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Intercultural Studies in the Arab World from a Contrastive Rhetoric Perspective

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Abstract

Writing in a second/foreign language involves more than the use of appropriate vocabulary and accurate grammar. It requires some knowledge about the rhetorical styles bound up with the target culture and its audience's expectations. Different cultures often have very different modes of organization and other conventions of written discourse. Likewise, speakers of different languages have diverse patterns of thought and unique perceptions of the world. For this reason, when relying on their first language writing knowledge, non-native English learners may use rhetorical conventions and textual features that make sense in their native language but they are alien to the English writing tradition. The objectives of this article are to show that contrastive rhetoric can help to provide answers to some of the writing problems faced by students in their second or foreign language. It aims to shed light on the role of contrastive rhetoric in overcoming cultural barriers for Arab ESL/EFL students and the necessity of raising students' target language cultural awareness as well as integrating intercultural differences when teaching second or foreign language writing.

Keywords: contrastive rhetoric, intercultural differences, cultural awareness

Introduction

The impact of a target language culture on the learners of this language has long been treated in terms of values, behaviors, attitudes and the sociolinguistic conventions for language use (Paige et al., 1999). In other words, target language culture teaching/learning was concerned with the little “c” culture (i.e., the daily life aspects, including the beliefs and values, of a particular group of people) and the big “C” culture (i.e., anything related to literature, fine arts, history, politics, etc.) in addition to the sociocultural context of language production. Nevertheless, there is another dimension of culture that has been neglected until recently, manifested in the cross-cultural variation in the use of rhetorical features and stylistic patterns. There are two reasons why the specifics of culture influence on writing were disregarded; first, the long dominance of the Audiolingual Method where language was considered primary in its spoken form and secondary in the written one. Second, the devotion of transfer studies (contrastive analysis, error analysis and interlanguage analysis) to the study of language components in isolation which made them incapable of uncovering the native culture influence on students’ target language writing. With the shift of contrastive studies from “linguistic competence to communicative competence and from...the study of sentences to the study of text and discourse” (Mukattash, 2001, p. 117), and with the development of contrastive rhetoric, culture-discourse transfer started to gain some momentum in the realm of applied language studies.

Contrastive Rhetoric

Contrastive rhetoric is an area of research that studies discourse differences between different languages and cultures as reflected in the writing of second/foreign language students (Xing et al., 2008). The emergence of this field of study is attributed to the work of one man, the American applied linguist Robert Kaplan. Since Kaplan’s (1966) seminal study, the field of contrastive rhetoric has come a long way from the analysis of international students’ paragraphs in the late 1960s to the intercultural discipline it is today.

Kaplan based his work on the assumption that logic and rhetoric are both interdependent and culture specific. Accordingly, different cultures impose different perspectives of the world, and different languages have different rhetorical patterns. In relation to this, Kaplan (1966) illustrates:

Logic (in the popular, rather than the logician's sense of the word), which is the basis of rhetoric, is evolved out of a culture; it is not universal. Rhetoric, then, is not universal either, but varies from culture to culture and even from time to time within a given culture. It is affected by canons of taste within a given culture a given time. (p. 2)

Connor (1996) maintains that each language has its unique rhetorical conventions and that some of those conventions interfere in foreign language writing. Even if they use the correct grammar and the relevant vocabulary, non-native students’ target language writing exhibits foreign-sounding structures that belong to the first language and many of their “sentences make more sense in the students’ native language than in English...” (Bennui, 2008, p. 73). This weirdness in students’ foreign language composition could be related to their unawareness of audience’s perceptions and expectations, organizational modes and the sociocultural context of

their target language writing since “conventions of written discourse are shaped by culture, and thus differ cross-culturally...every culture defines its ‘genres’ by specifying their form, content, language, audience in a way that is not necessarily shared by other cultures” (Merrouche, 2006, p. 193).

Kaplan’s (1966) article “*Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education*” was the first in an ESL setting that was devoted to the study of rhetoric in writing, thus, extending the analysis beyond the sentence level. Kaplan’s (1966) pioneering study analyzed the organization of paragraphs in ESL student essays and indicated that L1 rhetorical structures were evident in the L2 writing of his sample students. Starting from a holistic analysis of 500 international students’ English essays and on the basis of Aristotelian rhetoric and logic, Kaplan (1966) identified five types of paragraph development, each reflecting different rhetorical tendencies, and came to the 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). The five original paragraph development types are described by Connor (2002) as follows:

Anglo-European expository essays are developed linearly whereas essays in Semitic languages use parallel coordinate clauses; those in Oriental languages prefer an indirect approach, coming to the point in the end; and those in Romance languages and in Russian include material that, from a linear point of view, is irrelevant. (p. 494)

Orientation, Aim and Field

Contrastive rhetoric emerged in the first place as a result to the growing number of international students enrolling in American universities which made American writing teachers and researchers interested in the distinct rhetorical styles exhibited in the writing of non-native students. Therefore, in orientation, contrastive rhetoric is fundamentally pedagogical and has “a significant impact on the teaching of writing in both ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes” (Connor et al., 2008, p. 1).

Contrastive rhetoric, asserts Connor (1996), was originally developed to identify and explain problems faced by non-native learners. It attempts to provide teachers and students with knowledge of the language-culture relationship and to demonstrate how language learners’ written products reflect their textual discourse features and patterns of organization. However; according to Wang (2006), when reviewing his original study Kaplan found that contrastive rhetoric can offer more than the analysis of rhetorical differences between languages. It can provide a cultural understanding as well as the right mechanisms that help students overcome their difficulties and produce effective L2 texts. Moreover, Kaplan acknowledged that its aim goes beyond pedagogy “to describe ways in which written texts operate in larger cultural contexts” (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; cited in Wang, 2006, p. 22).

After being limited in its early years of development to the study of students’ essays, today - after the increase in the types of written texts within second/foreign language education around the world - contrastive rhetoric’s field of study has expanded to include writing in many EAP/ESP situations. It continues to contribute to our understanding of cultural differences in general as well as in the teaching of ESL/EFL writing. Other important genres relevant to

contrastive rhetoric studies include academic research articles, research reports and writing for professional purposes, such as business, for example.

From Contrastive Rhetoric to Intercultural Rhetoric

In 2004 and after reviewing the goals, methods and achievements of research in contrastive rhetoric; Connor (2004) suggested a new umbrella term to stand for the contemporary scope of cultural influences in second/foreign language writing. The term “*intercultural rhetoric*” was proposed by Connor after she came to realize the dynamic nature of writing and culture, and how writing in a given culture is closely attached to the intellectual history and the social structures of that specific culture. Connor (2004) points out:

Changing definitions of written discourse analysis – from text-based to context sensitive – and of culture – from static to dynamic – contribute to the changing focus of intercultural rhetoric research, a new term that better reflects the dynamic nature of the area of study. (p. 302)

The concept “*intercultural rhetoric*” was introduced to include cross-cultural studies as well as the interactive situations in which writers with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds negotiate L2 writing for varied purposes (Connor, 2008). It was hoped that its use would avoid any suggestion that one language is inferior to another (U. Connor, personal communication, May, 2005). The word intercultural emphasizes that international communication (speaking or writing) requires both parties to be involved, where the accommodation to each other’s styles is necessary and goes both ways (ibid.). Intercultural rhetoric is a better term because it shifts attention from pure contrast and possible stereotyping and encourages the examination of communication in action by studying how texts are both created and consumed. It focuses “on the social contexts of discourse” as well as the “processes that lead to the products” (Connor, 2004, p. 292).

The Influence of Arab Culture

Arabic-English studies can be traced to the late 1950s where the fundamental aim was to anticipate learning difficulties through contrasting languages on different levels: phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical, relying basically on structural linguistics (Mukattash, 2001). By the end of the 1980s, with the shift of contrastive studies towards an examination of communicative competence, texts and communication strategies, discussion broadened to include cultural influences on Arabic written discourse. More recently, there has been increased interest in the influence of Islam, ancient Arab civilization and Standard Arabic on Arabs’ thought patterns, their rhetorical choices and the process of learning an additional language, English.

Al-Khatib (2001; cited in Abu Rass, 2011) for instance investigated the way Arabs write personal letters in English. He found that their writing reflects a culture-specific tendency to include questions about the addressee’s health, family and personal life which is something unusual for a native English speaker to do. Abu Rass (2011) refers to the great influence of Islam on Arab culture. She stresses that “Moslems usually accept principles covered in the Qura'n as Divine truth and reject others that differ from the Qura'nic principles and teachings, which embrace all aspects of life” (Abu Rass, 2011, p. 207). As a result, Arab students never question

the ultimate truth and have no room for doubt expecting their audience to be in complete agreement.

In a related matter, Feghali (1997) argues that “social life in the Arab region is characterized by ‘situation-centeredness’, in which loyalty to one’s extended family and larger ‘in-group’,” takes precedence as opposed to “U.S. Americans’ self-reliant and ‘individual-centered’ approach to life” (p. 352). This sort of collectiveness is demonstrated in learners’ writings in the use of pronouns such as “*we*” and “*us*”.

Similarly, Smith (2005) examined the influence of audience and context on Arab and Chinese students’ rhetorical choices by assigning them to write two letters: one for a home country professor, the other for an American professor. Smith (2005) found that Arab students’ writing demonstrates ‘solidarity’ - which Feghali (1997) refers to as collectiveness - using “*we*” and “*their*” to show their group orientation and unity with their classmates. Furthermore, there was evidence of religious influence in terms of constant reference to God. In fact, one of the study participants commented: “In Arabic, you can relate everything back to God—In English you shouldn’t do that, but in Arabic, you can do anything” (Smith, 2005, p. 90). According to Abu Rass (2011) religious expressions appear mainly on the top of letters using expressions like “in the name of God, the beneficent, and the merciful”, in addition to others, such as “God willing”, to express the desire for something good to happen in the future.

This Arab culture/language influence on Arab learners’ English writing persists even at an advanced level. Al-Qahtani (2006) examined differences between research article introductions written by Arab scholars and those by American native English speakers using the CARS model (Create A Research Space). Through his analysis of Arab authors’ introductions, he found some cultural/religious sentences which do not reflect any of the CARS model moves and which are irrelevant to the topic discussed in the article. These sentences are classified in Al-Qahtani’s (2006) words into three categories:

The first is the Islamic opening statements that are required in many contexts particularly formal speeches, letters, acknowledgements, etc. The second is the use of the Holy Qur’an and the prophet (peace be upon him) sayings within the text. And the third is the inclusion of acknowledgements and prayers for the helpers at the end of the introduction. (pp. 78-79)

Another typical feature of Arabic discourse which has been discussed frequently is repetition as a persuasive tool. In this matter, Feghali (1997) argues that repetition is the most effective argumentation strategy: “repeated words, phrases and rhythms move others to belief, rather than the “quasilogical” style of Western logic, where interlocutors use ideas to persuade” (p. 361). Koch (1983) sees that frequent use of repetition or what she calls ‘presentation’ is a “corollary to the cultural centrality of the *lughah* (the Arabic language) in Arab-Islamic society” (p. 47). Lahlali (2012), for his part, highlights that repetition is an ideological tool to reinforce one’s thoughts, and a strategy that can have a persuasive and emotional impact on the audience.

Culture Awareness and Contrastive Rhetoric

Kaplan (1966) attributes students’ failure in the use of the appropriate target language rhetorical styles to their unawareness of the organizational modes of the written language.

According to Kaplan (1987; cited in Davies, 2004), native speakers recognize which modes to use and the consequences of their choices; non-native speakers, on the other hand, do not possess “as complete an inventory of possible alternatives” and do not recognize “the sociolinguistic constraints on those alternatives” (p. 85).

Awareness raising has most likely been the most essential contrastive rhetoric tool for helping non-native students overcome their difficulties in target language composition. In relation to this, Kubota & Lehner (2004) argue that contrastive rhetoric has “laudable pedagogical intentions to raise teachers’ and students’ cultural and rhetorical awareness in second language writing...” (p. 7). Thus, it is necessary first for second and foreign language instructors, especially those involved in the teaching of writing, to develop some familiarity with cross-cultural variation in the use of textual features and organizational patterns. Then, it is their duty to transmit this knowledge to students through classroom implementation. Davies (2004) on his part holds that:

“Raising students’ consciousness” is commonly viewed as one of the most important goals of L2 composition instruction, because it is thought that by enhancing students’ conscious awareness of the rhetorical traditions of both their native language and the target language, they will be able to identify cross-cultural differences, thereby making an easier transition to the rhetorical patterns of the target language. (p. 83)

In her empirical study at the University of Arizona, Smith (2005) found that students can develop some awareness of the rhetorical differences between their first and target languages and that they can switch in their use depending on the audience and the context of their writing. Although her sample was limited (four non-native students: two Chinese speakers and two Arabic speakers) and therefore cannot be generalized, her findings were in favor of awareness raising to overcome cross-cultural differences. Smith (2005) believes that students’ awareness “of how rhetorical conventions vary across languages” (p. 79) came about as a result of “a strong focus on analysis and writing for a particular audience” (ibid., pp. 82-83) in the University of Arizona’s first-year composition courses. In other words, raising students’ awareness of the rhetorical differences between their first and target languages required explicit teaching which included student-led discussions contrasting “different stylistic conventions” across both languages (ibid., p.98).

Conclusion

Writers’ cultural background influences their organization of written discourse. Since language and writing are cultural phenomena, each language has its unique rhetorical conventions (Connor, 1966). When relying on their first language writing strategies to write in the target language, learners may produce awkward pieces of texts. Contrastive rhetoric or intercultural rhetoric - even if the latter makes a better label for the field, it is still not widely conceived - is a research area in second/foreign language learning which aims to diminish non-native learners’ problems in composition by identifying them and comparing them to the rhetorical strategies of their first language (ibid.).

Arabic is one of the five languages originally investigated by Kaplan (1966) in his pioneering work on contrastive rhetoric. Kaplan (1966) found that in addition to the overuse of

coordination, Arabic paragraph development relies on a complex series of parallel construction. Years later, many other studies treated the Arabic-English differences from a contrastive rhetoric perspective for the sake of identifying the most common linguistic/cultural differences. However, the majority of them are descriptive in orientation, without a problem-solving intention. Awareness of differences between the first and target languages as well as target language awareness raising has been proved to be an effective measure for overcoming cultural barriers (cf. Smith 2005; Xing et al., 2008). Therefore, ESL/EFL specialists and teachers should focus on cultural differences in composition courses, first by teaching students to appreciate their native language rhetorical traditions, second by elucidating the cross-cultural differences and finally, by assisting them to make the transition to the target language organizational conventions.

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