Cultural Divergence in Academic Writing: A Case Study of the Research Article Introduction in Arabic

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Abstract

American universities have benefited from the internet to include students from around the world. Since most participation from students comes through writing, it is vital for professors to be cognizant of the culturally-based rhetorical patterns that these students may bring with them. This paper deals exclusively with the Arabic culture, and examines 20 research article introductions written by Arab writers educated in the Arab world. It applied the CARS model proposed by Swales (1990) to investigate how Arab writers (a) deal with previous studies, (b) establish a research gap, and finally, (c) present their studies. The results show that these rhetorical components as they are realized in Arabic research introductions are qualitatively dissimilar to those that appear in American English writing as described in the CARS model. These results provide important implications for professors to facilitate ESL students learning, particularly in the global eLearning context in higher education.

Key Words: research article, ESL writing, Arabic
Introduction

The number of international students registering for online classes continues to grow in U.S. universities. Thus, cultural diversity has become an increasingly important area of research investigation. For example, Campbell (2002) examined the cultural issues that affect eLearning such as age, gender, ethnicity, language, and cognitive development. She stressed the importance of recognizing cultural diversity in online courses and states “[c]onsider the audience for whom you are writing or designing. Even if you are not planning to include international students in your course, about 1/4 of your class will represent different cultures – Asian, Indian, European, Middle Eastern, South American, and others” (p. 50).

It is further recognized that writing is a crucial area of investigation in studies germane to eLearning as it remains the main method of communication in the online learning environment. Ge (2011) criticized the traditional approach of teaching writing in isolation, i.e. teachers lecturing and students writing by themselves. The researcher examined the effect of peer cooperation and interaction on students’ writing performances in China’s online education environment and found that students had significantly benefited from this online cooperative learning particularly those with lower writing abilities. Likewise, Peach (2012) examined the writer’s voice in online classes. In particular, Peach scrutinized the ways in which students learn to develop voice in their writing through an online first-year composition course. She focused on three areas: the student perspective, the instructor perspective, and the course structure. Her findings showed that students can develop their voice in online classes if the following conditions are met:

- Clear communication of expectations between instructor and student
- Feedback from multiple sources
• Time in class focused on voice
• Passion for the content (p. 139).

Following Swales (1990) creation of the CARS (Create a Research Space) model which deals with the introduction section of research articles, the rhetorical components in ESL writing have received more detailed attention by researchers. They found that the strategy of establishing a research niche was low in frequency in the introductory section in research articles (RAs) written in Arabic (Al-Qahtani, 2006; Fakhri, 2004; Najjar, 1990), Brazilian Portuguese (Hirano, 2009), Chinese (Loi & Evans, 2010; Taylor & Chen, 1991), Hungarian (Arvay & Tanko, 2004), Korean (Shim, 2005), Malay (Ahmad, 1997), Polish (Duszak, 1994), and finally in Thai (Jogthong, 2001).

Since writing is a crucial method of communication in the online environment, any deviation in this skill from the English writing tradition potentially challenges ESL students in their successful participation and benefits from online learning. To the best of our knowledge, there is no study within the genre of the research article that addressed this challenge with respect to global eLearning in higher education. Thus, the current study fills this gap by focusing on the introduction section in Arabic RAs.

Model and Data

This study applies the CARS model proposed by Swales (1990) to capture the rhetorical patterns of the research article introduction. Swales stressed the importance of three elements: (a) establishing a territory, in which the context of the paper is set for the reader, (b) establishing a niche, where a research gap is created in previous studies, and (c) occupying the niche, in which writers fill the research gap by their studies. The model is outlined in Figure 1.
Move 1  Establishing a territory
  Step 1 Claiming centrality and/or
  Step 2 Making topic generalization(s) and/or
  Step 3 Reviewing items of previous research

Move 2  Establishing a niche
  Step 1A Counter-claiming
  or Step 1 B Indicating a gap
  or Step 1 C Question-raising
  or Step 1 D Continuing a tradition

Move 3  Occupying the niche
  Step 1A Outlining purposes
  or Step 1B Announcing present research
  Step 2 Announcing principal findings
  Step 3 Indicating research article structure

Figure 1 The 1990 CARS model.

The data comprise 20 Arabic research article introductions written by Arab scholars. Ten RAs were taken from the field of educational psychology and 10 were drawn from the field of sociology. As pointed out in Fakhri (2004), texts from the humanities and social sciences tend to better reveal the cultural aspects as opposed to texts from natural sciences. Although Hyland (2000) noted the cross-disciplinary variations particularly between hard and soft disciplines, Alotaibi (2013) showed that the variations between educational psychology and sociology exist mainly in establishing a territory (Move 1 in the CARS model) as RAs in educational psychology rely on centrality claims and topic generalizations while those in sociology provide definitional clarifications and background information. Since the components of the centrality claims and topic generalizations are not dealt with in this paper, the cross-disciplinary variations are not expected, based on Alotaibi’s findings, and thus the results will be presented together from both disciplines.
The focus in this paper is on how the following three elements are presented in the introduction of the research papers: (a) the literature review, (b) the research gap, and (c) the presentation of the study. The research questions that address these three components are:

a) How previous studies are treated in the Arabic RA introductions?

b) How, if any, a research gap is created in the Arabic RA introductions?

c) How the study is presented in the Arabic RA introductions?

In the following section, the first research question will be referred to as the literature review, the second question as establishing a niche, and finally the third questions as presenting the study.

Results

1. Literature review

Swales (1990) showed that the main function of the literature review in English RA introductions is to show how past literature is somehow incomplete and thus enables the researcher to identify a research gap. In other words, Swales asserted that the discussion of previous studies should display a clear engagement of the writer, as he stated “the author needs to provide a specification (in varying degrees of detail) of previous findings, an attribution to the research workers who published those results, and a stance towards the findings themselves” (p. 148).

Discussion of previous literature in the Arabic RA introductions was found to be crucial as it occupied the majority of the space of the introductions. In educational psychology, the literature review covered 50% of the introductions’ space, and it occupied 51% of the space in sociology introductions.
Overall, previous studies were treated individually with no direct criticism or evaluation from the writers. Results of previous studies were taken for granted and were provided to familiarize the reader with the topic. There were two common strategies in treating previous studies. The first strategy used integral citations where a sentence began with a scholar’s name followed by a reporting verb. In Example 1, the previous studies were summarized and each was treated in a separate paragraph. Each paragraph contained one sentence except the first paragraph that concluded with a comment from the writer on the study that has been summarized. The comment, however, was not a form of evaluation but rather a restatement of the cited argument and an expression of agreement.

1 And Lecoq (1979) stresses that the prevailing beliefs of the general public towards distinguished people as individuals who have been exposed to a touch of madness. This perspective puts distinguished individuals in front of a real confrontation with the problems which generate within them poor adaptation to society around them, society which is an important source for the development of their talents and abilities, and a suitable place to express and enhance their skills and capabilities. The danger lies in this case when excellence goes with the wind as a result of such improper beliefs, especially when the distinguished becomes incompetent to overcome these problems with wisdom and rationality due to the wrong societal beliefs.

And Shuqaeer (2001) indicates that the distinguished child may live with a kind of social and emotional deprivation. When his basic needs, such as care giving, kindness, love, and appreciation, are not satisfied because he is a distinguished
child, this makes him subject to a number of psychological problems; thus he is in need for feelings of care and concern to satisfy the psychology compatibility and integration within him.

And Zayat (2002) indicates that the regular school curriculum may be the source of many problems for distinguished individuals like feeling bored. This is because they have the ability to learn easily while curricula are designed usually for middle level students. [EP 5]

The second strategy used non-integral citations in which the name of the scholar was placed at the end of the sentence in parenthesis, as shown in Example 2.

(2) Freudenberger is considered to be the first who used the term burn-out. This can be seen through his studies of the indicators of response to pressures that teachers and others in service sectors have experienced. He showed though his studies that those individuals who work hard are more reluctant to the burn out. That is because they have internal pressure that impetuses them to work, and at the same time, they face external circumstances that render their success. In the end, these conflicts render them from achieving the goals of the highest degree of success. (Alfarah, 2001; Neji, 1999). [EP 6]

Finally, the investigation of the literature review in Arabic RA introductions has yielded some additional usages that are likely to be considered alien to the English writing tradition. Example 3 shows the inclusion of a religious remark and Example 4 indicates the place of the convention. In both Examples, the date is mentioned in full.

(3) And what supports the democratic approach are the words of the forgiven King Hussein May Allah has mercy on him in his speech to the Arab nation 11/23/1992 in which he stressed the democratization of education says... [S 9]
(4) And in 2007, the Arab Regional Conference was held in Yemen (Sanaa on Tuesday 11/14/2007) for the elderly which was organized by the Arab League. [S1]

2. Establishing a niche

The four options of this move outlined in the 1990 CARS model (see Figure 1) are aimed to establish a research space. Swales showed that this move, especially via the steps of counter-claiming or indicating a gap, is mandatory in English RA introductions. According to Swales, the most employed categories in English introductions are negative and quasi-negative quantifiers (such as no, little, few) and lexical negation (such as fail, lack, limited, limitation).

The results show that Arabic RA introductions contrast English ones as the move was utilized only in 5 introductions in educational psychology texts and was used in 3 introductions in sociology RAs. As Table 1 shows, neither of the introductions used the counter-claiming realization to create a research gap.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step Options in Move 2: Establishing a Niche</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(establishing a niche)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 1 A Counter-claiming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 B Indicating a gap</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 C Question-raising</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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</table>
Step 1D Continuing a Tradition

Expressing needs

Logical conclusions

Total

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Step 1B</th>
<th>Step 1C</th>
<th>Overall</th>
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</thead>
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</table>

Step 1B Indicating a gap was used only twice in the examined introductions. In indicating a gap, the writers have not challenged or pointed a limitation in previous studies but rather they pointed out the lack of studies as in Example 5.

(5) It can be clearly observed the lack of studies that dealt with the teachers of gifted students. [EP 3]

In this introduction, after the lack of the studies has been mentioned, the authors provided reasons, or justifications, for the paucity of studies by the statement in Example 6.

(6) Probably the lack of studies that dealt with the burn-out of teachers of gifted students is because it is a new occupation in Arabic educational systems; it was initiated in Jordan since 1994 along with establishing the Jubilee school, and was found in the Sudan since 2005 when three schools of gifted students were initiated in the capital Khartoum. [EP 3]

Step 1C Question-raising was used only once in a sociology introduction. It features occupying the niche (Move 3) move embedded, which is underlined.
(7) So what is the role of the curricula in maintaining social values in light of these social changes? Especially since there are certain regularities which every society, including the Saudi society, seeks to maintain and pass on? And since this study concerns with the curriculum of Sociology, is there any [role] for Sociology as a curriculum studied by high school students in maintaining some social values? And what are these values? Or have other curricula taken away its role? [S 4]

Finally, Step 1D Continuing a tradition was the most employed strategy in establishing a niche.

It was employed three times in educational psychology introductions and was used twice in sociology texts. One introduction, in educational psychology texts, used this step in form of expressing needs, as in Example 8.

From here came the need to discuss this problem and find out the dimensions, symptoms, and ways to address them in order to reach a point where the faculty member does not suffer from burnout anymore; or identifying the phenomena or signs that cause the state of burnout, so the procedure becomes preventative before a cure is needed. [EP 6]

The remaining 4 cases used the form of logical conclusion to establish a niche. The case in Example 9 was taken from a sociology introduction which is the last statement in the introduction.

(9) Because individuals respond to the single phenomenon according to their perception of it and according to their personal attributes; it becomes a must to study the trends of political elites in Jordan with respect to the phenomenon of globalization with its various dimensions and different effects in light of their [i.e. individuals] social, intellectual, and professional characteristics which affect their attitudes and stances. [S 2]
Example 10 includes a logical statement function to establish a niche. It is followed by occupying the niche move, which is underlined.

Those who deal directly with others are the most vulnerable individuals to psychological exposure; and consequently teachers and university professors are the most vulnerable groups in society subject to psychological burnout; therefore, the current study came to deal with burnout and the extent of its prevalence and its relationship with some variables concerning the members of faculty of Al-Bayt University in Jordan. [EP 2]

3. Presenting the study

According to the CARS model, the last rhetorical component in English RA introductions is occupying the niche, or presenting the study, after a gap has been created in establishing the niche move. The obligatory realization is Step 1 either through outlining purposes or announcing present research. Swales (1990) provided examples of linguistic exponents of this step such as: *The aim of the present paper is to give … The present work extends …* (p. 160).

The investigation of this component in Arabic texts shows that it is relatively insignificant as it was employed in only 9 introductions out of 20, with 5 introductions in sociology and 4 introductions in educational psychology. Table 2 reports the number of cases of occupying the niche move. It shows that the most employed step is Step 1 with its two versions: outlining purposes and announcing present research (these two steps were merged in the updated CARS model). In addition, there is one RA introduction in sociology that used other steps indicating research article structure, summarizing methods, presenting research questions, and stating the value of the present research. The last three steps were added to the updated model in Swales (2004).
Step 1A (outlining purposes) functions in presenting the purposes of the study. It was used three times in educational psychology introductions and once in sociology texts. Example 11 includes two statements from an educational psychology introduction where the first statement functioned to establish a niche while the last one operated as a logical conclusion opening with “therefore”.

Table 2

*Step Options in Move 3: Occupying the Niche*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step Options in Move 3</th>
<th>EP</th>
<th>Sociology</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 A Outlining purposes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 B Announcing present research</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2 Announcing principal findings</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3 Indicating research article structure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summarizing methods</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting RQs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stating the value of the present research</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(11) Those who deal directly with others are the most vulnerable individuals to psychological combustion and thus teachers and university professors are the most vulnerable groups in society subject to psychological burnout. Therefore, the current study came to deal with the topic of burnout and the extent of its prevalence and its relationship with some variables concerning the members of faculty of Al-Bayt University in Jordan. [EP 2]
The second example was a comparison between the study presented in the paper and previous studies. After a long review of the literature, the writers compared their study to previous studies by highlighting the similarities and differences.

(12) After this overview of previous studies, the placement of this study among previous studies needs to be clarified with respect of similarities and differences. The similarities are with the consideration of the goal in which identifies the perceptions of teachers in high schools towards the democracy of education. The differences are with the representation of the spatial environment as the former studies often dealt with democratic practices while this study was a prospective for the democracy of education, although this study benefited from previous studies in building the model of the study and in discussing and interpreting the findings. [S 9]

The function of Step 1B (announcing present research) is similar to Step 1A (outlining the purposes of the study) except it presents the study without tackling the purposes. Examples 13, 14, and 15 show three cases of presenting the study through this step. The first case, in Example 13, was the first paragraph in the introduction. This is not the conventional place as described in the CARS model (and thus in English introductions) as it should follow the literature review and after the gap has been created.

(13) This study belongs to the field of medical sociology, which addresses the health field as a social and cultural system, which means a group of health institutions that aim at satisfying the needs of people in maintaining good health and resistance to diseases (Al-Jaohari, 1984 AD, p 525). [S 3]

The second case, as set forth in Example 14, is an abrupt mention of the study amid a list of questions that aimed to create a niche.
(14) So what is the role of the curricula in maintaining social values in light of these social changes? Especially since there are certain regularities which every society, including the Saudi society, seeks to maintain and pass on? And since this study concerns with the curriculum of Sociology, is there any role for Sociology as a curriculum studied by high school students in maintaining some social values? And what are these values? Or have other curricula taken away its role? [S 4]

The last case, in Example 15, was a clear presentation of the study which the writer considers to be a humble contribution.

(15) Based on what has been mentioned, the current study seeks to make a humble contribution to approach the concept of social quality, and also to provide a comprehensive and clear picture of the importance, nature, and dimensions of this concept as a new sociological concept; in addition [it seeks] to identify the factors that led to its appearance and finally [it seeks to identify] the theoretical dimensions and empirical indicators which used to achieve and measure and evaluate the social quality in the society. [S 10]

Finally, Step 3 (indicating research article structure) was employed only once. Although this step might occur in English introductions as outlined in the CARS model, the Arabic introduction went further to describe the reference list, and the appendix.
social quality, while the third section concerned with identifying the driving forces behind the emergence of the concept of social quality, and the fourth section was devoted to view the theoretical dimensions of social quality. And the study concluded with a conclusion that involved a group of outlines about the nature of the concept of social quality and its dimensions and importance, then [it concluded with] a list of references that were relied upon in the study. And the study was indexed with the empirical indicators, which are used for measuring and assessing the social quality with its different dimensions, [the empirical indicators] included the main and secondary fields for each dimension and each measurement indicator. [S 10]

**Conclusion**

The exploration of the three elements that typically comprise the introduction to a research paper according to Swales’ CARS model has shown that Arabic RA introductions are typically significantly different from English RA introductions in their component parts. Although the literature review is present and abundant in the Arabic papers, it seems to be provided in order to familiarize the reader with the topic only and not to problematize previous studies to create a research gap as is typical in English literature sections. The most salient point in discussing previous studies was the use of the non-integral citation, where the name of the scholar was put at the end of the sentence between parentheses. This strategy was sometimes problematic because Arabic paragraphs comprise several clauses in a few sentences and sometimes in only one sentence. So it was unclear which idea belonged to the cited scholar (see Example 1).

Establishing a territory move was scarcely employed in the Arabic papers as it was used in only 8 introductions out of 20. More importantly, it was never used to critique previous studies. The most applied strategy was *continuing a tradition* which suggests that the element of creating a research gap is entirely different within Arabic and English rhetorical conventions.

Occupying the niche move also appears to be insignificant in the Arabic papers as it was used in only 9 introductions out of 20. In addition, it was downgraded in the sense that it was (a)
placed at the outset of the introduction, (b) written as a final coordinated clause, and (c) compared to previous studies. Additionally, one introduction showed that the presented study was aimed to make a *humble contribution*.

**Implications and Future Research**

The differences in rhetorical conventions that we have shown here between Arabic and English RA introductions will unquestionably present some challenges to Arabic students who attend online courses in which writing is the primary method of communication. In addition to building an awareness of these possible cross-cultural “traps” for professors who are monolingual native users of English, we offer two additional areas for teachers to consider:

1) Professors of all disciplines are encouraged to familiarize their students with the prototypical and crucial components of each genre. Since the focus of this study was on the genre of the RA introduction, professors are encouraged to show that these rhetorical moves are quite essential in writing a successful introduction in English academic discourse.

2) On the other hand, professors need to be cognizant of these cross-cultural divergences and be flexible with these diverse writing styles. Since the English language is expanding and becoming more of an international and world language that comprise many varieties, professors teaching ESL students are encouraged not to judge ESL writing by applying norms found in the writing tradition in Anglophone communities.

The last point can be beneficial to editors in journals. Belcher (2007) has shown that off-network scholars, such as those from Middle East, Asia, Latin America, and Europe, encounter difficulties in getting their papers accepted in Anglophone journals. It is thus recommended that editors become aware of these different varieties in English.
Future studies are recommended to examine the appropriate ways of teaching writing, especially to ESL students, such as the design and the structure of the course and the appropriate tools used for online courses.
References


