Comparing the Use of Topic Signals and Strategies in English and Arabic Expository Essays

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Abstract:

    This study aims to compare and contrast the use of topic strategies and signals in English and Arabic expository writing using Goutsos's model of topic organization. The subjects were divided into two groups of students: Native Speakers of English (NSE) and Non-Native Speakers of English (NNSE). The two groups were in secondary schools. The NSE wrote expository compositions in English while the NNSE wrote expository compositions in Arabic and English. The data obtained from the writing samples were analyzed qualitatively and also quantitatively to find out the similarities and differences in the usage of topic strategies and topic signals by native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English in Arabic and English expository essays. The findings of this study showed that the expository writing of both groups of NSE and NNSE exhibit similarities. However; they might differ slightly in the occurrence of certain devices than others. The study suggested that English teachers should integrate the teaching of reading and writing English and introduce all the topic signals when they are teaching so that students would know and learn the characteristic features of good English writing.

Key words: Topic continuity, Topic shift, Transition span.

INTRODUCTION

The comparative studies deal with the historical relations between languages in terms of their influence on one another. Such studies explore the overlap between languages where the counterpoints exist (Hilal: 1962 and Nada: 1991). The current research uses and adopts Goutsos' framework of sequentiality to compare the topic strategies and topic signals in order to find out the frequency of topic signals and topic strategies in writing English and Arabic expository composition by English and Sudanese students at secondary school.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

From the experience of the researcher in dealing with writing of composition students at secondary level, it became clear that Sudanese learners of English at secondary level lack the knowledge and the skill of topic organization in their production of expository writing. The final product of their composition lacks the coherent structure which is based on the employment of sequential strategies of topic continuity and topic discontinuity (Goutsos: 1997). The instruction they receive and the materials they use do not focus on this important aspect. From another angle, their writing skills in their mother tongue heavily influence their product in the foreign language.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is concerned with the writing problems that are faced by the students and seeks to find out solutions to overcome those difficulties. It highlights the important role of linguistic devices in the topic organization and as a means by which writers start, continue, and end expository discourse as well as the organization of the expository text.

It is hoped that the findings of this study will increase the awareness of the use of linguistic devices that will automatically contribute positively to foreign languages teaching and learning especially in writing a coherent and organized composition in English and Arabic and enable teachers to evaluate their students' writing. Moreover, the study can contribute towards materials preparation.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

This study has the following objectives:
1. Comparing and contrasting the use of topic signals and topic strategies in English and Arabic expository essays.
2. Providing a coherent framework of topic organization which can work out as a frame of reference for the evaluation and assessment of the learners' production in expository writing

STUDY QUESTION

This study is going to answer the following question:
1. How frequently do English and Arabic students use topic strategies and topic signals in writing English expository essays and how frequently do Arabic students do so in writing Arabic ones?

a. How are these topic strategies used in the English expository essays by English and Arabic students?
b. How are these topic signals used in the English expository essays by English and Arabic students?
c. How are these topic strategies and topic signals used in the Arabic expository essays by Arabic students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contrastive rhetoric

In the1960s, the notion of contrastive rhetoric had its origins in pedagogical motives. In that period, a number of English second language (ESL) teachers became aware of the inadequacy of the audio-lingual method (ALM) approach in meeting the need of foreign students studying at United States tertiary institutions. Kaplan's reported speech in (1988) mentioned that a few problems have been identified when a considerable number of compositions written by international students have been scrutinized. There were many differences in the writing of English expository essays by L2 students compared to those written by native speakers. The aim of Kaplan's research is to understand those differences and to contribute to pedagogical systems bridging the gap.

Contrastive rhetoric is concerned with matters related to topicalization, ways of achieving cohesion and coherence and (the combination of surface linguistic features). The evolution of contrastive rhetoric firstly focused on direct comparison of discourse features in the texts of two different languages; secondly on the increasing number of discourse-based research which achieved dominance of syntactic/ textual features over the discourse structure; and thirdly on the wider divisions of text organization such as units of persuasive discourse, storygraph analysis, topical structure analysis, and content structure analysis. Finally, discourse research has started to concentrate on textual analysis which examines the usage of linguistic features of texts.

Contrastive rhetoric studies

Contrastive rhetoric is concerned with matters related to topicalization, ways of achieving cohesion and coherence and (the combination of surface linguistic features). Hence,

contrastive rhetoric was offered as pedagogical solution to the problem of L2 organization. The following studies lend support to the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis.

According to a study in English expository prose paraphrases focused on the degree of comprehension and retention of ideas from texts (Connor and McCagg: 1987). The purpose of this study was to find out cross-cultural differences in this kind of task and to determine the implications of such differences on ESL pedagogy. There is no evidence that the cross-cultural differences observed by Kaplan in essay writing happens when non-native English speaking students recall English expository prose. It is found that non-native speakers follow the order of the original passage while native speakers felt free to vary and rearrange the original. This difference between the native and non-native English-speakers can be explained by differences in language proficiency and writing fluency than by cultural differences. Moreover, non-native speakers recall fewer supporting details than native speakers.

A study in argumentative texts in students writing across cultures and languages was based on comparison between compositions written in L1 on an argumentative task by 16–year-old students from four different countries: England, Finland, German and the United States (Connor: 1987). The results of this study suggest the value of knowledge-based, process-oriented text analysis in the study of students writing. These analyses concentrated on the writer's causes for selecting ideas and how they are presented rather than on the surface-level structures of the language. Some cross-cultural differences were observed. The *situation + problem + solution + evaluation* structure was not used as consistently in the Finnish and German student compositions as it was in the English and U.S. student compositions. Nevertheless, the other analyses gave roughly equal results for all cultural groups. These text analyses pointed out that according to the rating scale for text

argumentation and compositions evaluation, the high-rated essays basically conformed better to the typical argument process structure: *situation + problem + solution + evaluation*, with speech act sequence of *claim, justification,* and *induction.* Moreover, it was discovered that a supplementary analysis scale concerning audience awareness and social-perspective taking demonstrated a direct and close relationship with the holistic quality rating.

In Korean writing, Eggington (1987) made an equivalent argument for an alternative rhetorical pattern. The Korean format looks as if developed from the same origin as the Japanese writing format. *Ki-Sung-Chon-Kyul* is the Korean rhetorical structure that follows a pattern of four elements: introduction and loose development, a statement of the main idea, concepts indirectly connected with the argument, and a conclusion of the main theme. Eggington claimed that Koreans prefer this pattern when they are not bilingual (English and Korean) and not widely exposed to English prose.

An equivalent pattern in Chinese writing was stated by Cheng (1985) and he argued that a Chinese rhetorical style comprises of a four-part pattern similar to the four-part patterns for both Korean and Japanese. This pattern also is believed to have the same historical source in Chinese poetry. Tsao (1983) pointed out that such origins may describe the large use of allusions and historical references observed in Chinese writing. The four- part pattern also has a historical relation to the Confucian eight-legged essay.

Analyzing rhetorical contrasts between English and Thai from a different perspective, Bickner and Peyasantiwong (1988) examined sets of students writing on the same task. They discovered that Thai students used more repetition, made extensive use of lists, and frequently did not use conclusions. English and Thai students' narrative writing were examined in a similar study by Indrasutra (1988). American writers wrote

essays in English, and Thai writers wrote essays in both
English and Thai languages. Although structure and cohesive
measures did not show significant differences, there were
indeed clear different preferences for the structure of the
narratives. Indrastura found that 'Thai narratives preferred
analogy for narrative description, making more use of
figurative language such as metaphor, simile, and
personification. She claimed that the distinction may be caused
by the different role narratives play in Thai culture. Narratives
are used as an important medium for exposition and instruction
which are not found in the American education context. Thai
students wrote stories which are taken from real life and were
intended to explain or construct.

A study examined Vietnamese students' narrative
writing in English in Australia by Söter (1988). She argued that
Vietnamese writers exert 'less effort on the plot development
and more effort on the attributional features of the characters'.
Analyzing culturally rhetorical preferences with respect to
Hindi, Kachru (1983, and 1988) examined a series of studies of
Hindi and English texts. She stated that syntactic and cohesive
features differ in the two languages as a rhetorical preferential
organization of the discourse. In a study of expository prose
(1983), she claimed that Hindi expository prose organization is
sometimes spiral instead of linear, reflecting circular patterns
of organization in traditional Hindi culture and religion.
Moreover, she claimed that traditional organizational patterns
are discovered in Indian- English writing.

In a further recent study, Kachru (1988) observed that
some Hindi expository prose essays follow linear patterns of
organization and perform 'English conventions of paragraph
unity, topic statement, and support for an argument following
the claim'; other expository prose writing neglects these
conventions. She does not state that all English expository

prose essentially follows the above conventions, but that they represent accepted reader expectations in English.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It uses samples of expository writing composition produced by secondary school students as its primary data.

Data collection and procedure

The data were obtained from the writing samples of students who are native speakers of English (NSE) and students who are non-native speakers of English (NNSE). The NSE group wrote expository compositions (in English). The NNSE wrote two versions; one in English and the other in Arabic.

The students were asked to choose one topic from a list of four topics to write on. The compositions written by both groups were collected in the second term of the academic year 2006/2007 during second and fourth period of the particular day. The compositions in English were written in fixed time (60 minutes), but another one hour was given to the Sudanese to write the expository composition in Arabic, this was done after a break of half an hour following to their finishing of writing the English expository composition.

Study instrument

The compositions written by the two groups were analyzed to provide answers to the research questions.

The writing task consisted of four topics of composition that deal with different aspects of writing in order to give the students the chance to choose one topic to write on. These topics were chosen because they did not require expert knowledge from the students. The students could use their background

knowledge of the topic in order to express themselves clearly. These topics were taken from Carrell (1992):

1. A problem in society that concerns you.
2. The easiest things for you to do in your home.
3. My life will be different from that of my parents.
4. The most important technological invention of the past twenty years.

The same topics were translated into Arabic and were given to the Sudanese students to choose one topic to write on. The topic in Arabic had to be the same topic that the student wrote in English. The main purpose of the writing samples was to compare the topic strategies and topic signals used in by the students in English and Arabic expository compositions.

Validity and reliability

The compositions which were written by the students were checked by two independent raters for the occurrence of topic strategies and topic signals. Moreover, the descriptive analyses of the students' essays were checked for inter-rater reliability.

Data analysis

The data obtained from the writing samples were analyzed qualitatively and also quantitatively to find out the similarities and differences in the usage of topic signals and topic strategies by native speakers of English and non-native speakers of English in Arabic and English expository essay.

All essays were parsed into sentences using a decimal system to show paragraph breaks and beginnings and ends of sentences within the paragraph. A new paragraph starts with a new number and the sentences are labeled as sub-sections of that number (e.g. 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 2.1, 2.2., 2.3, etc.).

The Goutsos' model is then applied to the texts to show how the students used the sequential strategies to organize

their topics. The following taxonomy was used to classify the strategies and topic signals employed by the students.

- ➢ **Topic Continuity**
  - o **Paragraph breaks**
  - o **Absence of signals**
  - o **Tense continuity**
  - o **Discourse markers**
  - o **Encapsulation nominals**
  - o **Local cohesive device of repetition**
- ➢ **Topic Shift**
  - • **Topic Framing**
    - o **Paragraph break**
    - o **Sentence-initial adjuncts**
    - o **Enumeration**
    - o **Question-answer pair**
    - o **Discourse markers**
    - o **Metadiscourse markers**
  - • **Topic Introduction**
    - o **Initial dummy elements**
    - o **Indefinite subject**
    - o **Question-answer pair**
    - o **Enumeration**
    - o **Metadiscourse markers**
    - o **Renominalizaion**
  - • **Topic Closure**
    - o **Discourse markers**
    - o **Metadiscourse markers**
    - o **Encapsulation**
    - o **Paragraph break**

The taxonomy is embedded in the figure taken from Goutsos (1997:75), see chapter two page 41.
The texts were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

For the qualitative analysis, each text is labeled and then the extracts which exemplify the Topic Strategies and the topic signals were cited. The point being focused on is either <u>underlined</u>, *Italicaized* or **bolded**. In each extract, the analysis shows how the topic signals are used to indicate the sequential strategy and how they are employed to unfold the continuation spans and the transition spans.

For the quantitative analysis, all of the instances that occurred in all of the texts were assembled in frequency tables. These tables were used in two ways:

(1) They were entered into the SPSS programme to show the mode(s) and the percentages of each of the topic signals coded. The programme also shows a histogram that provides a schematic picture of the relationship between the items as well as showing the curve of normality that indicates the normal distribution of the data.

(2) The tables obtained from the SPSS programme were entered into Excel spread sheets and transformed into graphs in order to make the comparisons between the three types of texts:

(a) A comparison was made to texts written by native speakers of English (ESTs) and texts written by Sudanese students in their native language "Arabic" (SATs). This comparison is to show the differences and similarities between the two groups of students when they write in their native language in relation to Goutsos's Model.

(b) A comparison was made to texts written by native speakers of English (ESTs) and the texts which were written by the Sudanese students in English (SETs). This is to show the extent to which the Sudanese students adhere to the Goutsos's Model in contrast with their English speaking counterparts.

(c) A comparison was made to texts written by the Sudanese students in Arabic (SATs) and the texts which were written by the same group in English (SETs). This is to show how the Sudanese students perform in relation to Goutsos's Model when they write in the foreign language.

A faithful translation of the texts which were written by the Sudanese students in Arabic was carried out in order to show the organization of the text. Great care has been taken not to interfere with the content or the style of the original. In the analysis, the focus was on the Arabic version, but the English translation was placed side by side with the Arabic version.

For the application of Goutsos's Model on the Arabic texts, every possible attempt has been made in order not to slip into any form of contrastive analysis. The minimum of technical and linguistic terms was used to illustrate the point being made. There are obviously more differences between Arabic syntactic/semantic terminology and English syntactic/semantic terminology than similarities. The focus is always on the application of the sequential strategies for continuity and discontinuity.

From another angle, no editing whatsoever has been done to the texts written by both groups. However, in the case of the Sudanese students (writing in Arabic or English) the segmentation of paragraphs and sentences (where no punctuation was used) has been done on the basis of ideas and controlling ideas.

Limits of interpreting the data

There were a number of limitations in data interpretation:

Firstly, the students did not receive any instruction regarding the appropriate limit of words number in writing the expository composition. This might have affected the number of

occurrence of topic signals and topic strategies in the compositions of English and Sudanese students.

Secondly, the sample size of the subjects is small. It therefore cannot be considered representative of all and the use of a bigger sample may result in different results. However, it is felt that the results from this study can assist teachers in understanding better the problems that students face in writing expository essays.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF DATA

This section presents the quantitative analysis of the data. Firstly, the three types of texts (ESTs, SATs and SETs) will be presented separately. Then the analysis will compare the results as follows:

(1) ESTs v SATs

Here the comparison will show the similarity and difference in the usage of sequential strategies between English students and Sudanese students in their respective native languages.

(2) SATs v SETs

Here the comparison will be made to show the similarity and difference in the usage of sequential strategies between the texts produced by the Sudanese students in their first language and in the second language.

(3) ESTs v SETs.

Here the comparison will be made to show the similarity and difference in the usage of sequential strategies in expository writing of English students and in that of Sudanese students.

However, not all of the topic signals will appear in this analysis. Some of the topic signals do not lend themselves naturally to quantitative analysis. These are paragraph breaks, absence of topic signals and tense continuity. Such signals cannot be counted and consequently they cannot be accommodated in a frequency table.
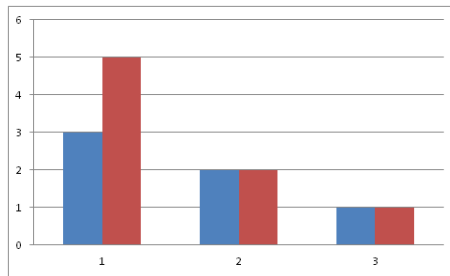
Figure5. 13: Topic Continuity: ESTs v SATs

As can be seen from Figure (5.13); in their native languages, both English speakers and Sudanese students use the topic signals of "Encapsualtion nominals (2)" and "Local cohesive devices of repetition" equally. As for "Discourse markers", Sudanese students use more of them when they write in Arabic.
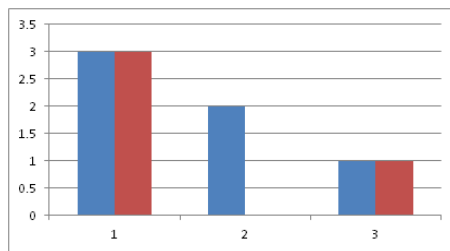

Figure5. 14: Topic Continuity: ESTs v SETs

Figure (5.14) shows that both English speakers and Sudanese students (writing in English) used "Discourse markers" and "Local cohesive devices of repletion" equally (1 and 3). However, in the texts analyzed, Unlike the English speakers, there appears no use of "Encapsulation nominals" in the expository writing of Sudanese students in English.
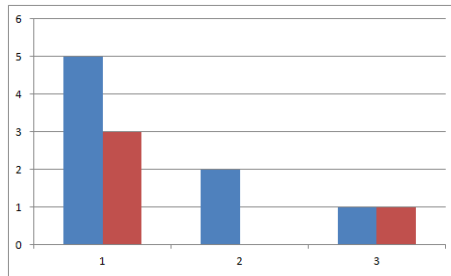
Figure 5.18: Topic Continuity: SATs v SETs

Figure (5.18) shows that with respect to Topic Continuity, Sudanese students use more "Discourse markers (2)" when they write in Arabic than when they write in English. However, they use of "Local cohesive device of repetition (3)" is equal in the two languages. On the other hand, they do not appear to use "Encapsulation (2)" in English as they do in Arabic.
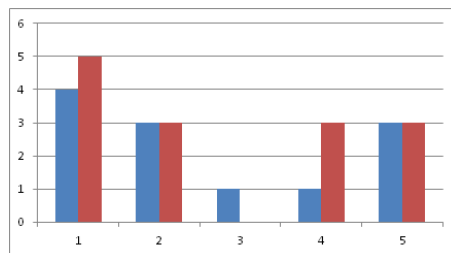
(b) Topic Framing

Figure5. 15: Topic Framing: ESTs v SATs

Figure (5.15) shows that English speakers and Sudanese students (writing in their respective native languages) are equal in using two topic signals: (Enumeration "2" and Metadiscourse markers "5"). It also shows that Sudanese students use more "Sentence-initial adjuncts" and "Discourse markers" than their counterparts. However, when it comes to "Question-answer pair (3)", Sudanese students appear not to use them whereas English speakers do.
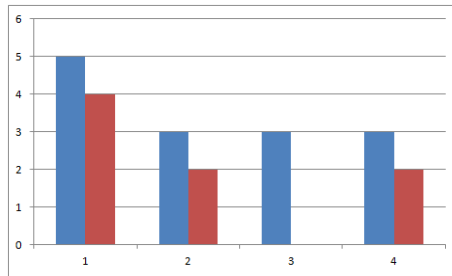
Figure 5. 19: Topic Framing: SATs v SETs

Figure (5.19) shows that there is a wide disparity in the use of topic signals with regard to Topic Framing in expository writing of Sudanese students in Arabic and in English. They use more "Sentence-initial adjuncts", "Enumeration" and "Metadiscourse markers" in Arabic than in English. Also; for "Discourse markers", they do not appear to use any of them in their writing in English.
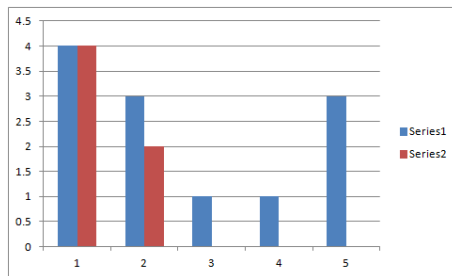

Figure 5.23: Topic Framing: ESTs v SETs

Figure (5.23) shows that, for Topic Framing, English native speakers and Sudanese students are equal in using "Sentence-initial adjunct (1)". It is also evident that English speakers use more "Enumeration" than Sudanese students here. On the other hand, English speaker use three more topic signals which their Sudanese counterparts do not. These are "Question-answer pair (3)", "Discourse markers (4)" and "Metadiscourse markers (5)".
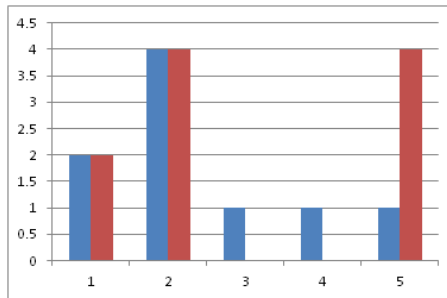
(c) Topic introduction

Figure 5.16: Topic Introduction: ESTs v SATs

Figure (5.16) shows that speakers of English and Sudanese students, when writing in their own languages, are equal in using two topic signals: "Initial dummy subjects (1)" and "Indefinite subjects (2)". However, Sudanese students use far more "Renominalization" than English speakers. On the other hand, English speakers use two topic signals which Sudanese students appear not to use; "Question-answer pair (3)" and "Enumeration (4)".
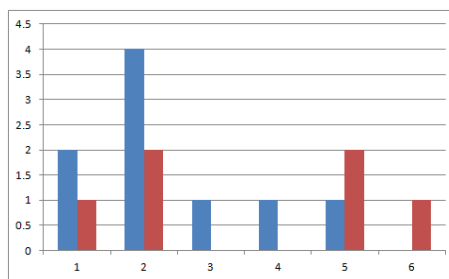

Figure5. 24: Topic Introduction: ESTs v SETs

Figure (5.24) shows that, with respect to Topic Introduction, native speakers of English use more "Initial dummy subjects (1)" and "Indefinite subjects (2)" than Sudanese students. However, Sudanese students use more "Renominalization (5)" than speakers of English. On the other hand, English speakers

use two more topic signals which the Sudanese students do not use. These are "question-answer pair (3)" and "Enumeration (4)". Also, Sudanese students use one topic strategy which he native speaker do not. That is "Metadiscourse markers (6)"
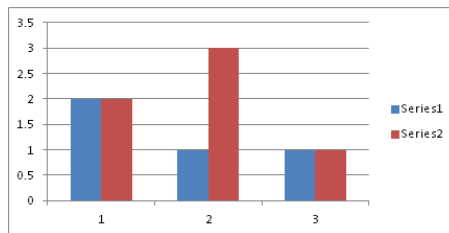
(d) Topic closure

Figure 5.17: Topic Closure: ESTs v SATs

Figure (5.17) shows that English speakers and Sudanese students do not differ in using "Discourse markers" and "Encapsulation" in Topic closure when writing in their native languages. However, they differ a great deal when it comes to "Metadiscourse markers". Sudanese students use far more of these than their English speaking counterparts.
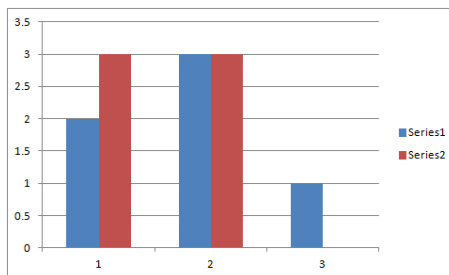

Figure5. 21: Topic Closure: SATs v SETs

Figure (5.21) shows that Sudanese students use more "Discourse markers (1)" for Topic Closure when writing in English than when writing in Arabic. They appear to be using

"Metadiscourse markers (2)" equally in both languages. However, "Encapsulation (3)" is used only in Arabic.

CONCLUSION

Summary of the findings of the study
  (a) In relation to Topic continuity:
  - Figure (5.13) shows that when writing in their native languages, both English speakers and Sudanese students use the topic signals of "Encapsualtion nominals" and "Local cohesive devices of repetition" equally. As for "Discourse markers", Sudanese students use more of them when they write in Arabic.
  - Figure (5.14) shows that both English speakers and Sudanese students (writing in English) used "Discourse markers" and "Local cohesive devices of repetition". However, in the texts analyzed, unlike the English speakers, there appears no use of "Encapsulation nominals" in the expository writing of Sudanese students in English.
  - Figure (5.18) shows that Sudanese students use more "Discourse markers" when they write in Arabic than when they write in English. However, they use of "Local cohesive device of repetition" is equal in the two languages. On the other hand, they do not appear to use "Encapsualtion" in English as they do in Arabic.

  (b) In relation to Topic Framing
  - Figure (5.15) shows that English speakers and Sudanese students (writing in their respective native languages) are equal in using two topic signals: (Enumeration and Metadiscourse markers). It also shows that Sudanese students use more "Sentence-initial adjuncts" and "Discourse markers" than their counterparts. However, when it comes to "Question-answer pair", Sudanese

students appear not to use them whereas English
speakers do.

- Figure (5.19) shows that there is a wide disparity in the
  use of topic signals with regard to Topic Framing in
  expository writing of Sudanese students in Arabic and in
  English. They use more "Sentence-initial adjuncts",
  "Enumeration" and "Metadiscourse markers" in Arabic
  than in English. Also; for "Discourse markers", they do
  not appear to use any of them in their writing in
  English.

- Figure (5.23) shows that, for Topic Framing, English
  native speakers and Sudanese students are equal in
  using "Sentence-initial adjunct". It is also evident that
  English speakers use more "Enumeration" than
  Sudanese students here. On the other hand, English
  speaker use three more topic signals which their
  Sudanese counterparts do not. These are "Question-
  answer pair", "Discourse markers" and "Metadiscourse
  markers".

(c) In relation to Topic Introduction

- Figure (5.16) shows that speakers of English and
  Sudanese students, when writing in their own
  languages, are equal in using two topic signals: "Initial
  dummy subjects" and "Indefinite subjects". However,
  Sudanese students use far more "Renominaliztion" than
  English speakers. On the other hand, English speakers
  use two topic signals which Sudanese students appear
  not to use; "Question-answer pair" and
  "Enumeration".Figure (5.20) also exhibits a wide range
  of differences in the employment of topic signals between
  expository writing of Sudanese students in Arabic and in
  English. They tend to use more "Initial dummy
  elements", "Indefinite subjects" and "Renominaliztion" in
  their Arabic texts than in their English ones. Also, the

figure indicates that they do not use "Metadiscourse markers" in Arabic for Topic Introduction.

- Figure (5.24) shows that, with respect to Topic Introduction, native speakers of English use more "Initial dummy subjects" and "Indefinite subjects" than Sudanese students. However, Sudanese students use more "Renominaliztion" than speakers of English. On the other hand, English speakers use two more topic signals which the Sudanese students do not use. These are "question-answer pair" and "Enumeration". Also, Sudanese students use one topic strategy which the native speakers do not. That is "Metadiscourse markers".

(d) In relation to Topic Closure

- Figure (5.17) shows that English speakers and Sudanese students do not differ in using "Discourse markers" and "Encapsualtion" in Topic Closure when writing in their native languages. However, they differ a great deal when it comes to "Metadiscourse markers". Sudanese students use far more of these than their English speaking counterparts.

- Figure (5.21) shows that Sudanese students use more "Discourse markers" for Topic Closure when writing in English than when writing in Arabic. They appear to be using "Metadiscourse markers" equally in both languages. However, "Encapsulation" is used only in Arabic.

- Figure (5.21) shows that Sudanese students use more "Discourse markers" for Topic Closure when writing in English than when writing in Arabic. They appear to be using "Metadiscourse markers" equally in both languages. However, "Encapsulation" is used only in Arabic

The point to be made here is that the expository writing of both Sudanese students and English students exhibits similarities however; they might differ slightly in the occurrences of certain devices than others. This may be accounted for by the differences of conventions of writing in the two languages as well as some linguistic disparities.

Implications

The following implications could be stated:

1. Teachers should be able to use the findings from this study to help them in teaching the characteristics of good expository writings to their students. Moreover, teachers should be trained to use the out-of-class strategies and encourage their students to use/utilize these strategies.

2. English teachers should use eclectic methods in teaching English language; combine traditional methods with the modern process-centered instruction to improve their students' language skills. Moreover, teachers should be trained to use the out-of-class strategies and encourage their students to use/utilize these strategies.

3. Moreover, teachers should be trained to use the out-of-class strategies and encourage their students to use these strategies.

Language students should be encouraged to learn English as well as other languages. It is shown that the students' own effort can improve their writing abilities and motivate them to practice pleasure reading and learn to enjoy it. Moreover, the students writing ability can be enhanced and improved by writing practice and feedback from teachers.

Recommendations for further research

The researcher suggests that further research can be carried out by using a bigger sample of Sudanese students could be

used in a another study conducted at the undergraduate level in order to further understand the students' problems in writing so that suggestions can be given to improve pedagogically and methodology in writing classrooms.

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