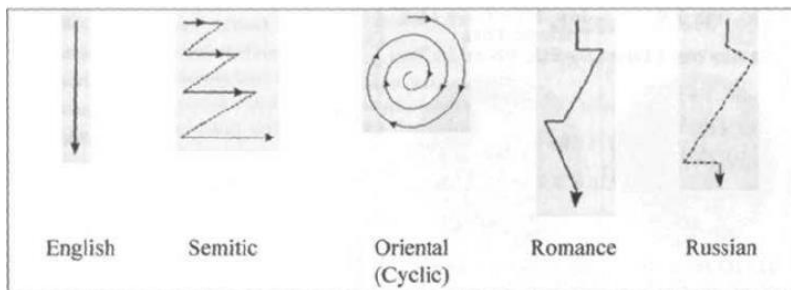


Cultural Writing

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) offered me many pleasures. The great variety of nationalities and personalities I encountered topped the list. I have almost an infinite number of stories to tell about the individual students and their interactions with other students, enough to keep me busy writing stories for a long time. For me, an unexpected result of studying how to teach English to people of varied cultures was learning that there are actually cultural differences in the way various language groups organize their thoughts and present them in writing.

At the time I was teaching ESL, I also taught English composition to American students. The day I learned that American composition calls for a "linear" approach to writing turned out to be a landmark for me in learning how to teach all kinds of composition, especially academic writing for speakers of other languages. It was an equally useful breakthrough in how to teach American students.

Native speakers of English value straight-line thinking. We teach our students to follow a simple outline of introducing a subject, discussing it, and concluding with a summary of what we have said. That may appear to us to be logical and basic; but when we look at compositions from other languages, we learn that there are other ways of organizing a presentation. Actually, our organizational ideal may appear abrupt and overly simple to many other cultures.



In an article by Robert B. Kaplan in a 1966 issue of the journal *Language Learning*, I was delighted to discover an explanation of the difficulty I was having in teaching Chinese students how to write essays that would be acceptable in English composition courses on the college level. Kaplan's article is titled "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education" and contains some exciting insights into the ways other speakers organize their thoughts. Chinese writers have a tendency to circle around a subject, showing it from a variety of views, but seldom directly stating it. Their composition development can be seen as a kind of spiral. I had found Chinese students almost invariably very polite. I feel that this spiral presentation is a basically polite way of explaining a subject. I have read that the great statesman, Sun Yat Sen, who was thoroughly bilingual, said that he found himself reasoning differently from his Chinese way of thinking when he thought in English. When I explained the American way of linear reasoning to the spiral-thinking Chinese, they were able to begin to alter their approach to writing so that they had a better chance of succeeding in an American university.

As I began to encounter more and more Arab students from a number of Near and Middle East countries, I found that their compositions showed more of a zig-zag, repetitious pattern. Think about the parallelism in the Psalms in the Old Testament. There you find an idea stated at least two different ways. Not only does the parallel statement make the point clear but, in the Psalms and other Old Testament writing, you find a kind of majestic poetry. I found the same phenomenon in the young Arabs' writings.

When I thought about speakers of Romance languages - Italians, Spaniards, and South Americans, even French - I could not find such a simple kind of writing as the Far and Near East Asians'. Kaplan's diagnosis of the Romance language pattern of composition was that those languages allow a much greater freedom of introducing extraneous material and digression. There is an entirely different kind of basis for Romance language logic, perhaps reflected in the more relaxed life style that supports siestas and late evening dining times.

The teaching ideas I received from Kaplan's diagnosis of language patterns were that no one basis of organization of ideas is correct. I learned to look for the natural way the speakers of other languages had in looking at a subject and to help them see the difference in the English-language approach of straight-line reasoning and their own cultural method. Since I've read Kaplan, I've thought that my task as a teacher of ESL is to introduce the student to a different culture and a different cultural way of composition. If the student plans to remain in the United States, he or she needs to learn as thoroughly as possible our linear ideal of writing. On the other hand, if the student's goal is to get an American degree and return to his or her native culture, then a different adjustment needs to be made - to adapt to the linear way of thinking in this country and return to the different cultural way of thinking when he or she returns home.

<https://study.com/academy/lesson/kaplans-thought-patterns-intercultural-communication.html>

Kaplan's Cultural Thought Patterns

Robert E. Kaplan in 1966 wrote an article '**Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education**'. His reasoning is that each language of the world is influenced by a thought pattern that's unique to the culture or the collective customs and beliefs of the people. This thought pattern is visible in the way the sentences in a paragraph are ordered and structured. Each language has a distinctive way in which sentences in a paragraph are written, that is, reflective of the thought process.