Identifying Needs of EFL Learners of Academic Writing: Help from Contrastive Rhetoric

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Learners of English as a second language who wish to gain skill in academic writing face many challenges. They need a broader range of vocabulary, additional kinds of sentence structure, skill in selecting content and ability to adhere to appropriate composition structure. Learners do not approach English academic writing with a blank slate. Rather, they come with their own conscious or subconscious notions of what constitutes acceptable written discourse. They know from exposure to myriads of texts in their first language (L1) how writers in their own culture convey ideas in academic or professional communication. Without instructional intervention, many will simply follow their L1 instincts when writing English.

ESL/EFL textbooks have emerged to help learners gain the skills that lead to acceptable English academic writing. The textbooks guide learners from various L1 backgrounds to limit their topic, select relevant content, and organize material. They also discover that organization involves formulating a thesis sentence and drafting a series of paragraphs that systematically develop the thesis. They further learn the value of editing and refining their work for a more satisfying final draft. The level of challenge in these steps varies according to learners' L1 conventions and practices. Along the way, learners often find themselves unlearning old habits as well as gaining new habits to approximate academic expectations in North America and other English-speaking environments.

Background to this Study

Recently in the country of Moldova, a former Eastern European Soviet republic, both of the present writers participated in an MA degree course in English academic writing, one as the instructor and the other as a student. Most of the students were English teachers who spoke both Romanian and English as well as Russian. It was apparent that these mature adults brought with them a style of writing that contrasted

with conventions of English academic writing as emphasized in Anglo-American universities. For example, rather than featuring direct entry into a topic and structuring text around a well formulated thesis statement, they frequently began with a wide-sweeping introduction, proceeded with gradual entry into the main topic and developed their topic without clearly recognizable organization. It was apparent that these fluent speakers of English shared a manner of writing that was entirely natural for them.

The experience with this class in Moldova led to an inquiry patterned after numerous studies in the field of contrastive rhetoric. Attention to contrastive rhetoric among language teachers began most notably with the pioneer work of Robert Kaplan who in 1966 published what he himself later referred to as his "doodle article" (1987, p. 9). Based on writing samples of ESL learners of different L1 backgrounds, Kaplan proposed contrasting thought patterns according to different L1s and represented these visually with sketched configurations, some in truly zigzag fashion. While Kaplan and others later recognized many flaws in that early study, it heightened language teachers' awareness of the contrasting cultural conditioning that learners of English bring to their academic writing. Grabe and Kaplan (1989) explain that "in research terms, contrastive rhetoric predicts that writers composing in different languages will produce rhetorically distinct texts, ..." (p. 264). Elsewhere, Kaplan and Grabe (2002) describe contrastive rhetoric as the study of "text construction across languages and cultures" (p. 194). For teachers of academic writing in English the aim of contrastive rhetoric, as Connor (1998) explains, is to help ESL/EFL teachers enable English learners to write more acceptably for native English readers. In spite of the practical intention, it seems that pedagogical applications have been few.

In an early overview of contrastive rhetoric studies, Leki (1991) pointed out that in the 1970s the focus of study was often on linking devices, especially anaphora, that is, on pronouns or other words referring back to preceding ideas. During the 1980s many studies appeared contrasting English with Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, and Spanish. Only very recently, as reported by Petrić (2005), have contrastive rhetoric studies focused on Slavic languages, such as Czech, Polish, and Ukrainian. The present writers' search for studies comparing English and Russian found only Petrić's small scale inquiry of 19 advanced level EFL students from the Russian Federation who were studying in a Central European university. As Petrić suggests, the dearth of contrastive rhetoric studies of either Russian or English written by Russian speakers may be attributed to the lack of explicit courses in writing in Russian education, the prevalence of the oral examination over the written, the dissimilar linguistic traditions between the English and Russian speaking worlds, and the relatively limited encounter of Slavic and English speakers in university settings before 1990. Now, in the twenty-first century throughout the schools and universities in the new republics of the former Soviet Union and its

satellite countries, English is being taught as an additional language on a large scale. How might the writing patterns of these European students, as well as other EFL learners, differ from the academic writing that prevails among native English speakers in Anglo-American settings?

The Nature of the Present Study

The present study investigates the natural L1 writing tendencies of two samples of writers. Specifically, it identifies ways Russian texts written by Moldovan students compare with the written texts of their counterparts in the United States whose L1 is English. The study recognizes that spontaneously generated texts, even as L1 texts, may fall short of their respective ideals of good writing. Yet, the authors assumed that the texts produced by groups of mature students would basically represent established norms of writing in their respective cultural and school settings.

In these samples of authentic writing, of special interest for EFL/ESL instruction are comparative quantity of text, complexity of sentence structure, measures of coherence, occurrence and placement of thesis statements, patterns of paragraph development, and prevailing person orientation. Accordingly, quantity of text is simply measured in terms of word count. Complexity of structure is viewed in terms of number of words per sentence, words per clause, and clauses per sentence as well as percentage of single-clause sentences (e.g., see Reid, 1990). Textual coherence, or cohesion, as elaborated by Halliday and Hasan (1976), focuses on anaphora, or the use of pronouns and substitute words referring to stated ideas, and use of discourse markers, perhaps better known as transition expressions. Attention to main idea statements follows Kubota (1998) and Hirose (2003) in noting whether or not a key sentence is included and, if present, where it is positioned. Paragraph development is viewed in terms of paragraph length measured by number of sentences per paragraph. Analysis of person orientation focuses on the prevailing orientation of clauses in terms of the first, second, and third person.

The Subjects of the Study

In the Moldovan capital city, Chisinau, a total of 37 students, consisting of 20 final-year secondary school students and 17 first-year university students, wrote in Russian as their L1. The majority of these were 18 or 19 years old with others in their early 20s. Ethnically, they were of either Ukrainian or Russian background, and Russian was the medium of their formal schooling. Their counterparts in the United States were 34 students who were all enrolled in a mid-western university. Of these, 22 were in their first or second year of university study with the other 12 in a later stage of undergraduate study. Thus, the writers of the English texts were on average slightly older than the

Russian writers. Of the 33 English writers who revealed their ethnicity, 25 were Caucasian, 7 African American, and 1 Asian. All maintained that English was their L1.

The Writing Situation

Every effort was made to equate the conditions of writing in the two contrasting cultural settings. The writing task was administered in the context of a foreign language class with the Moldovans in English language classes and the Americans in first-year Spanish classes. Students were given the same prompt in a regular class period without prior notification. In both settings the visiting researcher first stated the purpose of the activity, its voluntary nature, the anonymity of the writing, and the need for basic personal information on a separate form. Approximately 40 minutes of class time remained for writing.

The Writing Task

All were asked to take one of two positions on the given topic, namely whether their language course grade, or the knowledge gained in their foreign language class was more important. They were asked to support or elaborate on their position in any way they would choose for a designated group of intended readers. This task aimed to elicit expository writing rather than more challenging argumentative discourse although it allowed for the latter. The chosen topic was selected for its relevance to both groups of writers in the two settings. The entire prompt was translated so that all received the following in their L1.

> Some students think that the most important thing in a foreign language course is to get a good grade, but others think the advantages in learning a foreign language are more important than a good grade. Write a composition to give your viewpoint on this. Suppose you are writing your composition for students who are going to take your present foreign language class next semester. Imagine they are the people who will read your composition.
>
> You may first make notes or sketch a rough draft on separate paper, but plan to finish your final draft on the provided paper by the end of this class period. If you complete your work early, please remain seated until the end of the class hour. Thank you for your participation.

Analysis of the Compositions

All were asked to take a position on whether the grade obtained in their foreign language class or the language proficiency gained from the class was more important. Only compositions having at least 165 words were accepted. Guidelines for handling sentence fragments and irregularly punctuated writing, and rules for counting structural aspects of compositions were established. Also counted were devices for coherence,

specifically transition expressions, third-person pronouns, and pro-sentences, that is, sentences employing a pronoun to represent a stated idea in the same context, (e.g., *The result is basic proficiency. This gives the student an advantage*). Pro-verbs, a short form of a complete verb phrase, (e.g., *are studying as hard as I am*) were not counted since this grammatical pattern does not occur in Russian.

Findings on Quantity of Writing

The two sets of accepted compositions were remarkably similar in amount of writing. The Russian and English compositions averaged 273 and 275 words respectively. Average number of sentences per composition were 18.5 in the Russian texts and 14.8 in the English. Thus, sentences in English tended to be longer. In terms of number of paragraphs per composition, these were 4.2 and 3.6 in the Russian and English texts respectively while numbers of words per paragraph were 84.6 and 89.7. Initially, these raw counts did not appear to represent noteworthy differences but found more relevance later.

Findings on Sentence Complexity

Table 1 reports measures of sentence complexity in terms of number of words per sentence and per clause, and number of clauses per sentence. The Russian writers wrote less complex sentences and clauses in that on average both their sentences and their clauses consisted of fewer words, differences confirmed by the 2-tail *t* test for significance. The observed difference in clauses per sentence did not attain to statistical significance. Further, the Russian writers were more inclined to write single-clause sentences in that 39.5% of their sentences had just one clause compared to 34.3% in the English compositions. Thus, on several measures the sentences in the English texts are actually more complex than those in Russian.

Table 1

Measures of Sentence Complexity

Measure of complexity	Russian writers	English writers	2-tailed *t* test for significance
Average word count per sentence	15.55	19.06	Significant, $p \leq .005$
Average word count per clause	7.78	9.11	Significant, $p \leq .001$
Average clause count per sentence	1.78	2.13	Not significant

Findings on Discourse Coherence

Table 2 shows counts on three measures of discourse coherence: use of transition expressions, third-person pronouns, and pro-sentences. The totals of these in each set of compositions is shown and the percentage of each in respect to total word or sentence count.

Table 2

Measures of Discourse Coherence

Indicator of coherence	Russian writers	English writers	Chi-square test for significance
Number of transition expressions and their percentage of total word count	46 (0.46%)	74 (0.79%)	Significant, $p \leq .01$
Number of 3rd person pronouns and their percentage of total word count	301 (2.98%)	180 (1.93%)	Significant, $p \leq .001$
Number of pro-sentences and their percentage of total sentence count	41 (6.00%)	57 (11.35%)	Significant, $p \leq .05$

All three measures of coherence yielded significant differences, but in different directions. On two of the measures, use of transition expressions and occurrence of pro-sentences, the greater occurrence was in English. On the other indicator, use of third-person pronouns, the count in the Russian compositions was greater. Consequently, more measures of discourse coherence would be necessary to conclude confidently that overall coherence is stronger in one set of compositions than in the other. This inquiry does, however, indicate that the two groups of writers tend to favor different devices for coherence.

Findings on Key Sentences and Paragraph Development

The two sets of compositions were compared for occurrence and placement of a thesis statement, or a single sentence declaring the writer's position on the topic. The criteria for an acceptable thesis statement were that it is (a) opinion-oriented, (b) declarative, and (c) states which of the two language course outcomes given in the

prompt is more important. Sentences not mentioning both a grade and the results of knowing a foreign language were accepted only if the immediate context made it clear that a comparison of the two was in mind. (See Appendix 1 for samples of thesis sentences from each set of compositions that meet the criteria.)

There is an indisputable difference between the two sets of compositions in the presence of a thesis statement. Of the 37 Russian compositions, only 14 had such a sentence compared to 26 of the 34 English compositions. Chi-square analysis indicates that the chance occurrence of this difference is less than or equal to one in a hundred (Chi-square, $p \leq .01$). On the other hand, there was no significant finding on the placement of the observed thesis statements. In the Russian texts, 5 of the 14 theses were in the first paragraph while in the English texts 15 of the 26 had this key sentence placed in the first paragraph—in both sets of compositions one of the thesis statements occurred in a composition consisting merely of one paragraph. Concerning paragraph development, at first it was thought that the two sets of compositions represented similar development. However, when they were compared in respect to the proportion of compositions that contained two or more paragraphs made up of only one or two sentences each, 19 of the Russian compositions had one or two of these less developed paragraphs compared to only 7 in the English set, a significant difference (Chi-square, $p \leq .05$). Thus, on this one measure, the Russian writers appear more apt to have paragraphs that are less developed.

Findings on Person Orientation

To measure person orientation, every independent clause in each composition was tagged as oriented to first, second, or third person; that is, oriented to the writer, the reader(s), or anything else. Generally, first- and second-person orientation was marked by use of the first or second-person pronouns while third-person orientation was attained by the use of third-person pronouns and nouns in general. Counts of person orientation of all the independent clauses and their respective proportions were nearly identical in the two sets of compositions. The third person clauses prevailed in both sets, specifically in 69.9% of the Russian clauses and in 69.5% of the English clauses. On average, *I* (or first-person *we*) and *you* framed clauses were far fewer and of similar proportion in each set. Overall, third-person orientation was decisively the most frequent for both groups of writers.

Discussion

Differences between the two sets of compositions along with some striking similarities are noteworthy. The two groups of writers on average wrote compositions of the same length and with the same proportions of person orientations. On the other

hand, they favored different devices in attaining coherence, the Russian writers using more pronouns and the English writers more transition expressions and pro-sentences. The observed more complex sentence structure of the English compositions contrasts with Kaplan's (1966) early generalization that Russian writing is linguistically more complex than English. This reversal as well as the more frequent underdeveloped Russian paragraphs may arise from the fact that the English writers in this study were slightly older and had each taken, or were taking, a required university course in English composition. The Russian speaking Moldovan students were never offered a course explicitly in composition on either the secondary or university level, representing a curricular gap that Leki (1991) notes to be typical of education in most non-English speaking countries.

The present finding on the difference between the two sets of compositions in respect to the presence of a thesis statement is similar to Petrić's (2005) recent finding among Russian students at the startup of a course on academic writing in English. She analyzed the English writing of 19 advanced final-year university students and found 7 of 19 compositions lacked a single sentence functioning as a thesis statement. Petrić comments that "in some essays the main idea was not expressed in one sentence but was rather left to the reader to extract from the whole essay" (p. 221). She sees this tendency in earlier studies of writing in Slavic languages which in general have been found to be less linear than English in structure and more inclined to digression with delayed disclosure of the writer's purpose. That 63% of her students included a thesis statement compared to just 38% of the Russian students in the present study may well represent the former's more advanced level of study and greater exposure to English instruction in previous settings.

As for the placement of the observed thesis statements in the two sets of compositions, neither the Russian writers nor the English writers reveal a significant pattern. Kubota (1998) points out that early studies found English expository writing to be deductive with thesis statements placed early in the texts with the subsequent writing developing the main contention. While this pattern was weakly supported in the present study, it was not predominant. Only 41% of the 34 English compositions followed this pattern. Even fewer, just 16% of the 37 Russian compositions, contained this pattern.

Implications and Conclusion

In English academic writing classes, instructors do well to bear in mind that many of the features of good academic writing in English may run counter to EFL/ESL students' deeply engrained L1 writing habits. Accordingly, the challenge that both instructors and learners face is formidable. The present study suggests that enabling

EFL/ESL learners of academic writing to approximate the standard of the English writers investigated in this study would largely equip them with an acceptable level or writing skill to function at a university level. As instructors endeavor to give instruction toward that end, the following measures arising from this contrastive rhetoric study should prove helpful.

1. Introduce students at the outset to the concept of contrastive rhetoric, helping them see cultural differences in the way people communicate though writing. Many may have never considered structure beyond the sentence level and have assumed that organization in writing is a universal regardless of language or culture. Further, encourage learners to consider and write down what they think are the prevailing patterns in the writing of their own L1 compared to English. In this regard, writing instructors who have learned the L1 of their students have an advantage and can more convincingly guide students in a class-wide or group activity in making comparisons of short texts representing two or more languages Petrić (2005) reports presenting visual representations of Kaplan's early (1966) doodle sketches of thought patterns found in different linguistic families, and having students guess which diagram might characterize their own or other languages.
2. Emphasize that in English academic writing, the paragraph is the building block or package that conveys one unit of thought on the overall topic. Paragraphs in general should contain more than just two sentences and usually more than the average of 85 or 90 words that characterized the paragraphs observed in the present study. Class analysis of paragraphs in good descriptive or argumentative essays will make this clear. An observed frequent lack of paragraph indentation in the Russian compositions of this inquiry suggests that instructors cannot afford to overlook the customary way of signaling a new paragraph in written English—except when writing in block style as in a business letter—along with line spacing.
3. Impress upon learners the importance of having a thesis statement, a key sentence that summarizes concisely the writer's main idea on the topic of discussion. More challenging is helping learners formulate this summarizing sentence in the face of all the potential content one may have gathered for the composition. Learners need extensive practice in framing such sentences. Textbooks on writing offer degrees of help in this area. For example, Reid's (2000) widely used. *The Process of Composition* (3rd ed.) treats the formulation of a topic sentence or thesis statement in Chapters 1, 3, and 6. However, only a sum of 5 pages of this 342-page textbook focuses on writing this pivotal

sentence. Instructors, it appears, must design their own practice exercises and thereafter monitor closely learners' application of this learning to their own English compositions. As for placement of the thesis sentence, learners need to know the structural implications of early or later placement and the differing effects on the anticipated readers of a deductive versus inductive approach to development.

4. Give EFL/ESL learners extensive help in utilizing the many means of enhancing textual coherence. They must learn to employ transition expressions, synonyms, third-person pronouns, key word repetition, or in the words of Halliday and Hasan (1976) the whole "range of possibilities that exist for linking something with what has gone before" (p. 10). Raising awareness of the function of these devices in drafting paragraphs will likely preempt tendencies to engage in pointless repetition or to settle for disjointed and underdeveloped paragraphs. Students can learn much from analyzing the mechanisms of coherence in short sample texts and from completing exercises that require the rewriting of faulty paragraphs for better coherence.

This study has uncovered some cultural differences in the writing of two groups of student writers representing two very different writing traditions. Several of the observed differences have led to pedagogical suggestions that hold promise toward enabling learners to write more according to expectations of native-speaking English readers. Of course, many instructors, especially in ESL settings, have a mix of cultural traditions in their ESL classes and need to be alert to other tendencies not addressed in this study.

While contemplating the results of this study, instructors are cautioned about the following. First, one must not claim or suppose that the Anglo-American way of writing is superior to that of other traditions. Other traditions do exist and some have histories as long as or longer than that of present-day English. The issue is not which is best, but which is appropriate for the intended readers. Second, instructors are encouraged not to stereotype their learners, even groups of Russian EFL/ESL learners, as carbon copies of those in this or other reported investigations. Rather, instructors should be alert to the findings which are apt to characterize many learners of Slavic background while exceptions are sure to be found. Lastly, instructors are reminded that L1 writing tendencies of any one homogeneous language group can hardly be viewed as static. Instead, it is reasonable to suppose that tendencies of entire language families are in a state of flux as are so many traditions in today’s dynamic globalization. Yet, studies of L1 writing tendencies offer promising pointers for more focused and efficient

instruction on English academic writing to supplement the instruction that broadens learners' vocabulary range and improves their grammatical accuracy.

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Appendix 1

Sample of Acceptable Thesis Sentences

Russian Thesis Sentences (translated into English)

1. I . . . believe that learning a foreign language is more important than grades as it may be useful in one's life.
2. It seems to me that both knowledge of a foreign language and an objective assessment from the teacher are important in studying a foreign language.
3. The grade is not as important for me as the advantage of knowing a foreign language.
4. Grades in studying a language are an indicator of knowledge, but the knowledge itself is more important since teachers are not always objective in grading students.
5. If a certain student or pupil is going to get on and make good in the future, he or she should learn English for his or her own good, not learn just for a grade.

English Thesis Sentences

1. For me, I believe that learning a foreign language is more important than getting a good grade.
2. Earning a good grade is nice but the advantages of actually learning outweigh it by far.
3. A foreign language class offers many more challenges and rewards than getting good grades.
4. I believe that the advantages in learning a foreign language are more important than getting a good grade in the class.
5. I think it is very important for students to take a foreign language course for the content and practicality that it holds—not just for a grade.