A close look to problems of Sudanese ESL/EFL students writing: An intercultural study

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Abstract:

   This study aims to investigate Sudanese EFL students writing problems in terms of the contrastive rhetoric (CR) approach. CR is concerned with the study of aspects of differences and similarities between L1 and L2 writing techniques, this study attempts to explore Sudanese EFL students' English writing difficulties from linguistic and cultural backgrounds perspectives. The researcher uses a descriptive analytic method. The data is collected through two instruments: Teachers' questionnaire and Students English expository text which were evaluated by an analytic scoring method. The Subjects consisted of one hundred teachers of English language and ninety ESL/EFL students from different Sudanese Universities majoring in English. The subjects consisted female /male of different age groups. The subjects (Students) were asked to compose essays in English.

Key words: Rhetoric, Culture ,Arabic language

INTRODUCTION:

The study of writing has become part of the main stream in applied linguistics. Reasons for this change are may: the increased understanding of languages learners 'needs to read and write in the target language the enhanced interdisciplinary

approach to studying second language acquisition through educational, rhetorical and anthropological methods; and new trends in linguistics (Connor, 1996, p5).

Writing in English is especially difficult for non-native speakers because they are expected to produce native-like written products (Casanave, 2003). And ESL students often mentioned that when they write in English as a Second Language (ESL) they translate, or attempt to translate, first language words, phrases, and organization into English. (Connor 1996, p3).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the theory of second language learning suggested that L1 interfered with L2 acquisition. the dominant model of the contrastive analysis hypnosis emphasized the negative interference effects of the first language on the second language, which was considered harmful.(Connor, 1996. p12).A new models of second language acquisition and learning emerged, which emphasized the importance of "interlinguage" (a system of language that is structurally between L1 and L2, Corder 1967)....these models, such as Krashen's model (1977), suggested that neither L1 nor L2 is a "bad" influences of second language acquisition.(Connor, 1996,p12).

STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM:

This study investigates some difficulties that Sudanese ESL students writers encounters due to differences in writing techniques between English & Arabic. The researcher intends to explore whether observed students writing performance is attributed to rhetoric variations or not. In other words, the study will examine these students' English writing problems which are believed to be related to a wide range of cross-linguistic and cultural differences at both the paragraph and textual levels. Bearing in mind, some attempts need to be made to investigate Sudanese ESL writers confusion of

expository techniques of Arabic with those of written English discourse patterns.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES:

1- The transfer of Arabic rhetorical techniques into English writing have a negative impact on Sudanese's ESL students' expository writing performance.
2- Lack of cohesion characterizes Sudanese ESL students' writing performance.
3- Sudanese students face logical organization problems in writing an English expository text..
4- Lack of cohesive devices characterizes Sudanese ESL students' writing performance

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The researcher uses a descriptive analytic method. The data was collected through two instruments: Teachers' questionnaire and Students English expository text which was evaluated by an analytic scoring method. The Subjects consisted of One hundred Sudanese ESL teachers and ninety ESL students from fifteen Sudanese Universities majoring in English.
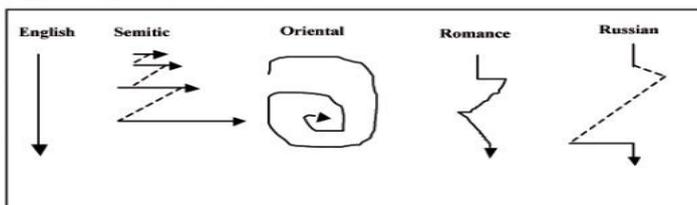
LITERATURE REVIEW: BACKGROUND OF CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC

In his controversial publication, entitled ─Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education, Kaplan noted that the writing problems of ESL students are not only a byproduct of their transferring structural patterns from their native language, but are also due to transfer of rhetorical strategies. According to Kaplan, when such rhetorical strategies, brought in from the native culture, do not match audience expectations in the target culture, the ensuing writing fails to logically

convey the message to the intended audience, namely, native speakers of the target language. Kaplan claimed that the reason for such failure in communication is that rhetorical structure, as well as the ─logic (in the popular, rather than the logician's sense of the word) upon which it is based, is culturally bound (1966, p. 2). In other words, he believed that as children acquire their native language, they also acquire culturally acceptable forms of reasoning and rhetorical expression, which differ from culture to culture. Kaplan concluded that since logic and rhetorical structure are by no means a universal phenomenon but are culturally defined, a perfectly logical argument in one culture might be viewed as sophistical or illogical in another. According to Kaplan (1966), when composing in English, a typical ESL learner who has not yet developed an understanding of the sociocultural constraints of English discourse, its underlying logical system, or rhetorical preferences falls back to those of his or her native language.

Kaplan categorized the student writing that he analyzed into five distinguishable ─rhetoric's or ─cultural thought patterns, namely English, Romance, Russian, Oriental, and Semitic based on differences in paragraph development. He visually represented his findings of cross-cultural variation in logic and writing with the following diagrams (Figure 1), which later became known as the ─doodle diagrams.

Figure 1. Kaplan's rhetorical structures

According to Kaplan, English writing follows a linear pattern of development that starts with a topic sentence followed by details that progressively support the main topic in a deductive fashion; Romance writing diverges from the main topic in the

form of quasi-linear digressions; Oriental writing employs an indirect approach distinguished by inconclusive spiral progression of ideas; partial parallelism and subordination are the salient features of Russian writing. Kaplan claimed that as a Semitic language, Arabic ─is based on a complex series of parallel constructions, both positive and negative‖ (1966, p. 6) as contrasted to the ─linear‖ nature of the English expository paragraph. In a later publication, Kaplan maintained the primary focus of writing in Arabic rests on the language of the text, not on its propositional structure.

From contrastive to Intercultural

In a later development in the field and after the criticism to the theory of rhetoric and described as been static, Connor (2004) argued for new definition and new name as intercultural instead as Contrastive: **"**the study of written discourse between and among individuals with different cultural backgrounds" (Connor, 2011, p. 1). IR examines the influences of first language, culture, and education on the production of texts with the aim of advancing cross-cultural communication research as well as informing writers, editors, translators, and language and composition teachers and learners, among other users and producers of text". So, the new term "intercultural rhetoric" to describe the current scope of cultural influences in writing and to detonate the direction the field needs to go.. In that sense, rhetoric helps examine the accommodation readers, writers, and speakers exhibit in communication. Furthermore, the term intercultural rhetoric was expected to suggest that no rhetorical tradition is pure but that everything exists between cultures... In other words, intercultural rhetoric studies may include both cross-cultural and intercultural studies. In addition, intercultural studies are sensitive to context and consider influences both due to inter-person and inter-culture influences. (Connor 2004).

Advances in Contrastive Rhetoric

Contrastive rhetoric has also acquired many critics. Scholars have criticized Kaplan for reducing rhetoric to merely structural elements and not recognizing that rhetoric is multidimensional. Spack (1997), who works with ESL students in the U.S., was concerned about the practice of labeling students by their L1 backgrounds, and Zamel (1997) disapproved of the tendency of contrastive rhetoric to view cultures as "discrete, discontinuous, and predictable." Scollon, in the same issue of the TESOL Quarterly as Zamel, criticized contrastive rhetoric research for being too focused on texts and for neglecting oral influences on literacy, and thus being unable adequately to consider EFL situations like the one in Hong Kong (Scollon, 1997). Both Spack and Zamel invoke changing definitions of culture which juxtapose the forces of heterogeneity and homogeneity and seriously question the latter. This is not surprising, for the whole concept of culture has been intensely interrogated in applied linguistics with relevance to field such as contrastive rhetoric in the last few years.

Rhetorical Influences

Instead of merely viewing rhetoric as culturally influenced, Matsuda (2001), in response to Ying's 2000 article "On the Origins of Contrastive Rhetoric," addresses the issue of Kaplan's view of contrastive rhetoric as a synthesis of "three intellectual traditions, including contrastive analysis, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and the then-emerging field of composition and rhetoric" (p. 260). In his original article, Ying contends, contrary to previous scholars' claims, that "[t]he Sapir-Whorf view of language as a causal determination is not compatible with Kaplan's position that rhetoric is evolved out of culture" (Ying, 2001, p. 265). Matsuda then asserts that Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric hypothesis is affirmed by (but not originated from) the Sapir- Whorf hypothesis, which claims that

language influences thought. Matsuda reasons that Kaplan's theory ultimately extended the discussion of linguistic elements beyond grammar and thought, and into the realm of culture (p. 258). According to Matsuda (1997), influences affecting rhetoric are culture, linguistic constraints (language), and education (p. 47). The linguistic explanation claims that linguistic factors are what influence a writer's rhetorical strategies and that we need to teach the syntax of the language to students for them to be able to produce rhetorically effective texts (p. 48).

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.

RESULTS BY HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis One
1-Transfer of Arabic rhetorical techniques into English writing has a negative impact on Sudanese EFL students' English expository writing performance.

The table below shows the result of student's essays and the problems encountered regarding the first hypothesis i.e Arabic interference problems.

Table (1): Arabic interference problems

No.	Dimension	Frequencies & percentages of existing instances	
1	Too long introduction	61	55.5%
2	Absence of capitalization	94	85.5%
3	Arabic performance usage	86	78.2%
4	Unnecessary repetition	106	95.4%
5	Exaggeration	65	59.1%
6	Embellishment	74	67.4%
7	Simile	50	45.4%
8	Metonymy	34	30.9%
9	Proverbs	10	9.1%
10	Emotional tone	78	70.8%

Discussion:

Table (1) above shows that 95.4% of the students used instances of unnecessary repetition in writing an English expository text. They tend to repeat conjunctions such as 'and', 'also' and 'or' as the following excerpts selected randomly from the students' English writing test indicate.

> 1- In university life there are interact between the students because they come from **_different_** parts of the country **_and_** there will be **_different_** tribes **_anddifferent_** customs **_and_** traditions and they learn from others (C18).
>
> 2- When we turn to the culture as a level of living, we find that most of people have well acquainted of other cultures **_and_** have an interaction, **_and_** that comes through media **_and_** Internet, so they opening to the world, **_and_** this lead to development by followed the others successful economic policy, which lead to high living (B8).
>
> 3- So in this context, I will shed light to different dimensions of university life. For example I will focus on the academic **_side of university life_**, cultural **_side of university life_**, and the social dimension **_ofuniversity life_** (A13).

As for the teachers' responses to this problem, 72.7% of them argue that the Arabic writing habit of repetition appears to be one of the most evident problems that face most Sudanese EFL students when writing an English expository text. The findings of the study also show that absence of capitalization (85.5%)

was found to be one of the major challenges that Sudanese EFL students encountered in their English writing. More precisely, only 15% of the target students were able to use capitalization correctly. The findings of the study also indicate that 59.1% of the students inclined toward exaggeration, while 67.4% of them inclined toward embellishment so as to beautify their written discourse.

Hypothesis Two

Sudanese EFL students face logical organization problems in writing an English expository text.

Table (2): Teachers' opinions on the students' logical organization problems in English writing

No.	Item	Strongly agree	Agree	No opinion	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Chi-value
12.	Many Sudanese EFL learners encounter serious problems n producing a well-organized written text in English.	50.9% 56	43.6% 48	1.8% 2	3.6% 4	-	88.5*
13.	Sudanese EFL learners usually find it difficult to write a meaningful topic sentence.	30.9% 34	51.8% 57	4.5% 5	12.7% 14	-	58.2*
14.	When Sudanese EFL learners engage in English writing, their introductions seem to be too long.	16.4% 18	36.4% 40	22.7% 25	23.6% 26	0.9% 1	36.6*
15.	The opening paragraph of most Sudanese EFL learners fails to include the controlling idea of the whole topic.	29.1% 32	46.4% 51	11.8% 13	10.9% 12	1.8% 2	69.2*
16.	When writing a paragraph in English, most Sudanese EFL learners' topic sentences lack supporting evidence.	31.8% 35	45.5% 50	10.0% 11	11.8% 13	0.9% 1	72.5*
17.	Sudanese EFL learners usually include more than one central idea in one English paragraph.	25.5% 28	47.3% 52	15.5% 17	11.8% 13	-	33.5*
18.	A great number of Sudanese EFL writers shift randomly from one idea to another, making the whole text sounds inconsistent.	25.5% 28	58.2% 64	8.2% 9	7.3% 8	0.9% 1	118.5*
19.	When writing in English, most Sudanese EFL writers concentrate on mechanics and grammar rather than on writing as a process of different stages.	17.3% 19	55.5% 61	10.9% 12	16.4% 18	-	55.5*
20.	A lot of Sudanese EFL writers find it difficult to make a clear conclusion.	15.5% 17	49.1% 54	11.8% 13	20.9% 23	2.7% 3	67.8*

Discussion:

As shown in Table (2) the majority of the students (70.0%) were able to state clearly a topic sentence in their introductory

paragraph. In other words, only 30% of their essays were found to be without clear topic sentences. Also almost 83% of the respondents agree that Sudanese EFL students usually find it difficult to write a meaningful topic sentence when composing an English expository text. Given this, it would be fair to say that this difficulty seems to have made the students to write too long introductory paragraphs when engaging in English writing. Moreover, the results of the teachers' questionnaire also show that approximately 76% of the target teachers believe that the opening paragraphs of most Sudanese EFL graduate students fail to include the central idea of the whole text. Below are some examples from students writing test which illustrate the above point:

18- I'm very glad to address you this morning to tell you about the title above mentioned which is very important for the human being nowadays (C16).

19- I chose this topic because it's has a big influence in my life. I worked for Arab Authority for agriculture and development for five months and half, and when this crisis happened, the organization was obliged to dismiss some of employees and I was one of them (B14).

20- I was so excited the moment that the investigators announced that we should put the pens downs at the last session of the Sudanese secondary certificate. I could say it was a moment of highly mixed feelings, delight, fear, hesitation, and hope (B27).

Hypothesis Three

Lack of cohesion knowledge characterizes Sudanese EFL students' English expository writing performance.

Table (3): Cohesive ties used by the students in English writing test

No.	Grammatical cohesive ties	Frequencies	Percentages
1	Personal reference	615	15.92
2	Demonstrative reference	368	9.53
3	Comparative reference	609	15.77
4	Nominal substitution	226	5.85
5	Verbal substitution	230	5.96
6	Clausal substitution	185	4.79
7	Nominal ellipsis	86	2.23
8	Verbal ellipsis	115	2.98
9	Clausal ellipsis	81	2.10
10	Additive conjunctions	342	8.86

11	Causal conjunctions	161	4.17
12	Temporal conjunctions	105	2.72
13	Adversative conjunctions	28	0.73
14	Repetition	256	6.63
15	Synonyms	98	2.54
16	Antonyms	252	6.53
16	Hyponyms	105	2.72
Total		3862	100.00

Discussion

The results indicate that of the three references examined, the students seemed to have more problems in using demonstrative references. That is, only 9.53% of them were able to use this type of cohesive tie appropriately. In terms of personal and comparative references, the findings reveal that there were no significant differences in the use of these two references, i.e. in both cases nearly 16% of the students were found to have employed proper personal and comparative references. In general, these percentages show that the students lack proficiency in the use of reference cohesive ties despite the fact that references are assumed to be the most common ones as compared to other types of cohesive devices. Below is an example of one of the target students' EFL writing technique indicating misuse of cohesive ties

> 27- University life require specific requirements needs more responsibility, and more attention for **_their_** study, and I think firstly the student need to prepare **_himself_** before enter the university in **_their_** secondary school must try to culture himself must learn how to read before go to the university the student must discover **_himselfhis_** ability, **_their_** choices mustn't be randomly just according to their degree in secondary school, simple because it affect **_their_** study and emotion in the university (A20).

To sum up, of the four grammatical cohesive ties investigated, the results show that adversative conjunctions are the most daunting problems that faced the target students followed by ellipsis, substitutions and reference respectively.

Hypothesis Four

Lack of coherence knowledge characterizes Sudanese EFL students' English expository writing performance.

Table (4): Coherence aspects examined in the students' English writing test

No.	Coherence aspect	Frequencies	Percentages
1	Verb-noun agreement	328	17.88
2	Appropriate use of subordinates	204	11.12
3	Appropriate use of commas and semicolons	388	21.16
4	Use of transitional expressions	287	15.65
5	Necessary repetition	83	4.53
6	consistent parallelism	86	4.69
7	Literal translation	458	24.97
	Total	1834	100.00

The above Table (4) shows that significant differences in terms of coherence aspects can be identified in the target students' English writing test. Apparently, of the seven coherence aspects examined, the results indicate that the students experienced great difficulties in dealing with both necessary repetition and consistent parallelism. So, what has been observed in the writing test is that although most of them inclined toward too much repetition, only less than 5% of them were found to be able to repeat the key words or phrases. By the same token, the findings of the questionnaire also reveal that quite a significant number of the respondents (88.2%) agree that English expository essays written by Sudanese EFL students often lack necessary repetition of principal words and phrases. As for the findings of the questionnaire in this regard, it was found that more than 74% of the respondents believe that Sudanese EFL written discourse often lacks consistent parallel constructions within the sentences. Thus, there is also a strong correlation between the teachers' viewpoints and the findings of the students' English writing test.

FINDINGS:

1-In terms of Arabic interference problems, the result of the study indicate that the majority of the target students exhibited unnecessary repetition while writing an English text. Also, English teachers' questionnaire responses show that almost 73% of the respondents agree that Arabic writing characteristics feature of repetition seems to be major difficulties that encounter many Sudanese EFL students. Other problems of Arabic interference that have been emerged include absence of capitalization (85%), un awareness of the differences between Arabic and English prepositions (78.2%), impressionistic tone 71% exaggeration (59%), embellishment 57%, simile 45.4 %, and metonymy 31%.

2- The findings of the study also reveal that a lot of the target students failed to state clearly the topic sentence in their English introductory paragraph. In this regard 83% of the respondents of the questionnaire contented that Sudanese students often find it difficult to produce a meaningful topic sentence in English writing.

3-The result of the teachers' questionnaire show that approximately 76% of the respondents believe that introductory paragraphs of most Sudanese students lack the controlling idea of the whole text.

4-The results of the study indicate that almost 99% of the respondents of the questionnaire agree that Sudanese EFL students English writing difficulties are resulted from the differences in writing techniques between English and Arabic

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The researcher offers the following recommendations hoping that teachers, Learners and syllabi designers find them useful:
1- Sudanese educational institutions' need to place much attention on the major principles of English writing.

2- As the results of the study reveal, that most Sudanese EFL students faced difficulties in achieving cohesion and coherence in English writing, it's advisable that prior to the commencement of   the scheduled programs), remedial classes on these two functions can be introduced.

3- Based on the finding of the study, one can recommend that English courses should be taught in all academic disciplines of Sudanese higher education institutions i.e. the essence of writing should be at the heart of the universities curricula..

CONCLUSION:

In highlighting these results it became clear that the characteristic features of the target students' L1 aspects such as unnecessary repetition, exaggeration, embellishment among others seemed to have affected negatively the way in which Sudanese EFL graduate students write in English. Furthermore, in discussing the results of this study, it was found that the target students lack appropriate ways of achieving both cohesion and coherence in their English writing.

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