

Making Sense of Materials: Negotiating the Global and the Local in L2 Writing Pedagogy

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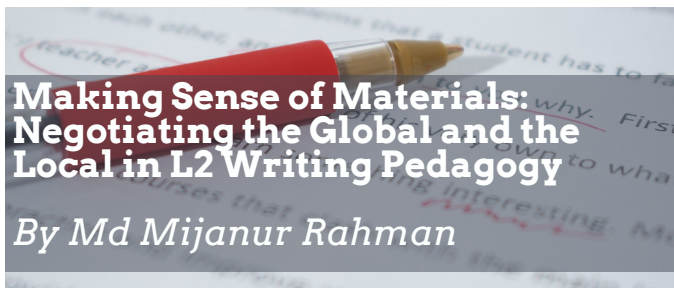
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Recommended Citation

Rahman, Md Mijanur () "Making Sense of Materials: Negotiating the Global and the Local in L2 Writing Pedagogy," *EnglishUSA Journal*: Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: https://surface.syr.edu/englishusa_journal/vol5/iss1/6

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that of Semitic language users as full of parallel constructions, that of Oriental writers as indirect, and that of Romance and Russian writers as full of digressions and tangential details (Kaplan, 1966).

During the last 50+ years, the scholars of second language writing and contrastive rhetoric problematized Kaplan's rather essentialist description of L2 writing styles, but one of the many statements that still stands out is that different cultures have different rhetorical tendencies in their writing, or writing is accomplished differently in different cultures (however one defines cultures) (see Atkinson, 2004; Connor, 2011). In second language writing classes, these cultural influences in writing, especially those coming from outside the U.S., have often been seen as deficiencies that instructors were supposed to correct with a goal to assimilate the L2 writers into the norms of the Western academic discourse communities.

But over time, this deficit approach to linguistic diversity in writing faced sustained criticisms, giving rise to what we call the linguistic turn in writing studies, or "translingualism". Translingualism is an approach to language difference that appreciates divergent language practices going beyond the difference as deficit notion. Translingual pedagogy also attempts to transform the phenomena of linguistic differences as a potential teaching moment for greater awareness about language, writing, audience, and the purpose for using the language in a certain way, instead of dismissing them as non-standard or bad (see Horner et al., 2011). Translingualism thus undercuts the ideologies of monolingualism and standard language, making space for both intralingual and interlingual variations in writing.

It should be kept in mind, however, that L2 writers' performance in writing can be

Abstract

This self-reflexive article traces the narrative an L2 writing instructor systematically investigating a pedagogical dilemma arising out of cross-cultural differences in writing. The instructor initially considered the differences a problem to overcome in every iteration of an ESP writing course in an EFL setting but later learned to utilize them as a resource to enhance student learning outcome for college level writers of English in a variety of contexts. Centering around the global and the local cultural tensions in instructional materials, the paper shows how a writing instructor can reconcile the seemingly irreconcilable cultural forces in writing genres by applying the principles of contrastive rhetoric, translingualism, and genre theories.

Contrastive rhetoric, L2 writing, & translingualism

In 1966, Robert B. Kaplan, an applied linguist, published an article titled "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-cultural Education", investigating how second language writers from around the world write, and how that compares with the mainstream writing practices in the U.S academic discourse communities. That article essentially started the field of second language writing, especially its contrastive rhetoric tradition, in the U.S. Kaplan (1966) argued, among many others, that "each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself" (p. 14) and characterized the typical English speakers' method of paragraph development as linear,

different for two reasons: 1. The difference might reflect their developing interlanguage system, which is always in transition as they make further progress in communicating effectively in the target language. 2. Many of these differences, however, can better be explained as a reflection of the writer's culturally preferred styles in writing and rhetoric. When Kaplan wrote about culturally variable writing practices, he meant this second category of difference.

While there have been a lot of developments like these in the L2 writing scholarships in the last few decades, not many L2 writing instructors receive training on L2 writing pedagogy even if they complete graduate degrees in ELT/TESOL, a scenario that has been recorded in many parts of the world (see Seloni & Henderson-Lee, 2019). The teaching gets further complicated when these writing instructors are required to use textbooks and materials produced for audiences in the mainstream native English-speaking countries like the U.S. The rhetorical preferences and writing styles in these materials reflect the globally dominant norms like those in the Western academic discourse communities, the norms that often come in direct conflict with the local writing conventions. As an L2 writing instructor at a university in Bangladesh, an EFL setting, I found myself in exactly the same position. This paper describes how I developed an extended action research project (in the form of a PhD dissertation) to address that dilemma, with a hope that transnational writing instructors like me will gain useful insights from this experience.

The pedagogical dilemma

In early part of my teaching career, I was teaching a course entitled "English for Professional Purposes" to native Bengali learners of L2 English, and I was required to use a textbook, *How to Write First-Class Business Correspondence: The Handbook for*

Business Writing (Baugh, Fryar, & Thomas, 1997/2007), which was written primarily for the U.S. audience. The text presented me with a series of challenges related to the linguistic differences in writing, especially writing business letters. Much of it had to do with the fact that the letter writing conventions put forward in the textbook came in conflict with many of the local conventions for writing letters in formal settings in Bangladesh. This became particularly prominent when I was teaching my students how to write letters of request in school settings, a type of letters the Bangladeshi students typically write to university administrators in Bangladesh for a range of purposes, including requesting a transcript, requesting permission to attend an exam without paying dues on time, requesting a testimonial or a studentship certificate, and so on. I wrote my fair share of these letters as a student myself and, as an academic coordinator in that institution, I also found myself on the receiving end on a daily basis.

For example, one key rhetorical difference I noticed among these letters lies in our addressing practice in schools, colleges, and universities. In Bangladesh, we address our professors and school administrators as Sir/Madam. But the textbook suggested we use Dear+Title+Last Name like:

Dear Ms. (Miss or Mrs.) Culver:

Dear Mr. Jacobs: (Baugh, Fryar, & Thomas, 1997/2007, p. 21)

The textbook, however, does mention that "Dear Sir" or "Dear Madam" can be used "if you do not know the name of the recipient, but you do know that you will be addressing a man or woman" (p. 21). As for the school letters, the students, however, do know the names of their addressees very well and the textbook tells me to address them as Dear+Title+Last name. But students' terms of address like "Dear Professor Karim" or "Dear Professor Islam" to the head of the department are not likely to have any positive reactions. As a writing instructor, I somehow told my students to address their

teachers and administrators as Dear Sir/Madam, which, in the textbook writers' eyes, would mean the letter is being addressed to a person whose name the student does not know, which is not true. I considered this an uncomfortable problem to overcome in every iteration of the course.

The pursuit of a PhD and changes in instructional circumstances

Entering a PhD program in English Studies with a focus on TESOL/Applied Linguistics at a university in the U.S. Midwest, I had to teach a variety of genre-based writing classes, including first-year-composition, writing in the academic disciplines, and written business communication courses, as part of the responsibilities for my doctoral teaching assistantship. Because I had the opportunity to choose almost any genre of writing in these classes, I started incorporating the genre of business letters in these courses and used materials from the same textbook (Baugh, Fryar, & Thomas, 1997/2007). This has to do with two things. First, the book provided lots of practical advice on how to write different genres, including letters, in business settings. Second, it was also written for the U.S. learners of business correspondences. Because the text's guidelines matched with the local practices, I didn't have to face, at least apparently, the trouble arising out of cross-cultural differences in writing and instructed students what they could do to address the readers of their letters.

On a personal level, though, it was not so easy, as I still experienced a kind of linguistic insecurity, which Meyerhoff (2006) explains as "speakers' feeling that the variety they use is somehow inferior, ugly, or bad" (p. 292). William Labov (2006) interprets the phenomenon of linguistic insecurity as a result of people's "[adopting] a standard of correctness which is imposed from without" (p. 318), and Denis Preston (2013) attributes it to

people's prejudice for what Lippi-Green (2012) called "standard language ideology", subscribing to the view that "an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language" exists and is desirable (p. 67). This linguistic insecurity was reflected in my variable practice in addressing my professors: I moved away from my local Bangladeshi practice of addressing my professors simply as "Sir/Madam" and generally addressed them as Dr+Last Name. But I experienced an addressing conundrum when I saw my peers addressing their professors simply by their first names. This insecurity was also creeping into my writing pedagogy that was initially characterized by an apparent erasure of my linguistically diverse self and allegiance to the standard language ideology, promoting the so called homogenous and normative mainstream American English variety.

However, I experienced a sea change in my attitude to language variations and linguistic diversity in my writing classrooms as I continued to take courses on sociolinguistics, language ideology, pragmatics, cross-cultural issues in TESOL, and became familiar with translanguaging or what has been called a linguistic turn, in composition studies (Horner et al., 2011). As my ideologies about language diversity changed, so did my understanding of why people write the way they write in different contexts and communities.

A dissertation project and a confluence of theories to investigate the pedagogical dilemma

As I developed my PhD dissertation project, I became familiar with a genre approach to understanding writing in disciplinary, professional, and civic life contexts (e.g., Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990). Traditionally defined as text types with distinct textual regularities, the term "genre" in the last three or more decades assumed new meanings as it came to be seen as social action (Miller, 1984)

and ways of being (Bazerman, 1997), promoting the understanding that genres of writing are more of an action than just words on the page. This is because the way we write reflects a lot on how we live our lives in specific settings, and that genres of writing both construct and reflect a community's norms, values, assumptions, and ways of life (e.g., Bazerman, 1997; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993). Genre conventions are not neutral or objective. They are rather value laden.

In addition, I drew on Austin's (1962) speech act theory in the context of letter writing, seeing letters as speech acts. According to Barton and Hall (1999), "letters have particular illocutionary force" as the participants in the written correspondence assume "some roles and identities" (p. 6) that go beyond the boundary of a simple writer and reader dichotomy. These assumed roles and identities affect how different parts of the letters are written, and these influences are particularly noticeable in three sections: salutations, bodies, and complimentary closes, which are culturally variable, reflecting the social power dynamics (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

The rhetorical and cultural variability of letters becomes all the more obvious if we consider letters as Face-Threatening Acts (FTA), requiring the use of specific politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1978/1987). Brown and Levinson's politeness theories posit that the degree of face-threat or its "weightiness" of a particular verbal (spoken or written) performance is determined by the measures of "social distance between speaker and hearer, the power that hearer has over speaker," and the degree to which the verbal interaction is considered "an act of imposition in that culture" (p. 76). This "weightiness" determines whether someone will do or not do the FTA and what kind of politeness strategies one will use.

Based on these theoretical perspectives, I

conducted a genre-specific contrastive rhetoric study of model business letters from a Bangladeshi school textbook, Grammar and Composition, and then some similar letters models from a U.S. handbook. I started my study with the two research questions: 1. *What values do the model business letters of request in the Bangladeshi and the U.S. school settings represent?* 2. *To what extent are those values cultural and/or colonial?*

For the actual analysis, I chose to focus on four different sections of the letters: reference or subject lines, salutations, bodies (especially their beginnings and endings), and complimentary closes, mainly because it is in these sections that one can find significant variability in conventions. During the analysis, I examined the genre conventions and textual differences, especially the lexico-grammatical choices made and the politeness strategies used to identify the potential value differences. This analysis helped me answer the first research question.

The findings show that the letter writing conventions in the Bangladeshi samples are significantly different from those in the U.S. in various ways, especially in the level and type of politeness strategies used, and their implication for social power dynamics. The analysis also shows that the Bangladeshi letters employ a higher form of politeness (e.g., negative politeness) through a humble, or rather, humiliated subject position of the writers, indirect speech acts, elaborate ritualized language, devotional vocabulary, depersonalized addressing practice (like Sir/Madam), polite pessimism, and acknowledgment of serious debts while also delaying the introduction of the requested action until the end. On the other hand, the U.S. letter models exhibit a far less polite way of making a request through letters by using direct speech acts, introducing the request mostly upfront, and using a personalized address that reduces the social distance

between interactants, which represents very little power differential between reader and writer.

Once I established these textual differences and the associated values, I answered the next research question: *To what extent are those values cultural and/or colonial?* by doing a historical sociolinguistic study based on letter data (e.g., Auer, Schreier & Watts, 2019) in the Bangladeshi context. For this I referred to what can be called some colonial antecedent genres: 1. begging letters or letters of supplication, “a quintessentially hierarchical form of address” that was used by the ordinary people to draw the attention of the colonial authority to everyday troubles during the British Raj in the Indian subcontinent (Raman, 2012, pp. 161-164); 2. Arzdashts, or arzi, a regular component of the letter writing practices during the Mughal empire (Raman, 2012; Zaidi, 2005); and 3. the daily correspondences of the British civil servants in India (Ashraf, 1995). To keep my historical sociolinguistic discussion current, I also examined the letter writing conventions in Bengali in a nationally prescribed textbook (Hassan, 2018). In these analyses, I compared the dominant genre conventions and their implication for the reader’s and writer’s social power dynamics to arrive at a conclusion that many of the present-day letter writing practices do come from the correspondence practices during the colonial period of Bangladesh’s history: both the British Raj and the Mughal empire before that.

Enhanced sense of materials and the value of action research

Through my PhD research, which I developed as a kind of action research in college settings, I developed a better understanding of the pedagogical materials I used in writing classes. I came to learn that a genre of writing is not just words on a page or a collection of textual regularities. The differences in word choice and genre conventions are not meaningless

either. Rather, these linguistic differences in writing do represent a cultural and often colonial baggage, which we need to make explicit to our second language writers so that they can make their own choice to write letters (or any other writing genre for that matter) in a way that reflects their own positionality. Instead of unilaterally dictating them what to do, we can help them develop a kind of L2 writing agency that scholars in second language writing have been advocating for some quite some time (e.g., Kubota & Lehner, 2004).

As a writing instructor and researcher from an EFL context, I did this project on business letters, but others can do it on a variety of other genres of writing, including CVs/resumes, paragraph development, and essay writing. I share this story with a hope that instructors like me can pave their own path forward by developing their own action research projects to negotiate the dilemma put forward by the pedagogical materials we see in L2 writing classes. The end result is that cultural differences in writing do not have to be a problem to overcome, but we can utilize these differences as a resource to enhance student learning outcome in all writing classes, including those involving the second language writers. That’s what the recent translingual approaches to teaching writing inspire us to do.

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