

# **Contrastive Rhetoric**

**Cross-cultural aspects of  
second-language writing**

**Ulla Connor**

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## Contrastive Rhetoric

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Cross-cultural aspects of  
second-language writing

*Ulla Connor*

Indiana University at Indianapolis



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This book is dedicated to my mother, Esteri Niemelä, and to the memory of my father, Antti Niemelä.





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## *Series editors' preface*

The influence of the learner's first language on the acquisition and use of a second has long been a focus of interest within applied linguistics. Much of this work has been confined to the sentence or utterance level and has explored both the linguistic and psycholinguistic aspects of the processes involved. The field of contrastive rhetoric, by comparison, extends and broadens this area of inquiry to the levels of discourse and text. Its areas of focus are the role of first language conventions of discourse and rhetorical structure on second language usage, as well as cognitive and cultural dimensions of transfer, particularly in relation to writing. The expanding discipline of contrastive rhetoric studies is hence of considerable interest to the field of second language learning and teaching, particularly to those involved in teaching composition and English for Specific Purposes.

It is this approach to the study of second language literacy which is presented in Ulla Connor's comprehensive introduction to the field of contrastive rhetoric, as she defines the outer boundaries of the field. Drawing on a wide and interdisciplinary body of theory and research, Connor traces the history of contrastive approaches to the study of second language writing and explores the interfaces between contrastive rhetoric and other disciplines, including composition studies, translation, text linguistics, genre analysis, and cultural anthropology. She demonstrates, with examples from a wide variety of languages, how second language writers draw on a range of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural influences at both the sentence, paragraph, and textual level. Connor examines the effects of these influences on different aspects of textual organization, including cohesion, coherence, and schematic structure, and shows how both linguistically and culturally bound assumptions about the nature and purposes of written texts can transfer from one language to another. She reviews and assesses research methods and assumptions underlying research in contrastive rhetoric, examining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to research in contrastive rhetoric, and also demonstrates the practical applications of contrastive rhetoric research in applied linguistics and second language composition teaching.

This book therefore makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of second language learning and teaching. It will be an invaluable source of information and theory for scholars, composition specialists, and students of applied linguistics and will form a welcome addition to the Cambridge Applied Linguistics Series.

Michael H. Long  
Jack C. Richards

## *Preface*

During this book's gestation, I was influenced by several competing viewpoints of writing research. Along with many others in the profession, Robert B. Kaplan's 1966 seminal "doodles" article had a great impact on my teaching and L2 writing research. For five consecutive years, Bob Kaplan and I organized a session on contrastive rhetoric at the International TESOL Conference. During this period the late John Hinds transformed contrastive rhetorical research because of his rigorous text analysis combined with an acute understanding of the L1 languages and cultures. John Hinds was a forceful presence at our contrastive rhetoric colloquia at TESOL. The proceedings eventually resulted in a collection of essays that redirected contrastive rhetoric towards a more text analytic approach (Connor and Kaplan, 1987).

Since the mid 1980s, four notable experiences – outside the mainstream ESL/EFL teaching – have shaped my views about the teaching and research of writing. First, collaborating with the rhetorician Janice Lauer in research on persuasive writing cross-culturally proved a valuable link in connecting classical theories of rhetoric and composition for L1 writers in the United States with the study of second-language writing. Second, my association with the International Education Achievement Project, directed by Alan C. Purves, on the writing achievement of school students in 14 countries was an eye-opener about the need for carefully designed writing tasks, scoring scales, and systems of analyses in cross-cultural analyses of writing. Third, my involvement in the NORDTEXT writing group in the Nordic countries – initiated by Nils Erik Enkvist and later led by Lars Evensen – instructed me about the special needs of teachers and researchers of writing in EFL situations. Finally, as a member of the Antwerp-Indianapolis-Turku project (with Ken Davis, Teun De Rycker, Piet Verckens, and Meg Phillips), in which international business writing is taught to students in the three countries simultaneously, I have become more keenly tuned to the subtle interactions among language, culture, and writing for specific purposes in the international writing arena.

In the process of writing this book through discussions and correspondence, I am particularly indebted to the following individuals: Bob

Kaplan for his continued encouraging discussions clarifying my views about the role of contrastive rhetoric in applied linguistics; Nils Erik Enkvist for invaluable guidance in the interconnections among related fields having an impact on contrastive rhetoric such as translations studies; Sauli Takala for many insightful discussions and sharing his own writings about the reinterpretations of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and other crucial matters of this book; Ann Johns and John Swales for introducing me to genre analysis; Patricia Carrell, Joan Carson, Andrew Chesterman, Nils Erik Enkvist, Lars Evensen, Bill Grabe, Paula Kalaja, Janice Lauer, Ilona Leki, Alan Purves, and Ann Raimes for their helpful critiques of early drafts of certain chapters; Diane Belcher, Guanjun Cai, Sonja Tirkkonen Condit, Shoshana Folman, Tom Huckin, Anncha Lindeberg, Anna Mauranen, Paul Prior, Eija Ventola, and Hilkka Yli-Jokipii for generously sharing their work on writing across cultures.

I am grateful to my students throughout the years at Georgetown University, at Indiana University in Indianapolis, and at several Summer TESOL Institutes for their comments and observations concerning early pieces of this book, and in many cases for collaboration on related writing projects. Among the most memorable contributors are Dwight Atkinson, Linda Jacobsen, Susan Mayberry, Peter McCagg, Ildikó Melis, Miyuki Sasaki, and Robert Springer.

I wish to thank the Department of English and the School of Liberal Arts at Indiana University in Indianapolis for granting me a reduced teaching load one semester as well as providing clerical assistance. Paula Pace, Stuart Schleus, Bill Stuckey, and Susan Springer provided assistance in word processing and editing. Maggie Robillard worked faithfully and patiently during the last few months of manuscript revision even while she was finishing her own undergraduate studies. Ken Davis and Helen Schwartz, faculty colleagues, provided moral support and encouragement. I also owe thanks to the ESL faculty, Karen Asenavage, Mary Boyd, and Barbara Zimmer, for their continued support as well as to the ESL students for sharing their writing with me.

During final stages of preparation of the book, I have experienced the generous hospitality of two universities in Finland: Åbo Akademi University, where Roger Sell hosted my Donner Visiting Research professorship in the Fall of 1994 and where I collaborated with Håkan Ringbom on cross-cultural research; and the University of Jyväskylä where Kari Sajavaara provided me research facilities on two occasions during the completion of this book.

I would like to acknowledge the extremely helpful and stimulating reviews by the two anonymous readers recruited by Cambridge University Press. I wish to recognize the series co-editor Jack Richards for helping to focus the book at the initial stages as well as his continual counsel. Mary Vaughn, the Executive Editor, deserves thanks for her patience in



communications related to the book, and Mary Carson for careful editing.

However large the constellation of supporters and friends connected with this book, there is one person who outshines them all. Ray Keller, professor emeritus, took tremendous trouble to read the many drafts of each chapter carefully, quickly, and with minute attention to the smallest detail. His comments not only improved the manuscript, but, more important, gave me an enthusiastic reader, making the writing process almost a joy. Ray is a linguist's linguist. I feel fortunate to have such a devoted former mentor – a role model of a linguist, scholar, teacher, and friend.

Finally, I thank John and Timo Connor, my husband and son, for their continued support and encouragement, for cheering me up by producing pleasant distractions of various kinds including gourmet meals and family trips. John, a competent writer of English himself and erstwhile collaborator, has been a tireless commentator on my research and writing throughout the years. Without his belief in me and my career, this book would have never been written.

Ulla Connor



**PART I:**  
**PRELIMINARIES; EARLY PHASES OF**  
**THE FIELD**



# 1 *Toward an extended definition of contrastive rhetoric*

## **Writing in a second language: anecdotal evidence about problems and solutions**

English as a second language (ESL) students often mention that when they write in English as a second language they translate, or attempt to translate, first language words, phrases, and organization into English. A Chinese ESL student describes his writing process as follows:

While choosing Chinese words is a second nature for me, extracting the proper English word is much more difficult. In casual communication, my inner thoughts are like free river flowing directly from my mind to the paper. I can write whatever appears in my mind. When I write compositions, I come into trouble. There are many good sources I could get from the Chinese culture while I write in Chinese: such as literary quotations, famous old stories, and ancient word of wisdom. These rich sources definitely influence my paper quality in Chinese. Unfortunately examples like this are very hard to translate to English. Sometime I try to make a joke, but it loses its impact in translation. Finding the right English word to match what I am thinking in Chinese is very frustrating and often blocks my writing process. To continue my writing, I have two choices generally. One is to give up this sentence and try to express the same meaning in another way. The other alternative is to check a Chinese-English dictionary. However, translating like that usually leaves me with vague meanings and the impact is lost in the tattered pages of my dictionary. Writing like this is very choppy and does not flow.

This student is an advanced-level ESL student enrolled in a freshman English class. After attending several ESL courses at an American university, he still seeks to translate from Chinese into English in his ESL writing.

An ESL student from Iran ponders her writing process at the end of a freshman English class:

Thinking in English rather than in Persian or in French was something that I had to take into consideration every time I started to write something. Many times I explained an idea the way I used to do in Iran and the reader could not understand my point. For example in my essay about "friendship," I used a Persian proverb and my writing group members did not really understand its

meaning so I had to change it. Gradually I learned to think in English but I still have to practice more.

This student recognizes the need to think in English just as she has learned to think in French, her first second language.

In her eloquent memoir, *Lost in Translation. Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffman, editor of *The New York Times Book Review* and a native speaker of Polish, describes the feeling of not being able to find the right words in the new language:

But mostly, the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. "River" in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. "River" in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke. (Hoffman 1989, 106)

Hoffman's description of the difficult decision about the language in which to write her adolescent diary is equally vivid in suggesting that bilinguals think differently in their two languages.

Because I have to choose something, I finally choose English. If I'm to write about the present, I have to write in the language of the present, even if it's not the language of the self. As a result, the diary becomes surely one of the more impersonal exercises of the sort produced by an adolescent girl. These are no sentimental reflections of rejected love, eruptions of familial anger, or consoling broodings about death. English is not the language of such emotions. Instead I set down my reflections on the ugliness of wrestling, on the elegance of Mozart, and on how Dostoyevsky puts me in mind of El Greco. I write down Thoughts. I Write. (Hoffman 1989, 121)

As a native of Finland, I can identify with some of the stages Hoffman went through. My first term papers in graduate courses were painfully hard to conceptualize and write because my English graduate studies in Finland had primarily tested knowledge through written examinations, not through writing term papers. I remember starting on papers early in the semester and involving native English-speaking roommates as editors. Twenty years later, after earning a Ph.D. and gaining several years of teaching and research experience in applied linguistics in the United States, I finally think that I am close to the final stage of second language development. This stage allows a learner to let ideas flow on paper without the interference of having to translate them or being overly conscious of the language. With this last stage comes confidence in oneself as a writer in English. This does not mean, of course, that I am unaware of some nonnativeness in my writing. For example, because Finnish uses neither articles nor prepositions, I tend to use them inappropriately.

Thus, it is not surprising that ESL teachers often comment that ESL students use patterns of language and stylistic conventions that they have