Rhetorical Preferences of Caribbean University Students: An Empirical Study

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Since the pioneering work of Kaplan (1966) and Connor (1996), teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL) have had access to an expanding corpus of study that has proved invaluable for understanding the rhetorical preferences and strategies of non-native English speakers. There has been a relative dearth, however, of rigorous research regarding how native English speakers from nations other than the United States, Great Britain, and Canada approach academic writing. The present study examines the rhetorical choices made by a group of US university students from English-dominant Caribbean nations and demonstrates that these students appear to use culturally-determined approaches to argumentative and persuasive writing differently than those used by native-born American college students. Specifically, the Caribbean students tended to either use inductive rhetorical structures in their arguments or refused to use an argumentative structure altogether for reasons having to do with their perceptions of the relationship between writer and reader. The results of the study are discussed both in terms of what they offer ESL practitioners and what they suggest for future research.

Since the pioneering work of Robert Kaplan in 1966, there has been a great deal of interest in writing behavior and writing pedagogy as it applies to students from different cultural groups. While his notion of "contrastive rhetoric" has been criticized for favoring a more-or-less static view of "difference," Kaplan (1966) and Connors (1996) have created an interest in intercultural rhetoric that, fortunately, informs both English as a Second Language (ESL) and composition pedagogy. Many colleges and universities, thus, now offer English for Specific Purposes courses to provide scaffolding for international students in their writing courses. Such courses allow students to gain an understanding of various academic genres and provide a way for international university students studying in the United States, Britain, and Canada to learn the explicit conventions of college-level writing (Hyon, 1996; Johns, 1997).

While such courses certainly assist non-native English speakers in acquiring an understanding of the conventions of academic writing, an area conspicuous in its scarcity involves differences in writing behaviors and rhetorical strategies used by different groups of native English speakers. It is not that such research does not exist. Wolfram and Whiteman (1971) found dialect "interference" in the writing of African American students. Farr and Daniels (1986) called upon writing teachers to be both cognizant of and sympathetic toward the impact of dialect differences on the English composition performance of students from different dialect communities. Ball (1996) suggested that the organization of expository discourse is affected by cultural preference and years of schooling and that preference for organizational patterns can be viewed as an obstacle to, or as a resource in, successful literacy-related experiences. Norment (1995) studied the "typical" errors African American students made in college composition courses. What is lacking, however, seems to be a more explicit and systematic study of the rhetorical approaches and writing strategies used by students from

places such as the English-speaking Caribbean and how the experiences and education of these students might impact the way they approach academic writing.

Teachers of First-Year Composition (FYC) and ESL sometimes tend to treat the rhetorical strategies of native-English speaking students as identical and, indeed, informed by similar cultural constructs. While Norment (1995) examined some of these issues, his analyses were more concerned with dialect than they were with culture. It seems that, on many college campuses, writing faculty often see students from primary English-speaking nations as more similar than different. In the words of Bennett (2002), we perceive students from the US, Canada, Britain, the Caribbean, Australia, and New Zealand as occupying the same "anglosphere" when it comes to their organizational and rhetorical strategies. At Cameron University (the site of the present study), for example, writing faculty tend to dismiss some of the difficulties evidenced by students from our Caribbean population as stemming from educational deficiencies as opposed to being rooted in cultural differences. Many of my FYC colleagues tend to believe that, because students from nations as diverse as the US, Jamaica, and South Africa all learned English as their primary language, their approaches to persuasion and argumentation will be identical. Any deviation is often explained away as resulting from differing qualities of secondary education experiences or by simple failure to follow rather prescriptive notions of argumentative organization. A simplistic view of cultural impact is adopted even as analyses of literary works from Anglophone nations show differences in the literary corpora produced by writers from these various countries (e.g., Donnell, 2006).

The present study seeks to examine some of these notions in a study of the rhetorical strategies of a group of students from English-dominant Caribbean nations studying at a small public university in Oklahoma. Their approaches to organizing persuasive essays were compared to those of a similar group of native-English speakers born and educated in Texas and Oklahoma. Focus group interviews were also conducted to gather information on the respective perceptions of the two groups when it comes to how they approach persuasive or argumentative writing assignments.

The University

Cameron University is a small (6,000 student) university in Lawton, Oklahoma. Over 250 of these students are from other countries, with the majority of them coming from English-dominant nations in the Caribbean (Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, Grenada). Whatever their country of origin, students at Cameron University are required to take freshman courses, the level of which depends upon scores on the ACT, other standardized tests, or our own in-house writing proficiency exams. Students are placed in one of several courses depending upon test scores and identified needs:

(1) Basic Composition Skills (a course that provides sentence-level instruction)
(2) Developmental Writing
(3) English for Academic Purposes (limited to non-native English speakers)
(4) Freshman Composition I
(5) Freshman Composition II

The Sample

Twenty students comprised the entire research sample. Of the 20 students in the sample, 10 students were from English-dominant Caribbean nations. Of the 10 students, 9 were female and the group had a mean age of 23.6 years. The nations represented were Trinidad and Tobago (2), Grenada (1), St. Kitts (2), Jamaica (1), St. Lucia (3), and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (1). All had completed Freshman Composition I within the previous six months and all had been in one or both of the lower-level writing courses. Ten students from Oklahoma and Texas also volunteered for the study. Of this sample, six were female. This group had a mean age of 21.8 years. As with the Caribbean students, all had completed Freshman Composition I within the past six months and all had completed one or both of the lower-level writing courses.

The groups were constituted in this fashion in order to hold a few variables constant, the most important of which was writing proficiency. By limiting the participants to those who were initially placed in a lower-level writing course before taking Freshman Composition I, the level of proficiency was held more-or-less constant and any differences seen between the two groups could not be said to occur solely as a result of differences in proficiency that existed prior to the study or to differences in educational background. Admittedly, while it would have been ideal to have studied two groups composed of equal numbers of men and women, women were the majority of both groups. The Caribbean students were of a higher average age because 7 of the 10 subjects waited one or two years between secondary school and coming to Cameron University.

Method

All subjects in both the Caribbean and the native-born American groups were given the following writing prompt:

> Some people like living alone. Others prefer to live with friends, family, or someone they are romantically involved with. In a well-crafted essay, tell whether you prefer living alone or with someone. Support your choice with examples.

The prompt was written in this way for a number of reasons. First, it was accessible to all participants. No background research needed to be performed as all the participants in the study had either lived in both sorts of arrangements or, at least, knew people who had lived alone or with family. Second, the word “preference” instructed the participants to choose a side and, thus, the prompt suggested persuasion or argumentation. Last, asking participants to support their choice with examples suggested a way to organize their writing. Participants were given 30 minutes to compose the essay.

The completed essays were analyzed to determine whether a participant used a deductive or an inductive organizational strategy. A deductive strategy was defined as one in which the writer began by stating his or her choice (i.e., his or her claim) and following this claim with supporting reasons or examples. An inductive strategy was defined as one in which the writer presented examples and support before the choice was made. Two researchers analyzed each

essay to determine the strategy used and, if there was no agreement, the essay was to be read and analyzed by a third reader.

Additionally, the essays written by Caribbean students were analyzed for differences in dialect. Both *The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (1996) as well as the grammatical features described by Aceto (2006) were used as reference guides for words, phrases, or syntactical structures that were unfamiliar to the researchers. Again, two researchers had to agree on the use of a particular phrase or word or agree that an observed grammatical feature was representative of "Caribbean English."

Two weeks after the essays were completed, the two groups convened (separately) for hour-long focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The following interview protocol was used:

(1) Describe your high school or secondary school English classes. How did your teachers approach writing instruction?
(2) What did your education tell you was most important in writing?
(3) What is argumentation?
(4) What is the best way to persuade someone?
(5) How do you view your audience?
(6) What do you think your audience wants when they read what you have written?
(7) Do you worry about offending people when you express your opinion?
(8) How does persuasive writing in your country differ from the way people write in other parts of the world?
(9) How do you appeal to a skeptical reader?
(10) What do you think college writing courses should do?

Because of the nature of the focus group method, discussions were essentially loosely-structured and evolved over the course of 60 minutes. The protocol, however, ensured that some common information would be collected between the two groups. The responses were compiled and recorded by two researchers.

Results

Rhetorical Organization

Rhetorical organization (e.g., deductive, inductive) is defined as where these students placed their thesis statements. The results of the comparison are shown in Table 1.

Lyons' (2003) definitions of "thesis," deductive, and inductive reasoning were used in the analysis of the essays.

- Thesis Statement: A thesis statement is the basic stand one takes, the opinion one expresses, the point one makes about one's limited subject; it is one's controlling idea, tying together and giving direction to all other separate elements in ones' paper.
- Deductive Organization: Thesis presented at beginning of essay, followed by supporting details and conclusion.
- Inductive Organization: Examples and details presented first, followed by thesis in final paragraph.

- None of the above: Includes essays that presented an implied thesis statement, which means that examples and details supporting one side of an argument are presented, with no explicit thesis either at the beginning or in the end; also includes essays that were off-task (e.g., about a different subject altogether than the one presented in the prompt or essays that did not take a particular point-of-view or side as described in the prompt).

Thus, while the vast majority of US subjects employed a deductive strategy in their writing (thesis statement or claim at the beginning of the essay), only one of the Caribbean students followed this strategy. The Caribbean students either favored an inductive strategy, presenting supporting reasons (often reasons that supported both choices) first and ending with a claim or, as in three of the cases, choosing to write more of a "comparison and contrast" essay rather than a persuasive one. Typical examples of the Caribbean subjects' writing include the following two excerpts:

Example 1. *First paragraph*. "There are many people who love living alone, while some feel more comfortable living with others. Both have its advantages and disadvantages. However, the writer will try to focus on the benefits of both. Some of the benefits of living with someone else are financial support, kinship, and emotional support. If you live alone, however, you have more freedom to do as one pleases."

Example 1. *Conclusion.* "And, so, while people differ, my reader can see that the advantages of living alone are many and numerous" (*Female, St. Kitts, sophomore, 21 years old, claim at end of essay).*

Example 2. *First paragraph*. "In everyone's life, choices are made. They can be as simple as what to eat or as complicated as the kind of woman to marry. The choice of whether to live alone or with a roommate is one that does not seem very complicated to some but, for others, it may be the most important decision they have made so far in their life. If you are in college, this decision will effect the four years that you are there. It can decide how you spend money and who your friends might be. It is important to consider how to live so that you make the best choice."

Example 2. *Conclusion*. "Do what makes you happy. Know yourself. Find the best living situation for yourself" (*Male, 22 years old, Barbados, sophomore, no claim).*

The students from Oklahoma and Texas, however, tended to approach the writing assignment in a fashion similar to the following:

Example 1. *First paragraph.* "Some college students enjoy the freedom of being out of their parents' house and being on their own. Others find that college can be lonely. They are away from familiar things. Personally, I enjoy living alone as I can do whatever I want whenever I want" *(Male, 20 years old, Vernon, TX, claim in first paragraph).*

Dialect "Interference" and Error Analysis

No instances of Caribbean "slang" were seen in the essays written by the Caribbean sample. Grammatical errors seemed to follow no discernable "cultural" pattern (Aceto, 2006). In other words, there were no regular patterns of deviation from the rules of standard written

Table 1.

Organization	U.S. Subjects	Caribbean Subjects
Deductive	9	1
Inductive	1	6
Neither	0	3

English in the essays produced by the Caribbean students. Both researchers assessed the errors found in the papers of both the Caribbean and the US sample. Fragments, run-ons, misspelled words, and comma splices were found in both samples and there seemed to be no apparent differences in their incidence. In many ways, both groups seemed more or less "typical" in the errors they produced (Connors & Lunsford, 1988).

Focus Group Results

Focus group transcripts were evaluated using a modification of the "long table" method described by Krueger and Casey (2000). The transcripts were read by two researchers and each researcher marked and highlighted those portions of the transcripts that suggested emergent themes. These emergent themes are described as statements made by the participants that suggest some important "underlying meaning." For example, if one of the American participants made a statement about "winning an argument," the researcher might highlight the remark and suggest that the remark has to do with the "goals of persuasion." Again, if both researchers could not agree on the "meaning" of a particular highlighted statement, that statement did not become part of the analysis. The major emergent themes, then, that came out of the focus groups were as follows:

(1) Previous writing instruction: Both samples described very similar experiences in previous writing instruction. Both groups described writing essays ("themes") as early as 6th grade and both samples described being assigned explicitly argumentative and persuasive writing in high school (American) or secondary school (Caribbean).
(2) Persuasion: American students saw persuasion as having more to do with logic and "forcefulness" (stating one's point clearly and without equivocation) than did the Caribbean students. The Caribbean students, on the other hand, saw persuasion as "getting the other person to see your point of view." Although both groups were able to discuss the necessity for a well-stated claim and warranted supporting reasons, American students saw the goal of persuasion as victory in a battle of ideas while the Caribbean students wanted, in the words of one, to "keep the dialogue going."
(3) Goal of writing: American students tended to see the goal of persuasive writing as just that—persuasion. Caribbean students, on the other hand, suggested that (for seven of them), "entertainment" was something they wanted to achieve with their writing, a phenomenon noted by Cooper (1993). For the sample of Caribbean students, the telling of a good story was as important as persuasion. Notably, all seven used personal narratives in their essays.
(4) Credibility: American students tended to believe that a credible writer is one who is consistent in the expression of his or her beliefs and who writes with a high degree

of confidence. The Caribbean students, on the other hand, believed that a credible writer was one who understood all points of view and was "polite." Indeed, the concept of "politeness" came up several times during the Caribbean focus group but not at all with the American students. A 20-year old female, for example, stated, "You cannot just tell someone they are wrong. You have to show them respect before you can disagree with them." A 22-year old female similarly suggested that simply stating one's opinion was "uncouth." For American students, "rightness" of opinion was expressed as being related to credibility. A 20-year old male student from Duncan, Oklahoma, for example, stated that, "If the facts are on your side, just use them."

(5) "Face" and politeness: Caribbean students were quite concerned with politeness in their writing, asserting that this is one of the hallmarks of education (Migg & Muhleisen, 2005). One student expressed this concern rather succinctly when she stated that, "I want to have a conversation with the reader. If I am too aggressive, the conversation is over." The creation of a more-or-less reserved persona on the part of the writer and a view of the reader as someone who expected a degree of reserve seemed most valuable to the Caribbean students. The American students had no such concerns except that all agreed that profanity had no place in academic writing.

Discussion

The present results are limited due to the size of the sample and the fact that the Caribbean sample was 90% female. Linguistic scholars such as Tannen (1997) and Johnstone (2008) suggest that women in the United States as well as in other countries are more likely to seek consensus in persuasive situations than are their male counterparts. It may be the case that the results of both the essay analyses and focus groups are influenced just as much by aspects of gender as they are by cultural factors. It is noteworthy, however, that the American women in the present study all stated that forcefulness and consistency were key to the persuasive act and, indeed, their essays did not seem to differ from those written by their American male counterparts. Still, a replication of the present study should involve more equal numbers of men and women in both groups. Another limitation of the present study is that the Caribbean students were, on the average, older and had spent some time in between secondary school and university studies. Future research should attempt to hold the age variables constant. Yet, what we can glean from this admittedly small study is that the Caribbean students tended to practice and value a more "performative" sort of writing that seems to subvert and transcend the limits of the persuasive genre, a phenomenon well-described in analyses of Caribbean literature (Cooper, 1993).

This apparent preference for a more aesthetically pleasing sort of writing is something well-documented in critical studies of Anglophone Caribbean literature. Both Cooper (1993) and Donnell (2006) and other scholars have noted this phenomenon. Indeed, Munro (2008) suggests that Caribbean writing in general features "aural elements," those literary devices that would seem to invite reading aloud. The rhythm of Caribbean writing seems to offer a greater opportunity for the reader to participate more fully in the enterprise of reading. Barrow and Ince (2008) suggest that this interest in the aesthetics of language in the English-speaking Caribbean is manifest in child-rearing practices throughout the region that would

seem to reinforce the efforts of young children to "speak like grown-ups." Additionally, politeness and "face-saving" as aspects of conversation are taught from a very young age and "rude talk" is explicitly discouraged (rude talk ranges from obvious instances such as profanity to more difficult-to-define behaviors such as not demonstrating proper deference).

What are the implications, then, of this study? Persuasion and argumentation are certainly understood differently by this group of native English speakers. These Caribbean students seem to place a greater value on aesthetic elements of persuasion, raising them to a place equal to (or even over) that of content. As this sample of students suggested that any type of writing has these performative elements, writing should be pleasing to the reader. If a piece of writing is not entertaining, it cannot persuade a reader as well as it might, according to this sample of Caribbean students. Yet, our own FYC program here at Cameron University (and the same is true of many universities) teaches a "stripped-down" version of argumentation (i.e., claim, supports, and warrant) as if all native English speakers similarly understand and make use of it. Knowing how Caribbean culture impacts the writing process for these students is invaluable in ESL curriculum design at American, British, and Canadian universities that welcome students from the Caribbean. Understanding that culture wields an influence that seems to subvert the conventions of the argumentative/persuasive genre as Composition faculty often understand these conventions can certainly enhance our pedagogical practices for these students.

Specifically, the results of the present study seem to support the adoption of a model used in Technical Writing and Business Writing courses used at many universities, including those courses offered here at Cameron University. Students are exposed to examples of specific genres composed by writers from different cultural groups. For instance, instead of teaching the genre of business letters as one that involves one rigidly-defined set of conventions, students are also exposed to letters composed by writers from "high-context" cultures in which the writers spend much time reminding the readers of the relationships they share. Such letters are necessarily longer than the rather brief and singularly-focused letters composed in Western business settings. Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2006) suggest that an understanding of factors such as "high or low context" is essential to cross-cultural communication and far more reflective of the "globalized" milieu students will enter after graduation. In the Freshman Composition class, as well, the teaching of genres such as argumentation as nomological and unchanging seems a disservice to students who will likely work and study in multi-cultural settings.

Still, the sample in the present study is far too small from which to draw many conclusions. Replications of the study here at Cameron University are planned for the 2009 Fall semester and it will be interesting to see if results consistent with the present study are obtained. Additionally, research into some of the other genres typically taught in freshman writing courses (e.g., exposition, process, comparison and contrast) are also planned as part of an ongoing research effort into the writing behaviors of international students.

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