Using Intercultural Rhetoric to Examine Translingual Practices of Postgraduate L2 Writers of English

Estela Ene^a

Kyle McIntosh^b

Ulla Connor^a

^aIndiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis, 420 University Blvd., Indianapolis, IN
46202, USA

^bUniversity of Tampa, 401 W. Kennedy Blvd., Tampa, FL 33606, USA

Abstract

This pilot study applies the three tenets of intercultural rhetoric (i.e., texts must be studied in context; culture is complex and dynamic; written discourse encounters necessitate negotiation and accommodation) to an investigation of the translingual practices of four post-graduate-level second language (L2) writers of English. By using stimulated recall to probe the participants' awareness and use of L1 and L2 academic conventions in the writing process, we were able to identify the negotiation strategies they employed and to understand the linguistic or cultural factors that influenced those choices. Our findings revealed that participants' translingual negotiations varied, depending on their level of proficiency in English, field of study, and experience writing

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Ene, E., McIntosh, K., & Connor, U. (2019). Using intercultural rhetoric to examine translingual practices of postgraduate L2 writers of English. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 45, 100664.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2019.100664>

academically in both their L1 and L2. Participants also tended to frame discussions of their academic writing in terms of both large, national cultures and small, disciplinary or classroom-based ones. Finally, this study illustrates how inquiries that highlight the social contexts and complexities of cross-cultural comparisons can be useful in operationalizing translingual concepts and developing evidence-based pedagogy for L2 writing.

Introduction

As our understanding of multilingual writing and writers continues to evolve, debates have arisen over the philosophical and, to a lesser extent, practical merits of translingualism and its perceived differences or similarities compared to second language (L2) writing (see Atkinson et al., 2015; Canagarajah, 2013, 2015; Gevers, 2018; Matsuda, 2014; Schreiber & Watson, 2018; Tardy 2017). Translingualism claims that multilingual writers use all of their linguistic and cultural repertoires to communicate successfully, thus repositioning “difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening” (Horner, Lu, Royster, & Trimbur, 2011, p.303). Case studies on translingual practices (e.g., Canagarajah, 2011; Lee & Canagarajah, 2018) have shown how multilingual writers manifest agency by negotiating with dominant writing conventions through the creative use of language, resulting in hybrid discourses and emergent interculturality. These studies contend that translingual negotiations are part of all learners’ mental capacity and occur even when outwardly invisible.

Recent case studies in L2 writing have found evidence of similar negotiations. Gentil's (2018) research on the challenges facing Francophone students at an English-medium university in Quebec demonstrated the importance of making comparisons across languages and cultures as a way to help bilingual students learn to write in their disciplines. While the study agreed with translingual scholars about the need for "deftness in deploying a broad and diverse repertoire of language resources, and responsiveness to the diverse range of readers' social positions and ideological perspectives" (Horner et al., 2011, p. 308), it also stressed "the value of distinguishing language differences at the level of registers, genres, and languages, and across historical, ontogenetic and moment-to-moment time scales" (Gentil, 2018, p. 126). Similarly, Rinnert and Kobayashi (2016) used empirical evidence to form a model of text construction in which multilingual writers' different languages (L1/L2/L3/etc.) and knowledge of topic, genre, discipline, and social context all contribute to their decision-making. While these findings are compelling, more empirical research is needed to understand exactly how multilingual writers engage with their linguistic and cultural repertoires in order to develop pedagogical practices that better address students' needs, particularly in English for academic purposes (EAP).

The current pilot study joins the conversation about the complex processes involved in multilingual writing by contributing empirical evidence from four postgraduate-level L2 writers of English with varying levels of multiliteracy. Part of the motivation for this study was the question: Do all writers engage in translingual practices and, if so, do they possess a sense of purposeful, agentic involvement in the

reconstruction of writing conventions? Translingualism largely assumes both to be true, while the L2 writing research cited above holds that moving between languages, as well as within and across genres, can facilitate the development of L2 writing and its instruction, but does not necessarily lead to challenging or changing norms.

We investigate these claims through the lens of Intercultural Rhetoric (IR), which is based on a dynamic conceptualization of culture that differs markedly from earlier research that defined culture largely in national or ethnic terms (Connor, 1996). A useful concept for IR has been Holliday's (1999) distinction between "large" cultures, which are based on ethnic, national, or international group features, and "small" cultures, which are rooted in the activities and discourses of social groupings (e.g., business culture, classroom culture). The complex interactions of these different cultural forces are important for writing teachers to consider, especially when their classes include students from diverse backgrounds. McIntosh, Connor, and Gokpinar-Shelton (2017) and You (2018) have remarked on the usefulness of IR in developing new pedagogical frameworks for translingual practices.

In this pilot study, we examine the negotiation processes of the four participants as they relate to the theoretical premises of IR, namely, that texts must be understood in their specific context, and that both large and small cultures have an impact on the negotiation and accommodation strategies of writers (Connor, 2011). For the purposes of this study, we were interested primarily in participants' reported awareness of differences in L1 and L2 writing conventions, the choices they made while writing, and the impact of these choices on their final products. By this design, we can test

translingualism's assumption that one's multiple languages are not separate entities.

The study was guided by the following research questions: (Q1) What kinds of negotiations do postgraduate L2 English writers undertake (if any)? And (Q2) which large- and/or small-cultural factors most influence these writers' negotiations? Thus, we use IR to examine translingual practices in L2 writing.

Study

Participants:

Our participants were three masters' level students and one visiting scholar at a large Midwestern University. One of the students was an Arabic-speaking woman from Jordan in the field of museum studies (hereafter Reema, a pseudonym); another was a Chinese woman who studied biomedical sciences (Xu); the third was a Serbian woman in the TESOL program (Jana). The fourth participant was a female visiting scholar from China with a background in English language teaching (Cate). The three graduate students were at the end of the first year of their programs, and the visiting scholar had spent one year at the university. Only Reema and Xu were required to take a graduate-level EAP writing course. All participants had begun studying English in their home countries in middle school. Jana had been in the U.S. for four years in a non-academic environment. Based on EAP placement results, Reema was a high intermediate learner and the least advanced of the four, while Jana was the most proficient orally, followed by Xu and Cate (see Table 1).

Table 1: English proficiency levels of participants

Participant	Program	Test + Scores	EAP Scores	EAP Placement
-------------	---------	---------------	------------	---------------

Reema	Museum Studies	TOEFL IBT	Total: 57	Total: 53/60*	Writing Course (FA 2016)
			Writing: 14	Essay: 3/4	Grade: A-
Xu	Biomedical sciences	TOEFL IBT	Total: 96	Total: 55/60	Writing Course (SP 2018)
			Writing: 20	Essay: 3/4	Grade: A-
Jana	TESOL	TOEFL	Total: 108	Total: 59/60	Exempt
				Essay: 4/4	
Cate	N/A	TEM-8	Total: 78/100	N/A	N/A

* Reema took an older version of the EAP placement test. We converted her score into the new 60-point scale for comparison.

Materials:

We collected graduate-level research papers written in English for courses taken by the three graduate student participants. We requested drafts and final versions of those papers with or without teacher comments. A prior writing sample in English was available from Reema only. Cate's paper from a linguistics course constituted the material in her case, along with drafts of a paper that she was writing for publication.

Data collection:

We first administered, to all four participants, a survey about their writing history, processes, and goals. We asked questions about their awareness and use of writing conventions in both their L1 and English to get a better sense of how (much) they move between those languages. In the follow-up interviews, two of the researchers sat down with each participant in front of a computer screen displaying her paper. These interviews were conducted as stimulated recalls in which the researchers asked participants to look at the paper on the screen and explain the process of composing and revising it. Prior drafts with teacher/mentor comments were also used to guide our questions; we asked participants what they thought the teacher/mentor was asking

them to change in a specific part of the paper, why they had written it that way, how that might differ if written in their L1, and how they were planning to revise. The interview questions were intended to further probe participants' awareness and use of L1 and L2 academic conventions in the writing process.

Data analysis:

Interviews

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed qualitatively, with the researchers looking for themes related to L1/L2 writing conventions, as well as negotiation and accommodation strategies, large and small cultures, and context (i.e., the tenets of IR). One of the researchers highlighted themes in the transcripts, and the other two reviewed them. One of the reviewers then grouped the themes into categories, and the other two reviewed those, making revisions until consensus was reached on the categorizations.

Results

The results of the analysis are presented below for each of the four participants and then summarized based on our research questions.

Reema

Reema, who was least proficient in English, saw no difference between writing in Arabic and English, and demonstrated little awareness of writing conventions in either language or of her own negotiation process beyond literal translation. She viewed writing in her discipline as factual: a matter of telling or describing historical events and artifacts the "way they were." She gave the example of her thesis as an "objective" chemical analysis of the materials in the monument at Petra, Jordan. For her, academic

writing was informational and only required finding the right words and grammar in a given language. Talking about the English abstract of her thesis, Reema explained that she had translated it from Arabic without changing the structure. She believed that writers simply write down information, and a teacher intervenes to provide direction when the novice writer does not know how to connect that information.

Reema saw the writing process in her courses in the U.S. similarly, and she was very aware of her word- and sentence-level needs:

“In English you have to have a verb. In Arabic you don’t have to have a verb so it could just be names or subject and adjective without verb. So it took me long sometime up to now **I write a sentence I look at it there is no verb**. This has no meaning I have to rewrite it.”

Reema used teacher feedback to obtain the linguistic items that she needed. In addition, she mentioned asking her school-aged children, who had been raised in the U.S. and were reportedly fluent English users, to read her papers; she said that the feedback they gave her also focused on vocabulary and grammar. However, she believed that her awareness of cultural differences had increased during her time in the U.S.:

“I used to translate word to word sometimes [...] my English language was better than now but I know the parts of the sentence now more than I did then. Or **I can understand the differences between the culture in the languages right now.**”

When we looked together at the paper Reema was developing for a museum studies course, we noticed that her professor had not commented on any language errors, but did point out: “[T]his is a fine outline but you might need to think about readings not listing them as you have.” While Reema was executing the assignment as

an exposition of events – what happened at the site the class had visited, what happened in the movie they had watched – the professor was asking for deeper analysis and synthesis of the readings, film, and fieldwork. Reema did not understand the meaning of the feedback until the interviewers parsed it with her, focusing on the advice about “not listing.” Up to that point, Reema had seen revision as a matter of polishing her word choices to make the final paper as expressive as she would have been able to in Arabic.

In brief, Reema’s negotiation strategies consisted primarily of direct translation, in which her main concern was matching vocabulary and grammar items from Arabic with their English correspondents. Her awareness of academic writing conventions in either language was low, as was her experience with different genres. Reema extrapolated her prior experience with report writing in Arabic to all writing since “it will be mostly same structure.” Her view of writing as objective, fact-focused, and expository, regardless of language, prevented her from seeing anything other than language-oriented feedback in the professor’s comments. Thus, Reema’s perception of the writing conventions of her discipline as practiced in Jordan seemed to be the main cultural influence on her writing, although the fact that she was intent on following her current teachers’ advice showed that the culture of the U.S. classroom was exerting some influence on Reema’s writing.

Xu

In her interview, Xu indicated that, like Reema, she often relied on direct translation:

"I think . my problem is mainly because I . actually (inaudible) **I'm very good at Chinese writing.** So actually what I think my problem is [...] I feel like **my mind was like ... just think things like how to write in Chinese.**"

Rhetorically, she found the expectation of stating a strong claim upfront to be one of the more challenging aspects of English academic writing because "in China you do not do that direct thing." However, Xu's description of writing in biomedical sciences suggests that is not necessarily the case for all types of academic writing in Chinese:

"Most scientific writing, it's pretty straightforward, so [...] the main structure, if you're writing this in Chinese, it won't be different a lot. Like for some of the sentence ... due to the grammar? It will be a little different, [but] **the overall structure should be not different too much.**"

As a graduate student in the U.S., Xu was reading more research articles in English than before. This helped her to move away from thinking in or translating from Chinese, as she used to do as an undergraduate, and into a kind of "English-only" mindset that she desired.

"This kind of first draft is already like. um the way I usually used to write in English I did not, because like **I started with this one just in English not in Chinese** so . yeah when writing I should try to think of things in English."

Xu exemplifies the case of a multilingual writer who is aware of the differences between L1 and L2 academic conventions, from the rhetorical impact of word- or sentence-level choices to the nuanced use of directness. During the interview, she picked out excerpts from her paper to illustrate these points. As Xu explained her interpretation of the teacher's comments and the revisions she had made, we noted the role that feedback had played in making her aware of different writing conventions, as well as its impact on her choices. Compared to Reema, Xu demonstrated a wider range

of negotiation strategies, as well as more awareness of her own writing processes. As shown above, she was influenced both by large-cultural factors such as writing conventions in Chinese and English, as well as small-cultural factors like disciplinary and classroom expectations.

Cate

Like Xu, Cate demonstrated awareness of L1 and L2 writing conventions, and discussed some of the similarities and differences that she kept in mind while writing. Cate felt that if she were more proficient with crafting arguments in Chinese, then some of those skills would transfer to her English writing:

“I must say **I’m not good at my Chinese argument** writing. So **this influence my English writing.** I think if you are good at argument because the academic paper at a certain level is an argumentative paper [...] because you point out the general opinion and then pull out several other [sources] to agree with you.”

In addition to articulating the view that academic writing is argumentative, Cate also mentioned directness as one of the main differences between the two languages, referring to Chinese writing as “loose on the surface” and stressing the need to “read between the lines.”

While Cate expressed a fairly traditional view of the link between language and culture in her discussions of Chinese and English writing, she did recognize that spaces were opening up for translingual practices in academia:

“I think **this kind of pattern is already realized in some of the field** but I think the language field is uh I mean language field in the western academic world maybe a requirement for you to follow [...] but in other fields some **for example in the medical field or engineering field your research object is not language so I think maybe your requirement for language is not as high.**”

For Cate, such practices reflected a shift in the values and expectations of particular disciplines rather than a manifestation of individual agency.

Cate had received some formal instruction in EAP while receiving her graduate degree in China, but it was the experience of writing a thesis that led her to understand the complex ways that structure and argument interact in research articles in terms of “cohesion, transition, and organization.” Cate was employing these strategies to develop a research article that she intended to submit to an international English-medium journal. However, when asked if she would continue to do so in the future, she replied:

“I am not [...] that high level to publish in a second language so frequently [...]. **Maybe in your first language of course to publish in high level journal is not an easy thing. [But] I think that is somewhat easier than writing in a second language.**”

Cate explained that the university she worked at in China was not very prestigious, and therefore she was not under as much pressure to publish as her peers at top-tier institutions. Thus, despite anchoring herself as a writer within a larger national culture, Cate displayed sensitivity to the smaller institutional and disciplinary-level cultures in which her writing was embedded. Moreover, she explicitly pointed out the usefulness of exposure to and instruction in EAP during her year as a visiting scholar in the U.S.

Jana

Jana, the participant who was most proficient in English, acknowledged her initial lack of awareness of its academic writing conventions:

“And the first [draft] was maybe 7-10 pages long and I remember **I had no idea what I was doing when I wrote that research paper. I was totally really lost.** I was so stressed. There was a lot of material to grasp,

the content, and also the structure. And the academic language. Especially prior to writing that paper **I hadn't used academic language or written anything in English for at least two years.**"

Interestingly, she was perhaps the most resistant of all the participants to the idea of translingual negotiation, at least in her academic career, due to a perceived lack of writing proficiency in her L1:

"I don't write anything in Serbian, nothing like a paper, nothing longer than two sentences on exchanging text messages or maybe emails or something like that. I think I know probably the better language and better structure [of English] than my own language."

Jana explained how recently, when she had to write an email in her L1 to lodge a formal complaint, she went online "to look for examples in Serbian to see what kind of language people use when they write that" because she had no prior frame of reference.

Although she felt more comfortable and confident writing in English than in Serbian, Jana took issue with certain aspects of classroom culture in the U.S. university:

"I come from culture where you usually given a choice between two or three [topics] or at least given one. You know and this is your topic. [Last semester] I spent more time thinking about the topic than actually writing."

Despite her frustration with the perceived lack of direction on topic selection from her professors, Jana valued their guidance on the organizational structure of research papers:

"Dr. S gave us specific guidelines with headings for each part with explanation of what she want us to include in this research paper and I think I made myself [...] a writing framework like we use in Dr. B class and I made like tables and plug in subheadings for each part and just fill in with information then I got rid of frame once I had some content."

From Jana's perspective, formal instruction in EAP was having a positive effect of her writing ability in English. Because her experience writing in her L1 was limited, she felt anchored to her L2's writing conventions, adding "I prefer knowing what is expected in that way and think right now I like having the structure." Thus, negotiation and accommodation gain even more nuance with her. Jana also demonstrated developing awareness of small culture factors such as course-specific guidelines.

Discussion

With regard to Q1, we found that the participants' negotiation strategies varied according to their level of proficiency in English, field of study, and experience writing academically in both their L1 and L2. With regard to Q2, we found that the participants tended to frame discussions of their academic writing in terms of both large, national and language-based cultures, and small, disciplinary and classroom-based ones. Another important finding was that the participants depended on their teachers or mentors to decipher the conventions of academic writing and help them to understand feedback. This highlights the need for EAP writing instruction to support multilingual writers and heighten their awareness of writing across languages and genres.

Conclusion

The evidence from this report suggests that multilingual writers can traverse linguistic and cultural boundaries, as translingualism holds, while still recognizing that such boundaries exist and are culturally meaningful, especially when pursuing academic goals. Translingual negotiations also seem to manifest differently depending on the writer's discipline, background, and level of multiliteracy. It is therefore important to

develop teaching practices that are mindful of such distinctions in order to enhance multilingual writers' awareness of their linguistic and cultural resources so that they may deploy them more effectively. Finally, as our study illustrates, IR-based inquiries that highlight the social contexts of writing and complexities of cross-cultural comparisons may be useful in further operationalizing translingual concepts and developing evidence-based pedagogy for L2 writing. Although these findings are preliminary, they point to the potential fruitfulness of conducting future research in similar directions.

References

- Atkinson, D., Crusan, D., Matsuda, P. K., Ortmeier-Hooper, C., Ruecker, T., Simpson, S., & Tardy, C. (2015). Clarifying the relationship between L2 writing and translingual writing: An open letter to writing studies editors and organization leaders. *College English*, 77, 383-386.
- Canagarajah, S. (2011). Codemeshing in academic writing: Identifying teachable strategies of translanguaging. *Modern Language Journal*, 95, 401-417.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2013). Disciplinary dialogues: The end of second language writing? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 22, 440-441.
- Canagarajah, S. (2015). Clarifying the relationship between translingual practice and L2 writing: Addressing learner identities. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 6, 415-440.
- Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Connor, U. (2011). *Intercultural rhetoric in the writing classroom*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Gentil, G. (2018). Modern languages, bilingual education, and translation studies: The next frontiers in WAC/WID research and instruction? *Across the Disciplines*, 15(3), 114-129.
- Gevers, J. (2018). Translingualism revisited: Language difference and hybridity in L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 40, 73-83.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.islw.2018.04.003>
- Holliday, A. (1999). Small cultures. *Applied Linguistics*, 20, 237-264.
- Horner, B., Lu, M-Z, Royster, J. J., & Trimbur, J. (2011). Language difference in writing: Toward a translingual approach. *College English*, 73, 303-321.
- Lee, E., & Canagarajah, S. (2018). The connection between transcultural dispositions and translingual practices in academic writing. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 14, 14-28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17447143.2018.1501375>
- Matsuda, P. K. (2014). The lure of translingual writing. *PMLA*, 129, 478–483.
<https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.3.478>
- McIntosh, K., Connor, U., & Gokpinar-Shelton, E. (2017). What intercultural rhetoric can bring to EAP/ESP writing studies in an English as a lingua Franca world. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 29, 12-20.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2017.09.001>
- Rinnert, C., & Kobayashi, H. (2016). Multicompetence and multilingual writing. In R. M. Manchón & P. K. Matsuda (Eds.). *Handbook of second and foreign language*

- writing* (pp. 365–385). Boston: De Gruyter.
- Schreiber, B. R., & Watson, M. (2018). Translingualism ≠ code-meshing: A response to Gevers' "Translingualism revisited." *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 42, 94-97. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2018.10.007>
- Tardy, C. M. (2017). Crossing, or creating, divides? A plea for transdisciplinary scholarship. In B. Horner & L. Tetreault (Eds.). *Crossing divides: Exploring translingual writing pedagogies and programs* (pp. 181-189). Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- You, X. (2018). Introduction: Making a transnational turn in writing education. In X. You (Ed.), *Transnational writing education: Theory, history, and practice* (pp. 1-17). New York: Routledge.