Intercultural rhetoric through a learner lens: American students' perceptions of evidence use in Chinese *yìlùnwén* writing

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ABSTRACT

To add to the currently limited intercultural rhetoric (IR) research that incorporates learner perspectives, this study examines how a group of American undergraduate students understood evidence use as they took part in an intensive study abroad program to learn Chinese *yìlùnwén* writing. Participants in the study included nine Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) students from five American universities and the course instructor. A variety of data collection methods were used, including classroom observations, field notes, document gathering, and text-based interviews. Findings of our study show that the CFL students' interpretations of evidence use in Chinese *yìlùnwén* writing differed greatly from the guidelines and expectations presented in class by the Chinese instructor, and that learners' L1 rhetorical knowledge had a direct impact on their perceptions of Chinese argument construction. Wrestling with two different sets of rhetorical preferences, the learners largely resisted in their *yìlùnwén* compositions to what the instructor had taught in class about evidence use. This study highlights the importance of an emic perspective and an expanded methodological repertoire in allowing IR research to shift its focus from text products to text producers in context.

1. Introduction

The growing population of international students studying in English-medium universities has inspired a considerable amount of research in intercultural rhetoric (IR), which seeks to investigate second language writing from a cultural perspective. From Kaplan's (1966) seminal work that contrasts organizational features in writing across cultures to critical contrastive rhetoric research (Kubota & Lehner, 2004) that adopts postmodern and postcolonial theories, debate on the value of IR research has been ongoing. Proponents argue that this strand of research stems from pedagogical concerns and highlights writing-related cultural differences that have practical implications for classroom teaching (Li, 2014), whereas critics emphasize the complexity of intercultural comparisons and view the traditional text analytical approach as being simplistic, essentialist and inadequate (Kubota & Lehner, 2004; Kubota & Shi, 2005; Shi & Kubota, 2007). Although this debate has generated important theoretical insights about the past contributions and future directions of IR research, it has not directed sufficient attention towards the design of empirical studies and related methodological possibilities.

One major weakness of IR as a field of research is that the number of rigorously designed empirical studies is still rather small. Earlier IR research heavily relies on textual analysis as the main methodology. This method, although indispensable for writing research, only warrants claims about the similarities and/or differences in terms of surface features in writing, and does not allow

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researchers to establish direct links between what they observe in the concrete text product and the abstract concept of culture. Oftentimes, the IR researchers have to make informed guesses based on their own understanding and interpretation of culture when deciding whether and/or how a particular feature in writing is connected to culture. Conclusions drawn from such analysis, not surprisingly, are often considered far-fetched, as they may only reflect the individual researcher's view on the relationship between writing and culture.

In response to such critiques, recent IR researchers have advocated a more nuanced approach to the investigation of culture and started to experiment with new methodological possibilities (Connor, 1996, 2011; Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008). Li (1996), for example, utilized an ethnographic design in her study of how good writing is defined in Chinese and English. Uysal (2008) also advocates the use of qualitative methods to investigate the complex processes that students engage in L2 writing. In the study, Uysal (2008) incorporated stimulated recall interviews to examine the reasons for students' rhetorical choices when writing in their L1 and L2. In addition, a recent study by Abasi (2012) applied a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of American learners of Persian as they summarized two editorials, one from an Iranian newspaper and the other translated into Persian from an American newspaper. The use of these new research methods expands the potential of IR in revealing the dynamic and complex relationship between writing and culture.

In order to sustain IR as a valuable strand of research, it is also important to investigate and understand "both product *and* process-and especially how they work *in relation to* each other" (Atkinson, 2004, p. 283). To achieve this goal, the methodological repertoire of IR research needs to be expanded, and the focus of inquiry needs to shift from the final text product to participants involved in the process of producing the product. IR studies so far have mostly reflected researchers' views on the similarities and/or differences between rhetorical and cultural practices. What is missing are other participants' voices about their understanding of the relationship between writing and culture. These include second/foreign language learners, their native or non-native speaking instructors, textbook and material developers, etc. Their views about writing and culture may not always be consistent with those of expert researchers. Therefore, only by including these participants' voices can IR research concretize and substantiate the study of the abstract notion of culture and its relationship with writing. As Belcher (2014) aptly puts it, IR "will need to turn much more of its attention to discourse consumers" for it to continue "to be of both pedagogical and conceptual value" (p. 65).

To add to the currently limited IR research that focuses on text producers, we report our classroom-based qualitative study that examined how a group of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learners wrestled with different sets of rhetorical and cultural preferences in their learning of Chinese *yìlùnwén* writing. The Chinese genre of *yìlùnwén* resembles, to some extent, the genre of argumentative writing, but in this article we decide to use the Chinese term *yìlùnwén* directly (instead of argumentative writing) in order to highlight the different rhetorical and cultural expectations between Chinese *yìlùnwén* and English argumentative writing (we will explain this in detail in the next section). We chose to focus on *yìlùnwén* because it is a culturally sensitive genre. What constitutes a convincing argument and how to effectively present an argument vary across cultures. Therefore, examining how American students understood and approached Chinese *yìlùnwén* writing allowed us to see how learners wrestled with two sets of potentially conflicting rhetorical and cultural preferences. We hope that our research, following the dynamic model of writing proposed by Matsuda (1997), can contribute to a new direction of empirical IR research that foregrounds learner voices and writer-reader encounters in context (Matsuda, 1997). In order to capture the dynamism and complexity of such encounters, we utilized a classroom-based qualitative research design, and collected multiple sources of data through classroom observations, interviews with the instructor and students, as well as students' submitted compositions and instructional materials. These data helped us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the writing context and how the CFL learners negotiate with the writing tasks in this context.

As teacher-researchers, we consider IR as one important field that sheds valuable light on second/foreign language writing pedagogy, as Li (2014) has argued. We acknowledge that traditional IR research may have contributed to a simplistic and dichotomous view of culture that neglects contexts and learner agency, but as Matsuda (1997) points out, "[p]edagogical implications of contrastive rhetoric studies should not be dismissed because of the problems with the early attempts to apply the findings of contrastive rhetoric research" (p. 58). As researchers, we are keenly aware that any interpretation of culture may be at best an ambitious attempt to oversimplify and the associated pedagogical implications thus warrant critical scrutiny. As classroom teachers, however, we are, among many others, persistently looking for "best practices" that would effectively help learners to see and understand the varied rhetorical expectations across different cultures. What we need, therefore, is a dynamic and nuanced approach to the study of writing and culture in context, an approach that would allow us to tackle both theoretical and practical concerns. As Atkinson (2004) explains, the challenging nature of IR research encompasses three complex areas: writing, second language learning, and culture. Our goal as teacher-researchers is to unveil how the three areas unfold in the classroom setting and highlight the potential of IR as a tool to elicit student voices and promote meaningful discussion on writing and culture. To this end, our research examined a group of CFL writers' perceptions about what constituted convincing evidence in Chinese *yìlùnwén* writing.

In this article, we first review relevant literature on IR and argumentative writing, seeking to define *yìlùnwén* and delineate its differences from English argumentative writing. Then we present our research questions and describe our research design and methodological choices. Finally, we report and discuss major findings of our study, and outline pedagogical implications.

2. Literature review

2.1. Chinese-English IR research on argumentative writing

Argumentative writing skills have long been perceived as crucial in postsecondary education, especially in acquiring academic literacies (Chandrasegaran, 2008; Hillocks, 2010, 2011; Newell et al., 2011). Despite its importance, argumentative writing as a