

Exploring the Effect of Cultural And Linguistic Features on the Academic Writing of
College-Level English Learners

by

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“Writing is the most important technology in the history of the human species,
except how to make a fire.”

~ Barry B. Powell

Author of

Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization (Wiley-Blackwell 2012)

Introduction

The research question for my Capstone Project is titled “Exploring The Effect of Cultural And Linguistic Features on the Academic Writing of College-level English Learners”. Based on that, I have a professional development (PD) that is meant for college writing center tutors that serve ELs. These college writing tutors are themselves students seeking an undergraduate degree and work as peer tutors in the writing center.

My capstone project PD is informed by Robert Kaplan’s contrastive rhetoric and Malcom Knowles’ andragogy. In place of Kaplan’s original term (i.e. contrastive rhetoric), I will refer to Ulla Connor’s preferred one: “intercultural rhetoric” (Kubota, 2010). In a conscious attempt to avoid the dichotomous connotation of the word “contrastive”, Connor chose the word “intercultural” so that the focus shifts to an acknowledgement that different cultures approach differently to discourse with no single culture acting as a point of reference. Kaplan’s views have been criticized for being “assimilationist” and “Anglocentric” (Kubota, 2010, p. 273).

Based on these perspectives from cultural discourses and adult learning theories, this PD explores an understanding of the relationship between the struggle of ELs with academic writing and the cultural and linguistic features that they identify with. This PD is designed to help writing tutors understand both the theoretical and practical aspects necessary to work with ELs who visit the writing center. With more ELs attending American universities and colleges, it is essential that the writing center student tutors are equipped with the current research-based approach to working with adult learners on campus.

In the 1960s, Robert Kaplan (as cited in Panetta, 2000) observed that nonnative speakers produced writings that at times were different and inaccessible to the average American educator. Kaplan (Panetta, 2000) coined the term contrastive rhetoric as he attempted to understand the underlying factors that contributed to such different writing approaches. He noted that such differences were beyond the narrow focus on grammar and technical errors at the sentence level (Kubota, 2010). Instead, Kaplan argued, such salient errors were due to thought patterns in the rhetoric and discourse of nonnative speakers' own languages. Following his seminal paper later in time, other researchers wrote about the same subject either as proponents or opposers (Kubota 2010). However, one aspect of Kaplan's work was not disputed: Contrastive rhetoric emerged in response to a pedagogical need to help and support the academic writing of nonnative speakers. In other words, there was the need to understand better ways to help ELs in American universities and colleges.

Ulla Connor (1996) notes that some studies point out that writing is embedded in culture and the schools reinforce the cultural orientation through pedagogy. Connor (1996) defines culture as a "set of rules and patterns shared by a given community" (p. 101). This suggests that cultural differences mean differences in the types of writing conventions available in one's culture. Connor (1996) references one study that suggests culture shock in an academic setting happens when a learner's literacy background differs from the literacy of the learner's school. The remedy to this unfamiliarity lies in the tutoring approaches of student writing tutors on campus. ELs do not benefit from the same tutoring approach that was designed to help native or native-like speakers.

Rather than focusing on grammatical errors, Kaplan takes a closer look at big picture concepts such as paragraph organization and draft outline (Kubota, 2010) in the academic writing of ELs in college. For context, there was little available research for Kaplan to study that would explain the reasons for the struggle of ELs with academic writing in American academic institutions. According to Matsuda (2003), before the emergence of contrastive rhetoric, emphasis was placed on spoken language in second language acquisition starting with the late 19th century to early 20th century. Widely used approaches included error analysis that mainly looked at sentence structure while ignoring discourse in the writing of ELs (Kubota, 2010).

At the time, the leading applied linguists believed writing was not a domain to be given much attention as speaking was. This means ELs in U.S. colleges and universities were not receiving tangible academic writing services. However, Matsuda (2003) stated that this attitude changed in the 1940s with the University of Michigan's English Language Institute (ELI). Yet, according to Matsuda (2003), ELI did not put significant emphasis on ESL writing at the discourse level. However, by the 1990s, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) which prepares ELs in U.S. colleges and universities for the major domains of communication and English for Specific Purposes with discipline-specific emerged (Hinkel, 2002).

In this Professional Development (PD) workshop, I will spend a great deal of time on two major parts: Foundation and Application. During the Foundation workshop, I'll delve into the theories and perspectives informing intercultural rhetoric within the framework of andragogy. During the Application, I'll present practical tips to help ELs visiting the writing center. I'll leave room for Q&A at the end of each session. In total, the PD will be about 4.5 hours of presentation including 15 minutes for Q&A.

Title: “EXPLORING THE EFFECT OF CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC FEATURES ON THE ACADEMIC WRITING OF COLLEGE-LEVEL ENGLISH LEARNERS”

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[Abdullahi's Google Slides](#)

Session I:		
The Foundations: Introduction and Discussion of Contrastive Rhetoric		
Times and slide #	Topics	Notes
1-2 minutes Slide 1-3	Title page/Epigraphs	Show title page and epigraphs
3 minutes Slides 3-5	Introduction/Objectives	<p>Hello everyone, I’m Abdullahi. Like you, I have been a student writing consultant. At the same time, I was (and still am) one of the many ELs navigating a new way of learning in American universities and colleges. Our single workshop will cover a lot of ground today. We’ll spend the first hour on Part I: The Foundation. Here, we explore Robert Kaplan’s perspective, contrastive rhetoric. We will also cover adult learning theories since we’re working with adults in the writing center.</p> <p>This workshop will be in three sessions, 90 minutes each. Part I is The Foundation; Part II is The Application - Syntax Level and The Application - Discourse Level. In Part II, we will explore practical elements in writing such as syntax (i.e. sentence structure) and discourse issues with an eye for cross cultural analysis. I will leave about 15 minutes for Q&A. But before we get started with our PD.</p>
10 minutes Slide 8	Pre-Quiz	https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1AVwvhuRPiljNZBehwkDEJKLEsolqMebAfZug1aWBIGI/edit

5 minutes Slide 9	Reviewing responses	Participants will share their thoughts about the topic without feedback coming from the presenter.
3-5 minutes Slide 10	An Overview of Topic	<p>Introduce topic by stating that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ The research question for my professional development (PD) is titled “Exploring The Effect of Cultural And Linguistic Features on the Academic Writing of College-level English Learners”. ❖ This (PD) is meant for college writing center student tutors who serve ELs. ❖ My PD is informed by Robert Kaplan’s contrastive rhetoric and Malcolm Knowles’ andragogy. ❖ Ulla Connor preferred using the term “intercultural rhetoric” instead of contrastive rhetoric (Kubota, 2010).
5 minutes Slide 11	Reflection	Why do you think Connor preferred the term “intercultural”?
10 minutes Slides 12-14	Continue with Topic Overview	Share the response to the question in Slide 11. Offer historical background that explain the experiences of international students attending U.S. colleges and universities in the early 20th century.
1 minute Slide 15	Begin Part 1 of 3	Part I: The Foundations - to ground the participants
5 minutes Slides 16-19	Contrastive Rhetoric / The Foundations	Introduce and discuss contrastive rhetoric and the criticism against it
5 minutes Slide 20	Reflection	“What does Kaplan mean by ‘rhetoric is culturally determined?’”
5 minutes	Continue with discussion	Elechachi (2015) notes that many English language

Slide 21	of contrastive rhetoric	learners with Arabic background are unaware of this essential feature about the English language – that its “style is very direct”.
5 minutes Slides 22-24	Short activity	Language activity to demonstrate difference in world discourses – for example: “News that freezes the chest.” Ask participants what they think this means.
3-5 minutes Slide 25	Pair Work - Discussion: “What does an explicit instruction mean to you as a writing tutor?”	Some of the criticism with Kaplan’s contrastive rhetoric is that it is grounded on “othering” of other cultures and having a eurocentric lens. Its connotation makes the English language a point of reference. Yet, as with any other human endeavor, his call for explicit instruction for ELs working on their academic writing is widely accepted.
3-5 minutes Slide 26	Large group Discussion: Few volunteers to share what they discussed with their pairs.	Thank you for sharing your perspectives on explicit instruction. Contrastive rhetoric made a major contribution in the teaching of composition to ELs and has been a strong advocate for “explicit teaching of the conventional rhetorical structures of English” (Kubota, 2010, p. 268).
5 minutes Slide 27	Reflection: What does Kaplan mean by “conventional rhetorical structures of English”?	Writing in English requires one to be familiar with the conventional rhetorical structures of the language. These are big picture concepts that take time and effort to develop and master.
3-5 minutes Slide 28	Response to the question	These conventions include: Kubota (2010, p. 268): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Paper outline ● The writing process ● Organizing paragraphs Canagarajah and Jerskey (2009, p. 8): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Thesis statements ● Topic sentences ● Audience awareness
5 minutes	Reflection:	Contrastive rhetoric is said to have a goal of making ESL students culturally competent so that they are

Slide 29	How would ELs get access to knowledge about these conventions?	equipped with the rhetorical structures of English (Kubota, 2010). NOTE: Cultural competence does not subtract anything from anyone.
Session II:		
The Foundations: Understanding Culture and Discussion of Andragogy		
Times and slide #	Topics	Notes
1 minute Slide 30	Section Title	The Foundations → Culture
3-5 minutes Slide 31	Reflection: “What is your definition of culture?”	According to Richards & Schmidt (as cited by Elachachi, 2015) culture refers to “the set of practices, codes and values that mark a particular nation or group.”
10 minutes Slides 32-34	Understanding Culture / The Foundations	Culture affects creative processes such as literature, art, etc. Samovar et al (Elachachi, 2015) takes it further by arguing that “culture and communication are inseparable”.
5 minutes Slide 35	Reflection: What are key differences between deductive and inductive writings?	Explanations of this question found in Slides 36-38
10 minutes Slides 36-38	Discussing deductive and inductive approaches	Responds to Slide 35
1 minute Slide 39	Section Title	The Foundations → Andragogy
3-5 minutes Slide 40	Factors that affect adult education	Merriam (2013)

<p>5 minutes</p> <p>Slide 41</p>	<p>Turn & Talk</p> <p>Purpose of education had shifted from being an attempt to produce “the educated man” to that of “competent people” (pp.18-9).</p> <p>What does this mean to you as a tutor of academic writing working with ELs?</p>	<p>With this shift came seeing the teacher as a facilitator for adult learners. As a result, instructors now focus more on what Knowles (1980) calls “learning” and less on “teaching” (p.19) in the context of adult education. The implication for you as tutors is that, to educate or help one to be a competent writer, you have to be explicit and employ tutoring strategies that are grounded in adult learning theory.</p>
<p>20 minutes</p> <p>Slides 42-64</p>	<p>Five Major Adult Learning Theories</p>	<p>An overview of adult learning theories:</p> <p>Behaviorism is the oldest of them all and holds the view that learning is a response to a stimulus in the environment (Merriam, 2013). In contrast, humanists argue that learning is intrinsic and comes from within since learners have the freedom to choose and self-initiate. This argument is also reflected in Knowles’ andragogy and Maslow’s self-actualization concepts. For cognitive, the focus is how the brain functions to solve problems and use memory and process information (Merriam, 2013). Cognitive “learning depends on mental process not observable”. Social cognitive, a fourth theory, adds a social dimension to the cognitive perspective and argues that learners learn and strive for success through observing how fellow students behave in an academic setting (Merriam, 2013). Constructivism as the fifth major adult learning theory proposes that learners create meaning from experience and, therefore, knowledge is a construction from those experiences (Merriam, 2013).</p>
<p>1-2 minutes</p> <p>Slide 65</p>	<p>Malcolm Knowles’ approach</p>	<p>Introduce him and his area of research.</p>
<p>3 minutes</p> <p>Slide 66</p>	<p>Basic definitions of Andragogy and Pedagogy</p>	<p>(Knowles, 1980, p. 43).</p> <p>Andragogy is an approach that is learner-centered while pedagogy is subject-centered. In other words,</p>

		learners in K-12 are still dependent on the teacher for learning while the assumption for andragogy is that the adult is motivated to self-direct himself/herself when learning.
3 minutes Slide 67	Exceptions	Knowles (1980) observed that there might be learning situations where adults might perform well under pedagogy-informed instructions and a child might do well in situations with self-directed learning. Therefore, Knowles considered these two models as being “as two ends of a spectrum” (p. 43). This means that Knowles (1980) deduced that using a suitable instructional approach (pedagogy or andragogy) for each scenario is recommended irrespective of the learner’s age.
5 minutes Slide 68	Turn & Talk: What implications can you think of regarding ELs learning to write in an unfamiliar language and culture?	There’s an implication with Knowles’ conclusion that the two models should be seen “as two ends of a spectrum”. What implications can you think of regarding ELs learning to write in an unfamiliar language?
5 minutes Slide 69	Large group Discussion: Few volunteers to share what they discussed with their pairs	Thank you for sharing your perspectives on this. Contrastive rhetoric made a major contribution in the teaching of composition to ELs and has been a strong advocate for “explicit teaching of the conventional rhetorical structures of English” (Kubota, 2010, p. 268).
Session III		
The Application		
Times and slide #	Topics	Notes
1 minute Slide 70	Section Title	The Application Welcome back! Now that we’ve covered the theoretical background, let’s turn to some practical applications. The focus for this section is to experience issues in ELs writing at the sentence and discourse levels.

		Before we get started with new activities, this time find a new partner different from the previous one. In this session, we look at syntax and discourse in the writings of ELs.
1 minute Slide 71	Pair Work: Syntax level	Introduce to the participants the two activities (and ask them to work on Slides 72 and 73)
10 minutes Slide 72	Activity 1 - Syntax	https://docs.google.com/document/d/10BTZ0LqfwwkMfZOilwAdSGwXKrD7mIJvjW36bGy91g/edit
10 minutes Slide 73	Activity 2 - Syntax	https://docs.google.com/document/d/17wSl3YwofRwjEm7yyjSQe_luWKAroDDFWo9iSSdHds8/edit
1 minute Slide 74	On collocation errors	A word about collocation errors: According to Boers and Web (2018), collocation is “the above-chance co-occurrence of two words” that are in essence formulaic and can sound “unconventional” when violated -- for example “highly religious” instead of “deeply religious.” The Thai students’ collocation errors (e.g. “My hair is busy”) is, according to Nadja Nesselhauf (Boers and Web (2018), as a result of “L1 influence”. Also, in Thai language, verbs do not change form even if “tense and time” change (Bennui, 2016)
1 minute Slide 75	Pair Work: Discourse level	The PD presenter will ask the pair giving feedback to use a self-directed learning approach which includes an adult’s motivation to learn and appreciation for independence. A written instruction will guide them to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believe that the learner is motivated to learn and appreciates if given space to explore the assignment independently • Believe that learner can construct knowledge from previous experiences • Assume that he is knowledgeable about North American writing conventions
5-7 minutes	Activity 1 - Discourse	Here is a paragraph with some issues. Participants will be asked to use andragogy’s self-directed

Slide 76		<p>learning approach. They will focus on cohesion of the paragraph.</p> <p>https://docs.google.com/document/d/18BWcg1ZEJlrN9vCBSv4mWZOIEyoD6ZPETp-c8tzBJZw/edit</p>
3 minutes Slide 77	Large group Discussion	Have participants reflect on their experiences with this discourse activity
1 minute Slide 78	Activity 2 - Discourse	<p>Now, switch roles.</p> <p>The PD presenter will ask the pair giving feedback to use pedagogy and subject-centered approach. A written instruction will guide them to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Suppose your EL student is not ready for andragogy’s self-directed learning yet ● Believe that learner has rich cultural reservoir for expressing his/her thoughts on paper, but is a novice in the North American writing convention and rhetorical choices ● Guide the learner throughout the writing process by providing explicit instruction as needed while allowing co-construction and discovery along the way ● When necessary, provide a brief explanation of what the error is and why it should be fixed in the style of North American convention <p>https://docs.google.com/document/d/1AJzTaEjnxPA0FrQ277vJGgE_3MLn7XVI_ugkktCmBzs/edit</p>
3 minutes Slide 79	Large group Discussion	Have participants reflect on their experiences with this discourse activity
2 minutes Slide 80	On giving feedback	<p>A NOTE ABOUT FEEDBACK:</p> <p>Dana Ferris and John Hedgcock (2014) discussed whether or not feedback should be direct or indirect (p. 287) . They suggested that direct feedback benefits lower-level ELs who struggle with correcting their errors after the instructor/tutor has</p>

		<p>pointed them out for them. This agrees with Kaplan’s call for explicit feedback to help ELs learn and grow so that they can eventually self-direct their learning.</p> <p>Image source: from my copy</p>
10 minutes	Post-Quiz	<p>https://docs.google.com/document/d/15_zKhHqO6EaD_d9nQxvoTX8OObqx90U7Voc_bNua5Xc/edit</p>
Slide 81		
	Conclusion	<p>According to Ken Hyland, writing “remains among the most important skills that second language students need to develop” (Hyland 2019, p. xiii). But writing can not be isolated from culture and geography. A Shakespearan sonnet which used the analogy of summer to describe beauty of a young woman did not make any sense to the Arabic speaking population since summer is associated with dryness and ugliness in their environment. The solution? They had to replace summer with another season to that conforms to what Shakespeare had in mind.</p> <p>One participant described her perception on Chinese and English essay writing as follows, “Writing a Chinese essay is very [different] from writing an</p>

		<p>English essay. The English essay usually [is] based on the structure of “introduction-body-conclusion,” but Chinese essay structure [is] more characterized as “beginning following-turning-concluding.” Due to cultural differences, it is difficult for me to get rid of the influence of my mother tongue, thinking in the actual writing process before learning the outline writing. I also use gorgeous language, with celebrity quotes and various rhetorical means. Actually, when we [write] an English essay, we should [be] more direct to express our opinions, [and] the most important thing is [that] any argument needs specific supports” Li, F., & Liu, Y. (2019).</p> <p>In other words, when tutoring, culture and language of ELs can interfere with the writing. Helping them navigate with explicit instruction is recommended. I really want to thank you for your participation and engagement throughout these sessions. In the next 15 minutes, I’m here to answer any questions from the group.</p>
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