TRANSFERENCE OF NATIONAL RHETORICAL STRATEGIES AND ARGUMENTATION PATTERNS: EVIDENCE FROM AN ADVANCED ENGLISH CLASS OF L1 RUSSIAN SPEAKERS

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Abstract
The past decade has seen a powerful trend in Russian tertiary education towards soft skills development among university students, favouring them over hard skills. The traditional Russian higher education model is characterised by focusing primarily, if not exclusively, on hard skills. However, with the pressing need to internationalise Russian universities so that they fit into the global education and research landscape, there emerged a need for a shift.

An immediate response to the challenge consisted in “importing” British and American curricula to introduce classes of Academic Writing and, later, Academic Public Speaking in Russian universities. However, the attempts to blindly transplant a foreign rhetorical tradition have proved to be misguided. Although both the Anglo-Saxon and Russian academic rhetorics are rooted in the Greek culture, their evolution over the centuries resulted in two separate and non-identical rhetorical traditions. The differences are particularly striking when a student, an instructor or a researcher who was raised in a Russian academic environment is taught or forced to adopt Anglo-Saxon conventions.

The resulting tension can be most efficiently addressed by an adjustment of the existing “domestic” conventions and creation of a customised rather than one-size-fits-all curriculum. To be able to take into account the “domestic” conventions, there has to be an inventory of them.

The present paper reflects research conducted within the framework of contrastive rhetoric, as proposed by R. Kaplan in his seminal “doodle paper” (Kaplan 1966) which threw into spotlight a need to identify national patterns and build on them when teaching academic writing in English to international students. We start on the premise that before tackling the language issues, the course should address rhetorical strategies and argumentation patterns, as errors in these areas often prove to be a bigger barrier to understanding than purely linguistic mistakes.

We analyse a sampling of English-language argumentative essays written by an advanced English class of Russian L1 speakers before they received any instruction in academic writing. We then identify the emergent rhetorical patterns and argumentation chosen by the students. We hypothesise that students will transfer the accepted Russian argumentation patterns and rhetorical strategies into their English language essay.

Keywords: academic writing, contrastive rhetoric, argumentation, teaching writing.

1 INTRODUCTION
The past decade has seen a powerful trend in Russian university education, where there emerged a shift towards soft skills of university students, favouring them over hard skills. This marks a departure from the traditional Russian tertiary education model which is characterised by focusing primarily, if not exclusively, on hard skills development. However, with the pressing need to internationalise Russian universities so that they fit into the global education and research landscape, there emerged a need for this shift.

An immediate response to the challenge consisted in “importing” British and American curricula on Russian universities by introducing classes of Academic Writing and, later, Academic Public Speaking styled after the US and British schools. However, these attempts to blindly transplant a foreign rhetorical tradition have proved to be misplaced. Although both the Anglo-Saxon and Russian academic rhetorics are rooted in the Greek culture, their evolution over the centuries resulted in two separate and non-identical rhetorical traditions. The differences are particularly striking when a student, an instructor or a researcher who was brought up in a Russian academic environment is taught or forced to adopt Anglo-Saxon conventions.
The study of different cultural conventions in academic writing (and academic discourse in general) emerged as the so-called contrastive rhetoric. The term was proposed by R. Kaplan (1966) [1], whose famous ‘doodle paper’ laid the basis for further research in the similar vein. It threw into spotlight a need to identify national patterns and build on them when teaching academic writing in English to international students.

The present paper reflects research conducted within the framework of contrastive rhetoric, as proposed by R. Kaplan. We start on the premise that before tackling the language issues, the course should address rhetorical strategies and argumentation patterns, as errors in these areas often prove to be a bigger barrier to understanding than purely linguistic mistakes.

Traditions of academic writing across various cultures draw on the differences in argumentation models, information presentation, rhetorical appeals, reference to authority, language and style. Since R. Kaplan, extensive research has been carried out in the Arabic [2], Japanese [3], Korean [4], Chinese [5], including separate analyses of Taiwan [6] and Hong Kong [7], Finnish [8], Turkish [9] etc. writing styles. Cross-cultural differences in argumentation include attention to general comprehensibility of the written product. Some scholars talk of reader-friendly vs writer-friendly cultures [10], while others speak in terms of high-context and low-context cultures [11]. Whatever the term used, the difference lies in the level of explicitness of the textual information. Low-context (reader-friendly) cultures put the burden on the writer / speaker to make the text explicit, specific, and analytical, whereas high-context (writer-friendly) cultures expect the listener / reader to understand contextual cues for the message to be decoded.

Western writers tend to favour logical arguments over emotions (i.e. logos over pathos, in Aristotle’s terms). Eastern / Oriental writers, coming from collective cultures, tend to use arguments where they themselves are not beneficiaries. Finally, the Arab writing culture is reported to favour indirect approaches to argumentation and expression; repetition is a commonly used means of persuasion. Pervasiveness of an idea may be valued more than its logical merits (what Uysal calls ‘affect over accuracy’ [12]).

The order in which information is presented in a written text is also subject to cultural variations. Thus, in Russian or Finnish writing styles the main thesis (claim) is reported to be delayed until the end of the piece, which makes this style different from German or British [13]. Fig. 1 shows the famous Kaplan doodles which illustrate preferred models of different writing cultures:

![Figure 1. R. Kaplan’s ‘doodles’ (1966).](image)

As the doodles illustrate, Russian writing tends to avoid direct pathways from thesis to supporting arguments to conclusion. Digressions are often praised as evidence of knowledge (if you digress, you are able to showcase it), and English texts are often called simplistic.

2 METHODOLOGY

Traditionally Russian academic writing is described as being more in line with the Eastern / Oriental traditions. To check this hypothesis, we analyse a sampling of English-language argumentative essays written by an advanced English class of Russian L1 speakers before they received any instruction in academic writing. We then identify the emergent rhetorical patterns and argumentation chosen by the students. We hypothesise that students will transfer the accepted Russian argumentation patterns and rhetorical strategies into their English language essay.

Students (n=24) who are all advanced English learners and Russian L1 speakers were tasked with writing an in-class argumentative essay. The topics were styled after the famous trolley dilemma, i.e.
students had to outline a solution to an ethically controversial hypothetical situation. The topics were selected from *Moral Reasoning*, by Victor Grassian’s *Moral Reasoning* [14].

The essay writing was preceded by a warm-up task to set the tone and activate schemata. The students were shown a video by M. Sandel (*The Moral side of murder*, URL: [http://justiceharvard.org/themoralsideofmurder/](http://justiceharvard.org/themoralsideofmurder/) ) followed by a discussion.

The hypothesis tested is that given the time constraints students will choose to follow the ingrained writing strategies. Below we analyse the means of argumentation employed by the students.

### 3 RESULTS

Of the 24 papers submitted, six essays featured no main thesis to be supported by argumentation. The distribution of argumentation types in the essays is shown in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Argumentation type</th>
<th>Number of uses</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Factual data / Statistics</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logos</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathos</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to authority</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to personal experience</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to general knowledge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factual data or statistics were not used at all, which is understandable given that this is an in-class essay with no recourse to offline or online resources.

Logos seems to the predominant argumentation type. It is found in 10 papers and either takes the form of a conditional clause (*If… then*) or is introduced in the sentence with the help of a connector, such as *as a result*. To illustrate:

- *e.g.* If the coach allows Mike and Sam to play next week, *then* the result will be much better.
- *e.g.* As a result of such decision there may appear a problem.

Pathos, i.e. appeal to emotions, is found in four instances. In one case it manifests itself in attempts at expressive syntax, such as:

- *e.g.* Such hideous of a crime would it seem!

In other cases it takes the form of particular word choice, such as epithets (*e.g.* I saw a tearful woman) or interjections and nouns:

- *e.g.* Oh, what a disaster, thought I after my car crashed into a red mini-cooper.

References to morality and ethics can also be counted as pathos:

- *e.g.* I would definitely not blame her for that decision. In this situation, everyone would panic. It seems very hypocritical to blame her when you have no proof that you wouldn’t do the same thing in her shoes.
- *e.g.* I cannot approve of her behaviour.

Reference to authority is found in three papers. In all three it refers to the Kantian moral imperative as opposed to Utilitarianism. It may be safe to assume that students have chosen to use the factual information presented in a video task the group had done before they were tasked with the essay. Although all 24 students watched the video and participated in the discussion, only three chose to include the information in the essays.

Reference to personal experience, or at least posing as an expert, is found in 8 papers and so is second only to logos:

- *e.g.* From real-life experience I know that there is a mandatory police investigation in such cases.
Curiously, the writer chose to refer to their personal experience as an authority even though in this case it is not needed — there are official sources of information to check this information.

Other examples include:

e.g. As for me, there are no indispensable people;

e.g. If I were…, I would … (not followed by any other arguments);

e.g. To me, this looks like good advertising; and I personally do not know a legislative system that allows the killing of a group of people without any consequences.

Another type of argumentation is reference to general knowledge, where the writer appeals to things the readers, they assume, are well familiar with, such as:

e.g. The situation represented in this dilemma is similar to that of Robin Hood. He robbed rich persons;

e.g. It is well-known that women are naturally ‘programmed’ to care for their children; e.g. Desperate times require desperate measures, so the saying goes.

4 CONCLUSIONS

As the bar chart in Fig. 1 shows, spontaneous writing by Russian L1 speakers in English demonstrate almost equal preference for equating personal life experience with logical reasoning:

While we do not pretend that a small sampling can be conclusive enough to build a general Russian cultural writing model, we believe it to be a useful diagnostic tool for particular class. Assessing how the students write intuitively should be the starting point for any writing training.

REFERENCES


