The Influences of cultural characteristics in writing English: Perspectives from multilingual learners

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A B S T R A C T

Research studies have discussed about potential influences of the learners' cultural characteristics on writing in the first language to writing in English. However, only limited bodies of literature highlighted the phenomenon from the learners' perceptions and experiences. Using a case study approach, the current study interviewed two ESL writing learners who come from Indonesia and went to Australian high schools. The audio-recorded interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Findings of the study show that writing in their first and additional languages as well as writing in English do not have significant differences, despite a few difficulties dealing with English grammar. There were several other factors which could also determine learners' performance in writing classes, such as teachers' instruction, teachers' feedback, classroom environment, and home literacy practices. The participants' experiences have demonstrated that intercultural rhetoric (IR) better approached ESL writers as it views culture in complex and dynamic perspectives, and acknowledges learners' different cultural backgrounds. The learners expect that the writing teachers aware of potential cultural differences in their writing and provide more intercultural opportunities. This article also highlights the IR-informed pedagogical approach which can potentially utilize the strengths of multicultural and multilingual writers in ESL classrooms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Language instruction has been encouraged to put culture into consideration. As cultural features are intertwined with language (Crozet & Liddicoat, 1999) , language learners from different backgrounds will inevitably bring their own cultural characteristics to the classroom. The term "culture" encompasses not only the culture of the target language, but also the culture of the learners themselves. If cultural diversity is not considered, it may put those who are not familiar with the cultural norms of English-speaking countries at a disadvantage. Failure to manage learners' culture or incorporate it into the teaching and learning process could result in negative effects on classroom interaction (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2018).

Communicative language teaching has evolved to include a learning approach that emphasizes cultural awareness in language classrooms. The approach is known as intercultural approach, which encourages learners to become critically aware of their own native culture and to approach other cultures without prejudice (Liddicoat, 2022). However, the actual practice of positioning culture in ESL/EFL learning context is still worth further investigation. Multicultural learners need to be appreciated for their own unique characteristics, including

those depicted in writing practices. On the other hand, they are also expected to learn stylistic pattern of English writing. In a classroom, second or foreign language learners are required to develop intercultural competence as they participate in interactive process of learning to write, thus teachers should take account of intercultural aspects in writing.

Numerous studies have concerned on multilingual learners' performance in ESL writing (e.g., Indah, 2017 ; Mott-Smith, 2013 ; Naibaho, 2022). While these studies have offered insightful findings, but they have several limitations. Firstly, they only examined the writing products to conclude learners' writing performance and do not view the phenomenon from the learners' lens. Writing a composition, especially for ESL learners, require complex processes and analyzing the final products alone is not sufficient to identify whether the cultural characteristics affect their English writing. Secondly, little is known about pedagogical paths to deal with culture in teaching writing. Therefore, the purposes of this essay are (1) to discuss the influence of cultural features of writing in first language to writing in English, (2) to reveal learners' experience in writing in her native language and writing in English. An in-depth examination of learners' experience is expected to suggest a clear pedagogical path to teach writing for multilingual and multicultural learners.

1.1 Cultural Characteristics in Learning Writing

Liddicoat (2019) suggests that culture is not static, as it is related to how people deal with everyday life practices. As those routines are also shaped by cultures, possible cultural differences might be found in educational practices. There are two major concepts that views how culture relates to writing. The first one is Contrastive Rhetoric, an approach addressed by Kaplan (1966), who proposes that rhetorical patterns in writing are influenced by the writer's culture. The other is Intercultural Rhetoric, which is based on the same notion that individuals have certain cultural backgrounds which might affect their literacy practices, but developed into a more complex view suggesting that differences in second language writing are not only derived from writer's first language.

Kaplan (1966) believes that the logic depends on the values that people hold by raising a simple sample sentence 'I see him' as the problematic expression which interpretation varies accross cultures. English and Indo-European understand this utterance as a human activity but this sense of meaning will be expressed 'he appears to me' by Eskimo. This notion is, then, utilized to look at the thought patterns embedded in another language practice, which is writing. Kaplan (1966) claims that English writers have linear, deductive, and coherent rhetorical patterns while written texts from Oriental are perceived having features which are the other way around. Asian texts are marked by less cohesive paragraphs, indirect patterns and said to be 'turning and turning in a widening gyre' (p. 10). On the other hand, written texts in Arabic are claimed to contain numerous conjunctions and comma and this is how Arabic writers typically link their ideas.

The stereotypes presented above seem to benefit English-speaking writers, and might lead to overgeneralization that texts composed by second language writers do not constitute good writing criteria. It can be perceived that a good piece of writing is limited to the texts that are created by the native speakers. Added to this, it is also a shady conception in the sense that the learners surveyed at that moment might produce a particular pattern due to their lack of ability, not because of their cultural self, and thus cannot be representative to judge L2 writers superficially.

Connor (2011) carried out a study which aimed at revealing Spanish and Vietnamese learning to read in ESL classroom. Based on the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis, Vietnamese learners will have more difficulty in reading ESL texts, compared to Spanish learners, whose language structures resembles those of English. The result, however, does not agree to the hypothesis since Vietnamese learners' performance is better. The critique of contractive rhetoric is also presented by Forbes (2020) in their research findings, that although the organizational pattern of L1 writing is somewhat different from that of English, foreign language learners can develop skills and strategies which contribute positively to English writing and L1 writing. By implication, contrastive rhetoric fails to prove that learners' cultural background, including their first language, are the main causes of negative transfer. Van der Veen and Meijnen (2001) outline that there seems to be other factors, such as socioeconomic status, parent's level of education, and the language socialization at home, that play apart.

As a shortcoming of contrastive rhetoric has been uncovered, this concept is challenged by intercultural rhetoric (Paltridge et al., 2009), suggesting that a piece of writing cannot only be studied from national culture of its writers but also other disciplinary contexts that involve (Connor, 2011) . This approach offers a more democratic way to see cultural characteristics among learners. It does not only concern with learners' first language or national identity, but admits that culture is also derived from smaller community. Holliday (1999) distinguishes it into large cultures, which denotes normative paradigm of cultures, such as ethnic, nation, international community; and small cultures, which refers to 'any cohesive social grouping' (p. 237) which is reflected in people's activities and bound by specific dynamic practices. This concept of culture is considered more pertinent as the nature of culture is dynamic, rather than static (Connor, 2011 ; Liddicoat, 2019). As writing is acquired within school activities, small culture paradigm can be used to examine its practices.

Classroom has their own culture and according to the illustration in Figure 1, other cultures, such as student culture, national culture, academic culture are overlapping. It can be inferred that large cultures, that is national culture, interact with several smaller cultures, thus learners' literacy practices cannot be identified as the result of large cultures only, including their nationality or mother tongue. Therefore, it could be the case that although cultures in L1 writing might influence L2 writing, culture itself is a complex and changing thus it is not justifiable to stereotype second language writing.
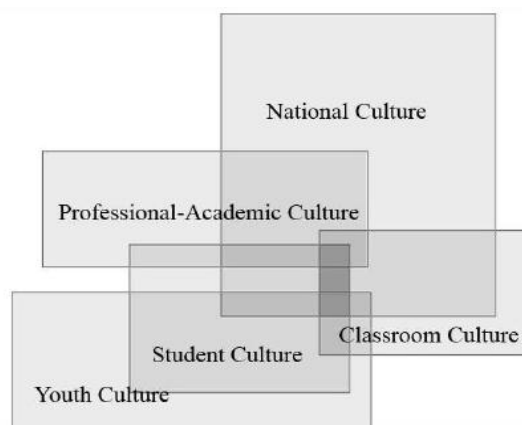

Figure 1. A framework of interacting cultures in educational settings (Holliday, 1999)

1.2 Teaching Writing for Multicultural Learners

As Paltridge et al. (2009) state that the writing process serves an important role in teaching writing interculturally, teachers are required to deal with cultural features in the classroom interaction. Writing instruction in multicultural settings are not only required to take learners to producing good quality of compositions, but it is significant to facilitate each writing sub-processes. The writing processes which consist of planning, formulating, and revising could be tailored based on multicultural learners' needs, as demonstrated in Ng's (2020) study. Ng (2020) adopted contrastive rhetoric approach and investigated the writing process of monolinguals and bilinguals. The biliterate and bilingual learners in the study showed prospective and retrospective behavior when formulating a text, which was not the case among the monolingual participants. From the study, it is somewhat implied that multicultural writers may formulate writing problems differently, thus the teachers should concern and approach them accordingly. More multilingual and multicultural students learn to write English in ESL/EFL contexts, and dynamic model of teaching writing need to be proposed and discussed. Johnstone (2011), further, suggested that recognizing learner's cultural differences should be adopted in school curriculum, for it is vital to guide ESL writing teachers to manage and accommodate them.

Teaching second language writing for the learners from diverse cultural backgrounds needs teachers' awareness. Tsui and Ng (2010) argue that the L2 teachers should be aware of their teaching context and should understand that cultural traditions might shape learners' beliefs and ways of thinking. Those could have an impact to their literacy practices and even further, academic achievement. This notion, however, should also be carefully thought as it might simplify multifaceted nature of learners' multicultural characteristics which could lead to cultural stereotyping. An example of stereotyping second language writers was found in Mott-Smith's (2013) narrative inquiry on a writing class in the US. The writing teacher who worked with Chinese international students considered them as passive and plagiarizers. The generalization towards students with similar cultural backgrounds disadvantaged them since the stereotype of passivity often disregard other factors, such as personality and classroom environment.

The writing activities commonly include generating text itself, spoken and written peer response, teacher-learner conferences, and other communicative practice which involves negotiation. Both talk and text forms might entail learners' values and perspectives, thus teachers in multicultural classroom need to make use of those diversities and explicitly teach cultural variation, as a tool to enhance learning to write in the target language (Connor, 2011). A success story of bringing culture into second language writing classroom was documented in Jimenez's (2001) study where he examined that immigrant students could perform excellent when the teachers encouraged to recognize their cultural backgrounds and connect writing in English to writing in their own language. In addition, Tsui and Ng (2010) shared best practices in Hong Kong secondary schools about effective strategies in teaching second language writing. The teachers skillfully used features in the cultural traditions that they shared with their students in teaching and learning activities. The teachers in the study developed pedagogical strategies in response to students' hesitancy in participating in the learning processes.

2. METHOD

2.1 Research Design

The research employed a case study approach, which could gain comprehensive understanding of a specific individual, community, or institution (Casanave, 2015). The design fits the purpose of the current study which attempts to do in-depth investigation of the extent cultural characteristics influence multilinguals in writing in English and compare the case of two learners as a sample. The study, however, does not aim to generalise findings of the subject into a broader population as the case being studied is a particular bounded phenomenon (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013)

2.2 Participants

This study recruited two participants, who were selected based on purposive sampling. The criteria were whether they are enrolled in ESL classroom and write in English; and whether they are multilingual and/or multicultural learners. These two participants are identified using pseudonyms: Ani and Eka. Ani is an Indonesian who was in Year 8 in one of public schools in Sydney, Australia. She speaks Indonesian and Aceh language, one of the local languages in Indonesia, despite its infrequent use. She began to learn English since she was six years old, when she went to elementary school back in Indonesia. Ani's English class was a heterogeneous classroom, which comprised local and overseas students. Eka is also Indonesian, who can speak Indonesian, Balinese, and English. She went to a public school in Sydney and was in Year 9. She began to learn English since childhood as her parents continued their study in Australia. She and her family went back to Bali, Indonesia for a while before coming back to Australia. Eka did not go to the same school as Ani, but the students in Eka's school were also diverse.

2.3 Instruments

As it is a qualitative case study, the key research instrument is the researcher, who serves as data elicitation (Duff & Anderson, 2015). In addition, the study employed a semi-structured interview, which was audio-recorded with participants' consent. The interviews aim to (1) reveal the influence of cultural features of writing in first language to writing in English, and (2) describe learners' experience in writing in her native language and writing in English. A set of questions was adapted from Zhang (2020), which was adjusted to address the needs of the current study of investigating learners' perceptions and experience on writing in their first language and writing in English. These questions, then, were translated into Indonesian language and tested to two Indonesian high school students before the interview sessions were conducted.

2.4 Data Analysis

The interview recordings were transcribed manually and the transcripts were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The interview transcripts were carefully read and the recurring patterns were identified. Similar patterns of data were color-coded and the similar codes were grouped to generate themes (Miles et al., 2014) which could describe the influence of learners' cultural characteristics of writing in the first language on their writing in English.

3. RESULTS

3.1. The influence of cultural features of writing in first language to writing in English

Both research participants are ESL learners who moved to Australia and have writing experience both in English and in Indonesian. Based on the interview, they conveyed that writing in Indonesian and in English have similarities and differences in several ways. Ani and Eka stated that writing in English and Indonesian is similar in a way that it follows a particular organization of paragraph. Eka highlighted that her writing in Indonesian, her first language, was not really organized compared to her writing in English.

> *Instead, I find my English writing is more well-structured. I write about what is it, and then the example, the implication, and done. In Indonesian, we write so many paragraphs, but not direct... they are not quite organized.* (Eka)

Eka felt that when she wrote in Indonesia, her composition was long-winded and did not have good organization. Ani did not elicit more information about the organization of writing in Indonesian and English as she stated that she had the same approach and practice in organizing paragraphs in both languages.

Related to the differences of writing in Indonesian and English, Ani stated that the challenge of writing in English is thinking about grammar, as Indonesian language does not have that norm.

> *I felt confused about simple present tense, past tense... If we write in Indonesian, we do not need to pay attention to the verbs although the subjects are different... but in English, different subject can have different (forms of) verbs* (Ani)

Ani pointed out that she found it difficult to apply the English grammar rule of tenses and subject-verb agreement which does not exist in her first language. However, Eka, who was in ESL classrooms at her early schooling, did not feel that English grammar is an issue when she writes an English text. When the conversation extended to a point whether she considered English grammar is easy to learn, she conveyed that it was because she was used to writing in English and seem to be familiar of the pattern in English grammar.

> *(Grammar is) Not easy, but I often write in English; I speak English with my parents. I don't know, I may get used to it...* (Eka)

Eka did not feel troubled in terms of English grammar as she also used English at home. From the interview, it was revealed that both of Eka's parents were scholars pursuing doctoral degree in Australia and her parents speak English fluently.

3.2. The learners' experience in writing their native language and writing in English

The research participants shared their writing experience in English and in Indonesian, and they had quite different learning experience. To clarify their experience in more detailed, the current study examined it in three different writing stages, namely pre-writing, drafting, and revising stages. In terms of the pre-writing stage, both participants stated that they had nearly similar activities of pre-writing, both in English and in Indonesian classess.

In terms of the drafting stage, both participants stated that their English and Indonesian language teacher employed several strategies to guide the learners to write. Eka and Ani said that they had their work checked by their English and indonesian teachers. However, Eka felt that her English teacher monitored her writing progress more frequently and gave useful

feedback when she got difficulties developing her paragraphs. When Eka was told to create a narrative text, for example, she was stuck, and the teacher gave a prompt.

> *The teacher will give me specific ideas but do not really tell me what is it, she just tells me a story and let me find out.* (Eka)

Eka also mentioned that another distinct point about writing in English was related to various kinds of texts to compose. Back in Indonesia, she got writing tasks in news article and descriptive texts, while in her English class, she wrote some short transactional texts and argumentative texts, then more texts with longer responses were encountered when she moved to Australia and went into ESL writing classroom.

Furthermore, Ani shared her opinion about how helpful the teacher's writing instruction to guide her to write. She said that her English teacher provides specific instruction before the learners draft their texts. On the other hand, the Indonesian language teacher merely asked them to write with a given topic and sometimes told them to be creative.

> *The instruction is quite similar, but in English, (it is) more detailed ... how you should write it, how to construct ideas, they make us write extended responses—three body paragraphs based on the theme...* (Ani)

In terms of final revising stage, both participants highlighted the feedback that they got after writing a draft. Eka stated that she commonly got feedback in content and organization of the paragraph. She said that the teacher encouraged her to reread her paragraphs and make some improvement. On another occasion, the teacher also had a look at her drafts and discussed if there was something wrong so that she could fix it. On the other hand, Ani felt that she was good at contents, but had some problems on grammar and spelling as the teacher commonly gave her correction in those two aspects in most of her writing assignments. Ani explained that the teacher talked to students personally and motivated them to explore ideas. She stated that the teacher also provided feedback and at the end of writing process by giving scores followed by several comments in a written form. Meanwhile, Eka did not feel troubled with English grammar although she stated that her teacher made a few comments about grammatical mistakes in her submitted composition.

4. DISCUSSION

There have been several studies which focused on multilingual writer' performance in English writing (e.g., Indah, 2017; Mott-Smith, 2013), but limited studies have examined to the extent the writer's cultural characteristics of writing in their native languages affect their English writing. The current study found that the learners can bring their cultural characteristics in Indonesian into their English writing, such as grammatical mistakes which could happen because Indonesian grammar rule is somewhat different from English grammar rule. However, it is important to note that there are other factors which could influence this mistake and looking beyond the large culture is a useful perspective to investigate the practice.

Classroom culture as a part of learners' small cultures plays apart in their writing performance. It is evident as the participants of the study made use of their writing teacher strategies in the classroom. Both participants implicitly stated that their teachers approached writing as a process and they generally benefited from this approach. It agrees with what is suggested by intercultural approach that it is best to look at writing as a process (Paltridge et al.,

2009), and the process in this context consists of helping learners during pre-writing, drafting, as well as making revisions in their drafts.

The participants in the study made use of the teachers' guide and instruction before creating a text. Giving a clear instruction at the beginning of writing activities is essential in ESL classroom (Han & Hiver, 2018). It assists learners to operate from teachers' expectation, which is possibly a very abstract concept, into a set of chronological steps—in the sense that multicultural learners need to be informed of writing instruction in English composition, not to dictate them. It also links to critical contrastive rhetoric that views different cultures have different expectations in writing, indeed, and these different expectations should be conveyed for ESL learners so that they have the same access to be proficient in creating texts. The potentially different writing instruction experienced by multilingual learners in ESL setting could affect their text quality, as stated by Holliday (1999) that classroom culture, as a part of small culture, impacts learners' literacy practices.

Teacher expectation on learners' writing can be performed by inviting them to analyze the writing purpose. For example, in the case that the learners are required to compose an essay, the writing teacher should emphasize if they are expected to argue a position or to just show what they know about a particular subject. Connor (2011, p.70) notes that it is not easy to do since their 'cultural ways of knowing and communicating' have been internalized in long time so that we are rarely able to modify.

However, a continuous and explicit teacher talk of intercultural awareness might help learners to get used to deal with it. It is verified by Casanave (2017) who recommends that those texts can be compared to full text levels. English teachers can have intercultural pre-writing activities in the classroom by asking learners to compare L1 and L2 texts with the same genre. Also, teachers may position culture as a writing topic to highlight various identities in the classroom. Liddicoat (2019) promotes 'your country' topics which might be very authentic theme and the sense of motivation can be gained along writing activities. Yet, it has the potential to stereotype or lead to misleading opinion that learners' cultural perspectives and target language perspectives are mutually exclusive. It might not really benefit immigrant learners, who had left their country as children and have little knowledge about their culture and language in the previous country. They can end up making up the story of the culture they are not familiar of.

In terms of giving feedback, one of the participants in the study admitted that she often made grammar mistakes as the grammatical rules of English are different from those of Indonesian. It is relevant with what is proposed by Forbes (2020) that second language learners do not easily follow target language's pattern but requires time. They dealt with difficulty in choosing the words and structure in texts (Rohmana & Jianggimahastu, 2019). The feedback, however, should not only operate in these criteria but more on meaning-making aspects. It is also better, according to Ortega and Carson (2010), to focus on what the learners can do, other than what they cannot do. Although what the teacher does by giving error correction is not really encouraged in intercultural approach, the teacher still considers non-threatening interaction in providing feedback for the learners. The other participants, on the contrary, did not have a concern about her grammar, despite their similar first language background. She further mentioned that she was used to using English, inckuding at home. It could imply that intellectual climate at home helped to learn and write better. Van der Veen and Meijnen's (2001) study on Turkish and Moroccan students in Netherlands discovered that students' poorer performance including poorer quality texts could be influenced by intellectual practices at home.

However, I should state that the examination of the participants' learning experiences at home has fallen outside the scope of the current study. Future research could explore greater relation between home practices and learners' writing in English and in their first language.

Teachers should position cultures as the complex concept that operates beyond large cultures so they will work on more considerate criteria in judging learners' work. However, the fact that local varieties of English still could not be easily accepted in academic writing tradition (Connor, 2011) is somewhat problematic. Presenting techniques to deal with English writing might not always make the learners a 'good writer'. Therefore, the indicators of 'good writing' should be accessible for L2 writers. It can be achieved by giving more feedback in terms of meaning-making, rather than error correction. By giving such comments, it is also expected that learners will be reinforced to focus on content without being too much worried and burdened of critiques on form. Giving such feedback is a part of intercultural rhetoric-informed pedagogical practice by emphasizing on learners' writing processes.

The discourse of intercultural rhetoric in writing classroom should not stop in appreciating writers who come from different cultural backgrounds, but also extend to making use of second language writers' strengths (Belcher, 2014). Ortega & Carson (2010) considered multilingual writers having 'multicompetence' (p.50) as they can employ various meaning making resources in composing a text. In addition, as they are exposed to more than one culture or language, they can even express more sophisticated ideas which are close to the complex contexts of their lives (Coady & Escamilla, 2005). Hence, teachers should encourage learners to focus on processes which can later lead the learners to be successful in creating writing text, instead of just focusing on their final work and judge them with deficit perspective.

4. CONCLUSION

Despite a widely-criticized concept of contrastive rhetoric, it has pioneered an awareness to cultural differences in second language learners' writing. However, the way we perceive learners' writing practices must not be stereotypical considering that multidisciplinary contexts—instead of a single large culture, can influence writing in English. ESL teachers should make use of culture to assist learners acquiring English writing skills as a language cannot be learned successfully without understanding its cultural context. It is necessary for writing teachers to be aware of potential cultural differences in their writing and provide more intercultural opportunities for the learners by empowering writing processes, doing appreciation towards cross-cultural texts, as well as focusing on content feedback.

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