

# From Accuracy to Discourse: Analyzing the Evolution of Writing Pedagogy in Controlled Composition and Traditional Rhetoric

Mustapha Rakrak\*

*Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco*

**Abstract:** This paper examines the Controlled Composition approach to writing instruction, which gained prominence in the first half of the nineteenth century. This method emphasizes linguistic accuracy, focusing on grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and cohesive devices, while treating writing as a process of applying language rules in a controlled, error-free manner. Rooted in structuralism and behavioral theories of language learning, it views texts as autonomous entities that can be analyzed independently of their context. The paper attempts to explore how this approach influenced writing pedagogy, particularly through techniques like sentence combining and substitution exercises designed to reinforce correct usage. It then highlights the limitations of the Controlled Composition approach, particularly its neglect of the reader's role, the contextual nature of communication, and the writer's agency in meaning-making. In response, the paper shifts to discuss the Current Traditional Rhetoric approach that emerged in the 1960s, which broadens the scope to include discourse-level structures, cultural differences in writing, and the organization of paragraphs. This paper also explores how rhetorical patterns, such as the use of models, outlines, and paragraph analysis, are used in this approach to teach students how to structure more complex texts. Finally, the paper critiques this approach for its over-reliance on rigid structures and its ethnocentric assumptions about writing practices, stressing the need for a more nuanced understanding of writing instruction that accommodates cultural diversity and student agency.

**Keywords:** controlled composition, traditional rhetoric, writing pedagogy, contrastive rhetoric.

## 1. Introduction

The teaching of writing has long been a complex and evolving field, shaped by a variety of approaches that seek to address the challenges students face in mastering the written language. As learners navigate the intricacies of composition, they encounter a range of difficulties, from grammatical errors to struggles with coherence, organization, and audience awareness. In response to these challenges, several pedagogical approaches have emerged over time, each offering distinct techniques and methodologies to improve writing skills. These approaches vary significantly in their theoretical foundations, objectives, and instructional practices, reflecting the diverse ways in which educators have sought to understand and address

the act of writing.

Over the years, certain approaches have gained widespread popularity and achieved dominance in the field of writing instruction. For a period, a particular method may be embraced by teachers, institutions, and curricula, often because it resonates with prevailing educational philosophies, societal needs, or technological advances. However, as time passes and new research and perspectives emerge, these approaches tend to lose favor, making way for new paradigms. Each shift in writing pedagogy responds not only to evolving educational priorities but also to the ongoing feedback from both students and educators, as well as changing societal and cultural contexts.

These shifts in writing pedagogy have resulted in approaches that vary enormously in terms of their foci and techniques. This article explores two prominent approaches, *Controlled Composition* and *Current Traditional Rhetoric*, offering a comparative analysis of their theoretical underpinnings, teaching techniques, and their respective strengths and limitations. By examining these approaches, this article aims to provide both learners and instructors with a deeper understanding of the ways in which writing can be taught and learned, while also offering practical insights into how these models have evolved to meet the diverse needs of students over time.

## 2. The Controlled Composition

This approach to the teaching of writing gained worldwide popularity during the first half of the nineteenth century. In this approach, the focus is mainly on the linguistic features of the written discourse. Learners need to concern themselves primarily with the linguistic knowledge and mind the appropriateness of vocabulary use, cohesive devices and syntax. It is a single-shot writing where drafting is not welcomed. Its theoretical underpinnings stem from the structural view of language and the behavioral view of language acquisition and language learning. Hyland (2009) describes this approach as follows:

Based on ideas inherited from structuralism and implicit in the Transformational Grammar of Noam Chomsky, a basic

\*Corresponding author: [mustaphalharfi@gmail.com](mailto:mustaphalharfi@gmail.com)

premise of this approach is that texts are autonomous objects which can be analyzed and described independently of particular contexts, writers, or readers. Texts have a structure. They are orderly arrangements of words, clauses and sentences, and by following grammatical rules writers can encode a full semantic representation of their intended meanings (p. 8).

The claim that texts can operate autonomously of any context implies that human communication is no more than the transfer of ideas from the writer's mind to the reader's through language (Shanon & Weaver, 1963). The different backgrounds of the writer and the reader have no bearing on their interpretations of texts. The reader can decode the same meaning the writer has encoded provided that they use the same language. Accordingly, meaning resides fully in vocabulary items and is not subject to any influence beyond the word limit.

Such view of writing that considers the use of correct forms as the nucleus of good writing has paved the way for the emergence of a bulk of studies into the regular properties of texts. Large computerized corpora have been studied thoroughly to find out how student writers express certain functions such as negation and stance (Tottie, 1991). Other studies sought to measure students' improvement in writing by focusing on certain formal properties of their written products, such as modality and passives. In his study, White (2007) studied occurrences of morphemes, words and clauses in learners' written products to gauge their progress. More frequent occurrences are an indication that learners' ability to write is improving. Shaw & Liu (1998) took research in this respect a step further and focused in their study on the traits inherent in the academic writing style, such as the use of impersonality markers and the formal style, words and structures. They concluded that as learners progress, their writings tend to become more written-style-like while getting rid of the spoken-style features.

From this standpoint that considers texts as independent entities, it follows, then, that the goal of teaching writing is to train learners on accuracy (Heyland, 2003). The major concern of teachers is to find out ways of how to instill good writing habits into the learners' minds through substitution and guided composition exercises. In this approach, errors are conceived of as bad habits that need eradicating, which is a typical representation of the essence of the behavioral learning theory underlying this approach. Accordingly, the teachers' feedback takes aim at the linguistic competence as a target and tries to identify the grammatical and lexical weaknesses of the product rather than the meaning making processes and strategies the writers use while encoding the message. Silva (1990, p. 12) summarizes the tenets of the controlled approach as follows:

It focused primarily on formal accuracy and correctness...to avoid errors ostensibly caused by first language interference and to positively reinforce appropriate second language behavior. The approach preferred practice with previously learned discrete units of language...and its methodology involved the imitation and manipulation (substitutions, transformations, expansions, completions, etc.) of model passages.

In simpler terms, students are provided with a passage to

manipulate. They re-write it and make "a few specified changes to it" (Raimes, 1983, p. 97). Examples, to name a few, might include rewriting a present tense text into the past or a direct passage into the indirect form. Writing is, then, a good reinforcement of previously learnt grammar and vocabulary. Raimes (1983) suggests the following ways as techniques teachers can adopt within the controlled composition framework:

*Sentence Combining:* This technique is believed to benefit learners a lot as it provides them with practice on the syntactic structures of the target language. Sentence combining exercises boost the students' sentence competence and help them produce long and syntactically varied sentences. In these exercises, however, the voice of the writer goes unheard because they do not decide on the content. What to say is already there and their role is limited to finding ways of how to say it.

*Guided composition:* It is less controlled and students come up with similar but not identical writings. For instance, students might be provided with a picture to describe following a certain outline.

*Parallel Writing:* It is "the freest kind of writing... Students read and study a passage and then write their own on a similar theme, using as a guide the vocabulary, sentence structure, cohesive devices, and organisation of the model passage" (Raimes, 1983, p. 109).

Criticism has been leveled at this product oriented view of writing for its failure to account for the impact that the readers' background (beliefs, experience, etc.) can have on their interpretations of texts (Heyland, 2003). Another criticism is that syntactic complexity is by no means an indication that the learners' writing is making progress. Some learners come up with syntactically complex structures but still fail to produce an appropriate piece of discourse tailored in a way to suit a particular audience and serve a certain purpose. Besides, because of the total focus of this approach on accuracy, some of the students' errors are attributed to their resort to avoidance as a strategy so as not to use the structures they are uncertain about (Ziad, 2015). Accordingly, their progress will be somehow hampered as they deliberately avoid taking risks and stretching their output to the maximum level (Hyland, 2009). Another limitation Zamel (1982) highlights is that the exaggerated emphasis on correctness in this approach entails overlooking understanding how ideas are exposed through writing.

### 3. The Current Traditional Rhetoric

In the sixties, another version of the product approach tried to trespass the sentence boundaries and consider features above the sentence level as the focus was shifted to discourse. This is the essence of the current traditional rhetoric, a response movement to the critique that has been leveled to the sentence level approach. Hyland (2003) holds that this approach "looks beyond surface structures to see texts as discourse, the way we use language to communicate, to achieve purposes in particular situations" (p. 12).

The shift of focus from the sentence to discourse as the unit of analysis was triggered by two main reasons: firstly, the

grammatical and syntactic mastery of the target language was not enough for learners to produce extended forms of written discourse, such as paragraphs and articles. Hence, larger and higher levels of composition should be considered. Secondly, there was clear evidence for L1 interference instances occurring beyond the sentence level (Kaplan, 1966).

Kaplan (1966), following his analytical study<sup>1</sup> of how writers organise their paragraphs, reached the conclusion that writing is culturally specific. People belonging to different cultures write in different ways. Raimes (1983) confirms this stand because she holds that “The organization of the written discourse is culturally determined in the same way as are eating habits and social interaction. How we write in English has many conventions as how we use a knife and fork” (p. 115).

It follows, then, that learners who write well in their L1 will not do so in their L2, and difficulties will crop up due to interference (Matsuda, 1997) because each language has its own pattern of organization that is culturally determined. So, “different cultures have different rhetorical tendencies” (Connor, 2002, p. 494).

It is fair to say that the contrastive rhetoric theory has studied writing across cultures. Similarities and differences have been identified at the level of rhetorical organization and fruitful conclusions have been reached. But we might legitimately wonder about the bearing this research has had on the classroom practices. Has there been a pedagogical model that draws on the underpinnings of contrastive rhetoric to offer solutions to the problems and difficulties learner writers face at the rhetorical level?

#### A. *The Paragraph-Pattern Approach (Raimes, 1983)*

The current traditional rhetoric approach is primarily concerned with how to construct and arrange discourse forms in a logical manner. The paragraph, henceforth, becomes the focal point of study. Its components have been delineated and studied extensively. Due importance was also accorded to the means of development writers use in writing paragraphs, such as exemplifying, contrasting and comparing (Silva, 1990).

As early as 1983, Raimes made a rigorous attempt to come up with a pedagogical model that would aid learners and provide them with ample rhetorical training in the target language. This model underscores the importance of training learners on the organizational pattern of the paragraph as a way to familiarize them with the English way of handling a topic. In this model, “students copy paragraphs, analyze the form of model paragraphs, and imitate model passages. They put scrambled sentences into paragraph order, they identify general and specific statements, they choose or invent an appropriate topic sentence, they insert or delete sentences” (Raimes, 1983, p. 8). Otherwise, they will come up with “a very un-English text” (p. 116).

Compensatory exercises that train learners on how to recognize and use topic sentences and supporting details such

as examples and illustrations become widely adopted in the teaching of writing (Raimes, 1991). In broader terms, three major techniques become central tools teachers used in the classroom to provide student writers with ample rhetorical training (Raimes, 1983). The techniques are outlines, analysis and models.

#### 1) *Outlines*

The teacher can provide students with a written passage and ask them to come up with an outline for it. They can apply this technique to their writings as well. They can do it prior to writing or as a post writing activity. The student writer sketches out an outline before embarking on the task of writing. They can also swap papers “and make an outline of each other’s piece of writing” (Raimes, 1983, p. 119). If the writing is clearly sequenced and logically organized, the outliner will easily and quickly work out the outline. But he is likely to encounter difficulties if the writing is disorganized and violates the norms of the English rhetorical norms.

#### 2) *Analysis*

Analysis is another technique teachers can have recourse to to raise their students’ awareness and get them familiar with the organization of a written paragraph. Raimes (1983) suggests some exercises which include asking students to:

- identify the sentence that expresses the main idea of a paragraph;
- provide the missing topic and concluding sentences;
- answer questions that target the analysis of how the writer has organized his ideas in a written passage;
- make distinction between generalizations and details.

#### 3) *Models*

This is the technique the current traditional rhetoric approach to writing has utilized a lot. Students are provided with a sample text to analyze. They sort out the way it has been organized and they delineate the elements of its internal structure. They are asked, afterwards, to write something similar and closely stick to the same structural pattern of the model. Students, for instance, study a text comparing two cars. Then, they use the same pattern to write their own text but about bicycles.

The problem with such ‘comparative writing’ is that students will learn that the form should be prioritized over content. This conception will be discouraging and ‘handcuffing’ for student writers because their major concern throughout the whole process of writing will be how to conform to the structure of the model.

This approach, despite its possible merits, did not escape criticism because of its “descriptive nature” (Matsuda, 1997, p. 46). The writer is denied agency because they cannot make decisions on how to write. Their role is reduced to that of reproducing patterns that are already in place. Besides, Inherent in the contrastive rhetoric approach is the view that cultures are discrete, discontinuous, and predictable entities (Zamel, 1997). However, in today’s world, which is strongly and closely interlinked and where outlets of intercultural communication

<sup>1</sup> In his study, Kaplan (1966) wanted to explain the written styles of ESL students. He analyzed the written products of students from different cultures to find out how they organize their writings and identified five patterns of paragraph writing. The Anglo-European writing is linearly developed, the

Semitic languages are characterized by the use of parallel coordinate clauses, Oriental languages are circumlocutory and indirect, and writing in the Romance languages and Russian is digressive as writers tend to include extraneous information and material, which an English writer might find too excessive.

are in abundance, it is hard, if not impossible, to draw edge cutting demarcations among cultures and among discourse communities. Kaplan (1966) was also criticised for “being too ethnocentric and privileging the writing of native English speakers” and “for drawing the conclusions on the basis of writing samples written by developmental writers” (Connor, 2003, p. 223). He was also monolithic in his vision and failed to account for the varying styles that exist among members of the same culture or discourse community.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of writing instruction from the *Controlled Composition* approach to the *Current Traditional Rhetoric* model reflects a significant shift in pedagogical priorities. While the *Controlled Composition* approach, with its emphasis on formal accuracy, grammar, and syntax, was foundational in the development of writing instruction, it also had notable limitations. By treating texts as autonomous objects that could be decoded through correct application of linguistic rules, this approach neglected the complex, contextual nature of communication and failed to account for the writer’s agency in meaning-making.

The *Current Traditional Rhetoric* approach, which emerged in the 1960s, sought to address these issues by shifting the focus to the organization of larger discourse units and recognizing cultural differences in writing styles. It introduced new pedagogical techniques, such as paragraph analysis, outlining, and model-based writing, to help students understand the structural and organizational patterns that govern effective written communication. However, despite its advantages, this approach also has limitations. Its over-reliance on rigid structures and its tendency to prioritize form over content can stifle students' creativity and limit their ability to engage meaningfully with the writing process.

Ultimately, both approaches offer valuable insights into writing instruction, but a more balanced and flexible approach is needed—one that integrates linguistic accuracy with an awareness of the social, cultural, and rhetorical dimensions of

writing. In today’s increasingly globalized world, students must be equipped not only with technical language skills but also with the ability to understand and navigate the complexities of diverse discourse communities. Future pedagogical models should focus on fostering critical thinking, creative expression, and the capacity to adapt writing to various contexts, audiences, and purposes.

#### References

- [1] Connor, U. (2002). New directions in contrastive rhetoric. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(4), 493-510.
- [2] Connor, U. (2003). Changing currents in contrastive rhetoric: implications for teaching and research. In B. Kroll, *Exploring the dynamics of L2 writing* (pp. 218-241). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [3] Hyland, K. (2003). Genre-based Pedagogies: A social Response to Process. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 12, 1-29.
- [4] Hyland, K. (2009). *teaching and researching writing* (2 ed.). New York: Pearson.
- [5] Kaplan, B. R. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 6(1), 1-20.
- [6] Kaplan, R. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *language learning, a journal of research in language studies*, 16(1-2), 1-20.
- [7] Matsuda, P. K. (1997). Contrastive rhetoric in context: a dynamic model of L2 writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 6(1), 45-60.
- [8] Raimes, A. (1983). *Techniques in teaching writing*. New York: Oxford university press.
- [9] Raimes, A. (1991). Out of the woods: emerging traditions in the teaching of writing. *TESOL Quarterly*, 407-430.
- [10] Shanon, C., & Weaver, W. (1963). *The mathematical theory of communications*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- [11] Shaw, P., & Liu, E. (1998). What develops in the development of second language writing? *Applied Linguistics*, 19(2), 225-254.
- [12] Silva, T. (1990). Second language composition instruction: developments, issues and directions in ESL. In B. Kroll, *Second language writing research* (pp. 11-23). Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
- [13] Tottie, G. (1991). *Negation in English speech and writing: A study in variation*. University of California: Academic Press.
- [14] White, A. (2007). A tool for monitoring the development of written English: T- Unit Analysis Using the SAWL. *America annals of the deaf*, 152(1), 29-41.
- [15] Zamel, V. (1982, Juin). Writing: the process of discovering meaning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16(2), 95-209.
- [16] Zamel, V. (1997). Toward a model of transculturation. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 341-352.
- [17] Ziad, H. (2015). L2 writing instruction approaches and their impact on composition studies in Morocco. *International journal of English and education*, 4(4), 107-119.