

BOOK REVIEW

Intercultural Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom, By Ulla Connor. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011. Pp. xii + 124, acknowledgments, series foreword, references cited, index.)

Pawin Malaiwong

Department of English, Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand
winthewickedcool@gmail.com

Intercultural Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom, divided into six chapters, provides a brief yet comprehensive overview of how intercultural rhetoric emerged from the field of applied linguistics to becoming the grounded discipline that it is today. *Contrastive rhetoric*, *cross-cultural rhetoric*, and *intercultural rhetoric* are used interchangeably to refer to “the study of written discourse between and among individuals with different cultural backgrounds” (2). Ulla Connor looks into its relationship with other fields, including those of new literacy studies, translation studies, English for Specific Purposes as well as cultural studies from the time when intercultural rhetoric was still at a tender age. She incorporates theories of culture, a discussion on small and large cultures to be more specific, in her attempt to boost intercultural awareness in both L1 and L2 college writing classrooms. The most significant merit lies toward the end of the book when Connor shows how intercultural rhetoric can be used outside the field of teaching in healthcare literacy.

The first two chapters of *Intercultural Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom* are rather slow-paced as Connor reassesses her dissertation to see how it fits in with the greater scheme of intercultural rhetoric studies. In her discussion she includes theorists like Robert E. Kaplan, George Kennedy, Patricia

Sullivan and James Porter as a basis for presenting several case studies from her own teaching experiences. She argues that contrastive rhetoric was known, first and foremost, as a subfield of second language acquisition in the 1990s. Teachers of English to non-native speakers became increasingly concerned about how the English language had been taught, specifically in a writing classroom. Students were often penalized on the so-called “grammatical errors” that came with their L1. Connor suggests that her book, *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-Cultural Aspects of Second-Language Writing* (1996) marks a crucial paradigm shift in contrastive rhetoric studies. It sets out the field as “a legitimate area,” and it “reflected the interdisciplinary nature of the research and the resulting pluralism of the research methods” (11).

Perhaps the most significant argument in the first two chapters is the politics of naming. The term, “contrastive rhetoric,” gives a very strong sense of ethnocentrism. Traditional contrastive rhetoric considers ESL students as passive members in class, who have to make adjustments to blend in with the majority. The term provoked the notion of the existence of linguistic norms and standards thus rendering it discriminatory in one way or another. In the 1990s, scholars in the field decided to change it to “intercultural rhetoric,” which portrayed the sense of a more dynamic exchange between teachers who are natives of English and their ESL students. The new coinage was believed to reflect what has been practiced in the field more accurately: the teaching of writing while “encouraging students to express their own native lingual and cultural identities” (18-9).

Connor’s discussion gets more engaging when she progresses into the third chapter. She integrates grand theories of culture to convince that intercultural rhetoric is necessary for both L1 and L2 writing classrooms. Connor refers to a postmodern concept of culture. She also believes in the

complexity and pluralism of culture, and that society, culture and education shape our identities. She writes about the existence of two kinds of culture, large and small, and elaborates on how they somewhat overlap. In her discussion, large culture refers to class, ethnic, racial and national backgrounds that are essential and prescriptive, a classic example of which would be classrooms with diverse fusions of L2 students. Under such circumstances, an introduction to intercultural rhetoric is definitely required. Small culture, on the other hand, refers to the by-product of social activities and group behaviors. Even if a writing class were composed of only L1 students, they would still need to be exposed to intercultural rhetoric because new small culture is formed every time learners get into a new course or simply rotate in group activities.

In order to back up her claim that L1 students can benefit from the study of intercultural rhetoric, Connor cites specific examples of some U.S. universities that provide different intercultural opportunities for American students through web-based learning. Of course, web-based conferencing does not provide the exact same kind of experiences face-to-face interaction does. Non-the-less it is important because nowadays intercultural communication has been complicated by not only race, class, gender and education, but also by the influx of global capitalism and transnational border crossing. Intercultural rhetoric should therefore be introduced in all classes, at all levels, and with different groups of students.

On a more practical note, Connor adds that there are two effective approaches to the study of learners' written discourses; they are (1) a top-down corpus-based analysis, and (2) ethnography. In contrast to a bottom-up corpus-based analysis that emphasizes the lexio-grammatical pattern of a text, the top-down approach is more functional. Focusing on rhetorical moves, such as definition, classification, and

argumentation, the top-down corpus-based analysis helps teachers of English understand and “operationalize” the concept of politeness in different cultures (60). According to Connor, this can be done by selecting a representative sample of writing from each culture and identifying comparable textual units, for instance moves, discourse and pragmatic functions. These units of analysis should then be confirmed with language users in each culture before quantifying the amount of “these textual universals in each corpus” (49). Ethnography, on the other hand, is an attempt to put texts in contexts. Observations, interviews, and field notes are often used in intercultural rhetoric studies to add richness and accuracy to the interpretation of the textual data. Connor notes that ethnographic research has a great deal of promise for application when data collections are both in L1 and L2 because they will bring about a deeper analysis of international English.

Health communication is not something foreign to those in the fields of global health and community development. However, health literacy is a relatively new arena for ESL and EFL researchers. In Chapter Six, Connor steps outside her areas of expertise to examine how intercultural awareness and training can be helpful in health communication. She studies immigrants who barely speak English but have a dire need to see a healthcare practitioner, and examines physicians that graduated from medical schools outside of the U.S. and Canada who do not fully understand how medical practices in the U.S. might differ from those where they come from due to diversity in cultural backgrounds. Connor writes that, “disease and illness cannot be understood apart from a cultural context” (94). This is why intercultural differences should not and cannot be taken for granted. Starting from 2004, the Indiana University Family Practice Residency Program has initiated a language and culture assessment; specific culture trainings are

being offered in order to facilitate a better communication among medical practitioners and patients.

Intercultural Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom is definitely a decent read. The first few literature review sections are a bit too repetitive; but to those who might be new to the field, these chapters definitely give a very solid background introduction on how intercultural rhetoric has developed and has eventually been recognized as a discipline. Connor's discussion on theories of culture and the application of intercultural rhetoric outside the field are definitely a must-read.