

Cultural obstacles in writing faced by efl university students

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Resume

Chaque langue est enracinée dans la culture de sa communauté de conversation. Les textes Écrits et la façon dont ils sont utilisés varient selon les groupes culturels, ainsi les conventions et les utilisations d'écriture parmi un certain groupe culturel sont apprises à l'école. Beaucoup d'apprenants de langues étrangères présentent une faible performance écrite dans la langue cible à cause de leur incertitude et l'oscillation entre leur modèle de pensée et leur culture natifs et les modèles de pensée associés à la langue cible. Cet article essaye d'examiner l'impact de telles barrières culturelles sur l'écriture en anglais d'apprenants arabe (prenant en considération des étudiants Universitaires d'anglais algériens) et mettre en évidence quelques caractéristiques culturelles natales liées à l'écriture qui crée des difficultés dans l'écriture anglaise. Ce travail propose aussi des solutions pour aider nos apprenants à surmonter les barrières culturelles et communiquer avec succès avec les membres de différentes sociétés dans cette ère de mondialisation.

Abstract

Every language is rooted in the culture of its speaking community. Written texts and the ways they are used vary according to cultural groups and the conventions and uses of writing among a certain cultural group are learned in schools. Many SL/ FL learners exhibit poor performance in writing in the target language because of their uncertainty and oscillation between their L1 thought patterns and culture and the thought patterns associated with the target language. The present paper tries to examine the impact of such cultural barriers on Arab learners writing in English (studying the case of Algerian EFL University students) and to highlight some native cultural features related to writing that create difficulties in English writing. This paper also proposes ways to build bridges between the writing patterns of the two languages overcoming cultural barriers in order to achieve successful communication between members of different societies in this era of globalization.

1 INTRODUCTION

English language instructors may face many problems when teaching writing to EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. Although native speakers of English also have problems with writing, non -native speakers' problems can be quite different; teachers find their papers overwhelming because there are several issues that need to be addressed. In addition to the linguistic problems faced, EFL learners also encounter some cultural obstacles that may cause hindrance in their writing.

In effect, as discourse and writing are believed to be embedded in the culture of its speech community, written texts and writing conventions may vary from one cultural group to another. Therefore it may be expected that L1 cultural features may cause hindrance in FL writing, as Kaplan (1983:150) explains:

The non-native speaker brings with him/ her the alternatives available in the L1 and applies those alternatives in the L2, thereby creating a tension between the apparent relationship of ideas to topic and the possibly inappropriate realisation of focus through intersentential syntax.

Indeed, one should be aware of the fact that cultures have different rhetorical devices, and each culture expresses these devices differently. This may create difficulties for FL learners and one might expect to find evidence of such cultural barriers or difficulty to cross such barriers in students' writings. The present paper is concerned with the cultural obstacles faced by Algerian EFL university students (being Arab learners of English) when writing in English it also deals with how to help our learners to overcome these cultural barriers in order to achieve success in English academic writing.

2 TYPICAL PROBLEMS FOR ARAB EFL LEARNERS

Recognizing grammar problems is so easy that it tends to mask the more serious problems of EFL writers, those related to culture. In fact, how another person's cultural style differs from a native speaker's style is new knowledge to many EFL writers, even the very experienced ones, and it takes time and practice to recognize and change the style to fit an English speaking academic audience.

The differences at the cultural level between the Arabic-speaking and the English-speaking communities have a direct effect on the rhetorical organization of Arabic and English texts. The two speech communities differ along many cultural dimensions. While Arabs are known for their oralised tradition, collective living style, high-contact society and reader-responsible discourse; English speakers have a literate tradition, are known for their individualism, low-contact, and favor writer-responsible¹⁰ discourse. This divergence creates differences in writing the two languages which pose problems for Arab learners of English. Then, it is important to highlight the many points of difference between the two languages which are responsible for a large potential for errors and difficulties faced by Algerian EFL university students when producing written English.

2.1 Cross-linguistic Factors Posing Problems

2.1.1 Alphabet, Letters and Way of Writing

The alphabet, letters and way of reading and writing are quite different in the two languages. Arabic is read and written from right to left unlike the Latin alphabets (English) which are read and written from left to right. Moreover, the scripts of both languages are very different. English has both capital and lower case letters; whereas no distinction is made between upper and lower case in Arabic which is written in a cursive script, and the rules for punctuation are much looser than in English.

Unsurprisingly, these fundamental differences between the Arabic and English writing systems cause Algerian EFL learners significant problems. Many of these students ignore the rules of capitalization when writing in English and produce one sentence long paragraphs. This generally affects the clarity of their content.

2.1.2 Word patterns

Arabic has a three consonant root as its basis. All words (parts of speech) are formed by combining the three-root consonants with fixed vowel patterns and, sometimes, an affix. Algerian EFL learners are very often confused by the lack of patterns in English that would allow them to distinguish nouns from verbs or

¹⁰ Reader responsible discourse is likely to require reader's background knowledge for understanding (the case of Arabic); while in writer responsible discourse, the writer provides maximum assistance for the reader which may include excessive guidance to the structure of the text and clear organization of the text (the case of English).

adjectives, etc. This leads them to use deviant forms such as adjectives instead of nouns or nouns instead of verbs.

e.g. *Benisaf is a coastal.*

It is very sunning

It is a height and cold place.

2.1.3 Grammar

Arabic is from the Semitic language family, hence its grammar is very different from that of English (an Indo-European language). Arabic has no verb *to be* in the present tense, and no auxiliary *do*. This is really problematic for our learners as they often produce forms such as:

She good teacher.

When you come to Algeria?

Furthermore, there is a single present tense in Arabic, as compared to English, which has the simple and continuous forms. These differences result in errors such as *I flyings to Algiers tomorrow.*

Where he going?

Arabic does not make the distinction between actions completed in the past with and without a connection to the present. This leads to failure to use the present perfect tense, as in

I finished my work. Can you check it?

In addition, there are no modal verbs in Arabic. This, for example, leads to erroneous forms such as:

From the possible that I am late. (I may be late.)

Another area which may cause problem is the inexistence of the indefinite article in Arabic, leading to its omission when English requires it or its misuse. On the other hand, there is a definite article in Arabic but its use is not identical with the use of the definite article in English. The following examples are cases of article misuse.

e.g. *Algeria has become touristic country.*

It contains a pure water.

Cheriaa is place for the children and the families.

It is a very cold place in the winter.

Word order of the two languages is also different. Adjectives in Arabic follow the noun they qualify. This may be the source of some word order mistakes such as:

It is famous for its air pure.

Algerian EFL students have also problems with genitive constructions such as *the boy's dog*. In Arabic this would be expressed as *Dog boy*, which is how such constructions may be conveyed into English.

Arabic requires the inclusion of the pronoun in relative clauses, unlike English, in which the pronoun is omitted. This results in mistakes like:

Where is the pen which I gave it to you yesterday?

Another problem encountered in writing by Arab learners of English and Algerian ones is spelling. While Arabic words are almost always written as you hear them, the spelling of English words does not always conform to their pronunciation. Students feel at a loss because hearing what they think is spelled "*chaout*" is spelled:

shout. Add to this silent letters, and so many different ways to spell one sound (and ways to sound one spelling).

2.2 Rhetorical and Syntactic Styles

Possibly the most difficult problem encountered by EFL learners in writing is the logical and thorough development of ideas as they relate to cultural training. Indeed, Kaplan (1967) holds that rhetoric is culturally determined and bound, just as syntax is. This has been confirmed by many other studies which revealed that there are preferred patterns of writing used by L2/ FL learners specific to their culture (Ostler, 1987; Nasr and Samadi, 1995; Halimah, 1991, qtd. in McDonough 1995). In effect, many Algerian English teachers have noted that their students are biased towards the use of some rhetorical and syntactic patterns specific to Arabic such as preference of coordination over subordination, the use of metaphorical style, or tendency to start with universal statement, and end with some type of formulaic or proverbial statement. This may create a real obstacle for our students because what an English native speaker considers logical in an academic paper may not be logical in another culture. Then, some of our learners will have trouble sticking to a thesis, narrowing a thesis sufficiently, or proving a thesis concretely enough for an English speaking audience.

2.2.1 Coordination and Subordination

Subordination and coordination are two syntactic features that are employed in writing in both English and Arabic. It is often argued, however, that the two languages differ in their preference for either syntactic relation. English is said to make use of more subordination than coordination, while Arabic favors the use of coordination rather than subordination (Kaplan, 1967; Ostler, 1987).

We have noticed that our EFL students use excessively coordination as a means of structural linkage either in free composition writing or sentence combination. For example, when students were asked to combine the following sentences:

I met the man. The president spoke to him.

Many of them wrote:

I met the man and the president spoke to him, instead of I met the man whom the president spoke to.

Yet, in English it is strongly advised to use subordination, rather than coordination, because it helps make one's writing more mature, sophisticated, interesting and effective. This tendency is very clearly noticed in English writing textbooks (Oshima & Houge, 1991).

2.2.2 Direct vs. Metaphorical Styles

Many EFL students do not recognize that the English style is very direct and very narrow in comparison to the Arabic style which admires the beauty of the language as much as the message using allusion, analogy, proverbs and figures of speech. English teachers of writing at the Algerian university often comment that their students use patterns of language and stylistic conventions that they have learnt in their native language and culture to write in English. However, this contrasts with the expectations of Western readers who regard these patterns as clichés, and with Western teachers of writing who encourage students to write in their own voice using

their own words. Therefore, this writing behavior is going to pose problem for these students at two levels:

First, students have not met the expectations of the academic reader of the target language. They have not realized or accepted the registers and purposes of discourse in the academic community (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Stern, 1992).

The second problem lies in the use of culture-specific expressions such as proverbs, verses, metaphors, idioms, historical incidents long forgotten and legendary personages which do not always have one-to-one correspondence in both languages. For example, as part of culture, one should consider the ecological conditions because Arabic belongs to an area of hot and dry climate, whereas English belongs to an area of cold and wet climate. Thus, according to Ilyas (1989), some Arabic expressions are associated with *cold* weather to express positive and favorable connotations of joy and delight to Arabs such as *يثلج الصدر* *khavarun yuthlij aS-Sadir* (news that freezes the chest). In fact, it is happy news whereas the ecological equivalent in English expressions that have positive connotations are usually associated with *warmth* rather than cold such as: 'He was given a warm welcome' and 'He is a warm-hearted man', i.e. kind, person. Ilyas (1989: 128) explains that

What may be a connotatively favorable expression in Arabic could have a pejorative sense in English, and vice versa.

Other examples of Algerian EFL students' erroneous use of metaphorical style are found in their English compositions. For example:

-He made all his efforts and put the bomb in the café.

-He fought against France in order to take the independence. Independence is taken and not given.

-I went with the house to Oran.

These are only few examples among so many, and mistakes related to culture specific expressions are very often found in EFL Algerian students' writing.

3 HELPING LEARNERS TO OVERCOME CULTURAL BARRIERS

There is much discussion nowadays about whether to change the English speaking audience's expectations or whether to make others change to fit this audience's traditional style. Waiting for an agreement, it is important to look for some solutions and to help our EFL students at least to be aware of the variances in writing between the two languages

3.1 Raising Teacher Awareness of Their Students' Cultural Barriers

Teachers need to be aware of the socio-cultural differences between their learners' speech community and that of the target language because achieving success in a new culture does not, however, lie solely in learning the grammar and vocabulary of the language. Ability to negotiate cultural barriers and develop new ways of learning are also essential. Teachers need to be familiar with the socio-cultural sources of the problems encountered by their students when writing in a foreign language, including differences in rhetorical styles (Cai, 1993). This awareness enables teachers to assist learners in analyzing their expectations versus the expectations of their English reading audiences based on the rhetoric they have learned in contrast to the rhetoric they are learning.

Thanks to this awareness teachers will consider learning to compose in a foreign language not simply as an isolated classroom activity, but a social and cultural

experience. For example, the rules of English composition carry values that are absent in, or sometimes contradictory to, the values of the Arab society. Likewise, the rules of Arabic writing reflect beliefs and values that may not be found in other societies. Therefore, learning the rules of composition in a foreign language is, to a certain extent, learning the values of the corresponding foreign society (Shen, 1989). And therefore, the teacher will act as a mediator to make the process of learning to write in the target language, a process of creating and defining a new identity and balancing it with the old identity.

Teachers need also to be aware of the similarities that may exist between the linguistic and cultural features of the two languages and try to enable their students to use strengths from their first culture's writing in their English writing. Many examples of cultural correspondence exist between Arabic and English for example some Arabic metaphors have their corresponding ones in English (see Ghazala, 1993):

1. To throw light on.(yulqee- d-daw'a ala): focus on(yurakkizu ala) : THROW: YULQEE; LIGHT: DAW'ON.
2. Head over heels(ra'san ala aqeb):entirely(kulliyyatan): HEAD: RA'S; HEELS: AQEB
3. Seize the opportunity. (yantahizu l-fursata):benefit from something (yastafeedu min amren ma): SIEZE: YANTAHIZU.

Then, it is important for EFL teachers to understand that their Arab students bring with them linguistic, cultural, attitudinal, and academic experiences, and many of them already possess study skills at an advanced level in Arabic. Therefore, all what these learners actually need is the teacher help in transferring these skills to the target language and adjusting them to a different academic environment (Jordan, 1997). The relationship between L1 language and communication skills and learning an L2 is highlighted by Connor (1996:113) who explains that:

A strong relationship is seen between L1 language and communication skills and development of literacy in both L1 and L2. This kind of model allows for positive transfer of shared linguistic and cultural features from the first language to writing in English as a second language.

3.2 Raising Students' Awareness of Cross-Cultural Contrastive Rhetoric in English Writing

The teaching staff at university has noticed that many Algerian EFL students are able to construct grammatically correct sentences, but find it difficult to write clear, coherent, idiomatic English compositions simply because they have to write in the unfamiliar rhetorical styles of the target culture. Add to this the complexity of the use of different cultural conventions in English academic writing. Therefore, students need to know not only the grammar and vocabulary of the target language, but also the cultural constraints associated with the language forms and the consequences of selecting a particular form. Understanding those contrastive aspects of two cultures may constitute the first step for EFL students to attain sensitivity to common errors traceable to their L1 and culture. This approach provides further support for contrastive rhetoric as an analytical tool employed by student writers to better understand rhetorical differences.

4 CONCLUSION

Because Arab writers bring with them their cultural experiences that affect their writing, EFL teaching may not be successful if the underlying culture in L1 is not addressed, or if contrasts between L1 and FL writing structures are not made sufficiently explicit. Contrastive rhetoric has brought new insights to L2/FL acquisition and thus L2/FL writing and has highlighted the fact that there are some native cultural features related to writing. These features may be transferred to L2/ FL writing and sometimes create difficulties. Research claims that these writing patterns related to culture are beneficial to L2/ FL learners if taught at schools, and insists that teachers should be aware of their learners' prior experience i.e. the differences of their instructional backgrounds, in order to use appropriate teaching approaches. Therefore, it is high time to exploit contrastive rhetoric findings in the FL composition classroom to help our students overcome cultural barriers in writing as pedagogy needs to change to meet the demands of the growing multiculturalism of this era. Liebman (1992:157) highlights this point stating:

If ESL writing teachers want their students to succeed in a variety of academic writing tasks, they must become aware not only of these different forms but also of differences in instructional background. It is not enough to determine what will be expected of ESL students in the university and then give them models of what we want them to produce. We must also determine what these students' prior experiences are. Students from different backgrounds will require different approaches.

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