

THE IMPACT OF NATIVE LANGUAGE LITERACY ON ESL COLLEGE FRESHMEN'S WRITING OF ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS

Yu Ren Dong

Non-native English speaking students have tremendous difficulties with argumentative writing, particularly when this mode of writing is used as a timed assessment instrument for writing competency. The stakes are high when passing such tests is tied to passing composition courses and, ultimately, to graduation from college. An argumentative writing test used in The City University of New York (CUNY) typically requires students to respond in writing to a controversial social issue presented by an agree or disagree prompt. Within fifty minutes, writers must take and support a position on the issue with details and examples from their experience or their reading. An example prompt from The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test follows:

It always strikes me as a terrible shame to see young people spending so much of their time staring at television. If we could unplug all the TV sets in America, our children would grow up to be healthier, better educated, and more independent human beings. Do you agree or disagree? Explain and illustrate your answer from your own experience, your observations of others, or your reading (2).

Students' essays are graded holistically, based on the development of an idea, organization, supporting details, coherence, grammar, and mechanics. An essay must be scored four or higher on a scale of six by two readers, for a total of eight or higher in order to be a passing essay. The evaluation criteria for a passing essay include rhetorical and language components. For the rhetorical component, the essay must be focused, organized, specific, and concrete. For the language component, the essay has to be clear and mainly correct in the writer's use of sentences, word choice, and punctuation which reflect a sufficient command of standard written English (The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test 1-5).

Although both native and non-native English speaking students are concerned about these exams due to time constraints and language demands, non-native English speaking students are at a greater disadvantage because they must demonstrate language skills which they might not yet have acquired. This writing task is more difficult for non-native English speaking students coming from cultural and educational backgrounds that have different ways of thinking and writing. These ways of thinking and writing might contrast greatly with the ways of thinking and writing valued in American academic communities. In this paper, I report on differences which I found when I interviewed students and test raters and when I examined these students' actual writing on the Writing Assessment Test (WAT).

Background

Second language researchers have approached non-native English speaking students' writing difficulties through a contrastive analysis. Contrasting and comparing language structures between languages, researchers have tried to explain or even predict certain difficulties that second language learners might have in their learning to write in English. It was not until Kaplan that contrastive analysis extended the investigation of the differences among languages to the discourse level. Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric hypothesis revealed that the organizational pattern in a

piece of expository writing varied from language to language due to culturally governed ways of thinking. While English writing is organized in a linear fashion, writing in other languages is organized differently (410). For example, Chinese writing is circularly organized and does not approach the thesis directly. Since Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric hypothesis, many researchers have examined the organizational patterns of academic writing, contrasting written texts in English with written texts in various languages. In analyzing textual structures of academic argumentative written texts across three languages, English, German, and Finnish, Connor found that while English argumentative writing was organized by making a thesis statement to introduce the problem, providing details to support and develop the thesis statement, and drawing a conclusion to clinch the point, argumentative writing in German and Finnish did not follow that organizational pattern closely.

Cultural characteristics of written texts are also reflected by the readers' expectations when reading a text. Examining published journalistic and expository written texts in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai, Hinds found that writers from these cultures tended to organize their writing by a "delayed introduction of purpose" with possible digressions and by using hints in contrast to a deductive pattern in English writing characterized by stating a main point, providing a detailed reasoning process, making a connection between the main point and the reasoning, and drawing a conclusion (98). For Hinds, while English academic writing is more reader oriented and places the responsibility on the writer to make the reader see the thinking process that s/he goes through, academic writing in other languages, such as Japanese and Chinese, is more writer oriented and places the responsibility on the reader to make active inferences and to puzzle through the reading (145). Therefore, while an English reader may be easily confused by the organizational pattern presented in a text from these cultures, a reader from those cultures may find the text clear and meaningful.

Cross-cultural studies have shown that the Aristotelian rhetoric which shapes American academic argumentation and persuasion is not a universal rhetoric shared by other cultures. Matalene demonstrated that Chinese rhetoric was based on the principle of maintaining a social harmony and was characterized by appealing to the authority of the past, manipulating fixed phrases, and exhorting with assertions (800-801). Ballard and Clanchy also noted a cultural difference in the perception of knowledge and learning which influences the different writing conventions found in the East and the West. According to Ballard and Clanchy, while Western cultures view knowledge and learning more as an extension of the existing knowledge, Asian cultures view knowledge and learning more as a preservation of existing knowledge (23-24). This fundamental difference in perception leads to Western culture's emphasis on stating personal opinion and on striving for originality and Eastern culture's emphasis on imitation and the conservation of previous knowledge. Thus, writing instruction in different cultures reflects different social and cultural values and ideologies. For example, while writing instruction in American universities and colleges focuses on process writing and values students' abilities to become independent thinkers and writers, writing instruction in mainland China focuses on teaching consensual knowledge and providing explicit contextual support and resources (Jolliffe 272). When non-native English speaking students from China come into American universities and colleges without Western contextual support or explicit teaching of the consensual knowledge, they very often rely on what they know about writing from their native culture.

While studies so far have mainly focused on final written products, few have investigated the educational and cultural contexts of the writing except for Carson and Liebman. These researchers have examined ESL students' previous education in writing skills and the role that previous education plays in facilitating or impeding the process of learning to write in English. However, researchers have not studied the conventions of the

agree/disagree argumentative writing task presented by the freshmen composition test, although it is widely used to evaluate both native and non-native students' writing competence in universities and colleges in the U.S. (Fisherman 23-24). Little has been done to study the impact of cultural and educational backgrounds on non-native English speaking students' performance on writing competency tests.

Writing Assessment Test

The Writing Assessment Test (WAT) given by CUNY has been used for both placement and evaluation of competency for the past two decades. At Queens College, which is part of the CUNY system, the WAT statistics for all first-time freshmen in the past ten years (1986-1996) showed that the passing percentage for students who took the WAT for the first-time was 73.8% among native English speaking students but only 15.24% among non-native English speaking students. The non-native English speaking students' low passing percentage suggests the need to investigate reasons behind this low rate of success.

Facing a steadily increasing non-native English speaking student population and a very low passing rate on the writing competency test in the first attempt for these students, writing instructors, researchers, and administrators need to know about these students and about how much their culturally oriented discourse patterns influence their writing. At the same time, Hamp-Lyons argues that students need to know the readers' expectations while reading and grading the essays (61). Studies on readers' expectations on large scale composition competency tests, such as by Basham and Kwachka, have revealed that rhetorical patterns have at least an equal impact, if not a greater impact, on readers' reading and scoring of writing competency tests (43). While doing holistic reading, test readers often look for the rhetorical patterns typical of English language academic discourse in addition to appropriate language features. When these patterns of discourse and these language features are not identified, the essay is not deemed a passing essay. In comparison, an appropriate presentation of

American academic conventions with a strong content can compensate for some language problems. As one of the WAT raters I interviewed said, "If the content and the development are strong, we might ignore some of the errors." If these discourse patterns and language features are challenging for native English speaking students, they will be at least as challenging to non-native English speaking students.

Being a part of the large Freshmen Year Initiative (FYI) project of Queens College, "From the Margins to the Center: Meeting the Challenges of the CUNY Student of the Year 2000," I was interested in exploring the ways in which those on the "margins," students and faculty, integrated into the college. I wanted to investigate these questions: 1) Are there any culturally oriented ways of thinking and writing that influence the writing of these non-native English speaking students on the WAT? 2) What are some of the WAT readers' expectations? and 3) What are some of the mismatched expectations and conceptions of discourse patterns between the students and the WAT readers?

After an initial demographic questionnaire given in an ESL composition course in spring 1997, nine non-native English speaking students who failed the WAT at least once were selected for interview. Each interview lasted for an hour. The interview with the student had two sections (See Appendix B for the interview questions). The first section asked for the interviewee's recollections of his or her experience of learning to write in the native language; the second section asked the interviewee about his or her perceived difficulties in dealing with the WAT. In answering questions, the interviewees were encouraged to make connections as well as make comparisons and contrasts with the instruction that they received in their native language and in English. These nine students represented a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds which reflect the diverse nature of an urban college. They came from seven different countries: Bangladesh, Greece, Korea, Mainland China, Peru, Poland, and Russia (See Appendix A for the demographic information on these students). The nine students had an average age of 22, ranging in age from

17 to 42. Seven out of the nine students were newcomers to the U.S., their residency in the U. S. ranging from a few months to a little over one year at the time of the study. Although the remaining two students have lived in the U.S. for quite some time, neither had had much exposure to written English. The Greek student, though she has been in the U.S. for 27 years, had stayed home all these years to raise her children. One Chinese student, who came to the U.S. five years before and attended high school in New York City, had been placed in a bilingual program for all these years and claimed that she received minimal writing instruction in English before coming to college. All of these students claimed to have had strong oral and written language skills in their native language. Transcripts from their high schools back home showed an average GPA of B+ in their native language.

To compare what these students talked about in the interviews with what they actually did on the WAT, I examined a total of 13 not passing essays written by them on their previous WAT tests. In addition, I interviewed two WAT readers for their perspectives of these essays. One WAT reader is a college English composition instructor; the other is a college ESL reading and writing instructor. Both of the WAT readers had been teaching college remedial classes and ESL composition classes for over five years and had been WAT readers for over three years at the time of the interview. The 45-minute interview with each WAT reader had two sections. Section one consisted of general questions on the purpose of the WAT, the scoring criteria, and the scoring procedures. Section two involved think-aloud protocols where the reader was asked to read an essay that did not pass, comment on it, and provide a rationale for the not passing rating. The questions used for the interview with the students and the WAT readers are included in Appendix C.

Results of the interviews with the students showed that these nine students had received extensive writing instruction in their native language before coming to the U.S. All nine students began to learn to write in their native language in elementary school;

some started to compose as early as the first grade. Several students noted that they had received separate writing instruction on how to write by either examining and mimicking exemplary writing models or by using the process approach. The frequency of the writing assignments, according to these students, ranged from once every week to once every two weeks. The process of their home language and literacy acquisition followed a pattern similar to that of native English speaking students, from descriptive and expressive writing in the lower grades to informative, research-oriented, and argumentative writing at high school.

The interviews suggested that these students did have some kind of argumentative writing experience back home. Some countries, such as China and Korea, also have a nationwide writing examination in their native language as an important element of a once-a-year college entrance exam. Though other countries, such as Bangladesh, Peru, Greece, and Russia, don't have a nationwide writing examination, students who plan to go into the field of humanities are supposed to take writing tests administrated by individual colleges and universities. All this evidence suggests that writing skills are explicitly taught and even emphasized in their home cultures.

However, these students' schooling backgrounds varied in terms of the emphasis on the function and genres of writing. For example, the Bangladesh student reported that his schooling had placed a strong emphasis on descriptive writing. At grade three, students were asked to describe a cow and a horse. In high school, they wrote many essays to describe the life and the works of famous writers. Both the Chinese and Korean students recalled that their writing in elementary school and even in high school was primarily oriented toward expressive writing. They were asked to express their feelings after a field trip or a movie. The genre called "xianwen" in Chinese, a kind of expressive writing which reveals the writer's feelings from observing a natural scene, was frequently assigned to the students in high school. In contrast,

the Russian student noted that the writing instruction he received was very controlled, focusing on reporting research findings.

According to these students, formal writing instruction was often connected with the reading of the literature, though Chinese, Korean, Bangladesh, and Russian students all said that they had separate composition classes. For example, the Bangladesh student noted that the language arts teacher analyzed a piece of good writing in the literature to illustrate writing conventions for the student. The Chinese students revealed that they were asked to study exemplary writing by both ancient and modern Chinese writers. The Korean student claimed that the writing process back home was very similar to instruction in the U.S. The teacher would give a topic and then ask the class to brainstorm ideas before going into the writing task. The importance of reading was noted repeatedly by Chinese, Bangladesh, and Russian students. According to the Chinese students, their teachers told them the only good way to learn to write is by reading good writing and mimicking these models.

When comparing writing in their native language and writing in English, specifically writing an argumentative essay on a writing competency test, these students disclosed their varied expectations and ways of constructing written texts in their native language. Even though students were all aware of language problems in their writing, what surfaced from the interviews was their struggle with the mismatches at the discourse level between writing in their native language and writing in English in the following four areas: 1) interpreting the agree or disagree prompt, 2) introducing the position, 3) specificity and concreteness, and 4) attributes of a passing essay.

Interpreting the Agree or Disagree Prompt

Interpreting an agree or disagree prompt on the WAT involves decision making as to what position the writer takes and how ideas are going to be presented. Two WAT readers revealed that an argumentative or academic essay using the agree and disagree prompt was intended to ask a person to present a position and

then support it. Although this position can be both to agree and to disagree, seeing from both sides of the issue, the position has to be supported with concrete and specific details, rather than in a general and vague discussion. According to the test readers, due to the time constraints on the test, the writer is expected to take one side of the issue, either agree or disagree, in order to develop sufficiently his or her view.

However, these readers' expectations have not been adequately communicated to these students. All nine non-native English speaking students voiced some difficulty and confusion with the agree or disagree prompt presented at the writing competency test. Several students claimed that even though they had something to say about the topic, the agree/disagree prompt produced confusion because they did not understand the purpose of the prompt. As a result, they had to resort to the expectations derived from writing instruction in their home culture, which may mean a different interpretation of the task and the logic for idea development. One Chinese student commented:

Unlike the teacher here asking us to show your point of view or argue whether you agree or disagree, the Chinese teacher would give us two topics, one positive and the other negative. We were supposed to choose one and then argue for it. So when you choose one side and write about it, you don't have to argue why you think this side is your opinion, not the other side; but argue how it is true. Since everything has two sides like Yin and Yang, you really cannot say this is true all the time. So I have difficulty in expressing my opinion and coming out to say this is the best. So the topic itself produces confusion. It's very hard for a topic like this to say one is better and the other is worse. You can never completely agree or disagree. I remember one topic like this: The teenager should not live with parents before graduating from college, agree or disagree? I have difficulty in writing this topic because there are good points such as being independent but then there are bad points like they

are easy to get bad influence and cannot focus on their study. A topic like this is difficult to write about and you really cannot say absolutely it is good to live with the parents or vice versa.

According to this Chinese student, argumentative writing in Chinese does not require the writer to choose a side because the side is already chosen for the writer. Troubled by the agree or disagree prompt, she found herself having a hard time in deciding which side she should choose. As a result, she was unable to identify the purpose of the writing task and to take a position. This student's uncertainty about the topic and the difficulty in settling for one point of view revealed more than a problem with the content of the topic and the language.

A Bangladesh student, though exposed to a similar agree-and-disagree type of argumentative writing task back in his home country, had a different set of problems. In writing this type of essay in his native language, he was taught to "stand in two boats" and argue for both sides without explicitly telling which side he favors. Even though later he figured out the rule of the game to choose one side and stick to it, he found himself having a hard time presenting his position clearly.

When I was at the high school, we were asked to write about these topics like agree/disagree writing, such as the computer. The teacher asked us to tell about the computer and why you think it is good or bad. But the teacher back home told us to write about both good and bad points about the computer.... In that case, I can do anything, I can just say yes, this is good for me and at the same time I can also say, no, this is not good for me. This is easier to write by stating both good and bad things.... When we write an argumentative essay back home, we can stay in both sides, like standing in two boats at the same time.

In the following excerpt of an essay, the writer was asked to take a position on whether parents should always tell the truth to their children. The writer talks about how childhood is a precious time and how a child has an easier life compared with the adult's difficult life. Therefore, she argues, we should protect the child's innocent and happy life and not tell the truth to the child. However, she then changes her view by saying that we should tell the truth to the child:

...Why should we tell our children about everything what is wrong in our world? Isn't it better to lie sometimes (when it is necessary, of course not all the time)? Isn't it better to leave them with their own world? It is such a good time to be a kid: to play, to meet people, go to school, make everything a playground, just make fun. We are obligated to give kids a good time.

But everybody knows that sometimes it is going to be really hard. There are a lot of bad things in our world like financial problems, divorce, sick, death. Sometimes it is better to say truth, sometimes it is better to lie, but lie should be nearby truth. What I mean is that we shouldn't lie at all. Don't think that children are stupid. Oh, no, they are usually more clever than adults...

The writer then ends her essay by saying that we should lie to the child. Interviews with the two readers revealed that even though the student might have clear ideas about the issue, the essay suffered from an under-development of either side of the issue. She gave strong points but failed to support them with details and examples. As a result, the readers interpreted her position as contradictory instead of meaningful or coherent.

Introducing the Position

While American academic readers expect the writer to introduce his or her position early on in the essay and present that

position clearly, readers and writers in other languages, as indicated by these students, have different expectations of introducing the position when writing in their native language. For example, Chinese, Korean, and Russian reports emphasize the need to make an appeal to an authority in the introduction. A Chinese student explained her understanding of a good piece of writing in Chinese based on writing instruction she received back home. According to her, a delayed articulation of the purpose of the writing is often expected in Chinese writing. Instead of introducing the writer's position abruptly up front, it is important for a Chinese writer to first make an appeal to the reader by referring back to history or by providing a vivid mental picture in the reader's mind, and then skillfully introducing the position.

In Chinese, good writing often begins with historical background information from the past to the present. Teachers ask us to use supporting details from old times. For example, if you want to write: The soldiers without ambitions are not good soldiers. This topic demands you to give historical examples to show your point, such as Napoleon and many Chinese historical figures to illustrate that those who did not have high goals in their lives cannot succeed at anything. Very often you don't remember the exact words such as what Napoleon said, but the teacher does not look for those details. We can say that from the past to the present, we have seen many famous figures who used to be ambitious and did not contend with what they had. It's OK to tell a story and then lead the reader into the thesis. You can write about the introduction from different angles to attract the reader and then bring in the thesis.

The Russian student echoed a similar perception of what a good introduction should look like in writing in Russian. Instead of stating the position up front, this Russian student noted that writing in Russian required the writer to use the party line in the introduction.

In Russian, we usually have a very big introduction and a big conclusion. For example, if we are supposed to write about the computer use in modern life, we are supposed to start like this "Mathematics was greatly appreciated by our great leaders; now it is used more in the technology such as computers." We are supposed to give a political and historical background in the introduction.

The focus on the introduction was also reflected in Peruvian students' recollections of the writing instruction received back home:

In writing in Spanish, we focus more on introduction. The introduction is much longer. We were told to write long introductions. But here they asked us for a short introduction but more details in the body.

In the following excerpt of an essay on the topic of whether the welfare program should have a two-year limit for able-bodied people, the writer tried to build for a reader a picture of hardship that many immigrants went through. Although she had strong ideas and was obviously compassionate about these ideas, her opening was too long and, hence, not in conformity with the perspective of an American academic audience. The reader had difficulty in finding out how the paragraph related to the topic. Therefore, she had to go back to check for the topic of the writing in order to make sense of the opening paragraph, which frustrated her.

The U.S. is one of the developed countries, but this country's the differences of the wealth of the rich and the poor people are very big. Every year many immigrants come to America with their American dream, not most of the people can speak English, so they need help from the U.S. government. Many immigrants experience language

problems, so they get 3D job, dangerous, dirty, and difficult. They also cannot earn enough money for a living. In addition, there is not a job opportunity.

The above introduction uses a late coming of the thesis. Though it might be a way of argumentative writing in other countries, it is not appreciated by American readers. American readers tend to regard this delayed articulation of the writer's position as a digression, therefore, indicating incompetence.

Specificity and Concreteness

While a test reader from an American academic community values specificity and concreteness in backing up and developing one's position in argumentative writing, students from other cultures have different views of what is counted as a piece of good writing. For example, coming from a homogeneous culture which emphasized shared beliefs and values, a Greek student disclosed that writing in Greek relied heavily on providing words as raw data for the reader rather than boring the reader with details to show the reader each step of the writer's thinking process:

In Greek, we don't write the text like it is here. A good piece of English writing is with details and supporting ideas. In Greek, I won't go into that much detail. For example, [the teacher] the other day wanted me to write about the difference between man and woman, woman works harder than man, do you agree or disagree. [If it was written in Greek,] we don't have to put the details like what a woman does. We feel that is very boring, you know, to say what she does in a day. It is always like they [the readers] remind us like "We know what you mean." It's a different way of thinking. If that writing was written in Greek, I would give the words or using strong vocabulary words to say what women do.

This Greek student indicated that in Greek, the writer often made assumptions about the reader, assuming that the reader shared his or her background. Therefore, there was no need for an explicit description or a detailed explanation of what a woman did. Instead, they learned to use adjectives as pointers to cue the reader in. In the example below, the writer responds to the topic "Do you agree or disagree that children learn violent behaviors from their parents?" In supporting her argument that children do learn from their parents, the writer paints a contrastive picture of two different parents whose behaviors are followed by their children, using adjectives instead of concrete examples.

The parents' behaviors are very important to their children. The parents' action and the way they talk will affect their children's behaviors and ideas. Children may follow parents who are kind, sensitive, polite, and hardworking. Children will follow parents who are violent, selfish, and dishonest. So children learn violent behaviors from their parents at most.

The Bangladesh student noted a similar reader's expectation in writing in Bangladesh. According to his home education, giving hints is an acceptable practice to provide the reader with the opportunity to make inferences.

Another difference is that here in English when we write a paragraph, we have a main idea. And for that main idea, we have to give details to support the main idea. The details have to be so clear that everybody can understand. But in my country (Bangladesh), my culture, sometimes, we are not encouraged to give details, we just give some hints. And nobody had any problem understanding these hints.

This Bangladesh student's problem with details and specificity is presented in his essay below. In responding to whether you agree or disagree with a single parent's adoption of a child, he made

strong statements of the benefits for a child to be raised by both parents, expecting the reader to pick up the cues and share his views:

Both parents will be able to spend more time with their children than a single parent. Childhood is the best time for learning. At that time whatever the children saw they will learn it. So parents need to stay with them and teach them what is good or what is bad. It's easy for a couple to raise a child properly. Because, if one of them went to work other person can stay with the child and spend time. On the other hand, a single parent couldn't spend enough time with the children. So children would pick up lots of bad habit at the absence of their single parents. So, it takes two people to raise a child properly.

However, both readers at the interview mentioned that his lack of supporting details prohibited the essay from making a meaningful case for the claims that he made. One reader talked about the student's lack of specificity like this:

So here the writer was saying that parents should teach them the difference between good and bad. So can you show us what kinds of things they can teach them. What are some of the bad things? How could they teach them what's good and bad? He is saying that two parents can spend more time with the child and the child will not pick up the bad habits. So they can raise the child properly. So what is properly?

A Russian student recalled that writing in Russia was not much on personal opinions or arguing from a personal point of view. For example, in the eighth grade, he was assigned to write a ten-page report on World War II; and in high school, he wrote a 21-page book about Tolstoy's life and writings, based on his library research. The Russian student still remembered his teacher's words when talking about what constituted good writing: "Pure

imagination is not enough; you should read and use the materials well." For him, a logical argument is not based on personal point of view, but based on scientific facts using a rational reasoning process. Therefore, in order to answer an agree/disagree prompt, he has to know enough facts about the topic and then make a generalization about it. Therefore, he had difficulty in finding personal examples and using them in argumentative writing.

Since I have not had any kind of experience with this agree or disagree format of writing, it gave me some problems. You see, I have to think about which is good and which is bad. When I am starting to think about it, I am going back and looking for the facts which can prove these ideas, so I am losing myself in ideas and opinions. While writing it, I realize that the other side is correct too. After that I don't know what to write. I know to choose one side, both these ideas are all correct, I was lost in confusion. I am confused at how to prove my ideas. I did not have any training on this kind of writing. Writing in Russian, we have to consolidate facts, you just say what this rule is and then give facts.

What Is Counted as A Passing Essay

Interview data obtained from the test readers suggested that very often a passing essay can be more than taking a position and giving examples and details. Both readers noted that non-native English speaking students had a problem with building a logical thinking process between the example given and the point to be made. In the following essay, even though a Korean student gave an example, her failure to make connections between her example and her point prevented the reader from seeing a developed position that a single parent can do equally as well as two parents in child adoption. For both readers, it is not enough to cite an example; the writer has to show the reader how the example is related to the point that s/he makes:

Nowadays, single mother and single father increase, but some people oppose it because they think two people must raise a child properly. However, I don't think about that.

First of all, to raise a child is a kind of ability. Most of all human society, to raise a child needs a lot of money because every person has to study until at least high school, and they have to eat and wear. I think the important point is that a person who have money can raise a child with love. For example, a famous actress in Korea, she raise a girl. She didn't get marry, but she wanted a baby, so she adopted. She really wanted a daughter. When she dreamed to become a mother, she was able to adopt a baby. She said although I was a rich person, I couldn't happy before I had a baby. I think it is also to become an ideal family in modern society.

My second reason is that to adopt a baby is to have a responsibility. At the responsibility, two people or one people are not important. Some people say that every child should is raised by two parents because when children grow up, they need two parts of their parents. It means father's character and mother's character are important to them. It's true, but single mom and dad can raise very well because they have relatives, and the children were educated at their school. Relatives can help the single mom and dad, and the children can make some friends, and other adult people like their teacher can learn sex roles. Therefore, I think single women and men can adopt children.

Showing and proving your point, the requirement for American academic writing, was the theme which came from the interviews with the two essay readers. According to them, the writer is expected not only to come up with examples but also to communicate a clear purpose of using the examples to support his or her point to the reader. However, here the student stops short

of fulfilling the reader's expectation, that is taking the examples further to prove her point that the Korean's actress's adoption is a success and the child under her care is happy. One of the readers commented on this point at the interview like this:

She just cites an example, she doesn't utilize the example or prove how that example supports her point... So unless I give you some details as to why I made this point, I am not really proving it. Just because a girl was adopted by an actress, it doesn't prove that is why a single parent can adopt a child and be a good parent. But if I can show you how even though she is single, she did a good job in raising her child. She gives her love. She gives her all the clothes that she needs. She is able to support her because she has enough money to give her a good education. She spends three hours a day with the child. She kisses her every morning. The more concrete illustration, the more developed the essay. As I was telling my students, don't just tell, show. Show us.

However, as this Korean student commented at the interview, even though she learned to give examples in English writing, still her writing might not be valued due to the example that she used in a foreign context, requiring background knowledge which the reader might not have. Comparing writing in Korean and writing in English, she noted the difficulty in knowing about the ways to do so and how much she needed to do in order to make her writing comprehensible for the reader in the new writing context:

In Korea, the teacher told us that a piece of good writing often has main ideas and details by using examples. In giving examples, the teacher encouraged us to use the wiseman's sayings such as what Confucius says... By doing that, the teacher would understand me. But here I feel very confused about how specific the examples have to be. For example, once I wrote about a very influential Korean Ancient philosophy called nihilism. I am a believer of that

philosophy. But my teacher did not know. I sense that it is not only that the meaning is lost in translation but also Americans do not believe in that. Words like that make my writing very strange to the reader. But I don't know how to make my writing clear to American readers.

Two readers commented repeatedly on the importance of developing ideas and linking these ideas with examples in order to argue adequately for a position on the WAT. While doing the holistic reading, the reader looks at each paragraph for a main point sufficiently supported and argued by the writer. Uneven development or insufficient connections between the examples and the point are signals for not passing. For example, in the following excerpt, despite an almost native-like sentence structure and fewer errors, the first body paragraph of the essay written by a Chinese student fell short. The student was asked to argue whether or not informing communities that convicted sex offenders who live in the same area was a fair law:

One reason is most sex offenders sexually offend others after they have been released from prisons. A recent survey shows sixty percent of sex offenders will commit the same kind of crime again in a year after they are released. Last month, a teenager was raped by a man who had committed the same crime before.

Even though the student has given hard statistics to support the point that it is a fair law to inform community of the sex offenders now living in the same area, still, there is minimum connection made between the statistics and her point. What is more, in the first paragraph, the reader expects the writer to take a well-developed stance. Therefore, the development of her position in this short paragraph is not adequate. As one of the readers mentioned in an interview, especially since this was her first paragraph, it was even more damaging:

For the first main idea that has only a couple of sentences, it is very minimally developed and that hesitates me passing this paper... She clearly states her view. But the development is not that adequate. Within the three paragraphs, the first paragraph has only a couple of sentences. If it is the third paragraph, then we say, OK, maybe the student has run out of time and since the other two paragraphs have already developed so well, it's OK. But a first paragraph like this is inadequate.

Obviously here the reader's expectations of a passing essay go beyond an appropriate use of rhetorical and language strategies and content of the essay. The reader also looks at the sheer quantity of the essay, the number of sentences in each paragraph, especially the beginning body paragraph and uses all these to gauge the writer's investment in writing. Unfortunately, as the Korean student mentioned repeatedly at the interview, these reader expectations were not introduced clearly and sufficiently in class. These students were not familiar with the scoring criteria nor were they given any sample to illustrate a piece of good writing on the WAT that fulfills the reader's expectations.

Conclusion

Even though non-native English speaking students' difficulties with American academic argumentative writing can be explained by a number of other factors, such as a lack of writing experience in English and limited or poor language and writing skills, the data gained from the interviews with the students and the examination of their writing confirmed findings of contrastive rhetoric research on organizational patterns such as the variation of introductions and the reader's expectations. These results also suggest that non-native English speaking students do bring their culturally varied ways of writing to the writing task and these ways of writing do have an impact on their composing in English. While American readers favor clarity, readers in other cultures may favor elusiveness, an appeal to authority and history, strong visual

imagery created by a powerful use of vocabulary, or reliance on the reader's active participation in drawing conclusions. These ways of writing range from global essay organizations to local word choices, from what counts as directness and specificity to how to project, support, and develop one's personal view. Thus, the impact of these students' sociocultural and educational background on their English writing development cannot be ignored when these students change the cultural and educational environment and learn a new set of literacy skills.

This small study by no means can be generalized. However, by looking at writing skills and expectations from the perspectives of both the students and the test readers, this study may be a starting point for writing instructors and writing program administrators to bridge the gap between test readers' expectations and non-native English speaking writers' knowledge about argumentative writing in American academic settings. The WAT test cited here is one example that illustrates need for this bridge. Very often in ESL or basic composition classrooms, we ask about our students' native language backgrounds, the length of their stay in the U.S., etc. However, we seldom ask about our students' writing experiences in their native language, including the ways that they approach an argumentative writing task, the writing instruction that they received back home, and reader expectations in their country. Composition teachers need to learn their non-native English speaking students' home literacy practices and potential differences in thinking and writing and use their newly gained knowledge to teach. Essay readers need to be trained to be aware of their own culturally mediated ways of thinking, writing, and reading. They need to know that something which initially looks like trouble or confusing writing to an American academic reader might be something better understood and appreciated in other cultures. This training is important because test readers might not be conscious of their cultural bias in reading.

Although many non-native English speaking students have had access to English grammar, they have had less access to discourse patterns and reader expectations held by American universities

and colleges. As demonstrated by these students' words, these discourse patterns and reader expectations are not often clearly communicated to them. When students are assigned to write or choose a topic to write about, especially for a high stakes writing competency test, the purpose of the writing, what the writing prompt entails, the writing context, the scoring criteria, and reader expectations need to be made clear. Some issues already familiar to native English speakers might have to be explained, illustrated, and modeled for non-native English speaking students. For example, expectations of an agree-and-disagree prompt, establishment of a personal view on the issue, and definition of concrete and specific for an American academic audience must be explained, illustrated, and modeled. In addition, information on how the test is read and scored, who the reader is, and what is expected at the levels of sentence structure and discourse patterns needs to be given in order to familiarize these students with the new writing context.

The interview findings from the perspectives of the students and the test readers attempt to explain some the problems that are frustrating to both the students and the writing faculty. The answers to these problems are complicated and the explanations of the reasons behind these problems reveal more challenges to writing teachers. Several students articulated their suggestions for the writing teachers at the end of the interviews:

So if professors know about our backgrounds, such as our training in two sides rather than one side, it can be very helpful. I know a lot of students from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Singapore. A lot of them are trying to pass this kind of test for the first time.

I did not know how we should write on the WAT test... If I were to retake the class, I think I would have liked to see an example of the writing done by the student who took the WAT test and passed. I don't have that opportunity last

time. If I knew how they succeeded, I could succeed myself.

I think different students have different problems. For me, that's the problem with the development of ideas, but for other ESL students, that may be the grammar problem. Maybe ESL programs should be divided into two parts for the students who need grammar practices and for those to develop and organize writing ideas.

The suggestions point to a need for a re-examination of writing instruction. In order to prepare these students who have already failed the writing competency test to pass the test, the placement in a writing program might be made according to these students' strengths and weaknesses in these two areas: language and discourse. Teaching can be more centered around sentence structure or discourse patterns as needed.

Further intervention strategies might include using a writing portfolio to create a profile of these students' writing and establishing a forum for discussions of linguistic, social, cultural, and educational influences on writing. The content of the portfolio might begin with students' writing about how they learned to write in their native language. An initial writing topic might be "My Journey to Become A Writer in My Native Language." Afterwards, a series of writing tasks can be designed to compare and contrast issues of reader expectations, organization, writing prompts, and written argumentation in their native language and in English. The portfolio can help the teachers learn the writing background of their students and strategize teaching from that knowledge. Using comparison and contrast to illustrate reader orientation strategies used in American academe and the students' home cultures as discussed by Scarcella, teachers can familiarize students with expectations of academic readers and strategies to orient readers to their writing. Portfolios can also contain revised or transformed essays focusing on the key issues. For example, in revising the introduction, the teacher might help the student to transform an essay with a long or a digressive

introduction into a short and a focused introduction. Further, writing instructors can collaborate with one another in teaching reader expectations. By asking students to write for another teacher and by playing the roles of both an evaluator and a coach, the writing instructor can explicitly model the ways to make reader appeals and satisfy the reader's needs.

As revealed by the interview results, simply asking students to take a side, to be specific, or to give an example is not enough to prepare non-native English speaking students for a writing competency test like the WAT. Writing instructors need to make clear how they want students to develop their ideas in a specific and focused manner. Explicit teaching about the expectations of American academic readers and argumentative writing conventions is necessary. Other teaching strategies might include the topoi technique as implemented by Kirch, extensive reading on social issues, illustrating how to make links between a point made and examples given, and providing models of successful writing. The widespread use of writing competency tests and the strong impact of the tests compel us to look more carefully at the test takers. Writing instructors and administrators must make test expectations clear to the test takers, and they must take steps to become informed about their students' previous writing instruction and the cultural expectations of these writers in their native lands.

WORKS CITED

- Ballard, Brigid and John Clanchy. "Assessment by Misconception: Cultural Influences And Intellectual Traditions." In *Assessing Second Language Writing in Academic Contexts*. Ed. Liz Hamp-Lyons. Norwood, NJ: ALEX Publishing Corporation, 1991. 19-36.
- Basham, Charlotte and Patricia B. Kwachka. "Reading the World Differently: A Cross-cultural Approach to Writing Assessment." In *Assessing Second Language Writing in Academic Contexts*. Ed. Liz Hamp-Lyons. Norwood, NJ: ALEX Publishing Corporation, 1991. 37-50.
- Carson, Joan G. "Becoming Biliterate: First Language Influences." *Second Language Writing* 1.1 (1992): 37-60.

- Connor, Ulla. "Argumentative Patterns in Student Essays: Cross-cultural Differences." *Writing across Languages: Analysis of L2 Text*. Eds. Ulla Connor and Robert Kaplan. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987. 57-72.
- CUNY Task Force on Writing. *The CUNY Writing Skills Assessment Test*, Office of Academic Affairs, The City University of New York, 1983, 2nd ed.
- Fishman, Judith. "Do You Agree or Disagree: The Epistemology of the CUNY Writing Assessment Test." *Writing Program Administration* 8.1.2. (1984): 17-25.
- Hamp-Lyons, Liz. "The Writer's Knowledge and Our Knowledge of the Writer." *Assessing Second Language Writing in Academic Contexts*. Ed. Liz Hamp-Lyons. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1991. 51-68.
- Hinds, John. "Inductive, Deductive, Quasi-inductive: Expository Writing in Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Thai." *Coherence in Writing: Research and Pedagogical Perspectives*. Eds. Ulla Connor and Ann M. Johns. Alexandria, VA: TESOL, 1990. 87-110.
- - "Reader Versus Writer Responsibility: A New Typology." *Writing across Languages: Analysis of L2 Text*. Eds. Ulla Connor and Robert Kaplan. Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1987. 141-152.
- Jolliffe, David. "Writers and Their Subjects: Ethnologic and Chinese Composition." *A Rhetoric of Doing: Essays on Written Discourse*. Eds. S. Witte, N. Nokedate, and R. D. Cherny. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press. 1992. 261-275.
- Kaplan, Robert. "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-cultural Education." *Language Learning* 16.1 (1966): 1-20.
- Kirth, Anna. "A Basic Writer's Topoi for Time Essay Tests." *Journal of Basic Writing*, 15.2 (1996): 112-124.
- Liebman, JoAnne D. "Toward A New Contrastive Rhetoric: Differences between Arabic and Japanese Rhetorical Instruction." *Second Language Writing* 1.2 (1992): 141-165.
- Matalene, Carolyn. "Contrastive Rhetoric: An American Writing Teacher in China." *College English* 47.8 (1985): 789-808.
- Scarcella, Robin C. "How Writers Orient Their Readers in Expository Essays: A Comparative Study of Native and Non-native English Writers." *TESOL Quarterly* 18.4 (1984): 671- 688.

Appendix A

Demographic Information of the Nine Students

<u>Native Country</u>	<u>Native Language</u>	<u># of Students</u>
Bengladesh	Bengladesh	1
China	Chinese	3
Greece	Greek	1
Korea	Korean	1
Poland	Polish	1
Russia	Russian	1
Peru	Spanish	1

Appendix B

Student Interview Questions

Section One: The Interviewee's Experience of Learning to Write in His or Her Native Language.

1. What is your name?
2. Where are you from?
3. What is your native language?
4. Which high school did you attend?
5. When did you begin to write in your native language?
6. How did you learn how to write in your native language?
Describe that experience.
7. Name some of the typical writing assignments that you were given back home.
8. How many times did you have a writing assignment in your high school days?
9. How did your teacher back home teach you to write in your native language?

10. What is made of a piece of good writing in your native language back home?

Section Two: The Interviewee's Perceived Difficulties with the WAT.

1. Were you familiar, before coming to the U.S., with the agree/disagree kind of topic used in the WAT? (Explain why.)
2. Are you familiar with the structure of the writing you are asked to produce on the WAT?
3. What gave you the most difficulty in taking the WAT?
4. If you were asked to retake the preparatory course like CESL 31, what suggestions would you have made for the teacher to better prepare you for the WAT?
5. Who are the readers of your writing on the WAT?
6. What are some of the crucial elements to include in your writing in order for you to pass the WAT?

Appendix C

WAT Reader Interview Questions

1. What are the criteria for a passing score on the WAT?
How do you score each essay?
2. In scoring, what weight do you give to rhetorical issues and grammatical issues?
3. Based on the agree/disagree prompt, what is the reader's expectation for the writer? (choose one position and argue about it)
4. What type of supporting details or examples do you have in mind? Is there any particular emphasis on personal examples?
5. Within the 50 minute limit, what is your expectation regarding the number of ideas to be developed in the essay? (only one or two ideas?)

6. What are some of the ESL students' common problems in dealing with the WAT? Are the problems more rhetorical problems or grammatical problems? Any organizational or idea development or specificity problems?
7. While reading this particular essay, think aloud to see whether this essay has fulfilled your expectations in language and in content.
8. What made this essay a not passing essay? Comment on your decision and give rationales.

I would like to thank Sue L. Goldharber and Kevin Birth for their help with this project. I would like to express my gratitude to the students who participated in the study. I am also grateful for valuable comments made by Judith Summerfield, John Walsh, and Myra Zarnowski in the course of writing this article.