Many Souls, One Self: A Comparative Study of Multilingual Writing and Western Rhetoric

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Abstract

This essay investigates the connections between the experiences of multilingual students in L2 composition and the principal appeals of Western rhetoric. The purpose in doing so is to illustrate ways in which writers might be improved in the classroom with little to no expense to their specific ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Closer inspection of these connections suggests that in learning how to negotiate conformity to linguistic expectations and expression of self, educators can maintain the authenticity of student personas and still stimulate improvement and achievement in multilingual student writing.

"To know two languages is to possess a second soul."

Charlemagne

Introduction

At present, the realms of education— early, secondary, and collegiate— face an exigency to identify and uplift diversity. The globalized society of modern day makes the world boundlessly expansive and yet the distances between us grow seemingly closer by the day. As the world shifts at the macro-level towards transnational and transcultural collaborations, so too does it shift at the micro-level where the days of ordinary people are ever more frequently colored by interactions with those who come from different backgrounds than their own. This is a relatively new development that stands to be benefitted by compassionate and competent individuals, equipped to cooperate with others just as complex as themselves. To that effect, education can act as a vehicle, giving students the means to navigate a world of novel, complex, and highly interconnected pathways of communication. Correspondingly, the exigency to recognize diversity in the classroom is met with added vigor in the domains of multilingualism and, often by relation, multiethnic and multicultural learners.

The purpose of this investigation is to address a critical plight of a specific student population: multilingual learners. I will consider the combined needs of a teacher and a multilingual student regarding rhetoric and composition, the goal being to identify the ways in which the experiences of these students also reveal valuable and implicative insight for maximizing the student's capacity to communicate in their non-native language(s). It is important to note that this investigation looks at the experiences of those multilingual writers at a level of fluency in a foreign language that permits them to study in the collegiate setting in countries where the lingua franca, or common language, is not native to them. Ultimately, the paper fleshes out common conflicts for L2 students in their configuration of foreign language texts. I aim to accomplish this namely in considering the principles of Western rhetorical strategy and its relation to the writing and ethnolinguistic identities of multilingual students. In doing so, I will also reveal ways that educators

can be unresponsive to these conflicts but can learn to be less so with some repositioning of perspective.

Literature Review

Writing and writing in academia in particular are formidable feats for most. Writing requires a careful and deliberate utilization of language in its every manifestation, and to be able to decode all of the context and information to employ that utilization, there are systems of established knowledge in place for guidance. These systems of knowledge are governed by the concept of *rhetoric*. By the time that most L2 students, or students studying in a non-native language, reach college, they struggle not in discerning what to say as much as how to say it. L2 students are often completely equipped to express themselves fully and adequately in their native languages but struggle with articulating those expressions to the same extent and with the same depth in a foreign language. This issue may be understood more thoroughly as two issues in actuality, the first being degree of fluency and the second, the focus of this investigation, being difference in rhetorical standard. Up until the mid-twentieth century, this type of conflict for multilingual learners went unnoticed and unexplained. Today, it is recognized as a distinguishable construct in composition and linguistic studies termed *contrastive rhetoric*. The linguists Robert Kaplan and Ulla Connor are the leading figures of this subject and therefore offer necessitous insight into its relevance and impact in the other periphery studies of this investigation.

In 1966, Robert Kaplan published "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-cultural Education," a study which responded to a growing need to acknowledge that the teaching of reading and composition to L2 students differed from that of L1 students. Overall, the work posits the concept of contrastive rhetoric as a legitimate topic of study, addressing the fact that standards for literacy, rhetoric, and composition are not uniform across all cultures. Further, L2 students are influenced by their native cultures and language, which have their own conceptions of effective writing and communication that may or may not deviate from the Western standard. It is important to note that Kaplan's study leads from a Westernized perspective, and this investigation will also develop from this perspective as a precedent. I defend this choice to use the Western standard as a point of departure from which to compare other rhetorical standards and linguistic traits as it arguably dominates expectation in American school systems, including at the collegiate level. However, this choice in no way reflects the efficacy of any one standard and instead aims to validate the effectiveness of them all within the global society. The findings of Kaplan's seminal study persist in setting a principle for contrastive rhetoric, but the extent of their applicability to teaching composition is contested by many (Leki 123). Amendments to Kaplan's initial claims have been explained and published by a number of scholars including Kaplan himself alongside Ulla Connor, another linguist who has since specialized in and pioneered the development of contrastive rhetoric in the teaching of L2 students. Connor takes on a more nuanced approach which compensates for the arguably ethnocentric, product-centric, and overly deterministic conclusions of Kaplan's original study and instead orients her research towards developing something of a universal rhetoric that stands to reflect improvement in the writing of all L2 students. Together, the two have taken important steps to establish a standard, which teachers of L2s can enforce to a more equitable degree. It is equally important, however, to consider that the typical learning communities for L2 students are shifting and expanding. Therefore, I look next to researchers Larry Selinker, Jack Chambers, and Ben Rafoth for a means by which to ground the conclusions of Kaplan and Connor more solidly at the side of their L1 counterparts.

Diversity takes on many faces in the world today and to define all the ways in which it reveals itself is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are certainly ways that we as educators can begin to understand the importance in reaching beyond the bounds of our own identities to meet those of our students. Because if the purpose of education is to foster proactive and well-rounded contributors to the global society, it starts first in meeting learners where they are and, most importantly, as they are. Today, that includes accepting that most American classrooms will see unprecedented levels of diversity, which means that all educators should approach the classroom with a foreknowledge of teaching to previously unconventional student populations like L2 students. While Kaplan and Connor do well to suggest that L2 students have a unique learner identity, scholars like Selinker, Chambers, and Rafoth refine the constructs of that identity by exploring the internal relationship between a student's L1 and L2. The linguist Larry Selinker, for example, puts forth in his paper "Interlanguage" that the grounding of an L2 student in language and communication is most often situated somewhere between the student's L1 and L2, creating an interlanguage. This interlanguage is formed as a sum of differences between the two languages but nonetheless presents similarly to some degree in most L2 students. For the students, conventions of both languages may arise as well as new concepts outside of either of the languages, suggesting that these students evidently construct a highly individualized identity (Selinker 214). On the note of further navigating the L2 identity, Jack Chambers explains in his essay "Sociolinguistic Theory" that language is variable by nature and, thus it is necessary to situate any person's use of language within social contexts. What that means for L2 students is that honing a foreign language becomes a complex but forgiving process, one that acknowledges that any language is just as rooted in orthodox usage as it is in irregular usage. Essentially, language is not static. Social context, in the form of a piece's interaction with others or an audience, will always impose a degree of influence on not only the product, but also the process. In considering the theories of Selinker and Chambers, another researcher, Ben Rafoth, offers practical strategies in pedagogy that can help all educators to interpret the needs of this student population in his book *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers.*

Moreover, the findings of each of these pieces will be analyzed in further detail adjacent to the work of Michel Meyer's *What is Rhetoric?.* I have chosen this book as a historical examination of the Western standard of rhetoric and intend to apply its defined tenets of rhetorical standard and the formation thereof to that of other cultures and to the research aforementioned. Further, I will use the connections I discern to devise some conclusive advice for educators that is theoretically informed but mostly attitudinal in application. That is to say that the guide seeks to meet educators at the fore of philosophy, approaching the teaching of L2 students with a certain mindset as opposed to a strict edict of pedagogical strategy.

Research and Discussion

Rhetoric may be defined as a calculated use of language and thought to achieve a certain persuaded outcome, all orchestrated by the author or orator. The central principles of constructing successful rhetoric can be condensed into five concepts: ethos, pathos, logos, telos, and kairos ("Aristotle's Rhetorical Situation"). I will address each of these concepts individually and in aspect to sociolinguistic research and accounts of L2 students from various sources.

Ethos

In the realm of rhetoric, ethos is the most representative of the author or orator. It is the extent of credibility that reflects back on the person who is presenting the rhetoric, and it is essential in establishing a relationship of trust or reliability between the rhetorician and their audience. Writers achieve an appeal to ethos by showcasing their knowledge of a subject and their ability to portray

that knowledge respectably. According to Meyer's, this condition likely emanates from Cicero's *De Oratore* which asserted that "the value of what is said depends on the value of who says it" (39). Essentially, the appeal revolves around the writer's identity. The conflict for educators of L2s is encouraging students to present themselves favorably within their writing without enforcing linguistic utilizations that may betray their authentic identities. Meyer offers this summation of the speaker as explained by Cicero: "The aim of the speaker, according to Roman rhetoric, is to be approved or at least be recognized in his position, by being seen to embody the human or humanistic values associated with *Romanitas*, such as courage or determination, wisdom or experience, mastery of the subject or elegance (eloquence) of style" (41). As a related example of this, in their collaborative study on transcultural writing patterns, Connor reflects on the findings of a previous study conducted by researchers Duszak (1994) and Golebiowski (1998) of Polish and English academic journal articles which indicated that "English texts used more direct, assertive, and positive positions" (499). This suggests that the language had significant implications for the article as a whole. The most striking feature of this conclusion is that the quality of the positions was changed, not the vocabulary, not the syntax. The very essence of the paper, the stance, was altered according to the language. In that regard, it is easy to see the gravity of this conclusion, and it is not hard to imagine how L2 students studying in foreign classrooms must negotiate their identities in order to establish sound argumentation. This is not to say that writers are wrong to initiate such alterations in their writing. Rather, it highlights the fact that when a person learns a language, they are predisposed to the culture of those languages. In aspect to the L2 student, the language itself has an identity that the student attempts to inhabit, creating a hybridized sense of self or interlanguage.

Pathos

Pathos is the rhetorical appeal to emotions and serves to secure the audience's investment in a persuasive attempt. Meyer looks to Plato as the initial pioneer of this strategy and argues that it dominated the majority of his works (14). More importantly, Meyer dissects and demarcates the basal attraction of pathos to an audience, explaining it as a skillful employment of ambiguity (16). Pathos relies on that which cannot be objectively applied and defined: passions and emotions. To that effect, writers stoke those emotions and the various meanings they can take on, leading to a self-affirming perspective on the part of the reader. It simply leaves room for the audience to jump or suspend belief in their own conclusions, generated from the gap and individual interpretation purported by subjectivity. On the other hand, it is for exactly that reason that L2 students are often met with compounded struggle in their approaches to Western rhetoric and English language composition. Ben Rafoth in his book targeted towards tutorial and writing center research as well as teaching English as a second language explains how linguistic features like idioms and collocations can stump L2 writers. Multilingual writers can sometimes struggle to understand and employ words with awareness to their implicit meanings because those meanings operate on cultural significance and subject specificity. In response to that struggle, Rafoth suggests that educators keep collocation dictionaries in the classroom (119). The necessity of resources like these is typically overlooked due to the fact that the implied meanings of words and phrases is not necessarily taught as much as they are absorbed from experience. As evidence of this, Rafoth presents some hallmark examples that native speakers do little to recognize the commonality and utility of: "*powerful computer* sounds fine to a native speaker of English, but *strong computer* sounds not quite right" (119). Would a reader not get the sense of the author's intended meaning? Sure, but still lies the problem…it "sounds not quite right," and that can be the difference between an L2 student successfully communicating their argument and even in communicating the meaning that they themselves intended.

Logos

The appeal to logos is a premeditated movement towards reasoning and style in rhetoric. According to Meyer, logos was intended by Aristotle to "impress or please the audience" with "reasoning and inferences" (20). That is, logos is an appeal to logic in that it requires authors to employ evidence and to present it in a way that makes sense. Studies in contrastive rhetoric have shown that the structuring of the evidence can be just as important as the evidence itself. Writing organization is a feature that often differs across cultures, due in large part to language. There is nothing to say that one structure for, say, an argumentative text is inherently correct; however, research does show that people of certain cultures will perceive the quality of an argument differently based primarily on its structure. In the video "Writing Across Borders," one student explains a key difference she had to confront in her own writing as an L2 student; she notes that American writing leads with the main point of the essay, while Ecuadorian writing delays the purpose for the essay (Wayne 5:54-7:28). This is an important point where teachers can meet with their students on the basis of their backgrounds. Unlike the idea of collocations and idioms mentioned prior, variations in organizational preference can be detected and rectified much more quickly. Again, this is not to say that any style of writing is objectively correct but to acknowledge that conforming to compositional tradition is but another aspect of inhabiting the language.

When a native speaker collaborates with a multilingual student to teach and improve writing, translating the cultural significance of a collocation can be hard for a native speaker to explain because the conventions of its use are internalized from experience and not instruction. Organizational preferences, on the other hand, are easier to diagnose because the idea of a certain essay structure is explicitly taught and conditioned, especially by educators. In this way, L2 students are forced to depart from not only the traditions of their language and culture but also even the knowledge systems within which they operate. In considering the Western premise of logos, for an L2 to compose in American tradition is to literally defy logic in a way. The question arises: How do educators teach L2 students to subscribe to Western expectation but still validate the identities of those students? Similar to the attention given to other manifestations of linguistic variation like dialect, educators must teach L2 students the expectations they should learn and imitate in order to achieve but also find spaces where the constructs of their ethnolinguistic identity can thrive as well.

Telos and *Kairos*

This connection between logos and organizational preference is also where educators can make room to consider two rhetorical aspects discussed less frequently: *telos* and *kairos* ("Aristotle's Rhetorical Situation"). Teaching a language's organizational preferences is essential in acclimating L2 students to the standard with which most of their intended audience is familiar. *Telos* embodies the purpose of the argument and *kairos* addresses the timing of the argument. In many ways, each stands to be undermined by a poor or illogical procession of details within an argument. In order to steer multilingual students to more successful attempts at writing in foreign language, educators can pose the constraints of a prompt in a more directive manner. Rafoth, in revealing a misconception about L2 students, distinguishes between error and mistake in language teaching where an error "is something learners say or write incorrectly and usually cannot recognize or repair on their own because they doesn't [*sic*] know the rule behind it", and a mistake "is something that they can both recognize and repair because they have learned the rule and can apply it" (106). So, educators are encouraged to approach from a position of individualized assessment, determining, first, which writing issues are recurrent and in need of address and, second, in what order they need to be addressed according to their severity.

Conclusion

Humans are specialized in both the breadth and depth of their abilities to communicate, so it is no surprise that language and conversation are inextricably linked to our identities. Humans vary in the languages they speak but are nonetheless defined by their capacity to participate and convene in community of which language and culture are integral parts. Indeed, as time would have it, the feats of human history have woven a vast web of connection that have made communication exceedingly complex but still exceedingly apt in realizing grander futures. The average classroom in the twenty-first-century world will include students of any of a number of backgrounds and in order to provide an adequate education, which they are all undeniably entitled to, it is necessary for educators to bring light to those differences in conflation with those of others. Educators can tend to and fulfill this calling by identifying the ways in which their students' backgrounds allow them to absorb knowledge academically, emotionally, and socially.

As has been explained, there are certainly points within the Western tradition of rhetoric where multilingual students commonly struggle to bridge the schism between the conventions of their L1 and L2. In looking at the pillars of Western rhetoric, the L2 student's move towards compositions that are conforming can often result in texts that are contradictory to the student's ethnolinguistic identity. Educators to L2 students can learn to validate and empower these identities when they encourage student self-awareness, thereby reconciling the complexity of their multilingual personas with the spaces where those personas can create effective discourse. Accepting that multilingual students neither fully incorporate nor are they fully aware of all the impositions of a language in their writing teaches educators to consider what the intricacies of a student's background can reveal about their writing deficits. This is a notion that can be extended to native and multilingual writers alike. As for other types of diversity, the essence of this lesson may still offer clarity: form student relationships that exceed both the student's and the teacher's self-knowledge, allowing both parties to establish collaborative and productive relationships positioned towards greater cultural knowledge and cooperation between all.

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