

## Analyzing Cross-Cultural Writing Differences using Contrastive Rhetoric: A Critical Review

Badar Almu hailib\*

State University of New York at Fredonia, USA

Corresponding Author: Badar Almu hailib, E-mail: almu5862@fredonia.edu

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: November 07, 2018

Accepted: February 27, 2019

Published: April 30, 2019

Volume: 10 Issue: 2

Advance access: March 2019

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

### Key words:

Contrastive Rhetoric,  
Writing Skill,  
Cultural Influence,  
L2 Writing

### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical review of the cross-cultural writing styles in the light of contrastive rhetoric approach established by Kaplan in 1966. Although Kaplan compared different writing styles depending on the culture each language was attached to, his comparison was criticized by some scholars the prominent one of which is Conor 1996. Advantages and disadvantages of the approach being utilized to find the cultural influences in L2 writing was discussed detail. Further, the implementation of such approach was shed light on, apart from how policy makers would benefit from the approach in teaching the L2 writing skill.

Rhetorical styles in writing can vary drastically from one language and culture to another. Kaplan (1966) was the first to employ the concept of contrastive rhetoric to investigate how discourse structures differed between languages. Cultural differences were found to be responsible for differences in rhetorical patterns. Since then, many studies have explored different languages, methods, and contexts using contrastive rhetoric. In the 1980s, linguistic studies focused on the systematic organization of first language (L1) vs second language (L2) (Enkvist, 1987; Leki, 1991; Matsuda, 1997). The text was later seen as a dynamic entity by Connor (1996), who redefined contrastive rhetoric as “an area of research in second language acquisition that identifies problems in composition encountered by second language writers and, by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, attempts to explain them” (p. 5). Since the 1980s, numerous studies have complemented the early research on contrastive rhetoric by extending this framework to other domains, such as ESL education, translation, and genre-specific writing (Connor, 1996; Noor, 2001).

An interesting case that has seen less formal analysis in this field, however, is Arabic diglossia. Sayidina (2010) claimed that cultural differences could be related to different literacy practices in the Arab world. Reading and writing in Arabic were established more than 1,000 years ago, but strong oral features still appear in students’ writing because of diglossia (Ferguson, 1959). Diglossia occurs when a group of

people use two languages or dialects of the same language for different reasons. In the Arab world, people grow up speaking various colloquial varieties of Arabic that are sometimes mutually unintelligible and vary by country and region. These colloquial varieties are accorded lower social status than Classical Arabic (the language of the Quran) but are ubiquitous. In formal education, students usually learn to read, write, and speak Modern Standard Arabic, a modernized version of Classical Arabic, even though this language is not used in students’ daily lives. Thus, Classical and Modern Standard Arabic are considered an L2 for people in Arab countries, while they often are not taught to read and write in their native variety. Classical or Modern Standard Arabic instruction can therefore be challenging for students as well as teachers, as there are no native speakers students may talk with. Instead, they are required to memorize poetry and prose texts. This shows how Arabic writers may transfer rhetorical organization derived from literacy practices in the Arab world instead of orality (Ong, 2003). To address this issue, the present study offers a critical review of research on cross-cultural writing differences in the Arab world using contrastive rhetoric.

### Significance of the Review

This study could be of help in several areas. Arabic students could benefit from being familiar with the rhetorical aspects

of written Arabic and compare those to their native variety to avoid common cross-linguistic and cross-cultural errors, which contrastive rhetoric would reveal. With respect to instructors, policymakers, and consultants, this review could raise awareness of cross-cultural and rhetorical errors. This knowledge could then inform materials, practices, and classroom lessons. In terms of pedagogy, this literature review shows that each group of students coming from a different culture should be exposed to a pedagogy tailored to the specific challenges related to their unique culture and L1 background.

According to Al-Rubaye (2015), among many articles, Arabic rhetoric needs to be explored more deeply and empirically by researchers fluent in Arabic and English. One figure many articles have cited is Kaplan, but he has also been criticized for his conclusions about Arabic and the sample he analyzed. For instance, as noted by Hammad (2002), Kaplan generalized Biblical rhetorical patterns to Arabic since Hebrew and Arabic are both Afro-Asiatic languages, and part of the King James Bible was translated from Hebrew. However, part of the Bible was also translated from Greek, which likewise influenced Biblical English. In addition, Kaplan did not refer to any Bible written in Arabic when the King James Bible was translated. Finally, Kaplan did not look into possible rhetorical variations between Arabic and Hebrew in order to back up generalizing his results to Arabic. Based on this and other criticisms, a critical review of the literature is needed to facilitate further studies, improve teaching practices, and encourage a greater cultural awareness among researchers.

## CRITICAL REVIEW

### Background on Contrastive Rhetoric

As mentioned above, contrastive rhetoric started with Kaplan (1966) when he studied the writing of international students. According to him, “each language and each culture has a paragraph order unique to itself, and that part of the learning of a particular language is the mastery of its logical system” (p. 14). With this in mind, he analyzed how students learning English as a second language (ESL) organized their essays to explore how their paragraphs were developed and which rhetorical patterns they followed. He stated that Anglo-European students wrote linearly while native learners of Afro-Asiatic languages employed parallel coordinate clauses (as cited in Connor, 2002). Kaplan (1966) also pointed out that learners of “Eastern” languages tended to write indirectly with the topic sentence coming last, the opposite of Anglo-European writing style. Kaplan established contrastive rhetoric in 1966, which continues to be debated and explored today in terms of how L1 writing could affect L2 writing.

### Criticism of Contrastive Rhetoric

As noted above, there have been many critiques of Kaplan’s contrastive rhetoric theory. For instance, he saw L1 transfer as a negative effect on L2 writing, did not consider different writing styles in L2 composition, and ignored

the linguistic and cultural variation within linguistic texture (Gamie, 2009). According to Gamie (2009), other critiques come from the field of composition, claiming that contrastive rhetoric only pays attention to the product rather than how the product is produced and that it is inclined to implement abstract theories on L2 writing. Another criticism is the ability to apply contrastive rhetoric findings and their effects on students’ L2 writing. Gamie argued that even if students have been taught to be aware of the findings of contrastive rhetoric, that would not guarantee their L2 writing proficiency will improve since knowing information does not mean one can apply it practically.

Other scholars have advocated for contrastive rhetoric and its role in instruction, especially in ESL, where scholars have tried to connect contrastive rhetoric to process-oriented writing pedagogy (Connor, 2002; Leki, 1991). Connor (2002) and Leki (1991) argued that the potential for implementing contrastive rhetoric would be in designing curriculum in textual-oriented and process-oriented situations. Another advantage of contrastive rhetoric is that students would know that their L2 writing challenges might have nothing to do with their abilities but rather may derive from their experience with L1 rhetorical structure, which could increase their confidence to engage with the L2 linguistic community (Connor, 2002; Leki, 1991; Panetta, 2001).

Connor (2002) claimed that English native speakers were privileged by Kaplan, which was another source of criticism. In the early version of contrastive rhetoric, Kaplan thought languages that came from the same origin would not have any cross-cultural or cross-linguistic constraints in writing (as cited in Connor, 2002). Another critique of contrastive rhetoric was that making himself as the notion of the position when analyzing the students written text and Kaplan himself referred to the approach’s weakness of analyzing texts in his 1966 paper, which limited his analysis of students’ writing (Connor, 2002).

### Background on Arabic Rhetoric

According to Al-Rubaye (2015), little research has been conducted to investigate Arabic rhetorical features, and what few studies exist are often based on inaccurate research, with Arabic seen as redundant, repetitive, and exaggerating. Moreover, he asserted that some of these studies built their samples on students who were beginners and not well educated in their L1 (cf. the previous discussion of diglossia), which affected the results and generalization about Arabic rhetorical features (Sa’Adeddin, 1989). I had the same impression after reading many articles regarding Arabic rhetoric. Below, I explore and critique what has been written about Arabic rhetorical patterns.

Arabic rhetoric has the same task as English rhetoric, i.e. linking “text receiver” and “text producer” (Abdul-Raof, 2006). There are three fields tied to Arabic rhetoric: semantics, figures of speech, and embellishment, which differ from English rhetorical patterns (Al-Rubaye, 2015). According to Al-Musawi (2001), “The Arabic term *balāghah* covers rhetoric, eloquence, and *faṣāḥah*, or purity and perfection of language since its pre-Islamic usage, it has never

lost its inclusiveness of manner and matter, clarity” (p. X). In contrast, English rhetoric has been defined as “the art of speaking or writing effectively: such as a: the study of principles and rules of composition formulated by critics of ancient times b: the study of writing or speaking as a means of communication or persuasion” (Rhetoric, n.d.). Hence, English rhetorical research extends to fields such as social and psychological studies, while Arabic rhetoric is built on eloquence and elegant expressions of language (Fogarty, 1959).

Some researchers have tried to explore the early stages of Arabic rhetoric from before the Islamic era. According to Chejne (1965), the rhetoric of poetry was the main resource of rhetoric people imitated and learned from, and when the Islamic era started, the Quran became the main resource of Arabic rhetoric to study and learn from. Kaplan (1966) added that Arabic written rhetoric was not developed in that era because of the Arab nomadic lifestyle and environment. Arabic written rhetoric has been claimed to be influenced by oral characteristics when presenting ideas (Koch, 1983), an idea explained in greater depth later.

### Cultural Resistance

Considerable research has examined foreign language patterns influenced by many factors related to learner culture, beliefs, worldview, and assumptions. (Kramsch, 1991). According to Hyland (2003), culture is a major influence on students’ background knowledge and writing. Even choosing a writing topic could be sensitive to cultural mores. For example, in Saudi Arabia, certain topics related to family and religion may be taboo in the context of class discussion (Shukri, 2014). Thus, teachers may want to avoid certain topics or at least be aware of which topics could conflict with students’ cultural values (El-Araby, 1983). On the other hand, all cultures are in a state of flux, and some previously taboo issues can become normalized over time, such as many topics in Saudi society recently.

Shukri (2014) found students showed resistance to speak about certain topics, especially about Western culture, because of their loyalty to Islam. These students viewed Western ideas about open-mindedness and freedom of speech in a negative light. Corbett (2001) gave some examples of students feeling their native language or culture was marginalized in writing assignments. For instance, a Japanese student was given a topic to write about his country in a way that he felt was unfair, while a Muslim student was given a topic related to religion that conflicted with his cultural values. Topics such as religion, politics, status, and sex would not be allowed in a Saudi context, resulting in resistance from some learners, and “privacy” could be interpreted differently from one learner to another (Barakat, 1993; El-Araby, 1983; Hyland, 2003).

### Contrastive Rhetoric Studies in Arabic

Contrastive rhetoric studies can be divided into two categories (Al-Qahtani, 2006). The first are studies conducted by nonnative speakers of the target language, and the second are studies by native speakers of the target language. Different

perspectives related to culture could lead to differences in the interpretations of a native and nonnative speaker. The American linguist Hinds, for instance, could not correctly interpret features of Japanese writing as intended by the L1 writers (Kubota, 1992, 1997). In the same vein, many researchers have noticed that nonnative speakers of the language investigated may not be able to explain their findings due to inadequate cultural background (Connor, 1996; Shaikhulislami & Makhoul, 2000). Arabic rhetoric studies are no exception. Major research of Arabic rhetoric by non-Arabic L1 speakers includes Kaplan in 1966, Ostler in 1987, and Harfmann in 2004. Other studies have been conducted by Arab linguists, mainly as a response to nonnative researchers’ proposals about Arabic language or culture (Al-Qahtani, 2006). Below, I review nonnative studies of Arabic rhetoric followed by studies conducted by Arabic speakers.

### Studies by Nonnative Speakers

In the first seminal contrastive rhetoric study, Kaplan observed paragraph development and claimed this development was based on positive and negative groups of parallel constructions (as cited in Al-Qahtani, 2006). According to Kaplan, there are four forms of parallelism: synonymous, synthetic, antithetic, and climatic. He claimed these forms were behind ESL writing being different from that of native English speakers. Arab ESL students tended to write with more coordination, while native English readers believed a well-written text should use more subordination.

In 1987, Ostler investigated Arabic rhetoric, extending Kaplan’s work but largely reaching the same conclusions (as cited in Al-Qahtani, 2006). Ostler investigated Arabic essays that aligned with Classical Arabic prose and compared them to English essays. Ostler stated that English developed from being an oral language focusing on repetition, parallelism, and coordination to using more subordination after the emergence of large-scale literacy and printing, causing features of an oral society to vanish at the beginning of the twentieth century. In contrast, according to Ostler, Arabic rhetoric retained features of an oral society. She claimed that Arabic rhetoric was overloaded with parallelism and *saj’*, a style of prose writing using rhyme. The test Ostler ran to investigate students’ writing revealed the students wrote long sentences and used more coordination than subordination. Ostler believed these results showed Arabs were more tied to Classical Arabic, a formal oral language transferred to writing. Thus, she concluded that Arabs did not tend to develop their L1 writing, which affected their L2 writing style.

In 2004, Harfmann’s findings on Arabic rhetoric were mostly the same as Kaplan and Ostler, such as using parallelism and coordination (as cited in Al-Qahtani, 2006). He tested 20 essays in Arabic and German and compared them to each other. Harfmann proposed two reasons that Arabic used repetition, coordination, and parallelism: to get the reader’s attention and to achieve cohesion. The outcomes also revealed that the Arabic essays closer than Germans’ to written mode.

### Studies by Native Speakers

In this section, I review contrastive rhetoric studies conducted by Arab linguists. According to Al-Qahtani (2016), Arab studies of this type are often defensive and made in response to claims of Western linguists about Arabic rhetoric and oral features. Arab linguists claim that Western linguists failed to fully understand the reasons behind Arabic rhetorical patterns. While some Western linguists have claimed the oral features attached to Arabic writing derive from Arabic still being tied to Quranic language, Arab linguists argue that Arabic uses these features to accomplish particular rhetorical goals (Sa'Adeddin, 1989; Shaikhulislami & Makhlof, 2000). For example, according to Sa'Adeddin (1989), oral features recreate the intimacy and connection of a conversation. Repetition has likewise been found to be a strategy in phrases, clauses, and in the larger context.

In addition, Arab linguists have argued that Western linguists did not consider other reasons for Arabic rhetoric (Alqahtani, Year). The linear development of an argument is not a new mode of writing as Western linguists have stated but rather has been used since the eleventh century in scientific and formal texts (Sa'Adeddin, 1989), and Arab students have written in a linear style when adequate time has been given (Shaikhulislami & Makhlof). In the Arab world, the audio-lingual method is still employed when teaching writing, which may be one reason behind the oral mode of writing among Arab students.

### Implications for Research

As these views have shown, it is advisable for a researcher in contrastive rhetoric to have adequate background knowledge of the language and culture being studied in addition to an assistant researcher who is a native speaker of the target language to function as a consultant when conducting the study and analyzing the results.

### Implications for Teaching

According to Elchachi (2015), professors in Algerian English as a foreign language (EFL) classes found that students understood how to use grammar correctly and could write a correct sentence, but students found it challenging to write a cohesive and clear paragraph due to the different rhetorical styles of English and Arabic. In addition, Elachachi claimed that English and Arabic are attached to different cultures, which further complicates writing for Arab EFL learners.

To raise students' awareness of this issue, L2 teachers could introduce different resources to students, such as reading clubs, group discussions, and language labs, to give learners the target language tools and opportunities to discuss cultural issues (Elachachi, 2015). Purves (1988) emphasized the importance of introducing different structures, rhetorical styles, topics, and audiences. This would expose students to other cultures and language styles and would ease learning the L2.

Abu Rass (2015) listed ways L2 teachers could improve the learning process for EFL students. Regarding classroom

practices, he suggested teachers could facilitate communication between teacher and student. Furthermore, language awareness should be introduced to students to let them understand the accepted writing forms and styles of the target language explicitly and implicitly. In addition, a teacher may compare Arabic texts to English texts and ask students to find the differences to familiarize them with English rhetorical patterns to follow when writing in English. Since Arab students come from a culture that advocates oral rhetoric over written discourse, a teacher may explain orally before moving on to written examples.

Moreover, a teacher may explain L2 cultural norms, expectations, beliefs, and ways of thinking. For example, a teacher could explain notions of gender equality, individualism, and understanding issues from multiple contrasting perspectives. This might make students more comfortable writing from different perspectives on a topic rather than having to avoid the topic entirely (Abu Rass, 2011). Students also need to know that Western culture is built on critical thinking and favors originality and innovation over reproducing ideas.

### CONCLUSION

Each written language has its own unique rhetorical patterns in terms of style, structure, and content (Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Leki, 1991). In some languages, such as Arabic, the audience is given the burden of understanding the text, while in other languages, such as English, the writer is expected to clearly explain concepts to the audience. Developing an awareness of these differences among students could lead to better writing and learning outcomes. Connor (2002), for instance, suggested teachers and consultants in grant proposal writing should expose students to the target reader's expectations. The strategy of exposing students to multiple rhetorical styles can make learners more sensitive to different reader needs and norms and better equip students to use the writing patterns needed for a given context.

### REFERENCES

- Abdul-Raof, H. (2006). *Arabic rhetoric: A pragmatic analysis*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Abu Rass, R. (2011). Cultural transfer as an obstacle for writing well in English: The case of Arabic speakers writing in English. *English Language Teaching*, 4(2), 206–212.
- Al-Musawi, M. (2001). Arabic rhetoric. In *Encyclopedia of Rhetoric*. Retrieved from <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195125955.001.0001/acref-9780195125955-e-21>
- Al-Rubaye, M. H. K. (2015). *Metadiscourse in the academic writing of EFL and ESL Arabic-speaking Iraqi graduate students* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=theses>
- Barakat, H. (1993). *The Arab world: Society, culture, and state*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Chejne, A. G. (1965). Arabic: Its significance and place in Arab-Muslim society. *Middle East Journal*, 19(4), 447-470.

- Connor, U. (2002). New directions in contrastive rhetoric. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(4), 493–510.
- Connor, U., & Kaplan, R. (1987). *Writing across languages: Analysis of L2 text*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Corbett, J. (2001). Contrastive rhetoric and resistance to writing. In C. G. Panetta (Ed.), *Contrastive rhetoric revisited and redefined* (pp. 31–46). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- El-Araby, S. A. (1983). *Teaching foreign languages to Arab learners: Methods and media*. Tokyo, Japan: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.
- Fogarty, D. J. (1959). *Roots for a new rhetoric*. New York, NY: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Gamie, S. (2009). *A study of selected errors in Arab students' English compositions and an investigation of Arabic rhetoric* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/dissertations/AAI3380530>.
- Hammad, H. M. (2002). *A contrastive examination of the rhetorical patterns of Arab speakers' Arabic and ESL writing* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1880/42480>
- Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Koch, B. J. (1983). Presentation as proof: The language of Arabic rhetoric. *Anthropological linguistics*, 25(1), 47–60.
- Kramsch, C. (1991). Culture in language learning: A view from the United States. In K. de Bot, R. B. Ginsberg, & C. Kramsch (Eds.), *Foreign language research in cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 217–240). Philadelphia, PA: John Benjamins.
- Leki, I. (1991). Twenty-five years of contrastive rhetoric: Text analysis and writing pedagogies. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(1), 123–143.
- Panetta, C. G. (Ed.). (2000). *Contrastive rhetoric revisited and redefined*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Rhetoric. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster Online*. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rhetoric>
- Sa'Adeddin, M. A. A. (1989). Text development and Arabic-English negative interference. *Applied Linguistics*, 10(1), 36–51.
- Shukri, N. A. (2014). Second language writing and culture: Issues and challenges from the Saudi learners' perspective. *Arab World English Journal*, 5(3), 190–207.