Contrastive Rhetoric and What it Can Teach Us About Using Students' L1 to Scaffold their L2 Academic Writing

ギャビン・ブルックス

Gavin Brooks

ESL writing teachers in Japan spend considerable time conceptualizing, planning and delivering English courses. Course content is usually matched to the students' general level of competency in English. There is an assumption that students in higher-level classes will have a better command of English than those students in lower level classes. Consequently the content of higher-level courses in English writing composition addresses more advanced elements of academic essay construction. Unfortunately current research (McKinley, 2010) suggests that many students, of all levels, struggle with academic writing because they have never received adequate writing instruction beyond sentence structure, even in their first language. Consequently students are not easily able to understand and construct the more complex structures involved in writing an academic paper. ESL teachers have to backtrack and provide specific instruction on the basic structure of English composition before addressing more complex writing skills. In this process, one of the more challenging tasks of an ESL writing teacher is to develop their student's metacognitive awareness (Hyland, 2008) of the strategies they use to write so that students can reflect critically on their own writing. This paper discusses the current trends in the field of contrastive rhetoric and examines what it can teach us about how we should design academic writing classes for Japanese university students. Through a greater understanding of what their students already know it is hoped that teachers will be better equipped to design and implement classes that help their students develop as competent academic writers in both English and Japanese.

Key Words : Academic Writing, Contrastive Rhetoric, Scaffolding, Genre Approach

Introduction

Along with reading, speaking and listening writing is one of the four basic ESL communication skills taught in universities across Japan. Of the four basic skills, writing is often one of the most demanding for both the students and the teacher. For the students, the writing process takes time and is often confusing and frustrating. Writing teachers also find writing courses demanding as they are required to "spend a great deal of time annotating papers ...making meticulous and copious comments on student papers and holding conferences" (Leki, 1990, p. 57) Therefore, when designing a writing curriculum teachers try and maximize the amount of improvement that students are able to make in their writing while, at the same time, trying not to make the workload too burdensome for either the teacher or the students. Teachers "therefore have to develop a systematic plan of what needs to be learned, selecting and sequencing the content and tasks that will lead to the desired learning outcomes." (Hyland, 2008, p. 54) Part of this development process involves understanding both the desired outcome of the class as well as the assessing the students' needs. Questions such as: "What are learners' goals, backgrounds, and abilities? What are their language proficiencies? Why are they taking this course? What kinds of

teaching do they prefer? What situations will they need to write in? How are writing knowledge and skills used in these situations?" (Hyland, 2008, p. 58) help us understand student needs. Part of effectively evaluating student needs is understanding students' "current abilities, (their) familiarity with the writing process and written genres, their skills... what they are able to do" (Hyland, 2008, p. 59). If the writing teacher is able to understand what their students require in order to become proficient writers then they will be able to design a curriculum that provides the scaffolding needed to help the students progress as both writers and English language learners.

The Importance of Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a term that is used more often when talking about early childhood education than second language acquisition. In education scaffolding involves a kind of assistive partnership and process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts. Effective scaffolding consists of the adult "controlling" those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (Wood, 1976, p. 90). The term was first used in the 1970s to describe "what Vygotsky (1960/1978) meant when explaining how learning occurs as a result of the interpsychological support coming from the more knowledgeable other that leads learners to internalize what is being learned. " (Ko, Schallert, & Walters, 2003, p. 304)

In the classroom it refers to the process in which the teacher constructs a task in a way that students will be able to fulfill the task successfully and learn from the process of completing the task. In the language classroom "scaffolding...would thus consist of those supportive behaviors, adopted by the (teacher) in collaboration with the L2 learner, that might facilitate the learner's progress to a higher level of language development." (De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000, p. 53) This process is especially important in the writing classroom due to the cognitive demands that are placed on second language writers.

In the writing classroom the composition teacher must present the writing activities within a framework that allows the students to both participate in the writing process and develop as writers themselves. "When teachers merely assign writing topics without teaching, they are essentially throwing non-swimmers

into the pool and shouting 'Swim!' from poolside" (Read, 2010, p. 48). However, it is often hard for teachers of a second language to know what their students are able to do and what they are not able to cope with in terms of both their abilities to use English and to write academically. As early as the 1970s researchers tried to solve this problem by comparing the rhetorical styles of languages other than English. This field of study is called contrastive rhetoric and the hope was that "the insights of contrastive rhetoric (would) have great pedagogical potential in the ESL writing classroom..." (Oi & Kamimura, 1995, p. 65).

Early Contrastive Rhetoric and Japanese

To understand the pedagogical implications of this field of study it is important to look at how the field has evolved over time. Initially the field of contrastive rhetoric suggested that students from Japanese, and other Asian, discourse communities would find themselves at a distinct disadvantage when it came to writing in English. According to early researchers the rhetorical structures of Asian students' native languages were so different from English. The belief was that this was further complicated by their sociocultural situation: "Asian learners of English (were) often characterized by constructs which claim that they lack an individual voice and critical thinking skills. In addition, it is said that unlike their Western counterparts, because of collectivist and hierarchical tendencies, they hesitate to express adversarial views" (Stapleton, 2002, p. 250). The idea that there was a negative transfer from the students' first language to their second language started with the research of Kaplan (1966) and Hinds (1983) and, for a long time, was the dominant view of language transfer in the field of contrastive rhetoric.

Early studies in contrastive rhetoric viewed the rhetorical structure of Japanese as "an inductive (and) bottom heavy approach to presenting arguments" (Hirose, 2003, p. 182). These views came from a number of studies that focused on differences between the rhetorical structures students of other languages would use when writing in English compared to the rhetorical structures found in the writing of native English speaking students.

One of the first researcher to look at the pedagogical implications of contrastive rhetoric was Kaplan (1966; 1967). His early studies are extremely important in the field of contrastive rhetoric and

have been extensively cited. Leki (1991) states that, "contrastive rhetoric studies with implications for the ESL writing classroom began with Robert Kaplan's 1966 study of some 600 L2 student essays" (p. 122). In this 1966 study the author analyzed the organizational patterns found in samples of academic writing taken from ESL students from a variety of different cultural backgrounds. His conclusion was that students from different cultural backgrounds typically exhibit very different rhetorical patterns in their L2 writing. He went on to describe the rhetorical styles commonly seen by students from a number of different cultural backgrounds. As you can see in Figure 1, he described the rhetorical structure of native English writers as being direct while Asian writers, including Japanese writers, were shown to exhibit an indirect rhetorical style. (Connor, 1999, pp. 15-17)

Figure 1: Patterns of Written Discourse (Kaplan, 1966:15)
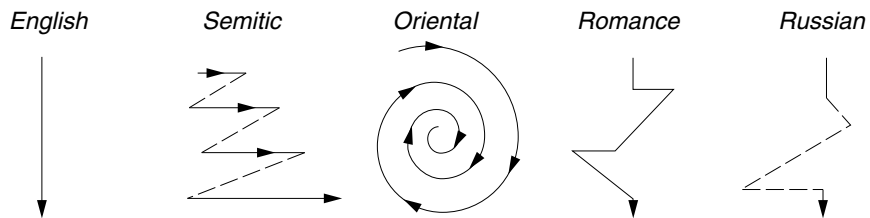
Another important researcher in the field of contrastive rhetoric as it applies to Japanese students is Hinds (1983; 1987). Hinds originally began his study as a critique of the work done by Kaplan. One of Hinds's main concerns about Kaplan's description of the rhetorical styles of different cultures was that the samples that Kaplan collected came from students who were writing in their second language. Hinds believed that "...in order to get a clearer picture of the rhetorical structures of other languages, researchers must look at compositions written by native writers in the native languages." (Miyake, 2007, p. 12) In order to do this he analyzed a collection of articles written in Japanese and published in a major Japanese newspaper. Hinds found the rhetorical structure of these articles to exhibit an indirect rhetorical pattern and went on to claim that most Western readers would find "...Japanese writing and logical development, full of "deviations" as it is, ...rather incoherent from a logical and rhetorical standpoint." (Takashi & Wilkerson, 2007, p. 27).

Hinds described Japanese rhetorical style as having a paradigmatic four-unit pattern. He claimed that this "common organizational framework for Japanese compositions is recognized by Japanese authors, ...is termed *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu*, and describes a pattern which originated in Classical Chinese poetry." (Hinds, 1983, p. 188) Takashi and Wilkerson (2007) describe the organization found in *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* as such; "According to this pattern, the writer introduces the topic in *ki*, develops the topic in *sho*, then makes a transition in *ten*, and finally concludes the topic in *ketsu*." Of the 4 unique sections found in this pattern, studies in the field of contrastive rhetoric tend to focus on the penultimate '*ten*' section. According to Hinds it is the abrupt change in the flow of the argument found in the *ten* section that causes the biggest problem for Western speakers as they see this change in the flow of the argument as being irrelevant and counter intuitive. (Hinds, 1983, p. 183)

Building on the work of Hinds, other researchers in the field of contrastive rhetoric went on to further describe 8 discourse level features that they believed could be found in Japanese writing. These include: 'overall organization moving from specific to general'…'no strong specific position taken by the writer, thus leaving more up to the reader', and 'presentation of the topic in the introduction without indicating a specific point of view about it' (Rinnert and Kobayashi, 2001, p. 192).

Recent Studies in Contrastive Rhetoric

The field of contrastive rhetoric "experienced a paradigm shift in the 1990s and '(a) broader definition that considers cognitive and sociocultural variables of writing . . . has been substituted for a purely linguistic framework' (p. 18)" (Connor as cited in Kubota & Lehner, 2004, p. 9). This has caused "the notion of the rhetoric of a whole culture being reduced to a label such as 'linear' or 'direct' as proposed by Kaplan (1966) (to) became increasingly controversial" (Stapleton, 2001, p. 508). Confronted

by studies that did not support the ideas of earlier researchers in contrastive rhetoric it became clear that students rhetorical styles could not be so easily defined by one of Kaplan's whimsical doodles and that rhetoric is a complex phenomena that varies not just with culture but also with the academic and social backgrounds of the writer (Berlin as cited in Kubota, 1998). The problem was that Kaplan's ideas about culturally specific rhetorical styles were difficult to show scientifically and statistically the connection between the types of rhetoric used and the student's first language was often difficult to prove. As more studies were done in the field of contrastive rhetoric it became clear that a lot of the data contradicted the ideas of both Hinds and Kaplan. These new studies lead many researchers to criticize

Kaplan's thesis as being more of an intuitive idea than a scientific hypothesis (Miyake, 2007, p. 12).

Several studies of Japanese university students demonstrate the problems that exist with Kaplan's earlier thesis. In a 1983 study Achiba and Kuromiya looked at 130 expository compositions written by Japanese students studying English at a university in the US. When they grouped those compositions into 5 categories they found that, when writing in English, "that the highest percentage (of discourse pattern used) was found in the linear approach (34%) and the second highest in the circular (or indirect) approach (27%)" (Miyake, 2007, p. 22) These results can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Discourse patterns of students' compositions (Miyake, 2007:21)

	Japanese compositions	English compositions
Category 1(↓)	29%	34%
Category 2( )	0%	19%
Category 3( )	8%	6%
Category 4( )	46%	27%
Category 5( )	17%	14%
	100%	100%

(Achiba & Kuromiya, 1983, p. 7)

Another recent study by Sasaki and Hirose (1996) rated 70 Japanese university students composition based on how well these papers followed the Western rhetorical pattern. In this study Sasaki and Hirose found that "the key indicators determining writing quality, were L2 proficiency, L1 writing ability, and metaknowledge (about English expository writing)" (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996, p. 137). A subsequent study done by Kubota (1998) on writing samples taken from 48 Japanese university students studying in Japan also found that Japanese learners do not use a single discourse pattern. She found various organizational patterns in her students' writing, and virtually no negative transfer of the types of culturally specific rhetorical patterns that both Kaplan and Hinds tried to describe (Kubota, 1998). Further, Kubota found that the quality of L2 writing among her Japanese subjects depended more on the quality of their L1 writing than on their cultural background. In other words, she found that students who could write well in Japanese were also able to write well in English. (Stapleton, 2002, p. 251)

Along with this lack of empirical evidence to collaborate Kaplan's theory of comparative rhetoric is the problem that his Orient style of rhetoric does not correspond to the rhetorical style that most Japanese students of a university age have been taught to use in their academic writing. In fact, most of the students who would have learned the *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* style in Elementary school would have used it, not as a way to structure their arguments, but rather as a way of organizing narrative writing (Takashi & Wilkerson, 2007, pp. 32 - 34).

Because Japanese students are expected to participate in the global academic community the rhetorical structures taught to Japanese students may not, in fact, be so different from the style of deductive argumentation that is taught to students in academic writing classes in Europe and North America. With the introduction of new guidelines by the Ministry of Education in 1947, Japanese schools began to teach high school students the linear rhetorical styles, that are more familiar to western readers, as an attempt to

"refine the techniques and skills to enable (Japanese students) to write with originality so as to order their thought and make them appeal to others clearly, correctly, and in an easily comprehensible manner" (Saito, as cited in Takashi and Wilkerson, 1987, pp. 36 - 37).

A 2002 study by Rinnert and Kobayashi (2002) showed that commercially available reference books in Japan, designed to teach high school students how to write a good essay in Japanese, almost always encourage students to use a deductive style, i.e. to present their opinions logically, using reasons and examples to support their assertions; and to begin with a strong thesis statement that presents their opinion at the start of their essay. One such text written to teach high school students how to write a good essay for university admission was aptly titled, 'How to Write Successful Short Essays: Yes or No, Decide Your Position First' (Higuchi as cited in Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2002, p. 105).

Implications for the Academic Writing Classroom

Kaplan began his study into contrastive rhetoric as a means of providing pedagogical support to teachers who were teaching English writing to foreign students in the US. At the time his research helped to give new insight into how we should teach writing in the second language classroom. However, recent research has shown that the pedagogical approach offered by Kaplan and other early studies in contrastive rhetoric, and the approach still taken by many English language teachers, that focuses on the differences between Japanese and English can actually make it more difficult to teach students good academic writing skills. This is because this approach often leads "to a deterministic stance and deficit orientation as to what students can accomplish in English and what their writing instruction should be." (Zamel, 1997, p. 341) As teachers and researchers it is therefore important that we look at the changes that have happened in the field in the 50 years since his paper was published and examine how these new studies can be used to help us in the classroom.

Probably the most important thing to take away from these recent studies is the need to abandon the stereotype of Japanese learners as individuals lacking critical thinking skills. As teachers we need to understand that the "reason for (Japanese students') reticence in discussion is their limited language proficiency and resources, rather than critical thinking skills" (Connor as cited in Alagozlu, 2007, p. 6) The issues that we see in the language classroom at universities in Japan are not unique to Asian students. For example, researchers have shown that a lack critical thinking or good rhetorical structure in the writing of second language learners is likely to come from the fact that unskilled students tend to spend much more time on mechanics and sentence level structure than skilled students (Flower & Hayes, 1981). This is something that is true in English language classrooms all over the world.

Rather than view the students L1 as a negative influence that needs to be overcome the teacher should use the strengths and abilities that we find in the students first language and culture to help them improve their English language writing skills. This does not mean that we should ignore the influence of the students first language, it is just that we should not oversimplify the problem. As teachers we need to see the writing process as a complex system of interacting parts that is unique to each student. Sasaki and Hirose constructed a diagram based on their research that shows some of the possible factors effecting Japanese students' ability to write well in English (See Figure 3). If we are able to provide scaffolding to limit the amount of cognitive resources the student has to expend on solving one part of this writing puzzle this will allow them to focus on the other areas and help them to succeed in producing a better finished text.

Figure 3: Path diagram illustrating of EFL writing. (Sasaki and Hirose, 1996:161)
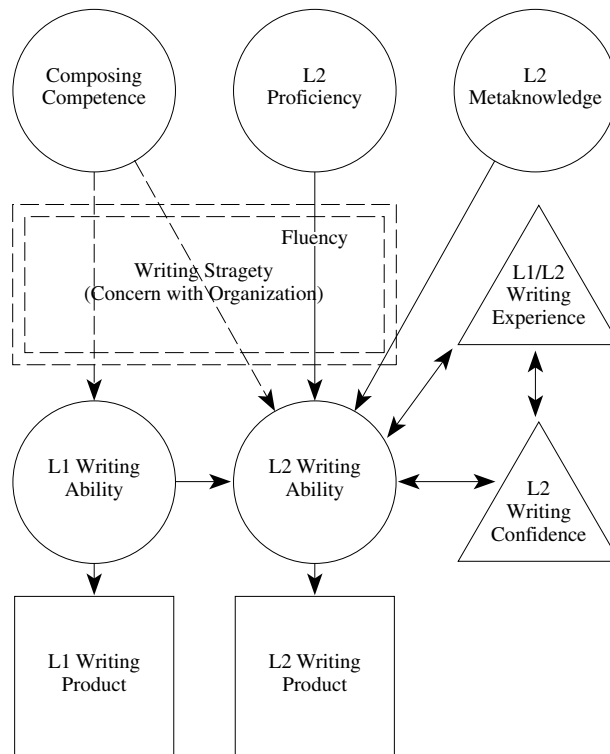
There are two ways that we can do this in the academic writing classroom. The first is to propose a topic that the students are familiar enough with to write about. In his study on the critical thinking skills of Japanese University students Stapleton found that "The problem-solving difficulties of novices can be attributed largely to the inadequacies of their knowledge bases and not to limitations in their processing capabilities (p. 99)" (Glass as cited in Stapleton, 2001, p. 531). The second way that we can help students to improve as writers is to introducing them to the genre that they are going to use before assigning them the task of writing something. This is an important part of the process because students have often not been taught how to write academically in English or in Japanese. Genres are socially constructed. They develop to meet the needs of a particular writer when writing for a particular audience (Read, 2010, p. 47). As such, it is unlikely that students would have the opportunity to learn the academic style of writing outside of the classroom setting. Thus, if this style was not taught to the students in their high school then the university English language writing class may be the first time that they have encountered this style of writing. Because of this, it is important to allow them to experience the style first as readers before asking them to produce it as a writer.

Both of these aspects are important because, without them, students will not be able to understand what it is they are supposed to do in the writing classroom. Studies have shown us that the students' inability to write well when they are unfamiliar with the theme or the genre is not something that is unique to the second language writing classroom. Unskilled writers have trouble understanding what it is they need to do and, even in their L1, unskilled students often spend much more time focusing on the sentence level while skilled students pay more attention to textual organization and the discourse-level structure of their writing (Uzawa, 1996). As research in the field of education has shown us, "comprehension of the solution must precede production. That is to say, the learner must be able to recognize a solution to a particular class of problems before he is himself able to produce the steps leading to it without assistance" (Wood, 1976, p. 90). What this tells us is that, if we want our students to become good writers, we must first teach them what it means to be a good writer.

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