



Contrastive rhetoric in the writing classroom: a case study

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Abstract

This note explores the role of contrastive rhetoric in writing pedagogy in the context of a monolingual class, in this case a group of students from the Russian Federation studying at an English medium university in Central Europe. The study compares students' argumentative essays written before and after a short writing course, which aimed to address cultural differences in writing in a non-prescriptive, exploratory, manner. The comparison focuses on, in this case, a culturally based textual element: the thesis statement. The analysis reveals that the essays written after the course display higher occurrence of thesis statements, more uniformity in the position of the thesis statements and less variation in the thesis statement sentence structure and lexical choices. The implications for the role of contrastive rhetoric in writing pedagogy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Cultural differences in writing have been studied extensively within the field of contrastive rhetoric (CR) since Kaplan's, 1966 study (see Connor, 1996, 2002, 2003 for overviews). However, pedagogical applications of CR research have received much less attention. As Leki (1991) states in her review of 25 years of CR

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research, initial enthusiasm often led to simplistic pedagogical practices and prescriptive teaching, which tended to present the Anglo-American writing pattern as superior to others. In a more recent overview, *Ostler (2002)* notes that there are no studies on the effectiveness of applications of CR in the classroom. At the same time, recently there have been criticisms of some assumptions of CR research that may have negative pedagogical consequences, such as labelling students in terms of their national identities, the static view of cultures, ethnocentrism and essentialism (*Kubota, 1999, 2001; Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1997*). These authors raise concerns that an over-emphasis on cultural differences in the teaching of writing leads to the creation of stereotypes and that it reproduces the existing power relations between the West and “the rest”. Thus, designers of ESP and EAP writing programmes are faced with important pedagogical questions: first, whether culture specific elements of writing should be addressed, and, if so, what should be taught and how.

This paper explores the role of CR in writing pedagogy in the context of a monolingual class, in this case a group of students from the Russian Federation studying at an English medium university in Central Europe. The preparatory writing course the students attended was based on the assumption that cultural differences in writing should be addressed in a non-prescriptive, exploratory, manner. After reviewing relevant CR research and analysing the approach adopted in the course, I will examine the differences in students’ essays written before and after the course, focusing on, in this case, a culturally based element: the thesis statement.

2. Contrastive rhetoric and definitions of culture

In a study involving CR, the issue of what is understood by the term culture is inevitably raised. It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a discussion of the various definitions of culture but it is important to take into consideration the recent shift in the way culture is defined and understood in applied linguistics. *Atkinson (1999)* traces a move from the perceived view of culture as a static and homogeneous national entity, which has been criticised for its tendency to view students as cultural types (*Kubota, 1999, 2001; Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1997*), towards views influenced by post-modern theories, which avoid the term “culture” in favour of “identity”, “discourse”, and “agency”. As a solution, Atkinson argues for a “middle-ground approach to culture” (1999, p. 636), which “takes into account the cultural in the individual, and the individual in the cultural” (1999, pp. 648–649).

In conceptualising the relationship between CR and writing pedagogy, it may be fruitful to apply the distinction made by *Holliday (1999)* between large and small cultures. Large culture refers to the received view of culture, which sees it as a national culture, while small culture pertains to “any cohesive grouping” (*Holliday, 1999, p. 237*) such as a group of students in a course. Placing the discussion about the relationship between CR and writing pedagogy within the framework of this distinction makes it clear that CR is mostly concerned with large culture differences (but see *Panetta (2001)* for recent extensions of CR to include other types of difference), whereas pedagogical situations naturally lead to the formation of small cultures.

This allows us to reframe the question as follows: to what extent does the large culture perspective of CR have a bearing on small culture processes in the writing classroom?

In line with this understanding, I will be using the expression “culturally based elements of writing” to refer to those textual features that are found by CR research to be characteristic of the writing pattern of a language and/or are reinforced through educational practices. In the next section I will review the relevant CR research based on the large culture perspective.

3. Contrastive rhetoric research on the differences between Russian and English writing patterns

In reviewing previous CR research into the differences between the Russian and the English writing patterns, I will focus on two areas: the findings of CR studies of textual patterns, and differences in writing instruction in the Russian and Anglo-American educational systems.

3.1. Textual patterns

The writing patterns characteristics of Russian (and of the Slavic language group as a whole) have only recently entered into the focus of CR research.¹ The emerging body of work investigating discourse-level contrasts between writing in English and the individual languages of the Slavic group shows that there are striking similarities among academic writing patterns in Slavic languages, particularly Czech, Russian, Polish and Ukrainian but possibly others as well, when contrasted to writing in English (Čmejrková, 1996; Čmejrková & Daneš, 1997; Duszak, 1994, 1997a; Golebiowski, 1998; Yakhontova, 2001, 2002). This similarity is explained by several factors: the common intellectual tradition formed under the long-lasting German influence on the education and academic discourse in the region (Čmejrková, 1996; Duszak, 1994; Golebiowski, 1998), similarities in syntactic structures of Slavic languages, and common ideological past. Therefore, it is possible to make some generalisations based on common findings from the studies comparing English with various Slavic languages, nevertheless bearing in mind that they represent general tendencies only. Here I present only those features that have been found to be common.

¹ For example, Connor's (1996) comprehensive overview of CR research mentions only one such study, Čmejrková's research (1996) on the differences between Czech and English discourse patterns, while Connor's (2002) review includes Duszak's (1994) and Golebiowski's (1998) work on Polish-English contrasts. This relative lack is partly due to the fact that cross-cultural linguistic studies in the Slavic world tended to be framed within a different linguistic tradition, such as contrastive linguistics (particularly strong in Poland (see Golebiowski (1998))) and the Prague structuralist school (see Čmejrková (1996)), both of which are based on the sentence-level rather than discourse-level perspective. Another reason is that, until 1990, contacts between Slavic and English speaking countries were restricted; consequently, only a small number of students from Slavic countries studied at American universities, where CR started and where most of the initial CR research was conducted.

CR studies show that academic writing in Czech, Polish, Russian and Ukrainian as compared to English writing tends to be less linear and more tolerant of digressions, relying less frequently than English on metalanguage, advance text organisers, and subsectioning (Čmejková, 1996; Duszak, 1997b; Golebiowski, 1998),² all of which indicates that the form of the text is less strictly regulated. Stylistically, this writing pattern favours “baroque” over a simple and straightforward manner of expression (Čmejková, 1996, p. 145) as a way for writers to show their mastery of the elaborate academic style. Another common characteristic, which is of direct relevance to the focus of this study, is the delayed expression of the purpose of the text and gradual development of the thesis (Čmejková, 1996; Duszak, 1994). These features make scientific writing in Slavic languages reader responsible in terms of Hinds’ (1987) distinction between reader and writer responsible patterns. Thus, the scientific prose in Slavic languages tends to be more concerned with presenting knowledge than addressing the reader (Čmejková & Daneš, 1997; Golebiowski, 1998; Nichols, 1988; summarised in Yakhontova (2001)), or, as Yakhontova (2002) aptly puts it in her study of conference abstracts written by Russian and Ukrainian academics in comparison to those written by American and British scholars, it tends to “tell” rather than “sell”. However, Čmejková and Daneš (1997) note that this does not imply a lack of cooperation between the writer and the reader but rather that the expectations are different: the reader is expected to invest effort into following the writer’s line of presentation. In the words of a graduate student from Russia who participated in my previous study (Petrić, 2002, p. 20): “My style [when writing in English] is rather Russian, I mean rather awake and the reader has to be a co-creator of the text and some activity, some efforts should be made”.

It should be noted that most of these scholars emphasise the changing nature of textual patterns in Slavic academic writing under the strong influence of the patterns of English as a global language.³ Nevertheless, they agree that the differences are considerable, which has important pedagogical implications for teaching writing on ESP and EAP courses to students from the region.

3.2. The role of writing instruction

Although less prominent than textual studies in CR research, research into the differences in writing instruction in different educational systems is an important area which offers insights into the ways certain writing patterns are promoted by educational practices (see, for example, Liebman, 1992). It is well known that in the Amer-

² In this respect, academic writing in Slavic languages seems to be similar to the Finnish (Mauranen, 1993) and German pattern (Clyne, 1987), which some authors (Čmejková, 1996; Duszak, 1994) explain by the historical influence of the German intellectual tradition on the region.

³ A good example of this change is the introduction of the genre of the CV in the Anglo-American style into many Slavic languages, which at present co-exists with but may be gradually replacing the traditional ‘biography’, written as a chronological narrative in the third person.

ican educational system writing instruction is given considerable emphasis, as evidenced in widespread college composition courses, the existence of writing centres at universities, and numerous writing textbooks (see Russell, 1992, for a historical overview of this tradition).

In contrast, the following excerpt from an essay by an ESP teacher⁴ from Russia is illustrative of the role and focus of writing instruction in the Russian educational system:

Russian students are not taught to write essays. We write essays on literature at school but we do it for the sake of grammar and the knowing of a book's content, first. The ability to express personal thoughts and put them appropriately into *written speech* is assessed as something that does not have great importance for educational process. So, Russian students fail in the field where their Western counterparts feel at ease. This is one of the reasons why Russians fail to enter foreign colleges and universities. I strongly believe that we should teach our students how to write, first in their native, then in a foreign language [italics mine].

Note the expression the teacher uses when referring to text: “written speech”, which is indicative of the primacy of the oral mode in educational practices.

Although these practices are changing, as most educational systems in Central and Eastern Europe are undergoing reform, writing in the native language is still mainly taught in primary and secondary school but not at universities. In secondary schools writing is typically dealt with within literature classes, with literary works serving as models of good writing. The focus of the instruction is on the development of students' ability to use the full potential of the lexical and syntactic wealth of their native language within a textual form that does not have strict structural requirements. This type of instruction is referred to as development of “verbal art” (Yakhontova, 2001, p. 399) or “language culture” (Zydek-Bednarczuk, 1997). While in English writing instruction there is an emphasis on structure, linearity and relevance to the thesis (Connor, 2003; Čmejrková & Daneš, 1997), text organisation and paragraphing are not explicitly taught and, as Čmejrková points out, students are “nearly free in their decisions about the structure of the text they are writing” (Čmejrková, 1996, p. 143).

At tertiary level, writing in the native language is generally not taught and the concept of teaching academic or discipline specific writing is not widely known (Yakhontova, 1997). Many scholars note the lack of textbooks or manuals of writing in the native languages (Čmejrková, 1996, for Czech; Vassileva, 2001, for Bulgarian) or even equivalent terms for “academic writing” (Duszak, 1997a, for Polish; Yakhontova, 2001, for Ukrainian and Russian). One of the reasons for this lies in the fact that the dominant mode of evaluation tends to be oral assessment. Writing

⁴ The teacher attended a seminar on teaching academic English held in Russia. The quote is from the teacher's feedback essay written three months after the course.

therefore does not play such a central role as in American universities since it is not directly relevant to academic achievement.

Differences are also noticeable in the types of writing assignments used in instruction. Of particular relevance to this study is the argumentative essay, a pedagogical form commonly used in the English writing classroom for practising persuasive writing. This type of essay and persuasive writing in general, however, are not part of writing instruction in many languages (see Hinds, 1990, for Japanese, Korean, Chinese, & Thai; Hinkel, 1999, for a review of related literature on Chinese, Korean & Japanese; Kachru, 1999, for Hindi; Liebman, 1992, for Japanese & Arabic). This seems to hold true for writing instruction in the Slavic languages discussed here, as illustrated by the following words of an ESP teacher⁵ from Russia:

Some students have never done it [written an argumentative essay] either in Russian or in English. Most of my students think that every essay is the way of expressing their thoughts and viewpoints only, but in the argumentative essay English language learners deal with developing and organizing their ideas, argumentation and persuasion of their readers.

This is in line with Čmejrková's (1996, p. 147) point that the essay form in Slavic languages typically offers the writer's thoughts on an issue as a stimulus to the readers' thinking rather than trying to persuade them. A possible reason for the lack of training in persuasive writing may be the fact, noted by Čmejrková for Czech (1996, p. 144), that persuasiveness is not seen as a feature of academic but rather journalistic writing. This reflects the already noted tendency towards the idealization of knowledge (Duszak, 1997a; Golebiowski, 1998) in the academic discourse in Slavic languages. Thus, learning the genre itself can be seen as a form of cultural learning, which involves not only mastering new types of form and function but also learning to use new configurations of the familiar ones, which may or may not be used in the same way in the writing pattern of one's own language.

Based on the large culture CR perspective on the Slavic-English contrasts (without taking into account other factors affecting students' writing) it can be predicted that the students in this study may be unfamiliar with the conventions of the argumentative essay and that the deductive essay structure, with the thesis statement expressed at the beginning of the essay, may not be their preferred way of writing.

4. The aim of the study and the participants

The aim of the study is to assess the extent to which the students acquired culturally based elements of writing as a result of a writing course which explicitly ad-

⁵ This quote is from the feedback essay by another ESP teacher from Russia from the same group as above.

dressed cultural differences. The course was attended by a group of nineteen students at an English medium university in Central Europe. The students were all from the Russian Federation; the first language for all of them was Russian. The teacher, a native speaker of Serbian, was not familiar with the students' language. The students were all in their final year of legal studies at different universities in Russia, and had been selected to attend a special one-year programme in the Legal Studies Department of the university. The selection was based on the following criteria: English proficiency (measured by TOEFL, minimum score 550), writing ability (tested by writing an essay on a legal topic), legal reasoning capacity (which tests analytical thinking and logical reasoning capabilities), past academic record and special experience of relevance to legal studies (such as internship in relevant organisations). Most students had no extensive previous experience in writing in either Russian or English, although a few had attended three-month courses at universities in the UK, where they were required to write seminar papers.

5. Method

The study uses a variation of the single group pre-test post-test method. The students took a test of writing ability on the first day of their study period. This was followed by a short writing course taught intensively over six days. The students then completed a writing assignment of the same type as the test. This method is not experimental since it relies on a found rather than randomised group and does not use a control group (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). Therefore, the differences in the performance between the two testing occasions may be attributed to factors other than the treatment, i.e., the writing course. However, due to the very short time span between the two tests (a week), it is plausible to assume that other factors did not interfere to a large degree.

Another aspect where experimental design had to be abandoned due to the constraints of the pedagogical situation was in ensuring the same conditions for the pre-test and the post-test. The first test was administered as a timed essay test, to be completed within 45 min. Three prompts were offered, each consisting of a statement followed by the instruction "discuss". The test was graded by the teacher using a five-trait analytical scale and the grades were used for diagnostic purposes. The second test, a home assignment to be completed for the following day, was not graded. The task was the same as on the first test, but the prompt was developed by the students themselves through a collaborative process guided by the teacher. This difference in the conditions of writing does not make it possible to compare the students' overall performance on the two occasions. However, since the tasks required the students to employ the same genre, they are suitable for comparing the culturally based genre elements before and after the writing course. It has to be borne in mind, however, that the greater amount of time allocated for the writing of the second essay allowed for more reflection, and the possibility to use resources or seek advice from others. Nevertheless, it is assumed that these essays ultimately reflect the choices made by the writers themselves.

6. The writing course

The writing course was held during the first two weeks of the students' study period with the aim to help the students "develop as a writer within the English speaking academic community by raising awareness of, practising, and reflecting upon the conventions of written texts" (*Introduction to academic writing. Study pack, 2002: 3*). The course was built around the genre of the argumentative essay as a pedagogical form suitable for practising a variety of writing skills necessary for academic work. The course consisted of six 100-minute sessions: introduction, the structure of the argumentative essay, essay writing workshop (2 sessions), paragraphing, and style. I will briefly describe the first session, which explicitly focused on cultural differences in writing.

The aim of this session was to "introduce the course, to make students aware of the writing processes with brief reference to the idea of contrastive rhetoric" (*Introduction to academic writing. Instructor's pack, 2002: 2*). The idea of contrastive rhetoric was introduced inductively, through exploratory activities aiming to involve the students in reflection and discussion. First, the students were asked to write about their views of the similarities and differences between writing in English and Russian, which was followed by discussion. This initial exploration revealed that while some students thought that academic writing is universal regardless of the language in which it is written, others noted some differences between Russian and English academic writing. These included general observations, such as: "sentences have to be shorter (in English)", "the constructions are different", "the style is different", "the rules of writing are different". A student pointed out different experiences of writing in different languages and their impact on writer identity: "I feel like a European when I write in English". Interestingly, this student, and possibly others in the group, identifies English with Europe rather than the UK or the US.

On further probing the students' assumptions about "the rules of writing" in English, the following emerged: "the English sentence should not be longer than 20 words", "personal pronouns are never used in English academic writing" and "using the same word should be avoided". What student believe about writing in English, and, in general, what they regard as the norm of writing in another language is another potentially fruitful direction for research within CR. An ironic possibility here is that while students may believe that they are following "the English pattern", the teachers or researchers may interpret their efforts as indicative of their culture's pattern.

The notion of cultural differences in writing was introduced through a guessing game activity. Kaplan's drawings representing different cultures' organisational patterns in writing (from his 1966 article) were presented and the students were asked to guess what language each was supposed to refer to. The students immediately identified the 'English' and the 'Russian' pattern as represented by Kaplan's "doodles" (as he himself referred to them in his 1987 article [Kaplan, 1987](#)) as a straight line and a zigzag dotted line, respectively. The representation of the Russian pattern provoked laughter. Students then read a short review of Kaplan's article "Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education" (1966), which was followed by discus-

sion. The article was placed in a historical context and the criticisms of the doodles were presented, especially in relation to the assumed superiority of the linear model. The advantages of being bilingual and proficient in different ‘logics’ of writing were briefly discussed. The issue of audience was raised as well: that readers may find it difficult to understand the text if it does not follow the expected ‘logic’ and that it is therefore important to take into consideration one’s audience.

As this brief description shows, the course addressed the issue of differences in the writing patterns in various ways, such as through reading materials, discussion, reflective writing activities and, later in the course, text analysis of an argumentative essay written by a former student. This is in line with what Byram et al. state, i.e., that “the mere acquisition of information” (1994, p. 5) is not sufficient for effective cultural learning. Of particular importance in this process are exploratory activities, whose aim is to engage students in examining and sharing their perceptions of differences and similarities before any information is presented (see Swales & Feak’s *textbook* (2000) for a different example of such activity), and reflective activities following the presentation of information, whose aim is to elicit students’ responses to it. The purpose of these activities is to encourage students to observe different writing patterns they encounter, both in their native language and in English.

The most common technique used in addressing the differences in writing was comparison, which Byram et al. (1994) see as the most important principle in teaching culture. Comparison was elicited from the students in various ways: through teacher questions, which involved genuine information gap since the teacher was not familiar with the students’ language, tasks for small group discussion, and individual reflection in writing.

7. Results: comparison of the two essays

Due to limited space, the comparison of the essays written before and after the writing course focuses on one textual feature only: the thesis statement (TS), which was identified as a culturally different feature both by CR research and by the students themselves. This element is therefore expected to be a good indicator of the students’ acquisition of the conventions of the argumentative essay. The thesis statement is defined for the purpose of this analysis as the sentence expressing the writer’s main idea or opinion regarding the given prompt. The following features of TSs are compared: the position within the essay, and the linguistic and rhetorical realisation.

7.1. The position of the thesis statement

When determining the position of the TS, it is important to note that not all essays contained one: in some essays the main idea was not expressed in one sentence but was rather left to the reader to extract from the whole essay. This was the case with seven essays written before the course, while all essays written after the course contained such a sentence.

Table 1
Position of the thesis statement in the text ($N = 19$)

Position of the thesis statement	1st essay	2nd essay
1st Sentence of the essay	5	1
Last sentence of the introduction	1	16
Within the introduction	0	1
Main body	1	0
Conclusion	5	1
No thesis statement	7	0

The position of the TS within the text, as can be seen in Table 1, varies widely in the first essay. In this group of essays the TS has two basic roles: as a starting point for the discussion or as the point of arrival. Five students start the essay with a statement similar to the one in the prompt, which is then discussed in the remaining parts of the essay. An equal number of students state the main idea only in the conclusion, while the rest of the essay either builds up towards it or expresses other people's opinions. These statements are not TSs in the sense of the Anglo-American argumentative essay, since they are more appropriate as concluding remarks or re-statements, but are listed here because in these essays they are the only type of sentence containing the main idea. As can be seen, there is no prevalent pattern in the position of the TS.

In the second essay, in contrast, all except one student applied the acquired convention of stating the main idea of the essay in its introductory part. In 16 (84.2%) essays, the TSs were in the predictable position: the last sentence of the introduction, as suggested in the students' study packs. Interestingly, the one student who did not follow this pattern stated in the consultation with the teacher that she did not want to do it because "it is wrong" and it would "spoil the essay". In this case, it can be seen that the taught structure clashed with the student's internalised feeling for what sounds good in writing.

7.2. Linguistic and rhetorical realisation of the thesis statement

7.2.1. The first essay

The linguistic and rhetorical realisation of the TSs in the first essay depends on their position in the text. Those found at the opening of the essay are typically almost identical with the given prompt (modified, for example, by added negation). Another typical feature is the expression of the writer's agreement or disagreement with the statement, where the prompt is used with little modification. For example, essays written on the prompt "Homosexual and lesbian couples wishing to establish a long-term relationship should have the same rights of marriage and adoption as heterosexual couples. Discuss." typically start as follows:

I don't agree with the statement that homosexuals and lesbians should have the same rights of marriage and adoption as heterosexual couples.

I positively agree with the given statement that homosexual and lesbian couples should have the same rights concerning the adoption of children (and other spheres) if they have long-term relation.

These TSs located at the beginning of the essays resemble the second element in the question–answer pattern, with the prompt functioning as a question and the remaining part of the essay presenting an extended response to the prompt.

The main ideas found in conclusions typically contain concluding phrases, such as “*to sum it up*”, or they indicate that this is where the writer’s opinion will finally follow, indicated in the following example by the word “*response*” (to the prompt):

In other words the response is that we should give a right of marriage to ‘unordinary couples’ since mainly it touches upon their rights, but the right of adoption influences the public interest and has a negative influence.

By analysing the sentences found in the position typically occupied by the TS in the Anglo-American tradition, i.e., the last sentence in the introduction, two types of sentences were found, which may be characteristic of a common pattern:

- (a) a sentence which points to the problem but does not reveal the writer’s viewpoint:

As a matter of fact the question of homosexual and lesbian couples is an up to date one.

- (b) a sentence indicating the approach to be taken in the paper or how the paper will proceed:

Traditionally there are two approaches that should be taken into consideration. From the first sight the problem can be analyzed as follows.

Both types announce the topic or the way the essay will proceed without yet stating the writer’s position.

7.2.2. *The second essay*

In the second essay, there is much less variety in the ways the TSs are formulated. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify two groups: TS as the main thought and the purpose of the essay, and TS as an expression of opinion.

- (a) Thesis statement as the main thought to be developed and the statement of the purpose of the essay

Ten TSs (52.6% essays) have the rhetorical function of expressing the writer’s position on the topic and indicating the purpose of the essay, following what was taught in the course. These TSs typically use the modal “*will*” and the verbs “*argue*” (5 cases) or “*prove*” (5 cases) to express the purpose of the paper, followed by a clause expressing opinion. In three TSs, the pronoun “*I*” is used, while the remaining seven use phrases such as “*this paper*” or “*this essay*”. The expressions used are:

“*This paper will argue*” (3 cases), “*In this paper I will argue*”, “*In the essay I will prove*”, “*In this essay I would like to prove*”, “*this essay will argue*”, “*This essay will prove*”, “*The aim of this assignment is to prove*” and “*This essay aims at proving*”.

(b) Thesis statement as an expression of opinion

In eight TSs (42.1% essays), the writer’s opinion is expressed using opinion verbs (“*I find*”, “*I consider*”), modal verbs (“*should*”, “*must*”), or simply by stating an opinion as a fact (“*the situation ... is impossible*” (probably meaning “unacceptable”), “*judge has no right*”). While these statements do convey the writer’s opinion, their rhetorical value is different from those in the first category, since they do not express the purpose of the essay.

In the analysis of TSs in the second essay, it was important to take into account the argumentative essay used in the class in a text analysis activity in order to check whether the students used it as a resource when writing their essays. The analysis shows that some students heavily relied on it as a model for expressing their TSs. Namely, the sample essay uses the pattern “*This paper will argue*”, which occurs verbatim in three and in slight variation in two cases. Another pattern that students imitated is the question–answer formulation of the TS in the sample essay: “*the question inevitably emerges*”. In 10 out of the 19 (52.6%) essays, TSs are expressed as a response to a question. The question is either directly stated (4 cases) or introduced by a phrase (6 cases) similar to the one in the sample essay, and, in one case, even identical to it: “*the urgent question is*”, “*so the question is*”, “*the question inevitably emerges*”, “*here another question arises*”, “*the question arises*”, and “*the question is*”.

Although the essay was meant to be used as an authentic sample for in-class analysis rather than a model, it is clear that half of the group used it as a model to imitate. While it is true that imitation can be a useful learning strategy, especially at initial stages, since it enables students to try on a new discourse (see Howard, 1999, for mimesis and writing development), there is a danger that it may lead to a mechanical application of patterns seen as formulas. Clear implications of this finding are that students need to be provided with a range of samples of a genre or its characteristic elements so that they can acquire a repertoire of linguistic and rhetorical devices from which to choose. This is true even in cases such as the TS, which, as Myers (1992) has demonstrated, follows a stereotypical pattern of expression determined by disciplinary conventions (e.g., biologists typically ‘report’, while linguists ‘argue’).

8. Discussion: contrastive rhetoric and writing pedagogy

This note has explored the acquisition of a culturally based element in the argumentative essays of a group of Russian students. The comparison of the thesis statements in the essays written before and after the course has revealed that the essays written after the course display

- (1) higher occurrence of TSs (all essays contain a TS as opposed to 12 (63.2%) essays written before the course);
- (2) more uniformity in the position of TSs (in 18 (94.7%) essays it is placed in the introduction, as opposed to 6 (31.6%) in the first essay);
- (3) less variation in the TS sentence structure and lexical choices.

In about half of the essays (52.6%), these changes can be directly traced to the students' adherence to the sample essay used in the course, ranging from direct imitation of the original to some variation in the syntactical and lexical expression of the TS. In less than half of the essays (42.1%), the changes reflect a more varied application of the newly learnt pattern, while in one case (5.3%) there is no change in the position and expression of the TS.

Due to the limitations of this study in both scope and method, it is not possible to draw detailed conclusions about the effect of the pedagogical approach adopted in the course. However, several points can be made about the relationship between CR and writing pedagogy, which deserve further investigation.

An important question in the discussion of the role of CR in writing pedagogy is to what extent CR findings about the students' native language pattern can serve as an indication of potential problems in students' writing in English. As the analysis of the first essays shows, the students showed almost equal preference for the delayed expression of purpose (6 essays (31.6%)); deductive essay structure with the TS in the introduction (6 essays (31.6%)); and not stating the TS at all (7 essays (36.8%)). The lack of a dominant pattern seems to reflect the variety of influences shaping students' writing including, among others, the pattern found to be dominant in the native language (i.e., delayed expression of purpose), lack of instruction in argumentative essay writing in the native language, and exposure to writing instruction in English (e.g., TOEFL training courses). This suggests that although CR findings about the native pattern may provide an indication of general tendencies, they should not be understood as a strong predictor of students' writing behaviour in English.

A related question is to what extent the dominant pattern of the native language interferes with the learning of a different pattern. This study found little evidence that the dominant native pattern, in this case limited to the role of the TS in the argumentative essay, stood in the way of learning a new writing pattern. This is partly because, as seen, some students did not follow it even when writing the first essay. Nevertheless, one student resisted the acquisition of the new pattern and supported her decision by reasons that can be attributed to the transfer of the native language pattern. In such situations CR may provide explanations of the background of such resistance. Literature on culture learning offers a framework for understanding this process by explaining that cultural knowledge is often implicit (Kramsch, 1993), i.e., students may initially be unaware of the culture-specific nature of the writing conventions of their native language, which leads them to regard them as universal, natural and logical. In such situations, it is important to stress the idea of writing for different audiences, and the notion of multiliteracy instead of replacement of one pattern by another. There is, however, another type of student resistance, which

results from an informed choice to challenge conventions. In such cases, it can not be said that the native pattern interferes with learning but rather that learning has already taken place.

At the same time, it should be borne in mind that students may significantly differ in the degree to which they feel they belong to “their” culture as well as in their perceptions of it. Therefore, when addressing cultural differences in the writing classroom it is important not to make assumptions about the cultural membership of students based on the facts of their country of origin. Even when sharing the same native language, students should not be expected to have the same views of the differences in the writing patterns of English and their native language. The process of exploring such differences in the classroom brings to light students’ perceptions, which, as Holliday (1999) states, are also a product of culture, rather than objectively existing differences.

The findings from CR studies can therefore be seen as pointers to general tendencies, whose relevance needs to be assessed in the context of a concrete teaching situation. The small culture of the writing classroom, with its specific characteristics, should be the basis for decisions about the implications of CR findings for a particular group of students. This approach allows writing pedagogy to take into account not only “the cultural in the individual and the individual in the cultural” but also the social.

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