

# **RHETORICAL CRITICISM AS AN APPROACH TO TEACH EFL ACADEMIC WRITING: A THEORETICAL DISCUSSION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*On previous theoretical discussions, I have explored the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to the examination of naturalized social representations in order to study their influence in argumentation. Over the course of my experience teaching English, I have come to use several approaches to teach English to non-speakers of this language. All these approaches have been intended not only to develop the students' language abilities, but also their critical thinking skills. Here, I present a theoretical discussion about the use of Rhetorical Criticism (RC) as a pedagogical approach to teach academic writing in the context of English as L2, and its benefits to develop argumentation.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Rhetorical Criticism, Academic Writing, Argumentation, pedagogical approaches.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Developing critical thinking skills for effective academic writing is one of the ultimate goals in the context of English language teaching, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. This is closely related to the role English has taken as the preferred language of academia, science and global communication.

In this context, EFL students are not only expected to develop their grammatical and lexical competence, but also to acquire as much expertise as possible in discursive practices and argumentation. Thus, we need to help students to self-develop their abilities, as well as lead their learning process as efficiently as possible.

While teaching English to speakers of other languages, mainly Japanese and Chilean students, I have acquired experience using various approaches which are not only inside the framework of English teaching didactics, but also inside the context of argument building.

Although communicative language teaching and task-based approaches have contributed significantly to fostering functional fluency, they may fall short when it comes to preparing students for the rhetorical demands of academic writing in English. In response to this, I have explored and implemented various pedagogical frameworks that seek to integrate language development with critical thinking and argument-building. Among these, Rhetorical Criticism (RC from now on) has emerged as a promising approach for EFL academic writing instruction.

It is within this pedagogical context that I propose a theoretical discussion of RC as an approach to teaching EFL academic writing. RC, traditionally understood as a method of analyzing

persuasive texts and communicative artifacts, can be reconceptualized in EFL classrooms, not only as a tool for textual analysis but also a tool for producing more rhetorically aware and critically engaged student writing.

This paper explores the theoretical foundations of RC and its relevance to EFL contexts, particularly in the area of academic writing. It further discusses the pedagogical benefits of integrating RC into the EFL curriculum, the challenges such integration might entail, and possible strategies for adapting this approach for learners with limited proficiency in English.

Drawing on both rhetorical theory and language pedagogy, I argue that RC can function not only as a method of critique, but also as a practical and adaptable pedagogical lens through which teachers and students alike can approach writing as an intentional, audience-oriented, and meaning-driven process.

## **2. RHETORICAL CRITICISM**

RC constitutes the analysis of claims with care and depth to arrive to an exhaustive explication by means of judgment, not belief. This analysis is carried out in order to interpret and assess the persuasive strategies involved in the rhetorical artifact. Rhetoric here is understood in the Aristotelian sense, that is to say, the means of persuasion, and it differentiates itself from other critical approaches because its critique is focused on rhetoric (García-Jerez, 2018)

As explained by Zarefsky, rhetorical critics provide answers to two general questions:

“[...] a) What’s going on here? and (b) So what? Answering the first question involves making clear the underlying dynamics of the rhetorical work—how it might be seen as influencing people. [...] Answering the second question—“So what?”—relates the particular rhetorical work to some consideration beyond itself. It asks how the understanding of rhetorical dynamics will be useful. What can we say about the meaning, meaningfulness, artistry, historical significance, or value of the work, for example? [...] The two questions have in common that they are hermeneutic; they call for understanding rather than prediction and for meaning rather than causality. Moreover, they cannot be answered by reference to the work alone and hence cannot be proved conclusively. But the answer can be supported by good reasons, those that would convince a reasonable person who was exercising critical judgment.” (Zarefsky, 2014, pp. 29-30). Then, RC can be effective to teach academic writing because it can train students to ask themselves questions such as “what am I trying to say?”, “why is it important?”, “how am I trying to persuade others about it?” or “am I being effective in achieving the goal of convincing others of this/my viewpoint?”.

By becoming rhetorical critics, the students will learn to analyse, interpret and evaluate data and their own texts, thus, enhancing their overall academic writing abilities.

As a manner of critique, RC does not entail specific methods. The critic decides how the analysis of the rhetorical artifact will be carried out and this decision is taken in function of the main objective of the analysis.

For instance, in her book “Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice”, Sonja Foss (2009), besides explaining what RC is and how rhetorical critics generally undergo their practice, she mentions various types of RC: Neo-Aristotelian Criticism, Cluster Criticism, Fantasy-Theme Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Generic Criticism, Ideological Criticism, Metaphoric Criticism, Narrative Criticism, Pentadic Criticism and Generative Criticism. In the examples illustrated in

this book, as well as in other books and papers, RC is usually applied to rhetorical artifacts such as political speeches and media.

As a pedagogical tool, professor Zarefsky, in the Argumentation Conference in Tokyo in 2016, explained how he uses RC in the analysis of history- and politics-related texts to teach argument. Now, the use of RC in EFL contexts has not been widely studied. It seems that RC is mostly used in contexts where the language of the participants is already of native or native-like proficiency, making it less likely to be applied in EFL classrooms of students who are less proficient in English.

This is understandable, since the critique of rhetoric implies a high level of language proficiency. Nonetheless, RC as a mode of critique is different than RC as a pedagogical approach. A pedagogical approach is the theoretical view that a teacher applies in the designing of their tasks and activities. The working belief sustaining the main hypothesis of this discussion is that using RC as a pedagogical approach can inform a given syllabus inside an overall curriculum in order to develop skills which will enhance the students' academic writing by guiding their analysis, interpretation and evaluation of data and their own writings.

## **2.1. RC to Teach English Writing**

RC as a pedagogical approach to inform the design of a syllabus to teach academic writing needs to start with the consideration of several factors. Variables that have always been relevant in learning, such as motivation and the communication between the teacher and the students, are crucial.

To actively participate in analyzing, for instance, media speeches, the teacher needs to engage students in discussions. This is not possible if the students are uncomfortable participating in the class. Affective variables, especially motivation, as factors influencing EFL acquisition have been addressed in several studies, usually underlining the social and psychological nature of FL learning as difficult to assess as it is individually defined by elements such as confidence, anxiety and willingness to communicate. This unpredictability significantly impacts the classroom performance.

Activities informed by RC seem to require a more proactive attitude and a certain degree of critical language awareness in order to be successfully completed within the time constraints of an English course, at least in my experience. Students must be willing to interpret, evaluate and critique persuasive discourse, which entails a shift from passive reception to active construction of meaning. As it was mentioned in the previous section, RC seeks for meaning, significance, or the value of the work being analyzed. Encouraging students to participate in classroom work is key for RC-informed activities.

The challenge of engaging students can be mitigated by adapting classroom materials and instructional strategies.

Simplifying RC contexts is the first step to take. This does not mean diminishing the intellectual value of RC, but rather adjusting its complexity to match the students' linguistic and cognitive development. The simplification of RC here means the adaptation of the level of 1) the language used in the rhetorical artifacts and by the teacher, and 2) the discursive and argumentative expectations for each activity.

Regarding the teacher', the context of intercultural communication is of great importance. In a classroom comprised of international students and a teacher who may not speak their first language -or languages, effective communication cannot only be based on grammatical and

lexical competence. Visual and non-verbal resources – such as gestures, images, facial expressions and graphic organizers- can become essential in modelling rhetorical analysis. Multimodality does not only help to reduce cognitive load or ensure comprehension, but it also helps with the metacognitive comprehension of rhetoric, which is a relevant part of the conceptual challenges we want our students to face.

Furthermore, the adaptation of the materials to be utilized are of particular importance in activities based on RC. As an approach to teach writing, RC-based tasks involve other language skills, mainly reading for interpretation and evaluation. Thus, adjusting the rhetorical artifacts to suit students' CEFR levels ensures that learners can focus on the strategies they will employ for these ends. Short opinion articles, simplified editorials and advertisements are examples of texts that can be used in earlier stages. A2 and B1 CEFR levels are not outside the possibility of using RC-based activities. Rhetorically rich texts as the ones mentioned are not only accessible, but they also provide starting points for their future development of critical thinking, discourse skills and rhetorical awareness.

Moreover, it would be beneficial to design activities which will help students to see the same rhetorical artifact in different levels. Tiered tasks where the same text can be studied at various depths might not only help with the students' proficiency, but also with their affective predisposition.

## **2.2. RC, Writing and Students' Self-Assessment**

A valuable benefit of integrating RC as an approach to teach EFL writing is its potential to foster students' self-assessment. Self-assessment plays a key role in a learner's autonomy, their metacognitive development and their ability to reflect. All these competencies are increasingly emphasized –and utterly needed– in contemporary educational settings, especially when it comes to higher-order writing tasks. By engaging with the critique of rhetorical artifacts, or at least activities that emulate RC, students are encouraged to contemplate topics beyond a product-oriented view of writing. By becoming rhetorical agents themselves, students are capable of making intentional and strategic decisions to persuade an audience.

Self-assessment processes inherently imply questions as the ones extended before. Queries such as “what is my message”, “why is it important?”, “am I being convincing?” and others can be part of writing assignments to help students evaluate their rhetorical effectiveness.

Also, unlike peer or teacher-given feedback, which may focus mainly on language or grammatical, RC-informed self-assessment may allow students to appraise their writing in terms of clarity of intent, persuasiveness and communicative goal achievement.

This last point is a relevant one. Many students see writing as a result-oriented task. However, as Ronald Kellogg asserts, “the author must first be able to comprehend what the text actually says at a given point in the composition (i.e., possesses a stable text representation) before he or she can imagine how the text would read to another person (i.e., acquire a reader representation)” (2008, p. 6). This sows the process-oriented nature of writing.

In this context of layering activities that may enhance all the skills related to writing, RC as a framework for self-assessment may be empowering for EFL learners, mainly those in lower CEFR levels: Engaging students in RC-based activities may help students to analyze their own writing in terms of meaning-making, which in itself would help them develop critical thinking skills by getting them outside of the idea of language perfection as the main goal of EFL learning, shifting their focus from “correctness” to “effectiveness”.

### **3. DESCRIPTION OF AN RC-BASED CLASS**

In this section, I describe the implementation of a unit informed by RC as a pedagogical approach within the context of an EFL academic writing course. The theoretical discussion in the previous sections is highly based on the observations collected from this experience. The intention was to explore the feasibility of applying RC in an EFL classroom. Also, I expected to gain more insights into the students' attitudes and progress when using this approach.

This RC-based unit was designed and carried out in a first-year Academic Writing course at a Japanese university, where students had an intermediate level of English proficiency (about B1B2 according to CEFR).

The design of the unit was guided by the following objectives:

- a. To analyze advantages and disadvantages of the application of this approach;
- b. To evaluate the improvement of the students' academic writing over time;
- c. To analyze the acquisition of discursive and argumentative skills by the students;
- d. To identify specific difficulties such as linguistic and/or cognitive constraints;
- e. To draw preliminary conclusions on the use of RC as a pedagogical approach to teach academic writing.

An especially challenging task for me was deciding how to assess the students' writing. As discussed before, RC here is proposed not as a content to be tested, but as a framework for critical engagement. Then, it would have been incongruent to evaluate the students' performance focusing on result-oriented driven models. Traditional forms of writing assessment, especially those based on linguistic accuracy or structural correctness alone, would fall short to capture the rhetorical complexity and critical reasoning that RC seeks to develop.

Thus, the students' writing was assessed using a holistic rubric designed to prioritize argumentative clarity, effective use of persuasion and rhetorical awareness. The rubric included descriptors such as clarity of argument components, global coherence and cohesion and audience awareness. Language use and grammatical accuracy were considered, but as part of the feedback mainly rather than as isolated components to be reviewed.

Students also engaged in self-assessment by using questions that helped them internalize rhetorical criticism-related modes of evaluation. In this regard, discussions were held in small groups and students had the chance to explain their own reasoning to their classmates and receive comments.

By observing the students in the classroom, I came to realize that they gradually became more confident in articulating their viewpoints and analyzing not only texts brought by the teacher, but also their peers' ideas.

Regarding the needed time to effectively apply the activities, the classes were adapted to some extent. When an activity was difficult to complete, we took between 10 and 20 minutes more than those of the official 90 minutes of every class. In response, I reduced the length and difficulty of the selected texts but I did not change the tasks nor I skipped any activity.

The selection of the texts for the analysis, interpretation and evaluation process was based on the topics the students had chosen, the argumentative nature of the texts and their CEFR level of the English language.

Being a class of academic English which mainly relies on actual practice, I had perceived the curriculum of the class was not flexible enough to use more than one class for theoretical background. In order to make the theory easy to understand, I instrumentalized the explanations and I included tasks to first familiarize the students with the purpose of the RC.

One challenge I faced was related to the language barrier, and to a lesser extent, the cultural background defining the expectations of what the role of a teacher is and what the role of a student is in the classroom.

The cultural background as a factor could make a difference in the teaching of EFL if we attain to the distinction between ESL and EFL being the place where you learn English.

That is to say, ESL students will be international students in a country where English is the native language and EFL students will be -mostly- nationals who learn English in their home country. In this differentiation, ESL learner groups are multicultural and, therefore, there is a given expectation in terms of their ability to socio-psychologically adapt themselves to a multicultural classroom. In contrast, EFL learner groups belong to one cultural group and, if the teacher is a foreigner, it might be translated into a communicative barrier.

Nonetheless, even considering this possible distinction in cultural background, RC may be a successful way of teaching EFL writing.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

In summary, the RC-based unit previously described provided the preliminary evidence presented in this theoretical discussion. This evidence shows that rhetorical criticism can serve not only as a critical reading tool but also as an instructional strategy for developing argumentative writing and critical thinking skills. EFL students demonstrated increased awareness of audience, improved ability to structure claims and reasons and greater engagement in peer discussions.

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