

Lemongrass room
3:05-3:30pm

Cultural Considerations for Academic Writing Pedagogy: Different Routes, Same Destination

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It has been established that culture plays a pivotal role in academic discourse. In academic writing, contrastive rhetoric research has examined the influence of linguistic and cultural norms on the use of a foreign language (Connor, 1996). Contrastive rhetoric research, also recently known as intercultural rhetoric (Connor, 2011), remains a relevant area of interest due to the globalisation of higher education (Altbach, 2015). In lieu of globalisation, it is expected for English language instructors at the tertiary level to manage varying linguistic and cultural variances of international students. In this presentation, we aim to highlight cultural variance which affected writing conventions, and to present ways used to help students gain rhetorical awareness.

Our inquiry is grounded in narratives of explanation, which would be a retrospection of events for the purpose of reconstructing meaning along an extended plot (Polkinghorne, 1988; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Smith, 2013). In this line of inquiry, incidents which are critical may surface. We define these incidents according to Shapira-Lishchinsky's (2011) study, whereby critical incidents are events which interrupt a teacher's practice or agency, leading to moments of vulnerability and powerlessness. These incidents may subsequently lead to a turning point in a teacher's pedagogical approach and/or epistemology (Hall & Townsend, 2017).

The inquiry is based on an intensive English course that students had to take before commencing the semester at the National University of Singapore. The course was sheltered in nature, whereby students are given language support to cope with incoming academic materials (Roessingh, 1999).

One critical incident that the paper's corresponding author Daron experienced was how East Asians hid behind the voices of others. What they did was to carefully weave information from different sources, yet without explicating a stand. This resonated with co-author Sylvia, as she found that there was a marked difference in writing quality when students paraphrased information from sources, and when they had to write authentically to explain their views in response to the sources. This is a common rhetorical strategy among East Asians. Studies have indicated that there is a symmetrical deference that needs to be observed, resulting in the delayed presentation of a main point or a lack of an academic voice. In academic writing, this is referred to the use of evidential information (Kong, 1998; Chen & Zhang, 2017). Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) argue that the notion of having an academic voice may be a Western construct which some of these learners are uncomfortable with as it goes against their sociocultural norms that value consensus and discourages discord. A study by Spalding, Wang, and Hu (2009) found that it was possible to help these learners develop a voice in their writing by providing students with opportunities to discover their voice by working on meaningful tasks.

To address this issue, both instructors modified their teaching methods. Daron, taking a data-driven approach, brought excerpts from published academic texts for students to analyse. The analysis concentrated on the organisation of information, specifically the theme-theme progression (Leong, Toh, & Chin, 2018). Sylvia, on the other hand, adopted a workshop approach to create an active and participatory space that encouraged learners to exchange views and perspectives on topics meaningful to them. Advocates of the writing workshop pedagogy claim that such interaction promotes voice development (Spalding, Wang, & Hu, 2009).

Through our retrospection, and subsequent narrative explanation of our experiences in teaching, issues were identified and addressed. Our pedagogical methods, while different, moved towards the same target, which is to socialise new international students with English academic writing conventions. This ultimately provided a linguistically and culturally responsive learning environment (Lucas & Freedson-Gonzalez, 2008).

Keywords

Contrastive rhetoric, English for academic purposes, academic writing

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