

“A Mass Kaleidoscope of Blooming Colour”: Rhetorical Preferences in the Expository Writing of Caribbean University Students

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Abstract

Two groups of eleven university students, one group composed of Oklahoma natives and one composed of students from English-dominant Caribbean nations, were asked to write a descriptive essay. The essays were analyzed for differences in content, length, and in the use of linguistic features such as subordinate clauses, adjectives, and adverbs. The Caribbean students wrote longer essays that made greater use of the previously mentioned linguistic features. Focus group interviews conducted with both groups revealed differences in English language instruction with the Caribbean students more likely to have taken separate courses in Literature and Writing while the Oklahoma students tended to take English courses where all aspects of language arts were taught in one course. Further, both groups expressed differences in terms of what each valued in university writing in particular and writing in general. Implications for writing instruction for international university students are discussed.

Keywords: Composition, freshman, international students, expository, Caribbean

Since the pioneering work of Robert Kaplan in 1966, there has been a great deal of interest in writing behavior and writing pedagogy as it applies to students from different cultural groups. While his notion of “contrastive rhetoric” has been criticized for its use of Western rhetorical techniques as a standard by which other techniques are judged, Kaplan’s (1966) and Ulla Connors’ (1996) studies created an interest in intercultural rhetoric that, fortunately, continues to inform both ESL and composition pedagogy. Many colleges and universities, thus, now offer English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses to provide scaffolding for international students learning to write in English. As discussed by Hinds (1987), these university writing programs recognize that, while English is a “writer responsible” language (with an expectation of clear unambiguous prose), speakers of other languages such as Japanese place the burden of understanding on the reader. Thus, these EAP courses provide opportunities for international students to gain an understanding of various academic genres and provide a way for these students to learn the explicit conventions and rhetorical strategies of college-level writing in English-speaking nations (Hyon, 1996).

While such courses certainly assist non-native English speakers in acquiring an understanding of the conventions of academic writing, an area conspicuous in its scarcity involves differences in writing behaviors and rhetorical strategies used by different groups of native English speakers. It is not that such research does not exist. Wolfram and Whiteman (1971) found

dialect “interference” in the writing of African American students. Farr and Daniels (1986) called upon writing teachers to be both cognizant of and sympathetic toward the impact of dialect differences on the English composition performance of students from different dialect communities. Ball (1996) suggests that the organization of expository discourse is significantly affected by cultural preference (and not by simply linguistic features) and years of schooling and that a cultural preference for specific organizational patterns can be viewed as an obstacle to or as a resource for successful literacy-related experiences. While Norment (1995; 2002) has similarly studied some of these issues, his analyses were still more concerned with dialect than they were with culture. More recently, Craig, Zhang, Hensel, and Quinn (2009) found that speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) score lower on standardized reading tests than do speakers of more “mainstream” dialects and advocated “dialect shifting” instruction for these students. Indeed, most of the research in this area explores the relationship between AAVE and writing performance. Still, much of the research deals with binaries between standard and non-standard dialects but fails to consider Kachru’s (1997) concentric circle model of English in which different varieties of English exist across countries and linguistic communities for which English is the dominant language.

Despite studies such as these, however, teachers of First-Year Composition (FYC) and ESL sometimes tend to treat the rhetorical strategies of various groups of native-English speaking students as identical and, indeed, informed by similar cultural constructs. This seems to suggest that the study of cultural differences between native-English speakers is necessary. On many college campuses, it seems as if writing faculty often consider students from primary English-speaking nations as being more similar than they are different. In the words of Bennett (2002), we perceive students from the US, Canada, Britain, the Caribbean, Australia, and New Zealand as occupying the same “Anglosphere” when it comes to their organizational and rhetorical strategies. At Cameron University (the site of the present study), for example, writing faculty tend to dismiss some of the differences evidenced by students from our Caribbean population as stemming from educational deficiencies as opposed to being rooted in cultural differences. Many of our FYC colleagues tend to believe that, because students from nations as diverse as the US, Jamaica, and South Africa all learned English as their primary language, their approaches to composition will be (and should be) identical. Any deviation is often explained away as resulting from differing qualities of or, indeed, deficiencies in secondary education. Thus, a rather simplistic view of cultural impact is adopted even as analyses of literary works from Anglophone nations show differences in the literary corpora produced by writers from these various countries (e.g., Donnell, 2006).

In an effort to explore cultural differences, Carney (2009) studied a sample of university students from English-dominant Caribbean nations and found that their persuasive writing was far more indirect than that produced by American-born students. Specifically, these Caribbean student writers used inductive rather than deductive rhetorical organizational strategies when engaging in argumentation. These students explained that their rhetorical preferences were informed by values of “politeness” and “face-saving.” The present study seeks to continue this exploration of how students from English-dominant Caribbean nations approach typical

university writing tasks. Specifically, the present study looks at expository writing and seeks to illuminate differences in how students from English-dominant Caribbean nations differ from American university students in their approach to this staple of First-Year Composition.

The University

Cameron University is a small (6000 student) university in Lawton Oklahoma. Over 250 of these students are from other countries with the majority of them coming from English-dominant nations in the Caribbean (e.g., Trinidad & Tobago, Jamaica, Grenada). Whatever their country of origin, students at Cameron University are required to take freshman writing courses, the level of which depends upon scores on the American College Testing (ACT) examinations, other standardized tests, or our own in-house writing proficiency exams. Students are placed in one of several courses depending upon test scores and identified needs:

- (1) Basic Composition Skills – a remedial course involving sentence-level concerns
- (2) Developmental Writing – a remedial course involving paragraph writing
- (3) English for Academic Purposes (limited to non-native English speakers)
- (4) Freshman Composition I
- (5) Freshman Composition II

The Sample

Eleven students from English-dominant Caribbean nations volunteered for the study. Of the eleven, eight were female and the group had a mean age of 26.8 years. The nations represented were St. Kitts and Nevis (4), St. Lucia (3), Grenada (2) and Dominica (2). All had completed Freshman Composition I within the previous six months and four had been in one or both of the lower-level writing courses. Eleven students from Oklahoma (each of whom was asked to verify the city in which they were born) also volunteered for the study. Of this sample, six were female. This group had a mean age of 28.1 years. All but one had completed Freshman Composition I within the past six months. (That particular student was exempt from Composition courses because of very high scores on a standardized test.) None had taken the lower-level writing courses.

The groups were constituted in this fashion in order to hold a few variables constant, the most important of which was writing proficiency. Unfortunately, because of the voluntary nature of the study, the sample of Oklahoma students lacked experience in the remedial courses offered. Also, while it would have been ideal to have studied two groups composed of equal numbers of men and women, women were the majority of both groups.

Method

All subjects were given the following simple writing prompt: Describe your favorite place. The prompt was written in this way for a few reasons. First, it was accessible to all participants. No background research needed to be performed. Second, the word “describe” suggested the

participants use descriptive language (i.e., adjectives and adverbs). Participants were given 30 minutes to compose the essay.

The completed essays were analyzed by the primary researcher in the study and two student research assistants, one from Oklahoma and one from Trinidad and Tobago. Analyses included word counts, adjective and adverb counts, and the use of subordinate clauses and transitions, all of which are generally regarded as hallmarks of good expository writing (Lavelle & Zuercher 2001). Additionally, the essays written by Caribbean students were analyzed for differences in dialect. *The Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Allsop, 1996), as well as the grammatical features described by Aceto (2006), were used as reference guides for words, phrases, or syntactical structures that were unfamiliar to the researchers. Again, two researchers had to agree on the use of a particular phrase or word or agree that an observed grammatical feature was representative of “Caribbean English.”

After the essays were written, the two groups convened (separately) for hour-long focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The following interview protocol was used:

- (1) Describe your high school or secondary school English classes. How did your teachers approach writing instruction?
- (2) Describe your primary or elementary school experiences in reading and writing.
- (3) What did your education tell you was the most important in writing?
- (4) What is good writing?
- (5) What is the best way to persuade someone?
- (6) How do you view your audience?
- (7) What do you think your audience wants when they read what you have written?
- (8) Do you worry about offending people when you express your opinion?
- (9) Do you picture a reader as you write?
- (10) What do you think college writing courses should do?

Because of the nature of the focus group method, discussions were essentially loosely-structured and evolved over the course of 60 minutes. The protocol, however, ensured that some common information would be collected between the two groups. The responses were compiled and recorded by the three researchers.

Essay Results

Preliminary results indicated that the sample of students from English-dominant Caribbean nations all demonstrated significantly higher word counts (a mean of 296 for the Caribbean students as opposed to a mean of 212 for the Oklahoma students), significantly higher numbers (both raw numbers and percentages) of both adjectives and adverbs in their compositions (84, as opposed to 61), and significantly more subordinate clauses (11 as opposed to 4). Indeed, t-tests performed showed these differences to be significant at the .05 level in all cases. The only feature measured that did not differ between the two groups was that involving the use of transition words or phrases (e.g., “first,” “next,” “on the other hand”). The importance of using these markers was identified by both groups during focus group interviews as an important aspect of writing. There is a more detailed description of the focus groups later in this article. See Table 1 below for a graphic representation of these results:

Table 1. Linguistic Features in Student Essays

Writing Features	Caribbean Students	Oklahoma-Born Students
Average word count for essay	296 words	212 words
Average number of descriptors (adjectives and adverbs) in essay	84	61
Average number of subordinate clauses in essay	11	4

From the results reported above, it would seem that the Caribbean students wrote significantly longer essays in the time allotted them and composed essays that featured more description and sentence variety. Scheppegrell (1998) suggests that these features are often scarce or absent in even very competent school-based writing in the United States and the fact that the Caribbean student writing featured them to such an extent is remarkable. Beers and Nagy (2009) suggest that the use of subordination in college writing is positively related to overall quality of essays in a number of academic genres. Yet, at our university, Caribbean student writing is often viewed as inferior to that produced by competent American-born students and this perception may have more to do with the fact that the writing produced by Caribbean students does not conform to expectations of what “freshman writing” should look like rather than with any objective matter of quality. Specifically, our faculty members often suggest that the writing produced by Caribbean students is often much too “ornate” and often lacks explicit topic sentences. At any rate, this is an interesting matter worthy of further research.

Finally, no “Caribbean slang” (as defined by Aceto, 2006) was found in the writing of the Caribbean students. Typical examples of the writing of the Caribbean students include the following:

- (1) “Grenada is known worldwide as the “Isle of Spice.” This name was given because the island is known for its famous spices like nutmeg (black gold), cinnamon...and cocoa which, of course, is used by many countries to make chocolate...It’s always fun to watch the North American tourist trying to play cricket.” (Female, Grenada, 25 years old)
- (2) “My island, the mass kaleidoscope of blooming colours...Imagine an experience you have had, one full of merriment, good company, and fine cuisine. It’s enough to leave you exhausted, right?” (Male, St. Kitts and Nevis, 23 years old)
- (3) “The tall buildings, the ever-present lights, and the presence of people on the streets inspired me. The buildings give me hope because they bring out the motto, ‘The sky is the limit.’” (Male, Nevis, 25 years old).

Typical examples from the Oklahoma sample include:

- (1) “That takes me to Red River, NM where I spent many summers in my youth and have taken my daughter to several times. It’s a ski town in the winter. I enjoy the cool mountain air in the summer. (Male, Oklahoma, 42 years old)

- (2) “The broad notion of having a ‘favorite place’ is one that I have a difficult time identifying. In the course of my life, I’ve been to a vast number of places that all express different types of attractiveness. (Male, Oklahoma, 19 years old)

The Caribbean students’ compositions wasted little time getting to the description of the “favorite place” while the Oklahoma students tended to write one or two paragraphs introducing the work, describing the processes they went through in choosing a favorite place, or listing the criteria for the choice of a favorite. As stated above, the Caribbean students’ essays were longer and featured more adverbs, adjectives, and subordinate clauses.

Focus Group Results

Focus group transcripts were evaluated using methods described by Krueger and Casey (2000). The transcripts were read by the three researchers and emergent themes were suggested. Again, if both researchers could not agree on the “meaning” of a particular statement, that statement did not become part of the analysis. The major emergent themes, then, that came out of the focus groups were as follows:

- (1) *Previous writing instruction.* Both samples described very different experiences in previous writing instruction. The Caribbean students, although coming from different countries, described more reading, more opportunities for in-class writing, and, surprisingly, more and earlier experiences with standardized (i.e., state-sponsored) testing aimed at writing skills than did the Oklahoma students. All the Caribbean students discussed taking separate classes in English (where most of the writing instruction occurred) and English literature. Students in the Oklahoma sample discussed taking only one English course each year in Middle School through High School which combined all aspects of English studies.
- (2) *Audience.* Although both groups described notions of audience as important in any sort of writing, most of the Caribbean students suggested that they actually pictured a physical human being reading their work as they were engaged in writing. Two of the respondents expressed the fact that they visualized a former teacher reading their work as they wrote. The Oklahoma students tended to speak of a vague collective notion of “audience” in a more disembodied manner.
- (3) *“Good” Writing.* Both groups expressed that they valued “entertainment” in expository writing (Cooper, 1993). Here, however, the two groups expressed some differences. For the Caribbean students, entertainment was something they valued in the work of others as well as in their own efforts. For the Oklahoma students, they wanted to be entertained when they read the work of others but tried to avoid “flowery” language or too much detail in their own writing. Two of the Oklahoma students explained that this rather “minimalist” sort of approach seems in line with what First-Year Composition instructors at our university tend to reward.

Discussion

Making general statements from the present results is difficult due to the size of the samples and the fact that both samples were predominantly female. Rhetorical scholars such as Tannen (1997) and Johnstone (2008) suggest that women's communication is, indeed, qualitatively different than men's. Similarly, these are two very small samples. What they seem to indicate, however, is that students from English-dominant Caribbean nations are influenced in rather robust and permanent fashion by the educational system and the cultural values of their countries. Indeed, these present results tend to support the findings of our previous study (Carney, 2009). There, however, while colleagues tended to view student resistance to deductive argument strategy as a deficiency, the study posited the existence of cultural influences. Here, it appears that the educational system throughout the English-dominant Caribbean impresses on students the value of language and, indeed, immerses them in English in ways that US schools do not. While it may not be fair or correct to conclude that our Caribbean university students in this study were more sophisticated writers than their US-born counterparts, it seems fair to say that they are more willing to use more "literary" styles and techniques in their writing and that they place a premium on these techniques. Scholars of Caribbean literature (e.g., Donnell 2006) have long asserted the existence of a uniquely Caribbean way of writing that colors the literary output of the region. It would seem that this way of writing is reflective of the values that the educational systems of Grenada, St. Kitts, and other English-dominant nations impart throughout primary and secondary school.

What are the implications, then, of this study¹? For the Oklahoma students, there is a perception that university writing teachers value a rather template-driven minimalist sort of expository writing. All of the native-born students interviewed here value writing that entertains and holds the interest of the reader yet, in their own writing, they seek something quite different. This is not the case with the Caribbean students who value vivid description in their own writing and in the writing of others. In the previous study (Carney 2009), it was suggested that cultural factors may lead to some difficulty in Caribbean students employing the Toulmin model of argumentation (cf. Toulmin, 1958) and, as a result, they often receive lower grades on assignments involving argumentation. Indeed, while rhetorical scholars recognize that the Toulmin model (a model of argumentative writing that requires an explicit claim, relevant reasons that support the claim, counterarguments, and rebuttals) is a cultural construct, it is still part-and-parcel of Freshman writing courses in the United States. Here, however, many of the same cultural values identified in the previous study also encourage the Caribbean students to write much more interesting (albeit sometimes overly dramatic) exposition than do their Oklahoma-born counterparts. Hopefully, as the data is more fully analyzed in the present study, a picture of the differences of these two groups of university students will emerge that might better assist FYC faculty in designing Freshman writing courses that better serve both American and international students.

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