STUDENTS AS CONTRASTIVE RHETORICIANS: EXAMINING ESL STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF L1 AND L2 RHETORICAL CONVENTIONS

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This paper explores four NNSs (2 Chinese speakers and 2 Arabic speakers) writing to varying audiences both in English and their L1, in order to explore the effects of language medium and audience awareness on student writing. Results suggest that students are acutely aware of how rhetorical conventions vary across languages, and are influenced by how they perceive those conventions. Student interviews suggest that the language in which they are writing strongly influences organizational patterns and lexical choices, as well as levels of directness and politeness. This study has implications for the teaching of L2 composition, including using inquiry about student perceptions of L1 and L2 rhetorical conventions to lead them to an awareness of how audience and language medium interact when writing across cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Contrastive rhetoric research and application has been met with controversy since its initiation, when Kaplan (1966) published his infamous "doodles article" where he depicted visual representations of cross-cultural writing differences. Building on contrastive analysis research such as that done by Fries (1945) and Lado (1957), Kaplan applied second language error analysis at the rhetorical, structural level of a piece of writing (Saville Troike, 2003, p. 147). He argued that by analyzing rhetorical patterns (at the paragraph level) across speakers of various language groups (e.g. English, Semitic, Oriental, Romance, and Russian), one could be aware of the *cultural thought patterns* behind the language. For example, he depicted the organization of paragraphs written by native speakers of English as a straight, vertical line to represent the linearity of the organizational pattern. On the other hand, he represented Semitic rhetorical patterns by a zig-zagged line and Oriental rhetoric by a spiral circle. Kaplan's initial contrastive rhetoric work has been heavily criticized and termed deterministic due to his claim that his visual representations reflect distinct *thinking* patterns among cultures. He has since modified his views, stating that various rhetorical patterns might instead reflect the writing *conventions* learned in a particular culture (Connor, 1996, pp. 15-16).

Despite the controversy surrounding traditional contrastive rhetoric research, Kaplan's discussion is important in the field of ESL composition because it offers a starting point for educators in exploring how language and culture are interconnected in writing. Drawing on Kaplan's initial work, as

well as critical discussions surrounding contrastive rhetoric research and application to the teaching of ESL writing, the current study seeks to explore ESL students' *awareness* of writing conventions in both English and their native language, and how this knowledge intersects with audience analysis and a given rhetorical situation in a first-year composition class. Grabe and Kaplan (1989) contend that even though the implications of traditional contrastive rhetoric research may have been overstated at the outset, contrastive rhetoric is nonetheless still relevant to L2 writing research and instruction. They point out that rather than reflecting writers' *thinking* patterns, ESL students' mastery of conventions across languages indicates that "literacy skills (both reading and writing) are learned; that they are culturally (and perhaps linguistically) shaped; that they are, at least in part, transmitted through the formal educational system; and that learners are, in principle, capable of learning writing conventions and strategies of various types" (p. 264). This addendum to Kaplan's (1966) original argument is significant, as it acknowledges the centrality of instruction in shaping students' understanding and application of writing conventions in both their L1 and L2.

In later work, Kaplan (2001) points to implications for contrastive rhetoric *outside* of the ESL arena, specifically regarding how such research "contribute[s] to an understanding of genre, curriculum, special-purpose writing (e.g. business), and the various transmission media" for native speakers of English from various backgrounds (p. xvi). Although many have viewed variations in L2 writing as stemming from students' language backgrounds and interlanguage developmental features, it is important to recognize that what students are *explicitly* taught about writing in a second language is central in the investigation of their writing choices. This paper examines ESL students' learned writing conventions, and their awareness of their knowledge, by comparing student letters written to the same audience both in English and their native language, in conjunction with interviewing the writers regarding why they made specific rhetorical choices in these letters. The findings indicate important implications for ESL pedagogy as concerns engaging students in writing activities and group discussion so that they can further explore the assumptions underlying learned conventions.

Moving Beyond the Limitations of Contrastive Rhetoric

Because contrastive rhetoric research has been so heavily criticized in the field of ESL composition, it's important to consider some voices of dissention to contextualize current perceptions of contrastive rhetoric research. Since Kaplan's (1966) "doodles" publication, many have challenged his assertions that distinct cultural thinking patterns are reflected in writing, and as mentioned earlier, even Kaplan has revised his initial argument. Leki (1991) notes that critics of contrastive rhetoric take issue with the extensive emphasis on the writing *product* as a focus, "ignoring both the contrastive rhetorical context from which the L2 writers emerge and the processes these writers may have gone through to produce a text" (p. 123). The current study seeks to apply contrastive rhetoric to capture the writing process by interviewing

students about their writing choices, rather than focusing on the product for analysis. Leki warns that too much emphasis on the product is problematic as it assumes a lack of "previously learned discourse schemata," when, in fact, L1 writing instruction will reflect particular cultural discourse styles (p. 124). Severino (1993) also points out limitations of Kaplan's "doodles," noting that "generations of teachers, tutors, and ESL students 'learn' that English speakers develop their ideas in a linear, hierarchical fashion and 'Orientals' in a non-linear, spiral fashion" (p. 45). Arguing that a multifaceted relationship exists between "cultural ways of thinking and that culture's literacy instruction," she recommends that ESL writing instructors urge students to contemplate the sociocultural and political bases for variations in writing instruction and favored features in writing between their home country and the U.S (p. 48).

Additionally, Canagarajah (2002) argues that although Kaplan has revised his initial position on contrastive rhetoric findings, his underlying assumption still implies that "human agency cannot transcend cultural biases" (p. 34). He is dissatisfied with the implication that variations in L2 writing are perceived to be indicative of the L1 culture coming through the language, and not the possibility that the writer is exercising a "creative case of appropriation or negotiation" (p. 34). In his own research on Sri Lankan scholars, Canagarajah found that "they shuttle ably between local and western academic communities belonging to their field as they publish their findings" (p. 35). In other words, separate discourse practices of these scholars overlap, as they are cognizant of importing varying features into their writing for their own purposes. Other researchers have been concerned with negative by-products of contrastive rhetoric research, such as stereotypes that arise from conjectures about ESL students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds which might influence educators' notions on the best approaches to writing instruction. Zamel (1997) is especially concerned that an emphasis on *difference* between the L1 and L2 "reinforces the idea that each is separate from, even in opposition to, the other and keeps educators from understanding the complex ways in which the two intersect, mingle with, and give shape to one another" (p. 341). She calls for a *model of transculturation* that would recognize a range of factors contributing to second language writing practices in order to move beyond the tendency to "reduce, categorize, and generalize," ultimately limiting students by typing them according to language and background (p. 342). Acknowledging the complex interaction of language and identity, she argues that though students from diverse cultural backgrounds will experience challenges when writing in a second language, that the "determinism" she identifies in second language research is limiting, as it connects too closely a writer's linguistic and cultural background with his or her attempts at writing in a second language, and deems L2 writer challenges as problematic rather than enriching. Furthermore, she argues that reductionism leads to failed observations about facets of identity that "intersect" or "transcend" language issues, [and] the existence of "multiple ways of being" not only when speakers shift languages, but also within the same language, and importantly, that what "individuals do in and with language, either their own or another, is contingent

on and embedded within specific situations" (p. 345). Students will become more adept at permitting their various languages to interact and feed one another as they proceed through more second language instruction that seeks to support their discourse and writing efforts.

Contrastive Rhetoric's Implications for Pedagogy

Matsuda (1997) argues that contrastive rhetoric research has not yet been adequately transformed into classroom writing instruction. He contends that studies in contrastive rhetoric have essentially led to a static theory of writing pedagogy that maintains a "mechanistic view of the writer," in which he or she is seen as a "'writing machine,'" as it were, that creates text by reproducing the pattern provided by his or her linguistic, cultural, or educational background" (p. 49). Matsuda therefore calls for a more dynamic model of L2 writing, in which writing is perceived to happen "in its own dynamic context, which is created as a result of the encounter of the writer and the reader—an encounter mediated through the text" (p. 52). His assertions echo Zamel's idea of a model of transculturation as discussed above, as both authors call for a more encompassing and contextualized view of the writer. Importantly, he points to the necessity of consulting with the student in order to analyze L2 writing in context.

In his well-known article about language and identity, Shen (1989) shares his experience of learning to write in English, and the challenges that ensued as he discovered how to merge his Chinese identity with his English identity. He writes, "I want to show how my cultural background shaped—and shapes—my approaches to my writing in English and how writing in English redefined—and redefines—my ideological and logical identities" (p. 459). Shen ultimately created two "selves," his "Chinese self" and his "English self" in order to ease his identity struggle when writing in two languages with very different cultural underpinnings which lead to different rhetorical organizational patterns (p. 461). He explains that a growing consciousness of his dual identities assisted him in merging competing systems of values and logic, and contributed significantly to his mastery of composing in English. Shen suggests that composition instructors might assist students' in balancing writing identities by explicitly teaching the cultural issues embedded in writing, such as, for example, "the different cultural/ideological connotations of the word 'I,' the connotations that exist in a group-centered culture and an individual-centered culture" (p. 466). It is through this exploration that students will come to a greater awareness of the *assumptions* underlying cultural writing conventions.

THIS STUDY

This paper explores ESL students' perceptions regarding English and their native language, and how they draw on this knowledge when making specific writing choices. In first-year composition courses at the University of Arizona, there is a strong focus on analysis and writing for a particular

audience. Therefore, an emphasis is placed on engaging students in various exercises in order to have them analyze their audience and choose appropriate language and persuasive strategies based on their relationship with the audience as well as their purpose for writing. One way to urge ESL students toward a greater understanding of audience, context, and language is to assign them to write a letter to both a home country professor and an American professor—the pedagogical underpinnings of this task is that cultural constraints on the given situations will push them to make varying rhetorical choices based on their audience.

But students at the university level generally arrive with learned ideas about English writing conventions, and it can therefore be challenging to adopt different strategies for different audiences while using English as a medium. This study is interested in precisely that issue—to what level are students influenced by audience (and the cultural expectations of that audience), and to what level does the language in which they are writing influence their choices? As Zamel (1997) points out, writing is mediated through a complex relationship which includes both language medium and cultural expectations of a given audience. Additionally, according to Matsuda (1997), it is imperative to engage students in their own examinations of why they make the particular writing choices that they do.

Context Of Study

This qualitative study was conducted in a second-semester ESL composition course at the University of Arizona. During the second unit of the course, students are required to research a controversial social issue in order to write an argumentative essay. As an activity leading up to the major essay for this unit, students were asked to write a letter to two professors—one American and one from their own country—to persuade him or her to cancel the final exam. The objective was to have students take social, cultural, and political elements into account while assessing their writing context, in order to prepare them to write for a particular audience for their persuasive essay. The third and final unit of the course centers around student reflection on writing. At this time, we discussed rhetorical conventions across languages, and students participated in a whole-class discussion to explore their views on English versus their native language. At this time, the class was asked to write a letter to their home country professor *in their native language* asking him or her to raise their grade. The ultimate purpose of this assignment was to have students reflect on the rhetorical conventions that they employ in their native language, as well as those that they learned in this course—this reflection took place in small group and whole-class discussion after they had written their letters. Students translated their letters into English and looked for particular characteristics of their native language writing style in order to contrast this style with the choices they when writing in English.

Participants and Methodology

In this pilot study, I asked students to write three letters: 1) Request to an American professor written in English, 2) Request to a home country professor written in English, and 3) Request to a home country professor written in the students' L1, subsequently translated into English by the student. My goal is to examine the intersection between audience and language medium. That is, I examine the salient differences between the letters written in English to two different audiences, as well as the variations between the letters written to the same audience, but in different languages. Then, I conducted face-to-face interviews to ask the students why they made the writing choices that they did. During the one-on-one interviews, we went over their letters, and I asked them specific questions about audience and language medium, taking notes on their responses.

Initially, the total number of participants included sixteen students in my ESL composition course. Of the sixteen, I chose four participants— two native Arabic speakers and two native Chinese speakers, which yields a total of 12 letters for analysis (each student wrote three letters). Two criteria determined this choice: 1) Interest in the comparison of at least two unrelated languages and two students in each language group, and 2) Desire for students to be at approximately the same level of English writing proficiency. Of the two Arabic speakers, one is a female from Kuwait, while the other is a male from the UAE. The Chinese speakers are both female—one is from Taiwan, while the other is from Malaysia. Despite the representation of two L1 groups, the students come from different countries and cultural backgrounds, which is expected to influence their writing choices. This sample is therefore limited, and is proposed as a pilot study to explore issues in students' perspectives on writing to different audiences in different languages.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

This section presents all of the four participants' letters in their entirety in table format. The two letters written in English are presented first, followed by analysis. Then, the third letter (written in student's L1) is presented, followed by analysis. The tables are arranged as follows: In the right-hand column is the student letter, broken up into single sentences, in chronological order. Notes in the left-hand column are my own categories indicating the focus of each sentence. All grammatical errors have been left as such, and the names are pseudonyms chosen by the students. The bolded text indicates my rationale for categorizing each sentence as I did in the left-hand column. When I could not point to any particular word or linguistic unit to exemplify the category in the left-hand corner, I did not bold anything, preferring rather to let the reader interpret the sentence as a whole. Examples of categories are as follows: "Rationale" means a student's reasons for making the request; "justification" is used when a student attempts to *support* why the request should be granted, and so on. Although I attempt to objectively sort out the main focus of each sentence, I realize that the division of categories is

based on only my own interpretations of the functions of each sentential unit, influenced by class discussions wherein students articulated what they were trying to accomplish with each letter. Further research might include a query of other ESL composition instructors to add validity to the categories.

Figure 1: Ahmed (Male, L1 Arabic, UAE)—English Letter to American Professor

Prompt: Request that your professor cancel your final exam	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Self-introduction Purpose	Dear Dr. Grimes, **I** am a student in your Biology class and **I have** a small **request** with respect to our final exam.
Rationale Request	Since our final **exam is worth such a huge part of our grade I feel** that it is only fair to cancel it.
Justification	The assignments and **other exams should be sufficient** as they give a more balanced look of a students performance.
Justification	**Having one grade decide the grade for the class does not give a fair judment** of the students efforts and knowledge over the whole semester.
Closing	Thank you, your student XXX

The following letter is based on the same prompt as the previous one, with a home-country professor as audience.

Figure 2: Ahmed (Male, L1 Arabic, UAE)—English Letter to UAE Professor

Prompt: Request that your professor cancel your final exam	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Solidarity with other students	Dear Dr. Ahmed, Over the last few weeks **some of my classmates and I have** been disscussing our grades for your biology class.
Solidarity / Background	**We realized** that the final exam is going to decide our grade for the class.
Rational	**We feel** that it would be very unfortunate is some of the students worked hard through out the whole semester and simply because **they didint perform** well on the final for whatever reason **all their efforts** during the semester would have gone in vain.
Request	**I personal request** that you reconsider the weight of the final exam.
Deference	Hopefully you will come up with a fair decision as you are known to do.
Closing	Thank you, your student XXX

Ahmed employs a solidarity strategy in his letter to his home country professor, using "we" and "their" (to refer to other students), rather than "I" as in his letter to his American professor. His letter to the American instructor states his purpose for writing in his first sentence, and then proceeds to give the rationale for asking as well as the justification for why his request should be granted. On the other hand, his letter to a UAE professor first establishes solidarity and a background or rationale for asking *before* stating the purpose for writing. A salient difference between the letters is a nod to the teacher in terms of his "fairness," in the UAE letter—this is absent in the letter to the American professor. Although these differences are subtle, Ahmed shows awareness of the different audiences in terms of what is expected. He explained that in English, one should "get to the point," whereas in Arabic he feels a necessity to "write a little bit before you say what you mean." Therefore, even though he was writing in English to his Arabic professor, he felt a need to belabor a bit before making his request. Ahmed called his letter to the Arabic professor "a compromise,"—it was what he wanted to say in Arabic, but written in English. The following letter is his request to a UAE professor to raise his grade, written in Arabic and translated into English.

Figure 3: Ahmed (Male, L1 Arabic, UAE)--Letter to UAE Professor Written in Arabic, Translated by student

Prompt: Request that your professor give you a higher grade	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Deference Appreciation Respect	To the **dignified** Dr. Ahmed Kerr, I would like to start of my letter by **expressing my love to the subject you teach** as well as **my respect for you** as a well **reputated educator**.
Rapport Focus on self	Over this semester **you have espressed to me** your impression by the quality of my work and **my diligence as a student.**
Rapport Focus on self	**Your constant encoragement** to me has pushed me to become an outstanding student, and you have expressed to the rest of my class mates that **you would want them to be outstanding as well as diligent like me**.
Purpose: Focus on wrongdoing to self	The reason I am writing you this letter is because **I have been unfairly devaluated** by the grade you have given me for the last assignment.
Rationale	Although **most of the students of the class would be satisfied** by the grade you have given me, **I feel** that I deserve a better grade.
Justification	As any other assignment **I devoted all my the extent of my power and effort**.
Plea	**I hope from you** that you would reconsider the grade you have given me.
Closing	Thank you, your respectfull student XXX

There are some marked differences between this letter to his UAE professor and the previous one written in English—namely, this one is much more expressive. Ahmed spends time conveying his "love to the subject" as well as his respect for the teacher. He thanks the teacher for his encouragement, and interestingly, manages to focus on his own accomplishments while praising the teacher. His rationale for asking for a higher grade is also self-focused, stating that he has "been unfairly devaluated" and that he deserves a better grade because he put extensive effort toward the assignment. When asked about his other letter to his home country professor (written in English), and the marked differences between the two, he replied, "That one's just in English. You told me to write in English to a professor back home, but I wasn't sure if you meant in Arabic style." He seems very aware of the different "styles" of the two languages, so much that he thought critically about which one the English composition instructor "wanted." Commenting on his translated letter, Ahmed said that "no one really writes like this, people write more like in the second one [the English one to the UAE professor]," but that some people "push it more" when writing to a high ranking official, like a judge. He acknowledged that in Arabic, "there's more of a focus on how you say things rather than what you are saying. You want to make it as beautiful as possible, make it respectful—it should be obvious that you put some time and effort into it."

Ahmed seems very conscious of how languages are used, and when it is appropriate to employ which styles. He is definitely making choices when writing—both in terms of language organizational patterns and audience. Interestingly, his awareness is so extensive that he wanted to adjust his writing according to what the instructor "wanted." His letter written in English to his UAE audience is especially interesting as he attempts to combine what is expected in Arabic with the conventions of English. The following letters, although also written by a native Arabic speaker, are from a female student from Kuwait.

Figure 4: Aisha (Female, L1 Arabic, Kuwait)—English Letter to American Professor

Prompt: Request that your professor cancel your final exam	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Self-introduction	Dear Professor Wood, **I am** a student in your MATH 110-009 class.
Positive comment about course	It has been a **great and wonderful course**.
Personal expression about course	**I have enjoyed** your class and **I have learned** a lot as well.
Referential statement	The final exam is coming up soon.
Rapport (informal / close)	**You might even be preparing it as I write you this letter.**

Solidarity with other students	**Some students and myself** would like to ask for a favor.
Hedge, Request	**This might be late but** we are asking you to cancel the final exam.
Rapport (informal / close)	**By now you might be asking yourself why?. allow me to explain.**
Solidarity with other students; Rationale	First **we have all be doing very well** in our exams, homeworks and quezis.
Rapport (informal / close)	**Think about it this way it will be less exams for you to correct.**
Rationale	Pluse Since it is the last exam and we have done so well **some of us feel that we might not want to take in feer that we will not do so well** since it contains alot of material.
Rationale / Justification	Plus when it is a final sometime **the time itself is short and our performance will not be as good.**
Rapport (semi-informal / close) Compliment	**You have been great all through the course and we have learnd not only math but be have learnd somethings from you as well.**
Rapport, Request	**I hope you can understand** and cancel the final exam.
Rapport (informal / close)	**Pretend that you were a student again.**
Closing	Sincerely, XXX

Aisha's letter to her American professor is noticeably longer than Ahmed's. The next table presents her same request to a home-country professor.

Figure 5: Aisha (Female, L1 Arabic, Kuwait)—English Letter to UAE Professor

Prompt: Request that your professor cancel your final exam	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Self-introduction Personal expression about course	Dear Professor Yousef, I am a student in your Social Sci. class and **I enjoy it** very much.
Expression of interests	I am **very interested in social life** and **this is the reason** why I am taking this class.
Knowledge of grading percentages	I understand that 50% of all students grades depends uppon the finel exam.
Solidarity with other students	**Many student and myself** worry about this.
Purpose Rapport (distance)	**The purpose of my latter is to persuade you** to cancel that finel exam **and allow me to explain before you stop reading.**

Justification	Since we have taken three midterms and in-class quezis, many of the students if not all feel very comfortable with their grades.
Justification	Plus the final exam will include all the meterial that we have taken through out the course, and **that is alot to cover in one exam** that determins half our grades.
Rapport (distance)	**This is your course and you are free to do as you wish.**
Rapport (closeness)	**But think of students like myself** who would like to start a career in social sci.
Rapport (distance) Solidarity with other students Deference	**Alot of the students look up to you a**nd feel that you will make a wise and fair decision.
Closing	Sincerely, XXX

Aisha's two letters written in English, despite different target audiences, are fairly similar in terms of organization. In both she expresses enjoyment for the course, solidarity with other students, and her rationale for asking for a cancellation of the final exam, as well as a justification of why her request should be granted. The differences seem to lie in the closeness and distance of rapport strategies—sentences in which she seems to be establishing a somewhat personal connection with the professor. In her letter to an American professor, she is more informal, creating a feeling of closeness with language like "By now you are asking yourself why?. allow me to explain," versus "allow me to explain *before you stop reading*" in her letter to the Kuwaiti professor. Other examples of this closeness are "Think about it this way it will be less exams for you to correct" and "Pretend that you were a student again." In her second letter she writes "This is your course and *you are free to do as you wish*" and "A lot of the *students look up to you* and feel that *you will make a wise and fair decision*." When asked about why her letters were so similar, despite two different target audiences, Aisha replied, "well, they're both in English," and "teachers teach that English should be direct." On the other hand, she admitted a certain informality that she felt with American professors that was not present in her relationship with those in her home country. The following letter is the one to her home country professor, written in Arabic and then translated into English.

Figure 6: Aisha (Female, L1 Arabic, Kuwait) - Letter to UAE Professor, Written in Arabic, Translated by Student

Prompt: Request that your professor give you a higher grade	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Heading (Convention)	**In The Name of God**

Emotional appeal Request	Dear Professor I write you this letter hoping that **I might reach your mind and heart** in order to convince you to raise my final grade in this subject.
Rationale	As you know at the end of the semester all subject grades are added up to creat my average **which will help in in getting employed**.
Justification	**I have attended all the classes** and **I have never been late**, **done all of my homeworks**, and on **my exams I have been above average**.
Rationale / Justification	**On the final exam my thoughts were scaterd** and **I was not able to focas** causing my grade to fall.
Referential statement	You have given me a final grade of 89 which is a B+.
Rationale (emotional)	**But this grade in affecting** my over all average.
Request (emotional)	**I'm asking you to look back** on my exams and work and effort I have put in to get this grade.
Plea	**I hope you can find that one grad that will raise me to my expectations.**
Appeal to religion Responsibility on teacher	**Everything is in the hands of God but now you have a choice of leaving me as I am or giving me a better chance for my employment life.**
Closing	Thank you, Sincerely, Student XXX

This letter is quite different in terms of expression and references to God. Aisha comments, "In Arabic, you can relate everything back to God—In English you shouldn't do that, but in Arabic, you can do anything." She explained that Arabic employs extensive use of metaphor, whereas English does not. Aisha felt that in her second letter, even though she was writing to someone in Kuwait, she felt constrained by the English language—unable to use references to God or metaphor, her letter written to a home-country professor in English resembles in large part her letter to an American professor: "You asked us to change the audience—but I didn't so much, because I didn't think of it in Arabic. The last one is expressive; it's exactly what I wanted to say. In Arabic, I can be formal, yet still say exactly what I want to say. You can't do this in English—the feelings come out too informal." Like Ahmed, Aisha is very conscious of what she "can" and "cannot" do in the two languages—her writing is therefore shaped by the medium of language that she is using, and how she perceives that language in terms of conventions or constraints. The following letters focus on native Chinese speakers from Taiwan and Malaysia.

Figure 7: Seong Fu (Female, L1 Chinese, Taiwan)— English Letter to American Professor

Prompt: Request that your professor cancel your final exam	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Self-introduction	Dear Dr. Lin, **This is** XXX XXXX from the Nats-101 class.
Referential statement about class	**The topic of the class is** about the revolution of the Earth.
Referential statement: shows her knowledge of class context	**It concluds a lot of different** scientific contents and experiencial research.
Referential statement: grade policies	However, the class grade is based on two midterms and one final exam.
Referential statement: requirements	On top of this **we also require to do** a rock research paper.
Beginning Rationale	**It is kind difficult** for a foreign student to follow the whole schedue and be prepare for every single exam.
Purpose / Request	**I suggest that you can** give us daily or weekly quiz to replace the final exam.
Justification	**This will be easiler** for most of foreign students **and can also mesaure** students daily learning effencetuel.
Justification	**Moreover, giveing a daily quiz can give students a basic guideline** about the focus of class and topic in each lecture.
Justification	**If you concern about the student's performance, this is easy for you to see** students study attuite and understand that [xxx] the students can catch the class schedue.
Proposal / Justification	Therefore, **I believe that cancel the final exam,** and put the grades to the daily or weekly quiz would be a beeter way for most of students to learn this class.
Proposal / Justification	**Also, you can see** the student's performance by testing the main idea of each lectures.
Personal expression about request	Therefore, **I think cancle the final exam** is a optimal choice for both you and the students.
Closing	Sincerely, XXX

The following table contains Seong Fu's letter to a home-country professor, composed in English.

Figure 8: Seong Fu (Female, L1 Chinese, Taiwan)— English Letter to Taiwanese Professor

Prompt: Request that your professor cancel your final exam	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Self-introduction	Dear Dr. Mendog, **I am** a student in your Network Marking class.
Appreciation	**First, I want to appreciated that your understandable and acceptable teaching** in this intire semester.
Statement of knowledge gained	**I've learned a lot** of specific Network skills and marking ideas through this class.
Focus of course, as outlined by instructor	However, **as you mentiond in the class**, the focus of this cources is based on learning the sell of trading goods in the Internet.
Referential: grade policies	**The grade of this class is mostly estabilshed** on mid-term quiz and final exam.
Personal statement Indirect Request	Personaly, **I think the final exam for this class could be an opptional choice for students.**
Justification	Becase the final exam is worth on 30% of the total grade, **many students may have a lot other different cources** to prepare at the same time.
Justification	**It is a easy way for student** to turn in a final paper instead of taking the final exam.
Referential: course content Justification	This Network marketing class inculdes many computer skills and management principal., so I think it is hard to determine students works by giveing them exam.
Request	Therefore, **would you please consider** about cancel the final exam and replace it with a final paper.
Appreciation	**Thank you for your time and attention.**
Closing	Have a great day. Sincerely, XXX

Noticeably, Seong Fu's letter to her home country professor is sandwiched between an opening and closing statement of appreciation, which is absent in her letter to an American professor. She shows her knowledge of the purpose of the course in both letters, but in the letter to her Taiwanese professor, she adds "*as you mentiond* in the class, the focus of this cources is…" to attribute what she knows of the course to her professor's statements. When making her request, she adds a "would you please consider" in her letter to her home country professor that is absent in her letter to an American professor. Her request to her Taiwanese professor also comes later in the letter than the one to her American professor. Her consistencies in using more politeness strategies with her home country professor seem to point to an idea that one can be more direct in English, ignoring certain appeals to deference.

Figure 9: Seong Fu (Female, L1 Chinese, Taiwan) - Letter to Taiwanese Professor, Written in Chinese, Translated by Student

Prompt: Request that your professor give you a higher grade	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Personal Expression	Dear Dr. Wang, **I am so glad that I have a chance to write a letter to you in order to express** how I feel about the class's gradeing method.
Referential: class content	Basically, **this class focus** on every quizes, tests and homeworks.
Affirmation	**And it is really good way** to grade student's score report.
Indirect Rationale	**However, this method may be also ignore or underestamate** student's performance on class beccase of the high contribution grades.
Rationale	**So it is import to reconsider** about raise student's grades or improve the grade system by focus on student's daily performance.
Justification	Firsty, the importance of knowing every student's performance on daily class is essential and nessary.
Expression—general	**It doesn't mean** that you are a good or bad student becase you can get good or bad grades on the tests.
Expression Justification	**You should not judge studen't cumulative performance** based on their scores **because** some students may sometimes late, or leave early, or even absent in the class but they can still get good grades.
Justification	**This is unfair to other students** who study hard and never absent in class, but can't get good grades.
Expression Request	Therefore, **I personally think you should rasie students daily performance grade** instead of focusing on the acadamic scores.
Justification	Second, **some student may choose cheat** or any way to achieve good grades because the pressure from their family, parents or themselves.
Justification	However**, this give them a incentive to get good grades but ignore the importance** of honst intgrety.
Expression--general	**This brings students a wrong way** to achieve their life goal later on in their life.
Request Justification	In order to teach students a correct way to achieve their goal or scores, **raise the student's grades on their general performance could lead them a better way to understand the importance of learning.**

Seong Fu avoids all references to herself in this letter, stating instead that "it is import to reconsider about raise student's grades or improve the grade system." When asked about the vast differences in this letter as

compared to the one written in English, she replied, "In English try to be directer. Chinese don't use "I" all the time—we use 'we.'" She commented that because students in Taiwan do not have the opportunity to voice their own opinion at school, it is more strategic to give a "speech for everyone in this class." As concerns her English letter to a Taiwanese professor, Seong Fu commented, "only English more similar to how professor here. It's easier for me." She explained that when writing in English, even to a national in her home country, it was easier to employ the "English style" of writing. The following letters were written by a native Chinese speaker from Malaysia.

Figure 10: Hwee-Lie (Female, L1 Chinese, Malaysia)—English Letter to American Professor

Prompt: Request that your professor cancel your final exam	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Self-introduction	Dear Professor XX, **This is** XXX, a student in your NATS 104 class, section 25.
Request	I am writing this letter **in order to plead you** to cancel our final examination in this December, 2003.
Justification	As the final examination makes up a 50% of our whole semester performance in this class, **I think this can be either a help or hurt to our overall grade**.
Justification / Suggestion	**What I think is** our daily in-class activities, pop quizzes, field trip, mid-term examinations, and reports, **are important to our final grade assessment too**.
Justification	**They will be a fairer assessment** for those students who turn in the classes regularly and participate all the pop quizzes and in-class activities actively.
Rapport Justification	**My plead may seem to be too much to you,** but our concern here is our knowledge learned throughout this semester.
Justification	**It will be faired for those active students** who participate the classes regularly, instead of those students who only show up during the examination and receive an average or good grade for the class.
Appreciation	**Your kind consideration will be very much appreciated.**
Pre-closing	I hope I can get back from you soon.
Closing	Thank you, Sincerely yours XXX

This next letter is Hwee-Lie's request to cancel the final exam written to a home-country professor in English.

Figure 11: Hwee-Lie (Female, L1 Chinese, Malaysia)—English Letter to Malaysian Professor

Prompt: Request that your professor cancel your final exam	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Self-introduction	Dear Miss Liew, **This is** XXX, a student in your STA 219 class.
Request	I am writing this letter **in order to plead you** to cancel our final examination in this coming December.
Justification / Suggestion	As the tight flow of the class participation and activities held in this class, **I think they are qualified to be our overall grade assessment** in this semester.
Justification / Suggestion	Furthermore, the concepts and **principles we learned in these classes could also contribute to our overall performance.**
Justification	**So I think these are the important elements** for our overall performance.
Justification (?)	In this class as well, instead of the final examination, which takes up a major portion of our cumulative grade points throughout the whole semester.
Rapport (?)	I cannot deny that the final examination is an important element to assess our overall concepts and principles in STA 219 class.
Justification	**Nevertheless, it takes up 50% of our overall performance may hurt our final grade** in this class.
Request Suggestion	**I hope you can kind cancel our final examination** and assess our overall grade base on all those interesting activities, participation, homeworks assignment and two mid-term examination.
Appreciation	**Thanks** for your kind consideration.
Pre-closing	I am looking forward to hear from you soon.
Closing	Sincerely yours, XXX

Despite her different audiences, Hwee-Lie's letters are very similar in terms of organization and lexical choices. In terms of her American audience, Hwee Lie commented that professors in the U.S. are more focused on "what we are going to talk about—the purpose." When asked about the similarities between her letters, she replied, "I had some influence write in English. Sometime we get confused—write in English." Laughing, and thinking for a few moments, she continued, "I think that what I learned in English is what always in my mind you should be focused on what we're going to talk about—don't put in too many figurative sentences." However, the differences in her letter composed in Chinese are numerous.

Figure 12: Hwee-Lie (Female, L1 Chinese, Malaysia)— Letter to Malaysian Professor Written in Chinese, Translated by Student

Prompt: Request that your professor give you a higher grade	
FUNCTION	STUDENT LETTER
Self-introduction	To: Professor Koh **I am** Accounting class's XXX
Purpose	At here, **have a request**.
Hedge	**Hope you would** a great deal **tolerate**.
Referential	Since my accumulate points, **only different two points in order receive an A**.
Request	So, at here, **I hope you can add extra two points for me**, so that I in this accounting course can get an A.
Hedge	**This request maybe too much**; however, I eargerly hope you will grant.
Rationale	Because, it to **my future career development has very great's influence**.
Rationale	Since my major is accounting, so outstanding's **accounting result toward my future job application is very important.**
Rationale	Furthermore, **I believe that boss also eargely wish to hire an accounting good at people** to handle their financial stuffs.
Self-focus	**I at class active's performance**, punctuate's tender homework, as well as enthusiam's learning attitude.
Request	So, **I eargerly wish you** will grant my request.
Closing	Lastly, hope safe and wealth.

Upon examining this letter compared to the first two, Hwee Lie commented, "there's a big difference—the grammar is very different, the words we use are very different. We use more humble formulations. Professor here—more straightforward. Very busy—get to the point. In our country, first talk broadly, then talk about main purpose at the end of the letter." That said, it still seems that despite her awareness about different target audiences, Hwee Lie was influenced by her perceptions of English when composing in this language. In other words, although she mentioned that one should first speak "broadly" about the subject before stating the purpose, her two English letters to different audiences are remarkably similar. She said, "we learn that English is straightforward, stress the point—because we write in English and we get influenced. There's a different outcome if you translate."

DISCUSSION

Students' rhetorical choices may be driven by previous language instruction, and how they perceive English rhetorical conventions. Evidence of

their identity as writers, however, seeps through when they compose a letter in English to a professional in their home country. That is, when writing in English to someone who speaks their native language, students struggle with balancing what they know about English rhetorical conventions and the expectations of their home culture audience. Students are conflicted when using English in a letter to a member of their home culture, as they are torn between what they have learned are the conventions of this language and the cultural expectations of their audience. This is exemplified in comparisons of their letters, as well as interviews with the student writers.

Somewhere in ESL or EFL instruction, students are learning that in English, writers need to "get to the point" and must be "direct." Perhaps this is a remnant from early contrastive rhetoric research's pervasiveness in ESL composition instruction—students are, in a sense, contrastive rhetoricians, in that they use their knowledge about expected conventions when writing across languages. Of course, results from a pilot study with only four participants are not readily generalizable to a larger population of ESL students—but these students' reactions to writing in English versus their native languages raise some important questions that are worth exploring. All four of these students exhibit remarkable awareness about how their native language composition conventions differ from those in English, and demonstrate an attempt to negotiate in the target language based on what they have learned about those conventions. So how can instructors draw upon this knowledge to urge students toward more effective writing?

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

Leki (1991) points to the importance of encouraging students to be "culturally informed" in their writing choices, arguing that contrastive rhetoric can often lead to "instant enlightenment" when students become cognizant of the inherent assumptions underlying English writing conventions and those of their L1 (pp. 137-138). Echoing Leki, Zamel (1997) calls for closer reflection on how languages are interconnected and give form to one another. Even when ESL students are working out developmental errors, as seen in their letters above, they can be engaged in discussions of audience awareness and cultural conventions. The students in this study grappled with "waiting to get to the point" while trying to conform to the "direct" nature of English. But it's important to have students reflect on their *assumptions* about perceptions of English as "direct" because English is not, in fact, always "direct" and "straightforward," although based on early contrastive rhetoric research comparing English to other languages, it might be branded with these characteristics. Perhaps instructors have emphasized too much the "linearity" of English, where the thesis statement comes in the introduction and a topic sentence should begin every paragraph. These "rules" or "conventions" might be helpful guidelines at first, but can be essentially reductive as students become more proficient in the language.

Learned conventions may be so pervasive that students are influenced (or constrained) by their perceptions of the "rules" of the language—even when writing to an audience with shared cultural expectations. When students come to the classroom with extensive knowledge about different stylistic conventions across languages, ESL instructors can engage them in activities to reflect on their literacy backgrounds. Such reflection could lead to insights about the assumptions underlying learned cultural conventions, as well as when those conventions may or may not be appropriate. Students need to lead these discussions, as it is *their* assumptions about writing—not the instructors—that will lead to greater insights. Ideally, students who share an L1 will debate about why, for example, one "waits to get to the point" in their native language, as this will lead to deeper understanding and confidence regarding their writing choices. Becoming a proficient writer in a second language is an ongoing process, but instructors can aid students by focusing on cultural contexts, conventions, and constraints to empower them to make appropriate rhetorical decisions.

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