



Rhetoric Transfer in L2 Writing: The Role of Second Language Proficiency

Adel Abu Radwan

Department of English,
College of Arts and Social Sciences,
Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

Abstract

Second language writing research has unequivocally demonstrated that a salient feature of L2 writing is the writers' tendency to switch back and forth between their L1 and L2, transferring their respective languages' rhetorical patterns, especially when they struggle with an L2 writing problem (Wang, 2003; Woodall, 2000). Ostler (1987), among others (cf. Thompson & Thomas, 1983; Cowan, 1978), claims that, despite their mastery of English, the L2 writing of Arabic-speaking students consistently exhibits rhetorical patterns peculiar to Arabic written discourse. However, Fakhri (1994) discovered that lack of conformity to English norms in Arabic-speaking students' L2 writing was not the result of transfer from the learners' native language. Rather, "factors such as the subjects' unfamiliarity with acceptable writing techniques ... or purely developmental factors common to all ESL learners may be a more plausible explanation." (p. 84)

The apparent disparity in research findings calls for further research to find out whether transfer could be the source of L2 writing problems among Arabic-speaking writers. Hence, this study has analyzed written text collected from 16 graduate students, divided into three groups. Statistical analyses have revealed significant differences between the intermediate Arabic group, on the one hand, and both the advanced Arabic speaker and the English native speaker groups on the other in frequency of most features. This result suggests that transfer from the native language into the target language during the writing process decreases as the writers' L2 proficiency develops, which casts some doubt on certain assumptions of the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis.

Keywords: Rhetoric transfer, proficiency, composition, discourse, contrastive analysis