Voice Analysis in English and Persian Persuasive Texts: Pedagogical implications in focus

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Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how voice is realized by Iranian EFL learners in persuasive English and Persian text types. This discourse-related notion is a required criterion for writing acceptable English. However, L2 learners from cultures other than English might face problems in realizing it, or even ignore it all through their writing. In this connection, the present study attempted to discover the possible relationship between the intensity of voice and the overall quality of text. Thus, thirty university students were selected as participants. They were asked to write in both English and Persian a persuasive text within the same subject matter. Then, their writings were rated in terms of intensity of voice and the overall quality based on Jacobs' voice intensity scale and Jacobs' overall quality scale (1981), respectively. The analysis of their productions indicated that there is a significant relationship between voice intensity and some of its features, and overall quality; while no relationship was found between English and Persian voice intensity. Therefore, voice deserves more attention on the part of writing instructor, as it could enrich the quality of L2 learners' written productions with more sense of naturalness and smoothness. Moreover, material designers can incorporate English writing materials with various aspects of this critical notion, in addition to other language rhetoric, for learners at appropriate language proficiency level.

Key words: Voice, identity, quality of writing, discursive features, non-discursive features

Introduction

Communication in writing is of great importance in today's world, despite the fact that it may take the forms of so called, traditional paper and pencil writing or electronic mail. Such importance calls for encouraging and nurturing writing as a communicative activity in second language learners' programs and language studies.

However, producing a communicative successful written text is a complex task which requires simultaneous control over a number of language factors in consideration of the ways the discourse must be shaped for a particular audience and a particular purpose (Olshtan, 2001).

Regarding language factors affecting a written text, Fox (1994) holds that language use is both culturally and socially determined. In other words, written texts are shaped by factors that differ not only cross- culturally, but also within a single culture.

Rhetorical styles are one of such differing factors. Discussions and debates in the field of second language writing have involved notions about the rhetorical styles of learners and how they are manifested on the page (Stapleton, 2002).

The notion of voice is one of the language factors and rhetorical styles that Stapelton (2002) contends is an important part of writing and communicating, and aspects of it are essential at the higher levels of academic writing where authors are aiming to publish.

Among various definitions offered for voice, a well known definition for voice is given by Hyland (2008) as "the ways writers express their personal views, authoritativeness, and presence" (p.5). Authoritativeness and presence is of high importance in western cultures writing. Therefore, he believes that is not an optional extra but an aspect of how the writer positions himself in relation to his community. Importantly, Hyland argues that writers do not construct the self-representation from an infinite range of possibilities, but draw on culturally available recourses when they write.

Regarding the constituents of this notion, Jacobs in his voice intensity scale (1981), presents another four constituents for voice i.e., assertiveness, self-identification, reiteration of central point and authorial presence. Among other scales, his scale is widely used by researchers in order to measure the intensity of voice in research articles (Stapleton, 2002).

In terms of modes of language that voice appears in, Stapleton (2002) states that voice applies to written as well as the spoken communication and it is concerned with the broader issue of a speaking subject's perspective and intention (2001).

As a realization of voice in language, Elbow (1994) draws attention to the concept of ''individualized voice'' in writing that has caused considerable debate about the role of voice in writing pedagogy. While Elbow's characterization of voice as an attribute that ''captures the sound of the individual on the page'' was largely confined to the first-language (L1) English-speaking community, this has recently been debated extensively in L2 writing circles, as well.

Background of the study

Matsuda (2001) argues that much of debate over voice has been provoked by suggestions that learners from so-called interdependent cultures (i.e., cultures where collective values take precedence over individualism) lack individualized voice in their L2 writing. This non-availability of individualized voice has been attributed to social norms and acculturation. Matsuda underlies these suggestions with the assumption that individualized voice is generally possessed by effective L1 writers and that L2 writing lacking such voice may be judged (by non-discerning readers) as falling short of native standards.

With this regard, Kaplan (1987) argues that interdependent or hierarchical values may either prevent L2 learners from projecting a strong voice in their writing or diminish their presence as authors. In alignment with this view and concerning language pedagogy, Matsuda (2001) claims that then L2 learners need to be taught or at least made familiar with certain features that enhance a writer's voice.

However, some factors hinder L2 learners from manifestation of voice while writing. With this regard, Belcher (1997) in a study sought to identify voice- related issues and dilemmas, and how they were resolved. In describing a participant, a PhD candidate, whose papers were published in Spanish medium and had a degree from an American university, yet he was in the middle level of his ESL writing class. According to him, this participant appeared to be in search of a voice, or an identity, that would begin to approximate the one he was moving from. Belcher argues that he wanted something beyond the technical aspects of writing; that should be voice.

The idea of whether voice should be considered by writing teachers has been long debated. For example, in a study, Ivanic (2001) suggests that an L2 writing pedagogy that raises critical awareness about voice in sense of self-representation can help learners maintain control over the personal and cultural identity they project in their writing.

The idea of critical language awareness-rising is that the learners should see the consequences for their own identity and voice type. They argue that for those who learn to write in a second language, there may be a double demand for such awareness: firstly, recognizing the extent to which the voice types supported by the new language are culturally acceptable alien to them, and secondly, recognizing the difference between voice association with the range of genres and discourses to which they are exposed in the new culture. The use of the first person is perhaps one of the most discussed discursive features associated with voice in both qualitative and quantitative studies; the first person has been identified as a key element in establishing the individual identity of an author (Hyland, 2001). With this respect, Tang and John (1999) propose that first person can be divided into six different identities depending on how it is used in a sentence. In an academic writing, they took samples from a number of undergraduates and found that occurrence of the first person could be categorized into six identities as following:

Representative – " in English *we* have words such as …"; *guide* – " so far, *we* have said nothing about …"; *architect* – "in my essay, *I* will examine …"; *recounter of the research process* – "all the papers *I* read were …"; opinion holder –"*I* would like to show that …"; and *originator* – "*my* idea rests on the assumption that …" (p.36-37).

They concluded that it is vital for the students and teachers to be aware of the real presence of these different ways in which the first person pronoun can be used in academic writing. They notice that for students, an understanding of the choices available to them may help them to decide how best to present themselves in their writing. Some L2 learners may be avoiding the voice of first person simply because of some vague per conceived notion that academic writing should be distant and impersonal.

Finally in terms of voice construction among languages, Matsuda (2001) contends that the ways in which voice is constructed, however are not universal; different languages provide different possibilities for construction of voice. He argues that the difficulties that the Japanese students encounter in constructing voice in English discourse are due to the ways in which voice is constructed in their native culture and English.

Regarding the aforesaid rhetorical features and lack of awareness of such cross-cultural differences in the text structure that cause misunderstanding in the languages of different societies, as well as the ignorance of L2 learners from the available choices to construct their voice, and the fact that it might become a hinder to effective intentional communication of authors' intentions, this research seeks to explore different aspects of written discourse by focusing on the notion of voice.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Taking the aforementioned purposes into consideration, the present study attempts to find plausible answers to the following research questions:

1. To what extent is the overall intensity of voice (including assertiveness, self-identification, reiteration of central point, and authorial presence and autonomy of thought) in L2 persuasive writing associated with the overall quality?

2. Is there any significant relationship between English and Persian writing in terms of application of voice intensity?

Based on the above research questions this study attempts to test the following null hypothesis:

H01: There is no relationship between the overall intensity of voice (including assertiveness, self-identification, reiteration of central point, and authorial presence and autonomy of thought) in L2 persuasive writing and the overall quality of writing.

H02: There is no significant relationship between Persian and English persuasive writing in terms of the application of voice intensity.

Methodology

Participants

The population from which the participants have been picked for this study included Iranian students (male/female) majoring in English translation at the University of Isfahan. In order to take an appropriate sample, the researchers needed EFL students of advanced level to check their voice intensity in writing. So, firstly they were administered an Oxford Placement Test (OPT), including 100 questions to choose the right participants. According to Oxford Placement Test the participants whose score is 80 and beyond are considered to be advanced EFL learners. After examining the scores on OPT test, 30 participants were chosen to attend the study.

Instrumentation

In this study, the following instruments were used:

Oxford Placement Test (OPT): This test was administered in order to homogenize the language proficiency and the level of the students.

ESL English Composition Profile: This profile was employed in order to check the overall quality of essays produced by the participants.

Voice Intensity Rating Scale: This scale was applied in order to measure the overall intensity of voice in both L1 and L2.

Correlation test: The correlation test was used in order to check the association between the intended factors.

ESL English Composition Profile

This profile was produced by Jacobs et al (1981) for testing ESL/EFL composition. It consists of five separate parts including: content, organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics. There are criteria for each part from excellent to very poor. Scores will be given to each part by raters based on the features of the essay. Then, the scores of all five parts will be added. The minimum score will be zero and the total maximum 100.

Voice Intensity Rating Scale

This scale was first devised by Jacobs et al (1981). It is an analytic rating scale with great number of subscales that looks more reliable than holistic scales. Moreover, it is a criterion-reference to various aspects of learners' writing ability; therefore it is more interpretable and pedagogically sounds (Hamp-Lyon, 1990).

In this model, the researchers considered four criteria for the notions of voice assertiveness, self-identification, reiteration of central point, and authorial presence and autonomy of thought- each consisting of four levels.

Procedure

The sample was given a persuasive subject matter (see below) to write a composition about in English. A week later, the same participants were asked to write about the same subject matter in Persian. Then, the English compositions were rated in terms of voice intensity and overall quality, while the Persian compositions were just in terms of voice intensity by three trained raters based on Jacob's scale.

Subject matter

"What would improve tourism industry in your home town? Write an essay convincing your town officials to make change/changes that would improve tourism industry in your town."

Scoring Procedure

Each composition, English and Persian, was rated in terms of voice intensity employing *Jacob's voice intensity scale*. Among three methods of scoring writing i.e., holistic, analytical and primary trait scoring, this scale as well as *Jacobs' ESL composition profile* are examples of analytical method due to its several subscales.

Although, there was a criterion to score compositions, there was a high possibility of subjectivity in scoring compositions. To remove or at least decrease the subjectivity of scoring, three trained raters scored the compositions. Then, the mean score of the three raters to each writing piece was deemed the final score and was, then, used in data analysis procedure.

The same procedure was done for overall quality score of compositions-only English ones. For each English composition, six scores were used: voice, (four components of voice) assertiveness, self-identification, reiteration of central point, authorial presence and autonomy of thought, and finally overall quality score. It should be noted that voice score was considered as a main score because the main concern in this study was the notion of voice. Also, the researchers used the score of four components of voice separately since some of them might show a relationship with overall quality of composition while some might not.

As for Persian compositions, there was just one score for each .i.e., voice score. Below is a summary of the study pattern:

	Voice intensity	Voice components (4 components)	Overall quality
English compositions	⋀	⋀	⋀
Persian compositions	⋀	-	-

Results

In order to investigate the first hypothesis, a Pearson two-tailed correlation test was conducted between the aforementioned variables to determine whether a correlation existed. Tables 1 and 2 below depict descriptive statistics as well as the correlational matrix output.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics of voice intensity and overall quality

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
voice	30	62.00	36.00	98.00	63.3333	17.80223
quality	30	40.00	48.00	95.00	69.1300	10.08020
Valid N (listwise)	30					

Table 2: Correlation between voice intensity and overall quality

Correlations

		voice	quality
voice	Pearson Correlation	1	.747[**]
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	30	30
quality	Pearson Correlation	.747[**]	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	30	30

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In the correlation matrix, the output of correlation between voice intensity and overall quality is presented (Table 2). Pearson correlation shows that there is a high correlation between the intended factors of this study. This correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (p- value). The Pearson's r is 0.747   which is actually the correlation value between voice intensity and overall quality. So, the first hypothesis was rejected. Figure 1 clearly shows this correlation in the scatter plot.
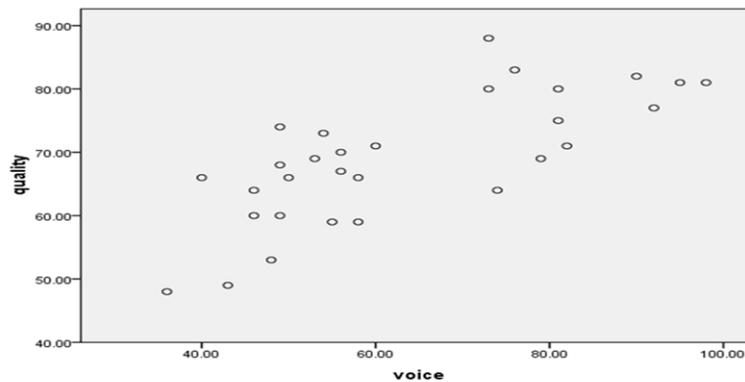
Figure 1: The relationship between voice intensity and overall quality

Also, a correlation test between each component of voice intensity and overall quality was conducted to examine where the relationships were. It revealed a correlation between self-identification and reiteration of central point with voice. However, no relationship was found between voice and other two components, i.e. assertiveness and authorial presence.

To closely examine the second research question, the same persuasive subject matter was assigned to the participants to write an essay in Persian. Then, the essays were rated in terms of voice intensity and overall quality. Tables 3 and 4 show the descriptive statistics as well as the related correlation matrix.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of Persian and English voice intensity

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Dviation
Persian voice	30	62.00	20.00	82.00	59.1667	15.51436
English voice	30	47.00	48.00	95.00	69.1333	12.93680
Valid N (listwise)	30					

Table 4: Correlation between voice intensity of Persian and English essays

Correlations

		Persian voice	English voice
Persian voice	Pearson Correlation	1	.139
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.463
	N	30	30
English voice	Pearson Correlation	.139	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.463	
	N	30	30

As the matrix indicates, the relationship between Persian and English voice intensity is a negative weak one. The Pearson's r value is 0.139. So, based on the results the second hypothesis is approved. Figure 2 clearly shows this lack of relationship in a scatter plot.
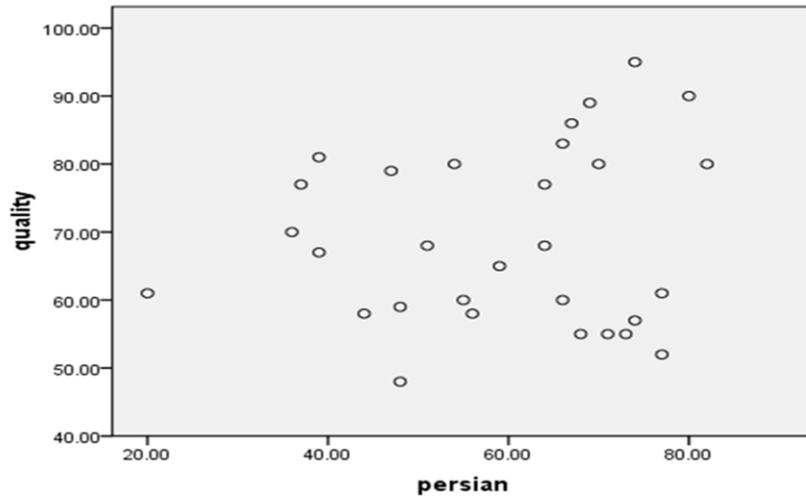
Figure 2: The relationship between Persian and English voice intensity of essays

Discussion of results

Regarding the first research question, the findings of this study are in line with that of Zhao and Liosa (2008). In their study, they found out that overall voice intensity is a significant predictor of L2 writing score. Same as their results, in the present study, the existence of a high correlation between voice score and quality score indicates the importance of considering this notion in pedagogy. Also, the results of this study are in the same alignment with that of Fox (1994). She found that almost the same results stating in a different way. Fox concludes that there is an association between the lack of quality of writing and authorial voice in English writing of his Chinese participants. She made an attempt to find a rational for this lack of voice through a qualitative study and found that voice is neglected by writing instructors; therefore Chinese L2 learners cannot present themselves decently in their English written productions. Similarly, Cadman (1997) observed the same association in his PhD Chinese students' writings and linked it to a culture gap.

The second research question in the present study addressed the relationship between Persian and English overall voice intensity of the participants. In order to respond to this question, the participants' composed Persian writings with the same subject matter as English. Then, they were scored in terms of voice intensity. Again, effort was made to eliminate the subjective nature of such study to the extent possible through inter-rater method. The results of the correlation tests showed no significant correlation ($r = 0.13$) between Persian and English voice of participants. With this respect, Matsuda (2001) points out that the language specific nature of discursive features that contribute significantly to the construction of voice. He argues that some discursive features in Chinese, the case he studied, have no counterpart in English and vise versa. Therefore, employing Jacobs rating scale for Chinese voice may lead to no relationship between Chinese and English voice. That might be why the results of the present study showed no relationship between English and Persian voice. The features of Persian voice might be way too different from that of English. If the Persian voice features were similar to that of English, there might be a considerable relationship, or even L1 transferability could be discussed. Also, it may be due to lack of access to a proper and exclusive list for voice features of Persian. Furthermore, Stapleton (2002) discusses the ways in which voice is constructed are not

universal; different languages provide different possibilities for construction of voice because, while many linguistic features are available across various languages, some are not.

The results of the present study are in line with the claims of Matsuda. It can be implied that usage of the same voice scale for all languages sounds not right. He asserts that if some voice features are available across languages, they can be positively transferred from L1 while writing in L2. Then, it can help the construction of voice in L2 for L2 learners. However, as the results of this study indicate, there are not much common features between the two languages. Therefore, the transferability idea in terms of voice is not the case for Persian.

Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to determine the relationship between the overall voice intensity and overall quality of the writing (persuasive text type). Also, the relationship between voice employed in English and Persian writings were examined. This study revealed a positive relationship between overall voice and overall quality of writing. That means that considering the voice components may improve the overall quality of writing; what is mostly expected by native audience and neglected by L2 writers.

Also, the present study showed no significant relationship in terms of voice score between English and Persian writings. This suggests that the two cultures might employ different strategies to represent the notion of voice in written discourse. Thus, writing teachers and EFL learners should be cognizant of this notion and the related points.

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