Exploring cultural barriers in EFL Arab learners’ writing

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Abstract

Every language is rooted in the culture of its speaking community which makes learning a foreign language especially challenging if the culture of the native language and the target language are too distant such as the case of English for Algerian learners. The present paper spotlights cultural difference between Arabic-speaking and English-speaking communities examining the impact of such cultural barriers on Arab EFL learners’ writing as written texts and the ways they are used vary according to cultural groups. For this purpose a case study of 16 EFL students from the University of Tlemcen (Algeria) was undertaken. Contrastive rhetoric was used to explain many problems identified in students’ English compositions. Relying on a qualitative data analysis, the results indicated that culturally bound differences related to some linguistic factors such as alphabet, letters, way of writing, word patterns and grammar, as well as some rhetorical and syntactic styles namely coordination, subordination and metaphorical styles were responsible for a large potential for errors and difficulties faced by Algerian EFL university students when producing written English. This paper closes with a set of pedagogical implications which encourage the use of contrastive rhetoric as a tool to understand cultural differences both in teacher education and writing instruction. Techniques and strategies are proposed to help reduce cultural barriers and build bridges between the writing patterns of the two languages in order to achieve successful communication between members of different societies in this era of globalization.

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1. Introduction

It is commonly agreed that language is culturally embedded. Then, during the last decades more attention has been paid to bring the cultural element into the second/foreign language classroom as it is believed to help solve present social and economic problems (Kramsch, 1996). Therefore, it is important to determine what culture is. Broadly speaking Culture is defined by Richards & Schmidt (2010, p.151) as “the set of practices, codes and values that mark a particular nation or group: the sum of nation or group’s most highly thought of works of literature, art, music, etc.”

An individual’s culture will be present not only in his/her oral and written products (language), but also in his/her behaviour (body language) leading to a strong connection between the inherited culture of a speech community and the way people communicate as highlighted by Samovar et al. (1981, p. 24):

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\text{Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication.}
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Today’s reality with the globalization process requires from the 21st century foreign language learner to be interculturally competent, i.e., to be able to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of other cultures. This implies that learning a language and communicating through this language does not necessitate linguistic knowledge only, but also the ability to use the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways.

However, learning a foreign language and communicating in this language is especially challenging if the culture of the native language and the target language are too distant such as the case of English for Algerian learners. Indeed, the historical and geographical distances between Algeria and the English speaking countries result in many cultural differences. This fact may hinder effective English learning for Algerian pupils and students as the different ways of thinking, behaving socially and interpreting the world provided by cultures may create cultural barriers for these learners. Consequently, it is necessary to raise the Algerian learner’s awareness of these differences and to help him/her transcend cultural barriers.

The present study is interested in Algerian EFL learners’ written discourse, and how it may be affected by cultural transfer from L1. In effect, it is believed that writing is embedded in the culture of its speech community, written texts and writing conventions may vary from one cultural group to another. Therefore it may be expected that L1 cultural features may cause hindrance in FL writing, as Kaplan (1983, p. 150) explains:

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\text{The non-native speaker brings with him/ her the alternatives available in the L1 and applies those alternatives in the L2, thereby creating a tension between the apparent relationship of ideas to topic and the possibly inappropriate realisation of focus through inter sentential syntax.}
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Indeed, one should be aware of the fact that cultures have different rhetorical devices, and each culture expresses these devices differently. This may create difficulties for FL learners and one might expect to find evidence of such cultural barriers or difficulty in students’ writings. Then, the present paper is concerned with the cultural obstacles faced by Algerian EFL university students (being Arab learners of English) when writing in English. In fact, conforming to English writing conventions and stylistics is very important for these students as they are most of the time required to write for academic purposes. This paper also deals with how to help Arab learners to overcome these cultural barriers in order to achieve success in English academic writing.

2. The study

The present study analyzes students’ compositions in the light of contrastive rhetoric from a linguistic, rhetorical and communication perspective.

2.1. Sample population

The sample population of this study is made of 16 university students enrolled in the first year of the English degree course offered by the English Department at the University of Tlemcen. These students are in the 18 to 20 years old age group. Their mother tongue (MT) is the western variety of Algerian Arabic while their L1 is
Standard Arabic. It should be pointed out that the terms MT and L1 are often used interchangeably in the literature, but the linguistic situation of Algeria compels the researcher to discriminate between these two terms. MT is the term used for the language acquired at home (a spoken form of dialectal Arabic), and L1 is used for Standard Arabic that is the national language and the first language learned at school and used as a means of formal instruction. French and English are respectively the students’ first and second foreign languages (FL1 and FL2).

2.2. Procedure

Students were asked to write a narrative essay and a descriptive one of 150 words in English. The topics that were chosen were selected on the grounds that they were not highly emotional and that the content was culturally neutral. At the same time, students had to verbalize their thoughts (they received training in the use of the think-aloud technique prior to the experiment). Their verbal reports were recorded then transcribed. The think-aloud procedure was used to unveil students’ thinking processes while writing. This was important as it allowed analyzing students’ compositions in the light of the processes they went through when writing and the social and cultural contexts in which those processes were situated.

2.3. Analysis

The analysis was carried out both at the linguistic (morphology and syntax) and rhetorical (Coordination vs. Subordination, repetition and elaboration and Direct vs. Metaphorical Styles) levels. Textual analysis was done in the light of the processes the learners went through. This was particularly helpful to detect errors that could be traced to Arabic cultural transfer, because it should be noted that Algerian students may also be influenced by the French language being their FL1 and acquired before English in the primary school, yet in the present study only those errors related to the native cultural transfer were dealt with.

3. Results: Discussion and interpretation

3.1. Cross-linguistic factors posing problems

Arabic is from the Semitic language family, hence its morphology and syntax are very different from those of English an Indo-European language. Many errors recorded in students’ writing were related to this difference as displayed below.

3.1.1. Morphology

The corpus revealed students’ use of deviant forms, i.e., they used one form instead of another confusing the forms of nouns, verbs (present participle), adjectives and adverbs.

- e.g. Benisaf is a coastal.
- It is very sunning
- It is a height and cold place.

This is mainly due to the fact that Arabic has a three consonant root as its basis. All words (parts of speech) are formed by combining the three-root consonants with fixed vowel patterns and, sometimes, an affix. Therefore, lack of patterns in English confuses Algerian EFL learners and makes it hard for them to distinguish nouns from verbs or adjectives, etc.

3.1.2. Syntax

Since Arabic and English belong to different language families, there are a lot of differences between the grammars of these two languages leading to many difficulties for Arab learners. Such difficulties appeared clearly in the corpus in the use of: Word order, Auxiliaries, Articles, Pronouns, Prepositions and Genitive constructions.

- Word order
Word order of the two languages is different. The major problem is recorded at the level of adjective noun order: many students write the adjective after the noun it qualifies following the rule in Arabic.

- **Auxiliaries**
  Auxiliaries seemed to be a source of confusion namely in interrogative statements; as Arabic has no auxiliary do, some subject students produced sentences without it.
  e.g. How *you imagine your future house?
  In addition, Arabic has no verb to be in the present tense, and no composed tense (i.e. ‘auxiliary + participle’) such as the present continuous. This led our learners to produce forms such as:
  e.g. It *nice place.
  Technology *getting more and more developed.
- **Articles**
  Articles are another area which causes problems is the use of articles as illustrated below:
  e.g. Algeria has become * a touristic country.
  It contains a pure water.
  Cheria is * the place for the children and the families.
  The inexistence of the indefinite article in Arabic leads many students to omit it when English requires it or to misuse it. Regarding the definite article, though it exists in Arabic, its use is different in the two languages leading to errors.
- **Pronouns**
  Arabic requires the inclusion of the pronoun in relative clauses, unlike English, in which the pronoun is omitted.
  This results in mistakes like:
  e.g. You send the letter to the friend who you know him very well.
- **Prepositions**
  The analysis revealed an indiscriminate use of prepositions. This is rendered to the wide difference between the prepositional systems of the two languages in terms of number and variety in meaning and use. Indeed, while the number of Arabic prepositions is estimated to twenty among which sixprepositions are most commonly used (min, ila, ala, ba, la, fi; Abbas, 1985, p. 320), the number of recorded English prepositions is one hundred fifty (Essberger, 2009). This led students in many instances to try to relate the use of English prepositions to Arabic use as unveiled by their verbal protocols.
  e.g. we meet on 9 o’clock. (at)
  Students are in need to this invention (of)
  I went from the narrow road (through)
- **Spelling**
  Spelling is another problem encountered in writing by Arab learners of English. While Arabic words are almost always written as pronounced, the spelling of English words does not always conform to their pronunciation. This mismatch between spelling and pronunciation often causes erroneous spelling. Add to this silent letters, and so many different ways to spell one sound (and ways to sound one spelling).
  e.g. The problem dealt with. (dealt)
  ICT tools play an important role specially in education. (especially)
3.2. Rhetorical problems

Possibly the most difficult problem encountered by Arab EFL students in writing at tertiary level is the logical and thorough development of ideas as they relate to cultural training. Indeed, Kaplan (1967) holds that rhetoric is culturally determined and bound, just as syntax is. This has been confirmed by many other studies which revealed that there are preferred patterns of writing used by L2/FL learners specific to their culture (Ostler, 1987; Halimah, 1991, qtd. in McDonough 1995). These features appeared clearly in the collected data.

Regarding the schematic structure of the essays, the verbal protocols revealed that all students were aware of the structure: introduction, development and conclusion; however, it was noted that the students were biased towards the use of some rhetorical and syntactic patterns specific to Arabic such as preference of coordination over subordination, the use of repetition and metaphorical style, or tendency to start with universal statements, and end with some type of formulaic or proverbial statements. This may create a real obstacle for Arab students because what an English native speaker considers logical in an academic paper may not be logical in another culture. Then, some of our learners will have trouble sticking to a thesis, narrowing a thesis sufficiently, or proving a thesis concretely enough for an English speaking audience. The following sections will display students’ culture bound difficulties at the rhetorical level.

3.2.1. Coordination and subordination

Subordination and coordination are two syntactic features that are employed in writing in both English and Arabic. It is often argued, however, that the two languages differ in their preference for either syntactic relation. English is said to make use of more subordination than coordination, while Arabic favours the use of coordination rather than subordination (Kaplan, 1967; Ostler, 1987). We noticed that subject students used excessively coordination as a means of structural linkage. Two examples from the data are provided below:

e.g.(1) The use of technology in teaching facilitates the explanation of lessons and provides pictures and information quickly and easily.

Instead of:

The use of technology in teaching facilitates the explanation of lessons, because it provides pictures and information quickly and easily.

e.g.(2) The use of technology reduces lost time and this time can be spent on studying.

Instead of:

The use of technology reduces time which can be spent on studying.

Yet, in English it is strongly advised to use subordination, rather than coordination, because it helps make one's writing more mature, sophisticated, interesting and effective. This tendency is very clearly noticed in English writing textbooks (Oshima & Houge, 1991).

3.2.2. Repetition and elaboration

In most compositions, it was noticed that students used more words than necessary repeating the same idea as revealed by the following example:

e.g. Writing is a skill that is required in many contexts throughout life. It is part of needs of people; they need it in their daily life because nowadays the writing skill is used in many contexts in all institutions and plays an important role in life…

This habit of repetition comes from the Arab tradition as explained by Abu Rass (2011, p. 209):

Arab students tend to write long and expanded English sentences with repetition of content and form. In Arabic, repeating ideas and phrases is used for the sake of persuasion. Repetition is presented by writing more synonyms in the same sentence to convey emphasis.

Indeed, many researchers came to the conclusion that Arabic speakers argue “by repeating arguments, paraphrasing them, and doubling them” (Koch, 1983, qtd. in Connor, 2002, p. 500) for the sake of persuasion. However, what may be considered as a mark of good style in Arabic, i.e. repetition, is considered as wordiness and redundant writing in English.
3.2.3. Direct vs. metaphorical styles

Many Arab EFL students do not recognize that the English style is very direct and very narrow in comparison to the Arabic style which admires the beauty of the language as much as the message using allusion, analogy, proverbs and figures of speech. English teachers of writing at the Algerian university often comment that their students use patterns of language and stylistic conventions that they have learnt in their native language and culture to write in English. However, this contrasts with the expectations of Western readers who regard these patterns as clichés, and with Western teachers of writing who encourage students to write in their own voice using their own words. Therefore, this writing behaviour poses problem for these students at two levels:

First, students will not meet the expectations of the academic reader of the target language. They will not realize or accept the registers and purposes of discourse in the academic community (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Stern, 1992).

The second problem lies in the use of culture-specific expressions such as proverbs, verses, metaphors, idioms, historical incidents long forgotten and legendary personages which do not always have one-to-one correspondence in both languages. For example, the expression ‘News that freezes the chest’ (جَاءَتْ نَصْبَةُ يَخْشَىُ S-Sadir), which is common to Arab speakers, is related to their ecological conditions because Arabic belongs to an area of hot and dry climate. Thus, according to Ilyas (1989), some Arabic expressions are associated with cold weather to express positive and favorable connotations of joy and delight. On the other hand, English belongs to an area of cold and wet climate which leads to expressions that have positive connotations usually associated with warmth rather than cold such as: 'He was given a warm welcome' and 'He is a warm-hearted man’, i.e., kind person. Ilyas (1989: 128) explains that “What may be a connotatively favorable expression in Arabic could have a pejorative sense in English, and vice versa.”

Many examples of Algerian EFL students’ erroneous use of metaphorical style were found in their English compositions this was namely due to the fact that students tended to brainstorm in Arabic then translate these ideas into English which resulted in erroneous statements. For example:

e.g. The purpose from it is to raise selling (الهدف منه هو رفع البيع)
e.g. I cut a promise to help my friend. (قطع وعده أن أساعد صديقي)
e.g. I went with the house to Algiers. (I went with my family to Algiers; this is a translation from dialectal Arabic)

These are only few examples among so many, and mistakes related to culture specific expressions are very often found in EFL Algerian students’ writing.

4. Implications: Reducing cultural barriers

There is much discussion nowadays about whether to change the English speaking audience’s expectations or whether to make others change to fit this audience’s traditional style. Waiting for an agreement, it is important to look for some solutions and to help our EFL students at least to be aware of the variances in writing between the two languages in order to be successful in academic writing.

4.1. Raising teacher awareness of their students’ cultural barriers

Teachers need to be aware of the socio-cultural differences between their learners’ speech community and that of the target language because achieving success in a new culture does not, however, lie solely in learning the grammar and vocabulary of the language. Ability to negotiate cultural barriers and develop new ways of learning are also essential. Teachers need to be familiar with the socio-cultural sources of the problems encountered by their students when writing in a foreign language, including differences in rhetorical styles (Cai, 1993). This awareness enables teachers to assist learners in analyzing their expectations versus the expectations of their English reading audiences based on the rhetoric they have learned in contrast to the rhetoric they are learning.

Thanks to this awareness teachers will consider learning to compose in a foreign language not simply as an isolated classroom activity, but a social and cultural experience. For example, the rules of English composition carry values that are absent in, or sometimes contradictory to, the values of the Arab society. Likewise, the rules of Arabic writing reflect beliefs and values that may not be found in other societies. Therefore, learning the rules of composition in a foreign language is, to a certain extent, learning the values of the corresponding foreign society.
(Shen, 1989). And therefore, the teacher will act as a mediator to make the process of learning to write in the target language, a process of creating and defining a new identity and balancing it with the old identity.

Teachers need also to be aware of the similarities that may exist between the linguistic and cultural features of the two languages and try to enable their students to use strengths from their first culture's writing in their English writing. Many examples of cultural correspondence exist between Arabic and English (see Ghazala, 1993), for example, ‘to throw light on’ (yulqeed-d-daw'a ala) or ‘focus on’ (yurakkizu ala).

Then, it is important for EFL teachers to understand that their Arab students bring with them linguistic, cultural, attitudinal, and academic experiences, and many of them already possess study skills at an advanced level in Arabic. Therefore, all what these learners actually need is the teacher help in transferring these skills to the target language and adjusting them to a different academic environment (Jordan, 1997).

4.2. Raising students' awareness of cross-cultural contrastive rhetoric in English writing

The teaching staff at university has noticed that many Algerian EFL students are able to construct grammatically correct sentences, but find it difficult to write clear, coherent, idiomatic English compositions simply because they have to write in the unfamiliar rhetorical styles of the target culture. Add to this the complexity of the use of different cultural conventions in English academic writing. Therefore, students need to know not only the grammar and vocabulary of the target language, but also the cultural constraints associated with the language forms and the consequences of selecting a particular form. Understanding those contrastive aspects of two cultures may constitute the first step for Arab EFL students to attain sensitivity to common errors traceable to their L1 and culture. This can be achieved by offering varied resources such as reading clubs, language labs, group discussions, etc. which would expand the lexical resources of the learner, and provide opportunities for discussing linguistically cultural bound matters. Indeed, research on written discourse highlights variations of the prose structure in the rhetorical style, purpose, task topic and audience (Purves, 1988). Thus it would be interesting to tackle global cultural issues which would help EFL learners socialize with the embedded cultural norms of the target language in an academic context. This approach provides further support for contrastive rhetoric as an analytical tool employed by student writers to better understand rhetorical differences.

5. Conclusion

In this increasingly diverse world, it is necessary to develop our learners’ intercultural competence by helping them to explore how varied underlying cultural orientations and patterns influence communication behaviours in both speech and writing. One useful tool is contrastive rhetoric, which served in this study as the basis for analysis. Yet it does not only seek to detect cross-cultural writing differences, but it also tries to account for them.

The findings of this small-scale research leads us to the conclusion that because Arab writers bring with them their cultural experiences that affect their writing, EFL teaching may not be successful if the underlying culture in L1 is not addressed, or if contrasts between L1 and FL writing structures are not made sufficiently explicit. Contrastive rhetoric has brought new insights to L2/FL acquisition and thus L2/FL writing and has highlighted the fact that there are some native cultural features related to writing. These features may be transferred to L2/FL writing and sometimes create difficulties. Research claims that these writing patterns related to culture are beneficial to L2/FL learners if taught at schools, and insists that teachers should be aware of their learners’ prior experience, i.e., the differences of their instructional backgrounds, in order to use appropriate teaching approaches. Therefore, it is high time to exploit contrastive rhetoric findings in the FL composition classroom to help our students overcome cultural barriers in writing as pedagogy needs to change to meet the demands of the growing multiculturalism of this era. Liebman (1992:157) highlights this point stating:

If ESL writing teachers want their students to succeed in a variety of academic writing tasks, they must become aware not only of these different forms but also of differences in instructional background. It is not enough to determine what will be expected of ESL students in the university and then give them models of what we want them to produce. We must also determine what these students’ prior experiences are. Students from different backgrounds will require different approaches.
This area is proving to be both interesting and challenging for policy makers and course designers especially in the Arab world as English is becoming a necessary tool for communicating globally and as the Arab world is investing more and more in teaching English.

References


