Ethnocentrism, Power, and the Dominance of Western Academic Writing Conventions in Higher Education

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Received: June 7, 2025 Accepted: July 5, 2025 Online Published: July 7, 2025

doi:10.5430/ijhe.v14n4p1 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v14n4p1

Abstract

The academic landscapes of the US, UK, Canada, and Australia, popular choices for international students, are firmly rooted in the Western education model, characterized by specific academic writing conventions. International students are expected to conform to these norms, which, it may be argued, perpetuates an ethnocentric view of Western academic approaches as superior, disadvantaging non-Western students and suppressing valuable intercultural exchange. The dominance of Western writing conventions, this paper argues, aligns with Foucault's view that education systems perpetuate ideologies and exercise power, shaping knowledge production and even defining truth. Ultimately, this creates a distorted picture of accepted knowledge, subordinating international students to Western norms. Knowledge from dominant systems is often deemed superior, while alternative knowledge is dismissed, leading to missed opportunities for diverse communication and limiting global scholarship by denying recognition to non-Western contributions.

Keywords: culture, ethnocentrism, Foucauldian, writing conventions

1. Introduction

English is the dominant global language for academic communication, and Western academic writing conventions are widely perceived as the ideal, with other approaches being marginalized or dismissed (Shukri, 2014). English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) students in Western higher education face the challenge of being asked to write in unfamiliar ways. These demands are an accepted feature of the acculturation process that the vast numbers of international students must undertake. However, viewed through a Foucauldian lens of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980), Western academic writing practices' dominant and ethnocentric position becomes an example of power and power relations shaping how knowledge is created and communicated.

This paper uses existing academic literature to explain how Western academic writing conventions provide a distinct form. By way of illustration, comparisons are made with non-Western academic writing conventions. The paper outlines how the prominence of Western academic writing conventions aligns with Foucault's assertion that systems such as education are used to perpetuate dominant ideologies and serve as a mechanism for exercising power and control (Foucault, 1977; 1980). In higher education, this mechanism not only shapes the form that knowledge takes but also influences its production, reproduction, presentation, and communication. It even dictates what is considered true or false, important or unimportant, and what should or should not be studied. The paper concludes by contending that the dominance of Western academic writing conventions and culture creates a distorted picture of accepted knowledge, resulting in the subordination of international students to Western academic norms and values.

2. Power/Knowledge

The form and shape of academic writing are largely determined by the parameters and structures within which it occurs. The way in which power and power relations impact these parameters and structures, the knowledge that is created, and the form it takes has been given little attention in academic literature (Heizmann & Olsson, 2015).

Foucault (1980) posits that power and knowledge are inseparable. Power shapes knowledge and determines the knowledge presented; it is not only the generation of knowledge that is power-determined but also the regeneration and communication of knowledge. The systems of power uphold and maintain the status quo. Foucault (1977) argues that, at an institutional level, knowledge is shaped by a 'regime of truth' (p.23) which is sustained by the power structures and the underlying mechanisms that these are composed of.

For Foucault (1980), power is not simply held and employed by particular social actors; instead, power is co-produced through social interactions. In a university, power is possessed not only by senior leadership but also within the structures and protocols that the institution has created. As Heizmann and Olsson (2015) argue, 'Foucault's power/knowledge lens offers a way to see power as productive of the specific truth claims and rationalities that shape societies at large and organizations more specifically' (p.760).

3. Ethnocentrism and the Subjugation of Knowledges

Ethnocentrism involves a particular group believing that their culture is more important and significant than others (Chen, 2020). A dominant culture places itself in a central position, judges others using its own standards, and makes other cultures subordinate. In its most dangerous manifestation, ethnocentrism takes the form of cultural hegemony, where a dominant culture exerts an extremely powerful influence on how or whether other cultures are valued and recognized.

Ethnocentrism produces a communicative distance between cultures. At its most benign, this takes the form of indifference to a particular culture and its associated artefacts. At its extreme, it involves 'denial, accusation, cultural conflict, prejudice, discrimination, distrust, or even hatred' (Chen 2020, p.274). Differences in how language and discourse are produced and presented are subject to powerful, culturally-situated ethnocentric forces.

Foucault's ideas have been used to frame explanations for the marginalization of some cultures and the knowledge constructed through them (Behrent, 2021). Said (1978) argues that Western academic practice perpetuates the view that its conventions and execution are superior to those of Asian culture. In interpreting and placing value on written academic output, ethnocentrism contributes to subjugating some forms of knowledge and its communication.

Subjugated knowledge is marginalized knowledge, which may be deemed inadequate and suppressed or ignored by the dominant power structures. Foucault (1980) argues that some knowledge is subjugated and regarded as 'beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity' (p.82). The systems of power 'filter, hierarchize, and order them in the name of some true knowledge and some arbitrary idea of what constitutes a science and its objects' (Foucault, 1980, p.83).

Foucault (1980) describes two types of subjugated knowledge: erudite and disqualified. Erudite knowledge may have been produced by experts or those knowledgeable in an academic field but has been buried beneath the dominant discourse. Disqualified knowledge is regarded as lacking in rigor or scientific merit; it is deemed poor quality and unreliable.

Western academics operate with a high degree of criticality, and some knowledge is deemed to be of insufficient quality to merit contributing to the dominant discourse. By dismissing erudite knowledge, they disregard potentially valuable contributions. Consequently, some legitimate and valuable knowledge becomes exiled (Epston & White, 1990).

Foucault (1980) emphasizes the potential value of subjugated knowledge and asserts that it should not be dismissed. Constricting or manipulating academic writing by imposing culturally-determined rules limits expression and may be responsible for preventing valuable knowledge from being communicated.

The dominant discourse in intercultural education includes the introduction of Western culture, its norms and values. Based on European ethnocentrism, Western hegemony prevails (Chen, 2020). Western academia has gained the perception of being modern and relevant. This dominance smothers cultural diversity, with Western values being held up as standard and universal. The hegemony of Western culture attempts to 'bring everyone into the same value system and the same cultural atmosphere so as to melt the national characteristics, weaken the national consciousness and dismantle the ethnic culture' (Chen, 2020, p.275).

The dominance of Western academic writing in a world in which English is generally regarded as the academic lingua franca has resulted in 'asymmetrical global higher education and knowledge systems' (Zhu et al., 2024, p.1). The West has come to dominate knowledge globalization, and the acculturation of international students studying in Western universities strengthens and perpetuates this domination.

4. Differences in Academic Writing Conventions

Rhetorical academic writing fulfils essentially the same purpose in any language and culture. It aims to produce a persuasive and convincing text. Culture is a powerful influence on the background knowledge that students bring to their academic writing and how they execute it (Hyland, 2003). What is considered to be true or of value is determined by those who hold power, using this power to strengthen and reinforce their dominant position (Foucault,

1972). The structures surrounding academic discourses and communication force individuals working within them to self-regulate, discipline themselves, and conform (Heizmann & Olsson, 2015).

The Western model of higher education is characterized by specific, well-established writing conventions, with English being generally regarded as the international language of academic communication (Altbach, 2007). While these writing conventions may dominate global academia, they are not the only way to construct academic writing.

When Kaplan (1966) outlined five models of global academic writing, the structures that represented Western, Asian and Arabic writing cultures provided the most evident contrasts. Examples of academic writing conventions from these cultures will be described and compared. For readers familiar with working within the conventions of Western academic writing, there may be an obvious *best* way to write. However, by considering examples of the writing conventions of other cultures with an open mind, it can be seen that the dominance of Western academic writing conventions and protocols is an example of ethnocentrism, perpetuated by the inevitable tangle between power relations and knowledge in academia.

5. Referencing and Plagiarism Conventions

Incorporating explicit references to source texts is an important feature of Western academic writing. Cotton et al. (2024) explain that:

> Academic writing is expected to accurately cite and reference the work of others, including in-text citations and a list of references at the end of the document. This helps to give credit to the original authors and to support the validity and reliability of the research (p.232).

Without accurate and sufficient referencing of source material, a writer is in danger of being accused of plagiarism. Importantly, in Western academic writing, material regarded as common knowledge (such as conceptual knowledge that is foundational or broadly understood by academics and students in a particular field) still requires supporting references.

Plagiarism is generally regarded as 'using another person's ideas, work, and expression and passing it off as one's ideas, work, and expression' (Romanowski, 2022, p.289). Plagiarism can be accidental or deliberate, but in Western academia, it is usually viewed as academic misconduct, a serious act of cheating and dishonesty that requires intervention. Students found 'guilty' of plagiarism will likely face penalties (such as a reduction or capping of marks) or punishment (such as expulsion from a course or institution). However, plagiarism is culturally situated and interpreted differently in non-Western cultures (Simon, 2019).

ESL students, and students from an Asian background in particular, often lack a clear understanding of what Western academia regards as textual plagiarism (Du, 2020). Multiple studies (e.g. Flowerdew & Li, 2007; Shi, 2010) have indicated that ESL students have a high propensity to use source material without crediting it. Students are poor at paraphrasing and 'rely heavily upon source language in the production of their completed writing' (Du, 2020, p.16).

Numerous surveys of Asian students conclude that they lack an understanding of plagiarism or an appreciation of its significance to the value of their academic work. For example, a 2005 study of Japanese and US postgraduate students (Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2005) found that 62% of US students believed referencing sources was important, compared with only 12% of Japanese students.

In Asian academic culture, memorization is considered a valuable and useful way to help improve structural writing skills (Mcdonnell, 2004). Students may be taught that when the sources they are using represent the highest authority level, it is unnecessary to cite them, as would be essential in Western academic writing (Duff et al., 2006). The origins of this perspective may be based on the view that in a collectivist society, well-established academic knowledge belongs to society as a whole and is common knowledge. In Chinese academic writing, if knowledge is regarded as being universally known by educated readers, then citations may be deemed unnecessary (Postiglione & Zha, 2022).

Officially, there has been a shift towards teaching Western academic practices in Chinese universities since 2012, with emphasis placed on the value and importance of referencing (Du, 2020). However, guidance and instruction on referencing source material remain notably absent at an institutional and departmental level.

China has produced an increasingly high volume of academic publications over the last two decades. According to Western academics, much of this material is of low quality due to frequent and flagrant plagiarism (Shuhua & Weldon, 2006). In 2010, Nature (Zhang, 2010) reported that 31% of articles submitted to a leading Chinese science journal included plagiarized material. The lack of references in articles written by Chinese researchers has also been reported as a key reason why the material was not published in Western journals (Gray et al., 2019). In international

science journals, authors appear reluctant to cite Chinese literature, thus perpetuating the subjugation of potentially valuable knowledge (Shuhua & Weldon, 2006).

According to Alghamdi et al. (2018), ESL students from an Arabic culture may be inclined to plagiarize in the Western sense because they simply lack sufficient understanding that it is unacceptable. Plagiarizing is a more acceptable norm amongst Arab ESL students, necessary for academic survival when completing demanding written work in English. Like Asian students, Arab students may also lack an understanding of how to synthesize material that they regard as common knowledge into their written work or appreciate the need to paraphrase. An interesting facet of the high level of plagiarism reported in academic writing by Arabic scholars is that this may be partially due to the lack of effective plagiarism detection software for written Arabic (Al-Thwaib et al., 2020).

Significantly, according to Hayes and Introna (2005), Arab students may also fear that they will distort the original ideas of experts by attempting to express (or re-express) these ideas in their own words. At a graduate level, when presenting quotations, Arab students also tend to include quotations in their text without attributing sources. In Western academic writing, this is deemed unacceptable. As with papers produced by Chinese researchers, a common reason for rejecting articles produced by Arabic researchers is plagiarism (Mohammed et al., 2015).

6. Originality and Objectivity

Originality is central to high-quality Western academic composition. Importance is placed on the value of individuality and for authors to have an authentic voice (Matalene, 1985; Lee, 2020). Moreover, 'Western culture is built on critical thinking and favors originality and innovation over reproducing ideas' (Almuhailib, 2019, p.105). The value of an authentic voice becomes increasingly important as students progress from undergraduate through to postgraduate and doctoral writing.

In contrast, the Chinese education system, with its traditions of valuing memorization, has resulted in a highly formulaic and uniform style of writing, with the authentic authorial voice often being lost (Matalene, 1985). Li (1996) attributes this writing style to the Chinese reverence for authority, manifesting itself in texts that avoid any contradictions or deviations from the original source meaning or argument, thus weakening opportunities for an authentic authorial voice.

According to Shukri (2014), Arabic students may be reluctant to discuss specific culturally sensitive topics and feel uncomfortable challenging traditional or accepted norms. In traditional Arabic learning culture, the deep embedding of rote learning has meant a resistance to demonstrating self-expression. A teacher asking students to present their own opinions may be regarded as placing unrealistically high expectations upon them.

In Western academic writing, an author's critical and original perspective is often highly valued. In Asian and Arabic writing cultures, however, this may be regarded as highly undesirable or even unrealistic. In Asian academic writing culture, being critical of acclaimed sources may even be perceived as a sign of disrespect (Pecorari, 2003).

In Western universities, students are encouraged to strive for objectivity (Chen & Ouyang, 2022). Expressing opinions, when unsupported by reference to high-quality source material, is often regarded as naive unless based on the student's own academic research. Using the first-person pronoun is often discouraged in Western academic writing, much to the frustration of those attempting to demonstrate an authentic authorial voice in their work (Brennan, 2024).

Writing by Chinese ESL students tends to include more personal expressions of opinions and logical reasoning and lacks objective, evidence and data-supported arguments (Lin and Hinkel, 2001; Zhang, 2018). Instead, Chinese writers are more likely to make subjective statements in their academic writing (Chen & Ouyang, 2022), strengthening these statements by using emphatics and amplifiers (Lin & Hinkel, 2001).

In their empirical study of Chinese students' English writing, Chen and Ouyang (2022) find that using opinion statements and logical reasoning are the principal ways of providing evidential claims to argumentative assertions. In contrast, Western academic writers are expected to attribute authority with reference to external sources by citing material with an appropriate level of recognized quality.

Writing by Arabic scholars may reflect the oral traditions of reproducing rhetoric historically associated with Arabic culture (Sayidina, 2010). Here, the emphasis is on producing elegance in expressing the language. Traditional Arabic writing includes repetition to emphasize and strengthen an argument, with further support from elaboration and exaggeration (Patai, 1983). Western academics may regard such writing as boring, unfocused, or repetitive (Nash, 2017).

7. Structure

Kaplan (1966) produced a typology of cultural writing patterns by ESL students in their essays. He developed typologies based on contrasting rhetoric analysis and provided models that reflected the structures typically used by students writing in different cultures. According to Kaplan (1966), 'each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of a particular language is the mastery of its logical system' (p.14).

The most distinctive structural difference in Kaplan's (1966) models was between Western and Asian academic writing. The former follows a linear path, with characteristic features of high-quality writing including being clear, direct and persuasive. Hu (2014) describes this as demonstrating 'a smooth and direct flow of ideas from start to finish' (p.56). Western academic writing often presents a balanced approach to argumentation, with the writer systematically evaluating both argument and counterargument (Shukri, 2014). In contrast, Kaplan (1966) describes Asian academic writing as circular, resulting in paragraphs that build around a topic; the writing is authoritative, respectful, indirect, and non-assertive.

In Western academic writing, students are taught to begin their work with a thesis statement, create paragraphs that include clear topic sentences, and present their arguments hierarchically (Kaplan, 1966). Western academic writers generally place their topic sentence at the beginning of a paragraph, whereas Asian writers place it at the end.

Arab students are likely to have been given writing instruction that reflects the traditional stylistic characteristics of Arabic writing structures (Shukri, 2014). Such writing structures are rigid and based on clear rules. In his study of Arab ESL students' essay writing, Ahmed (2010) established that students lacked familiarity of and thus found it challenging to construct thesis statements, write topic sentences, and sequence their ideas. Kaplan (1966) described how Arab writers produce written text based on a series of parallel clauses. Unlike Western academic rhetoric, a counter argument may be deemed unnecessary, with a singular argument being cumulatively constructed to be persuasive (Shukri, 2014).

Like Asian writers, Arabic writers tend to reach the point (the equivalent of a topic sentence) at the end of a paragraph. The process of presenting argumentation is based on repetition, in contrast to the syllogistic model used in Western academic writing (Barakat, 1993). Al-Rubaye (2015) argues that Arabic writing's characteristic repetition is often inaccurately portrayed as containing large quantities of redundant text and extreme exaggerations.

8. Onus of Responsibility to Understand

Chinese readers accept that making sense of and understanding texts is their responsibility (Hu, 2014). Chinese and Arabic are high-context writing forms in which the reader is expected to interpret meaning (Wang, 2009; Almuhailib, 2019). In Chinese academic writing, this meaning may be communicated indirectly through the text (Chen & Ouyang, 2022). The Western interpretation of such writing may be that it is 'elusive and undesirably indirect' (Hu, 2014, p.57). In contrast, Western academic writing is low-context: the writer is expected to take responsibility for achieving clarity and facilitating understanding (Wang, 2009).

9. Conclusion

There are clearly significant differences between Western academic writing conventions and those in Asian and Arabic cultures. ESL Students who are entering a Western university will, as part of the process of acculturation, be expected to conform to the norms and values of Western education; this includes conforming to Western academic writing conventions.

Writing conventions associated with non-Western cultures have been dismissed or subordinated. Hu (2014) argues that Western academics should show more awareness and acceptance of differences in academic writing conventions and that students be treated fairly 'with equal opportunities to achieve academic and professional success' (p.55). Extinguishing academic writing protocols by favoring a Western approach could be seen as subjugating a means by which knowledge is created and communicated. Foucault (1980) supported the idea of insurrections of subjugated knowledge and may have agreed that there should be push-back against holding up Western academic writing conventions as the ideal. Ironically, Foucault has been criticized for his Euro-centric perspective (Heywood, 2023).

The acculturation process of learning a new way of writing is complex for international students in Western universities. Students who have learned writing strategies specific to their home culture may find that they are poorly equipped to cope with the expectations of a very different culture (Hu, 2014). However, the push towards acculturation is powerful and may even be viewed as desirable by international ESL students themselves when hoping to gain an immersive Western academic experience.

Despite his paper on the differences between Arabic and English rhetorical writing being presented as critical, Almuhailib (2019) still provides advice on how Arabic writers can better familiarize themselves with Western rhetorical patterns. Similarly, while presenting empirical evidence of differences in Chinese and American students' writing structures, Yang and Cahill (2008) conclude their paper advising ESL teachers on how to teach paragraph structure to their Chinese learners.

Ultimately, why should Western academic writing conventions be regarded as the ideal? Their position of dominance is intertwined with power and power relations. When he produced his analysis of writing structures, Kaplan (1966) attempted to remain detached; he did not endorse one particular model as superior to the others.

The dominance of Western academic writing conventions has inevitably affected how global knowledge is created, communicated, and shared. This exemplifies education as soft power (Jack, 2024). The situation can also affect knowledge possibilities; some new knowledge may have been suppressed or dismissed, and some potentially influential academic thinkers may have been unable to progress as far or as quickly as their talents and efforts merited.

Chen (2020) argues that students should learn about cultural diversity by considering the similarities and differences between academic writing styles. Regarding communicative methods, ESL students should perhaps not face constraints to comply with specific cultural norms. The entire issue could be approached with a positive, open attitude and an awareness of the current ethnocentric impact of Western academic writing conventions.

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