

How Much of an Accent? Toward a Model of Contrastive Rhetoric for Writing Centre Tutors

Asif Siddiqui

MacEwan University, Canada

Abstract

This essay builds on research within Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) and other areas to delineate the main attributes and broad features of a model to help writing center tutors decide the kind of role they should play with second language (L_2) acquisition of their clients. The main attributes of such a model would be as follows. The clients' discourse-level CR patterns as manifested through first language (L_1) and original culture are the dependent variable. There are three intervening variables: 1) the role of the tutor; 2) client agency; and, 3) contextual factors (client's language skills, audience and requirements of the discipline). The independent variable is the level of accent in L_2 output. This is just the preliminary research outlining the main characteristics of the model based on work experience and the literature. The full development and testing of the model will have to come at a later point.

Key words: acculturation, contrastive rhetoric, ESL, language acquisition, writing centers

INTRODUCTION

Contractive Rhetoric (CR) is generally traced back to an article by Robert Kaplan (1966) titled “Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education.” In this article, Kaplan (1987) tried to show how languages differ and the way this was affecting the writing of college students in America whose first language was not English. He made simple graphic drawings to illustrate these differences – hence, it came to be known as the “doodles article.” These “doodles” can be described as the path the writing took in getting to the main point being made – very directly or very indirectly or some manner in-between (or even, conceivably, not at all). Although there were syntactic differences at the level of the discrete sentence (and also at the levels of the word and the phrase), he minimized these. For Kaplan (1987), the most important distinctions were at what he called the rhetorical level – that is, the level of organization of the whole text. Over the decades, CR has evolved into the study of how a person’s first language and culture affect their acquisition of subsequent languages, and why people often both speak and write with an “accent” in their second and later languages (Severino, 2009, 57).

The purpose of this essay is to help writing centre tutors understand some of the main factors that contribute to an accent in second language (L₂) output. This is of particular importance to tutors because a piece of L₂ writing that has been sufficiently influenced by the client’s first language (L₁) and culture to look very different from that of native speakers is often viewed as deficient by the reader, usually a university professor (Silva, 2001). The main job of tutors is to work with clients, whether they are native speakers or second

language learners, to become more proficient writers in accordance with their needs and course goals. So, tutors and clients need to negotiate how much of an accent is to be left in a written work.

This paper is based on my experience as a tutor at the Centre for Writers (C4W) at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. Although 20% of the campus population is composed of international students, approximately 50% of C4W clients are students whose L_1 is not English. This situation is not atypical for many universities across Canada and the United States. Hence, although the model being developed in this study is from Canada, it is applicable to all of North America. And, given the large number of international students that are expected to be coming to North America in coming years, the saliency of the model being developed can only be expected to increase in the foreseeable future.

This paper uses CR as its starting point to outline the main attributes of a model illustrating how L_1 and original culture could potentially influence L_2 writing so that tutors can better understand their role in the process. The title of this piece clearly indicates it to be only preliminary research working “toward a model.” Parsimony dictates that only the likely main factors and probable relationships between them will be outlined. Hence, this is just the first step in developing a full model and testing it, which will have to be done at a later point.

The main attributes of a model to be further developed in the future will be as follows. The clients’ discourse-level CR patterns as manifested through L_1 and original culture are the dependent variable. There are three intervening variables: 1) the role of the tutor; 2) client agency; and, 3) contextual factors (client’s language skills, audience, and requirements of the discipline), which might indicate that the reason for unusual L_2 writing might be due to factors other than L_1 or

How Much of an Accent?

original culture. The independent variable is the level of accent in written L₂ output. As noted, for the purposes of this study, the level of accent can be seen in how far the rhetorical style of argument within a paper deviates from Canadian norms. Common errors found in L₂ writing (such as articles, conjunctions, word choice, and subject/verb agreement) are far less important in this lexicon. How or even whether or not to deal with the accent will depend on the salience of the different intervening variables. Each of these variables will be discussed in turn.

A caveat is necessary before proceeding. As the criticism levelled against Kaplan's formulation of CR makes clear, it is very difficult to develop theories and models outside of a controlled, natural science laboratory. Whenever human beings are involved, heroic leaps of faith and suspension of belief are necessary in positing causality in an extremely complex world. Yet, models and theories continue to be developed in almost every part of academia. Why? Put simply, theories and models provide heuristic and intuitive insights that simplify reality to help people understand very complex situations. In fact, they are better than the real thing. For example, it is relatively easy to understand how to get from one subway station to another by using a map. It is a far more elegant solution of determining the planned route than taking the entire subway and putting it in one's trouser back pocket (which is impossible, of course). In sum, theories and models can be very useful for scholars in the development of their ideas. It is also possible that over the course of time, with greater research, causal mechanisms will become better understood with stronger evidence to support them. This is the way that scholarship has been pushed forward for much of human history both inside academia and out. With this caveat in place, it is now possible to proceed.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: DISCOURSE LEVEL CR PATTERNS

This section will serve as both a discussion of the dependent variable, the CR patterns at the discourse level and a literature review. There are five works that are necessary to understand the development of CR in the field. Although Kaplan's piece is generally considered the starting point of CR, it actually builds on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. So, literature on both ideas will be examined. The criticism levelled against Kaplan's formulation by John Hinds and Ryuko Kubota will be presented. Finally, Ulla Connor's defense of a modified version of CR will be discussed. Cumulatively, these works outline both the strengths and weaknesses of CR.

In order to understand the foundation upon which Kaplan's CR is built, it is necessary to go back to *Language, Thought, and Reality* by Benjamin Whorf (1956). The ideas underpinning the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis originated in this book. The basic concept underlying this principle is that each language has its very own set of rhetorical conventions. These conventions impact on the way that people think and write in those cultures. The strong version of the hypothesis is that language determines thoughts and perceptions. The weaker version merely states that language influences thought. The word "hypothesis" suggests that Whorf and (his professor) Sapir felt the weaker rendering might be more accurate. However, Whorf never used the word "hypothesis" in his writing. Instead, John Carroll, who wrote the introduction to the book did so. In fact, both Whorf and Sapir supported the strong interpretation of their conceptualization.

Kaplan (1966) picked up on this when writing "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education." His motivation was to find an

How Much of an Accent?

immediate solution to a pedagogical problem. He wanted L₂ undergraduate students to write to expected conventions, especially at the paragraph level. There is an assumption of a negative transfer from L₁ to L₂ that is the cause of the problem. Although Edward Sapir is cited in Kaplan's seminal piece, Kaplan was not interested in the philosophical connections between language, thought and reality. Rather, it was the textual and pedagogical concerns that were of far greater interest to him. His formulation was descriptive, rather than predictive. Several different culturally-based rhetorical patterns were delineated, and "doodles" of circles, zigzags, and straight lines were used to illustrate them. Many saw his work as an elegant way of understanding intuitively compelling truths, and expanded his work to other areas and languages (Ostler, 1987; Kassabgy, Ibrahim, & Aydelott, 2004). Others saw his work as over-generalizing and reductionist (Kowal, 1998). Nearly twenty years after "doodles," Kaplan (1987) acknowledged that some of his original claims might have been naïve or too strong. Even so, Kaplan felt that the basic notion of preferred orders in discourse varying across cultures remained valid.

Hinds (1983) was one of the first to point to flaws in Kaplan's argument. Hinds' starting point was that there were many reasons that nonnative speakers could have problems in writing English that have nothing to do with L₁ negative transfer. Reasons for difficulty could be that readers have different expectations having nothing to do with rhetorical organization. For Hinds, the problem could potentially be resolved by simply telling a Japanese writer not to expect the reader to read too much into anything since communication is the responsibility of the writer. It might also be the case that the writer is not very talented in L₂, and that is the reason for problems. Hinds, furthermore, added that Kaplan's categorization of languages was inappropriate.

Kaplan used the term “Oriental” for four different language families, but inexplicably left out Japanese from the category. Hinds also felt it was ethnocentric on Kaplan’s part to represent English prose in a straight line, and demonstrated that it was not always linear as Kaplan posited. These would form the basis of future attacks on CR by other scholars.

Kubota (1997) criticized both Hinds and Kaplan based on the research she did on L₁-L₂ transfer among Japanese university students in America. Both Hinds and Kaplan had argued that a rhetorical structure called *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* was the prevalent norm in Japanese writing. In fact, Kubota, a native speaker of Japanese who had moved to North America, argued that such a characterization was simply incorrect. Some Japanese students had learned the structure, others had barely heard of it. The presumed Japanese homogeneity plainly did not exist. Additionally, some of the students had poor skills in L₁. This was contributing to the problem of improving at L₂. In sum, Kubota argued there were many reasons for poor performance in L₂. CR could not explain them all and had limited utility.

The strongest defense in light of these attacks on CR came from Connor (1997). She is bilingual in English and Finnish, and this enabled her to personally analyze texts in different languages. She broke from Kaplan’s original work in two main respects. She did not accept the strong version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (something that Kaplan himself has also done). Second, she was interested in text analysis, and not the philosophical and cognitive underpinnings of CR. So, she pointed out the differences in topical, linguistic, and structural aspects of texts. She also acknowledged that L₂ output could “result from many factors besides linguistic, rhetorical and cognitive ones, such as schooling and writing instruction (p. 202).” She argued that despite its weaknesses, CR is still a relatively new field that could

How Much of an Accent?

potentially hold many benefits for L₂ scholars. In essence, she has been trying to move CR away from charges of reductionism and ethnocentrism, so that teachers (and tutors) can understand the many sources of difficulty that students might have in learning another language.

This essay builds on the above works and is a first attempt to start filling a gap in the literature. Some early work has been done on how CR can inform writing center tutors and help them in deciding the kind of role they should play with the L₂ acquisition of their clients (Madsuda & Cox, 2009). However, there is no model to help with understanding how the original culture's and L₁'s effect on L₂ production is mediated by the writing center tutor, client agency and other salient factors. This research is providing some theoretical underpinnings and delineating the main components of a future model that is to be developed based on CR research with the ultimate aim of helping tutors and clients negotiate the way L₂ acquisition proceeds.

INTERVENING VARIABLE 1: THE WRITING CENTRE TUTOR

Paul Kei Madsuda and Michelle Cox (2009) have done some preliminary work on the role a writing centre tutor can play in the L₂ acquisition of their clients. Their work is based on that of Carol Severino (1993) dealing with strategies that teachers can take toward their students in developing L₂ skills. Severino outlined three broad approaches: assimilationist (from L₁ composition); accommodationist (from sociolinguistics); and, separatist (from ethnic studies). To this can be added Min-Zhan Lu's (1992) conflict and struggle approach. Each of the four roles that the tutor can play will be discussed in turn.

The first potential role to be played is that of assimilationist. Severino (1993) describes it thus: “The most extreme assimilationist response to second language or second dialect writing would be to encourage the student to write linear, thesis-statement and topic-sentence-driven, error-free, and idiomatic academic English as soon as possible. The goal is to smoothly blend or melt into the desired discourse communities and avoid social stigma by controlling any features that in the eyes of audiences with power and influence might mark a writer as inadequately educated or lower class (p. 187).” It is important to note that from Severino’s view, an assimilationist is not motivated so much by ethnocentric concerns but by trying to be as helpful to the client as possible. From the tutor’s standpoint, deficiencies and differences are seen as errors to be corrected (Matsuda & Cox, 2007, 45).

The role of accommodationist is a more equal partnership where both the tutor and the client have agency in determining how to proceed. Severino (1993, 89) calls this the compromise position, and the best result is where the student is able to pick up the skills to function in the L₂ environment while not losing any of their original spoken and written discourse patterns. This means rhetorical repertoires are enlarged and to be used for different occasions. The tutor, in this perspective, would like to let the client know about different discourses and how some readers might see the differences as deficiencies. Ultimately, it is up to the client as to how much of their “accent” they would like to keep (Matsuda & Cox, 2009, 45).

The separatist stance is a very confrontational one. Severino (1993) argues that taking this position often means the teacher thinks assimilationist responses are unjust and colonialist. Furthermore, language minorities should not have to change or adapt in order to gain educational and economic opportunities. From the tutor’s

How Much of an Accent?

perspective, separatism is a means to further move the client away from writing like a native speaker of English. More than that, tutors would like the readers to be more open to other texts (Madsuda & Cox, 2009, 45).

Lu's (1992) conflict and struggle stance builds on the separatist position. In her view, struggle helps shape language and is something to be cherished. As she puts it: "we need to find ways of foregrounding conflict and struggle not only in the generation of meaning or authority, but also in the teaching of conventions of "correctness" in syntax, spelling, and punctuation ... (p. 910)." This is not just separating from the mainstream, but in fact pushing one's life experience rhetorical discourse upon it.

The position taken in this essay is that the role taken by the tutor should be done after speaking with the client and determining what is most suitable. This might mean that the tutor is not doing what he or she thinks is best for the client. However, the position of the tutor should be that the "client is king." It is the client that decides how the tutor is to proceed.

INTERVENING VARIABLE 2: THE CLIENT

The agency of writing centre clients is an underexplored area. Not much has been done aside from admonishing tutors to be very careful not to appropriate (Severino, 2009) others' work (or, do the work for them). However, many of the clients are immigrants or similar to immigrants. Theories and models have been developed in this area that can also be applied to the agency of clients when they visit a writing centre. John Berry (2003) has developed a framework on immigrants that very much mirrors the work of Severino (1993) above.

Berry (2009) posits that the immigrant community members can follow four strategies when it comes to dealing with the larger group. Those members who wish to maintain their ethnic identity can follow a strategy of integration or separation. Integrated members want to maintain some measure of their ethnic identity, but also want to take on some characteristics of the new society. This is similar to the accommodationist position discussed above. Separated individuals want to keep themselves apart from the main society. And, if the separation is forced, this can be called segregation. This is similar to the separatist position that a tutor can take.

Immigrants who do not wish to keep their heritage culture have the choices of assimilation and marginalization. Assimilated individuals want to take on all the characteristics of the new culture, and do not want to keep the identity of their home culture. This, of course, is very close to the assimilationist stance. Finally, those who choose marginalization do not want to have anything to do with either of the cultures (Berry, 2003: 24). This is close to the conflict and struggle position outlined above in that the individuals concerned are trying to break away from both their original and new cultures.

Each of these four outcomes holds different implications for writing centres. As noted, the essay takes the position that the client is the final arbiter of any negotiations about their and the tutor's role. A more fully developed model in the future showing how client and tutor interact can be based on this and the previous section. That is the hoped-for outcome of the research being conducted in this essay. This section might also be the starting point of research on the options of agency open to the client as so little work has been done on it.

How Much of an Accent?

INTERVENING VARIABLE 3: CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

In addition to tutor and client agency, the context of writing also plays an important role in determining L₂ outcome. There are at least three main variables in this category: client ability; audience; and, requirements of the discipline. Each of these will be examined in turn. If any of the reasons is the dominant one for L₂ deficiency, this will indicate that that L₁ or the original culture might not be the reason for the problem.

L₂ capability (or lack thereof) can trump either the role chosen by the tutor or the agency of the client. For example, even if a client wishes to assimilate and drop all vestiges of L₁ in L₂ writing, this might not be possible if the second language skills are not sufficiently developed (Silva, 2001). Short of appropriating the client's work, the cooperative tutor playing the role of assimilationist would probably not be able to help much. As noted, lack of capability in L₂ might have nothing to do with impairment being caused by the first language. There are many reasons why the skills in a second language do not fully develop. This is a view that is becoming increasingly accepted in psycholinguists and second-language acquisition. However, it remains underdeveloped in literacy and composition studies (Canagarajah, 2010).

Sometimes, the audience will determine what is being written, thereby affecting L₂ output. Canagarajah (2010) investigated successful multilingual writers as they shuttled between languages and discourses. In one of his studies, he focused on Professor Sivatamby's research articles in Tamil (L₁), English (L₂), and a local publication. Canagarajah found that a number of readers were misinterpreting some of the peculiarities in Sivatamby's writing for first language interference. In fact, he wrote in the way he did because

he was dealing with three different audiences. Unfortunately, some readers impart a lack of intelligence to the writer when they see something unusual. This is especially so if the first language is in a marginalized or a so-called third-world culture. Although the professor can speak English at the very highest levels, he deliberately chooses to have an accent in his writing at times. He might be doing this as a device to introduce different ways of thinking. But, there is also an undercurrent that other forms of rhetorical argument are equally as valid as those generally used in mainstream writing of native English speakers. In such situations, the tutor must step aside and let the client make all the important decisions.

Finally, some disciplines ask for a certain format from their writers. In nursing, it is not uncommon for the work to be divided up into many sections. Some sections might only be one or two sentences long. Someone in Political Science might think the writing is taking place at too low a level. Another example would be government reports. They usually are very descriptive about their subject matter. However, deep analysis does not get done. Someone in Economics might find they are not analytical, hence not of high quality. In sum, there are numerous reasons for L₂ output to come out a little bit differently from the mainstream assimilationist standard (assuming there is one), including disciplinary expectations. In those cases, the reason for out-of-the-norm L₂ writing might have nothing to do with the tutor or the client, and everything to do with context of the writing.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE: WRITING IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE

This section will discuss the two main outcomes for the independent variable, the written text in the second language. First, it

How Much of an Accent?

will discuss a situation where L_1 and original culture are the source of the problem in L_2 writing. Second, a situation in which the problem lies elsewhere will be presented. The different circumstances mean that the tutor must take different courses of action in order to best serve the client. Each of the two outcomes will be discussed.

What happens if the proponents of CR are correct, and L_1 and the original culture are having a negative transfer on L_2 ? Silva (2001) compared native English speaker with ESL texts, and came up with the following conclusions. His findings suggest that there are some superficial similarities in the composing patterns of the two groups, but it was “clear that L_2 composing is more constrained, more difficult, and less effective. L_2 writers did less planning (global and local) and had more difficulty with setting goals and generating and organizing material (p. 200).” In order to deal with these problems, teachers of L_2 writers need to be “cognizant of, sensitive to, and able to deal positively and effectively with sociocultural, rhetorical, and linguistic differences of their students (p. 202).”

Although L_1 CR interference might be a part of the problem, it can also be a part of the solution. If CR is seen (or suspected) as a reason for the way that L_2 writing is being produced, tutors can ask their clients about how arguments are typically organized in L_1 . Then, the two can discuss how arguments are typically structured in English-language papers at Canadian (and most Western) universities. This will help teach the client about differences in composition, and they can make an informed decision about how they would like to utilize their own agency and the role the tutor can play (Minett, 2009, 68). One scholar in the field has found that such open discussions can lead ESL writers to having “instant enlightenment about their writing in English (Leki, 1991, 138),” and the way ideas are created and organized in their first language in comparison to English. Another

found the discussions also make it clear to the writer that professors in North America usually expect to be able to follow a written argument without too much difficulty (Fox, 1994, 114). In sum, quite often CR can provide the information the tutor needs to be most effective at assisting the client. CR scholars are also conducting research to determine the style of rhetorical organization in an ever-increasing number of countries (Connor, 1996). So, if the tutor cannot get the information from the client, they should be able to find it without too much difficulty on their own.

The above model framework also leaves open the possibility that CR has nothing to do with L₂ writing difficulties. In this case, a discussion involving CR between the tutor and client is not likely to be very useful. The solution could lie elsewhere (for example, improving L₂ skills by the client). Or, it could simply be the case that the nothing is to be done because an accent in the writing is desired for certain contextual reasons.

CONCLUSION

This essay has delineated some of the main variables that would be required in developing a model in which L₁ and original culture could potentially have an impact on L₂ writing. Such a model would be useful for writing centre tutors because it would help them determine what role they should play and better inform the client about the options open to them. The roles that will be open to the tutor and the options available to the client will be determined by how the intervening variables interact with each other. The tutor should either let the client's agency or contextual factors dominate in this model.

How Much of an Accent?

This is only the preliminary research designed to highlight some of the prominent features of such a model. Due to the research constraints of this study, further development and tinkering of the model will have to wait until some future point. At this time, it is not clear how the intervening variables relate to each other. This could mean that some variables will have to be weighted because they have greater or lesser importance than others as more information becomes available and further testing is done. Potentially, with enough data, this model could better define the role of CR in L2 problems, the best roles for tutors to play to help most clients, and the development of vocabulary and skills to inform clients about the various options open to them. If the model is able to reach the fullest potential envisioned, it will prove a very useful diagnostic tool for both tutors and clients.

REFERENCES

- Berry, J. 2003. Conceptual approaches to acculturation. In K. Chun, P. Organista and G. Marin (Eds.). *Acculturation: Advances in theory, measurement and applied research* (17-35). Washington: American Psychological Association.
- Canagarajah, A. 2010. A rhetoric of shuttling between languages. In B. Horner, M. Lu & P. Matsuda (Eds.), *Cross-language relations in composition* (158-179). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Connor, U. 1996. *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Connor, U. 1997. Contrastive rhetoric: Implications for teachers of writing in multicultural classrooms. In C. Severino, J. Guerra, & J. Butler (Eds.), *Writing in multicultural settings* (198-208). New York: Modern Language Association.
- Fox, H. 1994. *Listening to the world: Cultural issues in academic writing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Hinds, J. 1983. Contrastive rhetoric: Japanese and English. *Text* 3, 183-195.
- Kaplan, R. 1966. Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 16 (1), 1-20.
- Kaplan, R. 1987. Cultural thought patterns revisited. In U. Connor & R. Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L₂ text* (9-21). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

How Much of an Accent?

- Kassabgy, N., Ibrahim, Z., & Aydelott, S. (Eds.). 2004. *Contrastive rhetoric: Issues, insights and pedagogy*. Cairo: American University in Cairo.
- Kowal, K. 1998. *Rhetorical implications of linguistic relativity: Theory and application to Chinese and Taiwanese interlanguages*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Kubota, R. 1997. An investigation of L₁-L₂ transfer in writing among Japanese university students: Implications for contrastive rhetoric. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 7 (1), 69-100.
- Leki, I. 1991. Twenty-five years of contrastive rhetoric: Text analysis and writing pedagogies. *TESOL Quarterly* 20 (2), 123-43.
- Lu, M. 1992. Conflict and struggle: The enemies or preconditions of basic writing? *College English* 54 (8), 887-913.
- Matsuda, P. & Cox, M. 2009. Reading an ESL's writer's text. In S. Bruce & B. Rafoth (Eds.), *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors* (42-50). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Minett, A. 2009. "Earth aches by midnight:" Helping ESL writers clarify their intended meaning. In S. Bruce & B. Rafoth (Eds.), *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors* (66-77). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Ostler, S. 1987. English in parallels: A comparison of English and Arabic prose. In U. Connor & R. Kaplan (Eds.), *Writing across languages: Analysis of L₂ text* (169-185). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Severino, C. 2009. Avoiding Appropriation. In S. Bruce & B. Rafoth (Eds.), *ESL writers: A guide for writing center tutors* (51-65). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- Severino, C. 1993. The sociopolitical implications of response to second language and second dialect writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 2 (3), 181-201.
- Silva, T. 2001. Toward an understanding of the distinct nature of L2 writing: The ESL research and its implications. In T. Silva & P. Matsuda (Eds.), *Landmark essays on ESL writing* (191-208). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Whorf, B. 1956. *Language, thought, and reality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Received in October, 2015

Reviewed in November, 2015

Reviewed version received in December, 2015