Intercultural Communication in Letters of Recommendation

Jing LIU

Department of English, Ocean University of China, Qingdao, China

Abstract: The letter of recommendation (LR) as a means to communicate across different cultures for the purpose of applying for entering a university can be problematic. Using contrastive rhetoric analytic framework, this paper compares LRs written by Chinese and English native speaker professionals. Discussion of culturally situated interpretations of the LRs is based on interviews with university professors who have been on the admission committee. The findings show similarities in macro discourse structure but differences in discourse content between the LRs, which suggest that successful intercultural communication in LRs requires meticulous dialogue with the 'other' according to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. Unequal power relationship between writer and reader is also discussed from critical discourse analysis perspective.

Key words: Letters of recommendation; intercultural communication; dialogism

Introduction

As more international students apply for admission to the colleges and universities in the United States, the admission committee has to read more letters of recommendation (LRs) written by English non-native speaker (ENNS) writers than ever before. The letters function as a medium in intercultural communication (IC) between English native speaker (ENS) readers and ENNS writers. However, "according to many educators and employers, too few letters of recommendation tell recipients what they really need to know about a candidate" (Palmer, 1983, p. 1). Although the writers' identification is not specified here, we can assume that IC between the ENNS writer of the LR and the ENS reader is more problematic than the communication among the same language speakers because of the cultural as well as linguistic differences.

The problems in this IC result probably from the different approaches to the discourse conventions. "Bouton shows that although the speech event has core characteristics cross-culturally, the realization of the speech event varies in both formal and content schema" (Bardovi-Harlig & Hartford, 1995, p 127). The differences may cause miscommunication if the reader fails to understand the discourse conventions of the writer if those are unfamiliar.

The LR has a long history in the Western world, and can be traced to the middle of the third century B. C. (Cotton, 1981, p. 2). "The routine of writing recommendation resulted in the emergence of a mold into which each individual case could easily be fitted (although, ..., room was left for variation) [original], expediency and economy profited from crystallized formulae and set phrases" (p. 6). The consistent practice of writing the LR has developed into a specific discourse genre with three characteristics. First, the participants are generally from educational field – the admission committee and the teachers or professors who write LRs for their former students, and hence form a specific discourse community. Second, writing and reading LRs constitute a specific speech event in which the writer recommends and the reader uses the recommendation as one of the information resources to select candidates. Third, all the participants share the communicative purposes, that is, the person recommended is to be considered as a candidate for admission to a study course.

By contrast, the LR does not seem to be a well-established genre in Chinese written discourse. Traditionally, higher educational institutes in China do not require LRs for admission. There has been an informal practice that a brief note or a simple letter, which mainly states the relationship between the writer and the person recommended, might be presented to the person in charge of admission. This kind of practice, however, is very limited. In such a letter, the qualities of the recommended person are

guaranteed by the credibility of the writer who is usually known by the reader. Therefore, the letter generally does not include any specific information but mostly the recommended person's virtues such as honesty, straightness, diligence, faithfulness, and so on.

The different cultural practice and language use in the LR cannot be ignored if appropriate interpretation of the letters must be achieved. However, the LR has rarely been studied, though "research on other aspects of academic discourse has been voluminous, from reprint requests (Swales 1990) to politeness strategies in scientific articles" (Myers 1989, cited in Precht 1998, p. 242). Viewing the LR in IC as a problematic issue, I will in this paper compare two LRs written respectively by an ENS writer and a Chinese native speaker (CNS) writer to find out how the writers from different cultural and linguistic background realize the speech act of recommendation. The contrastive rhetoric analysis will be incorporated with the characterizations of the LR as a particular kind of discourse genre as well as culturally situated interpretations of texts. In other words, the two letters will be compared in terms of their rhetorical construction by the writers and potential interpretations by the readers. The findings will be discussed in the light of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and critical discourse theory on the maintenance of power relations between the reader (addressee) and the writer (addresser). Further research will be suggested at the end in order to substantiate the findings in the current study.

Method

Data Two types of data are collected for this study. One consists of two letters from a file of LRs submitted to a MATESOL (Master of Arts for Teachers in English to Speakers of Other Languages) program at one of the US universities in the middle of 1990s. I was permitted to use them in this paper with the candidates' names and former universities deleted. Neither candidate was admitted to enter the program. One letter was written by an ENS in 198 words, and the other by a CNS in 200 words.

The other type of data comprises interviews and written comments on some samples of LRs found typical from the file. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted with both English and Chinese NS professors. The former are the University's MATESOL professors who have years of experience in reading LRs. Besides interviews, I also asked them to write their comments on the given samples. The latter are three Chinese NS scholars. The questions I asked them were focused on their experience in writing LRs, the history of Chinese LRs as a genre, and the problems of LRs written in English by Chinese professionals.

Analytical framework As a qualitative case study, this paper will follow with modification Precht's (1998) broad structure found in her study of 39 LRs written by 10 Americans, 10 British, 9 Germans and 10 Eastern Europeans. The structure has three major parts, i.e., Introduction/Frame, Body/Evaluation, and Conclusion/Prediction. Each part is constituted by a certain number of items (see Table 1). Three items usually form the Introduction. They are purpose of the LR, context in which the recommender knows the recommendee, and the recommender's personal comments on the recommendee's qualifications. Body can be formed either in a topical or chronological format with supporting evidence consisted either of a listing of facts or of stories about the recommendee (Precht 1998:253). Conclusion usually ends the LR with the writer's prediction of the recommendee's future success in the program applied.

Table 1. Analytical framework adopted from Precht (1998)

Structure	Constituents
Introduction/Frame	Purpose
	Context of knowing
	Personal comments
Body/Evaluation	Topicality vs. chronology
	Factual reporting vs. storytelling

Conclusion/Prediction	Future success of the recommendee

Besides the contrastive rhetoric analytic framework, Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and critical discourse analysis theory will be applied as theoretical framework for further analyzing the LRs. The former mainly refers to Bakhtin's definition of "speech genres as typified utterances that emerge within spheres of activity" and "genres are not templates we instantiate, but dialogic relationships that emerge among situated utterances" (Prior 2001, p. 72). Viewing LRs as a genre in Bakhtin's framework, I will explore the writer's intent and the reader's interpretation situated in the dialogic process of IC.

The latter is focused on power relations between the reader and the writer in the approach of critical discourse analysis. Analytic parameters consist of the writer and the reader's unequal roles in the social activities of recommending and gatekeeping respectively.

Data Analysis and Results

In this section, I will first analyze the ENS letter followed by the CNS one. After that, I will compare the two letters in terms of their structural patters.

The ENS letter begins with two big case lines, "TO: ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE" and "RECOMMENDATION FOR X," which can be categorized as the first paragraph to specify the purpose of this letter. The second paragraph introduces the features of the courses the candidate took with the writer. It attempts to provide a solid background for the writer's recommendation and knowledge of specific academic qualities of the candidate. The following paragraph focuses on the candidate's achievement in the course taught by the writer. It includes information on the number of credits, the candidate's grade compared with her classmates, and the grading system. From these two paragraphs, the reader is informed of the relationship between the writer and the candidate, and abilities of the candidate in her course, which is specifically described as a "large lecture course," "the size of the class and the difficulty of the material requires a high degree of industry and independence from the students," and "all discussion and written work are in English." Such description leaves the impression of reliability upon the reader because the information comprises what the course is like. It also focuses on characteristics deemed to be relevant to this specific application, for example, English language proficiency.

The last paragraph is about the candidate's personal and academic traits, and the writer's confidence in the candidate's potentiality as a graduate student, on which the writer's recommendation "with no qualifications" is based. The adjectives used to describe the candidate like "mature," "industrious," and "thoughtful" sound positive.

The CNS letter has four paragraphs. The first paragraph states the purpose for writing the letter. As the writer refers to the candidate as "my student" in the first paragraph, it is understood in the second paragraph that the writer had taught the person for three years, which seems to give a very strong background for the writer to speak for the person. However, the real content of the grade "A" seems ambiguous as the letter is from China, where, the reader may know, the grading systems are different from those in the United States. The lack of the specific information the reader needs to understand what the "A" implies probably weakens the function of this letter because it does not sound informative.

The writer continues in the second paragraph to describe the person as "diligent and responsible." The writer's experience with the person seems to indicate that the person is recommended because she had a strong interest in teaching languages in addition to her three A's in the courses. The writer seems to regard the person's intentions for further study in linguistics and psychology as a potential ability to be qualified for admission. The writer is obviously aware of his/her weakness as a recommender, because the courses he/she taught the recommendee were three ethnology classes (General History of China, China and Chinese Nationalities, and introduction to Religion), which are likely to be considered as irrelevant to the MATESOL program. Therefore, the writer especially declares that "language is closely related to ethnology." The writer's "great confidence in her ability, her maturity and determination to pursue advanced studies" seems to indicate his/her strong, sincere recommendation.

The third paragraph is about the person's art and music talent. From a Chinese point of view, the writer seems to know the person very well, and likes her as a versatile student.

The writer concludes with a strong recommendation in the fourth paragraph. It coordinates the first paragraph and seems to target at making a deeper impression upon the reader and hence probably influencing the decision-making. The choosing of the two words "budding scholar" to refer to the person seems to reflect the writer's sincere love and hope for her bright future since the phrase is commonly used in Chinese academic sphere to refer to those promising and usually young scholars.

Both letters share similar macro discourse construction, namely, statement of purpose/introduction, evaluation/body, and recommendation/conclusion (see Table 2). They both have four paragraphs. They move from purpose to context of knowing, evaluation by personal comments, and prediction at the end.

Table 2. Comparison of the structures between the two letters

P	ENS Letter	CNS Letter
1	Reader & purpose	Purpose

2	Context of knowing:
	
	Description of the courses – background for writer's credential for recommending the person as well as the courses' requirements and credibility
		Context of knowing:
		
		   1. three courses
		
		   2. discussions
		
		Personal comments:
		
		   1. diligent and responsible;
		
		   2. caring about future and interested in academic studies such as linguistics and psychology;
		
		   3. interested in teaching languages;
		
		   4. ability, maturity and determination to pursue studies

3	Context of knowing:
	
	his/her student for 2 semesters
	
	List of facts:
	
	   1. course title and its credits
	
	   2. grade and what it means
	
	   3. the grading system
		Topicality:
		
		Topic sentence 3.1
		
		Supporting details:
		
		   1. music
		
		   2. enthusiastic in teaching others
		
		   3. responsible
		
		   4. talent in art design

4	Personal comments:
	
	   1. highly motivated, interested
	
	   2. having fundamental mastery of the subject studied and creative approach to studying the subject;
		Conclusion/Prediction:
		
		   1. strong recommendation
		
		   2. "budding scholar"

> *3. mature, industrious, thoughtful, and having a positive effect on others around her.*
>
> Conclusion/Prediction:
>
> *1. having the requisite experience, the ability and the motivation to succeed in graduate studies.*
>
> *2. strong recommendation*

However, the differences appear quite obvious in three aspects. First, the two writers use different evidence for recommendation. The ENS writer exclusively focuses on the courses he/she taught the person and gives more factual information about the courses and grades; whereas the CNS writer lists three courses he/she taught the recommendee without specific information about the courses and how the students were graded, and in addition includes the person's abilities in music performance and poster design. The former's courses are in English on American literature, whereas the latter's on ethnology which is not specified either in Chinese or English.

Second, personal comments as evaluation are presented differently in the two letters. The ENS writer appears following a linear order. The writer first describes the courses, then states that the person was in the courses, presents the person's grades with relevant detailed information, and gives his/her personal comments in the following paragraph. The personal comments appear to be based on a list of facts. The CNS writer's personal comments seem to be topical and are presented in two paragraphs. The first group of comments is focused on her diligence and being responsible, and second on her liveliness and amicability.

Third, predictions are expressed in different manners. The ENS writer is certain about the person's possessing "the requisite experience, the ability and the motivation to succeed in her graduate studies," which is stated right before his/her recommendation "with no qualification" in the same sentence. In contrast, the CNS writer's predictions seem to be implied in personal comments in sentence 6 paragraph 2 and a metaphor of "budding scholar" in the last paragraph.

Now, we see the letters analyzed have similar macro structure as well as distinct evidence choice, manner of presenting personal comments and predictions. But what do the similarities and differences mean? To further analyze the data to interpret the writer's intent in connection with the reader's expectations, I will explore the culturally situated meaning of the similarities and differences of the LRs as a genre with its own characterizations.

Since writing LRs is a long-established social activity in the Western world, a set of rules for the writer to observe and the expectations from the reader for the necessary information included in the letters have been formed through the practice. Morristt (1935, p. 195) set eight criteria for a good LR for the selection of secondary school teachers: 1) the writer (position, professional attitude, academic standards); 2) the writer's opportunity to observe, actually know, and evaluate the candidate as a teacher; 3) the professional relationship between the writer and the recommended; 4) the kind of letter; 5) the tone of the letter; 6) the quality of information revealed in the letter; 7) the contents of the letter relative to the candidate; and 8) recency of the letter.

Some suggestions for writing the effective letters offered by the experienced letter readers are summarized in Palmer (1983, Abstract) as:

> (1) don't rely on a predetermined list of questions; (2) explain your relationship to the candidate; (3) learn about the candidate's career goals; (4) compare the candidate to others; (5) tailor the letter to the specific position or program being applied for; (6) back up your remarks with details; (7) decline the candidate's request for a letter if you feel uncomfortable about writing it; (8) elaborate

on the limitations of the candidate's current position; (9) avoid sexist or racist remarks; (10) watch for phrasing which could be misunderstood; (11) volunteer to provide further information by telephone; (12) keep the letter brief; and (13) end on an upbeat note.

Based on those studies, a good LR for the MATESOL program may comprise at least three elements: 1) the relationship between the writer and the candidate; 2) the specific information relevant to the candidate's academic abilities as a MATESOL student; and 3) the overtone of the letter is professional and sincere. In other words, as Prof. T suggests, the reader would look for the writer's credibility and the letter to be informative, relevant, and specific.

Accepting those characterizations, we may find that the ENS letter is more informative, relevant, and specific than the CNS one. The former focuses on learning abilities whereas the latter includes both academic and extracurricular abilities. The two letters present different proportion of facts and impressions and therefore one sounds more objective than the other (see Table 3 on the next page). As Prof. R comments, the ENS letter "sets up the criteria so carefully – what this professor's experience is with this student in her/his coursework, and how the student compares with others."

On the other hand, the ENS letter may not sound informative though it is relevant and specific. Prof. R comments on the specific information presented in 3.2 (see Table 3 for the numbered sentence) and the words "fundamental mastery" in 4.2 of the ENS letter, writing, "good info but it sounds like the person is <u>not</u> [underline the original] outstanding, just good" and "sounds sort of 'basic', nothing that special" respectively. On sentence 4.3, she writes, "This sentence is positive, but sort of generic in that everyone says stuff like this." On the basis of the familiarity of this kind of letter, she feels able to draw inferences and make interpretations that the person is just average, not outstanding, according to Prof. S. Those comments, however, may suggest that the ENS writer is honest, not trying to exaggerate though the recommended risks not being admitted.

Table 3. Comparison of facts and impressions in the Chinese and English NS letters

| Facts | ENS Letter | 2.1 The Senior Year of our Program at … is the culminating year; in this year the seniors must take two large lecture courses, American Literature and British Literature II.

2.2 This size of the classes and the difficulty of the material require a high degree of industry and independence from the student.

2.3 Since all discussions and written work are in English, success in these two courses reflects mastery of the fundamentals of prior years of study.

3.1 XXX was my student for two semesters in the required six-credit course, American Literature.

3.2 During the two semesters, her average grade of 80 placed her in the top ten percent in a class of 60 students.

3.3 This grade was based on written essays and exams, and on class participation. |
| | CNS Letter | 2.1 XXX was in three Ethnology classes – General History of China, China & Chinese Nationalities, and Introduction to Religion – for three years and received all A's.

2.3 She often had discussions with me about her career objectives as well as academic affairs.

3.2 She loves music and joined our Classical Chinese Chamber Orchestra in her sophomore year. |

Impressions	ENS Letter	4.1 XXX is a highly motivated, interested student.
		4.2 She has fundamental mastery of the subject which she studied with me and approached it creatively.
		4.3 She is mature and industrious and thoughtful, and has a positive effect on those around her.
		4.4 I'm certain that she has the requisite experience, the ability and the motivation to succeed in her graduate studies, …
	CNS Letter	2.2 She is a diligent and responsible student.
		2.4 In them, she showed a strong interest in teaching languages to other young people.
		2.5 She intends to enrich her knowledge and life experience through further study in linguistics and psychology.
		2.6 As language is closely related to ethnology, I have great confidence in her ability, her maturity and determination to pursue advanced studies.
		3.1 XXX is a lively and amicable young lady.
		3.3 She performed well on the Ryun, a Chinese lute.
		3.4 She was enthusiastic in teaching other members and loyally assumed her responsibilities as Vice President of the Chamber Orchestra in her junior year.
		3.5 She even demonstrated her talent in the design of performance posters.
		4.1 …this budding scholar…

Note: "2.1" represents paragraph 2 sentence 1 and all the other numbers follow this same fashion.

In contrast, the ENS professor readers feel confused when reading the CNS letter. Prof. S questions how the music and art talents are related to the MATESOL program requirements. To make it meaningful one has to first understand Chinese educational concepts. In Chinese culture, outstanding students are supposed to achieve high scores and at the same time be enthusiastic, active, and talented in extracurricular activities such as sports and art performances. The recommendee is thus presented as a special candidate with great potentialities for learning new things. The relevance of the content becomes culture-specific and culturally situated. That is why such interpretation, according to Prof. S, would not be available to an American reader who is not familiar with the Chinese writers' discourse conventions of the LR.

For the same rationale, the CNS writer presents more impressions than facts. The former seem to reflect a holistic approach to evaluation, whereas the latter an analytic one. The writer evaluates from his/her perspective shaped by his/her native culture. In the traditional Chinese holistic view, a potential candidate for higher degree study needs to be "diligent and responsible" as well as "lively and amicable." These qualitative words are supported by what the recommender feels about the person based on what he/she knows about the person.

Finally, the grade "A" the person received in the three courses is not informative to the readers because the writer fails to provide the bases of the grading. Since grading systems are not usually unified in American schools, the reader needs a specific context in which the grade can be interpreted meaningfully. The CNS writer seems to have taken it for granted that "A" of course means the best but seems to have

forgotten "A" would be interpreted by the reader as "average" if many of her classmates have also got "A".

To summarize, the two letters analyzed bear some characterizations of the LR as a genre. The writers state their purpose of writing clearly, present their evaluation and prediction, and recommend the person as qualified candidate. The different content included seems culture-specific and is interpretable if culturally situated.

Discussion

What has been found about the two LRs suggests that the LR as a social event necessitates a dialogic approach by both the reader and the writer, especially when the participants are from sharply different cultures. In the current case study, the ENS reader and the CNS writer need to understand each other's view of the dialogic relationships between the letter writing and recommending. Since writing LRs is not a popular or well-formed practice in China, there is no reason to expect that CNS writer would produce the same kind of content as the ENS writer. The different writing styles, however, represent the same recommending act. The CNS writer's consideration of the candidate's abilities in art and music as relevant and informative can be interpreted as legitimate simply because the writer is a well-educated professor and capable of writing persuasive articles. Disparate interpretations may result in the readers' expectations different from the writer's schemata for such a letter. According to the ethnographic approach to discourse,

> …what we say and do has meaning only within a framework of cultural knowledge. The ways that we organize and conduct our lives through language are thus ways of being and doing that are not only relative to other possibilities for communicating, but also deeply embedded within the particular framework by which we - as members of our own specific communities - make sense out of experience" (Schiffrin 1994:185).

Cultural knowledge of a specific speech community is conducive to the IC where two cultures do not share the same discourse conventions. However, knowing the "other" may not necessarily help "self" accurately interpret the "other" writer's intent. Commenting on my analysis of the ENS and CNS letters, Prof. S writes, "In our case we know that there were differences and that there had been a breakdown, but we could not interpret the intent of the writers." To achieve approximate interpretation of the writer's intent, the reader needs to be engaged in a situated dialogue with the writer. On the other hand, the writer needs to have his/her reader's expectations in mind and carry a meaningful dialogue when writing the letter.

The participants in the genre of the LR may not be able to carry an equal dialogue. In this specific genre, the reader as gatekeeper has definitely more power than the writer, especially the ENNS writer. The writer must provide required information and the reader decides if it is useful. The reader's interpretation of the letter decides whether the candidate will be selected or not. In such an unequal power relationship, it has to be the writer who must become aware of the genre conventions of a culture different from his/her own. On the other hand, the reader must fairly maintain his/her power for obtaining accurately interpreted information.

Conclusion

Contrastive rhetoric analysis conducted in this study has found both similar macro discourse structure patterns and distinct content selection and organization in the two letters. The similarities suggest that both writers implement their recommending acts by stating the purpose, presenting their evaluation and prediction of the person and recommending. The different choice of the content and organization is more associated with culturally situated genre practice.

Analysis of the LR as a genre in this paper is limited in rhetoric structure and cross-cultural dialogue. Other factors such as individual personal traits in writing and reading are not covered. Same as any other social activities, the LR involves more than what has been discussed here. According to Bouton (1995:213), the LR as a medium of IC has never been fully studied. Further studies in this field are needed to investigate more deeply the Western conventions of writing LRs on the one hand, and patterns of the LRs written by English nonnative speaker professionals on the other hand.

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About the author:

Jing Liu, PhD (University of Washington) and associate professor, is currently teaching and supervising graduate students in the areas of Intercultural Communication Theories, Ethnography of Communication and Discourse Analysis at the Ocean University of China, Qingdao.

Address:

Department of English
Ocean University of China
23 Hong Kong Road East
Qingdao, Shandong 266071
People's Republic of China