ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION AND CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC

Laura M. Colombo

The contested place of CR studies

Born within the frame of applied linguistics and second-language acquisition, contrastive rhetoric (CR) is an interdisciplinary field that has led to some very productive research in the field of writing in a second language. CR offers explanations about differences in writing patterns across cultures. Since its incipience, this field has been highly controversial - nevertheless, these controversies have led to a growth in the amount of studies currently available, the variety of research methods used and its pedagogical implications.

Robert Kaplan's article 'Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education', first published in 1966, is recognized as a milestone in CR studies. In this article, aimed to inform pedagogical practices, Kaplan seeks to explain why, despite their mastering of vocabulary and syntactical structures, second-language writers have problems organizing their writing in order to meet the native readers' expectations. He claims that "[e]ach language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself" (Kaplan, 1984: 51) and in each culture there are particular expectations, beyond the lexical and syntactical level, about general organization patterns in written language.

Kaplan's postulations were questioned for several reasons. First, his study was based on the analysis of second-language students' writing who were still developing their writing skills. Thus, they were not likely to represent the cultural group they belonged to in an accurate way (Connor, 1997; Leki, 1997) since their lack of proficiency in the second language could be intervening. Second, Kaplan was criticized for linking rhetorical choices and thought patterns in such a straightforward manner as to neglect the fact that rhetorical logic is "socially *constructed*" (Leki 1997: 90; italics in the original). Third, he was also questioned for "improperly grouping languages that belong to distinct linguistic families" (Connor, 1997: 201), such as Thai and Korean. Finally, the author was judged for presenting an ethnocentric view where the English paragraph-patterning was characterized as the most "logical" out of all the others and "by inescapable implication (at least to those who value this version of logic), superior" (Leki 1992: 89). Despite the criticism that Kaplan's article received, his work is widely recognized for opening up the possibilities for a discourse-based analysis of second-language writing (Connor, 1996; Pérez-Ruiz, 2001) and for initiating CR studies (Connor, 1996, 1997, 2004; Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Leki, 1991, 1992, 1997; Moreno, 1997; Trujillo-Sáez, 2003).

All the criticism directed at Kaplan's article helped broaden the field. Following Kaplan's lead, Ulla Connor—currently, one of the most fervent advocates of CR—built on the objections and took CR studies forward. She defines CR as "an area of research in second-language acquisition that identifies problems in composition encountered by second-language writers and, by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, attempts to explain them" (Connor 1996: 5). Further research provided empirical data based on text analysis, and developed new explanations for observed differences in discourse-level organizational patterns. In this way, explanations for differences in writing across cultures started to be related to "culturally embedded preferences for good writing, which result from many factors besides linguistic, rhetorical, and cognitive ones, such as schooling and writing instruction" (Connor, 1997: 202).

Always embracing the objective of informing the teaching of writing for academic and professional purposes, CR expanded its analysis to a variety of genres

produced in educational and professional spaces (Connor, 1996). This diversification of studies was accompanied with a variegation of the criteria and methods applied to them. Some studies compared texts written in similar contexts for similar purposes, but in different first languages (Clyne, 1987). Other research compared texts written by second-language writers with those of first language writers (mainly English as first language) (Connor & Kramer, 1995). Another set of research compared first language texts with their translations (Hinds, 1987, 1990), as well as the use of certain linguistic features and text structures in texts produced in first and second language (Choi, 1988; Ventola & Mauranen, 1996; Mauranen, 1993, 1996).

Gradually, the field of CR started to grow and those criticisms specifically directed at Kaplan's article began to vanish with the accretion of empirical research that found differences across languages at a structural and organizational level. Yet, despite the diminution of objections to CR, a new bevy of complaints developed, presenting further challenges to its advocates.

CR studies were, and still are, strongly connected to text analysis, resulting in a field of study primarily focused on form. This led some authors to criticize CR because it would not "move beyond the texts themselves" (Leki 1991: 129) and would show an "overemphasis on product" (Leki, 1997: 240). According to Connor, this trend reversed during the 1990s, when CR started to consider "both cognitive and sociocultural variables" (Connor, 1997: 202).

Despite including the social context in the analysis of texts, CR was criticized for considering cultures as "discrete, continuous, and predictable" (Zamel 1997: 343), presenting a "monolithic and static" representation of the disciplines (344), and lending tacit support to the native-speaker myth (Casanave, 2004). Atkinson (2004) addressed these criticisms in a special issue of the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*. He proposed a model for CR in which the interactions between big culture and small culture (e.g. national culture and classroom culture) should be taken into account when studying educational or professional contexts.

In spite of the fact that in the most current research contrastive rhetoricians "have certainly not interpreted all differences in writing as stemming from the first language and the national culture" (Connor, 2004: 15), these two elements still play a main role. CR keeps on being rooted in "the relativistic assumption that different language communities represent different cultures and literacy practices" (Canagarajah, 2002: 34). This relativistic assumption implies conceiving each culture as unique in itself (Connor, 2008), which brings a "healthy dose of relativism" (Canagarajah, 2002: 34) into the second-language writing classroom since students' writing is then treated with more tolerance and appreciation.

CR and the second-language classroom

The "different-but-equal attitude to discourses" (Canagarajah, 2002: 35) proposed by CR has been welcomed in second-language writing classrooms. By acknowledging and researching the uniqueness of each culture, CR has helped teachers to recognize that "preferences in writing styles are culturally informed" (Leki, 1991: 137). According to Zamel (1997), "taking into account students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds gives educators insight into and makes them sensitive to students' struggles with language and writing" (341). In this way, CR helps to "create and maintain an atmosphere of tolerance for differences in L2 [second-language] writing" (Leki, 1997: 244) in educational contexts. Furthermore, the relativistic assumption in CR studies can empower second-language writers since students can gain "enlightenment about their writing in English" (Leki, 1991: 138) by acknowledging that their way of writing is specific because of their culturally-based writing preferences. When students 'discover' that their rhetorical choices are not just individual mistakes or errors, but can be related to culturally-based preferences, they can validate their own rhetoric. This prevents students from feeling that they are lacking something when producing texts in their second language.

In addition, the textual-linguistic descriptions offered by CR could also improve second-language writing instruction in two regards. First, teachers could use the empirical findings that CR provided to "anticipate some of the challenges" (Canagarajah, 2002: 42) their students may face when producing texts in a second language. For example, research has shown that long and complex sentences are common in Spanish writing (Lux, 1991; Montaño-Harmon, 1991; Neff & Prieto, 1994; Ostler, 1987; Reid, 1988; Santana-Seda, 1975). These types of sentences usually do not pose a challenge for a Spanish-speaking person reading a text in Spanish; however, they do for English-speaking readers since they are not used to them. Therefore, when composing in English as a second language, Spanish speakers should be aware of avoiding using extremely long or complex sentences. Second, CR findings can facilitate students' access to language norms by drawing their attention to certain text features and structure. However, as Leki (1991) warns, "the ability to understand [rhetorical strategies] may far exceed the skill to use that understanding" (138) and thus, awareness does not equal acquisition. It is vital, then, to provide students with the opportunity of not only analyzing, but also producing texts in the language classroom.

The relativism underlying CR studies also has its downfalls. Defining cultures as unique and comparing them to discover how they influence writing practices can also lead second-language teachers to hold a view resembling "linguistic determinism" (Canagarajah, 2002: 34), which may have several implications. First, this can lead teachers to see students as "bound by their cultures" (Zamel, 1997: 342) and focus on the negative transfer of the first language rhetorical patterns to second-language writing. This, in turn, can limit teachers' expectations of students, causing them to underestimate their writing as a mere product of cultural influences. In this way, students' agency can be denied when teachers interpret some writing features as a mere language interference "rather than a creative case of appropriation or negotiation" (Canagarajah, 2002: 34). The application of CR in the classroom can reveal another downfall if it is only addressed to having students write in a native-like manner, preventing them from "expressing their own native lingual and cultural identities" (Connor, 2004: 17). Nevertheless, both shortcomings can be avoided by explicitly teaching cultural differences in writing to fulfill the norms and expectations of the target language without neglecting the "preservation of the first language and style" (Connor, 2004: 17). The following section provides some practical insights about this.

What can teachers do with CR studies?

The question of how we apply CR findings to the second-language writing classroom persists. Up to now, the field has shown that there are differences in the preferred rhetorical patterns, but has fallen short of explaining their origin(s) and recognizing writing practices as socially-situated activities. I personally think that second-language teachers can gain several insights from the empirical data found in CR research, and from questioning it—not taking its findings as absolute truths. As second-language teachers, we should take an "investigative pedagogical approach" (Casanave, 2004: 52) to critically evaluate this field, inviting students to also do so.

In my thirteen years of experience teaching first and second language writing, I have witnessed how easily theories can be mistakenly transformed into ready-to-apply recipes that educators merely consume. I have heard phrases such as *"you have to give tons of exercises about articles to Asian speakers because articles do not exist in their language"* or *"Romance-language speakers can't write in a straightforward manner so you have to show them the 5 paragraph essay outline"*. These statements not only depersonalize students, but also reify research findings. As the years passed, I learned that there are no magic formulae and that research findings are not set in stone but true-for-now facts that we should constantly question. In my opinion, if we take our profession seriously we should stay current with the research. I agree with Casanave (2004) that reading the original research is fundamentally important in order to avoid "uncritically applying principles" (43). Most probably, when reading CR studies, language teachers will

find themselves struggling with the highly technical jargon employed. Nevertheless, the inherent link of CR to the second-language acquisition field prevails and most articles directly address the pedagogical implications of research.

Therefore, the best thing we can do as educators is to embrace what I call an "educated eclecticism." In my opinion, being eclectic in the classroom can be profitable, but only if we take our profession (and, over all, our students) seriously. Based on the readings of the extant CR literature, I have come to think that there are two main factors which could help us avoid the erstwhile-contested reductionist approach: a student-centered pedagogy, and a definition of writing as a socially situated activity. When we apply a student-centered approach in our classrooms, we not only give our students more opportunities for negotiations in the second language (Antón, 1999), but we also evaluate our students' needs through an individualized lens. This avoids categorizing them solely by their cultural and linguistic background, since we are considering each student as a person-in-the-world (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Inevitably, we start taking into account other factors that could influence their writing such as home culture, educational trajectories and personalities. CR research could enhance this student-centered approach not only by informing the teacher about each student's cultures, but also by providing the students with tools to enable a better understanding of their own cultures. Along these lines, as Casanave (2004) proposed, teachers and students could evaluate CR postulates by contrasting them against their life-stories, and by applying its methods in class activities.

One way of bringing CR research to the classroom is by getting students in contact with CR findings pertinent to their own first language(s). Thus, instead of simply assigning Chinese-speaking students tons of exercises about article uses "*because CR says so*," teachers can present and discuss these findings with the students. Depending on the level, students could read the articles themselves or teachers could present a summary to the class. Then, students can contrast CR findings against their own

literacy autobiographies and/or the texts they produced in the second language. This type of classroom task can give teachers the opportunity to apply the aforementioned investigative pedagogical approach and empower students by granting authority to their voices and literacy stories. The "ready-to-apply recipes," then, become collaboratively constructed activities since the decision of how to apply CR findings does not only lie with the teacher but starts a negotiation process in the class. If the educator explores CR findings in a collaborative way with the students, they can later reach a common agreement as to how to apply them to improve the students' writing. For example, students can analyze their own writing in the light of CR facts. In this way, they gain ownership over their own writing and take more control over their language learning process by being more aware of how they write.

In addition to a student-centered approach, if we articulate the conception of writing as both a culturally shaped phenomenon and a situated activity, we would be better positioned to inform our teaching practices. First, our classes should propose contextualized writing activities, avoiding writing addressed to fictitious audiences or solely to the teacher. Many micropublishing tools, such as blogs, discussion boards and wikis, can be used to provide students with a real audience, emphasizing writing as a process rather than as a final product. These tools can also facilitate collective editing, which emphasizes writing as a social activity rather than as an individual and solitary practice.

Second, CR could help teachers and students to learn more about audience expectations. I endorse Casanave's (2004) idea of borrowing CR methods not only to compare texts, but also to analyze reader's expectations. Furthermore, activities in which students both write and read texts produced in class can be fruitful if we provide students with a space to discuss writers' intentions and readers' interpretations. Another class activity of note consists of having students from different linguistic backgrounds compose texts together. This would give students an opportunity to practice collaborative writing—a skill in great contemporary

demand—and learn from each other's writing strategies and rhetorical preferences.

Finally, I would like to add that, as English language teachers, we have a unique and valuable place: the one that brings together the situatedness of writing and the diversity embodied in our students. It is our responsibility to provide those articulation points where theories and practices come together— so that theories frame classroom practices, and classroom practices critically evaluate theories.

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