Indirectness: A Barrier to Overcome in Teaching Writing

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Kaplan (1966) identified "the existence of cultural variation as a factor" (p. 2) in written expression. When teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing, the relationship between language, thought, and culture needs to be explored in detail. No discussion about teaching EFL writing is complete without some consideration of this relationship. Cultural variation in the form of rhetorical differences should be a major concern for all EFL teachers, who must develop appropriate strategies to help learners with their writing skills.

When teaching EFL writing, teachers must understand rhetorical differences and their influence on learners' writing. Rhetorical differences exist and differ among languages and cultures. There is general agreement that "culture is really an integral part of the integration between language and thought" (Brown, 1994, p. 185). The rhetorical organization of a text tends to be culturally specific. In other words, rhetoric as a mode of thinking is culture specific (i.e., Confucian culture, Western culture). It reflects the culture of the people whose language embodies the culture, as suggested by the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (see Southworth & Daswani, 1974). The detrimental implication of rhetorical differences on EFL writing is that native language rhetorical patterns of thinking and writing cannot be ruled out in EFL writing (Strauch, 1997). EFL learners may employ rhetorical patterns and a sequence of thought which violates the expectations of the native English reader.

This can be illustrated with rhetorical patterns employed in English and Chinese. English rhetorical patterns value explicitness and directness, attaching great importance to the experience and voice of the individual. This Western view of the self leads to directness in writing and a topic is always closely supported by connected ideas expressed in direct language, including specific details, explanations, explications and exemplification, personal experiences, illustrations, and anecdotes. Chinese literary traditions, however, value indirectness owing to ancient Chinese or Confucian culture. In the Chinese culture, individuals desire to maintain social harmony or amiable relationships among members of a group, and too much self-expression is regarded as problematic or even socially harmful. To achieve social harmony and to avoid individualism, Chinese speakers express viewpoints in a roundabout way (Matalene, 1985; Wang, 2003). They

frequently and intentionally delay the real subject by referring to something else or by using suppositions before getting to the issue in question, and they often expect the audience to infer meanings instead of stating their views explicitly.

The primary challenge Chinese learners face when writing in English is the transfer of a variety of types of indirectness into English. They tend to support and argue their topics using an indirect approach (Hu, 1993; Wang, 1993), which is typically found in Oriental writing styles. Such organization "would strike the English reader as awkward and unnecessarily indirect" (Mu, 2002, p. 30). The research reported here focuses on the rhetorical differences in directness and indirectness between Chinese and English, derived from EFL writing samples collected from three groups of Chinese learners. Based on the analysis of the samples, strategies are suggested to help learners become conscious of English rhetorical conventions and overcome indirectness.

In remedying indirectness in Chinese EFL learners' writing, or in advocating the replacement of the traditional Chinese non-linear rhetorical pattern or other cultural rhetorical conventions in favor of the English linear pattern, I do not imply that the English pattern is superior. As Kaplan (1966) asserts, "the English rhetorical system is neither better nor worse than any other, but it is different" (p. 3). EFL learners of all cultural backgrounds need explicit guidelines for organizing their ideas in accordance with the common conventions of the English-speaking world so that they can perform better and maximize English readers' comprehension. Thus, teaching EFL writing should involve developing learners' competence with English rhetorical conventions.

Categories of Indirectness

A wealth of research focuses on rhetorical differences. Wang (2003) compared English and Chinese rhetorical differences by selecting 30 English argumentative texts from U.S. newspapers, written by native English speakers, and another 30 argumentative texts from English-language newspapers in China, written by native Chinese speakers. The results revealed that 87.5% of texts written by the native speakers were structurally direct and linear (i.e., claim + justification (facts) + conclusion) whereas nearly 50% of the texts written by the native Chinese speakers were indirect or non-linear (i.e., introduction + justification (suppositions) + claim (delayed thesis statement) + conclusion).

Others have observed that EFL learners organize their ideas in ways which present interpretive difficulties for native English speakers (Matalene, 1985; Mu, 2002). Scollon (1991) found that it was difficult for contemporary Chinese in Taiwan to directly express viewpoints in a thesis statement at the beginning of an article, though some language experts hold different ideas (see Edelsky, 1982; Kirkpatrick, 2000; Mohan & Lo, 1985).

The latter argue that EFL learners transfer positive writing abilities and strategies from their mother tongue to English, and that modern Chinese styles taught at school today favor a direct rather than indirect expressive mode.

However, in my experience, I feel that these rhetorical differences impede learners' writing ability. Having closely observed the English writing patterns of Chinese learners, I have found that they have a strong tendency toward indirectness. Over four successive academic years (2002-2006), I collected writing samples from three groups of learners in my classroom. Two groups, consisting of 33 undergraduates and 48 undergraduates respectively, had an intermediate level of English, and the third group consisted of 60 graduate learners with an upper-intermediate level of English. The learners had been trained in English writing competencies and had considerable knowledge of English orthography, lexicon, and syntax. The undergraduate learners had studied English for approximately seven years and the graduate learners for approximately 10 years. In spite of this, I found unmistakable evidence that they all employed indirectness to some degree in their writing. Every semester, the learners were required to write 10 compositions each. I analyzed these compositions for examples of indirectness and categorized them as follows.

Delaying Disclosure of the Topic

One way indirectness is manifest in the learners' writing is by delaying the disclosure of the topic. The writers may refer to traditions, history, or an authority before getting to the primary issue. They might also expect the audience to infer meaning instead of stating their views explicitly. Another type of delay is beginning with an introduction that is supposedly relevant to a topic but actually is not. These problems result from the lack of a thesis statement. The learners have little conception of formulating a thesis statement and placing it at the beginning of their writing. This type of indirectness is illustrated below, and represents the transfer of the Chinese rhetorical patterns into EFL writing. The assigned topic was why English is important to scientists. (Note: all examples are original and unmodified.)

> We live in a changing world which science and technology is developing very fast. The developing of science needs scientists from all over the world exchange their idea more and more frequently. However, the scientists come from different countries usually speak different languages. If there isn't a common language that can't be understood by everybody, they won't understand each other. On the other hand, we wish to know what others are doing and what experiences and knowledge and things we should learn to improve our work, so we must master the foreign language. However, there are countless languages in the world, we can't learn them all. Fortunately, there is a common language English. Most of the scientists of the world

> can speak and read and write English, most important academic journals are in English, and all the international academic meetings use English. If we master English, we can go to any corner of the world to exchange with the people without know their mother tongue. We can say we are holding one of the very powerful weapon of study science.

In this kind of writing, every aspect of the topic is implied. General statements about the significance of knowing English are made again and again. The development of the writing turns around the topic and a variety of tangential viewpoints are made, but the topic is never examined directly. The writing ends where it should have started. While this indirectness is linguistically possible in Chinese, the composition lacks the proper directness for the English rhetorical style.

Adopting Complex Thesis Statements

Indirectness stemming from complex thesis statements is another problem evident in the learners' writing. The learners tend to formulate a complex thesis statement with multiple subordinate ideas that confuse readers and lead the learner into emphasizing the subordinate ideas too much. Thesis statements such as the following were common in all three groups of writers. The assigned topic for the example was the importance of health and life. "Although money is important and necessary for a comfortable life, compared with other things, such as health and life, it means nothing." With this complex thesis statement, several ideas could be mistaken as the primary subject: (a) the importance of money, (b) health and life are more important than money, or (c) money means nothing. This type of indirectness reflects the Chinese habit of circular thinking before the topic is finally developed. The thesis does not focus directly on the topic.

Persistent Uses of Suppositions or Indirect Interpretation

In this category, two types of indirectness frequently occur. One is that the learner develops a topic by using suppositions instead of direct expressions or direct statements (e.g., *If you . . . , you will . . .* or *When you . . . , you must . . .*). Using suppositions instead of direct expressions causes the writing to be filled with examples, reminders, conjunctive adverbs such as *if* and *when*, and auxiliary verbs like *can*, *will*, and *must*. They feature the Chinese rhetorical style which expresses and explains a topic in a roundabout writing style or with indirect language.

As mentioned previously, individualism and self-expression are thought to be offensive and harmful in Chinese writing, and therefore, should be avoided. To sound modest and balanced, Chinese speakers tend to express their ideas in comparatively indirect language. As a result, they transfer this cultural convention into EFL writing. They support their thesis statements using suppositions in the form of unvaried main clauses with adverbial clauses of conditions, or with sentences containing auxiliary words such as *must*, *will*, and *can*. They do not state their ideas in direct language.

The other type of indirectness in this category is characterized by frequent use of set phrases, repeated assertions, use of well-known quotations, imitation of previous works, and borrowing of supporting materials from books rather than stating one's own argument. Although references to other sources are expected in English academic writing, this is done to support the writer's viewpoint. Chinese writers of English need to learn to clearly state their own ideas, views, or opinions together with referring to sources to give explanation, explication, and exemplification to the topic.

Arguing Through a Repeated Question-Answer Chain

In this type of indirectness, learners begin by asking a question rather than stating a topic and then raise one question after another without answering them. Although this is fitting and proper for the Chinese rhetorical style, it should be avoided in EFL writing. The following example on the topic of success illustrates this:

> What is success? Do we have a much sober recognition of it? Does having treasure mean success? Do different people have different views of success? What is your opinion? (A sample from a student in the postgraduate group).

In English writing, we use questions as a means of introducing a thesis statement to be answered, as is shown in this example: "We learn, as we say, by 'trial and error.' Why do we always say that? Why not 'trial and rightness' or 'trial and triumph'? The old phrase puts it that way because that is, in real life, the way it is done" (Wang, 2002, p. 135). However, Chinese EFL learners' uses of a series of discrete questions are to lure the audience to infer meanings of the topic. They are not intended to be answered openly and directly in the immediate developing sentences.

Alternative Uses of Different Writing Forms

This difficulty entails EFL learners employing different writing forms alternatively such as description, interpretation, and argumentative styles within a stretch of discourse (Sun, 1999). The following is an illustrative example from an assignment using cartoons as visual prompts and written by an undergraduate student:

> Here is a cartoon concerning praise. The picture shows a husband who is quite indifferent to his wife's winning medal and how his wife disappointed [description]. It reflects people are often reluctant to give others praise while we are eager to get it [interpretation]. In the picture, the husband even did not raise his eyes from a newspaper [another description]. . . .

The main problem of alternative uses of different writing forms is not that there is something wrong grammatically but there are problems in cohesion and coherence. Alternative uses of different writing forms cause the point of view to shift, disrupt the information flow, and result in indirectness. The learner should have put together all the

sentences describing the picture and those commenting on or interpreting this social phenomenon in order to keep the information sequence clear. Keeping the information sequence clear is a means of linking one part to another to be coherent.

Why Indirectness Occurs

An inclination for indirectness is evident in the students' writing and reveals their inability to construct rhetorical and organizational patterns appropriate in English, or possibly a tendency to forget these patterns when composing (see Barkaoui, 2007). This failure to use English rhetorical patterns may be partly due to the teachers' inadequate attention to these patterns in reading comprehension activities. EFL learners' awareness of English rhetorical patterns needs to be raised and reinforced. In China and other traditional educational contexts, language teachers have focused too much on teaching grammatical rules causing them to overlook how sentences are used in communicative acts. When teaching reading, teachers have paid too much attention to the explanation of language points and failed to help students analyze the cohesive and coherent connection between sentences or to develop and cultivate the learners' sense of English rhetorical patterns. Consequently, learners gain little scattered and vague knowledge about the conventions of the target language.

Thus, teachers should be aware that teaching EFL writing goes beyond teaching the basic aspects of a text (i.e., orthography, morphology, lexicon, and syntax). EFL learners need to be constantly trained regarding the rhetorical conventions of the English language. Teachers need to involve learners in developing strategies of "engagement and response to a community's discourses" as well as "how to structure their writing experiences according to the demands and constraints of target contexts" (Barkaoui, 2007, p. 38). They should be explicitly and consciously guided and instructed about why and how texts are organized and written the way they are.

This is an arduous task for two reasons. One is the predominance of a mother-tongue learning environment. The other is the lack of awareness of English rhetorical patterns due to learners' unwillingness to read extensively in English and master these rhetorical patterns. The two conspire to bring learners unconsciously and constantly back to the use of native rhetorical conventions whenever they write in English. Observing these categories of indirectness, and according to my classroom teaching experience, four strategies can be implemented to facilitate and enhance teaching learners to overcome indirectness in EFL writing.

Suggested Strategies for Remedying Indirectness in Classroom Instruction

Strategy One: The Development of English Rhetorical Awareness

Although learning rhetorical patterns in English seems a simple task, it is not easily acquired. Even advanced learners and professional language users tend to be indirect in their writing. To overcome the transfer of the native cultural and thinking modes into EFL writing, teachers must encourage learners to read both intensively and extensively in English. Learners should be required to pay special attention to native English speakers' ways of thinking and writing to promote an awareness of rhetoric conventions (e.g., topic organization, linear development, and writing conventions) (Hyland, 2002). This can be accomplished in several ways.

Familiarizing Learners With the Basic Unit of the English Rhetorical Pattern

To deepen learners' understanding of the English rhetorical structure, I begin with teaching them the basic unit of the English rhetorical pattern, the paragraph, through reading materials and asking them to identify thesis statements, supporting items, and restatements. The questions I often use are: What is the topic sentence of this paragraph? What are the supporting sentences? What is the conclusion? I then ask them to summarize the material in writing. The summary is a miniature version of the overall rhetorical pattern.

Identifying the English Rhetorical Structure in Texts

Following the previous step, I ask my students to identify the overall thesis statement, or central idea, and text organization in professionally written English texts. This involves training learners to recognize where the topic is introduced, distinguish the main body of the text where views and opinions are expounded upon, and identify the restatement or conclusion. Supporting items constitute the body of the writing and usually consist of a series of paragraphs, the first sentence of which is often a sort of minor thesis statement. I ask my students to list or paraphrase major supporting items used to prove the thesis statement. In doing so, they can further understand how each part is linked together to form a coherent whole regarding a particular topic. For instance, I discuss a text using these questions: What is the central idea of this text and how is it introduced? How does the writer organize the following paragraphs to support the central ideas and how many parts are there? What is the conclusion? The answers to these questions form the mainframe of the rhetorical structure.

I also share with my students a simplified motto about the fundamental English rhetorical pattern that they can follow when analyzing texts and writing their own texts. "Tell'em what you're gonna tell'em (thesis statement); tell'em (body or facts supporting

the thesis statement); tell'em what you told'em (restatement or conclusion)" (McGinty, 2001, p. 21). This helps them identify the different components of the rhetorical structure.

Guided writing

EFL learners can be engaged in guided or controlled writing. To teach guided writing, I provide a topic sentence as the first sentence in a paragraph. The topic sentence contains simple and concrete key words in the predicate. These key words serve as landmarks indicating the direction in which the writing will move. Learners are not allowed to stray too far from the controlling idea.

Through guided writing, learners can use their logical thinking and imagination to do some free writing. I often provide my learners with thesis statements such as "English has a variety of uses" and "English is the language of information," and ask them to develop these statements into a complete essay. Using this method allows learners a certain amount of freedom while still making them use the required rhetorical patterns.

Strategy Two: Formulating a Specific and Concrete Thesis Statement

The first two categories of indirectness directly affect the formulation of a thesis statement. A simple declarative statement with a single subject and a narrowed-down predicate that clearly expresses the main idea of the learner's writing is an absolute necessity in order to guide learners to write effectively. Training the learner to formulate a thesis statement in the classroom involves four steps:

1.   Select an idea regarding the topic. Determine what you're gonna tell'em.

2.   Make a road-map highlighting your main ideas. Generate ideas and limit the topic.

3.   Choose simple, concrete, and specific words for the predicate based on the road-map.

4.   Use a simple and declarative sentence structure as a thesis statement.

For example, in my classroom, I have some questions to help learners construct an effective thesis statement about a particular topic, in this case, English learning:

- What are you going to talk about? (The answer becomes the subject of the thesis statement.) *Writing in English.*

- What do you want to say about it? (The answer becomes the predicate of the thesis statement.) *Writing strategies.*

- How are you going to say what you are going to say about the subject? (Reveal how you will develop your thesis statement.) *Listing some strategies.*
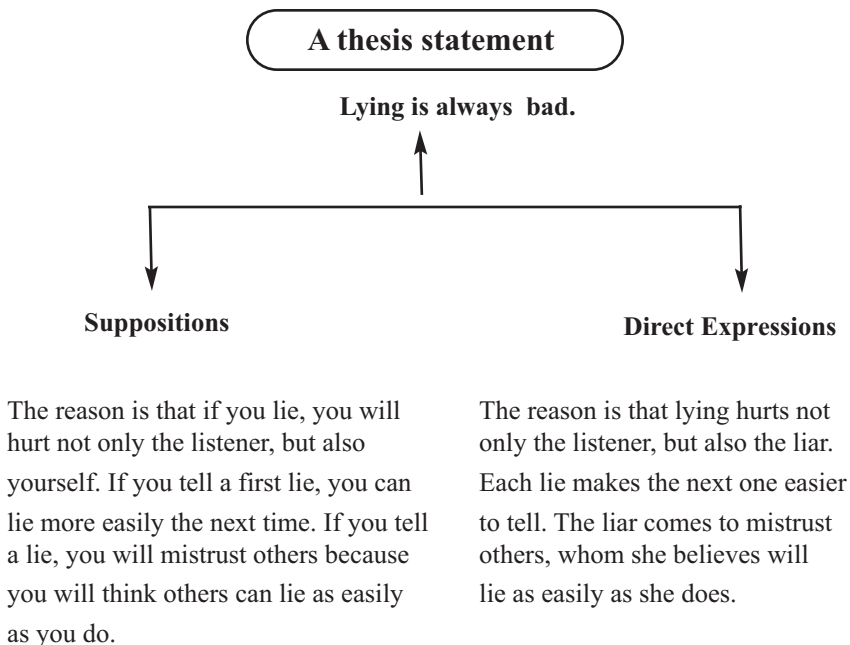
Learners are required to express these three major points in a simple and declarative sentence. Thus, the thesis statement would be: *Writing in English involves a number of strategies.*

I seize every opportunity to impress upon learners the need to formulate a thesis statement. I see to it that they understand that a thesis statement determines the clear and simple linear orientation of writing in English and make them aware that it is a mini-outline to organize the rhetorical structure. Everything in final draft should develop and support the thesis statement. Good writing begins with a good thesis statement (King, 2002).

Strategy Three: Direct Expressions vs. Suppositions

Writing in English for Chinese learners as well as other EFL learners involves developing the ability to develop a topic with direct expressions or in direct language rather than suppositions. A direct expression is defined as a report of facts or opinions (Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary, 2002). A supposition is something that is supposed. (e.g., Direct expression: When Mexican pilots land their airplanes in France, they and ground controllers use English. Supposition: When Mexican pilots land their airplanes in France, they and ground controllers will use English.) (Li et al., 2003).

EFL learners may find it difficult to distinguish between concrete direct expressions and suppositions. Even some advanced learners tend to support their thesis statements using suppositions. The high frequency of Chinese EFL learners' use of indirectness in writing partly results in their listing suppositions as a direct way of developing a topic. The instructional practice that I adopt is a comparative method. Using the comparative method, learners are compelled to consciously recognize distinctions between direct expressions and suppositions, and become aware of English writing requirements. Therefore, I often present an example such as this:

A thesis statement

Lying is always bad.

Suppositions

The reason is that if you lie, you will hurt not only the listener, but also yourself. If you tell a first lie, you can lie more easily the next time. If you tell a lie, you will mistrust others because you will think others can lie as easily as you do.

Direct Expressions

The reason is that lying hurts not only the listener, but also the liar. Each lie makes the next one easier to tell. The liar comes to mistrust others, whom she believes will lie as easily as she does.

This writing habit is deeply rooted in the Chinese culture. To reduce this negative transfer of culture and thinking, this method of comparison and contrast is necessary.

Strategy Four: Training for Cohesion and Coherence and the Level of Generality

Coherence and cohesion is "the quality of being integrated, logically consistent, and intelligible" (Wills, 1976, p. 145). Sentences that describe facts or supply examples, illustrations, or supporting details to develop a thesis statement should be so closely connected to one another that they flow smoothly without gaps between them or jumps in logic. When the sentences flow smoothly, one growing out of the other, the writing is coherent and cohesive. To arrange sentences in a coherent and cohesive way, the teacher needs to improve learners' ability to arrange sentences into a text. For this, I follow two techniques.

Reconstructing a Text

For the first technique, I number and scramble sentences from well-constructed texts and require learners to rearrange the sentences logically. This activity trains learners to follow the writer's organizational patterns. I also emphasize that learners must follow the road map that is indicated in a thesis statement, starting with the least important supporting argument and culminating with the most important argument (Hu, 1997). Helping learners develop their reconstructing ability trains them to recognize coherence, cohesion, and levels of generality.

Cohesion and coherence are two aspects of establishing unity in writing. They should happen together. Cohesion training involves developing learners' ability to identify cohesive devices. Coherence training refers to clear information sequencing. Here I mainly focus on training of coherence. Coherence depends on determining the semantic meaning of each sentence related to the topic and logical arrangement of the sentences. I provide learners with some scrambled sentences, as in the example below, and let them rearrange them into a perfect text.

> (1) We think our way along by choosing between right and wrong alternatives, and the wrong choices have to be made as frequently as the right ones. (2) Mistakes are at the very base of human thought, embedded there, feeding the structure like root nodules. (3) We are built to make mistakes. (4) We get along in life this way. (5) If we were not provided with the knack of being wrong, we could never get anything useful done (Wang, 2002, p. 135).

Obviously, the main idea of this paragraph is that progress is based on making mistakes. The correct sequence of sentences is (2), (5), (1), (4), and (3). Different types of texts can be used for this exercise to help students become more familiar with the ways that texts are developed.

The levels of generality (Adelstein & Pival, 1984), that is, arranging sentences from general to specific, is also an effective way to achieve cohesion and coherence. I ask learners to arrange sentences according to the level of generality using the following guideline. After a thesis statement, the most general or least important supporting argument comes first. Then the support becomes more specific, often providing the most important information. The writing is concluded with a brief recapitulation of the thesis in the conclusion. For example, learners are frequently required to do the following exercise in which they must rearrange the sentences into a perfect text:

> (1) The first, as mentioned above, is that no nation has all of the commodities that it needs. (2) Large deposits of copper are mined in Peru and Zaire, diamonds are mined in South Africa, and petroleum is recovered in the Middle East. (3) Countries that do not have these resources within their own boundaries must buy from countries that export them. (4) Foreign trade, the exchange of goods between nations, takes place for many reasons. (5) Raw materials are scattered around the world (Chen, 1985, p. 61).

According to the level of generality, the natural order of sentences in this paragraph is (4), (1), (5), (2) and (3).

Branching and Expanding a Text

The second technique, branching and expanding a text, is an effective way to help learners be more creative in both thinking and writing. It is not the same as using a prescribed English rhetorical pattern to fit a subject, but it should be regarded as a creative and imaginative writing process. It involves decision-making and an understanding of the dynamic nature of writing, and it increases EFL learners' awareness of how sentences are arranged logically in a text. This practice activity involves the teacher providing learners with the beginning of a story and asking them to write the rest of the story or vise versa. This encourages and motivates learners to go in the right direction themselves.

Conclusion

My teaching practice reveals that rhetorical patterns based on different cultures and modes of thinking have a strong impact on teaching EFL writing. Unless EFL users become competent in English rhetorical patterns, they will be unable to communicate effectively in writing with the English speaking world. Chinese EFL learners' transfer of indirectness into EFL writing is a case in point. It is a barrier to communicating. The teacher has to ensure that EFL learners' negative transfer of various cultural conventions be addressed so that they can prepare themselves to communicate in writing in the future. Motivated by the above consideration, I have recommended strategies for all teachers to use in teaching EFL writing. EFL learners from other cultural contexts likely have similar

problems with English rhetorical patterns, which may be addressed with the same instructional strategies.

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