they encountered in their research. Computer mediated discourse goes beyond traditional code-switching; it is a
combination of linguistic and semiotic features. That is, non-native English speaker online will utilize a variety of different strategies to communicate using an English dominated digital system.

In congruence with the dynamic theoretical notions of culture and discourse adopted by contrastive rhetoric, new and varied research methodologies were adapted from other social science disciplines to inform the new range of research endeavors in the field (Connor, 2004). Formerly, linguistic text analysis and quantitative research methods dominated contrastive rhetoric; today, multiplicities of methods that display the various research interests of the field are utilized. For example, the ethnographic approach and other qualitative methodologies have become accepted as valid and meaningful research tools for the contrastive rhetorician (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999). These methodologies provide for a depth of understanding that cannot be obtained by quantitative strategies alone. They appeal to a need to understand individual thought processes and opinions about rhetorical styles.

These significant shifts in the field of contrastive rhetoric have prompted a call for a new name for the discipline: Intercultural rhetoric (Connor, 2011). This change in nomenclature is aimed at encompassing all that contrastive rhetoric has evolved into a field that studies a dynamic and inclusive notion of cultures and their rhetorical structures through multiple methodologies (Connor, 2011). While contrastive rhetoric began as an inquiry into the issue of academic writing for the ESL/EFL classroom and was certainly helpful in informing pedagogical practices, the expansion of contrastive rhetoric into IR has had an even more consequential effect on the discipline of TESL/TEFL; that is, the multiple research interests and multiple research methods better inform teachers’
perceptions of their students’ cultures and language learning experiences, not just pedagogical practices (Connor, 2011).

**Intercultural Rhetoric and Teachers/Researchers in Training**

As teachers and researchers in training, students in MA TESL/TEFL programs need to not only to acquire useful pedagogical methodologies, but also develop awareness to the particular experiences and challenges that their students face learning another language. According to Connor (2011), “intercultural rhetoric helps examine the accommodation that readers, writers, exhibit in communication;” that is, IR gives TESL/TEFL practitioners a better understanding of the linguistic and cultural issues students face in the classroom.

Research from IR has also provided insight into teaching strategies that not only helps students negotiate meaningful identities in the target language/culture, but also helps them to develop critical writing strategies. Casanave (2004) argues that using methods developed for research in IR—such as text analysis—illuminates the contextual nature of writing for students. Casanave (2004) suggests that teachers facilitate this approach by having students compare the similarities and differences in discourse structure of texts in their first language and texts in the target language. Matsuda (1997) argues that strategies such as these increase student agency as writers.

Kubota and Lehner (2005) also attest to the importance of increased student agency through their suggestion of critical contrastive rhetoric. Critical contrastive rhetoric calls for encouraging students to critically reflect on how their writing styles in the first and target language are formed and have changed through time (Kubota and
Lehner, 2005). The authors argue that a critical and reflective eye will help students to resist assimilative tendencies in the educational system while, at the same time, appropriate discourses of power (Kubota & Lehner, 2005).

An example that combines Kubota and Lehner’s conceptualization of the critical with Matsuda and Casanave’s text analysis is the work of Starfield (2004). Starfield (2004) explains the benefits of corpus linguistics to illuminate rhetorical structures in academic disciplines to international students in graduate school. By linguistically deconstruct published academic papers in terms of discourse strategies, the students learned how to appropriate powerful rhetorical devices to help structure their dissertations. The author noted that not only were these students successful in creating academic papers, but they also found the experience empowering because it gave them learning tools to use in the future.

As previously stated, IR embraces a wide range of research methods and topics; subsequently, there are many opportunities for teachers and researchers in training to develop their research interests. Connor (2004) summarizes the many different research models currently used in IR; these models range from the more traditional methods of text analysis, to ethnographic methods and corpus analysis. It is reasonable to believe that any MA student with an interest in writing or rhetoric will be able to find a research niche in IR.

**Conclusion**

The journey from contrastive rhetoric to intercultural rhetoric has been insightful and controversial. Major shifts in the epistemological understanding of culture, identity,
and empirical research has greatly influenced how IR carries out research and develops pertinent theory. The study of IR is imperative to teachers and researchers in training because it not only provides methodologies that account for the development of student identity and agency as target language users, but also provides ample opportunities for meaningful research.
References


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