Transfer in Written English Discourse: The Influence of Arabic and French on Tunisian EFL Students' Argumentative Texts

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Abstract

Although the concept of contrastive rhetoric has received considerable attention in research on second language writing, it has not been adequately examined in a linguistically complex context such as Tunisia. This study is an attempt to contribute to the growing body of research on second language writing through investigating the validity of the Contrastive Rhetoric Hypothesis in the Tunisian context. The study is based on the assumption that the main causes of Tunisian students' deficient writing ability in the English language are transfer of Arabic and French rhetorical norms, insufficient writing ability in Arabic and/or French, lack of a well-developed metacognitive knowledge, and poor language proficiency in English. The research approach adopted is quantitative as well as qualitative. Two data collection instruments were used: a questionnaire and 150 compositions in three languages. 50 undergraduate students of English at the Institut Supérieur Des Langues de Tunis took part in the study, 25 of them were first-year students and 25 final-year students. The findings indicate that transfer is but one cause of the students' deficient writing ability and that the development of multilingual students' writing proficiency requires much more attention.

Keywords: Contrastive rhetoric; cross linguistic transfer; metacognitive knowledge; writing proficiency; rhetoric; multilingual writers

Introduction

Kaplan's (1966) claim that transfer of native language (NL) rhetoric is the main cause of deviant writing by non-native students (NNS) has been extensively studied in different contexts. However, the concept has not been thoroughly considered in a complex linguistic context such as Tunisia, which is characterized by diglossia and where the students learn two (and sometimes three) foreign languages. A substantial number of published contrastive rhetoric (CR) studies have analyzed English texts written by Arab students (cf. Doushaq, 1986; El-sayed, 1992; Fakhri 1994; Hatim, 1990; Ibrahim, Kassabgy, & Aydelott, 2000; Khalil, 1989), but the findings of these studies are not directly applicable to English as a foreign language (EFL) in Tunisia. Previous studies by Labassi (1996) and Mhamdi (2004) tested the CR hypothesis, but they did not involve the same genre or the same rhetorical features. This study is specifically concerned with the rhetoric of argumentation and aims to understand the extent to which cross-linguistic interference and other factors can affect EFL students' writing. The study aspires to reach a degree of applicability by contributing to the extant resources in research on writing, which may improve the teaching of writing in EFL contexts. The following research questions guide the present paper:

a) Is there evidence of transfer from Arabic and French in Tunisian students' EFL compositions?
b) If yes, what exactly do they transfer, i.e. what are the most common types of transfer errors?
c) Which language influences the students' English written discourse most, Arabic or French? Why?
d) What are the underlying causes of transfer?
e) Are discourse errors due to language transfer to be regarded as developmental errors?

Literature review

Contrastive rhetoric, a multidisciplinary area of research that investigates rhetorical differences across languages and cultures, was first characterized by a cultural approach to the NNS texts. It was influenced by the theory of linguistic relativity and assumed that rhetoric and culture were language specific. Several empirical studies tested the CR hypothesis in different cultural and linguistic contexts and some of them challenged

Kaplan's (1966) description of what he considered the rhetorical patterns of some languages. A number of studies (Bar-lev, 1986; Daoud, 1991; Ouaouicha, 1986; Sa'Addedin, 1989) criticized the description of Arabic rhetoric in early CR studies. Sa'Adeddin , for instance, argued that all languages have more than one rhetorical option and the writers' choice of the mode depends on the context and the audience. He also maintained that there are two main modes of text development available in every culture: the 'visual' mode and the 'aural' mode. In the 'visual' mode, the text is "premeditatively developed", linear, coherent and cohesive. In the 'aural' mode, which was believed to be a feature of Arabic rhetoric, the text is "extemporaneously developed" and contains many signs of oratory discourse. Sa'Adeddin's position was supported by the opponents of the cultural approach to CR. Kubota and Lehner (2004), for instance, called for a critical CR and Canagarajah (2006) warned against the association of one language with a specific discourse. In the same vein, Buell (2004, p. 102) noted that "Tying rhetorical difference only to ethnic or national culture ignores the diversity of codes operating within diverse genres. "

More recently, DePalma and Ringer (2011) recommended the expansion of the scope of CR studies through a focus on how the students adapt prior knowledge and skills to the new context, instead of focusing on what is transferred to L2. This suggestion echoes Canagarajah's (2002) proposal to consider the negative as well as the positive impacts of culture on L2 composition. These suggestions led to the development of the notion of transferability of skills across languages.

The notion of transferability of skills across languages focuses on the positive transfer of literacy skills from Na to L2. The theory is based on the *Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis* (LIH) suggested by Cummins (1976). The LIH posits that provided that learners reach a threshold level of linguistic competence in L2, transfer of skills across languages is possible. In L2 writing research, a number of studies (such as Berman, 1994; Ito, 2009; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Soleimani & Rasekh, 2010) have confirmed the strong link between the threshold level of linguistic competence and the transfer of writing skills from L1 to L2. A low L2 proficiency is believed to cause a "short-circuit" effect and thus hamper the transfer of writing skills from L1 to L2 (Ito 2009). Several other studies (such as Carson and Kuehn, 1992; Kobayashi and Rinnert, 2008; Kubota, 1998) probed and widely confirmed the cross linguistic transfer of writing skills. They demonstrated how a developed L1 writing ability plays a positive role in the development of L2 writing skill and a poor L1 writing competence may encumber the L2 writer. Some researchers (Chen, 2006; Rinnert

& Kobayashi, 2009) have also suggested that transfer can be bi-directional; advanced learners may transfer from L2 while composing in L1.

Despite that wide evidence, not all research has been conclusive about the cross linguistic transfer of skills. For instance, Carson et al. (1990), Pennington and So (1993), and Okabe (2004) did not identify a significant correlation between L1 and L2 writing abilities. The notion of transferability of skills across languages is of great relevance to the present study which posits that a poor writing ability in Arabic and/or French could be one of the causes of a poor writing proficiency in English. The study also assumes that inadequate metacognitive knowledge is another cause of transfer from Arabic and/or French.

Metacognitive knowledge refers to people's knowledge about cognitive processes used to control mental activities. It consists of three interactive variables: person, task, and strategy (Flavell et al. 2002). The person variable is about knowledge and beliefs one might have regarding the differences and similarities in humans' cognitive processes. It also includes awareness about self as learner. Knowledge of task variable consists of two subcategories: knowledge of the nature of the task and knowledge of the nature of task demands. For instance, people generally know that some tasks are difficult, time consuming and require higher cognitive processing. The strategy component refers to knowledge and use of strategies appropriate to the task. Different tasks require the use of different strategies. Anderson (2002, p. 3) maintains that "the use of metacognitive strategies ignites one's thinking and can lead to more profound learning and improved performance, especially among learners who are struggling."

Research in the field of EFL/ESL composition shows a correlation between metacognitive knowledge and writing performance. Several studies (Dülger, 2011; Farahian & Avarzamani, 2018; Kasper, 1997; Victori, 1999) have indicated that skilled writers have a more developed metacognitive knowledge than less skilled ones. Devine et al. (1993) and Schoonen et al. (2009) found an association between adequate metacognitive knowledge and good writing proficiency in L1 and L2. In the Tunisian EFL context (Ouerfelli, 2015) reported a positive effect of metacognitive knowledge on the students' reading and writing abilities. The present paper, too, investigates the effect of metacognitive knowledge on Tunisian EFL students' writing ability.

Context of the study

The linguistic situation in Tunisia is a very complex one. It is characterized by diglossia and bilingualism. Arabic is the official language and French is officially a foreign language. However, as Daoud (1996, p. 599) notes French "enjoys… the status of a second language". It is still used to teach scientific subjects in secondary schools and at tertiary level. The majority of educated Tunisians are bilingual and Arabic-French code mixing is very common in everyday communication.

The situation has been made more complex by the introduction of English as a second foreign language in academic institutions. English is also little by little gaining ground in everyday communication among young educated Tunisians. This complex linguistic situation and the urgent need to develop the students' writing ability justify the interest in the study of cross linguistic transfer.

Methods

Participants

Fifty undergraduate Tunisian students of English enrolled at the Institut Supérieur des Langues de Tunis took part in the study. Twenty-five of them were first year students and the other twenty-five were fourth (i.e. final) year students. The first-year group served to control the assumptions of poor proficiency in the target language (TL) and undeveloped metacognitive knowledge. When first year students took part in this study, they had just completed one academic semester of writing instruction in which they were taught how to write a paragraph. Fourth year students, however, had had writing classes for three years. All the subjects had the same educational background: Arabic, the native language, was the main medium of instruction during their primary and secondary education, and French and English were the two main foreign languages they learnt at school.

Data collection

The data consisted of 150 essays (50 in English, 50 in French, and 50 in Arabic) and a questionnaire. The essays were collected in academic settings during three separate sessions, two weeks apart each. In the first session, the subjects wrote the English essays and in the second and third sessions they wrote the French and Arabic compositions. Writing in Arabic was left last in order to reduce the risk of transfer from that language. In

order to have comparable data, the same topic was used in the three languages (appendix A). The topic was not culture-bound and was within the assumed knowledge range of all the subjects. The absence of topic choice was also important for the reliability of the results (Heaton 1988).

The second data collection instrument, the questionnaire, was designed to gather background information about the subjects, their attitude to writing, their previous writing experiences, and their metacognitive knowledge. Such information was needed to interpret the results of the other data collection battery and further check the subjects' familiarity with the writing conventions in the three languages. The questionnaire was administered to the participants during the last session of data collection.

Data Analysis

The essays underwent quantitative and qualitative analyses. They were evaluated anonymously by a team of six experienced instructors, two scorers for each language. An evaluation instrument, which consisted of a scoring sheet (Appendix D) and an extended profile, was used to evaluate the essays. The analytic scale used in this study was mainly an adaptation of *The ESL composition profile* (Hughey et al. 1983, p.139). The scale, which also borrowed from *The TEEP attribute writing scales* (Weir 1993, p. 160), consisted of six scales, each one focusing on one of the following features of writing: content, organization, cohesion, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics.

The extended profile (Appendix E) was mainly a reproduction of the profile suggested in Hughey et al. (1983). It was a form of support to the scoring scheme as it explained the concepts of good writing presented in the analytic scale. Both the extended profile criteria and the scoring sheet were translated into Arabic and French for the raters of the Arabic and French essays. The essays evaluators got some training in using these instruments during the pilot study.

The scores awarded to the essays in the three languages were statistically analyzed. Three types of statistical tests were used to identify the differences across languages and groups: chi-square, a two-tailed t-test, and General Linear Model univariate analysis. The compositions, then, underwent a qualitative analysis so as to identify features of transfer and compare text features across languages. Mann and Thompson's (1988) *Rhetorical Structure Theory* (RST) was used to analyze coherence in the students' compositions. In rhetorical structure analysis (RSA), texts have first to be divided into pairs of text spans. A text span is any part of the text that has a functional integrity. It can be a clause, a sentence,

a paragraph, or even a larger unit. The analyst has to assign a function for every span by identifying the relations that link the different parts together.

The analysis was carried out over two steps. The first step was concerned with the top-level structure of the essays in the three languages. The aim was twofold: to examine the global coherence of the texts analyzed and check whether the students used different rhetorical patterns when they wrote in different languages or used just one pattern and transferred it from one language to another. For the sake of this analysis, the classification of argumentative text patterns suggested by Maccoun (1983) was used. The second step of the RSA of the essays was an analysis of local coherence through a detailed analysis of the texts. The unit size for the detailed rhetorical structure analysis was the clause, but when needed, text spans were smaller than that. The only criterion for text division was that text spans had to form meaningful units in order to provide a plausible interpretation of the text. In order to reduce the degree of subjectivity inherent in each RSA, the compositions were analyzed twice by the researcher and then the analyzed texts were discussed and commented upon by two experienced writing instructors.

To check Kaplan's (1966) claims of heavy reliance on coordination and overuse of the conjunction "and" (the equivalent of 'wa' in Arabic and 'et' in French), an analysis of conjunctions use was carried out. A concordance software was used to analyze the French and English compositions, but the work was done manually during the analysis of the Arabic compositions. The identified conjunctions were counted, and then a t-test for independent samples was carried out in order to detect any differences between the two groups in terms of frequency of use. A chi-square analysis was also carried out to compare the subjects' use of discourse markers across languages.

Findings

The essay grades indicated a writing proficiency problem among the majority of the subjects. 91 out of the 150 scores ranged between very poor and poor. For both groups, the highest mean did not reach 3.00, which was the minimum required level. The results also revealed that fourth-year students' grades in the three languages, though higher than first-year students' scores, were still far below the expected level. The advanced students' grades were expected to range between average and good; however 5% of the essays written by the advanced students were very poor, 43% were poor, and 8% only were good. There

were very few good essays written by first-year students, too: 73% of their scores were poor to very poor and 21% were just average.

A comparison of the subjects' performance across languages (Figure 1) revealed that both groups performed in their native language better than in French and English. The highest scores were achieved in the Arabic essays, but the mean scores were slightly

Figure 1

Essays overall scores
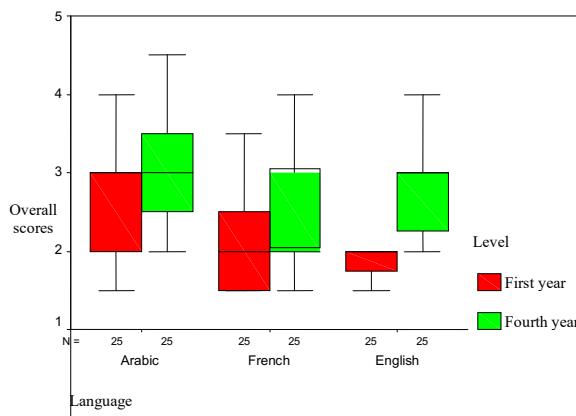
below average for both groups of subjects and they did not suggest a competent writing proficiency even in the NL. The results also indicated that fourth-year subjects outperformed the other subjects in Arabic; however, the difference was not statistically significant (t = -.511, df = 48, and p >.5). Fourth-year students performed better in French, too. 8% of their essays were good and 32% were average while none of first-year students' compositions were judged good and 16% only were average. The difference between the two groups was statistically significant (t = -2.305, df = 48 and p <.05).

The overall grades awarded on the English essays, displayed in Figure 1, suggest an even greater difference between the two groups. Fourth-year students' scores were far below the expected level since 40% of them were poor and 52% just average. Yet, these grades were much better than those obtained by the subjects in the other group. 28% of first-year students' essays were very poor, 68% poor, and only one essay was awarded 3.00 out of 5.00. An independent sample t-test of the English grades indicated a highly significant difference between the two groups of subjects (t = -6.012, df = 48, and p <.000).

A General Linear Model univariate analysis provided partial support for the claim of cross-linguistic transfer of poor writing. The F ratio was statistically significant for first year students (F = 16.524, p <.000) but not for fourth year students (F = 2.148, p <.124). However, the analysis of the scores of individual cases provided some evidence for the claim of transfer of poor writing even for the advanced subjects: most of the students who got poor scores in English had poor scores in Arabic and French, too; and those who wrote good essays in English performed well in the two other languages. The results of the analytic scoring provided further support for these claims.

Content, organization, and cohesion scores were very much similar to those presented above, most of the mean scores for these criteria were below the required level and there were very few significant differences across languages and levels. On the whole the participants wrote in Arabic better than in French and English. Figure 2 shows that the highest means were those achieved in the Arabic compositions and the lowest were those obtained in French. For example, as far as content is concerned just 30% of the scores awarded on the Arabic compositions were poor whereas 54% of the French grades and 50% of the English scores were poor. It is important to note here that language proficiency seems to have impeded the clarity of the message and therefore negatively affected the scores. The grammar and vocabulary scores provide evidence for the limited language proficiency claim.

Figure 2
*Content, organization and cohesion scores*
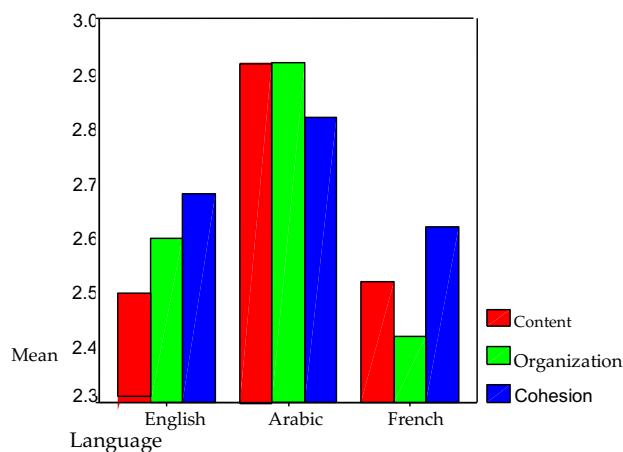
Grammar scores did not indicate a distinguished performance even in the NL (Figure 3). The results also suggested that first-year students' lower proficiency level negatively

affected their performance in the English essays. The difference between the two groups of subjects was highly significant (p=.000). 64% of first-year subjects scored poor while 72% of the more advanced students' scores were average.

Figure 3

Grammar Scores
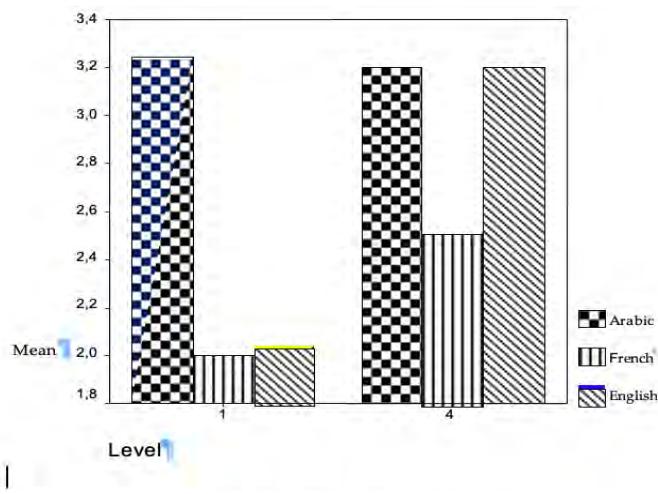
A comparison of the vocabulary grades across languages (table1) shows that the subjects scored best in Arabic, though their grades did not indicate a good command of the NL. The results also point out a wide difference between the two groups' scores in the English compositions. 72% of the advanced students scored average to good while 88% of first-year students' scores were poor to very poor because their compositions had a limited vocabulary range and contained many word choice errors. In some cases, it was clear that the subjects thought in Arabic and/or French and then translated into English, as in the following excerpt.

> All what is said doesn't deny us to say that woman, in spite of her physical structure or her social duties, has entered the world of work with regard to her reliability and to her competence, this competence that pushes her to challenge man in many jobs today, we can even see women working in occupations that people think they are only for men: we can see women driving a bus or an aircraft or the subway, we can see her in schools and in universities, etc. That's all that woman has improved her capacities and her abilities to create and to fulfill her prospects without any constraint, and finally, she shows by herself that is equal in gender with man.

The use of the word 'woman' in the singular while talking about women in general is a proof of translation from Arabic. The following expressions, too, indicate the use of translation from the NL: "all what is said" (Kulu ma quila), "with regard to" (nadharan li). Repetition of the expression "we can see women" and the redundant use of the word "abilities" are also signs of translation from L1.

Table 1

Vocabulary Scores

	First Year			Fourth Year		
	Arabic	French	English	Arabic	French	English
Mean	2.76	2.04	1.96	2.96	2.56	2.80
Minimum	1	1	1	2	1	2
Maximum	4	4	3	5	4	4

Lack of sensitivity to register seems to be an equally important cause of the poor vocabulary grades for both groups of subjects. There were 20 instances of shifts from formal to informal register in the English compositions, about twice as much in the French compositions, and 65 occurrences in the Arabic texts. The example below, taken from an English composition written by a first-year student, shows the impact of such a shift on the essay quality.

> And from these examples, it can be concluded that women are working only in comfortable jobs and easy professions while men are *sweating blood doing dirty* jobs….

Another important finding is an interest in eloquence among some students. The excerpts below, taken from an English essay written by a fourth-year subject, show the desire to impress through the choice of pompous language. The use of pretentious expressions obscured the meaning and made the compositions hard to analyze.

> This gender discrimination is *the head cornerstone* upon which patriarchal societies are built. What we tend to undo in the claim of few professions for women is its *univocal* aspect, its lack of *equivocality*.

The participants' performance in mechanics was not satisfactory, either. The subjects performed best in their NL. Forty-six per cent of the scores were good and 44% of them were average, whereas in the English compositions just 12% of the scores were good and 50% were average. The French scores were the lowest. The superior performance in the NL was not surprising given that there is no capitalization in Arabic and punctuation rules are quite flexible. One might suspect that this flexibility was transferred to the English compositions; however, a comparison of the scores of the two groups of subjects leads to the refutation of the transfer hypothesis. 60% of first year students' scores were poor while 64% of fourth subjects got good scores. A t-test indicated a highly significant difference between the means of the two groups of subjects in the English compositions ($p = .000$). This finding suggests that lack of awareness of the English language mechanics conventions among first year participants is the main cause of their weak performance.

Results of the RSA indicate further writing problems and interesting findings. Analysis of the overall text organizational patterns revealed two super patterns. The first one was labeled *question-response pattern*, because in this type of texts the students raised one or more questions at the end of the introduction and provided answers to the question(s) in the body or the conclusion. The highest-level relation which linked the two main constituents of such texts was always *response*. The essays classified under this category, generally did not contain a thesis statement in the introduction. The writer's position was often expressed in the response span. However, at a lower level, these essays could fit any of the patterns suggested by Maccoun (1983). The figure in Appendix B is an example of a question-response schema. Span 1 ends with a question about the extent to which the common belief is suitable and valid. Spans 2-8 are meant to provide a response. Spans 2-4 present the socio-cultural background in which the belief appeared and spans 5-6 refute the arguments presented in the previous span. This sample composition fits, at a lower level, the opposition's arguments first since it contains two different points of view (spans 2-4 and 5-6), the second one being the author's.

The second super pattern of text organization was called *the classical pattern*. Its structure fitted the commonly used pattern of text organization where the writer would introduce the topic and then state his/her position in a thesis statement. Not all the essays classified under this category contained a clearly stated position. Another important feature of this pattern is that the top-level relation between the higher constituents of the

texts depended on the theme and purpose of the writer. For example, the highest relation that links the different parts of the essay can be *justify* if the writer's aim is to justify a claim stated in the introduction.

Table 2

Top Level structure of the essays

Pattern of development	Question-response pattern				Classical pattern				Total	
	First year		Fourth year		First year		Fourth year			
	N	*%*	N	*%*	N	*%*	N	*%*	N	*%*
Arabic	21	84	4	16	4	16	21	84	50	100
French	13	52	7	28	12	48	18	72	50	100
English	5	20	5	20	20	80	20	80	50	100
Total	39	26	16	11	36	24	59	39	150	100

The analysis of the top-level structure (Table 2) revealed that the majority of the essays belonged to the classical pattern and only 37% of the data fell under the question-response text type. The latter was much more used in Arabic and French. 50% of the Arabic essays and 40% of the French essays were developed according to the question-response text type while 20% only of the English essays were organized according to this pattern.

The analysis also yielded interesting differences between the two groups of subjects. First-year students made a more extensive use of the question-response pattern: 84% of their Arabic texts and 52% of their French essays had one or more questions at the end of the introduction. This pattern of text development was used in the three languages by 12% of the students in this group. Fourth-year students made a more limited use of the question-response model, especially in the Arabic and English essays. 59 out of the 75 essays written by the students in this group followed the classical pattern. Only two students in this group used the question-response pattern in the three languages.

The results of the analysis of lower level text structure (Table 3) indicate an extensive use of *the opposition's arguments first*, a method of text development called thèse-antithèse in French. This text structure, which is believed to be popular in French rhetoric (Bloor and Bloor 1991), requires a consideration of the opposite point of view followed by a refutation and development of the author's point of view. 56% of the Arabic essays, 58% of the French essays, and 42% of the English texts fell under this category. 26% of the subjects used this

method of text development in the three languages. The results also revealed that first-year students adopted this pattern in their Arabic and French essays more than in their English essays. Some of them preferred the *problem and refutation of the opposition arguments* when they wrote in English. It is a pattern similar to the thèse-antithèse method of text organization, but it contains a solution span to indicate the writer's bias if it is not indicated in the problem span.

Table 3

Lower level macro rhetorical structure of the essays

Inside pattern	Arabic			French			English		
	1st year (%)	4th year(%)	Total (%)	1st year (%)	4th year (%)	Total (%)	1st year (%)	4th year (%)	Total (%)
Opposition's arguments first	52	60	56	60	56	58	32	52	42
Problem and refutation	32	24	28	8	28	18	36	28	32
Eclectic	12	4	8	20	8	14	20	8	14
One sided argument	4	4	4	12	4	8	8	4	6
Zigzag pattern		8	4		4	2	0	8	4
Other side questioned							4		2
Disagreement from within the same camp									
Classic form									
Total (%)	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

The RSA also revealed *coherence breakdowns* in the students' compositions. There were two types of coherence breaks*: misleading paragraph division and unrelated discourse elements.* Based on the paragraphing criteria set by Wikborg (1990), 130 instances of misleading paragraph divisions were found in the subjects' compositions. As shown in Figure 4, these instances of coherence breakdown could be divided into two subcategories: *unjustified paragraph division* and *topic shift within the paragraph. Unjustified paragraph division* refers to instances when the students started a new paragraph while there was no need for a paragraph break. Sixty-five percent of the instances of misleading paragraph divisions were classified under this category of coherence breakdown. Forty-eight percent of the occurrences were in the Arabic essays, 39% in the French essays, and 13% in the English compositions. Most of the essays which had such weakness consisted of one or two sentence paragraphs. In fact, 37% of the students' compositions consisted of 6 to 13 paragraphs.

Figure 4

Misleading paragraph
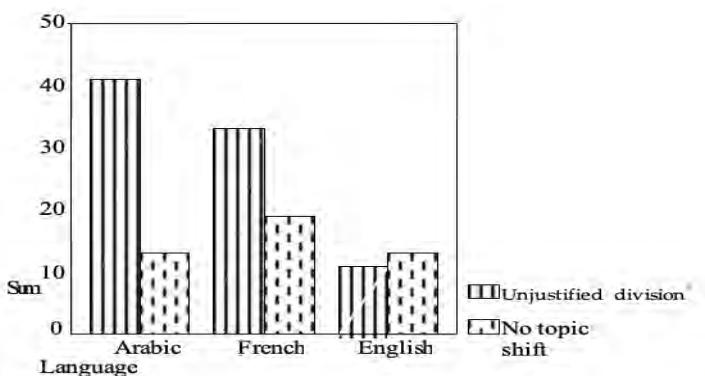
The student writer of the sample below wrote essays which on average consisted of 10 paragraphs each.

إلا أنني أظن أن المرأة على مشارف القرن الواحد والعشرين أبدت استعدادها للقيام بأي عمل كان على أحسن ما يكون ففي البلدان الأوروبية نجد على رأس المملكة المتحدة ملكة تدير شؤونها كما كانت قبل ذلك "أنديرا غاندي" في الهند وهذا يعني أن السياسة ليس حكرا على الرجال فقط. فالمرأة قادرة أن تدير شؤون أمة بأسرها.

كما أظن أن عدد النساء العاملات في ميادين كانت قبل ذلك منحصرة في الرجال لايزال يتصاعد بكثرة في السنوات الأخيرة وهذا يبين أن المرأة ذلك الكائن الضعيف قد اكتسبت قوة وخبرة تؤهلانه لاختراق ميادين كانت تبدو له مستعصية ومخيفة. فالمرأة اليوم قبطان سفينة وقائد في الجيش وبحار وغيرهم من الأعمال.

إن طموح المرأة وإصرارها جعلها تخترق الصعوبات وتعتزم دخول هذه المهن التي لا تراها مختلفة كثيرا عن بقية المهن.

All the paragraphs in the sample are about the same subtopic. The student states in the first paragraph his belief that "on the verge of the twenty first century, women have proved that they are ready to do any kind of job in a perfect way", and s/he provides the examples of the Queen of the United Kingdom and Andira Gandhi to prove that "politics is not to be monopolized by men since women can rule a whole nation." The second paragraph presents further support ("the highly increasing number of women doing jobs which used to be done by men only") and a comment on the support in order to confirm the writer's position. The comment explains that the above-mentioned statement is a proof that "women, the weak creatures, have gained force and experience that have allowed them to access fields that used to seem difficult and dreadful. Women today work as ship captains, army commanders, sailors, and so on." The third paragraph of the extract is also about the same subtopic, "these types of professions". The only addition is that it specifies

the causes that led women to do such professions and which were "women's ambition and perseverance."

The second type of misleading paragraph division occurred when the students grouped two or three subtopics in just one paragraph. The RSA revealed 45 instances of *absence of topic shift demarcation*, which corresponded to 35% of the total number of misleading paragraph divisions. The number of occurrences of this type of coherence break was higher in the French essays. The analysis also indicated two types of absence of topic shift demarcation. The first one was an i*nability to set introduction boundaries*. Four compositions had part of the introduction dragged to the first body paragraph and three compositions had the introduction and the first body paragraph grouped together. The second type of lack of topic shift demarcation was an *inability to deal with two or more subtopics in different paragraphs*. This occurred either when a body paragraph dealt with a new subtopic not mentioned in the topic sentence or when the body of the essay consisted of just one block.

Text coherence was also affected by the use of digression and repetition. The data contained 67 text spans, at the sentence as well as at the paragraph level, which were either irrelevant or had no clear function. There were also 172 occurrences of restatement in the whole data. The striking finding is that 52% of the digressions and 43% of the restatements were in the English compositions. The results also indicate that fourth-year students, who were expected to show a higher degree of awareness of the English rhetoric, did not really perform better than the other subjects. For instance, one fourth-year student made use of the restatement six times in his/her English composition, three instances were at the paragraph level (Figure 5). The student's aim in writing this composition was to refute the common belief. The response span (2-7) consisted of two elements in a contrast relation. The first span presented women's situation in the past and the second one described the actual situation.

In paragraph 3, the student writer presented three arguments to support his/her position: women's education, their ability to challenge, and technological progress. The ideas at that stage were not developed, they were just backed up with examples. The student writer probably noticed the lack of development and added three short paragraphs (units 4-6), but there was not much progress as s/he kept arguing in circles. The RSA revealed two other findings worth noting, the use of the *comment* and *joint*

relations. The *comment* relation was not overused; there were just 123 instances in the data. This relation use represented just 0.01% of the sum of the relations identified and the students in both groups made a more limited use of it in the English compositions. This finding is worth mentioning because comments, as in the example (Figure 6), echo Williams' (1984) claim that Arab writers intrude more than required in texts.

Figure 5

Example of the use of repetition at the paragraph level
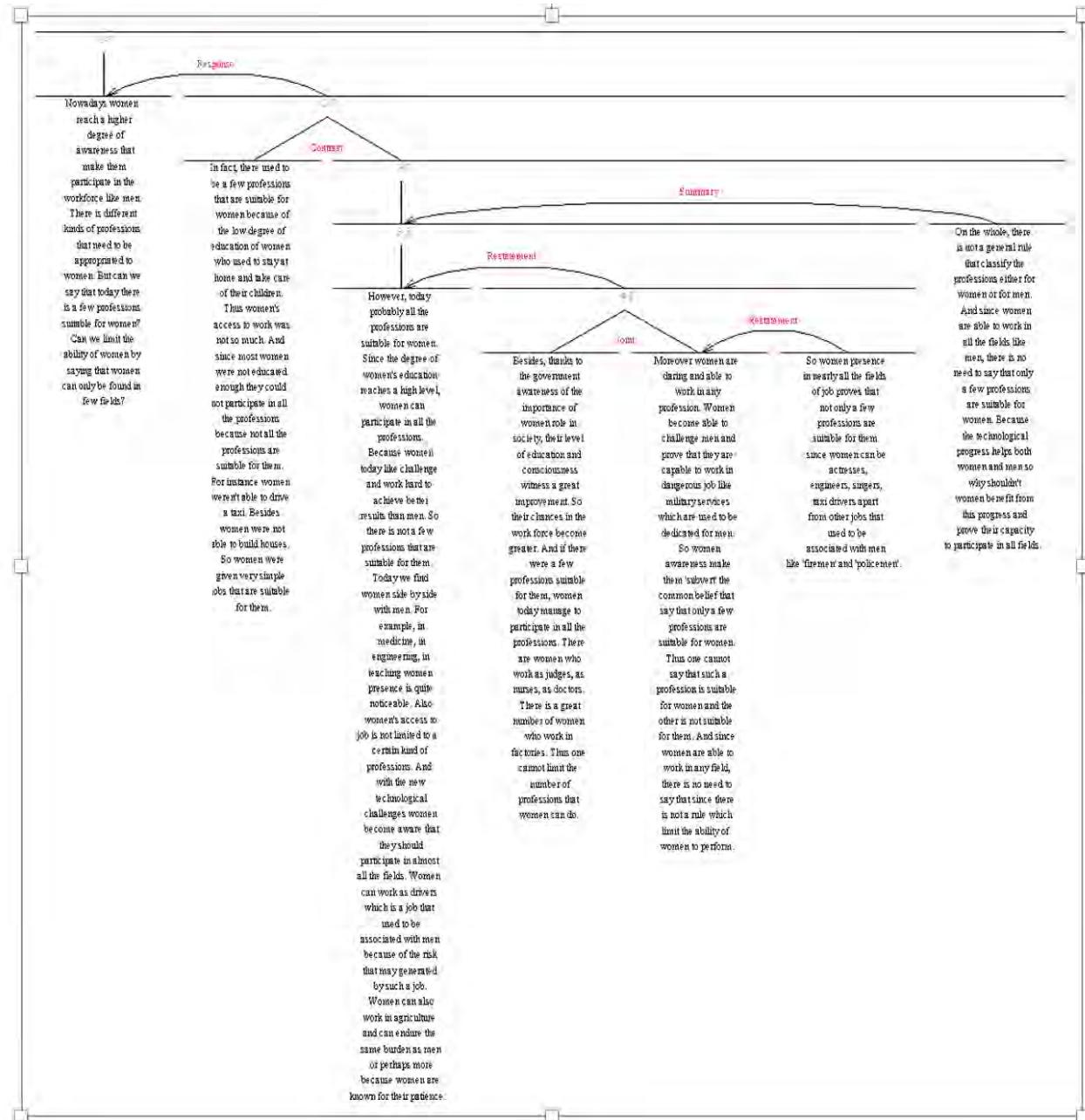
Figure 6

Example of the use of the comment relation
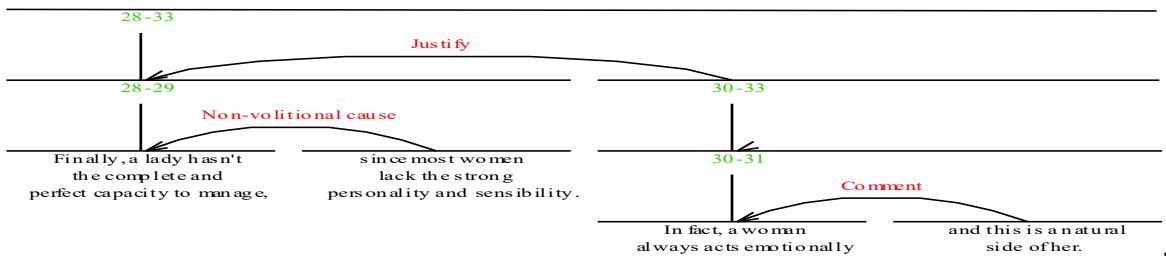
Joint, a multinuclear relation that links more than two units, occurred 464 times. 48% of the uses were in the Arabic compositions, as opposed to 24% in French and 28% in the English essays. The relatively high use of this relation in the Arabic texts seems to validate the claim about paratactic discourse construction being a feature of the aural mode of text development. In the example (Figure 7), the student writer most probably transferred this feature of Arabic to his English and French compositions. All his/her essays had instances of flat constructions containing clauses or sentences related through the coordinating conjunction 'wa' (the equivalent of 'and' in English).

Figure 7

Example of the use of the joint relation
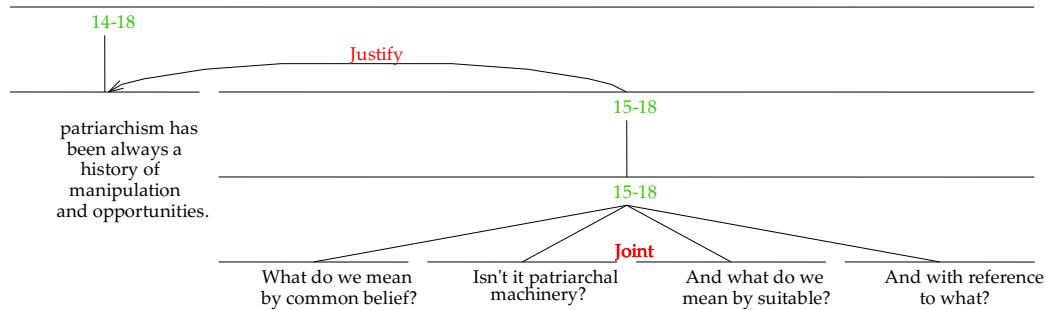
The extract (Figure 7) draws attention to another feature of the aural mode of text development: the desire of some students to maintain a dialogue with the reader all through the compositions. The RSA revealed 12 instances of questions (04 of them in the English compositions) used as a paragraph transition tool and 56 rhetorical questions (12 of them in the English compositions).

The results of cohesion analysis revealed that the students' compositions were not loosely organized and, thus, challenged Kaplan's claim of connector underuse. The essays contained on average 8 intersentential connectors, which is much more than required by

English writing conventions (Biber 1988). This relatively high connector density could be due to the influence of the French language which favors explicit cohesion (Vinay and Darbelnet, 1977). The highest number of connectors was in the Arabic compositions (Table 4). 50% of the connectors identified in the data were additive connectors and as expected, the most commonly used additive connector in Arabic was 'wa'. There were 146 instances in the Arabic texts but only 19 occurrences in the English essays.

Table 4

Connector usage in the subjects' compositions

	Arabic		French		English		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
First-year	273	48	187	52	189	48	649	49
Fourth-year	295	52	172	48	202	52	669	51
Total	568	43	359	27	391	30	1318	100

The density of connectors was not a discriminating factor between the two groups; however, there was a significant difference between the subjects in the use of individual connectors. The advanced learners acquired a wider repertoire and their essays exhibited a wider use of formal connectors while first-year subjects showed a tendency to use less formal discourse markers such as "to cut the story short". The qualitative analysis also supported the claim of the effect of poor language proficiency. There were 13 instances of coherence breakdowns due to a misleading use of linkers. Ten out of the 13 occurrences were in the English compositions. In the RST diagram (Figure 8), units 33-34 are linked by a connector which signals contrast between two ideas whereas the unit is meant to signal a result.

Figure 8

Example of misleading use of linkers

19
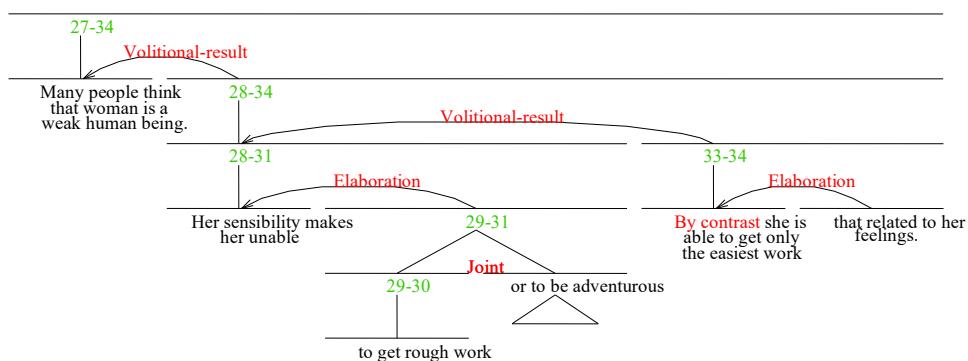
Data from the questionnaire yielded interesting information about the three variables of metacognitive knowledge. The participants' responses indicate a somewhat limited degree of awareness of self as writer. The scores obtained did not match the students' estimation of their writing ability. Most of the students overrated their writing ability, especially in French and English. For example, 96% of the English essays written by first-year students were poor to very poor but only 12% of the subjects in that group knew that their writing ability was far below the required level. The advanced students, too, thought that their writing ability in English was satisfactory while the results indicated that 48% of their compositions obtained poor scores.

This lack of awareness of self as writer might be due to insufficient practice which the subjects themselves confirmed in their responses to questions 5 and 6. Most of them admitted that they rarely wrote in the English language despite their strong preference to write in that language. Insufficient practice and lack of corrective feedback might also be the reason why the subjects did not show a high level of awareness of self when they reported their writing problems. Although both groups of participants reported several weaknesses (Appendix C), there is some discrepancy between their report and the weaknesses disclosed by the essays evaluation and the RSA.

Findings about the subjects' *awareness of the task*, the second variable of metacognitive knowledge, are to be interpreted with caution. Most of the participants could identify that they wrote argumentative texts. Nevertheless, this cannot be taken as an indication of a high degree of awareness of task requirements because most of them could not successfully describe the method of text development they chose for their compositions. The subjects were provided with a list of text types and were asked to indicate the method of text development used in the three essays they wrote. In some cases, the selection was done at random because the selected options were not all appropriate to the topic of the essays and did not match the method of development adopted in the compositions.

Another interesting finding, as far as *the task variable* is concerned, is audience awareness. 84% of the subjects (22 fourth-year and 20 first-year students) indicated that they usually think of the reader(s) during the writing process. They confirmed this awareness in their answers to question 11 where they noted that the readers were very likely to be teachers or researchers. Some students even thought of a secondary audience, such as feminists or anyone interested in the topic. The RSA of the essays did not confirm this awareness. If the essays were written for teachers or researchers, then they would be

formal and devoid of features of the "aural" mode of text development. The advanced students were expected to show competent linguistic proficiency and developed metacognitive knowledge.

Lack of awareness of *the specificities of the different discourse modes* is a further evidence for the subjects' inadequate metacognitive knowledge. Many subjects tend to think that there are fewer differences between French and English. For instance, 56% of them believe that French and English are similar in terms of text organization while 64% of them, mainly first year students, think that Arabic and English are different in terms of text structure.

The students' responses to the other questions about *the strategy variable* indicated a certain degree of awareness of the different stages of the writing process. Brainstorming, organizing ideas, and writing a thesis statement are the most widely used strategies. The subjects are also used to writing a formal outline; however, rewriting the essay, proofreading and editing are not very common practice. It is also worth noting that a comparison of the use of the writing strategies across languages revealed that some of the strategies are applied more when the students write in English. For instance, 56% of first-year subjects brainstorm when they write in English while only 44% always use this strategy when they compose in Arabic. This might reflect the approach adopted in the English composition classes, but most importantly it indicates that the subjects possess the required knowledge. This is an asset which the students did not seem to have used properly.

Discussion

The findings presented above do provide some support to the research questions. The first research question was about evidence of transfer from Arabic and French in Tunisian students' EFL compositions. The results of the study did not indicate that transfer was a common writing strategy among all the students, but they did provide ample evidence for transfer from Arabic and French at the levels of text coherence and cohesion. The subjects themselves confirmed the transfer hypothesis as 22% of them admitted that they relied on translation when they wrote in English. This leads us to research question number two which was about the types of transfer errors. The adoption of the question-response overall pattern of text organization, the extensive use of the popular thèse-antithèse (French method of text development), the unjustified paragraph division, the use of direct and

rhetorical questions, digression, and the frequent use of repetition are features of transfer at the level of text coherence. The RSA also suggested that the students' use of the joint and *comment* relations could be due to the influence of Arabic rhetoric which is believed to favor the flat sentence structure and the dialogic nature of texts.

As far as cohesion is concerned, the analysis did not really support Kaplan's (1966) claim of transfer of loose packaging. It rather indicated an overuse of connectors, which might be due to transfer from the French language which favors explicit cohesion. However, this claim requires further investigation because previous studies (such as Field and Yip, 1992 and Granger and Tyson, 1996) suggested that the overuse of some connector types is a feature of L2 texts. This means that a lack of mastery of the TL cohesion norms could be the real cause of this cohesion defectiveness.

The language from which the students transfer most was addressed in the third research question. The findings indicated that the students transferred from their NL more than from French. This claim is supported by the students' response to question 12 in the questionnaire. A further support is the subjects' obvious familiarity with the aural mode of text development. This does not mean that the visual mode was unheard of. The results challenged traditional contrastive rhetoric studies and confirmed Sa'adeddin's (1989) claim about the availability of more than one mode of text development in Arabic. Some students, in both groups, organized their essays in the three languages according to the preferred "Western" mode of text development and made ample use of logic and logical connectors. Further substantiation for this claim is in some students' listing of their writing weaknesses when they compose in Arabic. The reported weaknesses (Appendix C) echo the features of Arabic rhetoric reported in early contrastive rhetoric studies. If the students could see these 'features' as weaknesses, then this means that they were taught the "western" norms in their Arabic writing classes. Consequently, if such weaknesses are used in the English texts, they are not to be interpreted as transfer of Arabic rhetoric but transfer of poor writing ability.

The fourth research question was about the underlying causes of transfer**.** The study findings suggest three main causes. The major cause was a *transfer of poor writing skills*. The scores on the compositions show that poor writing ability in Arabic and French was a major cause of an undeveloped writing expertise in English for most of the subjects. This claim is further supported by RSA findings, the same weaknesses were identified in the Arabic, French, and English compositions.

A deficient metacognitive knowledge was another cause of transfer and insufficient writing ability. The findings suggested lack of awareness of self as writer; most of the subjects overrated their writing ability and could not provide an accurate description of their weaknesses. The task and strategy variables are also underdeveloped, though some of the results might suggest the opposite. 92% of the subjects correctly guessed the type of text they wrote and most of them reported the use of appropriate writing strategies; however, they are unaware of the cultural specificities of the discourse modes. This is the main reason that made them rely on the aural mode of text development.

The third cause of transfer was the subjects' limited language proficiency which impeded the clarity of expression. A command of the TL would have helped the student writers produce better essays. This claim is supported by the low vocabulary and grammar scores. Many subjects, especially first year students, were unable to express their ideas clearly and accurately and this also affected the content and cohesion scores.

Pedagogical implications

The results have shown evidence for transfer, but transfer was just one among other factors that intervened during the writing process and caused the student writers' compositions to deviate from the TL academic writing norms. The deviations should be considered just developmental errors. Transfer of the previously acquired knowledge is just a temporary bridge used by the learners. Once they develop awareness of the requirements of the different discourse modes and acquire a solid metacognitive knowledge, they will be able to produce texts that conform to the requirements of the target genres. In order to reach that stage, there is an urgent need to help the learners develop their language proficiency in the English language. A command of the language is a basic requirement for fluent expression of ideas and better writing quality.

Related to this is the need to help the students develop awareness about self as writer. This objective can be accomplished only when the students write more than one draft and get detailed corrective feedback. In the absence of detailed comments, the students will perceive the low composition grades as arbitrary and not really representative of their writing ability, especially that discipline instructors tend to focus on content. Detailed feedback will also allow the students to develop more awareness about the task variable. The instructors' comments will fill in gaps in the learners' metacognition.

Another pressing need is to provide the students with more practice opportunities. Writing, in the Tunisian universities, is tertiary in terms of amount of time allocated to composition classes. The study suggests the adoption of writing across the curriculum (WAC) which requires collaboration between the writing instructors and those who teach content courses such as literature or civilization. WAC will lead to an increase in the amount of writing practice and therefore an increase in the amount of corrective feedback. This will allow the students to improve their writing ability and develop awareness of the differences between the NL and the TL preferred rhetorical norms. At a later stage, they will learn how to use specific features of their TL rhetoric to express their identity without affecting text quality.

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Appendix A: The topic of the compositions

There is a common belief that only a few professions are suitable for women. What do you think?

Appendix B: Example of a question-response pattern of text organization

In the mean course of their history, societies used to determine the roles of both men and women, whether politically, economically or socially. From this perspective, women's status went unquestioned and from generation to generation a 'common belief' about their ability for specific jobs rather than others got fossilised. However to what extent this 'common belief' stating 'that only a few professions are suitable for women' is applicable and valid?

Actually, the belief that "only a few professions are suitable for women" is the result or the product of social conventions. In other words, it is simply a gender issue which classified what to be useful for women and is not.

In this respect, societies believed that-after taking consideration of the biological difference and status of women-; that professions like teaching, sewing, working as a clerk or in the kinder garden...etc are convenient and suitable for women. Yet, important to point out to, here, is that such belief match what is natural with what is cultural and which is by no means convenient.

Similarly, such a belief was rooted in societies unconsciously - where by women came to accept their social status as 'natural', 'inevitable' and 'necessary'. It follows also that such an acceptance of particular professions is part of a whole ideology that tries to keep particular class interests and relations. Thus, women became only products of their imposed socio-economic structure, cloistered in particular functions and having no access to other professions.

However, the wind of change blew in the twentieth century, carrying with it the challenge to this common belief regarding women. In fact, women challenged the imposed order and proved that they can hold and be fit to jobs that were once preserved for men only. For instance, we witness many women working in technical departments, in engineering and similar professions.

Also, many scientific researches and studies carried out -during the previous century- had shown that men and women have equal mental capacities. Accordingly, there is no validity for the claim that women cannot deal wit the scientific and technical arenas. One such example was that in the 1940s many women had registered in the US Military CORPS while others in pioneering?

By and large, it is then needless to claim that women are fit "only for particular professions." A claim that was absolutely a social production and convention but which the years had proved it to be false. The years when feminist movements in the West and Europe challenged theories and beliefs and culminated with the efforts in making women work in all domains with no exceptions.

Sure that it took time in eradicating and changing beliefs but as Bob Marley, the Reggae singer had put it, "only time will tell."

Appendix C: Writing weaknesses reported by the subjects

Weaknesses	Arabic		French		English	
	1st year	4th year	1st year	4th year	1st year	4th year
I often do not find ideas about the topic	16%	28%	52%	36%	28%	8%
My essays are often superficial	16%	36%	52%	40%	32%	20%
I sometimes include irrelevant information	36%	16%	20%	12%	20%	20%
I cannot develop my ideas	28%	28%	44%	52%	28%	24%
My essay is generally not well-organized	28%	28%	24%	20%	8%	12%
I write very long essays	48%	20%	16%	16%	20%	16%
I write short essays	20%	44%	52%	40%	48%	36%
I write a long introduction	44%	24%	28%	4%	12%	0%
I do not provide enough support	24%	28%	24%	52%	36%	36%
I often fail to present the appropriate support	20%	12%	32%	12%	24%	4%
I often write long or incomplete sentences	20%	24%	36%	24%	12%	20%
I cannot write long sentences	12%	12%	32%	24%	44%	8%
I cannot link ideas well	20%	12%	32%	24%	36%	24%
I overuse linkers	28%	4%	16%	4%	16%	16%
I often make grammar mistakes	12%	20%	64%	36%	52%	32%
I cannot easily find the right words	4%	12%	48%	36%	64%	40%
I rely very much on translation	4%	0%	40%	36%	32%	12%
I often make punctuation mistakes	4%	8%	28%	24%	24%	28%
I often make spelling mistakes	8%	12%	32%	32%	56%	24%

Appendix D: The Scoring Sheet

1. Use the following scale to evaluate the essay. Check the appropriate boxes.

Feature	Criteria	Rating	Comments
Content	**Excellent** Knowledgeable• thorough development of the thesis• substantive• relevant to topic•		
	Good Adequate knowledge of subject• satisfactory development of the thesis. adequate range• mostly relevant to topic•		
	Average Some knowledge of subject• some degree of development• limited range• relevant to topic but lacks details•		
	Poor Limited knowledge of subject• inadequate development of thesis• little substance• may contain irrelevant information•		
	Very poor Does not show knowledge of topic• non substantive• almost no relation to topic•		
Organization	**Excellent** Well-organized• fluent expression• ideas clearly stated • concise• logical sequencing•		
	Good Adequately organized• quite fluent expression• ideas adequately stated• concise• logical sequencing but may be incomplete •		
	Average loosely organized: the paper has all the right parts but does not have balance(for example• the introduction may be too long, or the conclusion may be too short) • somewhat fluent• main ideas stand out but not well stated• somewhat wordy •logical but inadequate sequencing•		
	Poor Very little organization of content: some main parts are missing, or the paper does not have a clear beginning , middle, and end• Non-fluent, lacks logical sequencing•		
	Very poor No apparent organization of content• non-fluent• no logical sequencing•		
Cohesion	**Excellent** The different parts stick together• effective combination of clauses and sentences• effective use of cohesive ties•		
	Good The different parts stick together• somewhat effective combination of clauses and sentences• somewhat effective use of cohesive ties•		
	Average Paper somewhat unified •somewhat satisfactory combination of clauses and sentences despite some deficiencies in use of cohesive ties• meaning unobscured•		
	Poor Ideas rather disconnected• unsatisfactory combination of clauses and sentences• ineffectiv e use of cohesive ties (for example, excessive use of repetition. little or overuse of transition words) • meaning rather obscured•		
	Very poor Cohesion almost absent• fragmented• meaning obscured•		

Vocabulary	Excellent	Sophisticated range• effective word/ idiom choice and usage• good mastery of word form • appropriate register and tone•
	Good	Adequate range• appropriate word/ idiom choice and usage• mastery of word form • rather appropriate register and tone•
	Average	Limited range• some word/ idiom choice errors• somewhat satisfactory mastery of word form•appropriate register though tone may occasionally shift to informal •
	Poor	Limited range• frequent word/ idiom choice errors (occasionally due to translation) • frequent word form errors• meaning obscured• inappropriate register and tone•
	Very poor	Essentially translation• little knowledge of English vocabulary• no mastery of word form• confusion of register and tone•
Grammar	Excellent	Varied sentence length and type• effective complex constructions• almost no grammatical errors•
	Good	Varied sentence length and type • minor problems in complex constructions• a few grammatical errors•
	Average	Mainly simple sentences• frequent problems in complex constructions• several grammatical errors but meaning seldom obscured•
	Poor	Major problems in simple and complex constructions• frequent grammatical errors• meaning obscured•
	Very poor	Virtually no mastery of sentence construction rules• dominated by errors• meaning totally obscured•
Mechanics	Excellent	Mastery of conventions• few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing•
	Good	Occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing•
	Average	several errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing, but meaning not obscured•
	Poor	Frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing• meaning obscured•
	Very poor	No mastery of conventions• dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization• communication hindered•

2. Rate the essay on a scale of one to five

1	2	3	4	5
Very weak				**Excellent**

Appendix E: Extract of Extended profile criteria

The following is a detailed description of the criteria descriptors for content at the very good mastery level. The other levels should be considered as varying degrees from this one.

Descriptor	Criteria
Knowledgeable	Is there understanding of the subject?
	Are facts or other pertinent information used?
	Is there recognition of several aspects of the subject?
	Are the relationships of these aspects shown?
Substantive	Are several main points discussed?
	Is there sufficient detail?
	Is there originality with concrete details to illustrate, define, compare, or contrast factual information supporting the thesis?
Thorough development of thesis	Is the thesis expanded enough to convey a sense of completeness?
	Is there a specific method of development (such as comparison/ contrast, illustration, definition, example, description, fact, or personal experience)?
	Is there an awareness of different points of view?
Relevant to topic	Is all information clearly pertinent to the topic?
	Is extraneous material excluded?