

Thesis Statement in English Argumentative Essays by Arab Students: A Study of Contrastive Rhetoric

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Abstract

This contrastive rhetoric study follows Petrić's (2005) work and investigates the thesis statement element in English argumentative essays written by eight Saudi students studying at an English language institute in the United States which offers intensive English programs that help students meet the academic programs requirement of language proficiency. The paper compares students' argumentative essays written before and after a workshop on writing. The workshop is given to highlight the cultural differences between English and Arabic argumentative writing. The findings indicate that the texts written after the workshop reflected a greater inclination towards the conventional use of the thesis statement in the English argumentative essays. Additionally, they adhered to one option from the two given in the prompt. The paper concludes by arguing for the importance of addressing the cultural differences in the writing classroom.

Keywords: Arabic rhetoric; Contrastive rhetoric; ESL writing; Writing instruction

Introduction

Contrastive rhetoric has taken multiple paths since it was initiated by Kaplan (1966). Several researchers (Connor 1996, 2002; Hinds, 1987) have extended Kaplan's (1966) ideas, and defended his original thoughts. A major scholar in the field Ulla Connor (2002) accomplished a pivotal work tracing its history and developments. Since it is involved with cultural aspects of language production, several scholars from all over the world (Kobayashi, 1984; Kubota, 1998; Liu 2007; Mohamed-Sayidina, 2010) have contributed significant works examining the similarities and differences between their own languages and English. Kaplan (1966) argued that L2 writing is significantly influenced by transfer of L1 rhetoric.

Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric claim invigorated the idea of this research and thus it seeks to elicit the cultural differences in English argumentative essays written by Arabic speakers. As a first step to conduct further investigations on examining the bond between Arabic and English argumentation, this study focuses on the thesis statement element of the academic papers due to the crucial role it plays in the argumentative writing in English. It follows Petrić's (2005) study where she examined the contrastive rhetoric in writing pedagogy in a monolingual class of Russian students. She focused on the use of thesis statement in two argumentative essays written by the students before and after a six-day writing course. The comparison of the two groups of essays reflected that essays written after the course showed higher presence of thesis statements, more uniformity in the position of the thesis statements, especially in the conventional position, and less variety in the formulation of thesis statements. This paper applies Petrić's (2005) assessment criteria—the occurrence, placement, and the linguistic and rhetorical realization of the thesis statement. By focusing on the thesis statement in eight Saudi students' argumentative essays written before and after a workshop on writing, this study specifically aims to examine the role of teaching the cultural differences in writing. In general, it aims to examine the validity of teaching the cultural differences in the academic writing classroom. In addition, it discusses some important issues pertinent to contrastive rhetoric such as the belief that the rhetorical patterns used in writing in the native language interfere while writing in a different language.\

Literature review

Contrastive rhetoric definitions and developments

The American applied linguist Robert Kaplan started the contrastive rhetoric research in 1966 which mainly underscores the cultural differences in writing. Connor defined 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 explaining the research in its early stages, Connor (2002) gave a clear synopsis of Kaplan's (1966) method by stating,

Kaplan's (1966) pioneering study analyzed the organization of paragraphs in ESL student essays and identified five types of paragraph development, each reflecting distinctive rhetorical tendencies. Kaplan claimed that 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)

It is clear then that Kaplan (1966) has considered that “language and writing are cultural phenomena” which means that “each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it” (Connor, 1996, p. 5). Overtly, this scholarship on contrastive rhetoric helped to attract researchers’ attention to focus on writing. Connor (1996) argued that contrastive rhetoric was “the first serious attempt by applied linguists in the United States to explain second language writing” because, according to her, the emphasis was confined to “teaching spoken language during the dominance of audio-lingual methodology” (p. 5). Regarding the interference issue, Connor (2002) has cogently showed that “the linguistic patterns and rhetorical conventions of the L1” that are transferred to L2 are different from the “potential interference at the level of syntax and phonology” because the first one “manifests itself in the writer’s choice of rhetorical strategies and content” (p. 494).

Similar to any other research, contrastive rhetoric has developed since it was initiated by Kaplan (1966). In her essay “New Directions in Contrastive Rhetoric,” Connor (2002) cited Hinds (1987) as one of the chief scholars who contributed to the development of contrastive rhetoric. Overtly, Hinds (1987) earned widespread recognition for his two notions “reader’s responsibility” and “writer’s responsibility” which came as a result of his comparison between English and Japanese texts (p. 141). He argued that in English the writer has more responsibility in making the message clear and the communication successful while in Japanese culture it is the opposite. Specifically, Hinds (1987) stated,

For English readers, unity is important because readers expect, and require, landmarks along the way. Transition statements are very important. It is the writer’s task to provide appropriate transition statements so that the reader can piece together the thread of the writer’s logic which binds the composition together. In Japanese, on the other hand, the landmarks may be absent or attenuated since it is the reader’s responsibility to determine the relationship between any one part of an essay and the essay as a whole. This is not to say that there are no transition statements in Japanese. There are. It is only to say that these transition devices may be more subtle and require a more active role for the reader. (146)

Like Hinds, contrastive rhetoricians in the 1980s “included linguistic text analysis as a tool to describe the conventions of writing in English and to provide analytical techniques with which to compare writing in students’ L1 and L2” (Connor, 2002, p. 496).

It is important to note that most of the criticism on contrastive rhetoric resulted from the blurry term “culture” (Connor, 2002; Petrić, 2005). Connor pointed out that many critics had discouraged the scholarship of contrastive rhetoric because of its involvement with culture where issues such as stereotypes are raised (p. 504). To refute such a claim, Connor argued that the differences in writing did not result from “natural culture” only but from “multiple sources, including L1, national culture, L1 educational background, disciplinary culture, genre characteristics, and mismatched expectations between readers and writers (p. 504). Petrić (2005) clarified the issue by stating,

Atkinson (1999) traces a move from the perceived view of culture as a static and homogenous national entity, which has been criticised for its tendency to view students as cultural types ... towards views influenced by post-modern theories, which avoid the term “culture” in favour of “identity,” “discourse,” and “agency”. As a solution, Atkinson argues for a “middleground approach to

culture” which “takes into account the cultural in the individual, and the individual in the cultural.” (p. 214)

The thesis statement

The thesis statement is one of the most important elements in writing. Researchers (Kobayashi, 1984; Kubota, 1998; Liu, 2007; Petrić, 2005; Uysal, 2008) have focused on due to its function as a cultural component. Two researchers (Kobayashi, 1984; Kubota, 1998) have compared rhetorical conventions regarding the placement of thesis statements in English and Japanese written texts. Kobayashi (1984) questioned the “differences in U.S. and Japanese students' use of rhetorical patterns in their first language writing and Japanese students' use of their first language patterns in English writing” (p. 737). The researcher instructed each student “to write three compositions, two semi-controlled compositions based on pictures and one free composition on an assigned topic-involving narrative and expository modes” (p. 737). The results showed that U.S. students preferred the deductive method while the Japanese chose the opposite. Regarding the results of Japanese students writing in English and writing in Japanese, the study showed that there was a clear similarity between the two. The researcher explained these results as a clear “tendency for Japanese ESL learners to use first language patterns and general statement types when writing in English” (p. 738).

Unlike Kobayashi (1984), Kubota (1998) found no significant difference in terms of “transfer” between English and Japanese written texts (p. 83). The researcher compared two collections of essays one in Japanese and one in English written by Japanese students in which half of them wrote on an expository topic and half on a persuasive topic. The analysis focused on the placement of the thesis statement, organization of the essay, and language use. The results showed a clear similarity between the two essays. For example, “no negative transfer of L1-specific pattern was observed. Instead, the kind of negative transfer was mainly that of poor organization. There were many instances of positive transfer” (p. 83). Kubota interpreted that as a result of “L1 writing ability, L2 proficiency, experiences, and perceptions about L1 and L2” (p. 76). Definitely, these factors that the author has pointed out are very important as ESL writers' backgrounds have different levels. It is hard to group all ESL learners under one category, even if they are from the same country. Furthermore, Kubota's new ideas are a valuable addition to the contrastive rhetoric scholarship. This definitely confirms Connor's (2002) claims that most criticism on contrastive rhetoric addresses Kaplan's (1966) original proposal and ignores the developments in the field.

While the previous works were found to be helpful for this study as they examined the thesis statements, the following three studies are more important because they explored the same type of papers selected for this study—argumentative. Liu (2007), who examined argumentative essays written by Chinese and American high school students, arrived at the same conclusion that was indicated by Kubota (1998) when he found no significant distinction in his examined papers. Specifically, Liu found that the three typical locations of thesis statement—in the introduction, middle, and conclusion—were all present in both groups, and the differences were minor. Thus, he concluded that “contemporary Chinese argumentative writing of foreign language school students is closer to the ‘Anglo-American’ rhetorical style than previously assumed” (p. 129).

Unlike the case in Kobayashi (1984), Uysal's (2008) comparison between Turkish and English essays showed that students who wrote English essays preferred the inductive method. The researcher collected two argumentative essays written by eighteen Turkish students studying

in the United States. The participants were asked to write one essay in English and one in Turkish, and the findings showed that the participants preferred using deductive patterns in Turkish (72%) essays while in English essays, participants chose inductive patterns (39%) “or collections (33%) rather than initial thesis statements (28%)” (p. 191). Only five participants used the same thesis statement in the same position in both essays. When participants were asked during the interviews about the reasons that made them change the location of the thesis statement, they maintained that they were familiar with the writing convention in English. Thus, the researcher argued that although her research “provided support for the claims of CR” the “L2 level, writer–topic interaction, emotional state, and audience played a role in the positioning of thesis statements” (p. 192).

Although both Kobayashi (1984) and Uysal (2008) have focused on the thesis statement, their exploration of inductive and deductive patterns is worth investigating. In Kobayashi’s (1984) study, the English essays reflected the deductive pattern while Japanese essays followed the inductive method. But, in Uysal’s (2008) study, English essays used the inductive organization while Turkish papers followed the deductive pattern. Uysal pointed out that the idea of having two different patterns by the same students should warn researchers against examining the L2 papers only. She supported the argument by this example: “if we had just examined L2 essays for the location of thesis statements, we could have falsely concluded that Turkish writers write inductively, despite the fact that the participants used deductive organization in their L1 essays” (p. 196).

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a discussion on the relationship between the type of reasoning (inductive or deductive) and the thesis statement, it is important to note that the *prompt* might play an effective role in this relationship. Overtly, it is known that the deductive organization indicates that the writer starts the essay with a specific and solid thesis statement and then expands it throughout the essay by adding examples and details. Yet, in the inductive organization, it is the opposite; writers begin with a general thesis statement (which seems to function more like a hypothesis) and then narrows it down into specific idea(s) at the end of the essay. So, if the previous description was accurate, it would be typical to see argumentative essays that respond to a given prompt to follow the deductive reasoning. However, in Uysal’s study both essays (English and Turkish) were written in response to given prompts. Here, Uysal’s notion of the role of the first language becomes more valid. In other words, it can be argued that when students write essays in their first language while responding to prompts, they more likely would use the deductive patterns; because it is more logical as they have clear statements in front of them and their task is merely to write a thesis statement on whether they agree or disagree. It would be odd if they choose the inductive patterns (as Turkish in their second language did in Uysal’s study).

Rhetorical writing patterns between Arabic and English

Arabic rhetoric was extensively investigated in the field of contrastive rhetoric (Connor, 1996, 2002; Hatim, 1990; Kaplan, 1966; Koch, 1983; Mohamed-Sayidina, 2010). Kaplan (1966) was specifically interested in the paragraph structure where he showed that it has “a complex series of parallel constructions, both positive and negative” (p. 15). Particularly, he identified four types of parallelisms: synonymous, synthetic, antithetic, and climatic. He maintained that the occurrence of this parallel construction appears to be “archaic or awkward” to the English reader as the style in English “is often gauged by degree of subordination rather than by coordination” (pp. 15 - 16).

Kaplan's findings were verified by Koch (1983) whose study was particularly focused on Arabic rhetoric. Koch found that the argument in Arabic discourse comes through presentation where writers repeat, paraphrase, and doubled down on their ideas. Also, she added that "[r]everse paraphrase seems to be one of the most frequent and most basic mechanisms in the statement of an argumentative thesis, and it occurs even in the most stripped-down, summary arguments" (p. 51). The author concluded by explaining her philosophy on presentation stating that "presentation is a dominant mode of argumentation in hierarchal societies, where truths are not [a] matter for individual decision. In a democracy, there is room for doubt about the truth, and thus for proof; in a core autocratic society there is not" (p. 55). This conclusion was supported by Connor (2002) who examined Arabic argumentation through several works chiefly written by Arab researchers. For example, she reviewed Hatim's (1990) study showing that "Hatim admits that Arabic argumentation may be heavy on *through-argumentation* (i.e., thesis to be supported, substantiation, and conclusion), unlike Western argumentation which... is characterized by counterarguments (i.e., thesis to be opposed, opposition, substantiation of counterclaim, and conclusion)" (Hatim, 1990, p. 500).

Other scholars (Abu Rass, 2011, 2014; Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Bacha, 2010; Mohamed-Sayidina, 2010) have incorporated a large body of research into the field of contrastive rhetoric by examining the cultural differences between Arabic and English. Abu Rass (2011) found that Arab students in their writings "have the tendency for exaggeration, assertion and group orientation. They also demonstrate their unity of belief, their tendency towards dichotomous thinking and their belief in a one right way or a single true path" (p. 210). Mohamed-Sayidina's (2010) research can be added to Petrić's (2005) and Uysal's (2008) although the last two were about different languages. Mohamed-Sayidina's (2010) study on ESL writing by Arabic speakers confirmed the issue of interference. She examined fifty research papers focusing on the types of transition words, and found that additive transition words were more commonly used comparing to the other types, like adversative, temporal, causative (p. 263). Surprisingly, the use of adversative transitions was significantly low. The author concluded by connecting her findings to the nature of Arabic culture, which according to her, does not "[tolerate] dissent and adversative opinions" (p. 264). Like Koch (1983), Mohamed-Sayidina (2010) confirmed the dependency of written language on the oral style as she found a high use of repetition of nouns of the same type which, according her, "may be a reflection of this cultural tendency to 'stick' to the same things as an expression of solidarity and loyalty" (p. 264).

Since Arab ESL students writing in English transfer L1 rhetorical patterns into their English writing (Mohamed-Sayidina, 2010) a pedagogical model was needed to facilitate the educators' task to assist their Arab ESL students. This task was exquisitely accomplished by Bacha (2010) who based her instructional approach on an experiment she made in order to elicit the students' specific needs. She gave Arabic students studying in Lebanon a pre-test and a post-test with a four-week course in between. Bacha's approach followed five steps: building the context, modeling and deconstructing texts, constructing texts jointly, constructing texts independently and linking related texts. The results of the second essay showed "qualitative development in the organization of the argumentative essay" (p. 235). The first essays reflected weak argumentation skills among Arab students which, according to the author, "confirms the rhetoric argument and the characteristics of L1 Arabic argumentative writing which is anecdotal and descriptive" (p. 235).

It seems then that the use of oral traits in written Arabic that the researchers have discerned is behind the zigzag pattern of the Arab ESL paragraphs that Kaplan (1966) has identified. In

other words, those scholars found many traits in Arabic written texts that are typically found in oral discourse such as repetition, paraphrasing, and description (Bacha, 2010, Koch, 1983). Also, Koch's (1983) idea of "presentation" which, according to her, is frequently apparent in "hierarchical societies, where truths are not matter for individual decision" might explain the reason why rhetoric of most collective societies (like Arabic and Asian ones) appeared in Kaplan's (1966) diagram in a zigzag and circular manner, while the rhetoric of individualistic cultures (e.g. the Anglo-American society) had a linear pattern (Koch, 1983, p. 55). Definitely, this claim is worth investigating as other societies that were known to be individualistic, e.g. the European, had also a zigzag pattern in Kaplan's (1966) proposal.

It is clear that Arabic rhetoric as described above makes Arab writers' arguments look like descriptions more than arguments in the American sense. Hatim's (1990) idea of counterargument that he discovered in English essays is very brilliant. He seems to suggest that the English writer thinks of the reader (or the critic) while Arab writers pay little attention to this issue as they find it enough to provide clear and thorough ideas. If this was true, then it would be difficult for Arab ESL students, especially at the beginner level, to produce English argumentative essays as preferred by professors in American academic programs. So, it is apparent that the obstacles that face ESL students, e.g., language proficiency and L1 writing ability, which were already pointed out by the researchers, (Kobayashi, 1984; Kubota, 1998; Uysal (2008)) should be expanded to include *rhetoric*. Finally, it is very interesting to note how the discussion above focuses on rhetoric and discourse rather than on the sentence-level; this is definitely one of the advantages of Kaplan's (1966) pivotal work, as pointed out by Connor (1996).

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study were eight Saudi students whose native language is Arabic. They were attending an English Language Institute located at a university in the United States. The mission of the institute is to offer intensive English programs for students who need to improve their English language skills and meet the requirements of the academic programs at the university which require a certain level of language proficiency. According to their teachers, the students' levels at the time of collecting the data range from high-beginner to mid-intermediate.

Comparison and analysis criteria

Since the focus of this study is on the use of thesis statement in students' argumentative essays, it is important to note its typical nature and position in English argumentative essays. The criteria that will be used to conduct the comparison and analysis in this study are the same ones suggested by Petrić (2005) which consist of (a) the placement of the thesis statement, and (b) the linguistic and rhetorical realization of the thesis statement.

a) The placement of the thesis statement in English argumentative writing.

It is traditionally known that the thesis statement in English argumentative essays is located at the end of the introductory paragraph (Bean, 2001; Petrić, 2005; Skwire, 1979). Several critics (Haluska, 2006; Ji, 2008) paid little attention to the location and focused instead on its structure and function. Similar to Kaplan (1966), Ji (2008), for instance, considered that the thesis statement is the distinctive characteristic of the English linear rhetorical pattern. This present study emphasizes the importance of placing the thesis statement at the end of the introductory paragraph. This placement is what will be labeled *conventional* in this paper.

b) The linguistic and rhetorical realization of the thesis statement.

For the purpose of this study, the thesis statement is defined as “the main idea that controls the whole essay;” so, this proposed definition is what will be meant when the phrase *thesis statement* is mentioned in this paper. Many scholars (Bean, 2001; Haluska, 2006; Ji, 2008; Petrić, 2005) highlighted its role as an important organizer of the paper because it enables the reader to follow the writer’s argument and development.

Since there is no specific wording for the thesis statement, the suggested scheme to identify it is through searching for the idea that appears to be dominant throughout the examined essay. Petrić (2005) proposed two categories, which will be implemented in this study but will not be adhered to as other expressions might be used by participants. Petrić’s categories show that the thesis statement might be used as:

- a) the main thought and purpose of the essay (e.g. “I will argue;” “this essay examines”);
- b) an expression of opinion (e.g. “I believe;” “in my opinion”).

Petrić noted that the first category has more “rhetorical value” because it tells both the writer’s opinion and the purpose of the essay (p. 224).

As noted above, these criteria are what will be referred to when the phrase *the conventional use of thesis statement in English argumentative essays* is mentioned in this study. Also, the essays selected for this study will be judged based on their meeting of these conventions.

Procedure

Students were asked to write an argumentative essay responding to a given prompt. After they had returned their first essays, the teacher gave them a one-hour workshop on writing where he explicitly familiarized them with the conventional framework of the argumentative essay in English. At the end of the workshop, the teacher wrote a prompt and asked the students to write an argumentative essay in response. Both the pretest and the posttest were compared by focusing only on the thesis statement.

The workshop on writing

The workshop aimed to check the validity of introducing the cultural differences in writing in an explicit way. Thus, the strategy of the workshop was to introduce those differences in the most serious and careful way in order not to make the students think that they were mere general and scattered thoughts by the teacher. The workshop took one hour during the class time. At the beginning of the workshop, the teacher, who shares with the students the mother tongue but communicates with them in English, told the students that he was unsatisfied with their first essays, and asked them to pay attention to the characteristics in English argumentative writing.

During the first fifteen minutes, the teacher asked the students to name the similarities and differences between Arabic and English argumentative styles. The students, vaguely and generally, mentioned several, yet insignificant features. They pointed out that in Arabic, there should be “a good title,” “a good word choice,” “many ideas,” and more importantly, according to them, the writer has to be “respectable to readers and people in general.” While talking about the English argumentative essays, the students stated that they should “include more quotes,” and “they are longer.” Clearly, it can be observed that the students did not have the basic knowledge regarding the nature of argumentative writing neither in English nor in their native language. For example, they did not tackle how the argument can be presented or developed in writing.

During the next half an hour of the workshop time, and in order to explain the nature of argumentative essays in English, the teacher told the students that he would focus on explaining the idea that should control the whole essay. He highlighted the problem in their first essays

where the essays tackled the two options given in the prompt, instead of choosing and developing one option and arguing for it. He explained that each argumentative essay must include a specific and a clear claim which had to be summed up in a sentence or two, and that was known to be called thesis statement.

Furthermore, the teacher explained the importance of having an introduction where the thesis statement should be placed at the end. In order to achieve that, the teacher emphasized the importance of establishing a frame of reference to the reader which starts by introducing the general topic of the essay followed by stating some existing arguments, if necessary. Then, the topic has to be narrowed down to one idea which has to be developed throughout the essay. He suggested some linguistic and rhetorical features that usually help in building the thesis such as the purpose of the essay, and the position the writer is taking. For the conclusion, the students were told to restate the thesis, but not to repeat it, because the conventional main purpose of the conclusion is to wrap up what the writer has mentioned.

For the last fifteen minutes of the workshop meeting, the teacher provided the students with copies of some academic argumentative essays written by native English speakers and asked them to work in groups to underline the thesis statement of each paper. At the end, the teacher gave the students a prompt and asked them to write an argumentative essay, and reminded them to apply all what they had learned in the class (the complete lesson plan is stated in Appendix 1).

Results

As noted above, the comparison made in this study focuses on the thesis statement, with particular attention paid to the occurrence, position, and the linguistic and rhetorical realization of the thesis statement. Concerning the last segment, the students' linguistic and rhetorical usages of the thesis statement were compared to the conventional linguistic and rhetorical features in English argumentative essays as described above. Table 1 summarizes the findings of the position of thesis statements.

Table 1. The position of the thesis statement in the essays

Position of thesis statement in the essays ($N=8$)		
Position of the thesis statement	1 st Essay	2 nd Essay
1 st sentence of the essay	0	2
Last sentence of the introduction	0	4
Main body	3	1
Conclusion	1	0
No thesis statement	4	1

The presence of the thesis statement

As Table 1 indicates, only four students wrote thesis statements in the first essay while seven appeared in the second. As pointed out earlier, these findings are not surprising because Saudi ESL students at the English language institutes had no experience in writing academic papers neither in Arabic nor in English. They had no experience in writing academic papers because the academic institutions in Saudi Arabia focus on giving examinations rather than writing academic papers. Again, these findings are not surprising because Arabic rhetoric, as described in the literature review section, favors giving full descriptions instead of picking one idea and sticking to it, which the thesis statement is all about. This idea is supported by some researchers (Bacha 2010; Connor 2002; Hatim 1990; Kaplan 1966; Koch 1983) who have argued that Arabic argumentation tends to be thorough which might compel writers to support their claims with examples instead of defending it by refuting the opposing arguments. This description of Arabic argumentation can be easily discerned in the students' writing of the first essay. Surely, the previous account was on the nature of argumentation in general but it could be related to the study of the thesis statement because its function in the argumentative essays is vital as it compels writers to narrow down their ideas. Yet, with arguments that require profound explanation and intensive use of examples, writers find it problematic to unite all of their ideas in one sentence. So, it appears that writers of this later type make it the reader's responsibility (Hinds, 1987) to fully read and comprehend the ideas and arguments presented in the text.

In this study, the students who wrote essays without thesis statements gave full analysis of the two opinions provided in the prompt. For example, to respond to the first prompt: "Parents should control what their children watch in T.V. Do you agree or disagree?" students gave long lists for the advantages and the disadvantages of enabling children to watch TV. Here is one example where the student presented several examples of the pros in one paragraph and the cons in another, and concluded by this statement:

Data Extracted 1

As a conclusion it can be said that television as a tool has nothing wrong with it, but how is allowed to be used in the house plays an important role.

This vague statement might work as a thesis statement if the writer supported it (in any part of the paper) but since the rest of the paper was devoted to explain the two options, it is hard to conclude that this essay is argumentative.

The placement of the thesis statement

It should be clarified here that the comparison in this section and the following one will be between four essays in the first group to seven essays in the second as the essays that did not have thesis statements were excluded.¹

It is clear that the absence of writing a thesis statement at the end of the introduction in the first essay reflects the students' unawareness of its conventional position in English argumentative writing. Also, its presence four times in that location indicates that the students had benefited from the workshop. Regarding the other positions, particularly with writing no thesis statement as a first sentence of the essay in the first group and using it two times in the second seems to suggest that students have inaccurately interpreted the teacher's advice in the workshop as he stressed the importance of introducing the idea of the essay in the introduction.

Linguistic and rhetorical realization of the thesis statement

The findings of this section are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. *The linguistic and rhetorical features of the thesis statement*

Position of thesis statement	1 st Essay	Linguistic & Rhetorical Features	2 nd Essay	Linguistic & Rhetorical Features
First sentence of the essay	0	-	2	Writer's opinion (2)
Last sentence of the Intro	0	-	4	Thesis Strategy (1) Writer's opinion (3)
Main body	3	General idea (3)	1	General idea (1)
Conclusion	1	Writer's opinion (1)	0	-

The first essay

All the students in their writing of the first essay failed to employ the strong rhetorical patterns: the main thought or the purpose of the essay. Instead, only the following statement reflected the linguistic feature of expressing the opinion of the writer:

Data Extracted 2

My opinion is I agree that watching T.V. is important for teach children some things and to spend nice or happy time but they must be under the supervision or control parents

The three thesis statements that were identified in the middle of the essay functioned as general ideas. They do not have any of the rhetorical features of the conventional thesis statement in English writing. Here are the three excerpts:

Data Extracted 3

There is a big advantage, some programs are especially for adults, and children can't watch those programs. The families can stay with their children and teach them how they can use the TV programming for educational purposes.

Data Extracted 4

It is important for children to watch television under their parents' supervision.

Data Extracted 5

If the parents do not check the programs which their children watch, the kids could watch programs not suitable for their age.

It should be noted that the issue with the previous statements was not only with their defiance of the conventional usage in English essays, but more significantly their failure of

controlling the whole essays. When the conventional use of the thesis statement was recommended, it was because of its strong pattern to control the whole essay. For example, when a thesis statement starts with “In this paper I am going to argue that parents must not allow their children to watch TV alone...” this kind of statement enforces the writer to stay within this claim. However, when a writer offers a statement like the previous one, the writer seems to have no control of the paper, and thus would jump from one idea to another. Therefore, suggesting the conventional place (the last sentence in the introduction) is vital for students as it helps them write well-formulated argumentative essays.

The second essay

The essays written after the workshop showed a significant improvement. For example, instead of explaining the pros and cons of each option provided in the prompt, like the case in the first essays, the second essays were more focused as they adhered to one option. Yet, the arguments remained weak as they leaned toward explaining the situation rather than convincing the audience. This tendency was also found in Bacha (2010) who wrote, “the rhetoric argument and the characteristics of L1 Arabic argumentative writing ... is anecdotal and descriptive” (p. 235). Regarding the implementation of the linguistic and rhetorical features, there was a notable development despite their weak structures and awkward nature.

The two thesis statements that were found in the beginning of the essays started by expressing the opinion—the second and weaker rhetorical choice, according to Petrić (2005). Here are the two statements responding to the prompt “People with prosthetic (artificial) legs should be allowed to participate in the Olympic Games. Do you agree or disagree?”

Data Extracted 6

I think it is OK if someone has artificial leg and wants to participate in the Olympics because they do not avoid any handicap to participate in any event but a society should encourage them to be a part in the world.

Data Extracted 7

In my opinion I think it is unfair for whom have artificial legs participate in Olympic for many reasons.

Despite their weakness and grammatical errors, it is clear that they indicate a clear standpoint. In the first one, the student tries to show that such a ban is a cultural issue. According to the student, the main reason is simply because the sports organizations (“they” in the student’s writing) do not prevent such thing. Hence, it seems to the student that the question or the issue should not be raised. It is known in Arabic culture that if something wrong is happening and remains private, people and media should not discuss it in public in order not to exacerbate the situation by attracting attention to it.

The use of “In my opinion” and “I think” in the second statement indicates that the student has tried to apply some of the suggestions of the possible ways of formulating the thesis statement that were given in the workshop. Similar to the essays written after the workshop, this essay manifests the students’ adherence to one side of the argument. In the conclusion of this essay, the student supported the first claim by writing:

Data Extracted 8

At the end, I don't agree with that because he can make success with whom have the same artificial legs that could be fair.

It is interesting to note the opinion's shift from "think" to "agree." This feature is common in Arabic writing where writers refuse to impose their opinion from the beginning. Instead, they start with a hypothesis to enable readers to see how they can turn the hypothesis into a fact in the conclusion. However, it is always hard to draw conclusions from a single case as it might be only a matter of coincidence. Also, as found in the previous essay, the use of "unfair" in the opening and "fair" in the closing is another indication of the student's realization of the importance of adhering to the same claim.

The four thesis statements that were found in the last sentence of the introductions had mingled the use of the linguistic and rhetorical expressions that were suggested in the workshop. Only one statement, "the essay shows" highlighted the purpose of the essay and met Petric's (2005) idea of strong rhetoric. The other three showed the writer's opinion, "I think," "In my opinion," and "To me."

The one found in the main body of the essay functioned only as a general idea in which the writer argued that,

Data Extracted 9

It is unfair because the medicine can do what you like and imagine.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the students' first essays showed many features that were proven to be typical in Arabic writing. Students repeat, paraphrase, and double down on their ideas (Koch, 1983). Their writing was too far from the conventional writing in English; particularly—as this study is concerned—from the typical thesis statement in English. There was a heavy reliance on giving loose topic sentences instead of specified statements. Some of these notes can advocate the argument of transferring as known in the contrastive rhetoric scholarship. However, the limited scope and data in this study along with the lack of literature offer an inadequate support for such assumption. Moreover, the students' level and number cannot give reliable representation of the Arabic culture, as most of them just finished high school, and had no experience in academic writing at the university level. More importantly, the system of education in Saudi Arabia relies on the examination rather than writing papers. All these factors, unfortunately, give no clear idea whether the students' writing in this study was affected by their cultural rhetorical patterns or whether it was a mere outcome of their low-level of language proficiency.

What this research can argue for is the role of teaching cultural differences in writing classroom. To fully show the productive function of the given workshop, here are the findings of the comparison that show that the essays written after the workshop reflect

- (1) higher occurrence of thesis statements (7 essays (87.5%) opposed to 4 (50%));
- (2) more adherence to the conventional position (4 essays (50%) opposed to 0);
- (3) more use of the linguistic and rhetorical features (the purpose of thesis statement:

1 opposed to 0; the writer's opinion 5 opposed to 1).

More importantly, the distinctive feature found in the second set of essays is the students' commitment to choosing and developing one option from the two given in the prompt. This adherence definitely further supports the role of addressing the cultural differences in the academic writing classroom. Petrić (2005) reached the same conclusion, although the students' improvement in her study was more significant probably due to the apparent high level of her students as compared to those in the present study.

Conclusion

The investigation of the usage of the thesis statement in argumentative essays written by Arab students studying in U.S.A. adds to the growing body of research on the scholarship. Due to the lack of studies on the use of thesis statement in Arab ESL essays, the analysis process in this study implements previous studies on thesis statements in contrastive rhetoric field in other languages and links them to the studies found on Arabic rhetoric. The specific goal behind the comparison between the essays written before and after the workshop was not to draw conclusions on the nature of Arabic argumentative styles rather it was to examine the role of addressing cultural differences in the academic writing classroom based on the element of the thesis statement.

The study has pedagogical implications and commendations for teachers teaching EFL/ESL students. The teacher should ask students, either verbally or in writing, to tell about their knowledge of writing in their native language, and it is the teacher's responsibility to point out the differences. Overtly, the objective of this is not to check the students' knowledge but to enable them to point out the differences. This makes it applicable even when the teacher does not speak the same language of students.

In fact, many ESL students, especially in English Language Institutes that prepare students for academic programs, as in the case with the students in this study, face the jeopardy of having their visas terminated if they do not achieve a certain level of language proficiency in a certain period of time. Those students along with others who enter these institutes to be prepared for the academic programs are in need of teachers who explicitly tell them that they have to improve their style of writing in order to succeed in academic life. The participants in this study had been familiarized with the rules of writing such as the thesis statement for about two semesters. Yet, when the role of the thesis statement was given as a tool of comparison for argumentative writing in their L1, students were surprised and maintained that they had never heard of it or even its purpose. According to the instructor, some students found it difficult to stick to one idea as they believed that good writing should explore all possible arguments and develop them. This belief can be linked to the common notion that "academic writing is universal" as Petrić's students also expected (p. 220).

About the Author

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Appendix A

A workshop on writing: cultural differences in writing between Arabic and English language.**Background and Rationale:**

This lesson is designed for high-beginner to low-intermediate level adult Saudi students learning English at an English language institute in the United States.

In most academic programs in Saudi Arabia, students are required to take examinations rather than to write academic papers. Therefore, it is necessary for writing teachers to help their Saudi students to be familiarized with the academic papers writing conventions, especially argumentative essays as most academic programs in the U.S.A demand.

Past argumentative essays written by the students of this class lacked the use of the thesis statement. When a few were employed, they were too far from the conventional use in English argumentative essays; e.g., their position was not in the introductory paragraph and their function was neither to show the purpose of the essay nor the opinion of the writer. Thus, this workshop was designed to address the cultural differences in the academic writing classroom as many scholars have pointed its usefulness. The focus of the cultural elements will be on the thesis statement. The essays which will be given after the workshop will be compared to those given before it in order to point out the effectiveness of teaching the cultural differences in the classroom.

Objectives:

- 1- Students will become aware of the importance of using a thesis statement in their writing.
- 2- Students will become aware of the thesis statement's conventional position in English argumentative essays.
- 3- Students will become able to apply the conventional linguistic and rhetorical patterns of the thesis statement.

Objectives	Teacher's Role	Student's Role	Time (min.)
Students will be introduced with the topic.	<p>Teacher greets the students</p> <p>Teacher introduces the topic of thesis statement and explains why it is important for them to learn it.</p> <p>He tells them that they will learn the way argumentative essays are written in English by comparing them to Arabic writing.</p>	Students listen to the teacher, and have a chance to ask about the teacher's opinion of their past essays.	2
Students will be able to share their opinions of the differences between English and Arabic writing	<p>Teacher asks students to name the similarities and differences between English and Arabic writing.</p> <p>Teacher guides the students' answers, and helps them to maintain focus on writing issues.</p>	Students have a chance to tell whatever comes to their minds of the differences they observed in the past.	15
Students will be familiarized with the general nature of argumentative essays.	Teacher tells the students that the main point of argumentative essays is to stay focused on one issue. He tells them that whenever they have to write an argumentative essay, they have to make a claim and stick to it.	Students should follow the teacher explaining the rationale behind argumentative essays.	5
Students will be introduced to the most important point of the workshop—the thesis statement.	<p>Teacher explains the importance of having an introductory paragraph where a clear and precise claim must be stated. He tells them that this is called the thesis statement in English writing.</p> <p>He tells that it is conventionally placed as the last sentence in the introductory paragraph, and emphasizes the importance of adhering to this position.</p>	Students follow the teacher explaining the conventional usage of the thesis statement in English argumentative essays.	10
Students will be given another chance to reflect on the cultural differences.	Teacher asks students if they can tell any difference between English introductory paragraphs and Arabic ones.	Students provide teachers with differences they can think of. They can help each other remembering any	3

		difference.	
Students will learn how the thesis statement is formulated.	<p>Teacher tells students that there are specific linguistic and rhetorical patterns of formulating the TS. He tells them that each stems from the rationale of the TS.</p> <p>Teacher explains that if the point is to tell the reader the purpose of the essay, they can use expressions, such as, “In this paper, I am going to argue..;” “This essay shows...”</p> <p>He tells them that if they want to express their main thought, they can use expressions, such as, “In my opinion...,” “I believe....,” “I think...”</p> <p>Teacher explains how they can develop their claim throughout the essay; and he briefly explains the role of the conclusion.</p> <p>Teacher asks students if they have questions</p>	<p>Students follow the teacher explaining these important criteria of the TS.</p> <p>They write down the rhetorical and linguistic patterns of the TS.</p> <p>They have a chance to ask question.</p>	15
Students will be able to highlight the TSs in the given papers, so they can double check that they fully understood the teacher’s explanations.	<p>Teacher passes four academic papers written by native speakers of English, and asks each pair of students to underline the thesis statement of each paper. (Each paper has four pages).</p> <p>Teacher checks students’ answers.</p> <p>Teacher reminds students of the homework which is about a prompt that contains two options in which students have to write an argumentative essay in response.</p> <p>Teacher answers students’ questions</p>	<p>In pairs, students read the TSs and share the rest of the class with their findings.</p> <p>They write down the prompt and ask questions if they have.</p>	10