

# Why Do My Students Write the Way They Write?

## The Problem of Culture in the Teaching of Professional Communication

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The motivation behind the writing of this paper was mainly prompted by a very practical question: *Why do my students write the way they write?* In this paper, therefore, I will attempt to understand the (written) rhetorical practices of my students in a business communication course using contrastive rhetoric as an explanatory framework. In the process of doing so, I will explore the possibilities and limits of using such a cultural framework in understanding rhetorical practices and their teaching in the classroom.

Pedagogically and theoretically, we as English teachers, and especially as teachers of professional, technical and business communication, must look towards what Kubota (1997) calls a 'multiplicity of rhetoric'. This notion of rhetoric notes that every rhetoric has in it an inherent potential for all kinds of writing forms and thus warns against obsession with contrasting rhetorics which may unnecessarily lead us to make unhelpful statements about *us* against *them*. In this age of globalizing communication forms and technologies, we should not simply be obsessed with the question: is this good or bad writing? A better question should be: *why does this student write the way she writes?*

### ■ Introduction

The motivation behind the writing of this paper was mainly prompted by a very practical question: why do my students write the way they write? In my professional communication classes, specifically business communication at the Faculty of Business at the National University of Singapore, textbooks, lecture notes and other resources essentially prescribe particular ways of writing different forms of professional, technical and business communication. More often than not, these writing templates and structures (although by no means completely unchanging) follow what many scholars and practitioners in the field call western models of writing. Students, however, produce work which deviates from the 'norms' of writing despite serious attempts by teachers and textbooks at sensitizing them to such ideals. Why, indeed, do my students write the way they do?

In this paper, I will explore my students' rhetorical practices in writing using culture as an explanatory framework. I do this because culture is a slippery concept, yet it influences any form of social or human communication in very significant ways. While we as teachers recognize the powerful role of culture in our classrooms, it is a phenomenon that is difficult to understand. In this sense, I will start with the assumption that culture and writing are intricately intertwined in the sense that student writing can be partly or largely influenced by their cultural practices and behaviors. This does not mean, of course, that this approach to understanding writing is unproblematic. In fact, the cultural approach embodies important limitations and dangers. This is because

although culture is a powerful lens through which we can understand what is going on in our classrooms, it is also highly problematic in terms of its malleability and messiness. Culture is everywhere, but can we ever systematize it in order for us to understand what it is? How do we ever know it is culture we are talking about and not, say, personality profiles or personal preferences? How do we differentiate between generalizing a culture and stereotyping it? What is culture, in the first place?

### ■ Culture: A working definition

In this paper, culture will be seen as:

*a system of behavior embracing, amongst other things, values and attitudes, modes of thinking and feeling, and non-verbal behavior, all of which come into play in the act of communication.*

(Kelly & Tomic, 2001:3)

This definition is used because it treats culture as intricately enmeshed in acts of communication. As such, culture shapes and is shaped by communication practices. Because acts of communication are human practices as well, we also have a view of culture as a human achievement. In short, our view of culture is one that is inherently changing, never static but dynamic, transformative because of its potential to change people's lives, and liberatory because humans, being part of it, also have the power to change it. In the context of writing which is the subject of this paper's discussion, the definition implies that writing is a cultural practice which

is influenced by the world around it but which also has the potential to change this world and create alternative ones. This perspective will reveal itself in hopefully more lucid ways in the succeeding few sections.

### ■ Contrastive rhetoric: Basic assumptions

For this paper, I will use the explanatory framework used by contrastive rhetoric because of a number of reasons. First, at the core of contrastive rhetoric is the assumption that logic is a cultural phenomenon (Kaplan, 1966:2). Rhetorical expectations and conventions, therefore, differ among cultures (Liebman, 1988:6).

Second, contrastive rhetoric originated from and partly continues to concern itself with issues related to (English language) pedagogy: it “examines differences and similarities in ESL and EFL writing across languages and cultures as well as across such different contexts as education and commerce” (Connor, 2002:493). Since the context of this study is an ESL classroom where students study business rhetoric and communication, this framework is particularly appropriate for this study.

And third, contrastive rhetoric has ample empirical database to support its claims:

*The accumulating evidence from contrastive rhetoric research warrants the view that linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds have some influence on the organizational structures of ESL text, although they are by no means the only factors.*

(Matsuda, 1997:48)

The birth of the contrastive rhetoric tradition is generally attributed to the classic essay of Robert Kaplan in 1966 where he argues, based on some expository writing paragraphs of advanced ESL students in the United States, that paragraph developments other than what is usually considered to be valuable and desirable in English essays also exist (Kaplan, 1966:14). Even today, this remains a very powerful argument against those who believe that the ‘best’ writing practices are those associated with English (largely Western) notions of writing. All kinds of writing are judged against such allegedly correct rhetorical practices. Early contrastive rhetoric, therefore, has functioned within the various rhetorical structures which emerged from Kaplan’s 1966 essay and which still find much currency in teacher training workshops and publications (Kubota & Lehner, 2004):

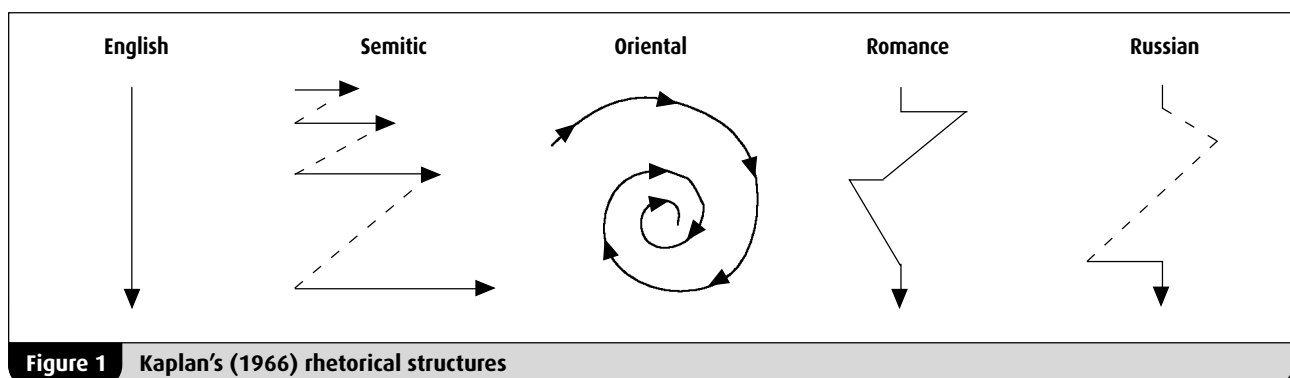
### ■ Contrastive rhetoric: Impact and uses

The impact of contrastive rhetoric on research in language and writing is undoubtedly noteworthy as evidenced by the broadening of research sites and/or areas where it is used to explain textual and other text-related phenomena. Such areas include written forms and surface/text structures (Kaplan, 1987), the process of writing and the sociocultural context of writing (Connor, 1996), rhetorical socialization (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), the evolution of patterns and norms (Connor, 1996), and strategies for communication in the global workplace (Woolever, 2001). Similarly, the uses of contrastive rhetoric are also well-documented in the research literature. In brief, contrastive rhetoric:

1. identifies the possible causes for the apparent lack of coherence in ESL texts (Matsuda, 1997:47);
2. provides teachers with some insights that can guide their decisions in developing curriculum and in responding to ESL students’ needs (Matsuda, 1997:47);
3. develops some understanding of students’ native rhetorical choices, bridging rhetorical gaps so writer, instructor, and even peer reader have a common ground from which to work with on the writing (Panetta, 2001:11);
4. helps instructors who teach writing to ESL students see that *our* truth is not *the* truth. (Panetta, 2001:5);
5. helps ESL and native English-speaking (NES) students become more conscious, proficient participants in academic discourse communities (Liebman, 1988:6);
6. provides students and learners with rhetorical choices (Liebman, 1988:17); and
7. promotes cultural decentering (Liebman, 1988:17).

### ■ Frameworks

There are two sets of framework which we will use in this paper. These are the theoretical and ‘textbook’ frameworks. I use both here (even if they are really not incompatible with each other) mainly to show how rhetorical structures are deemed both on a theoretical and pedagogical level.



## ■ Theoretical framework

### “Oriental” rhetorical structures

In many works in contrastive rhetoric, related fields, and even business communication textbooks, there is a proliferation of so-called rhetorical structures which are considered to be “oriental” in nature (Hinds, 1984; Egginton, 1987). In other words, these rhetorical structures tell us that there are supposed to be modes or ways of writing and thinking which are uniquely “oriental”. These claims are usually based on ancient and current writings of non-white peoples, including classical poetry and other forms of literature.

In the business course I teach, a bit of information on the classical Japanese rhetorical structure is used to explain why Japanese business letters are supposed to be ‘indirect’. In a pedagogical sense, the rhetorical structures below describe the basic moves in writing in Japanese and Korean. These moves in turn are deemed to have originated from Chinese classical moves in writing through the work of Fan-heng, a scholar during the Yuen Dynasty, who used it to analyze classical poetry (Chu, Swaffar, & Charney, 2002):

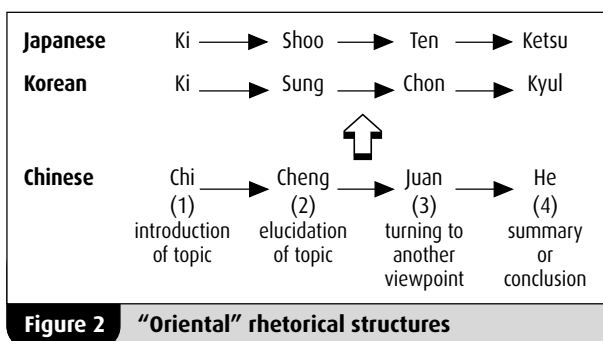


Figure 2 “Oriental” rhetorical structures

### “Moves” in letters of application

Closer to our study, a theoretical elaboration of rhetorical structures in U.S. and Asian business letters is provided in Connor (2003: 225).

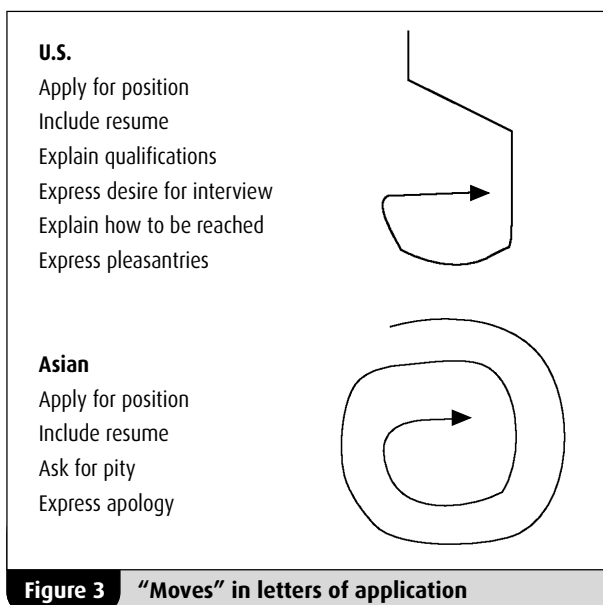


Figure 3 “Moves” in letters of application

Between these two idealized structures, American business letters do look more straightforward than Asian business letters. Another way of looking at them is to say that American business letters tend to focus on information-giving and persuasion through moves that require the writer to justify why he or she is qualified for the job applied for. Asian business letters, on the other hand, tend to have seemingly “extraneous” information which is deemed to have no direct impact on the writer’s fitness for the job. Nevertheless, our use of the word “extraneous” is problematic here since it is viewed from the perspective of writing where such information is indeed irrelevant. But from whose point-of-view must we come to be able to say that asking for pity or expressing an apology in letters of application is inappropriate or irrelevant?

## ■ Textbook framework

In this section, I will show how rhetorical structures are framed within pedagogical terms. That is, relevant textbooks in business communication usually provide readers (teachers and students) with clearly set or defined structures of writing, giving everyone the impression that certain kinds or forms of writing should be written in particular ways. In the discussion that follows, however, I will zero in only on writing that is relevant to our study.

### Recommended ‘moves’ in bad news messages

Bové, Thill, & Schatzman’s (2004) book, which is a recommended textbook in the business communication course offered to students of the Faculty of Business, proposes the following rhetorical moves for bad news messages:

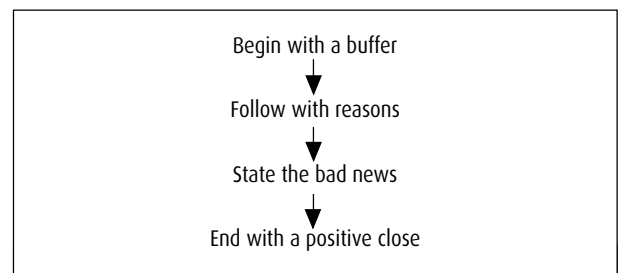


Figure 4 Recommended “moves” in bad news messages

In the lecture notes prepared for students of the course, the rhetorical structure is rearticulated as an indirect approach to letter writing, although essentially the moves remain the same:

#### Indirect Approach in Letter Writing

**Opening:** Start with a buffer—a positive sentence or two that shows you are interested and concerned. Your goal here is to put your readers in the right frame of mind to accept the negative news.

**Middle:** Explain the reasons behind the negative response. (Explanation)

Briefly state the refusal. (Refusal)

**Closing:** Offer an alternative solution if possible.

End with a positive, friendly statement.

### Types of buffer

In the same Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman's (2004) textbook, different kinds of buffers are provided. Such information is needed for this study in order to find out what sort of buffers appear in students' letters and what sort of 'buffers' are unique to their work.

- Agreement: Find a point on which you and the reader share similar views.
- Appreciation: Express sincere thanks for receiving something.
- Cooperation: Convey your willingness to help in any way you realistically can.
- Fairness: Assure the reader that you've closely examined and carefully considered the problem, or mention an appropriate action that has already been taken.
- Good news: Start with the part of your message that is favorable.
- Praise: Find an attribute or an achievement to compliment.
- Resale: Favorably discuss the product or company related to the subject of the letter.
- Understanding: Demonstrate that you understand the readers' goals and needs.

### ■ Data and Methodology

How do I explore (and answer, if possible) my basic classroom research question: *why do my students write the way they write?* First, I used as my data 41 letters of refusal written by students in a Business Writing module during a compulsory sit-down letter writing activity in the first semester of 2003. Because individual consultations are required in the course, I also took note of specific student responses to comments I made on their letters during such one-on-one sessions.

Then, I studied the letters through a simple rhetorical analysis of 'moves' in each of them, as well as compared the moves in current available frameworks for writing letters of such nature *and* in the letters of the students themselves. I juxtaposed the letters against expected/recommended 'moves' in letters of refusal in recommended textbooks, as well as 'moves' in various related forms of writing.

In other words, I set out to extract an individual rhetorical structure from each letter of refusal written by the students and find out how an idealized superstructure (if there is such a thing) is similar to or different from textbook and theoretical frameworks of writing available in the pedagogical and research literature in recent years. This is by no means a sophisticated and scientific approach to understanding the nature of my students' writing, as my study is exploratory in nature and is much more concerned with raising my own awareness of basic classroom questions regarding how my students write. Nevertheless, I hope that the questions that the study raises will also inject some kind of informed skepticism towards some things that we do in the classroom as language teachers.

### ■ Findings

The following are the major findings of my study. It is noted that students' writing has demonstrated much more use of rhetorical moves than expected from such kinds of letter in some standard textbooks.

1. While there are mainly four expected/recommended 'moves' in bad news messages, including letters of refusal (as shown in the Bovée et. al. [2004] textbook framework above), a great majority of letters in my study (38 out of 41) deploy five (5) or more 'moves'.
2. The average number of 'moves' of each letter is 6.5, or roughly between 6 and 7 'moves'.
3. There is a high concentration of letters using the average number of 'moves' (21 out of 41, or 51%).
4. 32% of the letters (13 out of 41) have more than the average number of moves (between 8 and 9 moves), while a smaller number of letters (7 out of 41) have 3-5 moves.

What accounts for all these "extra" moves? There are five main factors.

- 1) **Buffers are extended.**
  - a. Twenty-three (23) out of 41 students (56%) buffer their letters much more than what is recommended by some standard textbooks.
  - b. Thirteen (13) students give reasons for the bad news after the initial buffer, and eight buffer the bad news again in other parts of their letters.
  - c. Only five (12%) students write the bad news after the initial buffer, and four couple it immediately with an apology or an expression of understanding.
- 2) **The closing part of the letter is extended.**
  - d. Thirteen (13) students (32%) end their letters with an extended closing.
  - e. Twenty-eight (28) students (68%) have brief closings, but 10 (36%) still buffer their letters immediately before they close.
- 3) **The appeal for and expression of understanding moves abound.**
  - f. The majority of students (27 or 66%) use these moves in their letters.
  - g. The 'understanding' buffer 'move' from Bovée, Thill, & Schatzman (2004) states that writers should: 1. Demonstrate that (they) understand the readers' goals and needs. However, two additional 'understanding' moves from the data emerge in the study participants' letters of refusal: 2. Tell the readers explicitly that (they) understand their situation (expression of understanding) and 3. Appeal for readers' understanding of (their) own situation (appeal for understanding).
- 4) **The apology and/or appeal for reconsideration moves occur.**
  - h. These moves appear in 18 letters (44%).
  - i. They usually occur immediately before or after the bad news.
- 5) **Buffers are everywhere.**
  - j. While most buffers appear at the start of the letters (as expected), they also appear (along with

additional buffers) as second moves, with a few of them still occurring in latter moves.

## ■ Discussion

Based on the findings above, the following observations can be made about the students' letters of refusal. First, the letters deploy more moves than are expected from such types of business writing. Second, buffers are not confined to initial moves of the letters but actually appear almost everywhere in the letters. Third, while closing moves are generally brief, they are also preempted by what look like buffers as well. And fourth, the letters are generously peppered with expressions of understanding, appeals for understanding, apologies, and/or emotional appeals for reconsideration which are generally not encouraged in letters of such nature. In other words, the letters under study demonstrate a healthy dose of 'compassion' moves expressed by the writers but which they also ask from their readers. How can we explain these textual phenomena? The following paragraphs provide some possible explanations.

## ■ Rhetorical socialization: Developing a repertoire of moves

One way to explain the data is to look at it within the context of rhetorical socialization. In simple terms, we can argue that at the present stage the students are still grappling with rhetorical structures which are imposed on them rather than those which emerge from their own respective rhetorical communities. This is because the educational system is to some extent influenced by various modes of thinking and working which reflect the ethos of Western-oriented cultures. In this sense, the 5C's of the language of business (clear, concise, coherent, correct, and courteous) and the 4P's of letter writing (being polite, being positive, being personal, and being professional), which constitute the core of teaching in our business communication course, are classic examples of rhetorical moves into which the students are socialized. There is nothing naturally correct or desirable about these rhetorical moves; rather, certain historical and sociopolitical circumstances make them so.

We may note, for example, that the historical origins of the need for 'clarity' in academic writing can be traced back to the European Enlightenment of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to Descartes' works, and to ideologies of empiricism because of fear that language could not really capture the nature of scientific inquiry (Turner, 2003:188). Yet, without the benefit of such historical information, we tend to treat 'clarity' as one virtue in a "range of rhetorical virtues" (p.190) which is taught in language, writing and communication classrooms as 'commonsensical', 'desirable', and 'correct'.

## ■ Hybrid forms of writing

Another (though related) explanation is to look at the students' writing as hybrid forms of communication. Because certain kinds of socialization as mentioned above

run in conflict with some of the students' socialized identities and behaviors nurtured in other rhetorical environments (for example, their families, their religious communities, and so on), then what the students bring into the classroom are different identities and behaviors which now impact on the kind of writing and other works they produce in class. In other words, the students produce *hybrid* forms of writing and communication.

This is not an isolated remark: in his contrastive study of web-based teaching of argumentative essays in English and Chinese, Liu (2005) argues that "hybridity is probably the best word to describe contemporary Chinese rhetoric" given the various sources of influence on current Chinese ways of life and schooling: overpowering Western influences during the 20th century, a long history of Chinese ethnocentrism, the country's colonization by Western nations, and Soviet Marxist influence (p.15). Similarly, Kubota & Lehner's (2004) suggestion towards a critical contrastive rhetoric is based partly on the assumption that much of current rhetoric is diasporic because of population movements and the use of language(s) across geographical spaces:

*The diasporic nature of rhetoric as well as the evolution of rhetoric in relation to cross-cultural influences...indicates the significance of rhetorical hybridity which encourages an investigation of how rhetoric of a particular language transforms itself through internal and external forces.*

*(Kubota & Lehner, 2004:20).*

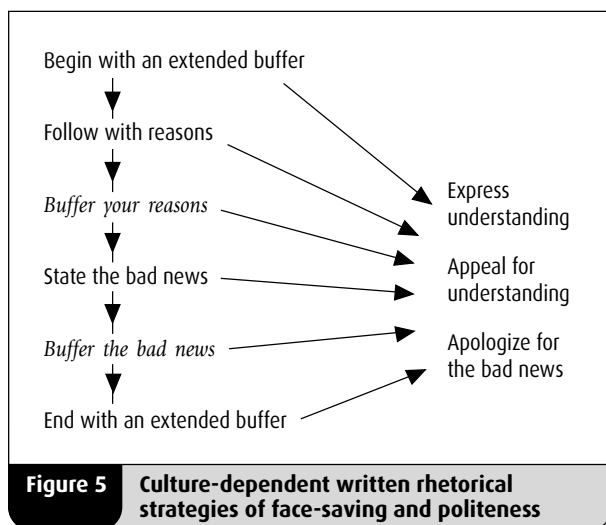
In pedagogic terms, students go through hybrid, conflicted and/or diasporized modes and discourses of rhetorical socialization generated by social institutions like the family, the school, the media, religion and the state polity, providing them with a vast array of rhetorical repertoire at their disposal. Thus, the rhetorical strategies emerging from the data do not simply represent a form of writing as a cultural artifact but, more importantly, a range of practices and discourses that make classroom cultures alive, dynamic and heterogeneous. Viewed from the phenomenon of rhetorical socialization, the data show that when students write, they reproduce and remake cultures as well.

## ■ The role of face in writing cultures

Another way of looking at the data is to understand the students' letters in the context of face-saving strategies. Turning down a request is a face-threatening act which requires 'moves' to preserve the 'face' of the reader, e.g. to tell the reader that you understand his/her situation and to express apology for the decision. The data generally demonstrate how the student-writers are concerned with the preservation of a 'positive face' (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive face is simply the desire to maintain social harmony and/or equilibrium; the desire to create a positive self-image and the desire for such image to be recognized. In the student letters, it is the desire to be liked by readers, thus the use of compassion moves and the occurrence of buffers from

beginning to closing moves to cushion the impact of negative news. The letters are much less information-giving than face-saving because of the desire to maintain harmony between writers and readers rather than to deliver a 'bad' message.

The face-saving moves employed by the student writers, in other words, relate closely to the crucial need for an elaborate use of *culture-dependent written rhetorical strategies of face-saving and politeness* which radically departs from the textbook and theoretical frameworks of writing. An abstract representation of such rhetoric of face in the students' letters is given below (moves in italics are found to be generally optional):



Not only do students have more moves in their letters than expected and buffer their letters from beginning to end, but they do so to orient themselves towards culturally desirable behaviors: express and appeal for understanding, and apologize for the bad news. They are engaged in two equally important parallel objectives: to deliver the news and maintain reader-writer harmony. No objective is privileged over the other; students navigate the two in their letters. It is for this reason that anyone who is rhetorically oriented towards the 5C's and 4P's may find most of the student letters confusing, without focus, and/or long-winded. If viewed within their own cultural logic, however, the students' letters may be easy to understand and follow.

### ■ The challenges of a cultural perspective on writing problems

With the help of contrastive rhetoric, there is no doubt that our understanding of the role of culture(s) in writing is greatly enhanced. Rhetoric as a cultural phenomenon is a premise that can only help us to be better scholars and teachers. The highly enticing (and well-advanced) proposition that our students' native rhetorical strategies influence the way they write in English promotes a liberal attitude towards cultural equality and openness in the classroom. Such proposition functions as a judicious or cautionary voice against dangerous ideas which suggest that the best way to write is *not* how our (Asian) students

write.

Nevertheless, the use of culture as an explanatory framework for understanding the nature of student writing is not without its own very difficult problems. As Connor (1996:163) asks, "How can we avoid stereotyping languages and cultures in contrastive rhetorical studies?" The possibility of stereotyping is one such problem. Indeed, ironically, while contrastive rhetoric has campaigned for rhetorical equality among languages and cultures, it is also enmeshed in such an issue. Is there really a Japanese way of writing? A Chinese way of writing? And so on. To provide a very specific example, Liebman (1998:12), commenting on 'Arab writing', recalls one Arab student who noted that the rhetoric of student writers could be different from the rhetoric of professional writers.

In other words, both in pedagogical and theoretical terms, how is it possible for us to capture the 'essence' of a particular community of writing and still recognize the uniqueness and even unpredictability of individual work? In the first place, can we ever capture the 'essence' of one body of writing, or is 'essence' by itself a cultural construction? In other words, are cultures essentially homogeneous enough to be 'captured' systematically? As soon as we identify a particular rhetorical structure, how do we justify its efficacy without losing sight of the fact that societies, rhetorical communities, cultures, and so on, are not static but are, in fact, fluid and dynamic phenomena which constantly change even as soon as we reify them into abstract configurations? (For a similar discussion of stereotyping in TESOL, see Kumaravadivelu, 2003; for a critique of traditional contrastive rhetoric on grounds of cultural homogenization and essentialism, see Kubota & Lehner, 2004). We should not fall into the trap of assuming in our research and pedagogical work, in the words of Gavin Jack (2004:124) in an editorial for the *Language and Intercultural Communication* journal, "a fixity of place and culture which homogenizes the cultural identities of those that populate certain national territories."

Another problem in using culture as an explanatory framework concerns ethnocentrism. Contrastive rhetoric, especially the early version of it (e.g., Kaplan, 1966), has assumed writing in English as the norm against which all other ways of writing will be judged (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:198). Similarly, while it has recently been noted that the study of rhetoric and culture for pedagogical purposes has moved on from highly decontextualized text-oriented approaches to more nuanced ones to include descriptions and evaluations of the processes of writing, as well as (diachronic) changes in patterns in writing (Connor, 2002; Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Liebman, 1988), several scholars still insist that much work around the world continues to focus on surface features of writing (e.g., Kenkel, 1991; Martin 1989; Pilegaard, 1997; Yeung, 1997). This exclusive focus on textual features neglects more ethnographic and interdisciplinary ways of finding out how genres and rhetorical structures emerge in social practice which are necessary before we can do credible

contrastive work (Scollon, 1997:356; for parallel observations of Chinese-English contrastive rhetoric research, see Liu, 2005).

In other words, it is one thing to draw rhetorical structures from student writing and another thing to find out how students carry on with their daily lives in or outside the classroom, which may explain substantially how and why they write the way they do. That is, it is one thing to say *this is how our students write*, and another thing to say *this is how our students write because...*:

*If it is argued that students write an essay in a particular way because of the structures of their language or culture, in some way, one would want to be convinced that those structures are of deeper cultural and semiotic significance than just the academic genres of school learning tasks.*

(Scollon, 1997:355)

### ■ Towards a ‘multiplicity of rhetoric’ in pedagogic practice

Having discussed both the possibilities and limitations of a cultural approach to understanding professional communication, how then do we deal with all these ideas and issues? I hope that my discussion has pointed to some important nuances of the complexity of our language classroom where cultures abound and are transcended by them, even if this discussion does not reveal ready answers to issues in the writing classroom. Pedagogically and theoretically, we as English teachers and, especially, as teachers of professional, technical and business communication, must look towards what Kubota (1997) calls a ‘multiplicity of rhetoric’. This is a notion of rhetoric which carefully notes that every rhetoric has in it an inherent potential for all kinds of writing forms, and thus warns against obsession with contrasting rhetorics which may unnecessarily lead us to

make unhelpful statements about *us* against *them* (see also Kubota, 2001):

*Contrastive rhetoric research has been offering insights into the cultural aspect of writing. It is important, however, for teachers and researchers to be careful not to overgeneralize cultural differences from small isolated pieces of evidence. Comparing cultural conventions of writing involves a danger of dichotomizing us and them and constructing, instead of discovering, cultural differences. In a world that is increasingly becoming one global community, research on linguistic and cultural similarities as well as differences and on the influence of the language with power on other languages would offer insightful knowledge to teachers and students in the next century.*

(Kubota, 1997:475)

In other words, while we need to incorporate cultural considerations into our pedagogical practices, we also need to develop critical self-awareness of the dangers of ‘picking up’ bits of cultural information from our students’ works, and reify them as the truth about our students, as well as defy the very notion of what culture is: free, messy, dynamic.

Therefore, I propose the following pedagogical framework for the teaching of professional communication where we take into account the cultural dimensions of writing while going beyond the rhetorical structures and understand them from multiple perspectives. This framework assumes that what we do in the classroom is really a matter of what happens to us in the ‘real’ world; both teachers and students bring into the classroom multiple identities, behaviors, personalities, and rhetorical styles, because of the influence of various dimensions of social life such as what I include in the diagram below:

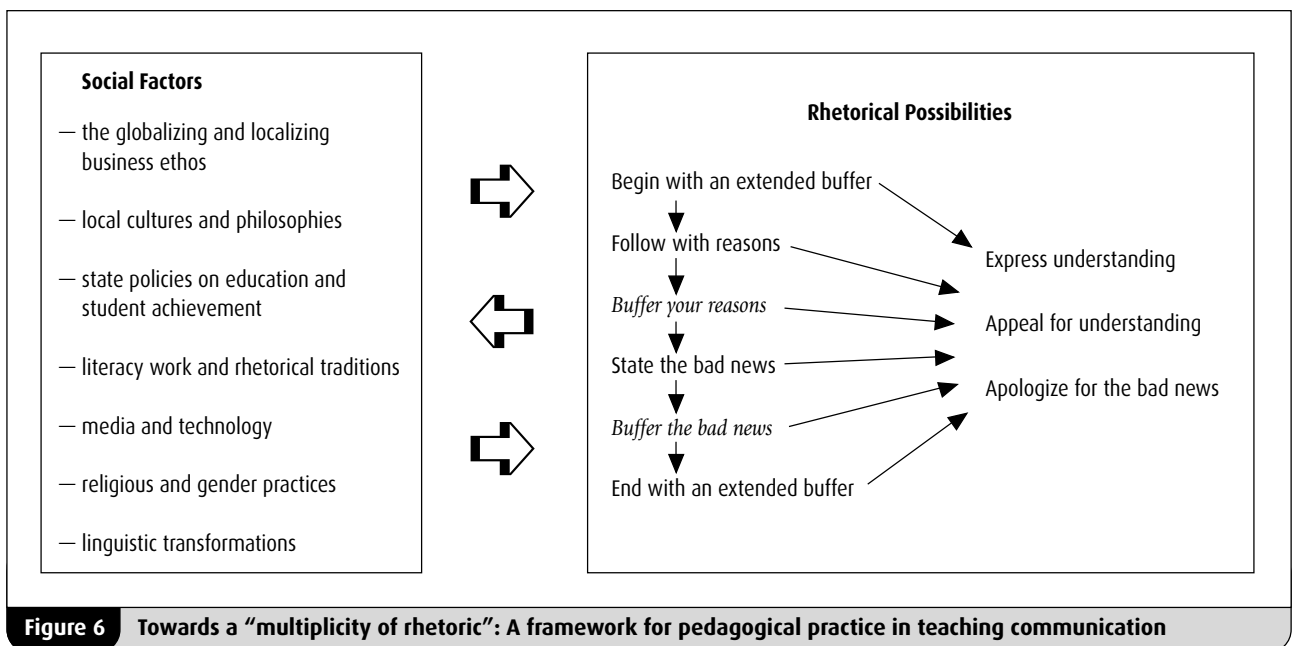


Figure 6 Towards a “multiplicity of rhetoric”: A framework for pedagogical practice in teaching communication

The multiplicity of rhetoric is understood from the diagram as rhetoric that is constituted by different sorts of social factors. This makes student writing more complex and unpredictable than perhaps we as teachers normally think.

So, what does the framework mean to us as teachers of professional communication and related courses? First, the framework really does not require the teacher to know every bit of social, cultural and educational information about each student in class. Rather, the framework tells us about the nature of power in the classroom: not only is our students' writing shaped in various ways, but it also tells us to be open to all possibilities in the classroom—because while there are, indeed, privileged and/or dominant forms of writing, the reality is that all these are socially and culturally produced. It goes without saying that forms and ways of writing which are marginalized in the classroom must be viewed with fresher eyes and less prejudiced minds.

In more practical terms, instead of saying this writing is correct and that writing is wrong, we must instead ask: what makes particular forms of writing correct or wrong, and who is saying such things? This will lead us to think that notions like 'correct', 'appropriate', 'best', and so on, are not natural givens but potent social constructs which come from dominant and/or powerful cultural practices promoted by those people and institutions whose interests are best served by the use of such constructs. This in turn leads us to critical pedagogical questions regarding *what* is taught/learned, *why* it is taught/learned, *how* it is taught/learned, *who* decides, and so on (Kubota & Lehner, 2004:20-21; Pennycook, 2001).

One other important point that the framework hopes to highlight is the reciprocity of influence between culture and writing. It is not just 'culture' that influences the way we write. If this was the case, we humans would be reduced to mere passive subjects of the world—unable to generate creative energies and critical thinking because anything we do would merely be a reflex of what 'culture' wants us to do. Rather, how we write also makes 'culture'

because writing works within what we all consider 'culture' in the first place. Writing, like all other social acts, does not happen in a social or cultural vacuum. It is part of 'culture' and, being so, helps create it.

The framework above, therefore, allows us as individuals (and especially as teachers and students) to view ourselves as social actors or agents who are not merely 'acted upon' by the world, but who also 'act on' the world (c.f. Shi-xu & Wilson, 2001). In other words, our students' writing is shaped by all sorts of cultural and social elements (such as the ones above in the framework), while in the process, it also shapes such elements and gives them the kind of social and cultural legitimacy that they get from the people who make them.

## ■ Conclusion

Research work in this paper was motivated essentially by a very practical pedagogical question: why do my students write the way they write? Though difficult to answer, the rest of the paper has raised some theoretical and practical questions and offered some tentative answers which I hope can lead to a better understanding of writing and communication in our classrooms. Pedagogically, the preceding discussion suggests that we need to deal with both predictable and unpredictable phenomena in writing and, as teachers, we need to embrace both for our own survival and for effectiveness. Additionally, we need to recognize the students' power to create and recreate their own cultural worlds through their writing practices (and, for that matter, all other classroom work).

Writing is a dynamic cultural activity that cannot be reduced simply to mere judgments of good or bad. What is the student thinking about when she writes? What is she doing when she writes? We should not simply be obsessed with the question: is this writing good or bad? A better question should be: *why does this student write the way she writes?* It seems then that the question with which we started this paper does not really need an answer—we just need to keep asking it in our classes.

**NOTES**

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