

Reflection on Intercultural Rhetoric

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## Abstract

Kaplan's (1966) article on contrastive rhetoric focused on contrastive culture between L1 and L2 learners to account for difficulties of L2 learners. Intercultural rhetoric has been developing continuously so far through modifying and criticizing contrastive rhetoric. In spite of the indispensable relationship between culture and language, we need to admit that not only L2 learners' own culture but also many other factors such as individual traits affect their rhetoric. In the era of the globalized world, we need to think about the pedagogical and cultural philosophy as an English as a Foreign/Second (EFL/ESL) teacher, rather than forcing students to conform to American English writing pattern disregarding individual's characteristic and cultural aspect of the learners. It is noted that in-depth research on Intercultural Rhetoric is needed in consideration for individual and cultural diversity.

*Keywords:* contrastive rhetoric, intercultural rhetoric, diversity

## Reflection on Intercultural Rhetoric

**TOEFL iBT Writing Test**

When I took the TOEFL iBT writing test for the first time in May, 2011, my writing score was 22 out of 30. I anticipated I would get high score because I thought I understood the given topics well and expressed myself perfectly, but when I saw my score, I was quite disappointed with the result. They said I didn't provide enough specific support for my main points and my ideas may be difficult to follow because of the way I organize my essay or the language I used to connect my ideas. Since then, I had to study how to write an essay to get a good score. I started from how to write a paragraph and I studied how to write a three-paragraph essay with reference to the TOEFL essay template. I got 24 in the second test taken in June and I assumed that it was because I used the template of TOEFL essay. At that time, I didn't think of the template of the TOEFL essay seriously, but while I was listening to Intercultural Rhetoric (IR) and taking part in group discussion in class, I realized that there is something about the template. The template has implied hidden meaning connected with culture and power. The TOEFL test requires foreign students to use American writing patterns in a subtle way as most Americans use.

**Kaplan is a Groundbreaker in Intercultural Rhetoric**

To be honest, I didn't know the term or contents of contrastive rhetoric at that time. Kaplan (1966), who proposed contrastive rhetoric first, stated that writing patterns of students learning English as their L2 were affected by their cultures including their L1, saying "Each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself" ( p.14), so teachers needed to be aware of the differences and apply them to teaching for students' effective learning. Personally, I am interested in Kaplan's doodle, which shows the different rhetoric depending on L2 learners' culture: English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, and Russian (Kaplan, 1966). If

Kaplan had seen my first TOEFL writing paper, he might have said “Sookhee shows typical Korean writing way with an approach by indirection.” If he had seen my second writing, he might have said “The flow of ideas sticks to the main ideas in a straight line, Sookhee’s writing has been developing.” If I could turn back time, I could meet the Oriental students who took part in the experiment. I really wonder whether they showed similar organizations or patterns of rhetoric. Though twins are born at the same time and are raised in relatively same environments, they are totally different individuals. Is it possible for people who have similar culture to represent themselves in a similar way? Though I admit that there is a deep relationship between language and culture, Kaplan’s doodle seemed to fail to convince me. However, in spite of continuous criticism derived from the limitation of experiment data or overgeneralization, Kaplan’s initiative proposal about contrastive rhetoric played a crucial role to ignite other related researches on it in the field of rhetoric, which has evolved into IR.

### **The Role of Intercultural Rhetoric**

Contrastive rhetoric based on Kaplan’s research has grown up to interdisciplinary field with various research methodologies filling up the insufficient aspects of contrastive rhetoric. We can’t help mentioning Connor, who made a great contribution to the development of contrastive rhetoric. She states (2004), “I propose the term *intercultural rhetoric* to refer to what might previously have been called contrastive rhetoric or cross-cultural studies of writing” (p. 273). She was the researcher who broadened the scope of rhetoric, naming contrastive rhetoric as intercultural rhetoric. Through using the term *intercultural rhetoric*, she has tried to bring static and inactive contrastive rhetoric to dynamic and active life. What did she want from changing the term? The answer to this question might explain the shortcoming of contrastive rhetoric and advantages of intercultural rhetoric.

The word *contrast* denotes distinguishing by comparing differences and it entails the distinction between superiority and inferiority. In Kaplan's (1966) research, English played a role as a criterion and the other four languages were used as comparison. In other words, it implies that English is a main, superior, and power language whereas other languages are peripheral, inferior and powerless. It might be sort of humiliating for L2 learners to underestimate L2 learners' writing from the perspective of L1 learners. To get rid of L2 learners' own styles based on their personality and small cultures and to let them fit into ready-made English style is educational and meaningful to them? I assume Connor had contemplated this problem and she had tried to cover students' small cultures rather than big cultures, spoken and written language in interactions rather than relying only on text or genre analysis. I think that's why she suggested intercultural rhetoric instead of contrastive rhetoric. Her approach seems to be much more warmhearted and embraceable than Kaplan's mechanical approach. Besides, she mentioned contrastive rhetoric kept changing and evolving in a positive way accepting new approaches and currents in various literacy research (Connor, 2002).

### **Why Don't We Believe Non-native Speakers?**

The time when Kaplan's article was published in 1966 was totally different from the present. The people in the past don't know the term *global village* and don't think of state-of-the-art modern communication or transportation technology such as a supersonic airliner, the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, and Skype, etc. that connect with people in the world with ease. In other words, they might have lived in a relatively limited society compared the present time without so much interaction as we does. We might say Kaplan's article was valuable at that time, since national cultural characteristic was more prominent in a limited society, but it doesn't seem to be valid any more from the present perspective.

We are living in the era of globalization now. It means we should open to diversity. Specifically, we should open to non-native's accent, other thought and culture, and different style of writing or speaking. However, what's the reality? Take a look at Intensive English Program (IEP) CSU, native English speaking teachers are the majority of instructors and only few non-native English speaking instructors work there. Looking back on my experience as an English teacher when I was looking for a native English speaking teacher in Korea, my vice principal forced me to hire white Americans or Canadians. He didn't like applicants from South Africa, Australia or England mentioning their strong accents no matter how they spoke English fluently.

“People perceive statements as less truthful when spoken by non-native speakers. Consequently, non-native speakers who have an accent are seen as less credible” (Shri & Boaz, 2010, p.1095). I admit that overall, native speech is easier to understand than non-native speech. However, that's not because native speech is superior to non-native, but because I am just accustomed to native speech. For instance, there are many international students who are from Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Taiwan and China in my class. To be honest, it was a little hard to understand international classmates' speech at first but as time goes by I am used to their accents and feel comfortable to communicate with them. Many years ago, a previous old Korean President Daejoong Kim addressed in an international conference. He started to learn English at his late age and his dialect accent was really strong. Even when he spoke Korean, it was so funny that comedy actors would mimic him for fun. Can you imagine how he addressed in English? It's the mixture of his Korean accent, local dialect accent, and his own unique accent. Surely it sounded awkward to me, but I was proud of him and his Korean accent.

### **What Did I Teach?**

Preparing for TOEFL test last year, I realized how difficult to write an English essay.

Therefore, I decided to teach students how to write a paragraph. I made a workbook to practice writing. The first thing I did was to present the typical paragraph writing template composed of stating main sentence + supporting sentences + restating main sentence. The next step was focusing on the importance of the template repeatedly. And then, let them practice writing a paragraph using the same template with different topics. Finally, students took a writing test and it is needless to say they had to use the template. I didn't care how they wanted to write. I was not interested in their personal traits or interests. I didn't analyze their writing patterns in advance of teaching writing. What I had done was force them to go into the small cage I already made, and the cage was actually made of my prejudice, stereotype and closed view on the diversity. Stupidly, I was very happy with the test results then since the majority of students got A. They were good students and showed typical structure of paragraph on the test paper as I taught (see Appendix A for complete proofs). What had I done to my students? Rather than respecting and considering their individual characteristic and culture, I removed their own personalities and urged them to produce ready-made English paragraph. I wish I could have listened to *Intercultural Rhetoric* earlier.

### **What Will I Teach?**

L2 learners, researchers and teachers are the subjects and the objects of culture and language (Kubota, 2004). Researchers in the field of rhetoric should keep their work with consideration of various factors affecting rhetoric. Based on their theory, teachers in class try to seek proper and practical teaching skills through meaningful interaction with L2 learners. ESL/EFL teachers must not compel students to acquire the cultural value of native English speakers or their typical language patterns blindly without consideration their identities (Matsuda, 1997). It is a teacher in the classroom who applies theories to actual class. It is a teacher in the

classroom who considers students' big and small culture. It's a teacher in the classroom who guides students to the wide world filled with unlimited diversity. A teacher should teach the importance of diversity and help to see the world with various points of view. In order to teach them, I myself need to be proud of my Korean accent and to open up to the different world I've never belong to.



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Appendix A

1. Writing Template I used in class

Introduction	<u>"State your idea"</u> <i>There are a few reasons why.</i>
Body	<i>First of all, "reason" + "supporting sentences"</i> <i>For the second reason, "reason" + "supporting sentences"</i>
Conclusion	<i>So, for these two reasons, "restate your idea"</i>

2. Students' writing sample showing the same pattern based on the template

