

## **Hybrid Rhetoric in Professional Writing: The Case of American and Filipino Parents' Letters of Excuse from School**

Alejandro S. Bernardo  
*University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines*

### **Abstract**

In much of second language writing, 'non-native' speakers of English are assumed to 'digress' from traditionally promulgated writing norms. This can be seen as negative, because they allegedly do not conform to the standard of writing; or positive, because their digressions are culturally relevant or appropriate. On that note, this study compares and contrasts letters of excuse from school written by 30 American and 30 Filipino parents. It contrastively examines the linguistic characteristics, moves, and rhetoric of Filipino and American excuse letters, with the goal of specifying the rhetorical preferences that are defining features of each corpus. More specifically, this paper examines the text layout, organizational patterns and special features of content like goodwill close and commonly recurring expressions used in stating requests in the two corpora. This paper argues that nonnative speakers of English are not the only ones that employ distinctive writing patterns which 'digress' from traditional writing models, but also the native speakers as well. The two discourses investigated demonstrate 'hybrid' rhetoric which cannot simply be described as 'native' or 'non-native'. This study also proposes that a 'discourse space' be given to any writing community which allows its members to employ rhetorical strategies they prefer.

**Key words:** Contrastive Rhetoric, discourse space, hybrid rhetoric, rhetorical strategies, rhetorical rights

## Background and Purpose

Contrastive Rhetoric (CR) has a very potent impact on ESL and EFL instruction (Connor, Nagelhout & Rozycki, 2008). From a simple beginning, it has become a very appealing field of research. In fact, Gonzales (2002) views CR “not simply an act of linguistic description, but more as linguistic explanation, attempting to answer the question *why do members of specific discourse communities write the way they do?*” (p.19). To Moreno (2008) CR now “...has been more interested in finding out how writers from different cultures organize their texts into coherent meaningful units to accomplish their communicative purposes” (p.27). Thus, it is not surprising that, at present, new trends have emerged in CR research and methods. These developments according to Connor, Nagelhout & Rozycki (2008) are caused by two key factors - the acknowledgment of more genres with specific textual requirements and heightened awareness of the social contexts of writing.

Kachru (1995) defines contrastive rhetoric as the “comparison of the writing conventions of various languages and cultures as they differ from the perceived norms of writing in American or British English” (p.21). This definition, however, was challenged by Kachru herself by emphasizing that one must question the assumption that there are well-defined writing patterns in English. Liebman (1988), on the other hand, defines CR most concisely as “the study of how rhetorical expectations and conventions differ among cultures” (p.6). Hence, contrasting stylistic choices of writing communities should not operate under the native speakers’ model as the only and valid reference point. To date, CR provides substantial insights into problems with adjusting to English rhetoric by providing information about the rhetorics used by non-English cultures (Panetta, 2001). Further, it promotes inquiry into a variety of levels of discourse and text, carefully examining the conventions and rhetorical structures of L1 and their influence on the use of another language (Kassabgy, Ibrahim & Aydelott, 2004).

Interestingly, the texts or corpora used in CR studies abound, are electronically accessible, and loaded sources of cultural and textual information. These are large databases that sample ‘real world’ text required in any CR investigation. It must be appreciated

that, at present, apart from study corpus like academic research articles, research reports, and grant proposals, writing for professional purposes has been regarded a “legitimate type of second language writing and worthy of research and teaching” (Connor, Nagelhout, & Rozycki, 2008, p.3). As a result, written correspondences like letters of request and letters of complaint have caught the attention of researchers to compare how a culture would write them with how another culture would do it.

In the Philippines alone, a great deal of research e.g. Gonzales (2002), Bautista and Madrunio (2004) and Madrunio (2004) have spurred the interest of many to conduct CR investigations. Findings of these studies have shown that Filipinos employ rhetorical conventions that are ‘uniquely Filipino’ despite the influence of American English as their second language. One may therefore argue that now, Filipino writers do not completely adhere to the exonormative or native speakers’ models of writing. These peculiarities in rhetorical patterns of language are said to be shaped by exposure to language (Magistro, 2007), language instruction (Smith, 2005), cultural thought patterns (Kaplan, 1966; Benda, 1999), and social practices (Kramersch, 1998).

To add to the growing number of CR research in the Philippines that center on comparing professional letters, this paper endeavors to describe how Filipinos and Americans write letters of excuse from school. Despite the contention that Western mode of writing should not be made as the usual reference point, this paper still used American letters to prove that even native speakers ‘digress’ from their own rhetorical norms. Letters of excuse were selected as the study corpus not only because of their ubiquity in Philippine schools but also because they could be a rich source of information for characterizing Filipinos’ organizational and lexical choices in writing. This study therefore contrastively examines the linguistic characteristics and rhetorical moves of Filipino and American excuse letters, with an attempt of specifying the rhetorical preferences that are defining features of each corpus. More specifically, this paper examines the text layout, organizational patterns, sequence of information presentation, as well as special features of contents like goodwill close and commonly recurring expressions used in stating request for excuse in the two corpora. At the end, this paper

proposes a framework that may be adapted to promote heightened recognition that a writing community has its unique 'hybrid rhetoric' which must be appreciated and respected and rhetoric that has unshackled from the influence of 'western' models of writing.

### **Theoretical and "Textbook" Framework**

This paper follows the approach of Tupas in his 2006 study "Why do my students write the way they write?" The author argues that 'theoretical' and 'textbook' framework are not incompatible and the fusion of the two can be used to show how rhetorical structures are deemed both on a theoretical and pedagogical level. It must be noted, however, that print textbooks were not actually utilized in this study but only online or electronically available references on writing letters of excuse. The model of writing letters of excuse was culled from <http://www.buzzle.com/>, since at the time when this study was conducted, no print sources like writing books were available. Hence, this paper also assumes that letters of excuse are rarely considered in foreign and local books and are given little attention as a form of professional writing.

### **Theoretical Framework: Writing Style**

It has been established that "[e]ach 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" (Kaplan, 1966, p. 14). Put more succinctly, all written languages contain a variety of and identifiable and specifiable organizational modes. Recent studies have clearly shown that writers' cultural backgrounds influence or shape their organization of writing, what they opt to use as evidence in supporting their main ideas, how they express their main ideas, and how they write in the foreign language (Benda, 1999). These studies have revealed how different rhetorical preferences are mirrored in textual organization in various languages (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989).

To Connor (1996), language and writing are cultural phenomena, and, as a direct consequence, each language has unique rhetorical conventions. Thus far, rhetorical modes which are tagged

'oriental' in nature, for example, abound in CR works, related fields, and business correspondence textbooks (Hinds, 1984). Tupas (2006) adds that "[t]hese rhetorical structures tell us that there are supposed to be modes or ways of writing and thinking which are uniquely 'oriental' (p.3). Unfortunately, these 'oriental' writings, like that of the Philippines, appear to be popularly characterized as 'indirect', 'roundabout' or 'circular' and at times, 'flawed', 'deviant' and 'nonstandard'. As an offshoot of this 'rhetorical labeling' or 'rhetorical branding', and 'rhetorical discrimination' the heightened interest to characterize the Asian stylistic conventions is further spurred not to defile the native speakers' norms but to somehow elevate, promote, and recognize non-native speakers' rhetorics.

The foregoing assumption propelled the present study to investigate the Filipinos' formal and stylistic choices when letters of excuse are used as the reference point. The Filipinos' rhetorical conventions are contrasted to the rhetorical preferences of the American writers using a model for writing letters of excuse as the 'contrast guidepost'. This was done to substantiate the notion that 'no two discourse communities write exactly the same' and to investigate if only the Filipino corpus or both the Filipino and American corpora 'deviate' or 'digress' from the traditionally promulgated Western excuse letter writing norms. In reference to the Filipino corpus, however, this 'deviation' is regarded positive and culturally relevant or appropriate since it promotes recognition that every writing community has its unique 'hybrid rhetoric', a term used by and borrowed from Kubota & Lehner (2004). Put more clearly, there is no pure American (native) and pure Filipino (non-native) rhetoric. In the case of the Filipino writers, their stylistic choices are a fusion of the native speakers' writing conventions and their own unique writing style largely influenced by their identity as Filipinos and cultural experiences. The insertion or omission of a writing move, for example, could be regarded as a 'nonnative ingredient' in professional writing while the adherence to the other Anglo-American style could be regarded as a 'native ingredient' that makes the Filipino's professional writing a 'hybrid' of native and nonnative writing styles.

## Textbook Framework: Writing Letters of Excuse from School

An excuse letter is typically required when one needs to explain a past or future absence at some institution, usually in school or college. It is generally expected that an excuse letter be prepared by someone in authority or control of the student - usually a parent or guardian, in some cases, where the absence is due to a prolonged illness a doctor's medical certificate also acts as an excuse letter. The following notes retrieved from <http://www.buzzle.com/> present how letters of excuse are usually drafted.

**1. *Beginning of the note:*** The excuse letter begins by inputting the date on the top right or left hand corner. This date should be the date one is writing and handing over the letter, preferably the latter.

**2. *Addressing the addressee:*** Written below the line where the date is given is the name of the person to whom the letter is addressed. This can be followed with the designation of such person and the address of such person in brief.

**3. *Subject:*** Below the 'from' and 'to' information, is the subject of the note beginning with "Subject: ....." or "Re: ....." where the student's name and the reason for the absence are indicated. The date(s) of absence within must also be mentioned in the subject-title.

**4. *Main text:*** In the body of the excuse letter, the subject-matter is put down in detail - who, when, and why - for which the excuse letter is being written. The content is brief, crisp, and lucid, stating just the reason for absence (whether past or future), relevant dates and any additional action, if necessary, which should be taken. For example, this could refer to the missed assignment, homework or test, which the student is/was unable to take on account of the absence.

**5. *Conclusion:*** The letter is closed with the appropriate closing salutations e.g. "yours sincerely".

The foregoing subsection shows how rhetorical structures in writing letters of excuse are framed. Tupas (2006) claims that "...relevant textbooks in business communication usually provide readers with clearly set or defined structures of writing, giving everyone the impression that certain kinds or forms of writing should be written in particular ways" (p.3). Apparently, it appears that American business communication practices and writing conventions

are still regarded as the yardstick and the most extensively discussed in textbooks and other local instructional materials.

## **Method**

### **Study Corpus**

Thirty Filipino and 30 American letters of excuse from school served as the corpus of this study. The Filipino excuse letters written within the academic year 2008-2009 were obtained from five different schools in the Philippines. Taking them from only one institution may be inapplicable since a prototype for writing excuse letters might be prescribed in that school. The sources who provided the sample letters, however, all disclosed otherwise. The 30 American excuse letters were sent via e-mail and shipping service by the researcher's colleagues presently based in the United States. Seventeen letters came from one middle school in California and 13 were from a middle school in Texas, USA. These letters were also written within the school year 2008-2009. The researchers' informants were asked to ascertain that the 30 American excuse letters were written by American parents.

One expressed limitation in relation to the corpus used is that the researcher was unable to gather additional pertinent background information about the parents who wrote the letters.

### **Method of Analysis**

This paper conducted a systematic analysis of differences between American and Filipino letters of excuse on a formal and stylistic level. The approach of analyzing and producing the results heavily relied on qualitative bases. The Filipino and American letters were compared using the western model of writing letters of excuse from school as the contrast guidepost. The letters were assigned numbers and the essential parts were analyzed and compared. The results are presented in tables with the areas of comparison as headings. The names of the addressees, parents, and students were omitted for purposes of confidentiality.

The physical analysis of the main text of the sample letters consisted of a simple count of the number of words. This was employed to find out which corpus is comparatively lengthy or more direct and concise. The analysis of form was limited to the analysis of the text layout and three letter parts. This step, however, was deemed necessary since "The layout of a text type can indicate the communicative intention of a text and can therefore guide the readers' interpretation" (Rentel, 2005, p.1). In the analysis, the focus was on the following: letter styles, From-To-Subject information, salutations, and closing salutations.

Since the central point of the investigation is the stylistic analysis, the writing moves employed in the two corpora were identified. The moves were labeled for easier classification and categorization. Recurring phrases and expressions were also culled and compared.

## Results

The following presents the results of the formal and stylistic analyses of the Filipino and American corpora. Taken as points for contrast are the following: (1) Text Layout; (2) From - To - Subject Information as Beginning Note; (3) Salutations; (4) Phrases Used in Stating Request for Excuse; (5) Number of Words in the Main Text; (6) Rhetorical Moves in Writing the Main Text; (7) Goodwill Close and (8) Closing Salutations.

Table 1 shows the letter style used in the American and Filipino letters of excuse. The data show that the American and the Filipino corpora frequently employ the full block style in framing the text layout. Perhaps the American and the Filipino parents are cognizant that full block style makes their writing more 'professional looking' and easier because it dispenses with all of the tedious indenting and punctuating. It must be noted, however, that the other typical components of full block letters e.g. inside address or the name and title of the addressee, are not indicated in 59 of the 60 letters examined in this study. Thus, in a majority of the letters, salutations immediately follow the dates when the letters were drafted.



Table 1  
*Letter Styles Used in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

Letter Styles	American Corpus		Filipino Corpus	
	f	%	f	%
Block	3	10	0	0
Semi-block	8	26.67	9	30
Full Block	19	63.33	21	70
Total	30	100	30	100

Table 2 presents the beginning note in the two corpora. The data reveal that only five out of the 30 American letters of excuse bear the *From-To-Re* preliminary opening. More surprisingly, the structure used differ in sequence and some components like 'subject' or 're' are intentionally omitted. Hence, it could be said that American parents infrequently use this structure. Similarly, the Filipino letters of excuse rarely follow the *From-To-Re* format. Only one letter uses it as a preliminary section and a majority of the samples (29 out of 30 Filipino excuse letters) begin right away with the dates when the letters were written and preferred salutations. Put more simply, *From-To-Re* structure is not a usual choice in the two corpora.

Table 2  
*From - To - Subject Information as Beginning Note in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

Beginning Note	American Corpus		Filipino Corpus	
	f	%	f	%
To-From-Re	2	6.67	1	3.33
Re-To	1	3.33	0	0
To-Re	1	3.33	0	0
To	1	3.33	0	0
From-To-Re	0	0	0	0
None	25	83.33	29	96.67
Total	30	99.99	30	100

Table 3 presents the salutations used in the American and Filipino letters of excuse. A closer look at the table would lead one to deduce that the Filipino and the American corpora greatly differ in their choice of salutations. It is important to note, however, that there is a preponderance of *To whom it may concern* in the Filipino letters of excuse. Equally worth noting is that there are Filipino letters which do not capitalize the first letter of each word of this salutation.

Table 3 also shows that the American corpus uses less formal salutations like *Greeting + Formal Address and Surname* while the Filipino corpus uses more formal salutations like *Sir* and *Madam*. Dropping the salutation could be a valuable option for the two sample groups for two reasons – if they do not know the reader's name or they know the reader's name but it is non-gender specific. Hence, they are tempted to start their letter with the trite and ineffective salutation, *To Whom It May Concern* (Angell, 2007). It is possible that this salutation serves as their last resort if they are unsure of the person's professional identify. They use this neutral replacement with the assumption that gender issues are not serious enough to warrant careful attention (Baude, 2007).

Table 3  
*Salutations in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

Salutations	American Corpus		Filipino Corpus	
	f	%	f	%
To Whom It May Concern	4	13.33	8	26.67
Greeting + Formal Address and Surname	13	43.33	0	0
Greeting + Professional Title	6	20	1	3.33
To + Professional Title	2	6.67	1	3.33
Degree + Surname	0	0	3	10
Formal Address (Sir/Ma'am/Madame)	0	0	7	23.33
Greeting + Formal Address (Sir/Ma'am/Madame)	2	6.67	8	26.67
Professional Title	2	6.67	0	0
None	1	3.33	2	6.67
Total	30	100	30	100

Table 4 presents the usual phrases used in the American and Filipino corpora in requesting for excuse. The comparison shows that both Filipino and American parents have created formulaic expressions when they compose letters of excuse. In the Filipino corpus, a majority (22 out of 30 letters) use *Please excuse* as an introductory phrase in requesting for excuse. Also, some parents opt for *Kindly excuse*. Very polite expressions like *May I respectfully ask* and *I would like to seek your very kind consideration to excuse* are also evident in the Filipino letters. Hence, it is possible that these are used to set a stylish tone to show that the addressees are deserving of respect as well as courtesy with a pragmatic force of receiving positive attention.

Table 4  
*Phrases Used in Requesting for Excuse in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

Phrases Used in Stating Excuse	American Corpus		Filipino Corpus	
	f	%	f	%
<i>Please excuse...</i>	14	46.67	22	73.33
<i>Kindly excuse...</i>	2	6.67	5	16.67
Others	1	3.33	3	10
None	13	43.33	0	0
Total	30	100	30	100

Analysis of the results in Table 4 also indicates that the American letters may opt not to use any of the recurring phrases especially when they merely want to state absence during the previous day/s. This makes the letters less explicit in stating the main purpose of communication. A good number of samples show that the American parents may be indirect in stating their purpose for writing. It must be noted that excuse letters are primarily written to 'excuse' the subjects from schoolwork or for being absent; however, the American letters seem vague or less overt in indicating purpose. In other words, these letters do not look as if they require specific course

of action from the addressees. It is possible that the writers are assuming that the addressees would understand the implicit statement of request of excusing the subjects from school. To illustrate this, some examples are given below.

(1) *I'm sorry to say that [name] hasn't been in school for the past 7 days, because of being at home, sick with the measles. The doctor's note I have attached will verify the illness. [name] was playing X-Box and surfing the net for a lot of the time, but also did some homework so as to keep up with the coursework.*

*Thanks for your attention to this matter. If you have any questions, please call me at [phone number].*

(2) *I would like to apologize for my son's absence on 2nd March. My son had a fever and was home all day. He did not see a doctor, as he still had the medicine given from the last time he was ill.*

*If there's any problem or inconvenience caused, you may call the contact number stated above. I hope you will understand. Thank you for your time.*

(3) *Brendan broke his leg and is in hospital and will be there for the next week, so will not be able to attend school.*

*I will make sure he receives any relevant homework.*

On the contrary, the Filipino excuse letters are very explicit in stating the purpose of communication. The addressees are given a very clear idea as regards what the writers ask them to do - to excuse the subjects from having been absent or tardy. The Filipino writers are very unambiguous in stating the purpose of writing by saying "*Please excuse my daughter/son from being absent*", short but with a pragmatic force of excusing the subject. Examples of these letters are given below.

(1) *Please excuse my son, [name] for being absent from your class last Monday because he was sick.*

(2) *Please excuse my son [name] of IV – Felicity for going to school late. My son is late because of diarrhea.*

(3) *Kindly excuse my daughter [name] for being late today since we need to follow-up the results of her laboratory tests and administer necessary medicine.*

It is also worth noting that the American parents excuse their children '*from schoolwork*' unlike the Filipino parents who excuse their children '*for being absent or tardy*'. Further, the expression *Please excuse [name] for being absent* has also become commonplace in Filipino letters of excuse. It is not unusual to see *for being absent* instead of *for having been absent* which is the acceptable phrasal expression in Standard English.

Table 5 shows the number of words in the main text or body of the American and Filipino letters of excuse. The average number of words (65.93 for the American corpus and 36.3 for the Filipino corpus) indicates that the American letters of excuse are relatively longer than the Filipino letters of excuse. It has been observed that nonnative speakers of English do not in general construct written texts in the straightforward linear sequence (Murcia, 2006). The results, however, show that Filipino parents when they write excuse letters are more concise, direct, and straight to the point as shown by the fewer number of words in the samples and the frequent use of subject-reason move (Please refer to Table 6).

Table 5  
*Number of Words in the Main Text of American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

Letter	American Corpus	Filipino Corpus
1.	363	76
2.	78	48
3.	23	31
4.	60	62
5.	11	49
6.	58	39
7.	64	24
8.	81	22
9.	54	28
10.	50	30
11.	30	25
12.	37	65
13.	49	72
14.	49	44
15.	44	34
16.	101	35
17.	62	24
18.	71	34
19.	36	25
20.	150	22
21.	20	22
22.	34	26
23.	69	26
24.	32	21
25.	33	21
26.	37	45
27.	31	31
28.	90	37
29.	64	43
30.	97	28
Average	<b>65.93</b>	<b>36.3</b>

Further analysis of the data above indicates that the American letters of excuse become longer when students are excused from anticipated absences (See the sample below). The letters provide more background information and indicate justification of the students'

predicted absences e.g. absence due to out of town trips, religious observance, and family affairs. The American letters are shorter when the reason for absence is sickness. In the Philippines, however, it is not common to see letters of excuse for anticipated absences.

Sample letter of excuse for anticipated absence:

*Please be advised that [student] will be out of school during the week of [date]. We ask that his absences be excused.*

*The reason for [student]'s absence is that our family will be out of the state during this week. While we are gone, we will be visiting Walt Disney World. We believe that [student] will be learning many things during this trip and that his education will continue in his absence from school.*

*Some things [student] will learn about:*

*\* Different cultures of the world, including architecture, language, diet, and dress, by visiting the different countries in the Epcot World Showcase (Japan, China, Germany, Mexico, Norway, Canada, France, etc.) [student] will have the chance to explore the exhibits for each country and speak with natives from each country who work as cast members.*

*\* American history by viewing the Hall of Presidents presentation in the Magic Kingdom and the American Adventure show in Epcot.*

*\* Nature and conservation at Animal Kingdom.*

*\* Science by exploring the Mission: Space ride in Epcot where he will have a chance to see and feel what it would be like to travel by rocket to Mars and by experiencing the Universe of Energy exhibit which teaches about fossil fuels, energy, and conservation.*

*\* Economics by managing his own spending money and making budget decisions on how to spend his money.*

*[student] will also be learning about map reading by navigating in and to the different theme parks, as well as the resorts and water parks via the Disney bus system, sociological aspects of crowds including patterns and behavior, physics of the different rides, breakthroughs in*

*technology at the Innovations computer lab in Epcot, art and animation and the history of film, and mathematics.*

*We believe this will be a wonderful and educational experience for [student] and hope you agree not to charge him with unexcused absences as a result. If it is possible for [student] to take any assignments with him to be turned in when we return or to turn in before we leave any work that will be due while he is gone, please let us know as soon as possible.*

*Thank you for your attention to this. If you have any questions or need any further information, please feel free to contact me.*

The comparison shows that the Filipino parents brief in writing letters of excuse. Hence, as stated earlier, it could be said that they are more direct to the point in stating their purpose and they rarely provide additional or background information. Examples of brief and straightforward Filipino excuse letters are given below.

- (1) *Please excuse my daughter [name] for being absent today. She is not feeling well. Thanking you in advance for your kind consideration.*
- (2) *Please excuse my son [name] for being late yesterday because he woke up late yesterday morning. Thank you very much and he assured this will never happen again.*

Table 6 presents the rhetorical moves employed in writing the main text of the American and Filipino excuse letters. The results show that the two corpora vary in terms of writing moves in composing the body of the letters.



Table 6  
*Rhetorical Moves in Writing the Main Text of American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

Rhetorical Moves	American Corpus		Filipino Corpus	
	f	%	f	%
Subject-Reason-Additional Action	14	46.67	1	3.33
Subject-Reason- <i>Justification</i>	9	30	0	0
Subject-Reason- <i>Justification</i> -Additional Action	2	6.67	0	0
Subject-Reason	4	13.33	23	76.67
Subject-Reason- <i>Additional Information</i>	1	3.33	5	16.67
Subject-Reason-Additional Action- <i>Justification</i>	0	0	1	3.33
Total	30	100	30	100

The “textbook” framework presented in the previous section purports that when writing the main text of the letter, the *subject* (who, when and why - for which the excuse letter is being written) is put down in detail first followed by the *reason* for absence and *additional actions* deemed necessary. The data indicate that the American letters of excuse usually follow this sequence. Although in some cases, they employ an additional move which this paper refers to as *justification* move since it can be inferred that these statements justify or rationalize the absence of the subject. Examples of these are the following:

- (1) *We believe that [student] will be learning many things during this trip and that his education will continue in his absence from school.*

*Some things [student] will learn about:*

*Different cultures of the world, including architecture, language, diet, and dress, by visiting the different countries in the Epcot World Showcase (Japan, China, Germany, Mexico, Norway, Canada, France, etc.) [student] will have the chance to explore the exhibits for*

*each country and speak with natives from each country who work as cast members.*

- (2) *It is important that our child join the congregational prayers held on this festive occasion. The Attendance department of the Dade county school board is well aware of this and has officially excused all children from school on this date due to the holiday.*
- (3) *It was recommended by our physician that [Name] stay indoors for at least 7 days, since an individual is able to transmit measles from four days prior and four days after "rash onset".*

The results also imply that the *additional actions* in the American corpus are typically statements that indicate request for favor from the addressee e.g. making phone calls, allowing the subject to take special exams or make up for missed lessons, which are rarely found in the Filipino corpus. Examples of these are the following:

- (1) *If you have any questions or need any further information, please feel free to contact me.*
- (2) *Kindly allow her to take special quizzes, projects or exams she miss during her absence.*
- (3) *I hope you would kindly allow her to make up for the lessons and exams she missed during her absence.*
- (4) *If it is possible for Jack to take school assignments with him on the trip to be turned in upon his return, please let us know.*
- (5) *Please allow him to make up his homework.*
- (6) *Please e-mail me at [e-mail address] with [student's name] assignments for the days that she will be absent.*
- (7) *If you have any questions or concerns, please contact [Parents Name] at [phone number]*

The data also show that the Filipino letters of excuse follow the prescribed move although they rarely ask for *additional action* from the addressees. Also, they employ an 'extra move' this paper calls *additional information*. This move does not really justify one's nonattendance but it only gives supplementary information e.g. assurance, concern, attempt to catch up, measures to be undertaken, as regards the subject's absence. Apparently, these are not found in the sample American letters of excuse. Examples of this extra move are given below.

- (1) *Her husband is out of the country and can't come to see you regarding this.*
- (2) *Nevertheless, she still opted to come to school to pick up the missed lessons and join the remaining classes today.*
- (3) *I already talked to the driver and promised me that the same incident won't happen again.*
- (4) *As her guardian, I am concerned for her condition.*
- (5) *After the follow up check up today she will be traveling to Bayombong for her classes.*

Although the Filipino letters of excuse employ an additional move unusually found in American writing, it cannot be regarded as unnatural and wrong. The results seem to show that even the native speakers have modified their own writing model as shown by the *justification* move in the main text of their letters. In addition, American rhetoric dictates that detailed support in writing is excessive and unnecessary. However, a good number of American letters are much longer because of the *justification* move which is not required by their own model of writing. On the other hand, the Filipino letters of excuse become longer only when they provide additional information which seems to be uncalled for. However, this move does not make the letters overloaded. The letters remain brief and straightforward.

Table 7 presents the usual goodwill close used in the American and Filipino corpora. The analysis shows that the American and Filipino letters frequently use "*Thank you for your consideration*" as

their goodwill close. It is also evident that the American writers may not put any goodwill close at the end of the letter. This, however, is not true to Filipino parents who would normally express their gratitude for the favor of excusing the subjects from their absence or overtly anticipate a favorable response from the addressees by saying, for example, "*Hoping for your kind consideration*". Goodwill close expressions found in the Filipino letters of excuse probably serve as buffers used to express sincere thanks and appreciation for receiving something or favor or to subtly oblige action from the addressees. The *Thank you for your kind consideration* at the end of the letter has a pragmatic force of making the addressee act on the request. This makes the writers assume that the addressees would undoubtedly do the favor. It seems that it has become a generic goodwill close for many Filipino letters of excuse.

Table 7

*Goodwill Close in American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

Goodwill Close	American Corpus		Filipino Corpus	
	f	%	f	%
Thank you for your attention to this.	2	6.67	0	0
Thank you for your consideration.	2	6.67	2	6.67
Thank you for your cooperation.	1	3.33	1	3.33
Thank you for your consideration on the matter.	1	3.33	1	3.33
Thank you for your attention to this matter.	2	6.67	1	3.33
Thank you.	10	33.33	15	50
Thank you for your kind consideration.				
Hoping for your kind consideration.	0	0	10	33.33
None	10	33.33	0	0
Total	30	100	30	99.99

Table 8 presents the usual closing salutations found in the sample American and Filipino letters of excuse. It can be deduced that the two corpora greatly differ in terms of the closing salutations used in ending the letters. It must be noted, however, that the

American corpus may not have any complimentary close at all which is an unusual writing practice in the Filipino corpus. Furthermore, it appears that *Respectfully yours*, and its variants have become a popular choice of the Filipino writers. This closing salutation is often used to imply high regard to school officials to whom the letters are addressed.

Table 8

*Closing Salutations Used in the American and Filipino Letters of Excuse*

Closing Salutations	American Corpus		Filipino Corpus	
	f	%	f	%
Sincerely,	8	26.67	3	10
Thanks,	1	3.33	0	0
Respectfully yours,	1	3.33	12	40
Best Regards,	2	6.67	0	0
Sincerely yours,	1	3.33	5	16.67
Truly yours,	2	6.67	4	13.33
Yours sincerely,	4	13.33	1	3.33
Very truly yours,	2	6.67	4	13.33
None	9	30	1	3.33
Total	30	100	30	99.99

## Discussion

The foregoing results indicate that Filipinos have developed a rhetoric that does not entirely draw bases from the native speakers' writing model. The data show that Filipino excuse letters 'deviate' from the norm and employ rhetorical moves not found in the 'exonormative' framework. In other words, they make discourse choices that do not necessarily meet the native readers' expectations. This deviation, however, may be regarded positive since Filipinos have developed their own discourse styles that have gradually unshackled from the influence of the West. Further, they employ a fusion of native and nonnative writing styles which make their rhetoric a 'hybrid' or a 'blend' of two stylistic preferences. It could be said therefore, that the Filipinos' excuse letter writing style is 'half

Filipino' and 'half American', or 'Filipino-American'. This marks a gradual process of developing and maintaining writing patterns that break free from the native speakers' influence. The writing style employed in the Filipino letters of excuse is a positive sign that non-native discourse styles that break away from the conventional norms continuously emerge. Their deviation from and modification of the writing model presented in the previous section attests to Graddol's (2006) claim that, "Native speakers' reference books may be developing as better guides to native-speaker usage, but are less useful as models for all learners" (p.115). Thus, imposing strict adherence to the traditionally promulgated professional writing paradigms might result in 'infringement of rhetorical rights' of the Filipinos to write the way they want to write.

A closer look at the results seems to show that the native speakers' model gradually loses its potency or influence as the prototype or standard for writing letters of excuse. Even the native speakers themselves seem to deviate from their own rhetorical blueprint. Hence, it appears that the model which conventionally belongs to them has weakened and might not be in existence at all. The constant deviation from the traditionally promulgated writing norm of composing excuse letters might result in its uselessness since complete adherence to it is no longer evident in the samples perused in the present study.

It is therefore necessary that every writing community be given a *discourse space* which allows them to employ rhetorical strategies they prefer. This discourse space provides writers from other cultures opportunities to advertently modify, deviate, or digress from the Anglo-American way of framing professional and even non-professional correspondences. It also bestows some sort of *rhetorical rights* upon ESL or EFL writers that would enable them to convey their communicative intents the way they want textual presentations to be framed and not necessarily by following exonormative paradigms.

The discourse space proposed in this study is deemed to result in linguistic creativity of the Filipino writers, for example, for the following reasons: (1) they become eclectic in their choices of rhetorical strategies, (2) they fashion texts by employing hybrid rhetoric which is not bad at all since they will 'get the best of both

worlds', (3) they become free from rhetorical restraints perpetuated by the longtime adherence to outside norms and (4) they are able to infuse their cultural identity in their writing that allows them to disclose a part of themselves to others.

Tupas (2006) underscores that writing is influenced or shaped by various dimensions of social life such as (1) the globalizing and localizing business ethos; (2) local culture and philosophies; (3) state policies on education and academic achievement; (3) literacy work and rhetorical traditions; (5) media and technology; (6) religious and gender practices; and (7) linguistic transformations. Hence, the Filipinos' modifications, deviations, and digressions from the traditional writing norms which makes their rhetoric a 'hybrid' should be welcomed and appreciated since they are manifestations of multiple identities, behaviors, personalities, and stylistic conventions.

### Conclusion

The contrastive analysis of the American and Filipino letters of excuse shows that both corpora have rhetorical conventions that *do* and *do not* adhere to the native speakers' model. The analysis also surfaced rhetorical features unique to the American and Filipino way of framing excuse letters from school. Further, the two writing cultures are found to have shared features and glaring differences i.e. one employs writing conventions that are of course, not evident in the other.

The present study found that the Filipino corpus 'partly' adheres to the traditional model of writing letters of excuse. 'Partly' because it introduces different writing moves that make the Filipino writers' stylistic choices a hybrid of different rhetorical styles. This study also found that the Americans also modify their own writing paradigm by employing additional moves making their own writing a hybrid as well. The results from a pilot study with only 60 letters, however, are not readily generalizable. This study is limited by the sample size of the dataset, which is not large enough to draw valid generalizations about the writing of all Filipino and American parents. However, this study raises some important questions that are worth exploring.

The results seem to have created another puzzle to be solved - *why do American excuse letters employ stylistic moves that are not found in their own writing model?* This assertion may sound intriguing, but it seems that their way of writing excuse letters makes their rhetoric 'half American' and 'half something else'. Their deviation from their own model makes their own rhetoric a hybrid of different writing styles as well. Further investigations, however, are imperative to explore how and why this occurs.

The present study is limited to textual analysis thus, probing deeper by conducting more sophisticated intercultural research methods is also recommended. Tracing the demographic background of writers from the two cultures would help generate more reliable findings since this pertinent information may have influence over the way they construct professional communications.

### References

- Angell, P. (2007). *Business communications design, creativity, strategies and solutions* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Baude, D. (2007). *Executive guide to e-mail correspondence*. USA: Bookmart Press.
- Benda, J. (1999). *Qualitative studies in contrastive rhetoric: An analysis of composition research*. Retrieved December 18, 2008, from <http://web.syr.edu/jpbenda/methcomm.htm>.
- Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive rhetoric: Cross-cultural aspects of second-language writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Connor, U., Nagelhout, E., & Rozycki, W. (Eds.) (2008). *Contrastive rhetoric: Reaching to intercultural rhetoric*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Gonzales, S. (2002). Politeness in Letters to the editor in Philippine English, American English, and Singaporean English. *Philippine Journal of Linguistics*, 3, 19-36.
- Grabe, W., & Kaplan, R. B. (1996). *Theory and practice of writing*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Graddol, D. (2006). *English next: Why global English may mean the end of 'English as a Foreign Language'*. UK: British Council.
- Gupta, S. (2009). Excuse letters for missing school. Retrieved November 21, 2009, from <http://www.buzzle.com>.



- Kachru, Y. (1995). Contrastive rhetoric in World Englishes. *English Today*, 41, 21-37.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 16, 1-20.
- Kassabgy, N., Ibrahim, Z, & Aydelott, S. (2004). *Contrastive rhetoric: Issues, insights, and pedagogy*. American University in Cairo Press.
- Kramersch, C. (1998). *Language and culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kubota, R., & Lehner, A. (2005). Dialogue. Response to Ulla Connor's comments. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14, 137-143.
- Hinds, J. (1984). Retention of information using a Japanese style of presentation. *Studies in language*, 8, 45-69.
- Horning, A. S. (1993). *The psycholinguistics of readable writing: A multidisciplinary exploration*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex
- Liebman, J. (1988). Contrastive rhetoric: Students as ethnographers. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 7, 6.
- Magistro, E. (2007). The multilingual classroom: New rhetorical frontiers in L2 writing. *College Quarterly*, 10, 2.
- Moreno, A. (2008). The importance of comparable corpora in cross-cultural studies. In U Connor, E. Nagelhout, and W. Rozycki (Eds.). *Contrastive rhetoric: Reaching to intercultural rhetoric*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 25-41.
- Murcia, M. (2006). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Singapore: Thomson Learning Asia.
- Panetta, C.G. (2001). Understanding cultural differences in the rhetoric and composition classroom: Contrastive rhetoric as answer to ESL dilemmas. In C.G. Panetta (Ed.), *Contrastive rhetoric revisited and redefined* (pp. 3-13). Mahwah, N.J. & London: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rentel, N. (2005). *Interlingual varieties in written business communication- intercultural differences in German and French business letters*. Proceedings of the Association for Business Communication 7<sup>th</sup> European Convention, May 2005.
- Smith, M. (2005). Students as contrastive rhetoricians: Examining ESL student perceptions of L1 and L2 rhetorical conventions. *Arizona Working Papers in SLAT* , 12, 79-98.

Tupas, R. (2006). Why do my students write the way they write? The problem of culture in the teaching of professional communication. *STETS Language & Communication Review*, 5, 1-9.

### **About the Author**

**Alejandro S. Bernardo** has been teaching English for nine years. He handles courses like academic writing, developmental reading, introduction to college English and oral communication in context. At present, he is a member of the Department of English of the University of Santo Tomas, Manila, Philippines. He is finishing his Ph.D. in English Language Studies at the same university. He has presented papers in national and international conferences e.g. CELC Symposium, National University of Singapore and IAWE, Cebu Philippines and has published articles in reputable journals e.g. Philippine ESL Journal, TESOL Journal and ELTWO. His research interests include contentious issues in language instruction, vocabulary acquisition, Philippine English, and developmental reading.