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A Contrastive Rhetoric of Algerian Students' Use of Connectivity

Abstract

As every speech community may have unique codes for oral communication, it may also have some culture-specific rhetorical patterns and organizational modes in terms of written language. Accordingly; when relying on their first language writing conventions to write in the target language, foreign language learners will face difficulties in conforming to the latter's stylistic standards, regardless to their grammatical and lexical proficiency. The present paper provides a contrastive rhetoric investigation of Algerian university students' use of connectivity across their Arabic and English writing to see whether they reach a rhetorical style closer to that of the target language, or they keep relying on their Arabic rhetorical strategies to write in English. Results revealed that students used the targeted features in a similar pattern in the two languages, and this clearly demonstrates the role of the first language in students' target language writing.

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ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى تسليط الضوء على تأثير اللغة الأم في دراسة لغة أجنبية فيما يتعلق بمهارة الكتابة. يقدم هذا البحث دراسة بلاغية مقارنة (A Contrastive Rhetoric Study) لاستعمال الطلبة للربط في اللغتين الانجليزية والعربية، محاولا معرفة ما إذا كان طلبة الجامعة الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية يستعملون أدوات الربط بالطريقة الأصلية الخاصة بتلك اللغة الأجنبية، أم أنهم يواصلون الاعتماد على مهاراتهم ومكتسباتهم من اللغة الأم للكتابة بلغة أجنبية.

Introduction

The writing skill seems to be the most demanding and difficult skill to develop in comparison to the other language skills. This difficulty stems from the many aspects involved in the activity of writing, namely vocabulary, grammar, mechanics such as spelling and punctuation, as well as content and organization. What makes it more difficult for EFL learners is the fact that the English text features of organization and stylistic patterns are different from those of other languages. In other words, foreign language writers struggle not only with the target language criteria of use but also with the influence of the first language which gets in the way of effective communication and affects negatively the assessment of written

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productions. With the emergence of contrastive rhetoric in the mid 1960s, the writing skill and the role of transfer started to gain some deserved attention in foreign language learning after being neglected for decades ago due to the long-established emphasis on teaching the spoken language.

1. Contrastive Rhetoric

Contrastive rhetoric is the study of how a person's first language affects his/her foreign language writing in terms of conventional norms and textual features. It also investigates the culture-writing relationship and how people from different cultural backgrounds have different rhetorical tendencies. The contrastive rhetoric hypothesis holds that language and writing are cultural phenomena; therefore, each language has its unique rhetorical conventions. As a direct consequence, the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the first language interfere with writing in the second language (Connor, 1996; 2002). On this basis, Connor (1996) defines contrastive rhetoric as "an area of research in second language acquisition that identifies problems in composition encountered by second language writers and, by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, attempts to explain them" (p. 5). In his article "*Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education,*" Kaplan (1966) -to whom the birth of contrastive rhetoric is accredited- investigated the English writing of more than six hundred (600) international students and found out that each language has a unique way of paragraph development.

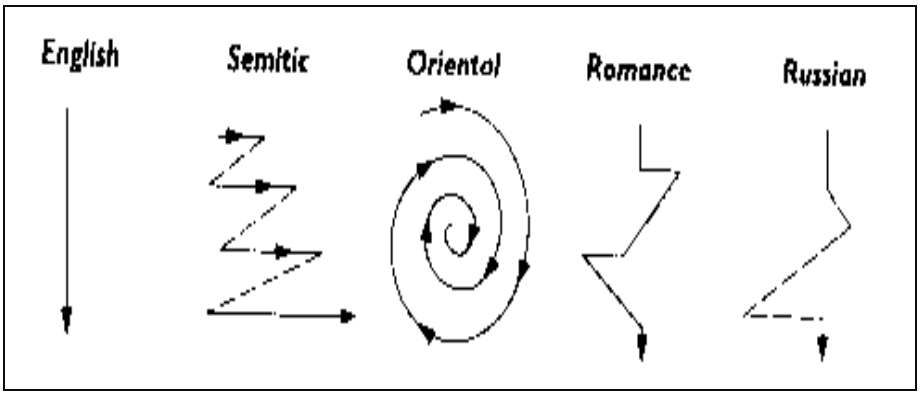

Figure 1: Rhetorical patterns of different languages (Kaplan, 1966)

According to Kaplan (1996); in English compositions, the ideas are conveyed in a straight line from the beginning to the end. In compositions written in other languages, the flow of ideas happens in various modes. For instance, in Semitic languages and because of the frequent use of parallelism, ideas occur in a zigzag line. In the Oriental pattern, the ideas are represented circularly -reflecting an indirect approach- in order to get to the main point. In the Romance and Russian patterns, there is a freedom to

Many years after Kaplan's original work in the field, the scope of contrastive rhetoric has expanded and its aim has developed. Today, contrastive rhetoric studies go beyond students' paragraphs and essays to include writing for many academic, specific

and professional purposes. Furthermore, contrastive rhetoric has become very effective in helping non-native speakers overcome cultural barriers and achieve effective communication, and "continues to contribute to our understanding of cultural differences in general as well as in the teaching of ESL/EFL writing" (Hamadouche, 2013: 183).

2. Connectivity

One area of difference between Arabic and English that results in many discrepancies in Arab students' written English is connectivity. Despite the significant role they play in writing, connectors are not sufficiently covered in the teaching of foreign language composition, and no reference is made to the conventional differences of use between languages. According to Shaheen (1991), connectors are crucial in combining semantic units and sentences as they "externalise basic logical relations: cause, result, and time, thus taking on a variety of functions such as tracing the development of an argument, relating a sequence of events, marking an opposition, and signalling a conclusion" (pp. 86-7).

2.1. *The Use of "and"*

Connectivity in Arabic is remarkably characterized with the frequent use of the coordinating conjunction *'wa'*, which is well-matched with the English connector *'and'*, at the expense of other joining patterns (Kaplan, 1966). English, on the other hand, relies on different markers to link the different parts of speech and to make the transition between ideas. Qaddumi (1995) maintains that "the *wa* is the most common particle used to join words, phrases, sentences and even paragraphs without altering the meaning or the beauty of the Arabic text" (p. 186). The conjunction '*wa'* is also used to mark the beginning of almost every Arabic sentence or paragraph. Nevertheless, when rendering the initial '*wa*' literally into '*and*' -something constantly done by Arab students in their English writing- it results in an awkward piece of writing that lacks cohesion and coherence (Shaheen, 1991). To illustrate more this issue, Abu Radwan (2012) presents a literal translation of an excerpt from a political article in *Asharq-Al-Awsat* newspaper number issued on November 25th, 1994 as follows:

> <u>*And*</u> the Yemeni minister confirmed that the government will not run any hotels or industrial institutions, and the economy will follow open market strategies. <u>*And*</u> he confirmed that the government declared yesterday the formation of two committees, <u>*and*</u> they will carry out the transformation.

(Abu Radwan, 2012: 374; original emphasis)

2.2. *The Overall Use of Connectors*

Another difference between Arabic and English in terms of connectivity is that the former relies heavily on explicit connectors while the latter favours implicit logical relations. Sometimes no connector is required in English writing; nonetheless, sentences or paragraphs may well be linked if the conjunction is assumed. This is not always the case for Arabic writing. Williams (1989) argues that "Arabic uses more multifunctional connectors than English" (p. ii). Shaheen (1991: 88) on his part sees

that coherence in English is "maintained by means of the logical relations which bind sentences [together]" whereas in Arabic, each sentence has to be linked with the following and the preceding one by means of explicit markers.

Tendencies in the use of implicit and explicit connections lead to the assumption that English writing focuses on ideas or content while Arabic writing stresses the language of the text. Sa'adeddin (1987; in Shaheen, 1991) relates this phenomenon to the linguistic personality of the Arab community claiming that "the Arabic linkage system symbolizes junction by means of lexical items which explicitly transmit the coherence of the text to native Arabic speakers, who perceive the import of the items so intuitively that they seldom think of them" (p. 89). On the other hand, the preference of implicit connections does not implicate by no means that English writing makes no use of explicit discourse markers; "English essays use [them] to signal relations between sentences and parts of texts" (Xing et al. 2008: 73). However; when the connection is lucid between parts of discourse, advanced writers of English prefer the zero connector and hence conciseness.

2.3. *Coordination and Subordination*

Arabic writers have a preference for coordination over subordination which is quite the opposite for native-English writers. In his original work on contrastive rhetoric, Kaplan (1966) notes that almost all ideas in Arab students' essays were coordinately linked and that there was very little subordination. Abu Radwan (2012) stresses that "while Arabic is predominantly additive, English is basically a subordinative language" (p. 374). Accordingly, the English style is judged to be mature by the degree of subordination rather than coordination. In line with this, Koch (1987) holds that "Arabic authors use a great deal of coordination, and very little of the subordination which is so highly valued in English…writing" (p. 85).

3. Methodology

3.1. *Participants*

Sixty (60) Algerian EFL students from the Department of Letters and English, University of Constantine 1 participated in this study. The participants were given two writing assignments in the second semester of their second-year to serve as a tool for rhetorical comparison: one in English and another in Arabic. The writing tasks were not administered until after reinforcing students' basic writing skills studied in the first-year[i], introducing to them the concept of 'essay'[ii] and providing them with ample opportunities of practice and feedback during the first semester of the same academic year.

The reason behind choosing second-year students as the population under examination in the present study is because they start producing extended texts in this year, and this makes it possible to investigate writing beyond the sentence level. Furthermore; if it is necessary to address the first language influence, it should be done at an early stage of students' learning how to write since they have many things to develop in their writing and the influence of the first language should be the last thing they need to worry about. Finally, students in their third-year will have to choose one

of three options[iii] within their major. During this year, the focus of the writing course and its content vary from one option to the other. Therefore, it seems more suitable to deal with second-year students throughout their general course of writing where the findings would be more generalizable.

3.2. *Instrument and Data Collection*

The participants took the writing assignments as a part of their "Written Expression" course. They were asked to write a one-page single-spaced essay so that their writing could be quantitatively compared. The topic chosen for the essay is: "*There are different ways of spending leisure time. Develop this idea providing three examples of how you spend your leisure time.*" This topic was chosen because students are supposed to have ideas on, so they would not spend the whole assignment's time generating ideas since more interest is placed on textual features -particularly connectivity- than content itself. Students started with writing the English essay and in the next session they wrote the Arabic one on the same topic and in the same conditions.

3.3. *Data Analysis*

The paired sample *t*-test is used to investigate students' use of the targeted features in their Arabic and English texts. The purpose of using the *t*-test is to check whether there would be a statistically significant difference or similarity in students' expository writing regarding the use of connectivity across Arabic and English compositions. Accordingly, we set out to answer the following question: do Algerian majors of English at university level attain a rhetorical style closer to that of the target language in terms of connectivity? Or does their English writing remain indistinguishable from their writing in the first language?

4. Results

The Use of "and"

Assignment	N	Percentage	Mean	SD
Arabic Compositions	60	59,17%	11.35	4.26
English Compositions	60	56,37%	10.70	3.27
***t*=1.076, *p*=0.285**				

Table 1: Frequency of occurrence of "*and*" in the Arabic and English compositions

The *t*-test results reveal no significant difference between the participants' performance in the two tasks (Arabic and English compositions) with regard to the frequency of use of "*and*"[iv] (*t*=1.076, *p*=0.285). Besides, students used "*and*" (Arabic

sample = 59,17% / English sample = 56,37%) more than all the other connectors combined together (Arabic sample = 40,83% / English sample = 43,63%). It is not unusual that *"and"* was used in such a rate in Arabic compositions since it is the most commonly used conjunctive device in the Arabic language. For English compositions, however, this kind of use creates some peculiarity in writing where *"and"* does not carry the same various functions as in Arabic.

The secret behind the students' overuse of "*and*" in their Arabic texts is that it can convey a wide range of relations among ideas. Though; in some situations, a different connector would serve the meaning better (example1). Moreover, it is often unnecessarily placed like in the beginning of a new paragraph (example2). Finally, many other connectors in Arabic are preceded by "*and*" resulting in expressions such as: "*and but; و لكن*", "*and as; و كما*", "*and since; و بما أن*", "*and even;و حتى*", "*and if; و إذا*", "*and because; و لأن*", "*and that is why; و لذلك*", etc. (example3). Since students' overuse of "*and*" on the cost of other connectors is similar in their Arabic and English compositions; it is fair to say that this habit, as a typical Arabic characteristic, is transferred from their L1 to their TL as illustrated in the following examples[٧]:

Example1:

- The internet is a good space to get together with my friends and chat with them <u>and</u> (but) this does not prevent me from meeting new ones from different countries.

- تعتبر الانترنت فضاءا جيدا للقاء الأصدقاء و التحدث معهم <u>و</u> (لكن) هذا لا يمنعني من التعرف على آخرين جدد من مختلف البلدان.

Example 2:

- <u>And</u> among the other ways that I prefer to spend my leisure time through is watching scientific programmes.

- <u>و</u> من الطرق الأخرى التي أحب قضاء وقتي بها هي مشاهدة البرامج العلمية.

Example 3:

- <u>And because</u> I like reading books and learning foreign languages, I find myself always looking for new words to learn and enrich my vocabulary.

- <u>ولأنني</u> أحب قراءة الكتب وتعلم اللغات الأجنبية، أجد نفسي دائما أبحث عن كلمات جديدة لأتعلمها و أثري مفرداتي.

In the students' English compositions, twenty-four (24) other connective expressions are used along with "*and*" to combine ideas together. Yet, those 24 expressions all together have occurred less than "*and*".

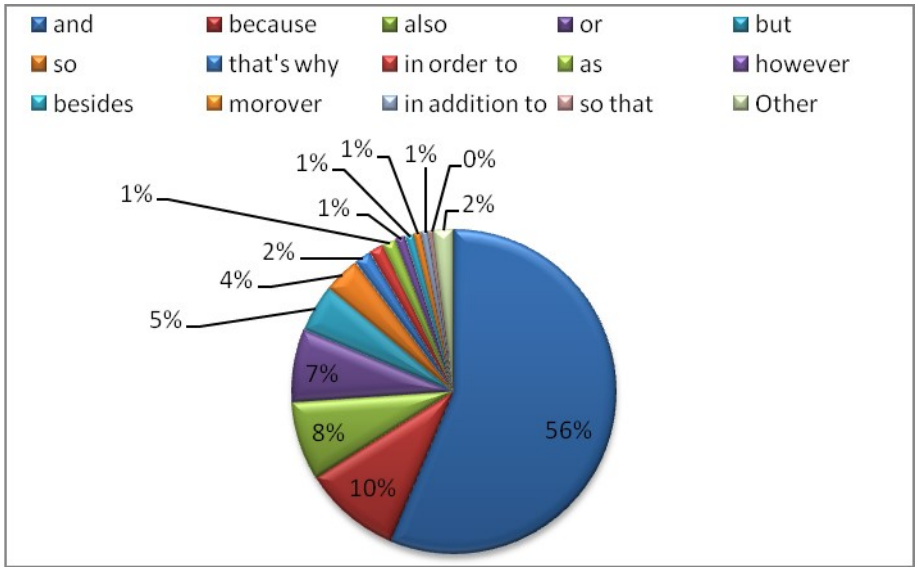

Figure 2: Distribution and percentage of connective expressions[vi]

Figure (2) shows the overall distribution and percentage of connective expressions. *Because* (9.75%), *also* (7.81%), *or* (7.29%), *but* (4.83%) and *so* (3.60%) take respectively the highest frequencies after *and* (56.37%). Other connective expressions are used even fewer times. In the students' sixty (60) compositions; *therefore*, *yet*, *either…or* and *although* are used three (3) times each. *For that*, *since*, *due to* and *furthermore* are used twice each. *Consequently*, *as a result* and *though* are used only once each.

The Overall Use of Connectors

Assignment	N	Mean	SD
Arabic Compositions	60	19.18	5.42
English Compositions	60	18.98	4.88
***t*=0.244, *p*=0.807**			

Table 2: Frequency of occurrence of connective expressions in the Arabic and English compositions

As there is a similarity between students' Arabic and English texts in the use of "*and*", there is also a similarity between them in the overall use of connective expressions (*Mean* = 19.18 for Arabic compositions / *Mean* = 18.98 for English compositions). The paired sample *t*-test results (Table 2) indicates that there is no significant difference in the frequency of use of connective expressions between Arabic and English texts written by the same students (*t*=0.244, *p*=0.807).

Coordination vs. Subordination

	Arabic Compositions 60			**English Compositions 60**			
Feature	**Percentage**	**Mean**	**SD**	**Percentage**	**Mean**	**SD**	
Coordination	86.01%	15.37	4.79	74.14%	14.72	3.69	***t*=0.951** ***p*=0.345**
Subordination	13.99%	2.50	2.01	25.86%	5.13	2.73	***t*=6.174** ***p*=0.000**

Table 3: Frequency of coordination and subordination in Arabic and English compositions

It is true that students used coordination similarly in their Arabic and English compositions (*t*=0.951, *p*=0.345) but not subordination (*t*=6.174, *p*=0.000). Yet, their writing remains closer to the Arabic style and very much influenced by their L1 writing strategy. This influence is reflected in the overwhelming use of coordination over subordination. Even if students used more subordination in their English texts (*Mean* = 5.13) than their Arabic ones (*Mean* = 2.50); they used coordination in a similar rate and also used more coordination than subordination in both languages.

Due to the exaggerating use of coordination, some unusual combinations of sentences have been noticed in students' writing in the two languages. In some instances, students coordinated a long list of clauses to one (example 1). In others, they made series of coordination i.e., two clauses are joined by coordination; another couple of clauses are also joined by coordination and at the same time coordinated to the first set, and so on (example 2).

Example 1:

- Praying is very necessary in our life because it erases our sins and strengthens our relation with Allah and adds to our good deeds and brings us closer to Heaven and keeps us away from bad deeds.

- إن الصلاة هي جد ضرورية في حياتنا لأنها تمحو ذنوبنا و تقوي صلتنا بالله عز و جل و تزيد في ميزان حسناتنا و تقربنا من الجنة و تبقينا بعيدين عن الأعمال السيئة.

Example 2:

- Practicing any kind of sports is enough to adjust and ameliorate our mood but for those with cultural tendencies joining clubs of poetry and writing is an important and a positive move to develop special skills and gain knowledge and get to know other cultures and concerning technology in our days it invaded all fields and areas cultural and entertaining….

- إن ممارسة أي نوع من الرياضة كفيل بتعديل و تحسين مزجنا لكن بالنسبة لذوي الميولات الثقافية فالانخراط في النوادي الخاصة بالشعر و الكتابة خطوة مهمة و ايجابية لتنمية المهارات الخاصة و اكتساب المعرفة و التعرف على ثقافات أخرى و فيما يخص التكنولوجيا في عصرنا الحالي فقد غزت جميع المجالات و الميادين منها التثقيفية و الترفيهية....

Conclusion

The analysis of students' compositions revealed a similarity in the use of connectivity across their first and target languages. Students used the targeted features, namely the frequent use of *"and"*, the overall use of connective expressions as well as coordination and subordination in a similar pattern in Arabic and English. In view of the fact that the study participants wrote in English before writing in Arabic, it is illogical to consider that they transferred the specified rhetorical strategies form the target language to the first language. The only explanation that makes sense is that they originally relied on their L1 rhetorical strategies to write in the TL even before knowing that they have an Arabic essay to write.

Students' failure in the appropriate use of the target language stylistic features is mainly attributed to their unawareness of the rhetorical differences between their first and target languages. Therefore, second and foreign language instructors, especially those involved in the teaching of writing, should develop some knowledge of the cross-culture rhetorical differences; then, it is their duty to transmit this knowledge to students. Besides, they should consider intercultural differences while planning writing activities for their students and while assessing their written performance.

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[i] In the first-year writing programme, students deal with sentence structure, writing mechanics, paragraph structure, and the different types of paragraph development.

[ii] The second-year writing programme is devoted to essay writing, basically the expository essay with different types of development.

[iii] The Department of Letters and English, University of Constantine 1 offers three options for third-year students to acquire their BA in one, and after that for the Master and the Doctorate degrees. The three options are: Language Sciences, Applied Language Studies and British and American Studies.

[iv] "and" refers to both *and* in English and *wa* in Arabic.

[v] All examples have been taken from the students' English texts as the target of investigation of the present study and then translated literally into Arabic. The reason behind this is to show that the specified utterances make more sense in Arabic and that their use in English is due to L1 influence.

[vi] The connective expressions represented together are those with the lowest number of occurrences. Only the sum of them occurs; otherwise, they wouldn't appear at all in the chart.