

Nastia's "Mark on the Wall"
Contrastive Rhetoric-Cultural Studies and the International Student Writer

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Cynthia L. Selfe
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Dear Chair Selfe:

We are submitting our 1997 CCCC paper presentation entitled “Nastia’s ‘Mark on the Wall’: Contrastive Rhetoric-Cultural Studies and the International Student Writer.”

This presentation juxtaposes contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies with practical composition classroom applications to assist composition teachers in more efficiently instructing and empowering international and L2 students. Contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies expand the conventional boundaries of writing and at the same time educate instructors on the most effective ways of teaching students. Contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies help teachers and students to

1. Understand the reasons for the organization and focal strategies international and L2 students use.
2. Promote the tolerance of diverse, rhetorical, cultural patterns that work well.

Teachers who incorporate contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies can empower their international students as writers by trying to understand the cultural, rhetorical patterns that they use, helping them to see alternatives in writing rather than promoting the English rhetorical pattern as the only valid cultural perspective.

We gratefully acknowledge our own international students and those teachers on our campus who have been our initial audience and primary sources. We hope this report will be helpful to you and meet the demands of the conference.

Sincerely,

Rodney D. Keller

Darin L. Hammond

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Summary

Teachers often express frustrations with having international students in their freshman composition classes. Teachers are perplexed with what they assume to be unusual behaviors and are uncertain how to respond to writings that are often significantly different from their native students. Some frustrating international student behaviors that concern two-year college teachers are exemplified through the use of Ricks College Eastern European international students.

This presentation juxtaposes contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies with practical composition classroom applications to assist composition teachers in more efficiently instructing and empowering international and L2 students. Contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies expand the conventional boundaries of writing and at the same time educate instructors on the most effective ways of teaching students. Contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies help teachers and students to

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Contrastive Rhetoric-Cultural Studies and the International Student Writer

Introduction

Teachers often express frustrations with having international students in their freshman composition classes. Teachers are perplexed with what they assume to be unusual behaviors and are uncertain how to respond to writings that are often significantly different from their native students. Some frustrating international student behaviors that concern two-year college teachers are exemplified through the following Eastern European students.

Nastia fights back tears as she receives a B- on her writing assignment--hard stuff for someone with a 3.7 GPA. The teacher comments that the paper relies on generalities and lacks both focus and personal involvement. For the entire class period she keeps her eyes focused on her desk to keep from looking at the teacher. In another class, Maggie receives back her first freshman composition and reads the grade B+; she immediately leaves the room in tears.

Slava constantly blurts out his comments and questions--he assumes the teacher is in the classroom only for him. He wants to answer every question. He refuses to work in any peer group. Instead of participating in the group, Slava follows his teacher around the room as she interacts with individuals using his small Walkman to record everything she says. The teacher tells him these comments won't help because they are not directed towards his paper, but he continues to record her (Boyle, 1996).

Vadim also asks frequent questions in his writing class. He is confident in his academic abilities and is assertive in getting his questions answered. He's driven academically. His teacher claims he is a "brown-noser" who comes to her office frequently. Most of the time he wants her to tell him exactly what to do on a paper. She recognizes that he is good at making generalizations, but he has difficulties pinning things down. He is an excellent writer, she says, especially concerning mechanics and grammar, and he is easily getting an A from her class (although he has the highest grade in the class, he is the only one who has already insisted on and has done extra-credit), but on his previous paper he has received a C+ because his ideas are general and lack specifics--the teacher allows him to rewrite the paper and suggests he go to the writing center (Grover, 1996).

The writing center sees Vadim often during the semester, but the director says he is rude and belligerent, especially with peer tutors. He insists on being helped immediately rather than set appointments, he interrupts other tutoring sessions, and he often refuses to consider tutor's suggestions. The director has had to step in and talk to him--he is always respectful to her, but he still insists that his needs be met immediately. A tutor once suggested that a paragraph was weak and said she would help him come up with ideas to strengthen it. Vadim then declared that if the tutor wouldn't fix it, then the paragraph wasn't weak, and he would do nothing to change it (Papworth, 1996).

And finally, Alexandr goes to the writing center at his teacher's suggestion. The peer writes this report of the visit:

Alexandr came into the center with his paper which was due in 30 minutes. He basically didn't want my opinion. I told him that parts of his paper contradicted

other parts. He argued that it didn't matter. When I told him I felt his paper was confusing and lacked integrity, he wanted me to 'fix' the problem for him. I felt this was his responsibility, and tried to get this across to him in a tactful way. His thesis did not have any connection to his paper. We focused on rewording the thesis to fit what he was trying to prove. Because of his attitude and time constraints, we were limited in what we could do. (Papworth, 1996)

These student profiles are frustrating for teachers, and obviously the students are also frustrated. Teachers need not only to be perceptive to what's going on with their students, but they also need to know how to assist them. Many of these difficulties are deep-bedded within both teacher's and students' cultural backgrounds and approaches to learning, thinking, and writing which conflict with conventions of academic discourse and rhetorical thought patterns in the United States.

Therefore to help international students and writing teachers to recognize, diagnose, and solve these conflicts, it is important to apply both cultural studies and contrastive rhetoric to these unique students. We will first describe contrastive rhetoric generally before directly applying it and cultural studies to our international students and their writing. Although we focus on Eastern European students, these principles relate to other international and second language students.

Rhetorical thought patterns, as described by Robert B. Kaplan in his discussions of contrastive rhetoric, exist because "different languages implicate different organizational expectations in written text and demand different types of inferences" (Grabe and Kaplan, 1989, p. 264). Each culture has unique, specific patterns of communicating and relating written

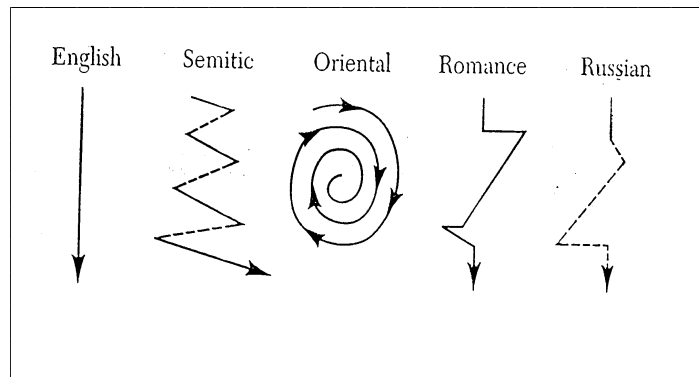
information. Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric can be useful in helping international students write more effectively if instructors can resist the temptation to oversimplify or overemphasize rhetorical patterns. Understanding that different cultures use different patterns of thinking and writing can help instructors to better assist students coming from unique cultures.

Contrastive Rhetoric's Origin

To place teacher response to student papers within this context, an understanding of contrastive rhetoric is necessary. The study of contrastive rhetoric grew out of an article that Robert B. Kaplan wrote in 1966 called "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education" (p. 1). In this study, Kaplan worked with about 600 student essays that were written in L2 English (essays written in English by students whose first language is something other than English). While Kaplan's work was not strictly scientific or comprehensive, it was ground breaking because the work opened up an entire new field of study (Leki, 1991, p. 123), one that offered new possibilities for the teachers of L2 students.

Contrastive rhetoric describes the influence of culture and society on rhetorical strategies in writing. In studying the L2 writing of these students, Kaplan found that the students who grew up in similar cultures, speaking similar languages, tended to use rhetorical patterns that were related, similar systems of organization and form that facilitate communication within the culture. A rhetorical pattern originates in the organizational dynamics of communication, between speaker/writer and audience/reader, within a given culture. Contrastive rhetoric, then, is the study of the similarities and differences among cultural, rhetorical patterns. Kaplan sensed that a great deal of the writing process is heavily influenced by society and culture and that L2

students transfer unique rhetorical patterns to their writing in English, presenting structures and organizations that are different from those used in English.



1 Kaplan's Contrastive Rhetoric Diagrams

In an attempt to illustrate how different cultures conceive and organize

written texts, Kaplan composed simplified diagrams, the figures in his original article, illustrating how these cultural rhetorics might be visualized. Kaplan suggested that the rhetorical, cultural pattern that

English uses in writing is primarily linear, while other cultures (he describes Slavic, Oriental and Germanic) typically use non-linear rhetorical patterns. Confining these rhetorics statically in discrete diagrams obviously oversimplifies the cultures, and opponents often use this as ammunition to destroy the theory. Ilona Leki warns against the dismissal of contrastive rhetoric based upon the diagrams saying,

Kaplan meant his work to be exploratory, but perhaps because these little diagrams are so clear and simple, they have led some teachers and students directly to the wrong-headed notion that rhetorical patterns reveal innate thought processes of other cultures. (1992, p. 89)

Leki correctly indicates that Kaplan's work was an exploration, and his intent was not to present static, inborn patterns of thought within cultures but to describe how the cultures influence the rhetorics of the societies. As an innovator on the cusp of creating a new field, Kaplan fell into

the trap of oversimplifying a complex interaction between writer and culture, a problem that time and further research would remedy.

Contrastive Rhetoric and Pedagogy

As a result of the recent, extensive research that lends support to contrastive rhetoric, the theory has become widely accepted among L2 scholars and instructors (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989, p. 265), but the question now is "how do we apply this theory in the composition classroom?" Ann Raimes suggests that contrastive rhetoric implicates us as teachers and our culture stating,

The thicket that contrastive rhetoric presents for teachers as they wander into the woods of theory is the question of the value of prescribing one form of text--English form--not just as an alternative, but as the one privileged form of text, presented as the most logical and desirable, with which other learned systems interfere (1991, p. 418).

As composition instructors, we walk a tenuous line between helping our L2 international students write well in an academic discourse community and inculcating our own rhetorical pattern, promoting it as the best and most logical. We should recognize that the rhetorical pattern we teach and use is only one of many cultural thought patterns and that ours is an alternative rather than a superior pattern.

Scholars have taken the extended vision of writing and culture and incorporated it into the foundation upon which composition pedagogy is constructed, a part of the social constructivist view of language and writing. Kaplan embellishes L2 composition pedagogy by constructing some objectives for working with L2 students. He states that six objectives in instructing L2 students are:

To make the learner of composition aware:

1. That audience must be defined before composing can be undertaken. . . .

2. That there are a number of different writing acts. . . .
3. That there are strategies for text organization that conform to coherence systems in the target language. . . .
4. That there are certain writing conventions in the target language. . . .
5. That, to compose anything, the learner must possess and be able to bring to bear on the composing task a universe of knowledge (including world and specialist knowledge). . . .
6. That, finally, writing is a social phenomenon--a technique for negotiating meaning with some other (identifiable set of) individuals--requiring more than minimal syntactic and lexical control of the target language. (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989, pp. 276-77)

Diversity and cultural complexity underlie these objectives. Kaplan pragmatically applies the implications of contrastive rhetoric to the composition classroom without oversimplifying or stereotyping the students, focusing on the aspects of the English rhetorical pattern as an alternative, audience driven way of writing. Learning to write in English for an academic audience becomes an expanding rather than a limiting experience, the writer incorporating different writing skills into his or her writing repertoire. The instructor must also develop her or his skills as a reader of the students' writing, each party in the communicative team capitulating in an attempt to understand one another efficiently. The instructor assists the student in communicating with a new audience, using style, form, usage, and organization as tools, and the students help the instructor to appreciate a new audience by maintaining and enhancing his or her personal voice and cultural identity.

Cultural Studies

With a general knowledge of rhetorical patterns and contrastive rhetoric, the instructor can also apply cultural studies for a more specific understanding of each international student's behavior and writing. Cultural studies may take many diverse forms, but it does not need to be complicated--good news for overworked two-year college writing instructors with limited resources. Writing instructors may informally study a student's culture by talking with a fellow teacher on campus who has had cultural experience with a particular group, talking with the campus L2 director, and most simply and effectively talking with their own international students--invaluable resources.

We will now describe how we've applied cultural studies and contrastive rhetoric to our Eastern European students introduced at the beginning. We will organize this discussion by classroom behavior and writing situations. Our resources are Vaun Waddell a two-year college writing instructor who recently spent a year teaching in Ukraine, Greg Hazard our campus L2 director, and students.

Teacher Authority

Remember that Slava blurts out his comments and questions assuming the teacher is there only for him. Slava follows the teacher with his Walkman recording all she says. Vadim also monopolizes the class discussion with his frequent questions and extended comments. Both students spend a lot of time in their teachers' offices wanting to know "exactly what they need to do" on an assignment. Both Vadim and Slava are respectful to their teachers, but the teachers also suspect "brown-nosing."

Vaun Waddell (1996) provides insights to these behaviors through his university experience in Ukraine. He claims that their system of education is really a no-system. The students who have been admitted to the university are those who are bright, even geniuses, or those who have money to bribe their way in. There are no course objectives, no course outlines, or syllabi. There are no handouts (Waddell spent half a month's salary to have a handout done for one of his classes). There are no quizzes and no exams except for a final exam that is given at the end of each year. In the case of literature, for example, the students will go into a room with five or six documents turned over. They select one, have twenty minutes to read it and take notes. Then the student goes to the teacher for an oral exam. No one essentially fails the exam because the university has admitted them, and they don't want to admit that they may have made a mistake or the person hasn't measured up--they all pass. The exam is purely subjective. The teacher has complete authority.

Consequently, Vadim and Slava recognize their American writing teachers' professional and classroom authority and focus their attention directly on the teacher. In their previous

education, evaluation has been subjective, dependent upon the individual teacher. Therefore, they continue now to learn “exactly what the teacher wants.” They want the teacher to tell them specifically what they need to accomplish. Greg Hazard, the L2 director, (1996) admits that American teachers often view Eastern European students as arrogant, challenging, and tactless, forthright. Their educational system has separated them from other blue-collar type careers and steered them toward university studies. Within their system, university students are encouraged to challenge teachers. It’s important to note that when they challenge, they are not challenging the teacher’s authority or knowledge (as our American teachers perceive them to do), but rather they are wanting teachers to stand up for and to clarify their professional beliefs. Questioning becomes an avenue for learning. They are not confrontational (they just lack tact), but they are pushing for knowledge.

Vadim also openly admits his need to question. In a synthesis paper he writes the following paragraph (this paragraph also portrays the tendency to generalize without specific detail):

We need to question things in life. People often belittle the thoughtful questioning of things, because they believe it is not very important. Also one of the reasons for that may be that some of us are not able to think critically. Questioning things in life is not waste of our time, as some think, but rather an efficient use of time. It is an indicator of our interest in something. Not having questions indicates a person’s low intellectual abilities. Relying on someone else’s knowledge is the easiest thing people can do, so we do it. We do it because we claim that we are too busy with other things. But are the things that we

are too busy with more important than acquiring knowledge? Probably not. (Grover, 1996)

Peer Interaction

This dependence on teacher authority also explains why Slava refuses to work within a peer group or why Vadim and Alexandr cause contention for writing center tutors. The tutors and peers have no authority over them and do not evaluate their papers--they assume that responding to and evaluating writing is purely subjective, thereby being a waste of time for input from anyone but the teacher. Hazard also admits that seldom will an Eastern European go to the writing center primarily they are so busy that they don't want to slow down and do what the writing center suggests they do. They are more concerned with the finished product than they are with the process (doesn't that sound like most of our students?). If there's something "wrong" with their paper, they want it fixed now so they can go on to something else. These students like to push themselves and to push others, even to the point that they sense they're barely staying above water.

Waddell, however, clarifies that Eastern European students do work in groups in Ukraine, but for a different purpose. The students are admitted to school in groups, and as groups they do all the work, all the reading, all the writing--there is no individual ownership of work; therefore, plagiarism doesn't really exist--they simply do what they need to do to get the work done as a group, and the teachers are not checking on originality but on content. So their group work is to achieve a common goal of accomplishing a single task for a teacher and not for an on-going process to learn and to write.

Grade Disappointment

Our Eastern European students are visibly and deeply hurt by what they consider to be poor grades. These students often represent the best, the brightest of their educational system--they have always received high grades. However, Waddell points out that their school system has little concept of general education. In the younger grades there is emphasis on subjects such as writing and math, but most students haven't had a writing or math class since they were 13 or 14. There are no composition classes in the secondary or post-secondary schools. So these international students are coming to us without recent, formal writing instruction, and writing is difficult for them. And Hazard continues to explain that Eastern European students in the United States are often incredibly success oriented, especially regarding grades. Most of them are also on academic scholarships while maintaining heavy course loads (usually 17-20 credits). So grades not only give them a tangible indication of their success but also become a financial responsibility that allows them to remain in the U.S. to study--no wonder they become teary-eyed with a B+.

Writing Generalizations

With these cultural understandings, teachers can now focus on the students' writing and contrastive rhetoric. Nastia's, Vadim's, and Slava's teachers each identify the single most frustration they have with these Eastern European's writings--the emphasis on generalities and lack of focus and specific examples. American academic teachers expect a single, clear point and examples to illustrate that point. Hazard says these students give great general overviews of a topic, but they have a hard time with specific thesis statements. Much of that is cultural. They do not want to be disrespectful by stating the obvious to the reader. They assume that intelligent

people will come to general conclusions, and only unsophisticated people need to have things spelled out for them.

And Nastia herself provides insights into her own writing and thinking process that reveals her lack of focus and emphasis on generalities. She, like the other Eastern European students, has been very frustrated with her own writing and with her teacher's responses. For example, when Nastia's teacher brings up her generalities and lack of focus in her writings, Nastia makes a connection which reveals something to both her and her teacher. That day they had read Virginia Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall." This story is often frustrating for most native students because it is classic stream of consciousness. But Nastia expresses how beautiful the story is because it's like she thinks and writes. Woolf also uses ellipsis points to have the reader continue on with the thought without providing the concluding thought. (The story is about a woman looking at a spot on the wall and goes on and on with whatever pops into her mind about the history of the wall, the life cycle of a tree used for lumber in the wall, what that spot could be, . . . only to discover at the end it's a small snail on the wall.) Nastia was so taken with the idea that she was able to get into someone else's mind that she didn't care where it was taking her but she wanted to just go along for the ride. Nastia then said that's how she writes in her journal—not about an event, but she just lets her mind go and writes whatever is there. She then reveals this is the type of writing she has done in Ukraine. She received good grades for her paper content (which she said gave general overviews) but poor grades for grammar, and here in the U.S. she gets good grades for grammar but poor grades for content (Nikiforova, 1996).

Nastia and her teacher use this experience to examine Nastia's writing again. The teacher illustrates the straightforward American academic approach as one method of idea development

and then illustrates Nastia's equally viable approach to acceptable writing in Eastern Europe but inappropriate for the U.S. college. Nastia with this visual concept is now able to revise her paper to have a specific point and specific examples to meet her American audience's expectations.

By juxtaposing contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies with practical composition classroom applications, nuances of alternatives readily appear, assisting composition teachers to more efficiently instruct and empower international and L2 students. Contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies expand the conventional boundaries of writing and at the same time educate instructors on the most effective ways of teaching students. Contrastive rhetoric and cultural studies help teachers and students to

1. Understand the reasons for the organization and focal strategies international and L2 students use.
2. Promote the tolerance of diverse, rhetorical, cultural patterns that work well.

These Eastern European students' instructors can empower them as writers by trying to understand the cultural, rhetorical patterns that they use, helping them to see alternatives in writing rather than promoting the English rhetorical pattern as the only valid cultural perspective. Maxine Hairston insists that we have our classes become culturally inclusive rather than exclusive. She says we can do this by "focusing on the experience of our students":

They are our greatest multicultural resource, one that is authentic, rich and truly diverse. Every student brings to class a picture of the world in his or her mind that is constructed out of his or her cultural background and unique and complex experience. As writing teachers, we can help students articulate and understand that experience, but we also have the important job of helping every writer to understand that each of us sees the world

through our own particular lens, one shaped by unique experiences. In order to communicate with others, we must learn to see through their lenses as well as try to explain to them what we see through ours. (1996, p. 538)

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