Writing and Related Problems for EFL Students

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ESL students who write in English may present written material in a rhetorical and organizational mode that reflects the pattern which is valued in their native culture and rhetoric. Considering the violation of English code of writing in the writings of Iranian students, we will notice one common characteristic: They are reluctant (or ignorant of) to write a unified paragraph. Their writing consists of one whole page or two. They do not divide their writing into separate paragraphs. The knowledge of the writer on any subject begins and ends as much as the time or space for writing allows with no paragraph separation. The length of sentences is extraordinary, and the position of modifiers does not seem natural according to the code of English sentence pattern. This means that elements transferred from L1 rhetoric result in a production which does not match the English language style and rhetoric, despite the fact that some students lack grammatical competence. As a result, this type of writing is labeled unacceptable, vague or erroneous by English language standards. The focus of this study is to use English major students' writings to identify the elements which violate English language pattern of writing. The sources of errors responsible for non-English language rhetoric will be classified after a short theoretical review in the literature and finally suggestions for the elimination of errors will be presented.

In a research paper presented at 2003 Midwest Research to Practice Conference in the United States, Min-Fen Wang and Lori L Bakken (2003) have assessed ESL clinical investigators' learning needs for academic writing for scholarly publication. The findings suggest that these ESL researchers who came with different nationalities lacked the knowledge for adequate writing experience as well as basic understanding of academic writing for scholarly publication. The most important finding of this research is the revelation of the fact that ESL researchers' passive attitudes formed by their native rhetorical experiences create barriers to learning (Min-Fen Wang and Lori L. Bakken 2003). The problems these clinical researchers reveal in their writings are the ones which many instructors and researchers are concerned with in the field of writing (Sundre, 2002).

The research paper mentioned above reveals important key elements that should be considered in discussing writing problems of non native English students in general and writing errors of English major students in Tabriz University in particular.

In the case of writing, we should reject a narrow focus on individual learner deficiencies as the only cause of writing problems (Collins, 1991; Tait, 1999). It is clear that different rhetoric follow different logic and logic of every nation affects the rhetoric of that nation (Reid, 1993:46). It is also obvious that language of each nation is part of the culture of that nation. It can be said with certainty that the rhetorical system of one language is different from the other language for this simple reason that their approach to logic is different (Silva, 1993:657).

A Review of Related Literature

Contrastive rhetoric began in 1966 as a result of a self-initiated study of international students' writing in English by Kaplan, who then made the pronouncement that "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" (Kaplan, 1966: 14). Kaplan argues that rhetorical logic, that is how ideas and concepts are lexicalized and arranged

in a text, is shaped by culture and that there is a preference for certain discourse patterns in each culture. Rhetoric here refers to the pattern of presenting and developing ideas effectively. Related to languages with Eastern culture and philosophy, he found that English paragraphs have a linear structure, whereas those in Oriental languages have circular organization.

Contrastive rhetoric was developed as a means to identify the patterns of paragraph development in the expository essays of L2 writers at university-level composition courses. These patterns were analyzed in terms of how they differed from the expectations of the readers, presumed to be native English-speaking teachers. Connor explains:

> Contrastive rhetoric, like contrastive analysis, began as an effort to improve [L2 writing] pedagogy and its adherents believed that interference from L1 was the biggest problem in L2 acquisition. It was initially founded on error analysis; 'errors' in beginning-level students' paragraph organization were examined and reasons for them were hypothesized based on the language background from which the student came (Connor, 1996:14-15).

Current-Traditional Model

In addition to error correction, early contrastive rhetoric was preoccupied with another precept of structuralism: form. Crowley (1998:95) acknowledges, "What matters most in current-traditional rhetoric is form". Silva (1990:13-14) establishes this connection by referring to Kaplan's notion of contrastive rhetoric as "the [English as a second language] ESL version of current-traditional rhetoric [because it] is basically a matter of arrangement, of fitting sentences and paragraphs into prescribed patterns".

Composition theorists like Crowley (1998:96) have criticized the current-traditional pedagogy as a "theory of graphic display" for its failure to promote critical thinking or to consider how socio-cultural issues of ideology and power are reinforced through writing instruction. This sentiment can be found in Pirsig's

sarcastic description of the instructional model implemented in a typical composition classroom:

> What you are supposed to do in most freshman-rhetoric courses is to read a little essay or short story, discuss how the writer has done certain little things to achieve certain little effects, and then have the students write an imitative little essay or short story to see if they can do the same little things (Pirsig 1974:176).

Silva states that "one could make a strong case for the notion that the current-traditional approach is still dominant in ESL writing materials and classroom practices today" (1990: 15).

Matters of form are undoubtedly essential to L2 writing instruction since arrangement is an integral component for constructing a rhetorical argument. For example, Hyland (2003) speaks of the importance of form in discourse analysis, which serves "to study the meanings learners are trying to express through their choice and arrangement of forms." What differs in Hyland's description of form, however, is the sense of agency awarded to the writer. Such agency is not possible if the writer lacks rhetorical awareness, a skill neglected by current-traditional pedagogy.

In reviewing current L2 research, Krapels (1990) argues that students' problems in EFL composition stem more from the lack of competence in writing strategy than in general language. Connor (1996) focuses on cross-cultural aspects of L2 writing. Indeed, she does not mention factors other than L1 rhetoric that influence L2 writing. Previous research suggests, however, that L1 writing expertise and L2 proficiency play significant roles in L2 writing (e.g., Cumming, 1989; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). The central question for language teaching is: how similar/different is L2 writing to/from L1 writing? Initial findings of L2 writing suggest that, while L1 general composing skills - both good and bad - transfer from L1 to L2 (see Arndt, 1987), 'L2 composing is more constrained, more difficult and less effective' (Silva, 1993: 668). Most L2 writers bring with them knowledge and experience of writing in their L1 and this resource should not be ignored.

However, they also bring the limitations of their knowledge of L2 language and rhetorical organization.

Related to Oriental mode of a text , Leki (1991) notes that rhetoric in the Asiatic tradition has an historical purpose of announcing truth rather than proving it. It is performed in such a way that the speaker/writer arranges the propositions of the announcement in a manner that references to a communal, traditional wisdom invite easy and harmonious agreement. Rhetoric in the Western tradition, quite conversely, has an object of convincing peers of some (originally political) position, and consequently places much prominence on the speaker/writer's ability to reason and to marshal evidence (Leki, 1991).

In summary then, we might describe the 'Oriental' mode of text development as deferential, anecdotal, and circuitous, one which seeks to address an issue by describing the surrounding terrain. It emphasizes group collectivity, the elicitation of consent, and the avoidance of direct conflict (Fliegel, 1987).

The most recent manifestation of contrastive rhetoric includes much of the theory that has influenced the evolution of first language (L1) writing, such as the theories of cognition, process method, and social constructivism. Connor (1996:18) states: "A broader definition [of contrastive rhetoric] that considers cognitive and sociocultural variables of writing in addition to linguistic variables has been substituted for a purely linguistic framework interested in structural analyses of products".

Berlin (1996:52) comments on how teachers might consider teaching matters of form in accordance with postmodern theory: "Students need a conception of the abstract organizational patterns that affect their work lives – indeed; , it is comprehensive conceptions of the patterns that influence all the students' experiences". "It is lack of such knowledge", Connor (1996:169) states, "that is believed to be the main cause preventing non-native writers' success in the international community". Thus, greater consciousness brings greater flexibility, and greater success, in the art of writing.

On the basis of foregoing, writing well in another language means thinking in the forms of that language. This can not be

achieved unless the language learner is aware of the differences existing between his rhetoric and L2 rhetoric. Iranian students are not an exception in this regard. With their own rhetorical background, they are inclined to transfer elements from their approach to logic, their outlook, and their rhetoric to their writing in English. Since it has been hypothesized that in producing erroneous sentences and paragraphs, students do cling strongly on their L1 semantically, syntactically and rhetorically, the focus of this study is to identify the source of errors in the nature and culture of source language, Farsi.

The Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study is based on studying the errors of students on paragraph level in essay writings of Iranian English major students in Tabriz University. Considering the English writings of Iranian essays, it is quite clear that the students do not show any evidence that is the characteristics of English writing model. Out of the models of composition offered by Williams (1998:52-69), the product (current-traditional model) and the process models are of importance because the writings of Iranian students show evidence of product model and lack of process model.

On the basis of the idea that L1 transfer is part of the mental process (Selinker1972; Brown,1980; Richards,1974; Ellis 1985,1997; Zobl 1980a,b; Schachter,1983), it is the cognitive notion of the role of L1 which is the main concern in this study. The view of Ellis in this respect is considered as touchstone:

> There has been widespread acknowledgement that learners draw on their L1 in forming interlanguage hypothesis. Learners do not construct rules in a vacuum; rather they work with whatever information is at their disposal. This includes knowledge of their L1. The L1 can be viewed as a kind of 'input from inside'. According to this view, then, transfer is not ' interference' but a cognitive process (Ellis, 1997:52).

In attempting to discover 'the input from inside' (Ellis, 1997) of Iranian students, it is of outmost importance to find out which aspect of L1 has the most potentiality to force this cognitive process? Such a notion has led to posing the following research question.

Are stylistic and linguistic differences in L1 and L2 the causes of errors in the writings of Iranian students?

Related to the review of literature, the study shows that L1 with all its associations stands first in the rank for the cause of most of the errors English major students commit. In other words, L1 is the cause for the errors of Iranian students and stylistic and rhetorical differences between Persian and English impede English major students to learn English efficiently.

Participants

Forty senior English majors studying at English department of Tabriz University participated in this study. These students had begun studying English six years before they entered university. However, their use of English Language has been limited to their English courses offered in schools. Nearly, all of them spoke Farsi or their native tongue after their English classes and their use of English language continued in the next English class. These students belonged to different ethnic groups, who came from different regions and had their own different dialects but with the same official Farsi language taught throughout their education.

The group was taught for three months during the whole term of their forth year of study at English department of Tabriz University. During the term, the participants were administered a treatment about paragraph organization, process of writing a paragraph, and organizing as well as writing an essay. It was intended to see the students' success in following the instructed material to write a well organized paragraph and, as a result, an acceptable essay on English standards. The group consisted of 40 intact subjects and no attempt was made to randomly assign

subjects to the group. Indeed, the design did not provide any additional groups as comparison. Thus, the group was given one treatment and one observation was made.

There was a question of whether any expected effects will result from the treatment. It was intended to see if the students follow the instruction in writing an organized paragraph and essay in accordance with English language standard.

Data Collection Procedure

Following guidelines offered by Ellis (1985:51-52), a sample of written language was collected from students' final essay writing exam. The students were asked to provide an outline and then write an essay for one of three different topics: 1- The world today 2- Television 3- Relationship between parents and their children. Most of the students tried to write about the second subject i.e. Television. They were given sufficient time to write. This was their final exam in their essay writing course in winter semester 2004.

During the treatment, a textbook by Reid (1982), The Process of Composition, was the focus of the study. Students were informed of the fundamentals of writing. The key subjects discussed were basic organization of a paragraph, the difference between subject and topic, the nature of topic sentence, the rules for writing topic sentences, paragraph unity and completeness, the process of writing a paragraph, writing an outline for a paragraph, techniques of supporting and organizing an essay, essay outlining, and writing thesis sentences and introductory paragraphs for essays. After the introduction of every item, practical examples from the book were studied closely to help students practice the subjects, followed by writing activities practiced in small groups in class and homework to be prepared for the following week.

The Students were expected to show their ability in writing a sound topic sentence, a well organized paragraph, a well organized introductory paragraph for the essay and a complete essay on the basis of what they had learned during the course. The individual sentences students included in their writings were also considered.

The sentences were expected to be based on the English sentence patterns with right word choice, right choice of modifiers, right position for modifiers, right punctuation, and logical length of sentence. It was presupposed that the students had gained enough knowledge about writing a suitable sentence.

The final production of the students was chosen to answer the question in reference to the post treatment behavior: What was the behavior of the subjects after treatment? It was of outmost importance to find out the extent of the effect of Persian language on the production of English sentences and the organization of paragraph and essay.

Every paragraph was studied closely to show those characteristics which were discussed fully during the course. The explanation of the errors will be presented in detail in Table 1.

Errors in Paragraph Organization and Rhetorical Devices

Table 1 deals with paragraph organization and rhetorical devices. There are important points to be considered in dealing with L2 written materials (Christensen,1963; Tylor,1981; Zamel,1982; Silva, 1993; Min-Fen Wang & others, 2003),and the following points are the focus of attention in each paragraph.

1- Suitable topic sentence on the basis of thesis sentence: abbreviated as **T.S.**

2- Inclusion of controlling ideas in the topic sentence: abbreviated as **I .C.I.**

3- Developing controlling ideas: abbreviated as **D.I**.

4- Summation or synthesis: abbreviated as **S.**

5- Announcing the truth and providing information instead of narrowing the idea: abbreviated as **P.I**.

6- Inclusion of "that" or "which" as a way to sound less "basic" i.e. to use the structure to change the subject. Such structures first provide information; on the other hand, since no idea remains as a central focus, no argument can logically be developed: abbreviated as **I.that/ <u>what</u>.I**./ **which.I**

7- Inclusion of "that" or "which" to modify a single idea. This will help the writer to focus on the idea to refine it and add ideas about it without moving away from it: abbreviated as **I.that.M.**

8- The technique of embedded and recursive structures. Students repeat syntactic structures to produce parallelism: abbreviated as **P.**

9- The number of sentences in each paragraph: abbreviated as **N**.

Suitable Topic Sentence on the Basis of Thesis Sentence

Looking closely at Table 1, one can discover revealing facts about the reason why Iranian students have problem to write in English. Almost all the students have forgotten to create a link between their topic sentences of different paragraphs in their essays and the thesis sentence mentioned in their introductory paragraphs. This shows that having an organized thought about any writing is quite alien for Iranian students. In other words, this type of approach to writing in L2-organization- has not been practiced in their L1 (Silva, 1993). Thus Iranian students are prone to rely on their universal knowledge about the subject and to follow their L1 pattern. This view is a dominant view in composition writing in Iran and as Silva (1993:657) has found, ESL writing practitioners have adapted practices from L1 writing with the assumption that L1 and L2 writing are identical or similar.

Inclusion of Controlling Ideas in the Topic Sentence

Out of total number of 40 topic sentences, 24 topic sentences lack controlling ideas and 16 topic sentences include key terms. Still, the outcome of the next column in the Table reveals that only 25% of the controlling ideas of the topic sentences have been developed and followed the L2 pattern of writing a paragraph (though they have other problems in writing their paragraphs) and 75% of the students have not considered the development of the key terms at all. Instead, these students have relied heavily on structures that are aimed to provide their universal information in unrelated sentences which have nothing to do with their topic

Table 1
Lack (-) or presence (+) of elements of a well organized L2 paragraph

Student	T.S	I.C.I	D.I	S	P.I	I.That.I	I.that.M	P	N
1	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	3
2	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	-	3
3	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	4
4	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	4
5	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	5
6	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	5
7	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	4
8	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	8
9	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	6
10	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	3
11	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	7
12	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	3
13	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	2
14	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	4
15	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	5
16	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	4
17	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	2
18	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	4
19	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	6
20	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	+	3
21	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	+	4
22	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	4
23	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	12
24	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	2
25	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	+	3
26	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	3
27	-	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	10
28	-	+	+	-	+	-	-	+	5
29	-	+	-	-	+	+	-	+	10
30	-	-	-	-	+	+	-	+	2
31	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	7
32	-	-	+	-	+	+	-	+	8
33	-	+	+	-	-	+	-	-	6
34	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	5
35	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	7
36	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	8
37	-	-	-	-	-	+	-	+	10
38	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	+	4
39	-	+	-	-	+	-	-	+	5
40	-	-	-	-	+	-	-	-	10
Total – (lacks)	40	24	30	40	9	16	40	7	
Total +(inclusion)	0	16	10	0	31	24	0	33	

sentences. Out of 40 students, only 9 students have tried to include sentences that are aimed to narrow the idea and 31 students have ignored to do so with the sentences they have written in their paragraphs.

Inclusion of "that' or "which" structures are also interesting. Only 24 of such structures are providing information of any kind and 16 structures are applied baselessly without any purpose. It seems that the inclusions of "that" or "which" structures are made under the heavy influence of the use of similar structures in their L1. But the most interesting finding in this regard is that none of the 40 students has used such structures with the purpose of modifying or to focus on an idea to refine it. Thirty three students have attempted to include recursive structures of any kind. They have repeated different syntactic structures to provide parallelism, following their discourse in L1.

The number of sentences in each paragraph is also worth mentioning. The paragraphs these students have written vary in the number of sentences used, varying from 2 to 10 sentences.

As it is illustrated in Table 1, the majority of students have not refined the controlling ideas of their topic sentences. It is only the amount of information they have tried to include in each paragraph that designates the length of their paragraphs.

The above-mentioned findings indicate that in the process of writing a paragraph in L2, Iranian students show weakness because:

1- The purpose of writing a paragraph for Iranian students is to include their knowledge about the subject of discussion instead of following a fixed pattern to develop an idea.

2- They have included their L1 style of parallelism of any kind to produce sentences which are out of the norm of English sentence pattern.

3- Their inclusion of modifiers, especially, "that" or "which" structures are heavily dominated by the use of such structures in L1 without the purpose of refining or modifying the ideas but only to use the device to include further information.

Conclusion

With reference to Table 1, the basic characteristic of the writings of Iranian students will be revealed as followings:

1-They lack a suitable topic sentence. 2-They lack controlling ideas to be developed in the paragraph. 3- In every paragraph, the writer has tried to provide information instead of narrowing any idea. 4- The paragraphs lack summation or synthesis. 5- The paragraphs lack unity and coherence.

In the process of teaching English literacy and on the basis of written corpus of Iranian English major students of Tabriz University, there are other problem areas apart from the lack of rhetorical patterning in their writings. These problematic areas are: the students' habitual lack of signaling devices (e.g., opening the discourse, introducing a new point, sequencing, illustration, qualification, generalizing, summarizing, concluding, etc.), improper layout of a document (formatting), inappropriate choice of textual strategy (e.g., chronological, ranking, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, discussion, etc.), syntactic errors (e.g., tense and aspect; modality; voice; relative clauses; reference), and violation of academic protocol in the target language. It might be appropriate to mention here that if syntactic or rhetorical deficiencies exist in the source code (i.e., the L1), then these tendencies will predictably carry into the L2 code (cf. Mohan and Lo, 1985). That is to say, if an L2 writer exhibits syntactic errors or poor development in the target code, it may well be due not so much to L1 rhetorical interference as to the reality that the same error would be committed in the native language.

One possible reason for their failure to write acceptable paragraph on the norm of English language is the powerful influence of their strategy to write in Persian. Their strategy can be inferred from the classification of their misconduct shown in Table 1. This study proves that students' attitude about writing is strongly influenced by some other force – most probably the manner of writing in Persian- under which the main purpose is to provide as much information as it is possible for the subject of discussion, without having any organized pattern to write. In general, students'

paragraphs reveal that they have problems in discourse level competence. Their basic problem is the way the text should be structured with reference to how coherence and cohesion are established. therefore, students should approach to writing in English consciously. Consciousness raising activities should come first to prepare students to write effectively in English.

Suggestions for Further Research

Graduate students of English department of Tabriz University have mastered their linguistic proficiency in L2. They have been told about the convention of L2 written products and have practiced in generating and organizing ideas in L2. Yet, their writings do not conform to the written standards of English language. There might be only one possibility that impedes these students to write well in English. It would be upon further studies to discover how influential the power of L1 is in the process of writing in L2 through studying the general approach to logic in Persian.

Pedagogical Implications

The only suggestion which would be useful for pedagogic purpose is to practice writing in L2 through practice in reading. The purpose of such reading would be to discover what the writer of the text has tried to do and how successful s/he has been in achieving his goal. It is through this approach that the students will gradually get familiar with the method of writing in L2 through reading courses. As a result, such terms as topic sentence, controlling ideas, developing of ideas, refining the ideas, providing support, organization of ideas, unified thought, diversion of subject, outlining, etc will be acquired indirectly. In general, reading should help develop writing skill of L2 learners by informing students about the approaches native L2 writers have followed.

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