

An Exploration of Voice in the Writing of Arab Learners of English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Developing a writer's voice is a challenging task for second-language writers who are new not only to the culture but also to the values associated with the target language. This study aims at exploring the writer's voice of Arabic-speaking learners who study English as a Second Language. The study mainly discusses the following question: Do L2 learners who learn to write in both first and second language have an individual, collective, or depersonalized voice? Investigating the impact of culture and society on language and identity will facilitate the discovery of voice in second language writing. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative research design in which data are collected via a discourse analysis of written texts. The analysis of the data adopted the holistic and dynamic perspective (Zhang & Zhan, 2020) by examining the various factors affecting Arabic-speaking learners of ESL including cultural factors, linguistic resources, and educational/academic pedagogy. Moreover, the study followed the analysis of the writer's voice proposed by Lehman (2018) and used further Lehman and Anderson's study of voice in academic writing (Lehman & Anderson, 2021). Lehman proposed three main topics to classify the writer's voice: (a) individual, (b) collective, and (c) depersonalized. The findings of this research showed that approximately 55.96% of the voice of Arab learners of ESL fell in the individual category, 29.97% fell in the collective category, and 14.07% fell in the depersonalized category.

Keywords: Arab learners, English as Second Language, identity, writing voice

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Introduction

Human communication revolves around exchanging information, influencing others, and expressing sentiments. We use the language daily basis to connect with others and to express our views. As language users, our voice is crucial in establishing and negotiating our identities. The process of writing in a second language is by itself a challenging task, but it is more challenging to adhere to more nuanced conventions such as voice. The rise of social media and global digital connection have reshaped our perceptions and articulation of our selves and the world. The impact of this connectivity encourages us, as researchers, to examine the voice in the writing of new generations of Arab learners of English as a second language. Although Arab communities can be classified as collective, a concept we had in mind when we first initiated this research, the results of our studies created a shift in the study of voice in the writing of learners of English as a second language. However, considering the global transformation of people's communication, we recognize the necessity of examining how new generations of Second Language Learners (SLL) employ voice not only in academic writing but also in general writing discourse. Since English and Arabic languages represent different societies and distinct cultures and have divergent value systems, we have come to realize the significance of pinpointing the impacts of these differences on writing for both learners and educators of English as a second language. Thus, the researchers hope that this study will assist language instructors in their future efforts to teach English writing and better guide learners of English as a second language. Further, this study is expected to be an informative resource for language textbook designers as they develop sociocultural awareness and a deeper understanding of the nature of voice in cross-cultural discourses. One of the main questions this study seeks to answer is the following: Do L2 learners who learn to write in both Eastern and Western traditions have an individual, collective, or depersonalized voice (Lehman, 2018)? By exploring the influences of sociocultural and sociolinguistic factors in terms of identity and native language, this study will contribute to the current discussion of voice by uncovering the presence of the voice in the writing of English learners.

Literature review

There appears to be no clear, universally accepted definition for the term 'voice' in the literature of writing in L1 and L2. For instance, Bowden (1995) defined voice as "style, persona, stance or ethos" (p. 173). Some recent researchers have used this definition as they recognize the voice as a part of the author's normal writing style, the rhetorical stance, and the self-repetition in his/her text (Sperling & Appleman, 2011). Although these definitions could be perceived as insufficient, they could help inform the purpose of this study. It is worth mentioning that Elbow (1994) has contributed significantly to the study of voice in stating that "the term [voice] has been used in such a loose and celebratory way as to mean almost anything" (p. 2). Thus, he has attempted in several works to use the term voice more precisely, although he also admitted the following:

When it comes to our own writing, then, we can scarcely avoid noticing whether the words we put down on the page feel like our words—whether they sound like our voice or one of our owned voices. Yet even here, I hope I've persuaded you that we write best if we learn to move flexibly back and forth between on the one hand using and celebrating something we feel as our own voice, and on the other hand operating as though we are nothing but ventriloquists playfully using and adapting and working against an array of voices we find around us. (p. 30)

Elbow (1994) has claimed that when people write about the term voice, this term has five metaphorical meanings: “audible voice; dramatic voice; recognizable or distinctive voice; voice with authority; and resonant voice or presence” (p. 4). As Elbow tried to draw clear distinctions between these five meanings, he strongly suggested that people “make voice a practical critical tool that we can use rather than just fight about” (p. 21). He clearly supported the idea of making voice solidly understood and widely acknowledged in our writing and reactions in both written and spoken language.

Bowden (1995) attributed voice to the notion of self-autonomy, stating that it is related to values of individualism as a result of counterculture movements in the West in the late 1960s. She further claimed that “voice, evolving as it has from its 1970s’ affiliations with powerful writing, carries with it connotations of an authentic and unitary self” (p. 109). Similarly, Scollon (1991) claimed that voice has been influenced by the Western concept of self-expression in writing, which is based on individualist values. More specifically, Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) correlated the notion of voice to the “ideology of individualism” (p. 46), which can be problematic for writers who are not familiar with individualist values. They asserted that voice is “[a principle and a practice] of U.S. university writing pedagogy in which the ideology of individualism appears to be strongly, if tacitly, implicated” (p. 46). They also claimed that voice is considered individual as it is “clear, overt, expressive, and even assertive and demonstrative” (p. 48). After defining the term voice in writing and reviewing some theoretical perspectives on voice, this paper proposes an empirical study to investigate the presence of the voice in the English writing of Arab natives. Since English and Arabic languages represent different societies and distinct cultures and have divergent value systems, pinpointing the impacts of these differences on writing can help both learners and educators of English as a second language. As a result, the researchers hope that this study will assist language instructors in their future efforts to teach English writing to Arabic-speaking students. Further, this study is expected to be an informative resource for language textbook designers as they develop sociocultural awareness and a deeper understanding of the nature of voice in cross-cultural discourses.

Several studies, such as Mustada (2001), Ivanič and Camps (2001), Zhao (2012), Que and Li (2015), and Javdan and Dastjerdi (2014), have studied the notion of voice by recording written data of learners coming from different cultural contexts. However, each of these studies has measured voice for various purposes and by using different methodologies. Zhao (2012) developed and validated an analytic rubric to measure the strength of voice in second language writing. According to Zhao, his study has bridged the gap between the conceptualization’s framework and past empirical attempts to study voice in written texts. As Zhao introduced researchers to reliable tools for examining voice in written texts, he identified voice in three dimensions to provide a reasonable alternative for the concept of voice. These dimensions are “(1) the presence and clarity of ideas in the content; (2) the manner of the presentation of ideas; and (3) the writer’s and reader’s presence” (p. 201). The study employed a mixed-methods approach designed to investigate the understanding and assessment of voice in L2 writing. Que and Li (2015) conducted a study on Chinese post-80s’ voice in academic writing by examining the discursive features that were used by Chinese graduate students as they wrote in English for academic purposes. More specifically, they investigated the following features: “the placement of topic sentences, the use of transition

words, the employment of first-person pronouns, the use of quotations from famous revolutionary leaders, and the influence of the traditional Chinese eight-legged essay” (p. 2).

Que and Li (2015) chose to measure voice by studying these linguistic features because they believed them to be fundamental to the construction of voice in academic writing. The findings revealed an alteration in the voice of participants as they were attempting to employ linear logical patterns and move out of collectivism in their writing. Therefore, their study introduced pedagogical implications for Chinese and English academic writing programs. The study could be useful in increasing awareness of voice in English academic writing among Chinese language teachers and learners, as well as for Western instructors who teach English to international students. Including Que and Li’s (2015) study all previous considerations of voice have positioned voice within the sphere of individualism. However, this positionality raises questions regarding other cultural traditions in terms of whether the voice of L2 in writing is considered individualist or not. One of the main questions this study seeks to answer is the following: Do L2 learners who learn to write in both Eastern and Western traditions have an individual, collective, or depersonalized voice (Lehman 2018)? By exploring the influences of sociocultural and sociolinguistic factors in terms of identity and native language, this study will contribute to the current discussion of voice by uncovering the presence of the voice in the writing of English learners.

Methods

Participant selections

The participants of the study are undergraduate students in their final year of the BA English program in the Department of English, University of Bisha. The participants have been selected according to their good academic records with their overall and accumulative grades ranging between 4 and 5. This selection was made to ensure the high level of English proficiency of all participants. The criteria selection of participants was not established based on gender consideration. The participants are bilinguals of Arabic and English. Participants are closely homogenous with similar educational and cultural experiences as they all belong to the same educational institution and are influenced by the monolingual context of the Arabic language.

Data Collection

The study is based on an analysis of students’ writing samples. The writing prompt gives participants the space to write in a narrative style about their life (see Appendix A). The researchers use ‘the impact of COVID-19’ as the main topic for its ongoing impact on the participants and its relevancy to these times. The researchers also wanted to examine participants’ voices through a topic that connects them to a global context. The samples were written at home, and outside of classrooms, and the participants were given sufficient time to write the samples.

The qualitative analysis of the writing samples indicated the variation between L2 who read carefully the writing prompt and responded precisely to it and L2 who overlooked the prompt details and responded inattentively to its questions and requirements. The analysis of the data adopted the holistic and dynamic perspective (Zhang & Zhan, 2020) to look at the factors

affecting Arabic-speaking learners of English as L2. Moreover, the study followed the analysis of writer's voice proposed by Lehman (2018) and was used further by Lehman and Anderson (2021).

Lehman introduced three main topics to classify the writer's voice: (a) individual, (b) collective, and (c) depersonalized. The researchers used a similar rubric scoring analysis to examine the characterization and influence of the learner's written voice in L2 (English) in the Arabic context (see examples in Appendix B). Based on the coding and data analysis, the written voice included approximately 55.96% of the individual category, 29.97% of the collective category, and 14.07% of the depersonalized category. The researchers found that there are three factors influencing the writers' voice in L2: cultural, linguistic, and educational (for examples, refer to Appendix C). The research, presented and reported based on these factors, aims to identify commonalities in the voices of Arab learners of L2.

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Findings and Discussion

Studies on the presence of the voice in written discourse have found that the use of voice can differ depending on the language spoken because not all languages share the same linguistic features and ideologies (e.g. Hirvela & Belcher, 2001; Canagarajah, 2004). In this study, the researchers attempt to examine the written voice with its association to the culture of the writers of the first language, the linguistic sources, and the academic pedagogy.

Voice and Arab Culture

Shukri (2014) associated collective culture with learning, claiming that "religious conformity, cultural resistance to self-expression, and pedagogical background" impact Arab students including those who write in L2 (p. 200). Running parallel to Shukri's statement, Hofstede (2015) asserted that societies that have strong collective values tend to adopt a "tightly-knit [social] framework" in which people depend on their community for support and protection. In these societies, as Hofstede (2015) noticed, a member's self-image is reflected in the collective pronoun 'we'. Although Hofstede explored culture's impact on the workplace, his ideas on collectivism and individualism intersect with Shukri's views and have been used in other contexts by other researchers including Kaur and Noman (2015) who applied his ideas to educational settings.

In this study, the researchers have also explored the collective culture through Hofstede's lens. For example, collective and individual pronoun use is investigated. Although the researchers had expected the collective pronoun to dominate the participants' writings, the use of the individual pronoun prevailed by approximately 56% in comparison with the use of the collective pronoun which did not exceed 30% in participants' writings. This might reflect the dominance of Western

culture which boosts individualism over collectivism, yet the use of the collective pronoun is still strong and varies from one participant to another. The use of the collective pronoun “we” in their writing is a reflection of the impact of the participants’ collective culture in which Arabic speakers tend to use collective patterns such as the plural pronoun ‘we’ to confirm their collective belonging and to reflect their commitment to the cultural norms. Nevertheless, there was one participant who did not use any individual pronoun, showing that even though all participants came from the same educational and cultural background, the impact of culture on each individual is dissimilar.

This agrees with the perception of Shukri (2014), who resisted the Western view of Arab students as “knowledge tellers” which dismissed their individual uniqueness; however, she simultaneously confirmed the importance of education as a way to strengthen L2 students’ individualism. Her insight might also explain the dominance of the individual pronoun in this study’s writing samples. Further, she recognized the impact of Arab students’ collectivist culture on their life and admitted its transfer to education. Her recognition of the collectivist culture’s transfer to education is visible in this study through participants’ writing as they used specific cultural terms. For example, in extract One, the participant used the cultural and religious terms “Al-isha prayer” and “Allah Al-Mighty,” thereby sharing the collective identity through rhetorical voice.

Extract One

Then I performed Al-Isha Prayer and took a nap for 2 hours. When I wanted to wakeup, I was shocked that I couldn’t do so and I was not having the strength to wake up. I decided to take Covid-19 taste as my whole body was racked with pai..... I returned to my work and gradually regaining my full strength and returning to my old self. I think it is a natural reaction to be extremely powerful that I overcame this pandemic and thanked Allah Al-Mighty for His blessings bestowed upon.

In his remarkable assessment of “voice and textual ownership,” Hyland (2003) proposed that rather than reflecting their individual selves, L2 writers tend to pass on acquired knowledge which may at times be perceived in all educational institutions as plagiarism. In fact, in most educational settings in Arab countries, students are still required to memorize and convey the information they gain by imitating the original sources. In Saudi educational institutions, this practice could be attributed to the impact of Islamic culture in which memorization and precise transmission of information are required skills. These cultural practices continue to influence the existence of Arab L2 writers’ individual voices to some extent. In analyzing participants’ writing, the researchers find one case in which the participant copied 13% of their writing from the internet. Although there is not enough evidence to explain the participant’s act, we assume that this was due to the impact of Arabian and Islamic cultures on memorization and transmission. When this participant found a clear intersection and overlap between her ideas and the sentences published on the internet, she copied them into her essay. In explaining the impact of COVID-19 on the world, she wrote:

Extract Two

With schools closed and children staying at home, families can use the time to strengthen the family relationship by engaging in group activities such as games,

sports or cooking. These activities bring family members closer together and may be an opportunity to forget differences and solve problems together.

From a Western perspective, this act is seen as a violation of academic ethics codes, but if explained from the participant's unique cultural perspective, this act might reflect how she has been impacted by the collective culture of memorization and transmission. The participant has evidently looked at the way English natives express the impacts of COVID-19 on their lives and probably observed and embraced the resemblances. Chien (2014) investigated plagiarism in a Chinese educational context. Liu (2005) wrote: "plagiarism by Chinese students when writing in English can be primarily attributed to their lack of language proficiency, writing skills, and educational training" (p. 121). This could be the case for some of the participants' writing samples. However, being the only participant who copied others' words without citation does not dismiss the strong effect of collective culture on different participants as this effect might take on different forms.

Voice and Arabic Language

Arabic and English belong to completely different language families and therefore have different linguistic systems. Arabic is a Semitic language with rich and complex morpho-syntactic and inflectional features and categories in comparison to English, which belongs to the European language family. The most common linguistic differences between Arabic and English are subject realization and word order. Arabic allows the subject to be dropped or overt, while in English, subjects are realized overtly in the sentence. Arabic allows two variations of word order, namely Subject-Verb Object (SVO) and Verb-Subject Object (VSO), whereas English has one word order of Subject-Verb Object.

Since the participants in this study are Arabic-speaking learners of ESL/L2, in this section we look at the linguistic voice/identity factor. The researchers believe that participants have various individual linguistic identities, not only cultural voice identities. Such linguistic voice identity in the participants' writing of English as L2 reflects the influence of L1, Arabic. For Arab learners of English as L2, the construction of voice is influenced by the unique linguistic experience of Arabic. Considering the major role played by linguistic features in voice construction (Que & Li, 2015), Arab learners of ESL are impacted by their first language. Influenced by the L1, Arab learners of ESL tend to make errors associated with grammar and structure in their writing (Alhaysony, 2012; Alshayban, 2012; Al-Zahrani, 1993; Qasem, 2020; Younes & Albalawi, 2015). According to Albalawi (2016), Al-Jarf (2008), and Allaith and Joshi (2011), writing errors in the early stage of learning English might be attributed to the different orthographic and phonological systems of Arabic and English which can be seen in the participants' writing. According to Zhao (2019), the student's voice is greatly impacted by several factors that include their L1 background. Overuse of the conjunction particle 'and' at the beginning of sentences is common in our participants' writing samples. This reveals the impact of the Arabic language since starting a sentence with a conjunction is common in the Arabic linguistic system (see extracts Three and Four from participants' writing samples below). Several studies support our research result, thus showing the overuse of connectors in the writing of Arabic-speaking learners of ESL (Abdul Rahman, 2013; Fareh, Jarad, & Yagi, 2020; Khalil, 1989). The common use of connectors in Arabic helps achieve semantic units, text harmony, and writing flow.

Therefore, the use of connectors by our participants is evidence that the voice of Arab ESL learners' writing is influenced by their first language constructions.

Extract Three

It was a unique and completely different experience that taught us to organize our times and that education is important **and** that we are able to learn in the most difficult times **and** circumstances. **And** also Understanding the scale of this crisis **and** what lies ahead is a challenge for all of us.

Extract Four

First At the beginning, it (COVID-19) was something very unexpected when the epidemic began to spread. I was attending university naturally and I was going through my social life comfortably, but after a month passed in the middle of the second term, the epidemic spread in the Arab world and the government issued strict decisions to confront the pandemic, the study was suspended for a period and then the markets were closed And the shops and it was a difficult thing that we did not face in our whole life, especially when we allotted some time to go out.

Nevertheless, the data analysis of participants' writing samples has uncovered that Arab learners of ESL are strongly influenced by the culture, writing style, and patterns of native English speakers. This can be seen in the result of their tendency to use individual pronouns at close to double the rate of collective pronouns (55.96% in comparison to 29.97%). This finding is in alignment with similar studies on Chinese' learners of ESL who attempted to imitate native English speakers' style by being clear, direct, and to the point (Ji, 2011; Kirkpatrick 2002; Kirkpatrick & Xu, 2012; You, 2004). The existing influence of the rhetoric style of native English speakers could be a result of the spread of new media and the dominance of English-speaking countries like the USA.

In addition to the previous factors, research has shown that academic background may have an impact on the construction of voice in writing (Yu & Cao, 2015). Although the emphasis on developing a writer's voice and motivating the emergence of distinct autonomy in writing is not prevalent within the Arabian academic context, ESL instructors who were educated in Western institutions are apparently transforming the traditional educational settings as the construction of voice and reflection of unique identity in the writing samples of this study are noticeable. Moreover, although the structure of participants' writing samples varies, they all share the lack of titles. Though creating a title is not required by the prompt, even in participants' native language of Arabic, having a title for a story or an essay is necessary. This lack of titles could be attributed to the pedagogy used to teach ESL in the institution including using a blackboard and online forums instead of traditional ways of writing.

Conclusion

The current study aimed to explore the voice in the writing of Arab learners of English as a Second Language (ESL). The analysis of the written samples of Arabic speaking learners of ESL showed that a writer's voice could be constructed and informed by cultural, linguistic, and academic factors. The written voice of L2 writers is dependent on the learner's cultural aspects,

individual experiences, and linguistic repertoire of their first language. The findings of this study indicated that the individual (personalized) category dominated participants' writing samples. Researchers found that the participants' written voice was influenced by L2, English, through academic practices and environment, exposure to Western culture, and English texts. This influence was revealed through the frequent use of the personalized 'individual' category in the written samples. The present study supports the fact that the voice of Arab learners of ESL is to some extent informed by English writing conventions, expressions, and patterns. This voice is also influenced by the collective cultural background.

Limitation and Suggestions

This study has certain limitations and suggestions. Conducting a follow-up interview with the participants about their choice of certain writing features and styles would add more depth to the interpretation and analysis of voice in addition to the qualitative data collected from the participants through the writing samples. Furthermore, the researchers did not consider the gender factor in this study. Looking at the gender factor would offer interesting insights and comparisons into the use of voice by male and female learners. Conducting a further study on writing samples in L1 and L2 with a similar target group would greatly contribute to the study of the ESL writers' voice.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Dear participant,

Write a story or an essay at least 500 words in response to the following questions: What is your experience with COVID-19 since it started in 2020? How it has impacted you and your family or your society positively or negatively? How did you overcome the challenges of this pandemic?

Appendix B

Individual voice ‘I’	Collective voice ‘C’	Depersonalized voice ‘D’
Discursive resources that communicate the individual self	Discursive resources that communicate the collective self	Discursive resources that communicate the depersonalized self
Singular self-mentions	Plural self-mentions	Pronoun mentions
The use of first person singular ‘I’ and verb I+ opinion verb	Use of plural person: we, us, our	2 nd person, 3 rd person singular and plural: he, they, you

Examples from the data

Appendix C

Linguistic factors	Cultural factors	Educational and academic factors
The misuse of language structure in L2 due to the influence of L1 (Arabic). This could be syntactic or semantic (The overuse of the ‘connective ‘and’ or the use of adverbs/ prepositions	The use of words and expressions related to Arab culture in the writing samples	Weakness of presenting ideas due to the less educational input. The errors in the copular be-structure
Examples: Then I performed Al-Isha Prayer and took a nap for 2 hours. When I wanted to wakeup, I was shocked that I couldn’t do so and I was not having the strength to wake up	Examples: Then I performed Al-Isha Prayer and took a nap for 2 hours. When I wanted to wake up, I was shocked that I couldn’t do so and I was not having the strength to wake up. My health condition were normal in the next eight days and my life was literally saved by the ultimate kindness and generosity of Allah Al-Mighty	Examples: My health condition were normal in the next eight days and my life was literally saved by the ultimate kindness and generosity of Allah Al-Mighty-