I am an East Asian national, second language speaking teacher of composition and linguistics trained in the traditional notions of Western rhetoric and composition. Five years ago, when I was hired at a university in the American Southwest, where I instruct a population of almost 79% Native American students, I began an encounter with Native American—primarily Navajo—rhetoric and culture. The majority of my student population was comprised of members of the Navajo tribe. Navajo is the largest federally recognized tribe with more than 300,000 enrolled members in the Navajo Nation (Donovan, 2011). Gray-Rosendale, Bird, and Bullock (2003) established that writing research rarely speaks for Native American students. Due to no extant research on Navajo students’ writing anxiety, in this article, I hope to examine Navajo rhetorical traditions and their possible relationship to writing anxiety by taking into account the concepts of contrastive rhetoric and other possible factors associated with Navajo students’ writing anxiety (i.e., reading, syntax, and past experience), and make some suggestions based on my own teaching experience with the Navajo college students.

Philipsen (1972) stated that “Navajo [culture] has no written rhetorical theory” (p. 139), but its rhetoric is “culturally defined” (Philipsen, 1972, p. 139) and differs significantly from traditional Western rhetorics. Navajo is a tribe in which oral tradition—storytelling—constitutes a major part of its culture. Eder (2007) stated that one of the major Navajo storytelling practices is its use of a cyclical structure. One of his interviewees, Henry Begay, explained “how Navajos seek to get away from concepts such as “beginning” and “ending.” Stories are repeated, and themes within stories recur” (Eder, 2007, p. 286). Eder (2007) then stated that unlike the Western rhetoric where the “lesson or moral” (p. 286) appears at the conclusion, in Navajo, the lessons take place throughout the story. Also, Eder (2007) stated that Navajo culture/rhetoric follows a four-directional framework, starting at the east, then going south, west, and then north, and finally returning east—this is different from Western rhetoric, which is linear with a beginning, middle, and end. The Native American oral tradition is much different from traditional, written notions of Western rhetoric. Narration is one of the required rhetorical strategies in English composition course outcomes. It is a linear rhetorical pattern focusing on story with a scene setter in the introduction providing background information, describing, evaluating, and resolving a complication in some way in the body paragraphs, and providing a conclusion in which a lesson is learned (Johnson-Sheehan & Paine, 2013). The events that take place within a story can be arranged in multiple orders—that is, chronological, reverse chronological, or in a nonlinear manner—that is, flashbacks. However, based on Eder’s (2007) concept of Navajo rhetoric or oral tradition, themes or motifs reappear throughout the entire story. Because of the differences in rhetorical conventions between Navajo and English, Navajo students might frequently find themselves unconsciously applying the rhetorical patterns of Navajo oral traditions in English narrative essay writing.
Many of my Navajo students have discussed Navajo oral traditions in my 300-level linguistics class. Several of them shared some concepts of their oral traditions after presenting their papers on an individual’s experience on second language acquisition. They shared contexts of these oral traditions with the class, informing us that these stories could be tribal stories, clan stories, or even personal stories. Some of these stories are seasonal, which can be illustrated in Eder’s (2007) article, in which she stated that some of the Native Americans may consider some stories to be season-restricted (Eder, 2007). Therefore, when assigning biographical assignments, it is important to make sure to mention that students need only share what they feel comfortable with and to allow them to leave out any content that may be seasonally restricted.

Also, in Western stories, lessons are often told explicitly: This is the opposite of Navajo stories in which meanings and beliefs are expressed implicitly. Eder (2007) stated that in the Navajo’s stories, “[a]ll of these meanings and beliefs are implicit—nowhere are they explicitly stated as the morals that are usually presented in fables in the Western tradition” (p. 287). Moore (1996) also stated that “[t]ruths are often disguised in stories to allow each individual listener the opportunity to use his or her gifts of intuition and observation to decide what the exact meanings of the stories are for them” (p. 23). Due to this nature, instructors may not be able to understand the purpose or thesis statements of Navajo stories using Western rhetorical norms. While reading Navajo students’ narrative papers, Western-trained instructors unaware of the students’ indigenous rhetorical traditions may be confused. Instructors must teach students the conventional concepts of audience and context, so they can envision an audience including their Western-trained instructors who expects them to adhere to Western rhetorical conventions, including a generally clear thesis and an explicit purpose in their English academic writing (context).

When I assign students readings in class and ask students to break into small groups to discuss the assigned readings, I observe that some of the students would sit at their desks and refuse to interact or have any discussion with students sitting next to them or are unable to form a group. They would only be comfortable sitting at the desk and reading on their own, alone, without any interaction or eye contact, although other students are discussing the readings together and facing one another in their groups already. McWhirter and Ryan (1991) stated,

"Navajo people’s use of language is a manifestation of the way they live. Coming from an agricultural background of sheepherding and corn growing, they carry a deep awareness of the ebb and flow of life around them. Because they have not chosen to band together in small communities like their neighbors the Hopi or the Pueblos and have chosen instead to live alone, they have learned to be comfortable with silence and to listen to their own thoughts. In addition, the Navajo youngster is taught that one learns more by observing and that one does not speak for the sake of speaking. (p. 77)"

Interestingly, when I lecture and ask the students whether they have any questions in class, several students would ask me questions, which shows that Navajo students participate in class, but when I assign them reading discussion in small groups, many of them do not participate. This lack of participation makes me think that reading seems to be the issue here. However, I also need to take their culture into consideration. The Navajo are taught to be quiet and listen to elders, which might affect their communicational style and group participation style.

In addition to the communication style students utilized during group discussions, I also observed that during group discussions, some of my students seemed to struggle with assigned readings or resisted reading before coming to class. This lack of reading may be a factor associated with the level of their reading comprehension. McWhirter and Ryan (1991) wrote that “[b]ecause the Navajo language has been predominantly oral, reading is not culturally accepted or reinforced” (p. 77). This had led to concern among many educators about Navajo children’s low level of reading capacity, and the ways in which these reading levels could threaten their future education success. I have observed this myself when many students have shown up in my first-year composition classes academically unprepared. Based on that, I usually assign one reading during each class period. I broke the students into small groups, and if several of them did not discuss or just read on their own without forming groups, I usually asked them to read it at home. So, we could discuss that reading during the next class period. Gradually, my students became used to reading, and I always asked them to provide answers by providing paragraph number and page number in the text to ensure they read and understand the contents of the assigned readings.

Again, reading comprehension can be a factor determining Native American students’ academic success. McWhirter and Ryan (1991) gave an example:

"In 1986, one reservation boarding school graduated approximately 90 eighth-grade students. Only 25% of these students could read at or above grade level. The rest were below grade level, some more than 3 years below level as demonstrated by standardized test scores. Being below grade level severely limits chances for high school success. (p. 77)"

This lack of reading comprehension seems to be consistent with my own teaching experience with the Navajo. During my students’ oral presentations on their papers, when asking them the academic sources they cited in their papers, the majority of them could not verbally present or summarize to the class the articles or books they found and cited in their papers, which illustrates that they either did not read or did not understand the contents of the academic sources they found.

Several previous studies have found an association between reading and writing anxiety/apprehension. Writing apprehension has been found to be associated with an individual’s
approach to either “approach or avoid writing” (Faigley, Daly, & Witte, 1981, p. 16). S. Lee (2005) conducted a quantitative study on Taiwanese undergraduate students’ writing performance in English and its relationships to various factors (i.e., free reading, free writing, writer’s block, writing apprehension, and attitudes toward reading and writing instruction). She offered a number of conclusions: that writer’s block (WB) has more of an impact on writing apprehension (WA) than vice versa, that neither WA nor WB is related to students’ writing performance, that free voluntary reading is negatively associated with WA and WB and positively related to writing performance, and finally, that free voluntary reading helps reduce WB in a foreign or second language with more knowledge in the literary language. Based on my observation and teaching experiences with the Navajo students, lack of reading habits could be a possible factor related to these Navajo students’ WA or WB. Because WB is not one of the main focuses of the study, whether or not these Navajo students’ reading comprehension relates to WB is worth future investigation.

Another study also found associations between reading and writing anxiety. S. Lee and Krashen (2002) conducted a quantitative study on 53 native speakers of Chinese, university students who had recently completed an intermediate English course after completing freshman English, which focused on their writing and reading habits, revision behavior (i.e., focusing on content, organization, grammar, or word choice while revising), and the relationships among the preceding factors to writing apprehension. The results among the factors suggested that “more reading and lower writing apprehension are associated with higher grades” (S. Lee & Krashen, 2002, p. 534), which illustrates that students who read more experience lower WA and receive higher grades in English than their peers who do not.

According to the previous studies on WA (e.g., Daly, 1978; Daly & Miller, 1975; Faigley et al., 1981; S. Lee, 2005; Martinez, Kock, & Cass, 2011), many factors related to writing anxiety—such as writing-related skills, past experience with writing, leisure reading, free writing, and self-confidence in literacy—have emerged to help instructors understand potential pre-existing problems students may bring with them to composition classes. However, Native American students’ writing anxiety has not been researched in the previous literature. Based on my teaching experiences, on the day the draft was due, the student attendance rate would go down, and there could be only one or two drafts from the students that day when it was due. During my first semester teaching at the college, I was very shocked when only a few students showed up with the drafts that day they were due, and the attendance that class period would be poor. These students’ avoidance behavior was consistent with Daly’s (1978) study. Daly stated that an individual who experiences writing anxiety generally tends to “avoid situations perceived to demand writing accompanied by some amount of evaluation” (p. 10). Other than drafts, I also noticed that many of the students in my first-year composition classes were struggling to meet minimal length requirements. Reasons contributing to this are worth future investigation.

Based on oral traditions and deficient levels of reading comprehension, which might be factors related to their problems with writing or writing anxiety as stated above, the differences between Navajo rhetorical patterns/oral traditions and Western rhetoric can be a factor associated with their writing anxiety. Also, the differences of syntactic structures between both Navajo and English could be a factor as well.

Because several of my students revealed that they cannot speak Navajo but can comprehend it, I would like to know whether Navajo language could contribute to their writing in English. Navajo is an Athabaskan language. The syntax of the language is subject–object–verb (SOV). Based on my reading of my students’ essays in my English composition classes, I noticed that some of the students wrote long sentences with many relative clauses in the beginning as subject, and the main verb of the sentence appears after these relative clauses before subordinating clauses. In addition to subjects with several relative clauses attached to them, some of them put the primary verb at almost the end of the sentence with objects that have multiple relative clauses attached to them at the end.

Here, I think it is worth discussing Navajo’s syntax. According to Smith, Perkins, and Fernald (2007), a Navajo verb word consists of pronominal prefixes and mode prefixes and verb base. Verb base consists of verb prefixes and theme. Verb theme consists of classifier and verb stem (Smith et al., 2007). Mode prefixes are discussed here. Navajo verbs are complex with seven modes, which are inflectional prefixes in Navajo verb words: These are modes that contain tenses: imperfective, perfective, customary, iterative, progressive, future, and optative (Smith et al., 2007). Based on Young, Morgan, and Midgette (1992), the imperfective mode describes an event or action that is incomplete and is usually translated as present tense form in English; the perfective mode describes an event that is completed; the usitative mode, which is called customary by Smith et al. (2007), describes an action or event that takes place usually or customarily; the iterative mode describes an event that reoccurs, repeats, or takes place customarily; the usitative mode and the usitative mode are used interchangeably; the progressive mode describes an incomplete event, which is in ongoing; the future mode describes an event or action that will happen in the future; and the optative mode describes an event as potential or desired that can be “in either a positive or negative sense” (p. 866). Also, in Navajo, “the perfective can appear in future sentences” (Smith et al., 2007, p. 67). As a result, a future tense sentence could simultaneously possess both perfective and future tenses.

Pronominal prefixes include subject and object, which include first, second, third, and fourth persons, and singular, duo-plural, or distributive plural. The fourth person is called alternate third person in Young et al.’s (1992) book, but called the fourth person forms in Faltz’s (1998) book. According to Faltz, the fourth person uses are the following:
Navajo language has fourth person compared with English with first, second, and third persons. Duo-plural represents two people or mostly groups of two (Faltz, 1998). Distributive plural represents a group of three or more people or things (Faltz, 1998). There are four classifiers in Navajo. Classifiers do not serve to classify anything. A verb theme must consist of one classifier prefix (“rarely two”; Young et al., 1992, p. 883). In some verb themes, the classifier functions as a thematic prefix without “discerning meaning or grammatical function” (p. 883), but other classifiers function as causative–transitive agents, or are required in the following verb categories: passive, mediopassive, which represents “the subject of the verb as both agent and object” (p. 880); reflexive, which represents that “the subject and direct object are one and the same” (p. 881); and reciprocal verb constructions, which represent that “two or more subjects act on each other as the object” (Young et al., 1992, p. 881). Also, note that a Navajo clause may be comprised of only one verb word (Smith et al., 2007). Navajo verbs are highly complex, functioning in multiple manners within a single sentence.

Smith et al. (2007) stated that certain features in Navajo are similar to that of Mandarin. Navajo temporal adverbs are “interpreted in the same manner as such clauses in languages like Mandarin Chinese. Mandarin is tenseless and allows optional temporal adverbs” (p. 55). Also, Smith et al. (2007) stated that zero-marked verb words in Navajo are like that of Mandarin. They are the verbs that are viewed as neutral without specification of perfective, imperfective, or progressive.

I agree that Mandarin is tenseless, but as a native speaker of Mandarin myself, I did not usually notice my Navajo students experiencing problems with tenses in English. Instead, they would write very long sentences, which got my attention. Therefore, whether or not their long sentences are associated with Navajo syntax is worthy of consideration for future research.

As for Navajo language, many of my Navajo students expressed in their essays their shame or frustration of not being able to communicate with their grandparents or elders during family gatherings in their native language. Some of them stated that they are taking beginning Navajo language classes in the hope of teaching their children the language. T. Lee (2009) conveyed that

the “shame” youth and youth adults express has more to do with the feelings they attribute to their own limited ability and limited fluency in their Native language. In response to messages and expectations they encounter with regard to their Native language, these students blame themselves for their lack of ability. (p. 314) Many of the students are aware that their native language might go extinct. They often blamed the boarding school or tribal government’s policies to send children to churches to learn English from the nuns, which is consistent with T. Lee’s (2009) study. Students blamed “their tribal government and schools” which should be responsible in providing more effective opportunities for them to learn their native language (T. Lee, 2009, p. 314). Students became resistant and frustrated and reclaimed their identity in spite of their level of language fluency (T. Lee, 2009). Due to economic reasons, academic success, and acceptance to the modern world, the majority of the students revealed that they do not speak their heritage language because it has never been taught to them by their parents in spite of the fact that some claimed they can somewhat comprehend it. Based on this, I would like to state that past experiences such as the legacy of boarding schools could be a possible factor linking to these Navajo students’ writing anxiety. Past experience has been found to link with writing anxiety/apprehension in the previous literature. Based on Daly and Miller’s (1975) study on undergraduate English native speaker students’ writing apprehension, they concluded that writing apprehension tends to be developed through “negative past experience” (p. 335) especially from instructors’ “low expectations, evaluations, and excessive error correction” (p. 335).

Besides the syntactic differences and the past experiences noted above, instructors also need to consider how technology such as social media changes the way Native Americans communicate including writing, which can result in language and rhetorical change. Students’ cultures and rhetorics or relationships of cultures and rhetorics between students’ and the academic community or mainstream society should be taken into consideration when researching contrastive rhetoric. Wang (2008) emphasized that technology affects cross-culture communications, and during the process, all the cultures change and evolve, and rhetoric changes as well because of more contacts of all different cultures. Wang then conveyed that contrastive rhetoric should focus on the similarities and differences of the rhetorics instead of only considering the differences of rhetorics in a static culture without considering cultural change and the new social situation which affects how humans from different cultures communicate by using all mediums of technology in this globalization era. The traditional contrastive rhetoric methods which focus on textual analysis without considering the fact that culture changes is not appropriate without considering the new social situation which involves technology and the new ways of human communication around the globe (Wang, 2008). Wang wrote that “[w]ith the increasing interaction between cultures, there are more reasons to examine Western rhetoric’s influence on the rhetorical systems in other cultures, and compare rather than contrast rhetorics to facilitate communication in the present age” (p. 143). Based on this, Wang recommended focusing on the similarities of the rhetorical structures between different cultures instead of differences.
In addition, Baker (2008) reviewed the book edited by Connor, Nagelhout, and Rozycki, and stated that these editors propose a new term—intercultural rhetoric—for contrastive rhetoric by including different variety of genres and corpus linguistics with more strict analyses of texts and ethnography with more extended understanding of contexts. Understanding my Navajo students’ culture seems to be the way to understand their difficulties including writing anxiety in writing English papers because oral traditions are a major part of their culture, and they do not have a “written rhetorical theory” (Philipsen, 1972, p. 139). This is the context that instructors need to learn and understand.

As noted above, whether the complex Navajo verbs cause students to write sentences containing many relative clauses attached to the subject or object contributing to their complex long sentence structures deserves future research. Daly and Miller’s (1975) study on students’ writing apprehension concluded that students who wrote short sentences are more anxious in writing; however, the students who write long sentences with relative clauses are more skilled writers with low anxiety in writing. Note that his participants speak English as native speakers. However, as noted, based on my experiences teaching mostly Navajo students, they can write long sentences with complex sentence structures; however, when the draft was due, few showed up in class with them. Writing anxiety or WB could be a possible reason that they did not show up in class. Again, reading and past experience could be two possible factors for Navajo students’ writing anxiety based on my teaching experiences to them.

T. Lee (2009) wrote that in a school in the rural area of the Navajo Nation, a previous director stated that

... in the early 1980s, 90% of the students who entered the school were Navajo speakers. ... Some 10 to 15 years later, the director reported that, at that time, the first language of 90% of kindergarten students at this school was English. (p. 307)

Due to the negative impacts from the boarding schools, Native Americans tend to resist becoming “Americanize[d]” (Enoch, 2002, p. 122), which many of my students blame as the factor that might render their language extinct. Some of the students shared their and others’ experiences in the boarding school with the class. They claimed that they forgot how to speak their first language when they came home during the summer. The majority of my Navajo students in my classes revealed in their essays that they can somehow comprehend the language but are unable to speak it at all or both comprehend and speak it. There is a complex psychology among these Navajos that some of them resist the American mainstream culture; however, some of the students claimed that their parents will not speak to them in Navajo in the hopes that not doing so will aid them in becoming successful in the society. For them, English language seems to be the key to succeed in the society; however, the tradition or culture seems to be very important to them as well.

Suggestions were given based on the previous literature. Pewewardy and Fitzpatrick (2009) suggested integrating culturally responsive practices and multicultural education into the curriculum for American Indian students, and they stated that “the best framework for educators working with American Indian students is to learn as much as possible about their families and cultures” (p. 93). They stated that “[t]eaching about cultures is sound educational theory, and thematic models are effective for all students” (p. 95). They then proposed this model: “[e]ducators could develop an oral history thematic unit that would include (a) interviewing elders, (b) documenting time lines, (c) developing visual or written essays, and (d) presenting their findings to the class” (Pewewardy & Fitzpatrick, 2009, p. 95). My assignments in my classes fit the culturally responsive practices indicated by Pewewardy and Fitzpatrick (2009). By doing this, I sent them a message that their cultures and languages are valuable, and I utilize their cultures and languages which they are familiar with as the foundation to build their knowledge and their confidence in their heritage.

Here are some examples based on my experiences. In the literacy autography assignment in my linguistics class, students are required to write their personal experiences learning how to read, write, and speak their native languages and other second or foreign languages. In the paper, students usually mentioned their grandparents and parents and how they communicate in what language at home and how they feel with the languages. They mentioned their tribal ceremonies and traditions where the Navajo language was spoken. In another assignment, students are required to interview one person who interests them focusing on one of the linguistic topics they choose. Some students chose to interview elders in the community who share their experiences in the boarding school and the Navajo traditions and cultures. Some interviewed immigrants in the community focusing on language acquisition. In another assignment, students are required to observe a scene or place on linguistic topics they chose as well. Some of the students chose to observe a traditional ceremony, a Navajo language class, or their own young children acquiring first languages. By doing these assignments, students become aware of their cultures and languages, or they gain knowledge by building from what they already know in their languages and cultures in the community.

As many of my Navajo students seem to be caught in between their traditions, including language and the Western mainstream culture, I introduced some readings written by authors from diverse cultures living in America to them. Grobman (2000) proposed a “teaching at the crossroads” (p. 88) approach, which she indicated as follows: “This theoretical framework requires in-depth study of specific, crucial issues or elements of a text to highlight the intersecting conflicts and cultures within” (p. 97). Grobman (2000) also suggested that
students can . . . read other autobiographical works by ethnic women, such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Women Warrior*, or Judith Ortiz Cofer’s *Silent Dancing* (1990). These texts demonstrate both the similarities and differences of women of color in the struggle for identity, particularly since Native cultures have traditionally been gynocratic. (pp. 99-100)

In my own composition assignments, I have also attempted to integrate culturally responsive practices (Pewewardy & Fitzpatrick, 2009) for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. I incorporated Grobman’s (2000) “teaching at the crossroads” (p. 88) approach by giving students readings with writers from diverse backgrounds such as Amy Tan, Chang-Rae Lee, and Richard Rodriguez, and students are required to write a paper analyzing the similarities and differences of these writers’ struggle with languages containing their family’s language and public language, which parallels Grobman’s (2000) approach of having an in-depth study of texts on specific crucial issues of conflicts and cultures within the society these authors live in. Also, in this same assignment, students have the option to share their own personal experiences on the languages they acquire and speak at home with their family members and in what way they themselves and their parents or family members speak the public language, and their feelings and struggle toward these two languages, which could be very much similar to the experiences of these authors. Many of my students happened to confirm orally and in their essays that they can relate to these authors’ experiences.

Composition instructors may be confused by the remnants of Navajo oral traditions/rhetorical patterns they may encounter while reading their Navajo students’ writing. They can teach students to organize their ideas and write an outline based on the genre’s rhetorical pattern, so they can become aware of the differences between Western and Navajo thinking/rhetorical patterns and may be able to follow the Western rhetorical structures in drafting their college academic writing following the outline.

Instructors can then consider letting students converse about their papers including outlines and drafts with peers and verbally provide feedback in class one-on-one. In Krych-Appelbaum and Musial’s (2007) quantitative study on 20 undergraduate students’ perceptions on interactive oral feedback, the results suggested that 53% of the students preferred “talking with someone about paper” (p. 135) in the future as their writing technique, which consists of these two techniques: talk after writing, 32%, and talk before writing, 21%. This strategy, peer verbal feedback, has worked well in my composition classes.

In conclusion, Navajo oral traditions or rhetorics may be a factor that contributes to Navajo students’ styles of writing English essays including lacking explicit thesis statements. Navajo language’s syntactic structures differ from English structures. Also, Navajo language has complex verb structures which could contribute to the grammatical and syntactic patterns they utilize when writing English sentences. Based on my observations and teaching, the Navajo syntactic structures seem to affect their writing in English sentences. Navajo oral tradition, reading, and Navajo syntax, including verbs, are all possible factors associated with their writing anxiety.

As instructors, learning to understand these students’ culture and language is the best way to help them succeed academically. Integrating culturally responsive practices can build Navajo students’ confidence in their heritage and knowledge based on what they already know. Instructors need to recognize students who live in between cultures and introduce readings written by authors experiencing similar situations. Instructors can utilize strategies such as outlining in class and verbal discussion of outlines and drafts in peers one-on-one to help make Navajo students aware of Western rhetorical patterns in each genre.

Further research is urgent to understand Navajo students’ difficulties in academic writing including factors related to writing anxiety (e.g., reading, Navajo syntax including verbs). Also, the rhetorical/cultural differences (i.e., oral tradition) and past experience could be the factors that can contribute to their writing anxiety and would affect their academic success; therefore, rhetorical differences and past experience are also factors related to writing anxiety which are necessary for future research.

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