

# The pedagogical value of intercultural rhetoric: A report from a Persian-as-a-foreign-language classroom

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## Abstract

Understanding how individuals interact with texts in situated writing acts and what goes into the process of writing in various social, cultural, and educational contexts has recently been laid out as a broadened research agenda for cultural studies of writing within the framework of intercultural rhetoric. However, there is a paucity of classroom studies of writing that reflect this revised and expanded view of writing cultures. This article reports the results of a teacher-research conducted from the perspective of intercultural rhetoric exploring the perceptions of American learners of Persian with regard to the rhetorical structure of two texts as they attempt to summarize them. The article discusses students' attitudes toward perceived difference and elaborates observed patterns in students' summaries motivated by the organizational patterns of the source texts. This is followed by a discussion of the pedagogical affordances that the rhetorical structures of the source texts generated and the pedagogical actions taken in light of the results of the study.

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## Introduction

In the face of conflicting research findings about the existence of cross-cultural differences in writing, second language teachers may justifiably be concerned about the real possibility of such differences. They may wonder about the consequences of these differences for pedagogy, students' perceptions of the differences, or ways to sensitize students to the fact that *different* does not necessarily mean *deficient*. Students' attitudes toward difference are particularly important. As readers construct a representation of not just the text itself but also of the writer's identity (Cherry, 1988; Ivanič, 1998), learners' attitudes toward L2 texts are directly linked to their construction of identities of the writers and writing cultures. This article is an account of a teacher research that was prompted by such concerns and what emerged in the process. Specifically, it reports the results of a situated study conducted from the theoretical perspective of intercultural rhetoric exploring the perceptions of, as well as the summaries produced by, a group of American learners of Persian as they summarize two 'Persian' texts of different cultural provenance that exhibit different organizational structures. In what immediately follows, a review of cross-cultural studies of writing is presented that situates the present study within the research tradition of intercultural rhetoric. Next, L2 summarization literature is reviewed. Before proceeding to the methodology and results section, the epistemological assumptions that underpin the study are also spelled out.

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## Review of intercultural rhetoric literature

There is an extensive literature of cross-cultural studies of writing conducted from the perspective of contrastive rhetoric (see Connor, 2005 for an overview). Apart from conflicting findings about the existence of cross-cultural writing differences (e.g., Hinds, 1990; Kubota, 1997; McCagg, 1996), studies conducted within this framework have been seriously questioned for their unexamined use of the notion of culture (e.g., Atkinson, 2004; Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Matsuda & Atkinson, 2008; Pennycook, 2001; Spack, 1997). Critics have pointed out that studies have all too often relied on a questionable understanding of culture as an all-encompassing, monolithic system of rules and patterns of behavior shared by geographically and nationally distinct groups of individuals. Other critics have noted that the failure to respond to the dynamic and hybrid nature of cultures and the interactions and fusions among them has made contrastive rhetoric studies appear to be seeking “native” cultural style of writing at a time when the cultural space of nations is increasingly disturbed by global forces, and therefore, fixed cultural linguistic descriptions are better described as myths rather than realities (Kostogriz & Godley, 2007; Mauranen, 2001).

Recently in response to such crucial critiques, there has been a conceptual shift from the oversimplified account of cultural influences in old contrastive rhetoric studies to what is referred to as intercultural rhetoric. Without totally dismissing culture (Atkinson & Connor, 2008; Connor, 2002), this new approach calls for studies of intercultural—rather than contrastive rhetoric where researchers need to be aware of their underlying assumptions and re-examine their methods of inquiry (Connor, 2004; Kaplan, 2005; Panetta, 2001). Methodologically, the approach advocates sensitivity to the social context and the dynamics of the interactions between readers and writers through texts. Foregrounding the situatedness and particularity of the writing activity, it further promotes genre-specific case studies supported by the *emic* views of the writers—with no claims of generalizability—to provide descriptions of the experiences of writers participating in acts of writing in different L2 contexts within their own local cultures.

Amidst all the debates and controversies that have certainly contributed to the theoretical and methodological sophistication of research on writing across cultures, one aspect that seems to have been overlooked is classroom studies of intercultural rhetoric (Ostler, 2002; Petrić, 2005). Specifically, there have been few situated studies exploring cross-cultural writing from the perspective of students in classroom contexts as they perform typical pedagogical tasks with real instructional value. Lost in the debate over the existence of cross-cultural differences, an additional neglected issue is the pedagogical consequences of difference or similarity. The paucity of such ecologically valid and pedagogically relevant classroom studies is rather ironic in a research tradition that initially grew out of L2 writing classroom concerns (Hinkel, 2005; Kaplan, 2005). Moreover, as Ansary and Babaii (2009) have rightly observed, the literature of cross-cultural studies of writing is too skewed toward English. There is a need to focus on other less researched languages of the world. The present study conducted from the perspective of intercultural rhetoric is in part oriented toward addressing these gaps in this literature.

## Review of L2 summarization literature

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in summarization in second language studies (e.g., Asención Delaney, 2008; Baba, 2009; Cumming et al., 2005; Keck, 2006; Kim, 2001; Yang & Shi, 2003; Yu, 2008, 2009). Despite this upsurge, it has been repeatedly noted that the knowledge base about summarization in L2 continues to be scant compared to that in L1 (Baba, 2007; Kim, 2001; Yang & Shi, 2003). This relative neglect stands in stark contrast to the importance of this foundational skill in second language study. As Johns (1988) has noted, “Whatever a person’s interest in studying a foreign language, there seems to be no escape from the acquisition and development of summarizing skills” (p. 79). “Given the lack of research in the field”, Kim (2001) has cautioned, “we currently do not have a clear understanding of what our students do when they summarize an L2 text” (p. 570).

The existing research on L2 summarization has focused on different dimensions of this complex reading/writing activity (Cohen, 1994; Sarig, 1993). A number of studies have focused on what could be called task performance conditions and their impact on the summarization processes and products (Allison, Berry, & Lewkowicz, 1995; Yu, 2008). One set of studies have investigated the impact of text features on the process of summarization (Kim, 2001; Kobayashi, 2002; Seidlhofer, 1990; Yu, 2009). Another set has explored the effects of summary writers’ characteristics such as their L2 language proficiency or L1 literacy expertise on the summarization processes and products (Corbeil, 2000; Cummings, 1989; Johns & Mayes, 1990; Rivard, 2001; Sarig, 1993). Others have compared L1 and L2 students’ summary writing performances (Connor & Kramer, 1995; Keck, 2006; Yang & Shi, 2003; Yu, 2008). Research has

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