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A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Written Discourse of Arabic-Speaking Learners of English

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Abstract. This paper identifies a range of problems, which confront Arabic-speaking learners of English in writing. One of these problems is that learners differ widely in how much they share in L1 discourse/rhetorical features, whatever they are. Also, learners who have studied English may well use western discourse features in their L1 as well as in English, their L2. The findings of this paper suggest that many discourse features are relatively easily learned and, even, back-transfer into a learner's L1. Many individuals from both language groups showed control over features for creating coherence, especially Arabic with the use of discourse markers, and English-like topic to topic relationships. Moreover, the data presents some pedagogical recommendations. Many discourse-organizing features are shared across languages and cultures or seem to be relatively easily learned. Moreover, rather than focusing all discourse-instructional energies on global features, however, more effort should probably be spent on local topical development techniques, often based on comparative syntactic studies rather than some of the amateur anthropologizing about oral and literate cultures that has occupied much of the literature. A number of recommendations are made to remedy the situation.

The teaching of writing, both to first and second language users, is a matter of serious controversy and differing approaches. The differences are based both on different theories of what writing is (theory of writing) and how writing ability is learned or acquired (theory of learning writing). Differences in theories of writing have to do with what is deemed more and less important in any type of writing and in what types of behaviors or types of writing are appropriate for various learners. Differences in theories of learning mostly have to do with the degree to which students are seen as able to develop writing ability on their own, with the guidance of instructors, and the degree to which writing must be carefully directed all through its development with strict direction of instructions [1; 2].

Based on this, teaching writing to non-native speakers in general, and Arabic-speaking learners in particular, requires understanding of the areas of similarities and differences between the two languages [3]. Fox [4] stresses the fact that most

"nonwestern" students have difficulty expressing themselves through writing. What is most important is how we as instructors often misunderstand them. Although early second language (L2) writing research found similarities between native speakers' and nonnative speakers' composing processes [5 - 8], they are not the same. One difference is that learners may use their first language (L1) rhetoric when they communicate using the second language (L2). This usage results in encountered difficulties when they begin their academic study.

One focus of written discourse analysis is the area of similarities and differences. Studies that analyzed English essays written by nonnative learners have concluded that some unique discourse features in those writings are the manifestation of the learners' L1 rhetorical conventions, confirming L1 interference in L2 writing [9; 10]. Interference of L1 writing conventions in L2 writing has been one of the foci in contrastive rhetoric research since Kaplan [11; 12]. It has been suggested that each language and its underlying culture has its specific rhetorical conventions and that they negatively interfere with L2 writing [11; 13 – 17; 2].

The analysis of writing difficulties and differences has relevance for the teaching of writing, especially for those involved in teaching students from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds [18]. Teachers and researchers have drawn on many sources for solutions. One of the most important of these sources is Discourse Analysis. Discourse Analysis has been an accepted part of the methodology of second language research for some time [19]. Its procedures are becoming increasingly familiar and even to some extent standardized. "While some linguists may concentrate on determining the formal properties of a language, the discourse analyst is committed to an investigation of what that language is used for" [20].

Studies in contrastive rhetoric have taken different emphases. For example, some studies have emphasized first language professional writing [21 - 23]. Other studies, Kobayashi [24], for example, have emphasized the difference between the organization of writing in the L1 culture with the writing of L1 in a different culture, a process otherwise termed 'transfer.'

'Transfer' in general is a term used to describe the application of previous performance or knowledge to subsequent learning [25; 26]. There are two types of transfer. The first is positive transfer, which occurs when the prior knowledge benefits the learning task, i.e., when previous knowledge matches present subject matter. The second is negative transfer, which takes place when the previous performance or knowledge disrupts the performance of the learning task.

The phenomenon of transfer has been a domain of research in second language acquisition and learning for a long time. It has been suggested that when a person starts to learn a language, he uses some of his own language background until he learns equivalent structures in the target language; then, he stops using his own language structure. For example, when an Arabic-speaking learner is beginning to learn English,

he may, in part, use the system of Arabic adverbial structure until he acquires the system of English adverbial structure. Then, it is argued, he will not use the system of Arabic adverbial structure any more. Language transfer, in general, has been an important issue in the study of second language acquisition. In the 1950s it was often deemed the most important factor to consider in theories of second language learning, as well as in approaches to second language teaching [27].

This descriptive study attempted to investigate how it is possible to teach English writing to Arabic-speaking learners. A systematic study focusing on the rhetoric of writing difficulties encountered by Arabic-speaking learners may suggest new ways of teaching English writing to Arab learners. Specifically, it may produce answers to the following questions:

1. What, if any, discourse features characterize the English writing of university-level students whose first language is Arabic?
2. How uniformly are these features distributed among a random sample of writers from the same L1?
3. How similar is the L1 writing of the writers to the writing they produce in English? That is, does the L1 writing of an individual exhibit features similar to the L2 writing of the same individual?

Initial studies in contrastive rhetoric inferred L1 (more precisely "First Culture") ideal features from L2 student writing produced by students writing while living in the target language culture. Later, a few studies [21 - 23] were done on L1 professional writing and established norms based on such writing. Kobayashi [24] established that Japanese students in Japan and writing in Japanese used different organizational patterns from Japanese students writing in Japanese but writing in the US. Several studies in Purves [28] provide some data on the development of L1 student writing in the home country or culture. Reid [29] and Ostler [30], using different methodologies, compare L2 student writing in the target culture with other L2's (Reid - Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, Ostler - Arabic, Spanish, Japanese) and with target language (English) student writing.

Several studies, Hinds [31; 21] and Namba and Chick [32] attempt to generalize about the discourse norms or ideals of a culture from historical evidence and from analysis of professional writing.

The researcher believes that differences among these types of discourse must be established before firm conclusions can be drawn about the status of discourse features in the writing of ESL students.

These questions have become issues for several reasons. First, it has been suggested [33] that much of what seems to be discourse transfer is simply lack of discourse competence in either L1 or L2, that the writers who fail to write according to English discourse norms are simply incompetent in either L1 or L2 discourse.

By examining the nature of the rhetorical difficulties Arabic-speaking students encounter, new dimensions of the Arab writers' composing process may be revealed. This study will exclusively address the above issues and will determine the most problematic features that Arabic-speaking learners, especially Saudis, encounter when writing in English. As an addition to the growing body of research on L2 writing, this study will also examine the writing rhetoric of Arabic-speaking students during the entire composing process.

One focus of the study, therefore, is what may be termed discourse transfer. Earlier studies of what has been called contrastive rhetoric have, of course, examined this phenomenon in a more indirect way, generally either by extrapolating L1 discourse norms from L2 production, or, more recently, by independently examining L1 discourse features and then looking for them in the L2 written production of speakers of that L1. In either case, what is being assumed is transfer of discourse features. But what has been omitted in most work done to date is to establish that individual L2 English writers do, in fact, possess the features in the L1 that are, presumably, transferred and do, in fact, exhibit those features either in their L1 writing or their L2 writing or both.

Studies of transfer have focused on issues of phonology, syntax, and semantics. Few studies have been done to examine the conditions under which discourse transfer does or does not take place. Despite the difficulties attending the study of discourse transfer, the attempt to find the circumstances associated with discourse transfer is an important one.

While investigators of discourse transfer have made use of all the traditional grammatical units of analysis such as morphology, words, clauses, etc., relatively little research has focused on the transfer of structural and interactional features of discourse [19].

Connor [34] conducted a study which attempted to describe and evaluate argumentative patterns in students' writing across cultures and languages. She studied four groups of learners of four different nationalities: English, Finnish, German, and American, using a writing task which required the subjects to compose a written argument in their native languages. The process of written argumentation in English, Connor claimed, typically has the following structure: situation, problem, solution and evaluation. Ten compositions from each group were selected and analyzed in order to discover whether the same pattern occurred in Finnish and German. Connor's analysis focused on the writer's reasons for selecting ideas and how they were presented. Considerable cross-cultural variation was discovered in the analysis. The situation, problem, solution, and evaluation structure was not used as consistently in the Finnish and German subjects' compositions as it was in the English and the American compositions. Connor concluded that culturally specific thought processes are evident in these subjects' composition.

Soter [35] compared essays written by Vietnamese-speaking and Arabic-speaking learners of English with competent speakers of English. She found that the less-competent subjects had many rhetorical problems beside the syntactic ones. These subjects suffered from culture transfer in their writing. Soter noted that the Vietnamese and Arabic subjects used patterns of narration which were not English-like. These patterns differed in various aspects, such as the way of introducing the story.

Clark [26] studied L1 and L2 texts written by college students from the US and Mexico to investigate whether the transfer of writing sophistication from L1 to L2 writing occurs. He found significant correlations between L1 and L2 texts, and concluded that the transfer of writing sophistication took place and that writers made attempts to conform to the norms of their L2.

Kubota [10] investigated whether individual Japanese students use the same discourse patterns in L1 and ESL writing and how each individual's use of similar/dissimilar patterns affected the quality of ESL essays. He found that about half the writers used similar patterns in L1 and L2. Moreover, he found that L1 writing ability, English proficiency and composing experience in English affect the quality of ESL essays.

Very few studies have examined possible transfer effects between Arabic and English. Koch [36] examined English essays by Arabic-speaking learners of English and found that most of the learners made heavy use of devices such as repetition of important words and phrases, and parallelism (restating of ideas in different words). The reason, she claimed, was that some features of Arabic discourse are transferred, and may encourage Arab students to repeat words or phrases in English.

Ostler [30, p. 169] asserted that the particular deviant style of Arabic students' writing in English reflects the style of classical Arabic, which differs in a number of ways from that of English. She attempted to answer the question "Why, when Arabic-speaking students seem to have mastered most of the English grammatical forms and idioms, do they still produce "foreign sounding" essays, and why it is that experienced ESL writing teachers can identify Arabic-speaking students' English essays as having been written by Arabic speakers?" She addressed the issue of the effect of the learners' cultural background on written discourse by looking at English and Arabic rhetoric from a historical perspective, and by giving an account of devices such as balance and coordination.

Taher [16] noted that while Ostler [30] purported to deal with discourse problems, she mainly dealt with syntactic problems and did not clearly define or describe the "discourse" phenomena she claimed to be concerned with. Taher examined English and Arabic essays written by Arabic-speaking learners to see what kind of discourse transfer strategies they employed when they wrote in English. Her subjects were eight adult competent English speakers, and eight adult competent Arabic

speakers. She asked her subjects to write about the same topic. The Arabic-speaking students were asked to write in both English and Arabic. She found that most Arabic-speaking learners used L1 discourse features such as parallelism and repetition in their English writing.

Ayari [37] examined 31 writing samples from Arab and American student writers to investigate the extent to which their writing reflects the rhetorical conventions of their native languages. He also investigated the extent to which L1 writing skills constitute a good predictor for the ability to produce an acceptable piece of writing in a second language. n this study the researcher asked the subjects to describe a religious practice common to all of the subjects: the Friday prayer in Islam (the American subjects were Muslims). The writing task involved describing the various stages of the prayer process. The Arab subjects wrote in both Arabic and in English. The American subjects provided English samples. Ayari found that the Arabic samples varied considerably in rhetorical structure. They did not reveal a single Arabic rhetorical style. Ayari also noted that some Arabic-speaking subjects employed a "linear" rhetorical style in their native language writing, describing the various steps in the prayer sequence in chronological order. These findings limit the claims made by Kaplan [11], Koch [21], and Ostler [30] that parallelism is the most important structuring device in Arabic.

Krahnke et al. [38] examined 100 sample essays written by three groups. One group consisted of competent English student writers, another group of Japanese learners of English, and a third group of Arabic-speaking learners of English. Subjects were asked to write essays in English and in their first language. The first group, the native speakers of English, was used as a control. The researchers found that non-native writers from both groups differ widely in their L1 rhetorical norms. For example, the Arabic writers made great use of discourse markers ("first", "second", etc.), while the Japanese used such devices relatively infrequently. The results also indicated that less-competent learners typically transfer discourse features from L1 to L2, while more competent learners rarely transfer. Not only that, but the study suggested that learners who are studying English or who have studied in an English environment are more likely to use Western style when they write in their own first language.

The work on transfer has refined the concept somewhat [39]. Rather than concluding that difference leads to transfer, and that the greater the difference the greater the likelihood of transfer, recent studies have shown that greater language differences frequently do not lead to transfer. This is presumably either because these differences are so apparent to the learner that they are easily overcome, or because such a contrast is perceived between the native language and target language that transfer is not adopted as a strategy. Smaller differences, however, may well be sources of transfer because the differences are not so cognitively apparent. Along with this more

sophisticated work has come the acceptance that transfer is highly individualized and few generalizations can be made about the processes operating for specific learners.

Kobayashi [24] analyzed narrative and expository samples from four groups. One group consisted of American college students, the second group of Japanese ESL students in the United States, the third group of Japanese students in Japan writing in English, and the fourth of Japanese students in Japan writing in their native language. The analysis revealed that cultural preference for certain rhetorical patterns clearly exists; this suggests that second language writers do sometimes use first language rhetorical patterns.

Discourse interference becomes a much less compelling explanation for lack of writing competence if it can be shown that students either do not share in L1 cultural norms or have largely acquired L2 norms, even in their L1. In this project, therefore, the researcher is not concerned with ideal or normative features of the standard language/culture but with the actual discourse produced in both L1 and L2 by users of English. These individuals may or may not be competent in the discourse of their L1 any more than a similar group of native English users might not be especially competent in English discourse.

Design

Fifty university students whose first language is Arabic were asked to provide writing samples in both English (AE) and their first language, i. e., Arabic (AA). Students who were taking academic courses at the Department of English in Imam Mohammed Bin Saud Islamic University were randomly selected from a spectrum of abilities. All subjects wrote in both languages on different questions. The English question was *"What are the suitable methods of learning English?"* While the Arabic question was *"What are the similarities and differences between learning Arabic and English?"* The subjects were asked to spend not more than one hour to respond to the Arabic and English questions for their writing samples. The subjects were told about the purpose and procedure of the study before the writing session began as was suggested by Pennington and So [40]. They also were provided with the topic at the location to insure that they did not have time to think about or plan for the topic before it was assigned.

As a control, and to provide a baseline for comparison, fifty students whose first language was English were asked to complete the same task. The participants are freshmen students at Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan. They were asked to write one essay about the question that was chosen by the researcher. The procedure that was carried out with the English subjects (EE) was similar to the procedure of the Arabic-speaking subjects (AA, EA).

The writing tasks were selected from many possible tasks because most of the subjects were familiar with the topics and were able to complete this assignment easily. An unfamiliar topic might have constrained the flow of composing, thus the topics were carefully chosen. First, the topics were of a general nature because a culture-bound topic might elicit extensive L1 uses [41]. These topics were expected to lend themselves to revealing the personal experiences of each writer, so that even unskilled writers were able to draw on their own life experiences to produce a composition in both their L1 and L2. All subjects were asked to write as if they were answering an essay question on a final exam. If required, the subjects were given assistance in understanding the instructions.

The topic of the Arabic sample was different from the English topic in order to avoid translating or following the same plan used in the English topic.

In order to obtain reliable samples of English and Arabic writing and to minimize the possibility of language transfer, one participant was assigned the English question first and the Arabic question a week or so later. The other participant was assigned the Arabic question first and the English question second. The total number of the writing samples collected amounted to a corpus of 150 compositions.[1]

A general discourse analysis of the writing samples was carried, with assistance from other analysts[2] to increase the reliability of some of the judgments. The analysis did not begin with any precise hypotheses to be tested. Using categories of discourse features found throughout the literature, the raters tried to characterize discourse-level phenomena for the sub-corpus they were concerned with and then sharpened their analysis as patterns began to emerge. Although any unit of analysis will present problems, the raters used the t-unit to make comparisons with previous work easier.[3] Initially the researcher looked for the following features:

1. Occurrence and location of thesis statements for the whole piece of writing

By 'thesis statement,' the researcher means one to three t-units that express a dominant topic about which the rest of the piece of writing can be seen as a

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1 It is almost certain that both genre and conditions of sample collection will simply influence the nature of the discourse produced by writers. This is merely one more factor that will, ultimately, need to be isolated. For the present, the researcher used a generic sample collection technique similar to that used in many testing settings, without, of course, the reality of a test outcome.

2 Three teachers of English writing courses at the English Department of Imam Mohammad Bin Saud University were asked to rate the writing samples. After the completion of the rating a meeting was held to fiscuss the findings.

3 Whike there are problems analyzing written discourse corssplinguistically using the t-unit, any other unit presents even greater problems. Little has been mentioned in the literature, for example, on the difference in sentence puntuation and prargraphing found across cultures, differences that rule these units out as meningfully comparable units.

development or comment. There are, of course, theoretical problems with the definition and identification of thesis statement. For the purposes of this study, however, the researcher used a loose, impressionistic definition that is common in the literature (see Schneider and Connor [42] for a similar definition) and supplemented it with multiple judgements. Location of thesis statements was coded as being in the first, middle, or last third of the overall text.

2. Presence of overt conclusion statement

Although formal conclusions may seem unnecessary in texts as short as many of those produced by the subjects, the researcher decided to note their presence or absence anyway, primarily because many of the subjects wrote them. the researcher used the same criteria for identifying conclusions as for thesis statements, conclusions occurring in the final one-third of the text, however.

3. Topic development, as measured by

a. the relative frequency of parallel topic occurrence, topic-comment structure, or no relation between sequential topics;
b. variety of t-unit topics as measured by the ratio of different topics to number of t-units,
c. topic continuity as measured by Givon's Referential Distance and Persistence measures.

By 'topic,' the researcher means what individual t-units (clauses or sentences) are 'about.' Although topic is also neither well-defined nor always formally marked, there is a large literature of attempts to relate the occurrence and development of topics to overall coherence in writing [44; 42]. The researcher used a mixture of formal (subject, early placement) and impressionistic (what does the t-unit seem to be about to several readers) criteria to determine the topic of each t-unit in the samples.

The researcher then used several techniques to try to determine whether any systematic patterns of topic development occurred in the texts. The first of these was to determine what the patterns of topic-to-topic relationships were. The researcher noted whether each topic was related to the previously occurring topic by a parallel relationship, a topic-comment relationship, or no relationship.

Examples

AE 35 (t-unit #20):

Moreover, *Imam students* are required to study a lot of courses and *they* are often required to master Arabic, English and religious subjects

(*they* refers to *Imam students* by a topic -to- topic relationship)

This measure only determines the local cohesion of topics, and it is clear that topical cohesion may not necessarily be only local. One reason the researcher chose to examine local topical cohesion, however, is that it has been asserted that Arabic, especially, is marked by frequent occurrence of parallel constructions [11; 30; 44]. Much of the literature is not at all clear on what constitutes a parallel construction, but one interpretation seems to be that it is a sequence of constructions with the same topic. This local cohesion measure will indicate the frequency of such a relationship. A combination of the frequency of topic-to-topic or parallel and topic-comment relationships will give an indication of overall topical coherence, of whether there is close cohesion from topic-to-topic or not. A difference in frequency of the types is also a potential way to distinguish between texts.

Another way that topic development was examined was to calculate the ratio of topics to the number of t-units, a feature we might call *topical depth*. A text that has few different topics for a given number of clauses will differ topically from one that has a large number of different topics. The researcher is not suggesting a quality difference with this measure, but merely looking for a quantitative measure of topical variation.

The third way in which topic was examined was to use two of Givon's [45] measures of topic continuity, *Referential Distance* and *Persistence*. The first, Referential Distance, is a measure of the "newness" or "unfamiliarity" of a topic. RD is measured by assigning a value of 20 to any topic that has not occurred before anywhere in the text (as a topic or not) or not in the previous 20 t-units (that being assumed by Givon to be the maximum distance that will assist processing). A text with many unique topics or one with many t-units between identical topics would have a higher index of Referential Distance than one that had few topics or a small number of t-units between identical topics.

Persistence measures the frequency with which a topic recurs once it has occurred. A topic that is not mentioned anywhere in the next t-unit is given a value of 0. One that occurs in three successive t-units is given a value of 3, and so on. This measure is similar to this study measure of topic variety, but is not restricted to the topical reoccurrence of a given topic and also measures persistence of topicality over larger units of text [46; 42].[4]

One dimension that is clearly missed by the present analysis is that of larger patterns of structure of topical development. These are apparent in many of the texts we examined, but the researcher has not yet attempted to describe them systematically. Structural analysis of the type proposed by Christensen [47] and used, in an updated version by Ostler [30] may be valuable here.

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[4] There is more work to be done in the study of topicality in texts. The work in Topical Structure Analysis by Lautamatti [46], Schneider and Connor [42] and others is interesting, but, as Schneider and Conner note, TSA, as it is presently formulated, misses much of topical structure.

4. Frequency of occurrence of discourse markers

Although some work has been done to investigate the role of conjunction in determining coherence, few studies have attempted to separate local conjunction, conjunction between noun and verb phrases, inter-clausal conjunction, conjunction between clauses, and what Evensen [48] has called 'superstructure' or conjunction that makes relationships between larger pieces of text explicit. Some work in oral discourse analysis, e.g., Schiffren [49] has referred to such conjunctions as 'discourse markers.' Typically, these are words or phrases such as 'the following,' 'first,' 'second,' 'finally,' 'as mentioned above,' and any other phrase that serves to indicate explicitly the relationship between parts of a text.

Use of discourse markers is one way to achieve coherence in a text. Certainly, texts can be coherent without the use of explicit discourse markers [48], but a text that contains discourse markers is potentially more coherent than one that does not.

The researcher chose to examine the frequency of discourse markers for several reasons:

1. They are frequently taught.
2. The researcher had informally noticed them in the English writing of Arabic-speaking students and wondered about their relative frequency.
3. They have not received much study previously.

While there are not precise formal criteria for identifying discourse markers, the researcher found little difficulty in deciding which words or phrases marked connections between pieces of a text larger than two t-units.

Examples:

First ..., Second ..., Finally ..., In conclusions ...,, As I mentioned above ...[5]

Results

Thesis statement near beginning

Sample	AA	AE	EE
Number	37	42	48

[5] The researcher did not include cases of "for example" in his count of discourse markers. While a case could be made that there are such markers, most often they connect a clause to a previously established topic.

The results show that the non-native writers used fewer thesis statements at the beginning of their texts than the native writers did. Tentatively, the researcher might conclude that most of the Arabic writers use explicit and early thesis statements similarly to the way the English writers do.

Thesis statements can, therefore, be regarded as potentially an element of discourse structure that Arabic learners of English could learn more of. (This is not new, of course.).

Conclusions

AA	AE	EE
33	30	43

Given the small number of the subjects studied, there is no clear pattern to the results of conclusion use. The Arabic writers do use somewhat fewer conclusions overall. The typically shorter texts produced by the non-English writers may also affect the occurrence of this feature.

Number of t-units

Samples	AA	AE	EE
Number	562	613	728
Range	4-18	4-20	9-31

Differences in the overall number of t-units are predictable, with the non-English writers writing less than the English writers. The differences in the non-English writing reflect differences in clause structure in the two languages.

Number of different topics

Samples	AA	AE	EE
	310	355	474

Percent of t-units with unique topics

Samples	AA	AE	EE
%	69	81	72
range	40-90%	37-100%	35-100%

If there is a pattern here it is that the Arabic writers tend to include more English topics in less text than the English writers. This feature may be related to notions of topical development [30], although that requires a specific measurement not used in this study. Number of different t-unit topics does, however, reflect how much variety in topicalization the writer uses. The local topical coherence measures described below correlate with this measure.

Frequency of discourse markers

Samples	AA	AE	EE
	120	96	79

Percent of t-units w/DMs

Samples	AA	AE	EE
%	32	29	23
Range	0-60%	0-65%	0-72%

The use of explicit, text-structuring discourse markers is the feature on which the groups of writers differ most strongly. The Arabic writers use a relatively large number of such markers. Differences in the use of this feature have not, to the researcher knowledge, been studied in of the non-English-speaking culture (i. e., Arabic) the researcher examined for this study. It is difficult to state at this point, therefore, whether the high frequency of discourse markers in the writing of the Arabic writers is a case of forward transfer from Arabic or of transfer from English and English language instruction. The difference in the use of discourse markers by Arabic-speaking writing in Arabic and in English may be an attempt to adapt to western discourse norms, either as a result of instruction or for less salient reasons.

Frequency of parallel topic-topic relationship

Sample	AA	AE	EE
%	18	24	14
Range	0-35%	0-48%	0-70%

This feature is described above as an identity relationship between the topics of two adjacent t-units. The results of this feature are especially interesting because of the similarity in the frequency of occurrence of parallel relationships in all texts. In part this interest is due to frequent descriptions [11; 30; 44] of Arabic as being characterized by parallelism. On this study, however, this measure of parallelism fails to distinguish Arabic writing, in English or Arabic, as markedly parallel in local topic development.

Frequency of topic-comment topic-topic relationship

Sample	AA	AE	EE
%	38	18	21
Range	10-62%	0-42%	0-45%

This result may be the most curious of all. The non-English writers, as groups and when writing in English, both develop topics using a topic - comment relationship at about the same frequency as the English writers do. In Arabic, however, the Arabic

writers use topic-comment structures much more frequently. Seemingly, there is convergence toward English norms from different non-English norms.

The Arabic results are more difficult to explain. The Arabic writers wrote significantly more topic-comment structures in Arabic than they did in English. This hardly looks like the parallelism for which Arabic is notorious [11; 30; 44]. It looks more like the rightward topic development that is often recommended in sophisticated writing instruction. Further understanding of this difference will depend on an analysis of Arabic student writing that is not influenced by English.

Overall frequency of topic- to- topic relationship

Sample	AA	AE	EE
%	70	41	46

This measure is merely a compilation of the previous two measures. If it is meaningful at all, it is as a measure of overall local topical coherence. The writings differ significantly, but not in a way that allows for easy explanation. What the numbers clearly suggest, of course, is that Arabic-speaking subjects' writing in Arabic (AA) is considerably more locally coherent than English writing is.

Referential distance

Sample	AA	AE	EE
	22.61	19.63	20.49
Range	8.5-40	8.15-40	6.4-26.2

As noted above, referential distance measures the newness of topics as they occur in the text. A text with many topics that are unique or are mentioned only a few times would receive a high referential distance score and would, according to Givon's theorizing, be more difficult to process. A text with few different topics or topics used frequently would receive a low referential distance score and would, presumably, be easier to process. The baseline provided by the English students is 10.49. The scores of all the other groups are comparable.

Overall, note how this more global measure of topical coherence minimizes differences between the groups on the more local measures.

Other results

As an addition to the above results, several observations need to be identified that were not explicitly mentioned above. The first of these is the range of scores demonstrated by individual subjects on each measure. As can be observed, the ranges are all quite high. What this clearly indicates is that while there are tendencies for individual students from a language-cultural background to structure discourse in a particular way, any individual may differ widely from the language-cultural norm. This

is as true for the English subjects as it is for Arabic subjects. In other words, any Arabic-background writer, or any English-background writer may exceed or fail to meet native language norms.

The second observation not visible in the data reported above is the degree to which individual subjects performed similarly across languages. More detailed work needs to be done on this question, with more subjects and more sophisticated design and analysis. The observations, however, suggest that individuals did not, by and large, perform similarly across languages. While it is true that for most measures (and only for the Arabic subjects) the highest and lowest scores in L1 and in L2 were given to the same subject's writing, in between the extremes, ranking correlations were low to negative. This indicates a high degree of cross-linguistic difference. Subjects who, for example, did not use a thesis statement at the beginning of their English writing may well have done so in their writing.

Discussion

Based on the above analyses, it is difficult to support a strong version of the contrastive rhetoric hypothesis. By "strong version," it is meant that a) there exists a set of discourse features that are commonly present in the L1 writing of nonnative students, b) that these features frequently appear in the same students' writing in English as a result of the student using the same discourse/rhetorical techniques in English as he/she uses in the L1.

The data do support a weaker version of CR, one that can explain some individual tendencies to over- or under-use various discourse-organizational features relative to their average frequency of use by native English student writers.

What seems to be the case is that, as common sense would suggest, students differ widely in how much they share in L1 discourse/rhetorical norms, whatever they are. Also, students who have studied English may well use western discourse techniques in their L1 as well as in English, their L2.

What this, and other evidence suggests, is that many discourse features are relatively easily learned and, even, back-transfer into a student's L1. One further observation of the data, not formally measured again, is that some of the samples that demonstrated low overall proficiency, showed good control over discourse-organizational techniques.

Moreover, the data presents the following pedagogical recommendations:

1. Many discourse-organizing features are shared across languages and cultures or seem to be relatively easily learned. Assuming that the researcher wants students

from non-western backgrounds to adhere to western *prescriptive* or *statistical* norms, these features can and should be taught.

2. Rather than focusing all discourse-instructional energies on global features, however, more effort should probably be spent on local topical development techniques, often based on comparative syntactic studies rather than some of the amateur anthropologizing about oral and literate cultures that has occupied much of the literature.

3. Most importantly, the researcher would like to enter a plea for a reorientation of comparative discourse studies away from stereotyping and prescriptivism. Just as we learned years ago that not all L1-L2 differences ended up as interference, and that not all L2 "error" is ascribable to L1, he should extend his understanding to matters of discourse. Additionally, the evidence from individual variation suggests avoiding stereotyping students. If he expects students of a particular language-cultural background to write one way or another he will look for just those features and label the student accordingly. Further he may commit the greater error of ascribing those differences as direct results of transfer from L1.

A turn away from prescriptivism is more difficult to argue, given the strong preference in second language teaching to teach to target cultural norms or ideals [50, pp. 415-16] for a discussion of this dilemma). Along with Land and Whitley [51], however, the researcher argues for a pluralism both in his reactions but also in a recognition that ideals and norms are just that see, e. g., the work of Braddock [52] on the occurrence of topic sentences in American professional writing, and that individuals are capable of more complex and variable behavior. Rather than teach the students to adopt a crutch to please an imaginary academic audience that reacts positively only to rhetorical correctness, we should recognize the variation in audience reaction demonstrated in work such as that by Mendelsohn and Cumming [53] and the variable means for reaching coherence evidenced by L2 writers.

Last, what the subjects needed most, in its estimation, was stronger overall syntactic and lexical competence (see Houghton and Hoey [54] for more details) With such proficiency, and with some knowledge of ways of achieving coherence, it is believed that most students could approach academic writing with greater control and confidence and could use the variety of discourse devices available to them to respond effectively to a variety of writing tasks and audiences.

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دراسة تحليلية لتأثير الخلفية الثقافية للناطقين بالعربية عند تعلمهم مهارة الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية

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ملخص البحث. يعين البحث مجموعة من المشكلات التي تواجه متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية من الناطقين بالعربية عند ممارستهم مهارة الكتابة. ومن هذه المشكلات تباين المتعلمين تباينا واضحا فيما يتقنون من قواعد لغتهم الأم على اختلاف مستوياتها، وهو ما لمسنا تأثيره في كتاباتهم سواء بلغتهم الأم أو باللغة الإنجليزية. ويخلص البحث إلى أن العديد من أساليب الكتابة باللغة الإنجليزية تتسم بسهولة نسبية في تعلمها، بل وفي انتقالها إلى اللغة الأم. ومع ذلك، فقد أظهر العديد من أفراد العينتين البحثيتين قدرة واضحة على التحكم فيما يستخدمونه من أساليب تحقق لهم الترابط المنطقي في كتاباتهم، سواء على النسق العربي أو الإنجليزي. هذا ويقدم البحث من خلال معطياته عددا من المقترحات التدريسية، إذ وجدنا أن الكثير من الأساليب المنظمة للكتابة تحظى بصفة العمومية: أي أنها قاسم مشترك بين اللغات والثقافات، وهو ما يجعلها تبدو سهلة التعلم. ومن ثم، فبدلا من التركيز على العموميات عند التدريس يجب أن ينصب الاهتمام على الأساليب التي تختص بها كل لغة وتميزها عن الأخرى، استنادا إلى الدراسات المقارنة في النحو والمفردات وليس إلى الدراسات الإنسانية المقارنة في

الثقافات المحكية أو المكتوبة التي تزخر بها الأدبيات التي تتناول هذه الظاهرة، حيث أوضحت الدراسة أن أفراد العينتين كانوا في أمس الحاجة إلى تنمية مقدرتهم النحوية والمفرداتية. وينتهي البحث بمجموعة من التوصيات لعلاج هذه المشكلة.