
**Kate Dobson**  
Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, USA

Whether or not one is familiar with the term “intercultural rhetoric,” anyone who has taken a critical eye to a piece of writing has had experience with it. Intercultural rhetoric (IR), previously known as contrastive rhetoric, is typically defined as “the study of written discourse between and among individuals with different cultural backgrounds” (p. 2).

For the better part of its life span, intercultural rhetoric research has been dominated by Ulla Connor. This book is a follow-up to her 1996 book *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-Cultural Aspects of Second-Language Writing*, in which she described the developing research methods for the field at the time. Upon the book’s release, some critics warned that the act of comparing the writing style of one person from a particular national culture to that of someone from another national culture may result in stereotypes. This book is the response to these criticisms by way of redefining the field.

The new definition of intercultural rhetoric, as presented in this book, is concerned with three tenets: culture is a complex intersection of national, disciplinary and other cultures, texts must be studied in the social contexts in which they were written, and spoken and written discourse encounters necessitate negotiation and accommodation. With this shift comes the concretization of the term *intercultural rhetoric* over *contrastive rhetoric*. This change in preferred term signifies the abandonment of contrasting two pieces of writing as disparate in favor of examining the negotiation between and among the writers’ cultures.

The book is split into six chapters, two of which cover the seminal topics of culture (chapter three) and text analysis (chapter four). Also included are a brief introduction about intercultural rhetoric (chapter one), and more in-depth background information about how contrastive rhetoric became intercultural rhetoric (chapter two). Chapters also address the role that intercultural rhetoric plays for the classroom teacher (chapter five) and its application to the health care field (chapter six).
The main goal of the book is to share future directions of the field, although it also includes a review of the genesis of the field and current applications. This book may be of interest to anyone in the fields of rhetoric, professional communication, globalization, or intercultural communication who is interested in learning more about the implications of this new IR definition. However, because of the ample references to linguistics and culture research, it is most likely to appeal to those with an interest in applied linguistics and English for Specific Purposes.

Recognizing that the field cannot advance without a generally established and less contentious definition of culture, chapter three gives this topic its due diligence. In it, some of the major recent theories of culture and the most useful frameworks of culture for IR are presented. The most salient framework to emphasize here is Holliday’s (1994, 1999) model of small cultures and large cultures. Dwight Atkinson (2004) was the first to apply Holliday’s theory to IR (at the time still known as contrastive rhetoric) to combat the criticisms following the 1996 *Contrastive Rhetoric*. In Holliday’s theory, every person belongs to large cultures and small cultures. Large cultures are more prescriptive, such as ethnic and national groups, while small cultures are more specific and often create their own specific discourses. A helpful exemplification is Holliday’s model of the unique classroom culture forged from the overlapping of small and large cultures, namely the students’ and teacher’s national cultures, student culture, classroom culture, the students’ disciplinary culture (such as anthropology or philosophy), and professional-academic culture. It is especially the variety of disciplinary small cultures that has profound implications in the field of intercultural rhetoric. For example, a business major will not employ the same writing structure as would a biology major, regardless of the writers’ nationalities.

This view of small cultures and large cultures helps to assuage the previous criticisms of contrastive rhetoric, while maintaining the importance of small culture discourse boundaries. When a graduate student is submitting an article to a research journal in his field, for instance, if he does not abide by the small culture norms of that discipline’s academic writing, his submission will not even be considered. (The related question of the ESL teacher’s responsibility to teach the norms and standards of English without asserting a dominant, or “correct” view, is addressed in chapter five.) With this framework in mind, the field of intercultural rhetoric moves forward recognizing that culture is not static, that there is room for individual variation, and that each writer belongs to small cultures as well as large cultures.

In addition to culture, the evolving standards for text analysis play a large role in the new intercultural rhetoric. When Robert Kaplan planted the first seeds of contrastive rhetoric in 1966 by discovering differences in his ESL students’ paragraph writing as compared to that of his native English-speaking students, he began to study the paragraphs in isolation. Today, the field has come to view *contextualized* text analysis as inclusive of an examination of how texts construct meaning and of the social context in which they are written, all while recognizing the previously stated new role of culture. In chapter four, today’s most popular methods of analysis in IR are identified: genre analysis, corpus analysis, multi-modal analysis, and ethnographic text analysis. The author gives concrete examples of IR studies analyzed using these methods, including discussions on the importance of complementary qualitative research methods and ethnographic approaches in order to properly contextualize texts.
Any reader who is particularly interested in intercultural rhetoric’s role in professional communication will especially appreciate the last chapter’s detailed example of IR and health care communication. This example of IR in an English for Specific Purposes setting shows the importance of the changing role of culture and text analysis in the field. In one example, the author details the work done at her research and training center, the Indiana Center for Intercultural Communication (ICIC), with international medical graduates from the Indiana University Family Practice Residency Program. Since 2005, the ICIC has administered language and culture assessments to the international residents, followed by individualized one-on-one trainings for each resident as necessary with an ICIC staff member. In emphasizing the importance of recognizing the residents’ small cultures and large cultures, the chapter includes a description of the comprehensive contents and process of the assessment, as well as a typical training plan. The use of contextualized text analysis is illustrated through a brief summary of the ICIC’s expansive health literacy and adherence studies in which corpus analysis and ethnographic interviewing techniques were employed.

*Intercultural Rhetoric in the Writing Classroom* gives a wealth of knowledge in a concise and accessible way. It is a quick read and its topics are easily transferable to conversations in classrooms of diverse disciplinary studies including communications, linguistics, international studies, health care, and ESL and EFL teaching, despite a title that might lead some readers to think that it is only applicable to teachers. Some may consider a weakness of the book its lack of exploring previous criticisms of the field in depth. While chapter two indicates how contrastive rhetoric was lambasted for what was considered a dichotomizing view of culture, the chapter on culture does not elaborate on this viewpoint in its examination and redefinition of the term. A weakness may also be seen in the book’s propensity to switch between chapters dense with theory to practical examples of IR, such as in the last chapter on health care communication. Although it is important to examine both the theory behind the practice and the practice itself, the shifting seems to disrupt the pace of the book at times. However, each chapter can be read on its own or in conjunction with any combination of others. Additionally, as any reader-friendly classroom text should have, it includes a handful of discussion questions at the end of each chapter. This book is an important addition to the literature of rhetoric, professional communication, and globalization, especially for those wanting an overview of IR and its future directions. The field of intercultural rhetoric continues to grow, the momentum of which will surely accelerate thanks to Ulla Connor’s new definition and direction for its future.

**References**


