

Contemporary Arabic-English Contrastive Rhetoric Studies: An Appraisal

Mebarka ACHI^{1,*} Ahmed Chaouki HOADJLI²,

¹ Laarbi Tebessi University/ Tebessa (Algeria), achimebarka@gmail.com

² Mohamed Kheider University/ Biskra (Algeria), chaouki.hoadjli@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT:

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The main tenet of this article is to highlight the paramount importance of contrastive rhetoric (CR) studies in addressing SL students writing problems and difficulties. It also aspires to cast light on the focal role that CR plays in suggesting potential solutions and indispensable pedagogical recommendations to alleviate if not get rid of SL writing deficiencies, meanwhile, assisting struggling writers to conform to the norms of the language under which they write their compositions.

* Mebarka ACHI

Introduction

In modern times, the craft of writing has gained much attention be it in institutional, academic or occupational fields for it represents the very basic instrument to the expression of one's ideas, views and perspectives. Nevertheless, writing in another language is deemed to be more demanding and difficult than writing in one's mother tongue. As a matter of fact, such difficulty arises as a result of the variances among both the writer's native language and culture (L1) and that of the target language (L2). As such, CR has emerged as a single scientific discipline that focuses on the study and analysis of L2 writing in an endeavor to find out practical solutions to the problem of L1 interference. In what follows, is a review of the most prominent cross-cultural Arabic-English rhetorical studies conducted by both Arab researchers as well as Non-Arabs.

I. The Birth of Contrastive Rhetoric

Connor (U, 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). Connor, also, states that the field considers writing and language as cultural phenomena because of the outright influence that culture exerts on both. The emergence of ‘Contrastive Rhetoric’ (CR) as a field of study in its own right was, in fact, initiated by a number of theories in linguistics mainly Kaplan's (1966) seminal work on ESL students' writing and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1956).

I.1. Kaplan's Model

As a professor at one of the USA universities during the 1960's, Robert Kaplan noticed that the composition of his non-native students who belong to different educational and cultural backgrounds took different writing patterns that is dissimilar to the organizational pattern used by English native students. Kaplan stipulated that the transfer of L1 rhetorical strategies do not meet readers' expectations of the target culture. Hence, L1 interference forms a true obstacle to write well and efficiently in English. Kaplan (R.B, 1966), further, asserted that the reason behind this failure in communication is the rhetorical structure, and logic on which it rests, which is culturally bound and is “affected by canons of taste within a given culture at a given time” (1966, p. 2). He concluded that languages have their own specific and culturally driven conventions and patterns of writing. Hence, a perfectly logical argument in one culture might be viewed as sophisticated or illogical in another.

Kaplan (1966) analysed more than 600 English expository writings of students from various nationalities, and identified five types of paragraph development. These findings led him to the immediate conclusion that “each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of the particular language is the mastering of its logical system” (p. 14). In his outstanding article “Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education”, Kaplan claimed that English thought patterns stem of the Anglo-European cultural patterns and follow a Platonic-Aristotelian sequence descended from the philosophers of ancient Greece and shaped subsequently by Roman, Medieval European, and later Western thinkers (1966, p. 3). While Arabic, as he posited “is based on a complex series of parallel constructions, both positive and negative” (1966, p.6) compared to the “linear” rhetoric of English expository paragraph. He believed that Arabs’ writing diverts from the linear and logical norms of English discourse because the logic in its Aristotelian sense is a foreign concept to Arab people.

I.2. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was formulated in 1956 by two American linguists, Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Whorf, hence the name. It is also known as “the linguistic relativity hypothesis” and “the negative transfer hypothesis” respectively, and is made up of two versions. The strong version of the hypothesis states that language does not only shape the way people think but it completely and strictly determines and controls our thinking patterns, the way we view and think about the world (Connor, 2002). Whereas, the weak version suggests that language only shapes or influences our thoughts and perception of the world. The less similar languages are, the more diverse their conceptualization of the world would be.

Noticeably impressed by the linguistic relativity hypothesis, Kaplan asserts that one’s first language (L1) influences one’s logic and rhetorical choices among which is the use of metadiscourse devices. As an active researcher and a leading figure in the area of CR, Connor (1996) explains further its birth and relates its origin mainly to the theory of linguistic relativity and to studies examining L1 transfer on L2 acquisition, contrastive analysis hypothesis, error analysis, and Interlanguage studies.

I.3. Negative Language Transfer Hypothesis

The negative language transfer hypothesis is another crucially significant and prevailing notion upon which the idea of contrastive rhetoric is based

(Khartite; Zerhouni, 2016). Negative Language Transfer Hypothesis was, first, proposed by Fries (1945) and Lado (1957) in which they argue that syntactic errors by L2 students are due to L1 interference. According to (Crystal, 1992), negative transfer refers to the errors a speaker introduces into one language due to the contact with the mother language. Most of students' errors in the target language result from a negative transfer from L1, mainly, due to a lack of certain levels of proficiency in L2. Although, some of the ESL students exhibit a good assimilation of structural units of the target language, they struggle to organize this gained knowledge into appropriate and coherent structures. This difficulty will generate a niche between the accumulation and the organization of knowledge.

In the context of L2 writing, Kaplan (1966) considered the undesirable transmission of rhetorical structures from ESL students' mother tongue into English as a strong evidence of the 'Negative Language Transfer' hypothesis, which makes them fail to use the right organizational/rhetorical patterns of the target language. He, further, postulates that "contrastive rhetoric has been concerned with such questions as ... what learners bring with them from their own cultures and how what they bring interacts with what they encounter when they undertake to compose in English." (Kaplan, 1988, p. 294). This evidently confirms the notion of negative transfer in students L2 writing.

II. Significance and Implication of Contrastive Rhetoric

Kaplan's 1966 notion of CR has pertinent pedagogical implications that seeks to solve students' problems and related issues in L2 writing through the explanation of the target language organizational patterns relying on linguistic, cultural and educational foundations (Matsuda, 2001). In this respect, Wang posits that, when reviewing his original study, Kaplan found that CR can offer more than the analysis of rhetorical differences between languages. It can provide cultural understandings as well as the right mechanisms that help students overcome their difficulties and produce effective L2 texts (Wang, 2006).

In collaboration with Grabe (1996), Kaplan has stretched the aim of CR to address various issues in L2 writing. In doing so, CR now explores the way written passages work in different cultural contexts, the differences between written and spoken discourse, the use of various genres in different languages, the explanation of what counts as evidence in different cultural contexts and the analysis of how evidence is arranged in various genres as they occur in many languages (Grabe; Kaplan, 1996).

Mostly and more importantly, CR is and will always be conceived “as an excellent resource for advanced or college-level ESL/EFL writing teachers, both for gaining understanding in culturally different writing patterns and for designing writing programs in light of genre, cultural, or rhetorical concerns” (Connor, 1996, p. 378). Therefore, implications from valid research on rhetorical schemata of various languages; within the field of CR, will surely lead to better ESL writing instructional practices for teachers. Consequently, when ESL students are better instructed to meet the expectations of L1 readers in their writing classes, they would surely be in a better position to make informed rhetorical choices when composing in L2 (Khartite & Zerhouni, 2016).

III. Arabic-English Contrastive Rhetoric Surveys

Arabic-English CR surveys provide a description of the commonly transferred features from Arabic rhetoric to that of English, which would result in rhetorical deviation. Since these studies form an overwhelmingly huge body of works, this section would only review those recent ones that took place in the 1990's onwards, by Arab and non-Arab scholars.

III. 1. Smith (2005)

Notably, Smith's (2005) study rests on the analysis of four letters written by Arab as well as Chinese speakers in L1 and L2 English. However, the recipients are of different cultural/social and linguistic backgrounds, one is a home country professor while the other is American. The assumption underlying this survey is to inspect the relevance of the linguistic and sociocultural background of the audience and the situation as well as context of writing to learners' rhetorical variance in their native language and the target one. Likewise, Smith's study seeks to answer the following question “to what level are students influenced by audience (and the cultural expectations of that audience), and to what level does the language in which they are writing influence their choices?” (Smith, 2005, p. 83).

To Smith's credit, her study is valuable for it demystified some unique features about the Arabic language rhetoric and writing style and highlighted the need to raise students' awareness to take such differences in consideration when writing in L2 English. She remarked, in the first place, that Arab students' letters exhibits ‘*solidarity*’ using expressions like “we” and “their” which reflects group spirit and collectiveness among students. In the second place, Smith (2005) noted that there was a sign of religious inclination linked tightly to the frequent reference to God in students' writing. It is not surprising, then, that one of the Arab students enrolled in this survey has pointed out that “In Arabic, you can relate everything

back to God. In English you shouldn't do that, but in Arabic, you can do anything" (ibid. p, 90).

III. 2. Al-Quahtani (2006)

Given the distinct emerging genres in academic writing, Al Quahtani (2006) has opted for the close analysis of research article (RA) introductions written in Arabic and English by three different groups: Arab-Educated Arab scholars, US-educated Arab scholars and US-Native Speaking Writers. As such, Al Quahtani attempts, through his research, to examine the macro-rhetorical structure of research article introductions following Swales' (1981) CARs Model responsible for identifying its moves. In his own words, Al Quahtani (2006) maintains, "First, the study seeks to recognize the general structure of the Arabic RA introduction. Second, the study wants to discover whether English RA norms have actually influenced the way Arab scholars write their RA introductions" (Quahtani, 2006, p. 4).

According to Al Quahtani (2006), the journals from which RA introductions were taken are refereed and have acquired a professional reputation. Being the case, two Arabic biannual journals were opted for, namely "the Journal of Um Al-Qura University" and "the Journal of King Saud University" and both publish articles in English and Arabic. The third journal, from which native English speakers' articles were extracted, publishes only in English and is entitled "Educational Psychology Journal". Accordingly, fifteen (15) RA introductions were selected from the aforementioned journals and compared in terms of the authors' educational and linguistic backgrounds based on three categorizations as follows: (1) Arab-world-educated Arabs Vs. US-educated Arabs. (2) US-Native English Speakers Vs. US-educated Arabs. (3) US-Native English Speakers Vs. Arab-world-educated Arabs.

Given the findings obtained from the study, Al Quahtani (2006) noticed that "In the Arabic corpus, a number of sentences were found to be very *problematic*" (p. 78). Such sentences had a particular cultural and religious inclination pertinent to Arabs' cultural and religious backgrounds and were distinct from the Western actual studies' point of view, hence, could not be ascribed to the CARS model moves. The Arabic-culture specific sentences falls into three classes: (1) the first is the Islamic opening statements that are necessary in various contexts mainly formal speeches, letters, acknowledgements, and so on. (2) the citation of verses from the holy Quran and the sayings of the prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him. (3) the enclosure of acknowledgements and prayers for the people who provided help at the end of the introduction (Al-Qahtani, 2006, p. 78-9)

In a similar fashion, Arabs educated in the US also did not conform totally to the CARs Model steps or moves. Nevertheless, Arab-world educated writers demonstrated more differences than those who had their educational background in the US when compared to the Native English speakers group (Al-Qahtani, 2006). In a serious vein, the extent of exposure to the English language (which is rather high in the context of Arabs who studied and graduated from US universities) determines the amount and percentage of the rhetorical differences between the three groups. Taken overall, the linguistic, educational and the cultural backgrounds of writers have a focal role to play regarding the micro as well as macro rhetorical features of their compositions.

III. 3. Ismail (2010)

Among the fairly latest cross-linguistic/cultural rhetorical studies conducted in Arabic and English is Ismail's (2010) Ph.D. dissertation research wherein he investigated the argumentative writing of advanced Arab native speakers of Arabic and that of US native speakers of English based on a contrastive rhetoric analysis. As such, the researcher aspires to test "the validity of the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis" and at the same time "expands the scope of contrastive rhetoric to include other genres and language backgrounds" (Ismail, 2010, p. 1). Put differently, Ismail seeks to identify whether advanced Arab writers find it challenging and problematic to write argumentative essays following the English rhetorical norms due to the interference of their mother tongue's rhetorical choices and strategies.

As such, Ismail's study incorporates sixty (60) participants carrying on higher studies in an English program and are divided into two groups: a group that encompasses thirty (30) Arab native speakers of Arabic and another group that is made up of thirty (30) US native speakers of English. Arab participants were asked to write argumentative essays in Arabic as well as in English in order to be compared to the English argumentative essays written by English speakers of the US. After that, a corpus of ninety (90) essays was first analysed following a 'holistic writing assessment scale' in order to evaluate 'the overall writing quality' (Ismail, 2010). Then, the researcher resorted to an analytical scale proposed by (Connor, 1990) to gauge four distinctive rhetorical features of participants' persuasive/argumentative writing which are: "argument superstructure, informal reasoning, persuasive appeals, and persuasive adaptiveness" (Ismail, 2010, p. 149).

It should come as no surprise that Ismail's study measurement findings showed that contrary to what the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis would suggest,

advanced ESL students' rhetorical difficulties regarding persuasive/argumentative writing are not mainly a result of native language transfer. According to Ismail (2010), "the within-group variance in rhetorical performance was much bigger than the between-group variance suggests that other individual, situational, and/or contextual factors might play a far more significant role than first language does in explaining the writing problems of ESL students" (p. 235). That is to say, individual, situational and contextual variables would highly contribute to students' rhetorical deviation when composing in L2 and not necessarily their L1 transfer of rhetorical strategies.

In view of that, the researcher calls for another paradigm of investigation for future studies which would rest on the exploration of "the potential interaction effect of such factors rather than preoccupying itself (research) with the contrastive rhetoric's reductionist and counterproductive approach" (Ismail, 2010, p. 235). He, further, suggests that research findings made in L1 English can tremendously inform the pedagogy and research on L2 writing because "the same rhetorical dimensions of persuasive writing were equally challenging for advanced native English speakers" (p. 240). Accordingly, the sharing of common rhetorical problems and manifestation of parallel writing difficulties by both Arab participants and English native speakers is considered as a true justification to the rejection of Kaplan's CR hypothesis and a direct questioning of the validity it held for decades.

III. 4. Abu Radwan (2012)

In a very real sense, the growing interest in L2 writing and transfer studies led Abu Radwan to scrutinize the role that L1 transfer plays in L2 composition. Additionally, his study involved another variable, namely the relation between L2 writers' proficiency and the amount of transfer made from L1. Similar to Ismail's (2010) study, Abu Radwan, in his own part, casts doubts on the CR hypothesis and its claim that nonnatives' L2 writings cannot escape interference of the mother tongue's rhetorical strategies, patterns and choices. Hence, this can be perceived as a third variable underlying Abu Radwan's survey.

The study examined the writing of sixteen (16) graduate students that fall into three groups: six (6) native speakers of English, five (5) ESL advanced native speakers of Arabic and five (5) ESL intermediate Arabic native speakers. Those adult graduate students were all enrolled in three universities in the Washington DC metropolitan area (Abu.Radwan, 2012). What is of special interest about the study's participants is that the advanced Arabic-native speakers "received several years of English formal instruction and who were identified as highly proficient

non-native speakers of English by their English native-speaking instructor” (Ibid, p. 373). Accordingly, disparity in students’ competence level would assist in measuring the comparative impacts of students’ L2 proficiency on the rhetorical organisation they deployed in their L2 written texts. Interestingly, the study involved the exploration of typical features of the Arabic writing system adopted from Sa'adeddin (1989) and Koch(1983). These features revolved around four (04) main linguistic points “(1) Loose packaging of information reflected in the frequent use of coordination and lack of subordination; (2) Overuse of the definite article "the"; (3) Circularity of organization reflected in repetition of the same ideas and frequency of paraphrasing; (4) High frequency of personal-involvement pronouns and statements” (Abu Radwan, 2012, p. 374).

With the findings of his study in mind, Abu Radwan (2012) concluded that “transfer from the native language into the target language during the writing process decreases as the writers’ L2 proficiency develops” (p.365). Moreover, the obtained results revealed that the Arabic and English participants have employed distinct rhetorical patterns and writing styles which implies that the linguistic as well as the cultural backgrounds of the participants have a significant role to play in the rhetorical disparity in the argumentative texts of both groups (ibid). However, when compared to the Standard English writing norms, the rate of L2 rhetorical deviation and L1 transfer of strategies decreased each time the L2 proficiency rose. Hence, the CR hypothesis would remain relative regarding the underlying level of writers’ L2 proficiency. Taken all in all and from a pedagogical perspective, Abu Radwan (2012, p. 391) suggests:

Knowledge of these patterns and styles can be very beneficial to Arab students learning English. At the same time, ESL specialists and teachers, particularly those involved in teaching English to Arabic-speaking students, should be familiar with these organizational patterns, for this awareness can potentially lead them to a better understanding of the problems their students encounter.

III. 5. Alluhaydan (2016)

In a parallel research to the previously discussed Arabic-English CR surveys, Alluhaydan (2016) casted light on the transfer of particular elements from the Arabic rhetoric to L2 English by Saudi EFL learners. The aim behind this study was “to apply contrastive rhetoric theory to samples of Saudi English writing in order to identify the linguistic and culturally-based challenges of writing in English for Arabic speakers” (Alluhaydan, 2016, p. 482). In doing so, the

researcher has selected his participants from diverse majors, ages, and backgrounds in order to get reliable information about the EFL Saudi students' L2 writing problems and difficulties. The sampling was small consisting of four (04) participants who were enrolled in different areas of expertise, namely: Geology, civil engineering, architecture, and special higher education studies with different educational levels ranging from High school undergraduate, Bachelor's degree graduate to a Master's degree graduate. During the study, the participants had to write "an argumentative essay that they had written for an academic class, whether for a university class or for an English institute class" (Ibid, p. 495). After that, the researcher conducted an interview with each participant in order to gain insights about their understanding of Arabic as well as English rhetoric.

Most importantly, the findings collected from this research study revealed that the same rhetorical features were substantively transmitted from L1 Arabic to L2 English leading to an apparent rhetorical deviation. Furthermore, the results indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the rate of transfer of rhetorical features regarding participants' age, majors, proficiency level and English writing experience. Based on his study findings, Alluhaydan (2016) concluded that: (1) Saudi students tend to transfer their L1 argumentation style and its indirectness. The types of Arabic persuasive writing cause Saudi students to use repetition when writing in English. (2) Saudi students suffer from insufficient rhetorical knowledge of L1 which has a negative impact on acquiring L2 writing skills because if a person does not know how to write effectively in L1, he would rarely be able to master writing in L2. (3) Saudi students conceptualize their ideas in Arabic when they write in English. (4) Redundancy and memorization have strong ties since students have to repeat in order to memorize and this definitely has a negative influence on the overuse of repetition. (5) Some problems occurred because there is a conflict between L1 rules and those of L2. Articles and prepositions are the most common of the grammatical errors encountered in students' writing. The third personal singular is another common error among Saudi students. (6) Saudi students use if conditions and complex sentences more than parallel sentences. Even though they do not over use parallel construction of sentences, they still use parallel construction of paragraphs (ibid, p. 505).

Conclusion

All things considered, the present article has shed light on some of the most recent cross-cultural surveys carried up in Arabic and English. As such, these myriad of studies aspire to probe SL students writing problems, namely L1

transfer and rhetorical organisation. Meanwhile, they seek to find out effective solutions to such arising writing deficiencies. As a true matter of fact, Kaplan R. (1966) was the first one to study and analyse SL student writers' compositions from a native-speaker lenses. His seminal work on international students compositions paved the way to many more scholars and linguists to take up various cross-cultural studies on the rhetorical organization of essays and other language aspects such as conjunctions, Metadiscourse devices, religious expressions, CARS moves and so on. Amid of all these studies, Arabic was no exception in which investigation made by native as well as non-native researchers has rested on. Most remarkably, the efforts furnished in analyzing writing pieces that belong to writers from different languages and cultural background have gained its fruits and resulted in raising SL writers' awareness towards the writing variances bound to one's native language and its underlying culture.

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