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Arabic Language Influence on the Iraqi EFL Tertiary Learners' Use of Grammatical Cohesive Devices in their Argumentative Essays

Jasim Mohammed Abbas^{1*}

Muhammad Subakir Mohd. Yasin¹

Kemboja Ismail¹

¹Head of English Language Studies Programme,
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

*Email: jasim.abbas71@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This study intends to shed light on the significant role that language rhetoric and cultural differences play in affecting the EFL learners' written discourse. Thus, it investigates the effects of Arabic language as a mother tongue (L1) on the use of English grammatical cohesive devices in the argumentative essays of 20 Iraqi EFL tertiary students in their third year study in English Department, College of Arts, Al Iraqiya University. By identifying Arabic rhetoric and the cultural differences that are involved in the students' use of grammatical cohesion, it will be able to determine which types of grammatical cohesion are actually influenced and which are more affected. In addition, it intends to identify the effects of Arabic as L1 through exploring the Iraqi students' appropriate and inappropriate uses of English grammatical cohesive devices in their argumentative essays. To achieve this, it employed two writing tests: pre and post as well as a background educational questionnaire. First, a background educational questionnaire was administered on 90 students. It included some questions which asked the participants about the usefulness and role of Arabic writing in general and grammatical cohesion in specific in their English essays. Next, a diagnostic

test, including two topics, was given to the participants and they were asked to choose one of them in order to write an argumentative essay. The purpose of this test was to elicit information about the students' ability to use appropriately the different types of grammatical cohesion in their argumentative essays. For post- pre-test, the participants received a training in cohesion and coherence similar to CATW approach in which they were trained, in a whole semester, on way to read a passage critically and make a paraphrase and then write an argumentative essay based on this paraphrasing. At the end of the semester, they sat for a final test in which two reading passages were given to the students and they were asked to write an argumentative based on them. The findings of the two writing tests, based on a qualitative content analysis, indicated that the participants, in the final test, used more appropriate uses of the four types of grammatical devices (reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunctions). Based on a contrastive analysis, the results also revealed that the influence of Arabic in the pre test was very clear. In contrast, the influence of L1 in the final test was considerably less than that in the pre-test. Additionally, the results of the questionnaire showed that Arabic writing and its grammatical cohesive devices have a big influence on the use of English grammatical devices in the students' argumentative essays.

Keywords: grammatical cohesion, reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, Arabic rhetoric

Introduction

Good writing is usually characterized by the use of certain grammatical and lexical features including the use of syntactic structure, various cohesive devices; grammatical and lexical, coherence, synonymy, etc., all of which could exhibit a great influence on the reader's understanding of a text. All these implements are significant for students to have a strong command of language and an understanding of text dynamics if they plan to become good and strong writers. In this respect, it could be argued that these can be challenging aims for any writer and accordingly, they cause serious problems for EFL/ESL writers. In particular, Iraqi EFL students have difficulty precisely judging their writing mistakes and resolving fuzzy writing problems. When they produce their essays, grammatical, lexical and organizational aspects are noticed by their instructors. These aspects are only addressed in general terms without identifying the real reasons the cause them.

It is argued that a readable text needs strong organization, the use of different cohesive devices for the purpose of relating the ideas of text together in a cohesive way. If sentences are not woven together, and if sentences are not well-controlled

with effective variety of structure (CUNY Assessment Test in Writing [CATW], 2010), within an obvious organized text, the writer will not express his/her ideas clearly.

This paper concentrates on the influence of Arabic language rhetoric on the use of grammatical cohesive devices in Iraqi EFL tertiary students' argumentative writings. Thus, much will be paid about the effects of cultural differences as well as the Arabic grammatical cohesive devices used in Arabic on the students' use of English devices in their writings. Using Hyland's (2000) model of contrastive rhetoric, the study intends to shed light on how grammatical cohesion used in Arabic language could interfere with the use of their English equivalents.

A number of researchers and scholars investigated the use of cohesive devices in EFL context and in Arab speaking students' writings and found out that interlingual differences between Arabic and English caused big problems for the students in their use of cohesion and coherence. According to Hinkel (2004), writing in a foreign language can cause a number of difficulties for EFL students to be aware and able to use the conventions and features of academic writing. In connection with Arabic EFL context Khalil's (1989) study was one of the important researches which clarified the overuse certain types of lexical cohesive devices that Arab learners use in their compositions. In contrast, they underuse the other types of lexical and grammatical links because of the influence of interlingual interference. Rabab'ah (2003) and Al-Khnesheh (2010) argue that essay writing is considered a difficult task for non-native students, especially for Arab learners because of interlingual differences between Arabic and English in addition to the effects of using translation in difficult words rather than teaching vocabulary in context.

What makes the present study differs from other studies is that its main concern is directed to explore how L1 rhetoric could affect the appropriate use of grammatical cohesive devices in the Iraqi students' argumentative writings.

Arabic Language Rhetoric

The study of language rhetoric is dated back to the late 1960s where Kaplan (1966) 600 expository texts written by different language groups. This work is generally considered as the beginning at a new stage of ESL writing research since it was the first major attempt to study different rhetorical patterns in the writing of L2 students from different L1 groups (Connor 1996). This type of research has become to be known as contrastive rhetoric. Contrastive rhetoric studies have investigated L1-L2 transfer by examining EFL/ESL essays only which are based on cultural rhetoric conventions. According to Kaplan and Grabe (1996), contrastive rhetoric later draw on discourse analysis and text linguistic research to find out how students' writing could be analyzed at the discourse level as a means of understanding the different patterns of organizational preferences in students' writing.

The present study, following Hyland's (2005) model of contrastive rhetoric and Halliday and Hasan's (1976) cohesive devices, tries to identify the influence of Arabic

rhetoric on the appropriate use of grammatical cohesive devices in the Iraqi students' argumentative essays. Specifically, it makes a contrastive analysis of the similarities and differences between Arabic and English in the use of grammatical cohesion in writing.

More specifically, Iraqi Arabic written discourse is influenced by the Arabic culture where the Arabic language and Islam is the essence of Iraqi culture. Arabic language is the medium of instruction at all levels. What distinguishes Arabic from English is that, as Connor and Kaplan (1987) argues, Arabic is very close to highly poetic language. This is significant in Iraqi and Arab culture because the written language and written rhetorical strategies used are looked at as means for retaining the audience attention as well making the message agreeable to the audience (Zaharna 1995: 244). Therefore, the role of the listener in Arabic language is heightened. Besides, as Zaharna (1995) points out, the burden of meaning, in western rhetoric, falls on the person delivering the message. On the other hand, Arabic prefers to put more emphasis on the context of the message than the message itself.

Accordingly, it is important stating that, though the features used in an Arabic text are almost the same as those used in English, the way of using them is obviously different. For instance, the conjunction "and" "wa" in Arabic is used in written discourse to stand for more than one relation. It is normally used as an additive conjunction to connect two similar sentences or phrases. It is also used as a temporary conjunction to mean "then", and sometimes used a contrastive conjunction meaning "but" or "however" and so on. An explanation of the Arabic grammatical cohesive devices will be offered in the section of data analysis.

Purpose of the present Study

Because of the great influence that L1 rhetoric and cultural differences can cause in shaping the EFL learners' written discourse, particularly in the respect of using grammatical cohesive devices in argumentative essays, this study intends to achieve the following objectives:

1. To evaluate the influence of Arabic language rhetoric and cultural background on the use of grammatical cohesive devices in the Iraqi EFL tertiary students' argumentative essays.
2. To examine how the students' L1 differences could affect their appropriate use of grammatical cohesive devices in their argumentative essays.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of the study were Iraqi native speakers of Arabic language studying English language in their third year in the Department of English, College of Arts, Al-Iraqiya University. The number of the sample was 110 male and female students: 20 subjects for the qualitative method and 90 for the quantitative since according to

(Creswell 2005), the number of the subject in a qualitative study is between 1, 2 until 30 or 40. The subjects were selected through purposive sampling. According to Maxwell, purposive sampling is a type of sampling in which, "particular setting, persons, or events are deliberately selected for important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices" (87). The justification behind selecting third year students is that they are taking essay course in this year. Above, at this level it is expected that the subjects have been exposed more extensively to English language writing through the first two study years and hence, their use of cohesion could be examined easier.

Instruments

The instruments used for this study were: (a) writing task consisting of (1) diagnostic (pre-test) which consisted of two topic they were asked to choose one of these topics and write an argumentative essay, (2) regular assignments included four passages given to the participants and they had to read them critically, make a summary of the whole passage with writing notes of the most important ideas it contains, and then write an argumentative essay based on the summarized passage, (3) final (post-test) was given to the students at the end of the semester and immediately after the training had completed. In that test, two passages were given to the participants and they had to choose one to make summary and write an argumentative essay as was done in the training. In addition, the study used (b) a background educational questionnaire.

Procedure

First, the students were informed of the nature of the present study which includes a pre-test, training course and a post-test. They were given enough explanation about the nature of the training they will receive. In fact, they were told that this training is of great benefit for the students since it helps them improve their writing skill and give them the opportunity to analyze, judge and summarize reading passages in a critical thinking which is not so familiar to them. As a result, more than 30 thirty students were willing to participate in the semester training. In this respect, the instructor of the writing course, helped too much in explaining the nature of the training course in which they will be enrolled. After that, the researcher and the instructor decided to choose 20 students as participants from their two classes and then gathered in one class to receive the training.

Before conducting the main study, a pilot test was carried out on five students from the third stage of the English Department in the College of Arts, Al-Iraqiya University. First, it was made for the background educational questionnaire in which the students were given a survey of 18 questions, some of them focus on the way the students see the influence of their Arabic writing on English writing and their use of English grammatical cohesive devices in their argumentative essays. Later, in the following day the pre-test was piloted in which the subjects assured that the two subjects given

to them were familiar because they were taken from their textbook. In a similar way, before administrating the final test, a pilot test was also done. By doing the pilot test, the researcher had a good insight of the time assigned for each instrument and how each one is practically administered.

After each participant had been further contacted and agreed to participate, the questionnaire questions were given to 90 students and they were told to answer in their class by ticking and in some items by giving very short answers on the paper of questions itself. Before they started to answer the questions, an extensive explanation was supplied to them in order they can respond easily. Further, they were informed that these questions should be answered accurately by them since this questionnaire is very important in providing the research with valuable information about their status in the area of the present study.

Concerning the writing task, in order to make it easier for students to complete, certain issues were taken into consideration in choosing the topics of the pre and post writing. The researcher aimed at selecting those topics which could be available in their textbook that may be familiar to them. In addition, one of the important considerations in the process of selecting the topics was the extent to which the topic induces the participants to use the different type of grammatical cohesive devices in their essays.

On the first administration, a diagnostic test as a pre-test was given at the beginning of the semester. This test consisted of two topics in which the participants were asked to write an argumentative essay within 90 minutes. After having collected the diagnostic essays, an analysis of the written work was performed by two professional raters and me with the purpose of having a rating of the participants' writing, which provided the researcher with some information of the level of grammatical cohesion they had achieved in their argumentative essays.

The following week, a training in cohesion and coherence adapted from CATW training started in which the researcher with the help of the instructor explained the aim of this training to the participants. Since this training is not followed in the teaching of essay writing in Iraq, the researcher himself, instead of the instructor, gave it to the selected 20 participants with some help of the instructor. Those 20 subjects had been gathered in a separated class and given the training two hours a week. The task of the researcher was to give a reading passage to the participants and asked them to read critically and then write an essay after summarizing the passage. Before giving them the assignments, the researcher provided the subjects with samples of CATW essays and explained extensively the steps in which the passage could be read and summarized and then how to write an argumentative essay based on the critical reading of the passage. In this training, the participants were given four passages and wrote four argumentative essays. After collecting the essays from the subjects, the researcher takes the papers with him to write his comments on the paper and the next day he brings them to the class. Inside the class he gives every participant his paper

and starts to explain orally the comment more clearly so that the participant could understand his/her mistakes clearly. After he finishes his comments, he gives every participant a copy of his/her essay and keeps the original paper (essay).

At the end of the semester and before the mid of May, 2015, the participants took the final test essay as a post-test. The same procedures followed in the diagnostic test were repeated. The participants were also given two passages and were asked to choose one of them to summarize and write an argumentative essay depending on CATW training. The post-test helped in showing the differences in the use of grammatical cohesive devices and how certain elements contributing to cohesion had developed over the semester training.

Data Analysis

Qualitative Coding

As the present study is a case one of a mixed mode method, qualitative and quantitative, the analysis of its data has been done both qualitatively and quantitatively. For the purpose of analyzing the participants' written pieces, a qualitative descriptive analysis based on Halliday and Hasan's model was employed to count the actual numbers of the four types of grammatical cohesive devices used in the students' pre and post- tests. A qualitative content analysis was also used to analyze the devices appropriate and inappropriate uses. On the other hand, a quantitative analysis based on SPSS descriptive statistics was used for the purpose of analyzing the questionnaire data.

In the analysis of students' written pieces, the researcher accomplished it according to the following steps:

- (1) collected 40 pieces, 20 for diagnostic test and the other 20 for the final test;
- (2) counting the use of grammatical devices according to its classification in each table of grammatical cohesive devices;
- (3) categorizing the grammatical cohesive devices.

According to (Kohlbacher 2006: as cited in Hasanah 2013), 520, qualitative content analysis has two basic procedures: (1) summary, and (2) structuring. For the first procedure, he recommended to sum up the data in order to reduce number of information and highlight only its important parts. In a similar way, the study reduces the number of data by distinguishing important point from each student's writing. For the structuring step, the researcher made a division of the unit of analysis according to the grammatical cohesion theory. In doing so, the researcher structured the discussion to display the texture of the writings of the students to find out whether grammatical cohesive devices are appropriate or not. Therefore, the discussion about reference, substitution, ellipsis and conjunction is shaped according to the grammatical cohesion theory.

Findings and Discussion

This section is used to answer the objectives of the study which are 1) the effects of Arabic language rhetoric and cultural background on the use of grammatical cohesive devices by Iraqi EFL learners in their argumentative essays and 2) the influence of L1 differences on the students' appropriate use of grammatical devices. In order to answer the study's problem, the section is divided into two sub-divisions. The first section aims at showing the difference in the grammatical cohesive devices use by Iraqi students in their diagnostic test and final test. The second displays a comparison between the percentages the appropriate and inappropriate uses of each type of the grammatical devices in the diagnostic test and final test. Table 1 and table 2 show the difference in the use of grammatical cohesive devices between the participants' diagnostic and final essays.

Table 1 Participants' Use of Grammatical Cohesive Devices in Diagnostic Essays

Types of Grammatical Cohesive Devices	Students' Grammatical Cohesive Devices Use	
	N	%
Reference	400	63.90 %
Substitution	1	0.16 %
Ellipsis	1	0.16 %
Conjunction	224	35.78 %
Total	626	

Table 2 Participants' Use of Grammatical Cohesive Devices in Final Essays

Types of Grammatical Cohesive Devices	Students' Grammatical Cohesive Devices Use	
	N	%
Reference	501	61.93 %
Substitution	2	0.25 %
Ellipsis	5	0.62 %
Conjunction	301	37.21 %
Total	809	

The findings in table 1 and table 2 revealed that the participants of this study employed more reference and conjunction in both diagnostic and final essays. Their

use of the four types of grammatical cohesive devices was better in the final test. Anyhow, their use of substitution and ellipsis are insufficient in the two tests. According to Hyland’s (2005) contrastive rhetoric, the participants employed more two categories of interactive markers: transitions such as, (and, also, but and therefore) and frame markers such as, (finally, to conclude and in conclusion). On the other hand, they also overused self-mentions as interactional markers. They used more personal pronouns like (I, we, my, our).

Arabic language Influence on the Participants’ use of Grammatical Cohesion

From the results of pre and post tests, it was found that the participants overused personal pronouns, demonstratives, additive conjunctions and some adversative and causal conjunctions. Though, their use of grammatical devices improved both in number and in appropriateness in the final test, they, in both essays, focused on the use of personal pronouns: subject, object and possessive as well as the demonstrative references such as, “the”, “this” and “these”. In addition, they used more the additive conjunctions, “and”, “and then” and “also”. They also overused the adversative conjunction “but” and the causal conjunctions “because” and “so”.

The participants’ overuse of these grammatical cohesive devices could be due to the clear influence of their mother tongue (L1). In Arabic language, EFL learners and writers as well concentrate on the use of such personals like (hadha) “this” and (hadhihi) “these” even there is no noun being referred to. Arabic language also uses the definite article “the” almost before every noun, singular or plural. That’s why, Iraqi students employed more these references in their diagnostic and final essays. In the respect of using conjunction, it could be argued that Arabic language prefers to use the additive conjunction (wa) “and” and (fa) “and then” and almost in every sentence (Al-Shurafa 1994). These conjunctions are used in the middle as well as at the beginning of the sentence. Another additive conjunction which is extensively used in Arabic is (kadhalik) “also”. For this reason, most of the participants’ uses of additive conjunctions were the use of “and’ and “also”. The participants employed a high number of the causal conjunctions “because” and “so’ since their Arabic language overuses these conjunctions (wathalika lianahu) “because” and (lithalika) “so”.

Table 3 Grammatical Cohesive Devices Appropriate and Inappropriate Use in Diagnostic Essay

Type of Grammatical Cohesive Devices	Appropriate Use		Inappropriate Use	
	N	%	N	%

Reference	298	74.5 %	102	25.5 %
Substitution	1	100 %		
Ellipsis	1	100 %		
Conjunction	131	58.49 %	93	41.51 %
Total	431	68.85 %	195	31.15 %

Table 4 Grammatical Cohesive Devices Appropriate and Inappropriate Use in Final Essay

Type of Grammatical Cohesive Devices	Appropriate Use		Inappropriate Use	
	N	%	N	%
Reference	454	90.62 %	47	9.38 %
Substitution	2	100 %		
Ellipsis	4	80 %	1	20 %
Conjunction	268	89.04 %	33	10.97 %
Total	728	89.99 %	81	10.01 %

The Influence of Arabic Language on the Participants' Appropriate Use of Grammatical Cohesion

Table 3 and table 4 indicate that the participants' appropriate use of grammatical cohesive devices was better in their final essay. This improvement in the appropriate uses is justified by the effect of the training in cohesion and coherence which enabled the students to receive the writing training in an English environment that could reduced the effects of Arabic environment effects.

Accordingly, most of the inappropriate uses that the students committed in their use of grammatical cohesion are due to the influence of Arabic and its cultural differences. Thus, it could be explained that their use of some personal pronouns is a reflection of Arabic use. For example, they used subject or object pronouns together with its noun in the same sentence as in, *The woman she took care of her children in a respected way.* In a similar way, they employed the demonstrative "the" almost before every noun, in that they looked at it as a grammatical article with the effects of their Arabic use. For instance, a sentence like the following was most used, *The education is considered very important for ever persons in the life.* They used the definite article in such a way because they are unaware of the way these devices are used as cohesive devices and it is also due to the influence of their L1. In Arabic, these words are normally preceded by the definite article in exception of being common nouns or not.

Moreover, most the participants' diagnostic essays uses of the additive conjunctions "and", "also", the adversative "but", the causal conjunction "so" and a number of the uses of "because were committed under the influence of their Arabic use of these devices. They used these additive conjunctions in different places in sentence. A high number of "and" was used inappropriately at the beginning of the sentence and some of these uses were repeated in the same clauses or sentences without using a comma since comma is not used as a conjunction in Arabic. The same explanation is said for other causal conjunctions.

What has been illustrated in the participants' written pieces in the respect of the influence of Arabic rhetoric on their appropriate uses of grammatical cohesive devices in their argumentative essays is confirmed by their responses in the questionnaire. Most of them reported that Arabic writing helps them in English grammar building, vocabulary meaning and translation. Some see that it is helpful in the aspect of essay writing. This means that they depend on Arabic vocabulary and translation when they write their English essays.

Similarly, the majority of the participants found that grammatical cohesive devices used in Arabic writing affect the use of these devices in English writing. The majority of the participants (60 participants) asserted that the grammatical cohesive devices they use in their first language could be used in their English writing.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Conclusion

From the findings and discussion above, it can be concluded that the participants' use of grammatical cohesive devices as well as their appropriate use of these devices are considerably affected by their L1 (Arabic language) and the cultural differences which are involved in the students' use of grammatical cohesion in their argumentative essays. However, the influence of Arabic rhetoric was reduced in their final essays due to the effects of the training in cohesion and coherence they received over a semester.

Suggestion

As the data of this study have been collected and the results have been analyzed, the researcher proposes suggestions regarding the findings as follows: 1) to conduct the influence of Arabic rhetoric on the use of grammatical cohesion in Arab spoken discourse and 2) to conduct the use of grammatical cohesive devices in the writings of Arab EFL learners and in those of English speaking learners.

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