



What we need and don't need intercultural rhetoric for: A retrospective and prospective look at an evolving research area

Diane Belcher*

Department of Applied Linguistics/ESL, Georgia State University, PO Box 4099, Atlanta, GA 30302-4099, United States

Abstract

This article surveys the evolution of what is now known as intercultural rhetoric (IR) and considers how developments in IR research may be seen as both productive and problematic in varying ways for goals that may not always happily co-exist, namely theory construction (or deconstruction) and language/literacy classroom practice. The affordances, challenges, and possible constraints of continuing to empirically and conceptually develop an area labeled “intercultural rhetoric” in view of recent research are discussed.

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The pedagogically-motivated research area formerly known as contrastive rhetoric (CR) and now, thanks largely to the efforts of Connor (2008, 2011), more often referred to as intercultural rhetoric (IR), has, like the concept of culture itself, had a “checkered history” (Atkinson & Sohn, 2013, p. 21). Its early days of being perceived as intellectually intriguing and pedagogically helpful may actually now be hard for many to remember or, for new English-language teaching (ELT) practitioners, even to fathom, given the groundswell of CR criticism that emerged in the decades following its arrival on the ELT scene. The purpose of this review is to revisit the contributions of both those engaged in and those highly critical of the IR project and to consider how new theoretical and research developments may help move us beyond the dichotomous pro and con arguments that this topic has inspired. The extent to which the related IR aims of theory construction and linguaculturally sensitive classroom practice can productively develop in tandem, as IR proponents have hoped, will be an underlying theme of this review.

In the beginning was Kaplan

Kaplan's (1966) now almost 50-year-old study “Inter-cultural thought patterns in inter-cultural education” did more than launch a pedagogically-inspired research area. Our reductive memories of this article, which many of us know better from references than actual reading (Casanave, 2004), may make it challenging to think of it as more than that “doodles” article, with easily remembered and arguably overly-influential graphic representations of discourse flow as a straight line for English, a gyre for “Oriental” rhetoric, and varying zigzag lines for “Semitic,” “Romance,”

* Tel.: +1 404 413 5194.

E-mail address: dbelcher1@gsu.edu.

and “Russian” discourse. Since most of us today were not in the field a half century ago when Kaplan’s article was first published, it is easy to overlook its initial novelty and significance: its focus on the cultural-contextual, discourse-level issues of what later became known as “contrastive rhetoric” rather than on exclusively linguistic, sentence-internal concerns of then-popular contrastive analysis, and the article’s argument for written, not just or primarily oral, second language use as meriting attention from applied linguists. Bloch (2013), who sees Kaplan’s 1966 article as “the single most important contribution to the discussion of second language writing,” observes that “its value arose from its ability to synthesize disparate fields that had long existed separately, in this case applied linguistics and contemporary rhetoric, into a new, highly generative area of inquiry” (p. 243).

The generative legacy of Kaplan’s early work has, however, been complex. Not only did it spark interest in culture, discourse, and second language writing, but it also eventually catalyzed what could optimistically be viewed as a dialectic progression of contrastive rhetoric research. Kaplan’s (1966) study itself is now often pointed to as a template for how **not** to do CR (IR) research: Don’t compare incommensurate texts, of different genres, by authors of varying expertise; don’t label, overgeneralize, and oversimplify ethnolinguistic cultures and rhetorics, as, for instance, Oriental or Semitic, linear or non-linear; don’t take a mainly etic perspective; and don’t overlook the need for empirical data analysis (Casanave, 2004; Connor, 1996; Leki, 1991). Kaplan himself (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Kaplan, 1987), we should add, later acknowledged many of the shortcomings of his earlier work, but from the perspective of critical pedagogists like Kubota and Lehner (2004), the damage was done. Despite the “good intention of associating ESL students’ writing in English with their cultural or cognitive *styles* rather than their cognitive *ability*,” Kubota and Lehner have noted, “traditional contrastive rhetoric” presents “a static cultural binary between the Self and the Other [that] constitutes a colonialist construct of culture” and, in effect, “legitimizes and reinforces asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 18).

Yet many, including Kubota herself, have found the challenge of empirically investigating Kaplan’s cultural, cognitive styles argument hard to resist. Especially notable among the earlier Kaplan correctors is Hinds (1987, 1990), whose oft-cited CR research can be seen as a crucial methodological and theoretical step, if not leap, forward. Rather than extrapolating about L1 culture from L2 learner texts as Kaplan did, Hinds examined L1 Japanese texts by accomplished, published authors, all using the same genre. More emic in his approach than Kaplan was, Hinds considered the audience perspective, proposing a typology of reader vs. writer-responsible texts (1987), later refined as deductive, inductive, and quasi-inductive discourse styles (1990), influenced, Hinds posited, by culture-specific traditional patterns of organization. Yet Hinds’ work was not emic enough to avoid serious flaws, according to Kubota (1997; see also Casanave, 2004), who as a native speaker of Japanese saw the journalistic genre Hinds focused on as not representative of Japanese expository prose, and the ancient *ki-shoo-ten-ketsu* (quasi-inductive) tradition he invoked as open to many different types of analysis. Kubota’s (1998) own methodological and theoretical advance consisted of analyzing both first and second language texts produced by the same Japanese English-speaking writers, whose essays in each language were evaluated by either Japanese L1 or English L1 raters. Given the variation found in the essays, as well as lack of evidence of negative L1 transfer, Kubota’s work empirically undermined claims of cultural homogeneity, which she later argued (1999) was a discursively constructed notion.

The methodological advance that Kubota helped pioneer (and then moved beyond) in the 1990s, is, according to Baker (2013), still too culturally homogeneous in its approach: “. . . [We] need to go beyond a comparison of texts produced in a writer’s L1 and in the target language. . . and look at texts produced with an intercultural audience in mind. . . [We] should be looking at the rhetorical patterns in essays written *by* and *for* multilingual and multicultural audiences” (p. 25). Baker suggests that writers, like speakers, eclectically choose and adapt their communicative behaviors for the perceived needs of their interlocutors (readers), who now more than ever before may be *lingua franca* speakers—a phenomenon that empirical research based on text analysis is only beginning to capture (see also Kuteeva & Mauranen, 2014; Mauranen, 2012).

The work of one of the most steadfast proponents of CR (IR) can itself be seen as a microcosm of the evolution of research in this area. As Casanave (2004) has observed, “More steadily than other scholars. . . [Ulla Connor] has noted the weaknesses of some of the early CR work and attempted to correct them. . .” (p. 39). Casanave rightly credits Connor with expanding this field of inquiry to include different languages, genres, and research methodologies, and tackling one of the most formidable obstacles to empirically persuasive work in this area, namely comparability. In her effort to rebrand CR as IR, Connor (2004), with her meta-awareness of the field, hoped the new name would better represent where the field has been and should go: its growing interest in broader views of cross-cultural/linguistic writing; its use of newer text-oriented methods, such as corpus analysis, and of more ethnographic approaches better able to do justice to language in interaction; and its quest for more dynamic definitions of culture, including small, non-ethnolinguistic cultures (see also Atkinson, 2004; Connor, 2008, 2011).

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