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ABSTRACT

The fact that a writer's culture influences the composing style is undeniable. Spanish speakers writing in English often allow their points to "leap around," perhaps constituting a pattern the instructor does not see. In "Beyond Culture," Edward Hall explains that cultures operate under either "monochronic" or "polychronic" time. In the monochronic United States, events happen one after another according to a time schedule. In a polychronic system, however, several things might be happening simultaneously because the culture places emphasis on people rather than on preset arrangements. When an instructor lived in Mexico, planned outings were always delayed because someone would be late--a scheduled time had limited meaning. The way a culture measures time is indicative of a world view and permeates other areas of life, including composing patterns. The instructor knows how to focus on a thesis statement when composing and to keep asking how each little point fits in. But the result would not be the same for someone without training. Many students from polychronic cultures, such as Mexico's, produce essays that take roundabout paths, that are indirect, circuitous, and resistant of directness. Professor Raul Ybarra believes that the indirections students sometimes follow stem from a predilection for storytelling; in storytelling, digressions are common. The process of switching or adapting rhetorical styles is a complicated one that involves many components of composing and thinking, but by showing students that their cultural influences are natural, they will be more likely to accept the fact that changing their writing styles is an attainable and worthwhile goal. (Contains 8 references.) (NKA)

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Mexican Indirection: How to Help Mexican ESL
Writers Channel Their Energies into Focused Essays

D.R. Ransdell

Last semester I was pleased by April's essay on birth order. She had used textbook sources to explain how the first-borns are usually responsible, ambitious, and leaders. I thought, yes, that's me. The middle children are rootless, striving to catch up to the first-borns and leaving the family rather than trying to find their role in it. My brother lives, not in Illinois, but Switzerland. Proof enough. The youngest children's need for attention leads them to be affectionate, personable, and outgoing. April had pegged my sister to a "T." I wrote down the "A" grade guiltily, though, aware that part of my reaction to her paper stemmed from my personal experiences and the fact that what she said rang true. That night, talking to a Mexican co-worker, I mentioned the nice paper I had read and asked Juan where he was in the birth order: he was seventh out of ten. Whoops. April's research wasn't written broadly enough to include a multicultural perspective. April I could forgive, but as for me, I was hovering close to what Edward T. Hall would label "cultural irrationality" (219), the inability to transcend cultures. I was so entrenched in the Anglo mode that I hadn't even realized it, and of course I had assumed that Juan would fit inside.

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But what happens when Juan is not a friend, but a composition student? How often have I tried to make my non-Western students fit into Anglo-oriented research patterns? Through reading newspaper and magazine articles and writing five-paragraph essays, many of my American first-year composition students have developed a sense that they need to state a thesis in their essays and that the initial sentences of body paragraphs should introduce key points. My second language students do not find these conventions automatic and sometimes struggle to recognize and use them. Although Robert Kaplan has received endless criticism for his attempts to draw other cultures' composing styles, the fact that a writer's culture influences the composing style is undeniable. It's no coincidence that 90% of my Asian students who come from abroad attempt to "hide" their main points in paragraphs near the end of the paper. They're following established cultural patterns that are used in speech and writing styles, too. But what about essays in which the points seem to leap around? I've noticed it especially with Spanish speakers. At first, it seems as if the writers have gotten distracted or have the kind of short attention span we might associate with basic writers. More logically, they are allowing cultural influences to affect their composing styles. What seems like "jumping from point to point" constitutes a pattern I don't see. These writers may be drawing upon a polychronic way of life or other cultural patterns as a way of composing, only to get caught red-handed in the expectations of

Western writing styles. It is by recognizing their strategies and helping them understand their readers' confusion that we can help our second language students write effective essays.

Evidence

Last semester, Jaime, an Hispanic student who grew up speaking Spanish and English, wrote an evaluation on Jerry McGuire. Jaime's thesis was that Director Cameron Crowe was able to portray determination, loyalty, and resistance to adversity. His second paragraph read as follows:

Jerry McGuire, a sports agent had everything going great for him. He had his life together and most of the biggest clients in pro sports. Crowe's ideas helped make this film believable by introducing real athletes to the film. Athletes such as Johnnie Morton, Drew Bledsoe, and Kijana Carter all make this film realistic enough to catch the viewer's attention. At the beginning of the film Crowe gives the viewer the idea of how good life is for Jerry and how everybody loves him. Except he takes a 180 degree turn into the film when McGuire gets fired for something he did that he thought was morally right, which was to write a mission statement for the company. The only thing though is that his ideas were what most companies would not even waste their time on even though it was the right thing to do. When Crowe started to show how

McGuire hated himself and his life, he was trying to get his point across that in this world today people don't really care about anyone but themselves.

This paragraph doesn't match the thesis Jaime offered in his introduction. It starts as a plot summary, but ends with a new point, that people only care about themselves. This paragraph typifies the rest of the essay, which contains other examples of non sequiturs and a variety of possible thesis statements.

When I got to the sentence about "real athletes," I wasn't sure how to react. My first emotion was surprise. My second was worry. I was tempted to categorize Jaime as a basic writer, someone who had had little practice putting ideas to paper and expressing himself in structured ways. Yet Jaime fit the definition of "basic writer" only inexactly. According to Lynn Quitman Troyka, basic writers are people who, given an hour, write three-sentence essays, people who "need to immerse themselves in language in all its forms" (13). Jaime had written five other paragraphs of similar length, and his essay was a third longer than I'd called for in the assignment. His sentences, though not grammatically perfect, were often complex.

I was perplexed. After skimming the essay for a rare third time, I was still confused. I kept writing in the margins, "This seems like a possible thesis." I couldn't guess at his goal for the paper, but I was intrigued by the possibilities. He hadn't run out of things to write about, but the way his ideas intruded on one another prevented him from making a coherent statement.

If there was a pattern, I couldn't find it, even when I tried to think his points through in Spanish. For a possible explanation, I turn to the work of anthropologist Edward T. Hall.

Edward Hall and the Polychronic Mode

One day after class three students approach my desk at the same time, all with the harried look of someone already late for the next appointment. The first is Nirav, who wants to ask about a rough draft I'd commented on. The second is Yu-Min, who wants to know how to get grammar help. Mann wants to make up a vocabulary quiz from the day before.

D.R.: (to Nirav) Did my comments make sense?

Nirav: Yes, but . . .

D.R.: Okay, wait. Yu-Min, what did you need?

Yu-Min: I don't know where to go for some help on my poor grammar.

D.R.: (to Yu-Min) Wait, I'm not sure. (to Man) Here's the quiz. (to Nirav) Where were we? Wait. (to Yu-Min) Try the Writing Center. I know they have hours in the afternoon. (to Nirav) Now, Nirav, what didn't you understand?

Instead of following a logical, orderly pattern, I bounced back and forth between students. I don't know if the frenetic system was any more effective than another would have been, and I remember thinking that the students probably thought I was peculiar. But I wasn't temporarily insane. I was demonstrating

polychronic behavior.

In Beyond Culture Edward T. Hall explains that cultures, by and large, operate under either "monochronic" or "polychronic" time. In the monochronic system used by the US, England, and other Northern European countries, events happen one after another according to a schedule set by the clock (17). In a culture that runs on "polychronic time," several things might be happening simultaneously because the culture places emphasis on people rather than on preset arrangements. Personal relationships interrupt the work schedule because unscheduled visits are more important than schedules.

I have experienced polychronic cultures on a personal level. When I lived in Rhodes, Greece, my boss would often call the instructors into his office, then answer phone calls or admit other callers while we were waiting. While I thought his behavior was odd and ineffective, I'd noticed similar strategies in the local grocery store and decided they were "typically Greek." This behavior wasn't new to me. While schedules in Greece seemed haphazard, in Mexico they had served as rough estimates. Planned outings were always delayed because someone would be late, and the reason would be along the lines of, "Oh, So-and-So stopped by," or "my mom asked me to run an errand." A scheduled time had limited meaning.

The way a culture measures time has an impact on other actions. It's indicative of a world-view and permeates other areas of life--including composing patterns. Of course,

individual styles and contexts dictate variances. Even within a culture labeled as polychronic or monochronic, there are exceptions--bits of behavior or people who don't fit the pattern. Most teachers have to wear polychronic hats at one time or another, as we get bombarded by all kinds of questions and requests at the same time. It's a trait that our profession teaches us--the context of the classroom demands polychronic action. I would imagine an emergency room team would draw on polychronic strategies as well, as would other professions where speed has an impact on the results.

But in my private life I often act in a polychronic mode as well. While I don't always manage to privilege people over lists of planned tasks, for every time that I can think of when I put off writing a personal letter in order to grade essays, I can think of other times when the work sat on the table so that I could have a heart-to-heart with a friend in need. Since high school, I've worked on several projects simultaneously because the system works for me; I get writing ideas while performing music, and inadvertently practice musical passages in my head while preparing classes or doing research. Time is an issue I've treated more consciously. Ever since living in Mexico, I've felt devious towards the American sense of strict time. I'm often a few minutes late on purpose--as if arriving on time somehow shows too much respect for a thing as arbitrary as a clock.

Even though I might act in a polychronic mode from time to time, when it comes to writing, by now I know what to do.

Instead of accepting stray thoughts, I focus on my thesis statement, once I've uncovered one, and keep asking myself how each little point fits in. I've gathered strategies that help me write effective paragraphs because the importance of focus and organization has been drilled into me--I suppose that's what the dissertation process was for. But what would happen to someone who hadn't had much training? Would their written work look like Jaime's?

Other Stories of Indirection

Although Jaime's case was an exaggeration, it reminded me of other papers I'd received from Spanish speakers in the past. In "A Better Classroom," Diana had jumped from a thesis statement that "students and teachers should be close" to a conclusion that "graduation has to be the number one concern for a better and brighter future;" her essay did seem to fit Kaplan's model of the Romance writer who starts in one direction but takes various twists and turns before finding a way out (16). Classmate Germán tried to discuss the importance of power in "Power and Family." He started by explaining that God controlled the universe, then almost contradicted himself by explaining how much control his mother had and then how much control his father had. In the end he went back to the explanation of God and church--this is almost the kind of circuitous route that I (and Kaplan) would expect from an Asian student trying to save the main point for later in the paper, even though Germán had introduced the point up front

as well.

I am not alone in noticing essays that take roundabout paths. At the 1997 Conference on College Composition and Communication, ESL composition instructor Ted E. Johnston noted that his own Mexican students often wrote essays that were indirect, circuitous, and resistant of directness. Are these essays the results of polychronism? Is it possible that these directions are influenced by Spanish, or the way Spanish is spoken?

Helen Fox points out that in Spanish, it's legitimate to ramble and digress (22). This doesn't stem from inexperience, but from an expected way of communication. Perhaps that style of communication carries over. Last month in class we workshopped a draft that had good analysis but whose structure confused the audience. Afterwards the writer came up, and explained that it was hard for her to write in English because in her native language, and she made a zig-zag in the air, speakers were allowed and even expected to go back and forth between points, rather than move straight from one to the other. Cecilia told me that she'd never heard of Robert Kaplan, nor had she studied composition theory. But Cecilia is from Bolivia, and her first language is Spanish. When I asked her to jot down her ideas in writing, she explained that Spanish is a richer language than English, that "Spanish is more 'colorful' due to its many words and ways of describing things . . . the language becomes more complex as there are more tools to decorate written works." She

pointed to the tradition of Cervantes and García Márquez as prime examples.

Perhaps it's true that the typical Spanish vocabulary is more extended, allowing for a more flowery style, but there's a necessary connection to culture. Cecilia also wrote:

I believe that the reason why Spanish people write this way is found in the culture; the way people are. Many Latin Americans never talk straightforward. They tend to 'go around the bush,' taking longer to get to the point. This is the way people in Latin America talk, think, and write. Americans and also other people from Northern countries like England and Germany tend to be very direct and that is reflected in the way they write. I am not sure why this cultural difference exists. A hypothesis will be the fact that Northern cultures have always had a different notion of time. In general, time is more valuable in the US than in Latin America, or in Germany than in Spain. People are always more busy and in a hurry; they need to get quick to the point when they write and talk too. That is probably why this situation influenced the language and the way of thinking of the people.

Of course, I was pleased that Cecilia corroborated my thoughts about time, but there is also power in the thought of being straight-forward. Somehow, it's more polite to avoid being direct, as has often been noticed in Asian writing styles. It

has to do with basic human communication--how people represent themselves to one another and help one another make sense of things.

Cecilia offered an overall view of her "problem" in writing: I tend to build my point in a paragraph little by little until I finally make it. The English style works the other way around, because the point is clearly made at the beginning, and what follows is the supporting material that only backs up the original point. I find this approach challenging because it requires you to have a clear idea of what you are writing about from the beginning. I think it is easier to give my background and then make my point. This way, I feel the reader will be warned about what to expect. The problem of my approach is that the reader can get confused and get different feelings. By stating the main point early, there are fewer chances that the reader will get lost in the process of reading. As I said, it is easier for me to write this way, but it is also harder for me to read something written with this approach.

Delaying the point until the end of the text does pose interesting problems. From what Cecilia says, changing one's writing should be a simple matter of reversing the points. While this may work for Cecilia, the twists and turns of Jaime's paper call for more than a reversal.

Helen Fox would explain the difference between Jaime's style and the expected one as an attempt to be holistic (27), an attempt to cover the whole picture. A holistic system emphasizes how things are interconnected, but to the Anglo reader, these connections aren't readily apparent. As Fox's student Carla noted, in the US the writing seemed childish "because we don't see with these connections" (21). Carla was prepared to make mental jumps while she was reading an essay, but her American counterparts were too thorough. Instead of letting her think through the essay, the American writers dragged her through points in a particular way.

Professor Ybarra explains the connections in terms of a more conceptual cultural feature. He believes that the indirections students sometimes follow stem from a predilection for storytelling. In storytelling, digressions are common. The narrator needs the audience to know background details, but those details aren't assembled in a certain order. Chronological details can be structured, but other narrative elements, such as setting or tone, cannot be. Because storytelling is an important part of communication, the style transfers from one language and genre to the next.

There are two main problems in adapting to a new style. Because people are usually unaware of their own cultural patterns, it's very hard to change them. In addition, learners may exhibit resistance because they don't want to accept another identity. Fox's student from Brazil, for example, was upset when

her friends back home told her she sounded different on the phone (83); María didn't even want them to notice a small change. (For an extended discussion of the difficulty of accepting a Western identity to produce acceptable academic writing, see Fan Shen's essay.) No matter the cause, the result of using an indirect system is that the writing is criticized by Western readers who see it as disorganized. The professors of Fox's own graduate students often assumed the students were basic writers (xiv); that's how odd the students' writing seemed to someone with little experience reading it. No matter how much we might appreciate students' cultural influences, the challenge is still to help students write texts that will be effective in US settings.

Strategies for Assisting "Indirect" Writers

It's important to investigate the "polychronic" or "indirect" style of writing because if we can identify the problem, we make it easier to approach and to modify. What to do? Helen Fox made most of her observations from students she was tutoring. She had blocks of time with these students and had the chance to analyze their writing styles thoroughly. As a classroom instructor, I don't have forty minutes to respond to a single essay--reading Jaime's paper got that evening's schedule completely messed up. I need a quick, dirty solution, and so do other classroom instructors whose students turn in essays with similarly unfamiliar patterns. When I receive an "illogical"

essay, I tell myself the following:

1. This essay might represent an unfamiliar logic. Rather than thinking, 'this lazy student threw these ideas together within ten minutes,' I have to look for patterns, and encourage the writers to make the kinds of connection that I, as a Western-trained reader, will be able to follow and make sense of. Often, this means that rather than failing a paper that derails, I need to insist on a rewrite.

2. Some students will be unable to approach a rewrite without assistance. I will have to explain how, after each extraneous sentence, I felt lost. Jaime and I went through several of his paragraphs in this slow, painful manner. After he read each sentence, I asked how it tied to the sentence before or to the thesis. In places where he couldn't explain the connection, he knew he needed to revise.

3. I need to help students see that it's good to have extra ideas. The information that gets rejected doesn't have to be "lost"; it might serve in future essays.

4. I should encourage them to keep trying. As Duane Roen, the Composition Director at Arizona State University, used to tell us graduate students, "nobody gets worse and worse. Everybody gets better and better." I might offer an analogy that explains the

difficulty of the task. My own favorite is Peter Elbow's explanation of writing being the process of wrestling a snake into a bottle (18). Unfortunately, students won't receive high grades just because they've had to struggle, but they will become more critical thinkers and hence stronger writers.

Conclusion

Cultural influences on writing make the job of the composition instructor especially challenging. I wish I had a handy way to help students jump into the Anglo mode and adapt their writing styles to practices that are readily valued in the American academic system. This paper, I suppose, is an attempt to find a short cut, or at least a long steady road, towards achieving that goal. The truth is that the process of switching or adapting rhetorical styles is a complicated one that involves many components of composing and thinking; perhaps we would feel cheated if we could somehow plug our writing into an electronic dictionary and change styles. I do know, though, that by looking at this process in detail, I will be more likely to serve my students. By showing them that their cultural influences are natural, they will be more likely to accept the fact that changing their writing styles, at least on certain occasions, is an attainable and worthwhile goal.

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