

## The Contribution of Intercultural Rhetoric Research to the Teaching of Academic Writing Skills

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**Abstract:** This study seeks to point out the contribution of intercultural rhetoric research to the teaching of academic literacy. It indicates that the teaching of academic literacy is an essential part of teaching English for specific purposes. It traces the emergence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a pedagogical approach which became necessary because of overseas students from various countries studying in English-speaking countries. These overseas students speak English as a Second Language (ESL) or speak English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The study indicates how the initial pedagogical approach to ESP instruction could not address the needs of ESL/EFL learners and shows how intercultural research brought about a shift in ESP pedagogy. It is explained that much of ESP is mainly English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The study then demonstrates how IR research findings and recommendations have been applied to the teaching of academic writing. It gives account of EAP instructors who have implemented the recommendations of intercultural rhetoric researchers and have found them useful. It gives some examples of EAP instructors who have confirmed that intercultural rhetoric pedagogical approaches have had positive impact on ES/EFL learners by improving their academic writing skills. The study concludes that intercultural rhetoric research has contributed and continues to contribute to EAP pedagogy in helping ESL/EFL learners to acquire academic writing skills.

**Key words:** Academic writing, EAP, EFL, ESL, ESP, intercultural rhetoric

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### INTRODUCTION

English Language Teaching (ELT) pedagogy has gone through the use of several pedagogical approaches over the years. ELT started with the grammar translation method of teaching. Richard and Rogers (1995) explained that when English was introduced into the curriculum of European schools, students were taught grammar rules of English. Stern (2001) states that the teaching of grammar rules had been an important part of ELT pedagogy. This approach of teaching grammar rules dominated the teaching of English until researchers and teachers in the field of ELT realized it was not addressing the communicative needs of learners, hence, the introduction of other approaches to the teaching of English. ELT pedagogy has therefore gone through several pedagogical approaches until the famous audio-lingual approach to the teaching of English. The audio-lingual approach became the pedagogical approach that was adopted to improve the communicative competence of people learning English as their second language. This refers to learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and people who learn English as a Foreign Language

(EFL). It became evident that ESL/EFL learners in higher education needed more than communicative competence in English to enable them pursue their courses. ESL/EFL learners from divergent cultural backgrounds who find themselves in American and British universities pursuing various degrees have to turn in assignments, term papers, project works and dissertations as requirements for the award of degrees. These learners in higher education face the challenge of meeting their academic requirements. They need to acquire language skills that will enable them cope with their academic work. Connor (2011) confirms the challenges of ESL/EFL learners by making reference to her experience as a master's student from an ESL/EFL setting of Finland in an American university in the 70's. This need for ESL/EFL learners to acquire language skills for academic work resulted in organizing English language courses for these learners. These English language courses developed into what has become known as English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses became common in American colleges and universities in the 1960's. The reason for their proliferation is captured by Ramirez (2015) as the result of large numbers of overseas

ESL/EFL students studying in English-speaking countries, especially, in America and the UK. ESP courses were designed to help ESL/EFL learners to acquire the needed academic skills for their academic work. However, the initial courses could not address the needs of the learners because their writing was found to be different from native English writing. To find out why ESL/EFL student's writing was different, Kaplan (1966) discovered that the reason why ESL/EFL "student's writing looked different from native English speaker's writings was because their cultural thought styles were different" (Connor, 2008). This initial discovery has become what is referred to as intercultural rhetoric research as an approach to the teaching of ESP.

This study points out the contribution of intercultural rhetoric research to the teaching of ESP. The study traces the emergence of ESP courses and the beginning of intercultural rhetoric research and shows how intercultural rhetoric research pedagogical recommendations have contributed to ESP instruction. The study demonstrates how the application of intercultural rhetoric pedagogical recommendations have served as instructional activities for helping ESL/EFL learners to acquire academic writing skills.

### **ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES (ESP)**

Academic requirements are responsible for the emergence of the field of ESP. The explanation of what ESP entails reveals this. According to Garcia and Frances (2015), ESP started after the Second World War when people had to learn English not for prestige or pleasure but for the purpose of research. They specifically indicate that ESP pedagogy became significant in the 1960's.

As indicated, ESP started as a result of trying to meet the English language skills requirement of ESL/EFL learners. What ESP pedagogy entails requires some explanation. The term ESP has not been captured as a definition of what it is, though several explanations and classifications of what it constitutes exist in the literature. According to Mohan (1986), ESP is an area of English language teaching that is directed towards the training of ESL/EFL learners "for chosen communicative environments" where English "is used for a limited range of communicative events". A detailed explanation of ESP is offered by Strevens (1988). According to Strevens (1988), there are four things that define ESP. The first defining feature of ESP is that it aims at meeting the specific language needs of the learner. Second, the content of ESP courses is related to the discipline or occupation of the learner. Thirdly, ESP is focused on the language that is most appropriate for the learner's

discipline or area of study. The fourth defining feature is that ESP is different from General English which is not directed towards the language needs of any particular discipline or occupation.

All the four things that define ESP point to one direction. That direction is that ESP is English language skills directed towards the needs of the ESL/EFL learner. These ESL/ EFL learners are adults in various professional fields who need to pursue their courses in English and then begin their professional practice. ESP Pedagogy therefore, aims at addressing two main issues which are related. These two issues are the academic and professional English language skills of ESL/EFL learners. For this reason, ESP has two branches or areas. The two areas under ESP are English for Academic Purpose (EAP) and English for Occupational Purpose (EOP). In fact, both EAP and EOP are meant to achieve the same purpose. That purpose is to prepare ESL/EFL students for success in their academic studies and for the world of work. Some researchers, however, are of the view that EAP is different from EOP and should be separated for specific focus (Jordan, 1997). On the other hand, Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) point out that, the difference between EAP and EOP is not clear because much of what is done for academic achievement is to prepare learners towards their profession or occupations. For this reason, what is practiced as ESP is mainly EAP as EAP is what prepares ESL/EFL learners for their various occupations.

In concluding this study on the explanation of ESP pedagogy, it is therefore important to note that even though ESP is in two folds; EAP and EOP, the field of ESP is dominated by EAP. This is obvious because as Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) point out, much of the tasks that prepare ESL/EFL learners for academic success also prepare them for their professions and occupations. For this reason ESP is often equated to EAP. The field of ESP is therefore, mainly understood as EAP.

**The content of EAP:** Several things are taken into consideration in designing EAP courses. Some of the things that are taken into consideration in designing EAP courses include student's needs, the discipline, the teaching situation, age and socio-cultural status of the learners (Garcia and Frances, 2015).

As a result of taking several things into consideration before EAP courses are designed, the content of EAP courses may differ in content depending on the needs of learners (Orr, 2001). The specific need of learners usually vary according to their disciplines. Despite the variations that may exist in EAP courses from one institution to the other and from one discipline to the other they are generally, designed to cover certain skills. Usually present

among these skills are study skills, grammar skills, reading skills and academic literacy skills. Paramount among the language skills that ESL/EFL learners need in every EAP course is academic literacy, skills. The most important need of ESL/EFL learners therefore is academic writing skills. Robinson (1991) observes that EAP is directed toward a goal and the courses are based on needs analysis in order to provide the language skills the learner needs: language skills for academic pursuit. Jordan (1997) points out that the needs of ESL/EFL learners is academic literacy and EAP courses are designed for the purpose of achieving academic literacy abilities. Shing and Sim (2011) also emphasize that EAP courses should be designed carrying out needs analysis so that, EAP courses will address the academic literacy needs of learners. The focus of academic literacy is for the learners to be able to write well within their various disciplines.

In an attempt to address the language skills of ESL/EFL learners, EAP courses according to Ramirez (2015) were designed as “detailed study of language in specific registers which demonstrated a positive interest in functional lexis and a concentration on form. “This is exactly how EAP pedagogy started with the aim of addressing the needs of ESL/EFL learners to acquire academic literacy so that, they would be able to write well within their various disciplines. Ramirez (2015), however pointed out that this approach offered little explanation about how words were put together to form sentences and why they were combined to form the sentences. As a result, this approach to EAP pedagogy could not help ESL/EFL learners to achieve academic literacy.

The initial approach of focus on lexis and grammar to the solution of the English language skills needed by these ESL/EFL learners could not address their needs to enable them cope with the requirement of their academic work especially the aspect of writing academic studys. Kaplan (1966), after a careful study of the essays of his ESL/EFL students points out that “Foreign students (ESL/EFL learners) who have mastered syntactic structures have still demonstrated inability to compose adequate themes, term studys, theses and dissertations. Instructors have written on Foreign student studys such comment as: “the material is all here but it seems somehow out of focus” or “lacks organization” or “lacks cohesion”. These comments by instructors show the challenges of ESL/EFL writers in writing texts that meet the standards of what their academic programmes require of them at the university level. ESL/EFL student’s studys according to Kaplan (1966) were out of focus because the learners were employing rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violated the expectations of native English

(Anglo-American) reader. He attributed this to the failure of the existing pedagogical approach to the teaching of EAP and ESL/EFL writing. Text construction in English has a rhetorical pattern that it follows. ESL/EFL writers therefore, face difficulties in composing texts that conform to the rhetorical conventions of English. In addition to this, each genre has a unique organization and ESL/EFL learners have to be aware of this.

EAP research and EAP pedagogy began to shift from a focus on grammar to rhetoric and discourse analysis after Kaplan (1966)’s landmark study. It should be pointed out that the shift from focus on grammar and registers to rhetoric happened in EAP pedagogy as a result of the initial study conducted by Kaplan (1966) who discovered that the reason why ESL/EFL student’s writing was different from Anglo-American English writing was because they were using the rhetorical strategies of their first language. The shift in EAP research is acknowledged in the literature. The 2002 years in an analysis of ESP research, indicated that ESP research shifted towards text/discourse analysis. Johns (2013) also indicates that, through a number of research studys, ESP instruction shifted from a focus on grammar to rhetoric.

Kaplan’s discovery in 1966 about differences in rhetorical conventions directed attention to the teaching of academic literacy skills in EAP pedagogy using rhetorical approach. Academic writing skills are a necessary part of EAP programmes because pursuing an academic programme at every institution of higher learning that gives instruction in English requires learners to write academic studys in various forms ranging from essays, term studys, dissertations and thesis as part of their study requirements. Learners, therefore have to learn how to write these academic studys. The discovery by Kaplan (1967) which he called contrastive rhetoric, now known as Intercultural Rhetoric (IR) marks the beginning of a focus on rhetoric in teaching academic writing skills in EAP pedagogy and has contributed greatly to the teaching of academic writing skills.

### **IR RESEARCH AND EAP PEDAGOGY**

Tracing the contribution of IR to EAP writing pedagogy is not a difficult task. This is because IR has been hailed and used by EAP practitioners from different parts of the world. Connor (2008) points out that the first study conducted by Kaplan in (1966) was novel because of a few reasons. The first reason is that EAP and ESL/EFL instructors at the time had not thought much about writing. The general notion at the time was that once ESL/EFL learners are able to construct well-formed sentences using appropriate registers, then they would be

able to write. For this reason, the focus of teaching writing ESL/EFL pedagogy as a whole was on clausal level and not at the level of discourse. Moreover, writing was thought of as a gift and not a skill that could be thought. The focus of IR on ESL/EFL writing and specifically on EAP writing pedagogy was therefore, new and promising for the teaching of EAP writing.

As a result of the innovative nature of the initial study that herald the field of IR research, it became an area of study that other EAP practitioners have found useful. Intercultural rhetoric researchers have discovered various ways in which ESL/EFL writings from different cultural backgrounds differ from Anglo-American writing. Intercultural rhetoric studies have confirmed that English expository writings begin from general to specific while Japan ESL writings as well as writings in Japanese begin from specific to general. English writings generally start from general by stating the broad idea and then progressing to specific details while Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Thai expository writings delay the statement of the topic (Fathman and Kobayashi, 1984; Hinds, 1990). These findings re-echo the conclusion by Kaplan (1966) that English expository paragraph is linear by structure. In addition, Kamimura and Oi (1996) confirm the difference between American student's writing and that of Japanese students, pointing out that American students writing start from general to specific while Japanese student's writing begin with details and the topic is delayed.

Some IR studies have been conducted by comparing the writing of Finnish writers writing in English with those of Anglo-American writers. Ventola and Mauranen (1991) compared the study of Finnish scientists written in English with the study written by Anglo-American writers and found out that Finnish writers scarcely use connectors as compared to Anglo-American writers. Mauranen (1993) discovered that Finnish writers delay the statement of their main idea. Connor *et al.* (1995) confirm the findings by Mauranen (1993) in their study of grant proposals written by Finnish writers.

Intercultural rhetoric studies have been conducted to establish Arabic-English contrast in rhetorical patterns. Hatim (1997) points out differences between argumentation in Arabic and that of English. Hatim (1997) establishes that argumentation in Arabic is characterized by supporting the thesis and substantiating it. English argumentation on the other hand is based on opposing the thesis and offering a counterclaim. Hottel-Burkhart (2000) also confirms differences in argumentation between Arabic and English and concluded that what is considered an argument in one context is shaped by the broad linguistic culture of the people. Differences have

also been found between Chinese and English rhetorical styles by some IR studies. Li (1996) found that in narratives, teachers in the US, value logic and good introductions as good writing. On the other hand, teachers in China value sentiments and moral messages as good writings. Scollon and Scollon (1997) discovered that quotations are not clearly attributed in Chinese newspaper reports as opposed to a clear attribution of authorship in Western newspaper reports. Yunxia (1997) in an analysis of sales letters found out that Chinese discourse is circular as opposed to the linear structure of English discourse. Gao (2012) also reports that Chinese graduate students studying in America initially find their studies unacceptable to the writing centre assistants because they tend to write in a non-linear and complicated way which is the Chinese rhetorical expectation.

Intercultural rhetoric research started with student's essays and has expanded to the analysis of professional genres. As part of the expansion of IR research, Swales (1990)'s genre analysis has been used by IR researchers to establish how ESL/EFL writings in specific genres differ from that of Anglo-American English writing. Examples of genres that have been analyzed across different cultures are research studies, business letters, grant proposals and job application letters (Connor and Mauranen, 1999; Golebiowski, 1998; Yli-Jokipii, 1996).

Since, the focus of IR research is to promote EAP writing pedagogy, IR researchers therefore propose various instructional guidelines that should be adopted in EAP writing instruction to enable ESL/EFL students acquired the rhetorical conventions of English. The guidelines proposed support explicit teaching of English rhetorical norms to ESL/EFL learners. The various guidelines suggested could be grouped into three categories. These three categories are things that ESL/EFL students should be told so that, they would be aware of about the conventions of English rhetoric, what the students should be exposed to for them to see about conventions of English rhetoric and things that the students should be asked to do for them to master the conventions of English rhetoric.

The first category of instructional guideline suggested by IR researchers is the creation of awareness about Anglo-American English rhetorical conventions. In order to help ESL/EFL students acquire the conventions of English rhetoric, some IR researchers recommend that ESL/EFL students are made aware of certain issues about writing in English. Kaplan (1972) suggests that, ESL students should be made aware of the cultural differences in how texts are composed cultural differences in the expectations of audience and cultural differences in world

knowledge and technical knowledge. Reid (1989), suggests that ESL/EFL instructors should discuss rhetorical differences between English academic prose and ESL/EFL student's first language prose. Reid (1996) recommends that the native-speaking reader's expectations of the second sentence following a topic sentence should be discussed with ESL/EFL students.

The second category of instructional guideline suggested by IR researchers is to give ESL/EFL learners authentic English passages to study as sample. Apart from creating awareness about English rhetoric through discussions, IR researchers recommend that ESL/EFL students are exposed to samples of ideal English rhetoric for them to get acquainted with the conventions of English rhetoric. Grabe and Kaplan (1989) recommend that ESL students should be given authentic English texts for them to identify the topic sentences. Reid (1984) suggests that ESL students should be asked to examine the formats of various academic assignments and pay attention to lexical and morphological structures of edited texts.

The third category of guidelines is the activities or tasks that ESL/EFL learners should be given in the writing class. It is suggested that ESL/EFL students do exercises that would help them acquire the conventions of English rhetorical patterns. Kaplan (1966, 1967, 1972) recommends some pedagogical devices for teaching rhetorical structure of English to ESL students. He recommends devices such as giving students scrambled paragraphs to rearrange, giving students carefully written topic sentences for them to supply the details asking students to fill in missing sentences and asking students to do controlled exercises. Reid (1984) recommends that students are asked to make outlines of various points to be developed.

#### **APPLICATION OF IR IN EAP INSTRUCTION**

EAP practitioners have praised the analysis of texts from various genres as a laudable contribution to EAP pedagogy. Strevens (1988) points out that EAP pedagogy is directed toward the specific language to the discipline of the learner and EAP research should focus on the description of the target language. This is exactly the research focus of IR studies as a field that supports EAP pedagogy. Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) acknowledge that rhetorical and pragmatic analyses of texts are useful to EAP pedagogy.

Analysis of specific genres in IR research benefits EAP pedagogy in two main ways. It benefits both the learners and the instructors of EAP courses. Intercultural rhetoric analysis provides instructors with great insights

into the target texts that are analyzed. It also directs instructors to the approaches or specific activities that they can adopt in the teaching of ESL/EFL learners in various disciplines. Genre analytical studies that compare texts from Anglo-American backgrounds and other cultures tend to show how texts from Anglo-American backgrounds differ from texts from the other cultures. This helps EAP instructors to appreciate the difficulties of their learners and it exposes them to the areas that they need to emphasize to help their students overcome their difficulties.

The research findings of IR studies which expose the differences and similarities between Anglo-American rhetorical conventions and those of other cultures serve as a guide for EAP instructors to adopt activities that can help their learners to acquire the rhetorical styles they need to improve on their writing. Analysis of texts from various genres also helps to expose learners to the best way to structure various texts. For example, how to structure an essay differs from how to structure a term study and how to structure a term study also differs from how to structure a research proposal within disciplines and across disciplines.

The recommendations by IR researchers to raise the consciousness of learners about the rhetorical conventions of specific genres has been adopted by EAP instructors. Hyland (2006) suggest ways of raising the consciousness of learners. One of such ways is to pick samples of the target discourse and expose it to learners in a practice known as "Rhetorical Consciousness Raising". Another way is to compare texts from different genres to identify the differences and similarities. Johns (2013) also suggests a form of consciousness raising referred to as "socioliterate approach". This is the exposure to discourse from different social contexts. Some other EAP practitioners have also emphasized the importance of creating awareness about language use in different genres as part of EAP pedagogy (Liyanage and Birch, 2001; Shing and Sim, 2011).

EAP instruction has benefited greatly from IR research about the specific activities that ESL/EFL learners should be exposed to in order to help them acquire Anglo-American rhetorical conventions. Hyland (2006) refers to these activities as "Scaffolding" activities "rooted by Vygotsky (1978)'s idea". The various activities suggested by IR studies such as writing an outline asking learners to arrange scramble sentences and developing given topic sentences into paragraphs provide instructors supported learning activities. In this way, these activities fit within Vygotsky's idea of facilitating learning by interacting with experienced others. In this case, the EAP instructors serve as the experienced others who interact

with the learners in carrying out the activities to improve on the performance of the learners. Ibrahim and Nambiar (2012) report that IR approaches have been used as scaffolding and have been successful in teaching ESL/EFL post graduate students academic writing.

The use of authentic text in EAP instruction is a recommendation offered by IR researchers. The use of authentic text for instruction in EAP pedagogy is highly endorsed and has become a practice in teaching writing and academic literacy. Carver (1983) states that one of the characteristics of EAP courses is that authentic materials are used for instruction. Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) observe that one of the characteristics of EAP programmes is that the materials used are authentic texts.

Several EAP instructors have reported the impact of IR approaches on ESL/EFL learner's writing. Xing *et al.* (2008) report improvement in the writing skills of Chinese students who were made aware of the expectations of native speaker audience. Walker (2006) also indicates improvement in the writing of Korean students following the use of IR writing instructions. Walker (2011) points out that IR instruction has been successful in the ESL/EFL writing class. Casanave (2004) demonstrates how IR pedagogical approaches have enhanced ESL/EFL instructor's awareness about differences in rhetorical conventions across cultures. Connor and Traversa (2014) report that there are promising results from the use of IR writing instructions that adopted IR pedagogical devices.

### CONCLUSION

The goal of IR in helping both teachers and students in addressing the writing difficulties of ESL/EFL students has not changed. The efforts of IR researchers in achieving this goal has expanded to include studying professional genres composed in ESL/EFL settings by comparing them to similar genres composed in Anglo-American English settings to find out the similarities and differences across cultures. The goal of these studies continue to be that of helping instructors, ESL/EFL students and professionals in ESL/EFL settings around the world to identify how professional genres composed in ESL/EFL settings vary from those composed in Anglo-American English settings. Intercultural rhetoric studies have had great impact on the teaching of academic writing to ESL/EFL learners. EAP is taught in universities and colleges that offer instruction in English in ESL/EFL countries as well as native English speaking countries where ESL/EFL learners receive instruction in English. In all these settings, IR approaches are used in instructing the learners to acquire academic literacy skills.

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