Native and Nonnative Speakers' Pragmatic Interpretations of English Texts

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Cultural differences in writing conventions complicate the process of learning to write in an L2. This study highlights some of the differences between writing conventions accepted in discourse traditions influenced by Confucian and Taoist precepts and those accepted in the U.S. academic environment. The study compares native-speaker (NS) and nonnative-speaker (NNS) evaluations of four short essays, two written by NSs and two by advanced ESL learners. In terms commonly used in the teaching of L2 academic writing (e.g. *a text's purpose* and *audience, specificity, clarity,* and *adequate support*), there was little similarity between NS and NNS judgment. The effects of this disparity on L2 learners' pragmatic interpretations and practical applications of L2 writing conventions are examined and pedagogical implications are discussed.

L2 students and teachers have long acknowledged that learning to write in an L2 is a complex and sometimes tedious process. In addition to linguistic concerns, there are difficulties associated with written discourse frameworks and rhetorical conventions. Written texts represent a convergence of different stylistic, cultural, religious, ethical, and social notions, all of which comprise written discourse notions and frameworks. Kachru (1988) asserts that "different language speaking communities have developed different conventions" (p. 112) of writing.

Cushman and Kincaid (1987) have established that the differences between written discourse frameworks and conventions accepted in language communities influenced by Confucian and Taoist precepts and those accepted in the U.S. academic environment extend into fundamental concepts underlying writing. The predominance of assertion, the type and extent of proofs, and the persuasive value of appeals to history and authority accepted in Confucian cultures contrast with

Anglo-American writing conventions, such as rational (Aristotelian) justification and specific exemplification (Kincaid, 1987).

Oliver (1971) indicated that in Chinese writing, the need for explication is not self-evident but the need to maintain harmony is, and text is written with a different purpose from that in many English-speaking societies, that is, to "adjust people to people" (p. 98), rather than explicitly state a point of view. From this perspective, general harmony between the writer and the reader "has greater value than achievement of any particular result" (p. 99). The author observes that the outcome of harmony maintenance is the depersonalization of text, which then becomes indirect and distant from any individual writer or audience and devoid of argumentation and persuasion since writing that does not reveal the writer's position on an issue is unlikely to argue very strongly for that position and is unlikely to be very persuasive.

Bloom (1981) concluded that his U.S. and Chinese subjects displayed significantly different interpretations of a text's purpose and the abstract notion of argumentation in English text. His Chinese subjects described English discourse and written argumentation as "insufferably" redundant, cyclical, excessively detailed, forced, and unnecessary.

Yum (1987) makes similar observations regarding contemporary Korean writing and states that persuasion and explicit description are rarely employed. Indonesian and Vietnamese writing conventions also reflect their Confucian cultural heritage and the classical Chinese writing tradition (Nguyen, 1987; Prentice, 1987). According to Hinds (1976, 1983) and Tsujimura (1987), vagueness and ambiguity are valued highly in Japanese text because they allow for the communication of minds rather than the communication of words. On the other hand, in Anglo-American rhetorical frameworks, vagueness and ambiguity are viewed negatively, explicit argumentation is considered more effective, and concrete support for most points is expected (Hinds, 1983; Winkler & McCuen, 1984).

Over the past 20 years, numerous studies have been carried out to determine how NNS writers structure L2 text (Connor, 1987a; Kaplan, 1978, 1988; Raimes, 1985; Scarcella, 1984). These and many other researchers into the acquisition of L2 writing have observed that ESL writers transfer concepts and conventions associated with writing from L1 to L2 (Carlson, 1988; Friedlander, 1990; Scarcella & Lee, 1989; Soter, 1988; Wong, 1990).

NNSs with demonstrated L2 proficiency who have assimilated the rhetorical frameworks of one tradition may have difficulty communicating effectively with readers who are familiar with and operate in a different discourse framework (Bloom, 1981). Matalene (1985) reports that her Chinese students' writing in English closely adhered to the

classical Chinese writing tradition in which the primary function of text is harmony maintenance and in which presenting brief images to indirectly affect the audience is viewed as a means of promoting unity between the writer and the reader. The author cautions ESL teachers that "logics different from our own are not necessarily illogical" (p. 806). Scarcella (1984) also found that her Japanese, Korean, and Chinese ESL students approached expository writing differently from NSs and tended to make different assumptions about their audience's background knowledge than NSs did.

Although many specialists on language and the acquisition of L2 writing have come to recognize that NNSs rely on their knowledge of L1 rhetorical paradigms, it has not been established with certainty whether NNSs who have received extensive L2 training and have achieved a relatively high L2 proficiency can effectively bridge the gap between L1 and L2 writing conventions. This paper focuses on distinctions between NS and highly-trained NNS pragmatic interpretations of Anglo-American notions pertaining to writing, such as a text's audience and purpose, specificity, support for the main idea, and persuasiveness. The purpose of the study is to ascertain whether rhetorical notions accepted in the U.S. academic environment and familiar to NSs are as clear to advanced and trained L2 learners from a written discourse tradition influenced by Confucian and Taoist precepts and culture.

PRAGMATICS OF TEXT INTERPRETATION

Differing rhetorical assumptions between NNSs and NSs have more than stylistic impact on written communication. In his account of pragmatic interpretation, Stalnaker (1991) shows that communication takes place only when the participants share mutual beliefs and assumptions which are recognized as shared. These common background beliefs and pragmatic assumptions impose constraints on what is reasonable, necessary, and appropriate in communication. He further indicates that the success of communication is contingent on the extent to which the common background beliefs and mutual contextual assumptions are shared. Bach and Harnish (1979) assert that mutual contextual beliefs play a central role in the success of communication because these beliefs determine the purpose, clarity, and relevance of the communicative act. In their view, cultural differences in contextual beliefs fundamentally affect the success of cross-cultural communication.

Strevens (1987) explains that cultural differences and notions pertaining to writing can become impediments in the acquisition of L2 communication patterns, particularly when these notions are related

to purposes which are absent from the learner's culture (i.e., precision in discourse, (Aristotelian) rationality of argument, and the need for reasoning, justification, and proof). He concludes that rhetorical value systems have a great deal of influence on rules of discourse and thus determine the extent of the cultural barrier between the learner and the target language.

Research has shown that when sufficient data are not available for interpreting abstract notions and information, both NSs and NNSs "default" to conventionalized presuppositions and assumptions in order to structure information (Jackendoff, 1983; Hudson, 1989). If NNSs lack access to the shared NS background in and mutual knowledge of notions used in the teaching of L2 writing, such as explicit support for the main idea, text's purpose, audience, persuasiveness, and specificity, they may interpret these notions differently from NSs. To a large extent, their pragmatic interpretations of L2 notions pertaining to writing may be derived from L1-based conceptual frameworks and communicative paradigms. Schachter (1983) provided extensive evidence that, in concept learning, adult L2 learners do not seek to refute their hypotheses regarding L2 abstract notions; instead, they look to L1 for confirmation. She indicates that learners gather information pertaining to a particular concept, observe regularities in the data, and formulate a hypothesis, which is then tested. However, "previous knowledge" (p. 109) that includes L1 knowledge and conceptualization serves as the basis from which the hypotheses are tested, confirmed, or rejected. Thus, if learners' previous background knowledge does not verify the newly formed conceptualization hypothesis, it is rejected.

The teaching of writing in an L2 frequently draws on presentations of models and examples from target language texts to facilitate the learner's interpretation of abstract notions pertaining to writing (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1984; Leki, 1989; Smalley & Ruetten, 1990). However, even if the models and examples are provided and explained, their correct interpretation by L2 writers cannot be assured. Acton and Walker de Felix (1987) found that until educated learners reach the advanced acculturation stage which they term *the immigrant*, their semantic networks and the cognitive constructs are almost exclusively L1 based.

Because the NNSs' understanding and pragmatic interpretation of the conceptual written discourse frameworks and associated conventions are dependent on their access to the L2 common background beliefs, the effectiveness of teaching L2 writing may be contingent on the NNS' acculturation rather than on explicit explanations and exemplification of notions associated with L2 writing.

METHODOLOGIES FOR TEACHING L2 WRITING

Two methodologies for the teaching of L2 writing are widely adopted in ESL teaching today: the process-centered approach and traditional explication of the rhetorical structure of English text. The former emphasizes the writing process and focuses on such issues as invention through discovery, purpose, audience, revising/drafting, and the clarity of the text to the reader (Zamel, 1982, 1983). The latter concentrates on the product of writing, the text's purpose, elements of style, form, clarity, and precision in meaning and considers prewriting preparation for the actual writing (Connor, 1987b; Kaplan & Shaw, 1983). Some methodologists of ESL writing have called for an integrated approach that involves both process and product as both seem to be essential for learning to write in an L2 (Raimes, 1985; Smalley & Ruetten, 1990).

Despite their methodological differences in how to approach the teaching of writing, both process and product methodologies, in one form or another, incorporate such notions as the text's purpose, audience, support for the main idea, clarity, and information relevance (Flower, 1984; Raimes, 1983, 1985, 1992; Zamel, 1982, 1983), because these are fundamental to writing in English (Matalene, 1985; Zamel, 1992).

In academic settings, instructors teach L2 writing by directly or indirectly alluding to, referring to, and exemplifying conventions accepted in writing in English. They bring their students' attention to the fact that a text addresses an audience and has a clear purpose (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1984; Leki, 1989; Raimes, 1992; Reid, 1988). In order to develop and explain the text's ideas, the writer needs to include specific and explicit information to support the main idea (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1984; Raimes, 1983, 1992; Reid, 1988) and clearly and convincingly show the author's views on the topic (Leki, 1989; Raimes, 1992; Reid, 1988; Zamel, 1982).

To construct a text that demonstrates their "knowledge of the format" (Reid, 1988, p. xiv) accepted in L2 academic environment and clearly conveys ideas to readers (Raimes, 1992), learners need to make presuppositions regarding their text's audience and its purpose. They have to understand what certain terms, such as the text's purpose and audience, persuasion, and specific and supporting information, entail within the L2 conceptualization of text, relate these abstract notions to text, interpret them according to L2 writing conventions, and apply them to writing. As many L2 writing and composition teachers know from experience, students frequently have difficulty accomplishing these tasks (Hinkel, 1992).

THE STUDY

This study is based on two experiments; in each, NS and NNS writers compared and evaluated two English texts, one written by a NS and the other by an advanced ESL student. The texts were written in response to essay prompts that were modeled on the Test of Written English, administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), and the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency Composition prompts, as well as those commonly found in ESL writing/composition texts (Leki, 1989; Raimes, 1992). The comparison and the evaluation of the texts was structured around Anglo-American writing conventions and the terms in which L2 academic writing is frequently described. The experiments were designed to ascertain whether trained L2 learners from written discourse traditions influenced by Confucian and Taoist conventions pragmatically interpret L2 writing conventions and text constructs in ways similar to NSs and whether they have like access to the common background knowledge and mutual contextual beliefs associated with L2 writing conventions.

Experiment 1

Subjects

Of the 146 ESL students who participated in the experiment, 91 were speakers of Chinese (CH), 20 of Korean (KR), 14 of Japanese (JP), 12 of Indonesian (IN), and 9 of Vietnamese (VT). All had been admitted to the Ohio State University and were actively working toward their degrees; their mean Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) score was 577. As U.S. resident aliens or citizens, the speakers of Vietnamese were not required to take the TOEFL.

The NNS subjects had received extensive instruction in ESL and L2 reading and writing for a period of 4–18 years, with a mean of 10.8 years. Their residence in the U.S. typically fell within 1.5 to 4 years, with a mean of 2.2 years. The only exception was the Vietnamese who were graduates of U.S. high schools and had lived in the U.S. for 4–11 years with an average of 5.7.

All NNSs subjects were enrolled in either Level 2 or Level 3 of a three-level postadmission ESL composition program that adopts the integrated process/product approach and that stresses the rhetorical notions and conventions of a text's purpose, audience, explicitness, clarity, specificity, and thesis. Classes met daily at Level 2 or thrice-weekly at Level 3 and included 30-min student-teacher conferences each week. Most NNS subjects had taken two ESL composition courses

in the program; those with TOEFL scores above 563 had taken at least one.

In addition to the ESL students, 28 NSs of American English, enrolled in various departments in the University, participated in the experiment and served as a control group. The total number of participants was 174.

Questionnaire Design and Administration

The students read the following prompt:

> Many people believe that there is no such thing as bad luck. They believe, in other words, that misfortune is caused by bad planning or incompetence. Do you agree with this opinion? Using detailed and specific examples, explain why you believe or do not believe in "bad luck."

Then the students read two English texts written in response to this prompt. Text A was written by a NS student enrolled in an English class and Text B by a speaker of Chinese who had achieved a 583 TOEFL score (see both texts below). They were given 1 hour to respond to the prompt. The NNS's text was edited for grammatical and lexical accuracy. After the participants read both texts, they responded to 12 questions which required them to make comparisons between the two texts and choose rhetorical notions that were applicable to one of them. (See Table 1.) The questions focused on the authors' utilization of English writing conventions and the texts' persuasiveness. The terms associated with English writing conventions and notions pertaining to writing—*ease of understanding the text's ideas* (Leki, 1989), *the clarity of the text's purpose and explicitness* (Arnaudet & Barrett, 1984; Leki, 1989; Reid, 1988), *the text's persuasiveness* (Leki, 1989, Smalley & Ruetten, 1990), *audience* (Leki, 1989; Reid, 1988; Smalley & Ruetten, 1990), *specific and sufficient supporting details/information* (Leki, 1989; Raimes, 1983, 1992; Reid, 1988; Smalley & Ruetten, 1990)—have been adopted from current ESL writing and composition texts.

Text A

> Do not open an umbrella in-doors—it will bring bad luck. Pick up a penny if you find one on the street—it will bring good luck. Is there really such a thing as good or bad luck? It would be hard to deny that things happen to people over which they have little or no control, but luck, either good or bad, is mainly a function of how one responds to a situation—not something that controls us.
>
> One of my friends unexpectedly made twenty thousand dollars on a real estate deal several years ago. This would seem to be extremely good luck. But instead of investing the money or using it wisely, he bought a new

luxury car. The insurance for the car was very expensive. Every time the car needed repairs, he had to pay a great deal of money. Furthermore, he was not comfortable driving it because he was afraid of having a wreck. In spite of this apparent stroke of good luck, my friend was not really benefited because he did not respond well to the situation.

History is also full of examples of people who have experienced difficulties but still managed to succeed. Viktor Frankl was interned in a Nazi concentration camp in World War II. His family was killed and all his possessions were lost due to circumstances entirely beyond his control. One might think that his luck was bad. However, he used this experience to learn about himself and about human spiritual survival. He came to peace with himself and wrote a book which has enriched millions.

There is really no such thing as good or bad luck, only good or bad responses to situations.[1]

Text B

I do not believe in bad luck because people can exercise self-control. People use bad luck as an excuse if they are not willing to work hard, develop good habits, and save their money. A person who overcomes difficulties, cooperates with others, and has a positive outlook may never encounter bad luck.

If a student studies hard for good grades and succeeds in his classes, he won't need excuses to explain why his grades are low. It is better not to start drinking than become an alcoholic and let the drink ruin one's life, cause damage to one's health, and then to go through the pain of changing the way of life and being forced to stay away from drink. Therefore, a person who has good habits will never say that his luck is bad. A frugal man can prosper because he knows how to invest well and accumulate greater wealth. Of course, the person who saves his money and does not spend extravagantly will never say that his luck is bad.

If a man chooses to do the right thing however difficult it may be, he will not withdraw from a difficult choice and by doing so, he will become successful. He may never find out what bad luck is. Napoleon, a historical figure, definitely never knew what bad luck was because he consolidated his power and never let it be divided. If a person maintains a positive outlook, he will not feel that he is aging as he is getting older, and he will encounter many opportunities to be happy. Good luck will accompany him, and he may wonder if bad luck really exists.

I always believe that good luck will come to those who learn self-control and self-denial, develop good manners, and have a good temper.

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[1]In the original version of the text, the lucky financial gain was obtained through the lottery. However, during the pilot study which preceded the actual administration of the questionnaire, it became clear that the subjects were distracted by the lottery. Instead of analyzing the text for its rhetorical devices, many commented on the fact that lotteries are associated with gambling and, therefore, can be immoral. In an attempt to find a subject-neutral means for a lucky financial gain, several options were considered and rejected. A lucky real estate deal proved to be the least distracting.

Both texts were written in the rhetorical mode of argument/exposition with the purpose of convincing/informing an unspecified general audience (Park, 1988). The texts are very similar in their overall organization: Both consist of an introductory paragraph, a recounting of third party experiences and generalizations from them, a historical allusion, and a one-sentence conclusion. Both texts stated essentially the same idea: They denied bad luck and asserted that an individual can have control of events in their lives.

However, the two texts differed in their approaches to the topic and the utilization of textual devices. In keeping with Anglo-American writing conventions, Text A explicitly discussed two contrasting events—a lucky financial gain through a real estate deal and the experience of a concentration camp survivor, both of which served as evidence of one's control in responding to extreme circumstances. The examples were followed by detailed descriptions and specifics of the two situations, provided as justification and proof for the thesis. In the first example, the text moved inductively from specific facts to the general thematic point. The second example started with the point to be illustrated and offered corroboration.

On the other hand, Text B briefly mentioned seven illustrative personalities—a student, an alcoholic, a frugal man, a person who is not extravagant, the man who chooses to do the right thing, Napoleon, and a person who maintains a positive outlook. These were referenced without a detailed situational proof, leaving the audience to infer much of the particulars. It is important to note that Text B did not exhibit a lack of focus. The first sentence established the theme and thesis, which were reiterated and upheld throughout the essay. The next two sentences identified habits or characteristics that negate bad luck. Most of the examples illustrated these habits or characteristics. Text B reflected conventions of Chinese writing with little elaboration, use of assertion, and vagueness (e.g., good habits, being forced to stay away from drink, doing the right thing).

The fact that both authors operated on the same basic premise and denied bad luck is important to the extent that the writing prompt does not appear to be culture bound (Lay, 1982). The number of words in neither text exceeded 300. Beyond the prompt, neither of the authors was instructed as to how they were to approach the topic.

Discussion of Results

Although the majority of subjects in all groups, except Indonesian and Vietnamese, liked Text A more than B, each group of NNSs evaluated both texts very differently from NSs. In fact, the NNS values were closest to those of NSs in response to the question, *The ideas in*

TABLE 1

Comparative Evaluation of Texts A and B (%) $N = 174$

		NNS								
NSs ($n = 28$)		CH ($n = 91$)		KR ($n = 20$)		JP ($n = 14$)		IN ($n = 12$)		VT ($n = 9$)	

1. Which text did you like more, A or B? (x^2 [1, $N = 74$] = 9.63 p = .0019)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
96	4	69	31	80	20	79	21	42	58	44	56

2. The ideas in which text are easier to understand, A or B? (x^2 [1, $N = 174$] = 8.71 p = .0032)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
100	0	77	23	75	25	71	29	83	17	56	44

3. The text's purpose is more clearly presented in which text, A or B? (x^2 [1, $N = 174$] = 17.22 p = .0000)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
89	11	47	53	45	55	43	57	42	58	55	45

4. Which text is more explicit, A or B? (x^2 [1, $N = 174$] = 14.74 p = .0001)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
89	11	56	44	50	50	50	50	33	67	11	89

5. Which text is more convincing, A or B? (x^2 [1, $N = 174$] = 23.23 p = .0000)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
93	7	51	49	30	70	36	64	33	67	22	78

6. The audience can relate better to points made in which text, A or B? (x^2 [1, $N = 714$] = 11.91 p = .0006)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
82	18	48	52	55	45	50	50	25	75	33	67

7. Do you think it is better for writers to use specific points to explain their ideas or choose a broader, more general approach? (S = specific; G = general; O=other) (χ^2 [1, N = 174] = 20.47 p = .0000; testing specific against all others)

S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O
96	4	0	50	46	4	40	35	25	50	43	7	83	17	0	33	67	0

8. In which text are the ideas more specifically presented, A or B? (χ^2 [1, N = 174] = 15.22 p = .0001)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
89	11	51	49	45	55	29	71	66	34	56	44

9. Neither text contains too much supporting information. (Ag=agree; Dis=disagree) (χ^2 [1, N = 174] = 7.61 p = .0058)

Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis
82	18	55	45	45	55	43	57	42	58	100	0

10. In your opinion, which text contains too much supporting information, A or B? (Expected counts were too small so a chi-square was not used. Fisher's exact test yielded a p value of .2889·with a sample size of 72.)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
7	11	33	12	30	25	50	7	50	8	0	0

11. Neither text contains too little supporting information. (Ag=agree; Dis=disagree) (χ^2 [1, N = 174] = 7.61 p = .0058)

Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis
18	82	45	55	55	45	57	43	58	42	0	100

12. In your opinion, which text contains too little supporting information, A or B? (χ^2 [1, N = 102] = 34.27 p = .0000)

A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
14	68	42	13	40	5	43	0	34	8	100	0

which text were easier to understand, A or B; and even here, only 56% to 83% of NNSs found Text A easier to understand, whereas all NSs did. Fewer than half of the subjects in all NNSs groups, except the Vietnamese, thought that A's purpose was more clearly presented than B's, although 89% of NSs thought so. Only 11% to 56% of NNSs thought that A was explicit while 89% of NSs did. A half or fewer of the NNSs viewed A as convincing while 93% of NSs did. Similarly, the majority of subjects in each NNS group, except for the Koreans (45%), thought the audience could relate better to points made in B than to those in A. Only 18% of NSs agreed.

In response to the question *Do you think it is better for writers to use specific points to explain their ideas or to choose a broader, more general approach*, 96% of NSs, 83% of Indonesians, half of the Chinese and Japanese subjects, but only 40% of Koreans and 33% of Vietnamese indicated that a specific approach is better than a general approach. The prompt, of course, asked for detailed and specific examples. However, whereas 89% of NSs evaluated Text A as more specific than Text B, only 66% or fewer of the NNSs in any language group had a similar view. The Korean and Japanese students' interpretation of the notion of textual specificity was particularly distant from that of NSs—only 29% of the Japanese and 45% of Koreans evaluated A as more specific than B. According to Yum (1987), implicit and ambiguous communication is valued very highly in Korean writing because words are perceived as misleading. The author emphasizes that "to understand without being told is . . . but a practical communication skill" (p. 83). Hinds (1984) shows that in Japanese text, information is implied or alluded to rather than explicitly stated. Because 34% to 71% of NNSs described B as more specific than A, whereas only 11% of NSs made the same evaluation, a sizable proportion of NNSs appear to interpret textual specificity according to L1 rhetorical conventions (Matalene, 1985).

The next 4 questions represent a four-tier approach to investigating the NSs and NNSs understanding of the notion of supporting information. Questions 9 and 11 require the subjects to Agree or Disagree with two statements Neither text contains too much supporting information and Neither text contains too little supporting information, respectively. In Question 10, the subjects who disagreed with the statement in Question 9 specified which text (A or B), in their opinion, contained too much supporting information. Similarly, those who disagreed with the statement in Question 11 indicated in Items 12 which text (A or B) contained too little supporting information.

Although 82% of NSs noted that neither text contained too much supporting information, 55% of the Chinese, 45% of Koreans, 43% of the Japanese, and 42% of Indonesians made such an evaluation.

The perceptions of the NSs and NNSs subjects differed substantially as to which text contained too much supporting information. Although 7% of NSs thought that A contained too much support and 11% believed that B did, 33% to 50% of NNSs indicated that in their view, A was overly supported. A smaller percentage of NNSs (0% to 25%) thought that B was.

A majority (82%) of NSs disagreed with the statement Neither text contains too little supporting information, with 68% indicating that B provided insufficient support. On the other hand, 0 to 13% of NNSs viewed B's supporting information as insufficient. Most of the NNSs who disagreed with the statement in Item 11 (34% to 100%) indicated that A lacked sufficient supporting information.

The apparent differences between NS and NNS responses (pooling together the different nationalities) were generally statistically significant (as confirmed by chi-square and Fisher's exact test results reported in the tables) with the exception of Question 10 in Table 1 (which did not reflect all individuals).

The disparity in the NSs' and NNSs' evaluation of the support provided in the two texts implies that whereas NNSs may be familiar with the notion of textual support, their interpretation of the form that it may take in English differs from that of NSs. Of special interest is the finding that 30% to 50% of NNSs believed that A provided too much support (Question 10), 34% to 100% of NNSs believed that A did not provide sufficient support for its points (Question 12), and only 7% and 14% of NSs, respectively, agreed with either view. Therefore, it appears that in the view of NNSs, Text B was relatively well supported whereas A provided too much and/or too little supporting information.

In their discussion of pragmatic relevance of information in communication, Sperber and Wilson (1982, 1986) and Wilson and Sperber (1986) demonstrate that pragmatic relevance is indeterminate. The authors show that, among many other factors, perceived relevance of information in text depends on the contextual implications, the assumptions made by communication participants, their common contextual beliefs, and their mutual background knowledge. They further state that although the information giver provides the foreknowledge, it is the information recipient who must supply the specific contextual assumptions and arrive at specific contextual interpretations. According to Sperber and Wilson's principle of relevance, most NS subjects interpreted the information in Text A as relevant and a large percentage of NNSs interpreted it as irrelevant to the text's purposes. Despite the NNSs' many years of training in L2 writing and the associated conventions, the NSs' and NNSs' interpretations of textual relevance seem to be based on different pragmatic presuppositions and assumptions.

Experiment 2

The purpose of Experiment 2 was to verify the results of Experiment 1 by controlling for possible topic and population sample biases in Experiment 1.

Subjects

Of the 160 ESL students who participated in the second part of the study, 91 were speakers of Chinese (CH), 22 of Korean (KR), 16 of Japanese (JP), 23 of Indonesian (IN), and 8 of Vietnamese (VT). All had been admitted to the University, and their mean TOEFL score was 573. The only exception was the speakers of Vietnamese whose TOEFL scores were not obtained. The NNS subjects had received extensive instruction in ESL writing for a period of 5–20 years, with a mean of 10.1 years. Their residence in the U.S. typically fell within 9 months to 4 years, with a mean of 1.7 years. In addition to the ESL students, 32 NS students participated in the second experiment and served as a control group. The total number of participants was 192. The conditions for the questionnaire administration in Experiment 1 were duplicated in Experiment 2: The NNS subjects were taking courses toward their degrees and were enrolled in the same ESL Composition Program and courses described for Experiment 1.

Questionnaire Design and Administration

The students read the following prompt:

> Many people believe that it is better to act quickly and decisively than to wait and think something over carefully because opportunity may be lost by waiting. Do you think that taking quick, decisive action is or is not advisable? Explain, using detailed and specific examples.

As in Experiment 1, the students read two English texts written in response. Text C (see below) was written by a speaker of Chinese who had achieved a 590 TOEFL score and Text D was written by a NS enrolled in an English class. They were given 1 hour to answer the prompt. Text C was extensively edited for grammatical and lexical accuracy. The same questionnaire was administered as in Experiment 1.

Text C

"Time is money." This is what my teachers have often told me. On the other hand, my parents also taught me that people must think carefully

before acting. Therefore, I have a dilemma. It is difficult to say which approach is better. It depends on the situation you are in. Many people get confused and do not know what to do when they have to make an important decision.

In some circumstances, we need to act quickly and decisively. In business, you should be quick and decisive; otherwise, a competitor may take advantage of the opportunity. When you drive a car, you need to make decisions and take action quickly. If someone is drowning, you cannot wait to make your decision, you jump in the river and save them. In an exam situation, you need to act quickly because if you take too long, you will run out of time.

However, in some other situations, we need to think things over. When deciding in which university to enroll, you need to check your information very carefully because a lot depends on your choice. If you are in love, you should think carefully if this person is a good match for you. If you are planning to buy a car, you should think carefully about the car you want to buy. When you take out a loan, you need to choose the bank carefully and decide whether you can afford the payment.

Those who act quickly and decisively usually think that opportunities and chances will be lost if they do not take action as soon as they arrive at a decision. Yet, they do not seem to realize that quick decisions may not be as good as they first thought. Sometimes, quick decisions will only harm them. Those who think first before taking any action will be able to handle things as they planned to.

Sometimes, something needs to be thought out carefully before taking any action. A quick decision cannot be made if people think carefully before making any decisions. In a different situation, people need to take a different action to respond to the situations they face. Therefore, whether to act quickly or to think carefully depends on the events that people are involved in.

I believe that taking quick and decisive action is better in some situations, and in some other situations, waiting and thinking carefully is more advisable. You may lose many great opportunities and regret losing them if you do not act quickly. Yet, if the decision you need to make is a serious one, you need to slow down and think before taking action.

Text D

"Is it better to think things over carefully before acting or to take quick and decisive action?" If you think things over carefully, you are much less likely to make a mistake, but a quick and decisive action allows you to take advantage of opportunities that may not wait for you to deliberate all the pros and cons. This, of course, is the central dilemma. You have to achieve some kind of balance between thinking and acting. As a general rule, though, I'd say the more that is at stake in a decision, the more you'd better think it over carefully.

Ordinarily, when you are deciding what to have for lunch, careful deliber-

ation is not required. Not a lot is at stake. If you make a bad choice, not a lot of damage is done. If you make a profoundly good choice, you don't reap a tremendous benefit. You'll be hungry again tomorrow anyway. Better to make a quick culinary decision and get on with the rest of your day.

A car is less ephemeral than a lunch. When you purchase a car, you'll have to live with the results of your decision probably for several years. A little planning is highly recommended. Research various makes and models, weigh carefully the cost and quality, think about what you really want and what you can afford. Even though the salesman may insist that several other people are interested in the same car, that it is the last of its kind on the lot, and that he has to have an immediate answer, your decision should only follow careful thought.

Marriage may be one of the most crucial decisions of your life. The impact of this choice could have a significant influence on the rest of your life and even on subsequent generations. Taking quick and decisive action regarding an issue of this magnitude would be a folly. Careful scrutiny of yourself and your intended over a fairly long period of time should precede your decision.

There are clearly advantages to quick and decisive action in some situations—you waste less time and capitalize on opportunities that would otherwise be missed—but when the decision could have significant consequences, it's better to think carefully first.

Again, the texts were very similar in their overall organization: Both consisted of an introductory paragraph that presented the author's thesis and both proceeded to discuss the situations in which a quick and decisive action is necessary or is not advisable. Both authors argued that whether to make a quick decision or to think something over depends primarily on the situation and/or on the importance of the decision. Both texts recounted common experiences. The number of words in either text did not exceed 440.

The texts differed in their presentation of information: C briefly mentioned four situations in which quick action is warranted (competing in business, driving, seeing someone drown, taking an exam), four situations in which quick action is inadvisable (deciding which university to attend, falling in love, buying a car, taking out a loan), followed by two paragraphs containing assertions and generalizations on the theme and then a conclusion that reiterated the thesis. It is important to note that the topic was addressed throughout text C, and the examples were carefully balanced. Text D discussed a method of decision making in three situations, listed from least significant to most significant, deciding what to have for lunch, buying a car, and considering marriage. Each of the three situations was supported with three to five sentences that argued for the amount of deliberation that the author felt each situation should be given. Like C, D ended with a brief conclusion that reiterated the thesis.

Discussion of Results

The results of Experiment 2 are presented in Table 2 and appear to be similar to those of Experiment 1.[2]

Although 91% of NSs liked D more than C, only 44% to 75% of NNSs shared this view. A similar proportion of NNSs found the ideas in D easy to understand, although 91% of NSs did. Only a minority of NNSs in all groups (26% to 46%), except Vietnamese (75%), believed that the D's purpose was more clearly presented than C's, although 94% of NSs thought otherwise. A half or fewer of NNSs found D explicit versus 84% of NSs; less than 40% of NNSs found D more convincing than C versus 94% of NSs. Fewer than half of the NNSs believed that the audience could relate better to points made in D than to those made in C; 94% of NSs had the same view.

The majority of subjects in all groups (56% to 92%) believed that text should present specific information to support its points (Question 7). However, NSs and NNSs interpreted the notion of specificity differently, as 89% of NSs indicated that D was specific whereas only half or fewer of NNSs made the same evaluation.

Again, a majority of NSs (84%) believed that neither text contained too much supporting information. On the other hand, slightly fewer than half of the subjects in all NNS groups (41% to 50%), except the Vietnamese, thought that D contained too much supportive information. Together with this, 78% of NSs evaluated C as containing insufficient supporting information, while 0% to 9% of NNSs had the same view; however, 41% to 48% indicated that D lacked adequate support.

Again, the apparent differences between NS and NNS responses (pooling together the different nationalities) were generally statistically significant (as confirmed by chi-square and Fisher's exact test results reported in the tables) with the exception of Question 10 in Table 2 (which did not reflect all individuals).

According to several studies (Bach & Harnish, 1979; Grice, 1991; Sperber & Wilson, 1982, 1991), the clarity of communicative purposes, the sufficiency of information, and the uses of language congruent with these purposes are essential in order for the information giver to be understood. Similarly, the appropriate strategies which the information recipients employ to evaluate sufficiency of information and discern these purposes and uses are also necessary for a communication to be successful. For example, if the purpose of a communication is to persuade the audience, the purpose must be clear to the audience

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[2]In Experiment 2, Text C was presented to subjects before Text D. However, for the convenience of readers, in Table 2 the order of data presentation has been reversed to make it consistent with that in Table 1 (i.e., the NS text appears first).

TABLE 2

Comparative Evaluation of Texts C and D (%) $N = 192$

NSs (n = 32)		CH (n = 91)		KR (n = 22)		JP (n = 16)		IN (n = 23)		VT (n = 8)	

1. Which text did you like more, C or D? (χ^2 [1, $N = 192$] = 13.37 p = .0003)

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
91	9	60	40	50	50	44	56	48	52	75	25

2. The ideas in which text are easier to understand, C or D? (χ^2 [1, $N = 192$] = 11.39 p = .0007

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
91	9	59	41	73	27	57	43	43	57	75	25

3. The text's purpose is more clearly presented in which text, C or D? (χ^2 [1, $N = 192$] = 28.03 p = .0000)

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
94	6	44	56	46	54	44	56	26	74	63	37

4. Which text is more explicit, C or D? (χ^2 [1, $N = 19.86$] p = .0000)

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
84	16	41	59	50	50	50	50	35	65	25	75

5. Which text is more convincing, C or D? (χ^2 [1, $N = 192$] = 36.36 p = .0000)

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
94	6	40	60	27	73	38	62	35	65	13	87

6. The audience can relate better to points made in which text, C or D? (χ^2 [1, $N = 192$] = 31.57 p = .0000)

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
94	6	41	59	41	59	44	56	30	70	38	62

7. Do you think it is better for writers to use specific points to explain their ideas or choose a broader, more general approach? (S = specific; G = general; O=other) (χ^2 [1, N = 192] = 5.82 p = .0159; testing specific against all others)

S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O	S	G	O
91	9	0	67	30	3	56	36	8	69	25	6	91	9	0	88	12	0

8. In which text are the ideas more specifically presented, C or D? (χ^2 [1, N = 192] = 18.76 p = .0000)

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
88	12	51	49	41	59	25	75	43	57	50	50

9. Neither text contains too much supporting information. (Ag=agree; Dis=disagree) (χ^2 [1, N = 192] = 13.66 p = .0002)

Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis
84	16	52	48	50	50	44	56	52	48	13	87

10. In your opinion, which text contains too much supporting information, C or D? (Expected counts were too small so a chi-square was not used. Fisher's exact test yielded a p value of .0156 with a sample size of 86.)

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
3	13	41	7	45	5	50	6	44	4	13	74

11. Neither text contains too little supporting information. (Ag=agree; Dis=disagree) (χ^2 [1, N = 192] = 13.66 p = .0002)

Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis	Ag	Dis
16	84	48	52	50	50	56	44	48	52	87	13

12. In your opinion, which text contains too little supporting information, C or D? (χ^2 [1, N = 106] = 63.83 p = .0000)

D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C	D	C
6	78	48	4	41	9	44	0	43	9	13	0

and the language used must include a sufficient amount of persuasion devices and techniques. The audience must also employ the appropriate strategies to understand the information purpose and the utilization of the persuasion devices.

Presuming that oral communication and/or written text has the goal of communicating to an audience, this goal is accomplished if the audience recognizes the text's communicative purposes and its uses of language to achieve them (Davis, 1991). In the view of the NSs, Text D achieved its communicative purposes to a greater extent and used rhetorical devices more appropriately than Text C. Conversely, in the perceptions of the trained NNSs, in Text D, the communicative goals and its use of rhetorical devices were not as easily discernible as those in Text C.

The NSs' evaluation of writing conventions and constructs utilized in Texts A and B in Experiment 1 and Texts C and D in Experiment 2 indicates that they appear to know the conventions of writing in English and recognize the textual devices that represent these conventions in text (Kachru, 1988). They share common background knowledge and contextual assumptions from which they derive pragmatic interpretations of notions pertaining to writing and textual paradigms. Therefore, they evaluated the sample texts according to these pragmatic interpretations.

The NNSs with many years of training in L2 writing do not seem to have the NS-like access to this common background knowledge and the contextual assumptions associated with L2 rhetorical notions and conventions and the appropriate rhetorical devices. Thus, despite their apparent familiarity with and formal exposure to L2 conventions and devices, NNSs made pragmatic interpretations noticeably distant from those of NSs.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

The results of this study indicate that the advanced abstract notions widely accepted in the teaching of composition to NSs are readily accessible to them for pragmatic interpretation. However, because these conventions of English writing require rational (Aristotelian) argumentation, justification, and proof which are concepts and frameworks not commonly accepted in many other writing traditions, such as those based on Confucian and Taoist philosophical precepts, NNSs exposed to different notions pertaining to writing seem to interpret L2 rhetorical notions differently from NSs. It further appears that many years of L2 composition instruction based on methodologies for

teaching composition to NSs may diminish this conceptual distance only to a limited extent, even if the rhetorical notions and conventions of text's purpose, audience, explicitness, clarity, specificity, and thesis support are stressed. In addition to the impact this conceptual distance has on L2 writing, further research should probably be devoted to the effect of Aristotelian argumentation and justification of NNS reading comprehension and information retention.

Most trained ESL writers have been instructed that English text must be clear and convincing. It seems, however, that these notions are not always self-evident, particularly when it comes to NNSs raised in cultures where harmony maintenance is emphasized and discourse vagueness is valued. Bloom's (1981) Chinese subjects clearly disliked the rhetorical constructs that they encountered in English texts. However, students need to be taught that learning Anglo-American writing conventions is inextricable from learning to write in English and that a lack of familiarity with these conventions may prove detrimental to their academic and professional opportunities.

As has been discussed, methodologies for teaching L2 writing and the associated text constructs are largely derived from those accepted in the teaching of L1 writing to NSs (Flower, 1984; Memering & O'Hare, 1983; Winkler & McCuen, 1984). Today, few of the writing/composition texts adopted in the U.S. teaching of ESL acknowledge that rhetorical traditions other than the Anglo-American tradition exist and even fewer delve into contrasts between the writing conventions accepted in other cultures.

An issue for further research to pursue is whether a methodology for teaching L2 writing to NNSs raised in Confucian and Taoist cultures can be made more effective by considering students' L1 rhetorical conventions. Although in ESL classes the student's writing frequently serves as means for sentence structure analysis, instructors rarely employ this technique for teaching Anglo-American notions pertaining to rhetorical development because they often appear to be either prohibitively complex or self-evident. However, juxtaposing reasonably short compositions written by NSs and NNSs can make clear the differences in the amount and type of textual support required in various traditions. When various experiments for this study were conducted over 2 academic years, ESL teachers who administered the questionnaires subsequently used Texts A and B, and C and D as models in class discussions. The teachers reported that comparing and contrasting the texts according to different rhetorical conventions proved to be very helpful in facilitating learner pragmatic interpretation of Anglo-American rhetorical paradigms and the rationale that underlie them.

The results of this study indicate that the advanced notions and conceptualizations of writing appropriate in the teaching of composi-

tion to NSs of English may not be fully accessible for pragmatic interpretation even to highly trained NNSs. Although learners' detailed familiarity with Aristotelian logic and rationality is not necessary for learning to write in an L2, familiarity with these assumptions is necessary if learners are to acquire nativelike pragmatic interpretations of English texts.

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