

The Application of Rhetorical Differences to EFL Reading and Writing Education

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Abstract

Most freshmen are usually unable to summarize the essays they have read because they have difficulties in finding the thesis statement of an English text and extracting its structure even if they have known all new words in it. Their English compositions usually seem out of focus. After analyzing their problems, it seems that the rhetorical patterns in Chinese exert a negative influence on their English learning. Therefore, some relevant methods are adopted to instruct them. Firstly, the typical differences in expression were illuminated between English and Chinese. Secondly, the students were asked to read and compare two groups of essays which are on same topics but written in English and Chinese. Thirdly, they were asked to recall how their high school teachers usually instructed them to write in Chinese; and then, they were required to reflect on the relationship between the instruction and Chinese rhetoric. Fourthly, the basic, typical structure of an English essay was introduced. Finally, they were asked to find the thesis statements and trace the outlines of some English texts from their textbooks. These methods have been adopted in three batches of freshmen and turned out to be helpful. After training, most of the freshmen could find the thesis statement and know the structure of each English text from their textbooks within a few minutes before an intensive study of them. Meanwhile, they gradually tried to organize their English compositions properly.

Keywords: University students, Rhetorical differences, EFL reading and writing education

Introduction

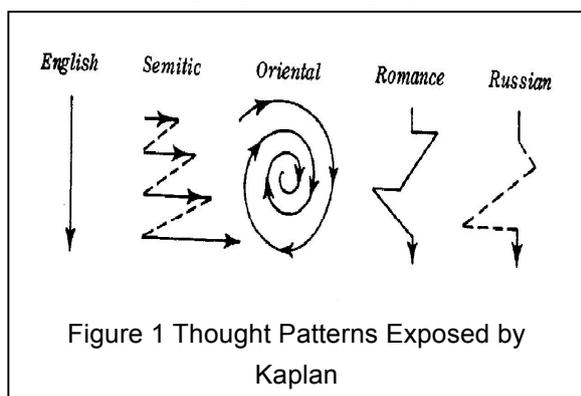
In many years, most of every batch of the freshmen in my classes have been found to have the same difficulties in English learning: 1) They usually can't find out the thesis statement nor tell the structure of an English text even if they have known all the new words and grammatical rules in it but they can answer most multiple choice questions correctly by finding out specific information; 2) most of them can't organize their English compositions properly when they use grammatical rules and words almost correctly. Their compositions usually seem out of focus.

Their difficulties should be common among college students in the main land of China. According to Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, there are 2845 universities and colleges in China in 2015. College students vary in the English level. My university is ranked in the first 100 of the total number in China based on the appraisal of Chinese universities and colleges in 2015 made by WU Shulian (武书连) who has been studying university appraisal 24 years in the main land of China. Although my university is located in the Southwest of China, my students come from every part of the mainland as well as Hainan Island. Furthermore, in order to organize class activities conveniently, the freshmen in my university are divided into two big groups in English learning—Group A and B—based on their scores in the English Test in National University Entrance Examination and the test they took after entering the university. The students who passed the tests are in Group A and their English level can meet the study requirements of college English in China. My students are in Group A. They could be a representative sample of many Chinese college students in English learning. Therefore, if they had such difficulties in English learning, a large number of college students would have the same problems.

By studying the results of their reading comprehension exercises and their compositions, I found that it seemed that their problems were beyond English. Perhaps, it was the rhetorical differences between English and Chinese that made their English learning difficult. There are two reasons. One is that, when learning an English text, they usually pay attention to the grammatical rules and vocabularies but not the way of how the author to organize their ideas. The other one is that they have an idea of how to read and write in Chinese, which will exert a negative impact on their English learning.

Literature Review

In 1966, in his paper—*Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education*, Robert B. Kaplan exposed some typical features of thought patterns as following and noticed the impact exerted on language teaching by them.



He proposed there should be difference in the teaching of reading and writing between American students and foreign students because of cultural differences in the nature of rhetoric. He said, "The teaching of reading and composition to foreign students does differ from the teaching of reading and composition to American students and cultural differences in the nature of rhetoric supply the

key to the difference in teaching approach.”(Kaplan, 2001)

Since then, more and more researchers have studied contrastive rhetoric. In TESOL 96 meetings in Chicago, quite a few researchers agree:

“1) A very broad range of studies have shown that no language or culture can be reduced to one or two diagrammatic structures which might be applied across the board from internal cognitive schema to paragraph structure, whether these might fly under the flags of ‘circular’, ‘direct’, ‘indirect’, ‘zig-zag’, ‘inductive’ or ‘deductive’; 2) At the same time, there is strong, clear evidence, amply demonstrated across the languages of the world that there are situationally, generically, or stylistically preferred compositional forms and that these are not the same from language to language or culturally defined situation to culturally defined situation.”(Scollon, Scollon & Kirkpatrick, 2000)

Maybe a language or a culture can't be reduced to one or two diagrammatic structures, but it is a fact that language is influenced by thought pattern. Due to intercultural communication, the rhetoric in one culture is often influenced by those in other cultures. However, it's a virtual certainty that people in different cultures prefer some rhetorical devices closely related to their cultures. Thus, people from different cultures may have some difficulties in understanding each others. Chinese people are often more indirect, more implicit than the people from English speaking world. Take the following examples. Chinese people usually don't say “I love you” to show their affection toward their family members except the young people when they fall into love. Chinese people often show their affections to each other by sharing some topics with interest and pleasure or do some interesting things happily together. Chinese people seldom say “Thank you” among family members. Instead, they will smile or show their happiness to express their appreciation.

The Influences on Chinese Expressions

Many factors exert influences on people's expressions, such as philosophy, society, the topic and their opinion on how to deal with interpersonal relationship, etc.

In China, Golden Mean was advocated in Confucianism and it has become a traditional philosophy more than 2,000 years. Whether we perceive it or not, it has an impact on us everywhere. Thus, achieving harmony is always what we want whatever situation we are in. Consequently, Chinese people are not too explicit. When talking, we like to talk around the topic but not state it in detail (点到为止), especially when talking about some embarrassing or unpleasant topics.

Meanwhile, hierarchical system lasted several thousand years in China so that hierarchical relationships have always been important in a political situation, working environment and at a family. How to remind or persuade authorities, superiors or elders smoothly requires delicate ways to speak or write. Furthermore, collectivism is what we emphasize. We prefer to give a group priority over an individual. In daily life, we like to stay within a group. If we want to work or stay together peacefully, we have to care about how others feel. Therefore, we promote harmony whatever we do and wherever we are. Owing to the impacts of these principles, we prefer delicate and indirect ways in expressions.

The differences in rhetoric between English and Chinese

In many cases, Chinese speakers or writers wish their listeners or readers could make sense of what they hear or read according to context although what they are listening to or reading is implicit. Of course, when organizing their ideas, the speakers or writers arranged them in some delicate ways by which their listeners or readers would be guided naturally and decently to the conclusion they wanted. Thereby, Chinese people seldom state their theses in the introduction of their essays. On the contrary, in most cases, a thesis statement will be presented in the introductory paragraph(s) explicitly in an English essay.

In contrast to the people who speak English, Chinese people usually adopt inductive reasoning although they are also good at deductive reasoning. Therefore, in Chinese, there is always a lot of background information put in front of foreground. Meanwhile, Chinese people always express themselves in a natural thought flow. Thereby, we prefer such natural sequences as action—result, cause—effect, a modifier before its modified and subordinate information before the main point. On the contrary, English is more flexible in the structures of sentences.

Furthermore, analogy is usually used more in Chinese. With the help of analogy, it's easy and natural for a speaker or a writer to guide their listeners or readers to what they really mean. Generally, making oblique references is a common way which Chinese people adopt in their conversations or writings especially when they want to give some suggestions or make a criticism.

Chinese is a more paratactic language than English in that it has less use of connectors (Scollon, et al., 2000). Although there are more connectors in modern Chinese than ancient Chinese with the influence of Western languages, the connectors in English are still more than these in Chinese. Take the following examples. In Chinese, there are only “Yinwei (因为)” or “Youyu (由于)” to show reason which can be used as a conjunction or preposition, while, in English, there are more connectors such as the conjunctions: “as”, “because”, “for”, “since”, “in that”, “in respect that”, etc, and the prepositional phrases: “because of”, “what with”, “on account of”, “owing to”, “due to”, “thanks to”, “as a result of”, “in virtue of” and so on. There are “however”, “nevertheless”, “while”, or “whereas” to mean “in contrast or comparison with the fact that” in English, but there are just “RanEr (然而)” or “Er (而)” in Chinese.

Every language just has their own basic characteristics in the structure of a text, which could be proved by the ways of how students are instructed to write in their mother tongues. Just as students are always taught basic and typical knowledge, so are they instructed in composition. There are differences in composition instruction between Chinese and English.

Chinese students are usually encouraged to organize their ideas in their compositions inventively. YUAN Mei (袁枚), a poet and a theorist of poetry in the Qing Dynasty of China, said that reading was like watching a mountain, no one wanted to look at a piece of flat land, and that there was nothing to enjoy if a piece of writing was as flat as a square field or stone. (文似看山不喜平, 若如井田方石, 有何可观). YUAN Mei tried to illuminate that writing should be variable in its structure, and that it would be boring if a piece of writing could be comprehended thoroughly at a glance. Chinese people always think that a good essay should show variety and should avoid writing in a simple and straight way. YE Shengtao (叶圣陶), a

modern famous Chinese writer and educator, also said that compositions shouldn't be constant while they are like streams which could be long or short, winding or straight and could run respectively to their own destinations in their natural ways (作文不该看作一件呆板的事情, 犹如泉流, 或长或短, 或曲或直, 自然各异其致)(Wang, 2013). The words show the basic instruction in composition in Chinese——there is no typical, basic compositional form for students to follow.

There is no uniform structure of a paragraph or an essay in modern Chinese for students to follow although there was an especially uniform writing style in ancient Chinese—Bagu Wen (stereotyped writing/eight-legged essay) which was used in the imperial examination system to select officials in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1664) and the Qing Dynasty (1636-1912). In modern Chinese, writers can state their main points at the opening, in the middle or the end of their essays although, in most cases, the central idea will be stated in the end of an essay. When teaching how to write a composition, some Chinese teachers will suggest their students echo the beginning (the introductory part) with the ending (the concluding part) of an essay (首尾呼应), present their thesis statements at the beginning of their compositions (开门见山—Open the door and see the mountain) or state the thesis in the conclusion of an essay (最后点题). In fact, if students can state the main idea inventively and naturally, their compositions will be acceptable. Students are encouraged to write the introductory part imaginatively. “How to open a composition, a riot of color (如何开头, 万紫千红——The ways to write an introductory part are rich in variety)” says MAI Jian (麦坚) (Mai, 2014), a Chinese experienced expert of composition, who has studied how to write compositions in Chinese more than ten years. Generally, what matters is ingenious in Chinese composition.

In contrast, the structure of a paragraph or an essay is more uniform in English. When teaching students how to organize a paragraph or a composition, English textbooks or teachers always supply a uniform structure. Take the following examples. According to Doug Emory, “a topic sentence is often, but not always, the first sentence in a paragraph”; the introductory paragraph of an essay serves two important functions. First, it draws readers into the essay; and second, it presents the thesis statement of the essay. “In the conclusion to an essay ... The writer summarizes or reinforces the central point and main ideas to leave readers with a memorable final thought or image.” (Emory, 1995) Santi V. Buscemi says, “Starting with a general statement and supporting it with specific details and ideas is one of the most popular and effective ways to organize a paragraph”. As to the introduction of an essay, Buscemi thinks that “in general, a formal introduction accomplishes the following: It reveals the essay's central idea as expressed in the thesis...” As to how to end an essay, Buscemi also gives seven suggestions, “Rephrase or make reference to your thesis; summarize or rephrase your main points; make a call to action; look to the future; explain how a problem was resolved; use a rhetorical question; and close with an anecdote” (Buscemi, 1990). Nancy Herzfeld-Pipkin gives the same suggestions, too. She says, “The first sentence often tells the reader the main idea of the paragraph”; “Introductory paragraphs usually begin with general information, become more specific in the middle, and end with a thesis statement.” As far as the concluding paragraph, Herzfeld-Pipkin suggests, “Summarize or briefly restate the main points of the essay; restate the thesis in order to emphasize the main idea; add some final comments in any of the following ways: make a prediction about the

future regarding your essay topic, give advice or make suggestions about the situation of topic or show results of the situation or topic” (Herzfeld-Pipkin, 2007).

Even when organizing a speech, one will do the same. Sue Kay, an English expert who teaches English speech in China more than 10 years, says that an English “speech must have a beginning, middle and an end. The beginning tells your listeners what you are going to speak about—and sometimes why. The end restates the main points of the content and if appropriate relates back to the introduction” (Kay, 2001).

It is clear that the typical structure of an English paragraph usually consists of a topic sentence and several supporting sentences in the following. The basic structure of an essay is quite similar to that of a paragraph—an introductory part always includes the thesis statement of an essay, implicitly or explicitly. And there are some main requirements to complete an essay—rephrase the key points in the body of an essay, restate the theme in different words, give a conclusion or some suggestion, call for some action, etc.

The Solutions to the Students’ Problems

In order to help my students learn English efficiently and effectively, some relevant measures have been taken.

Firstly, the students were reminded that there were typical rhetorical differences between English and Chinese. This information will help them know that rhetoric is culturally diverse.

Secondly, the students were asked to read and compare two groups of texts which were written in English and Chinese in order to let them recognize the differences in structure of an essay between English and Chinese.

There are several reasons why the essays were selected as the teaching materials. The first reason is that each group has the same topic which will be helpful for the students to compare and contrast them. The topic of the essays in one group is about “death” while that in the other group is on “study”. The two English essays, *Of Death* and *Of Studies*, were written by Francis Bacon (Bacon, F., 1998). One of the Chinese essays is *On Death* (论死亡) written by ZHOU Guoping (周国平), a modern Chinese philosopher and writer, and the other one is *Encouraging Learning* (劝学篇) written by Xunzi (荀子), a famous Confucian thinker and educator in the Warring States Period of China.

Another reason to select them is that most students are familiar with three of the four essays. Many students read the English essays in Chinese version in high schools. Therefore, it’s not difficult for the students to understand them in English although the forms of some words are different from these used today, such as passeth—passes, aspireth—aspire. Meanwhile, all Chinese high school students learned *Encouraging Learning*. Familiar with the contents, the students could ignore the difficult words in them and focus on the structures and rhetorical skills of them easily.

The third reason to choose them is that the structures of the two English essays are relatively typical in English. Readers can grasp the main ideas of them as soon as they begin to read. Both of the Chinese essays are typical in rhetoric of Chinese. ZHOU Guoping states his central idea in the concluding paragraph, and Xunzi used a lot of analogies.

Take the following examples. In the first part of *Of Death*, at the beginning, Bacon said, “Men fear death, as children fear to go in the dark; and as that natural fear in children is

increased with tales, so is the other”, and then he argued that people feared to die just because of their own imagination. Finally, ending the paragraph with the words—“Groans, and convulsions, and a discolored face, and friends weeping, and blacks, and obsequies, and the like, show death terrible”, Bacon restated that the things related to death make it more terrible. In the developing part, Bacon stated, “It is worthy the observing, that there is no passion in the mind of man so weak, but it mates, and masters, the fear of death; and therefore, death is no such terrible enemy, when a man hath so many attendants about him that can win the combat of him.” Then, he gave a lot of examples to support his argument. In conclusion, Bacon said that it was the great preparation for death made it more fearful, and to die was as natural as to be born. Bacon ended his exposition with the words—“it (death) openeth the gate to good fame, and extinguisheth envy”—to affirm that death is not terrible. From the very beginning to the end, readers are clear that the author tried to argue that death was not terrible.

Similarly, in *Of Studies*, Bacon made his central idea clearly at the beginning with the words—“Studies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability”, and then stressed the importance of study with the words—“the general counsels, and the plots, and marshalling of affairs, come best from those that are learned”. In the second part, Bacon argued that “reading maketh a full man”, and said different kinds of books could develop different abilities of a person. Finally, he concluded that “every defect of the mind may have a special receipt.”—every defect in mind may be repaired by reading (study).

However, the two Chinese essays are quite different in expressions and organizations. In *On Dearth*, ZHOU Guoping starts his argument with the scene of Tomb-sweeping Day, a festival for Chinese people to mourn for their nearest dead relatives. Then he says, “Although I often meditate on the problem of death, I never think that it is necessary to think about how to make preparation for my old age and how to live in old age (尽管我时常沉思死的问题, 但我从不觉得需要想一想防老养老的事情).” In the following, he mentions the different attitudes toward death between Western and Chinese philosophers, and he explains why death is but also isn’t worthy of sympathy. After that, he talks about how he would spend his life. Only when reading the last sentence of this essay, readers suddenly realize the author laments the present ignored by common people who try their best to prepare for future—“ordinary people always devote themselves to the undependable tomorrow and tomorrow next by sacrificing today and another today as a means (世人往往为不可靠的明天复明天付出全部心力, 却把一个个今天都当作手段牺牲掉了).” In fact, Zhou really wants to persuade his readers into valuing the present which is what everyone can have control of and make use of.

In most parts of the essay, *Encouraging Study*, Xunzi always gave a lot of analogies at first, and then stated the main idea explicitly. By this pattern—analogies + a main idea, Xunzi convincingly argued for the importance of study, learning methods, and so on.

Xunzi started with the words—“A sage said that study must never cease (君子曰: 学不可以已)”. However, next, he said, “Indigo is extracted from blue but it is darker than blue. Ice is made of water but it is colder than water (青, 取之于蓝, 而青于蓝; 冰, 水为之, 而寒于水).” It seems that these two sentences are not related to the theme—study. However, Chinese readers know they will find out the author’s meaning then. In the following, the author implied the significance of study with another three more analogies. After the five analogies, Xunzi illustrated that study could change a person and make him behave prudently by saying

“Wise men study widely, examine and reflect themselves every day. Thereby, they are wise and behave well (君子博学而日参省乎己，则知明而行无过矣).”

When talking about the importance of knowledge accumulation, arguing the necessity of persistence in study as well as the importance of concentration, he used metaphors, too. For example, by saying “Accumulated soil can make a mountain where rain will fall and wind will blow; Collected water can form a deep pond where there will be a dragon (积土成山，风雨兴焉；积水成渊，蛟龙生焉)”, he summarized that a person would have virtue by continuously doing good, and could have great mind naturally then. Thus, they would have wisdom (积善成德，而神明自得，圣心备焉).

Without explicative arguments but the analogies, Xunzi guided his readers to sum up the similar or same points as his in study.

To the readers who are not familiar with Chinese rhetorical devices, they, perhaps, feel a little puzzled when reading these essays. It seems that Zhou’s argument is kind of out of focus because he doesn’t state his central ideal till the end of his essay while what Xunzi wrote is not related to study sometimes. However, Chinese readers have no problem to understand what they wanted to argue and can enjoy the pleasure in reading them.

By contrasting these two groups of essays, the students would be conscious of the rhetorical dissimilarities in the two languages. Perhaps, it would be easier for them to read between the lines when reading in English and to organize their English compositions properly.

Thirdly, the students were asked to recall how their high school teachers instructed them to compose in Chinese. They have to recall their teachers’ requirements and to reflect why their teachers asked them to do so. They should share their experience and reflection in class and find out the relationship between their teachers’ requirements and Chinese rhetoric. Only two of 130 freshmen in the class of 2014 said their teachers introduced a pattern for them to imitate when guiding them to write an exposition. That was, the thesis statement would be presented in the introduction of a composition while the central idea of the essay should be stated in the concluding paragraph, which is quite similar to the structure of an English essay. However, other students never mentioned any compositional structure. Through these activities, they had a clear idea that there was no some unvaried basic form for them to follow in Chinese.

Fourthly, the basic, typical structure of an English essay was explicitly emphasized, which will help them recognize the differences in organization between the two languages, and organize their ideas properly in English composition. Meanwhile, this introduction will be definitely helpful for them to comprehend English texts.

Fifthly, within following several periods, they were required to skim through some essays from their English textbooks and tried to find out the thesis statement and traced the outline of each essay. Then, in classroom, the students discussed what they had found together. Thus, they could have a clear idea about the main point and the structure of each essay. Many students said that they daren’t believe it’s the thesis statement when they found it in the introductory paragraph(s) because it was so obvious. They said they had thought it would be difficult to find the central idea of an essay. Obviously, they were influenced by Chinese rhetoric.

Conclusion

These methods have been practiced within three batches of freshmen since 2010 and proved that they are helpful. Of course, some minor adjustments were made to these teaching methods in these years. For example, in the first try, only two essays were chosen for students to read and contrast. After several weeks' practicing, the students could not only reinforce the knowledge about the basic structure of English essays but also gradually build the structure in their minds. Gradually, most of the freshmen became more confident when reading an English essay, and could find the thesis statement and know the structure of each English text from their textbooks within a few minutes before reading them intensively. With the help of the outline of a text, they found it easier to comprehend the essay better. Many of them came to organize their English compositions properly. Within the last two years, some of my colleagues attended my classes, and they said my methods could work.

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