

A Comparison of English and Farsi Rhetoric and its Impact on English Writing of Iranian Students

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Abstract: This research made a contrastive study of the rhetorical organization of a number of essays written by both native English speakers and Iranian students. The sample of the study was made up of 25 English essays written by Iranian students and 25 essays composed by native English speakers. The essays of both groups were compared based on frequency and distribution of three features: T-units, discourse blocs, and coordinating conjunctions. The result of the quantitative analysis showed that there are significant differences in the use of these three elements between native speakers and Iranian students. Iranian students tend to use more T-units, discourse blocs, and coordinating clauses in their writing. It is argued that this is due to different thought patterns between the two languages claimed by Kaplan's (1966) contrastive rhetoric.

Key words: culture; contrastive rhetoric; T-unit; discourse bloc; coordinate clauses

INTRODUCTION

The study of contrastive rhetoric started after the publication of Kaplan's (1996) seminal paper "Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education." After reading and analyzing a number of students' essays in his study, Kaplan argued that the forms these essays took might reflect the "thought patterns" of the writers' cultures. Oriental thought, for example, was said to follow a spiral, whereas English thought was said to follow a straight pattern of development. The hypothesis, known as the theory of linguistic relativity, states (in Whorfian terms) that "we dissect the nature along lines laid down by our native languages" (Crystal, 2008, p. 422). However, as Ying (2000, p.260) put it, "the claim that the origin of contrastive rhetoric lies in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is untenable because the latter is actually rooted in German ideas on linguistic determinism" (p.260).

Matsuda's (2001) response to Ying (2000) includes a personal communication from Kaplan in which Kaplan admits having been very much influenced by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Matsuda concludes that the origin of contrastive rhetoric was a result of Kaplan's effort to synthesize at least three different intellectual traditions: contrastive analysis, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and the emerging field of composition and rhetoric. The latter encouraged Kaplan to approach contrastive analysis at the paragraph level (Connor, 2002).

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Kaplan (1966) suggested that all written languages contain a variety of organizational modes, and that native speakers recognize which modes to use. However, he implied that the non-native speaker does not possess a complete inventory of possible alternatives, does not recognize the sociolinguistic constraints of those alternatives, and does not know what constraints a choice imposes on the text. Kaplan's data were used (see Connor, 2002; Hinds, 1990; Hirose, 2003; Kaplan, 2001) to support contrastive rhetoric as a theory that dealt with foreign language learners' cultural barriers in their academic writing. These studies show how writers' cultural backgrounds influence their organization of writing, what they choose to use as evidence in supporting their main ideas, how they express their main ideas, and how they write in the foreign language. They also show how different rhetorical preferences are reflected in textual organization of different languages (Grabe and Kaplan, 1998).

For foreign students, linguistic and cultural patterns are transferred to their writing in the target language not only at the word and sentence level but also at the discourse level (Moran, 1991). Since their original styles may not work with the new tasks assigned by the target language teachers, they need to adapt to the new academic context which has its own conventions (Jordan, 1997). Learning to compose in a foreign language is not an isolated classroom activity, but a social and cultural experience. For example, the rules of English composition encapsulate values that are absent in, or sometimes contradictory to, the values of other societies. Likewise, the rules of Chinese writing reflect beliefs and values that may not be found in other societies. Therefore, learning the rules of composition in a foreign language is, to a certain extent, learning the values of the corresponding foreign society (Shen and Yao, 1999).

The data analysis of a recent study (Xing, Wang, and Spencer, 2008) demonstrated that there was a measurable difference in the rhetorical styles used by Chinese and UK writers, and that the study group of sixty Ph.D. students (thirty of them taking a conventional training course and the other thirty taking an e-course) majoring in natural sciences at the Harbin Institute of Technology (HIT) in China was distinguishable from both UK and Chinese writers on four of the five measures used. The measures addressed (a) presence and placement of the thesis statement, (b) number of paragraphs, (c) topic sentences and topic changes, (d) metaphorical use of language, and (e) marks of coherence and unity. Before receiving the training course, students in both the control group (those who would be exposed to conventional training) and the experimental group (those who would be exposed to the e-course) differed from the UK writers on all the above measures except for topic changes, i.e. measure (c). However, the conventional training course brought about significant changes in the participants' style of writing in two of the four measures (position of the thesis paragraph and number of paragraphs). More importantly, the provision of the e-course increased the magnitude of this change, and extended it from two to three of the four measures (position of the thesis paragraph, number of paragraphs and number of discourse markers). The interactive nature of the assessment within the e-course, an approach that Lee (2006) has shown to produce benefits in the form of more complex writing, may also have contributed to the performance of the experimental group in Xing et al.'s (2008) study.

Researchers who do contrastive rhetorical studies are interested in how writers' cultural backgrounds influence how they organize their writing, and (usually) how they write in a foreign language (usually English). As a matter of fact, students of English as a foreign language (EFL), who come from different cultural backgrounds, often have different kinds of problems from those of native speakers of English. In Farsi, for example, the borderline between the spoken and written discourse is not clear-cut. The spoken style is more widespread and dominant in Farsi. As a result, the paragraph, as the unit of written discourse, follows the internal rhetorical structure of oral discourse. Besides, one of the main characteristics of oral discourse in Farsi is topic shift, i.e. the speaker, from time to time, shifts from one topic to another trying his or her best to make the issue as attractive and persuasive as possible. As a result, multi-topical paragraphs which are, to a large extent, the legacy of the oral style are common in Farsi style of writing (Meskoob, 1995). Besides, the written discourse of Farsi is characterized by too many instances of subordinate as well as coordinate clauses, resulting in many cases of T-units in a Farsi piece of writing (Hassani, 2004).

THE STUDY

Given the above-mentioned features of Farsi rhetoric, i.e. the tendency to employ many T-units on the one hand and lack of enough investigation into rhetorical contrasts between Iranian students and native speakers

of English on the other would provide an exciting topic of exploration in the field of contrastive rhetoric. To this end, this study was carried out to probe into the rhetorical differences between essays written by Iranian students and those written by native English speakers in terms of the following target features:

T-units: As defined by Hunt (1965), a T-unit is a single main clause plus whatever other subordinate clauses or noun clauses attached to or embedded within it.

Discourse blocs: According to Pitkin (1969), “connected discourse is a hierarchy of discourse blocs. Discourse blocs, whatever their form, are function units. At any given level of the hierarchy there will be only two blocs, unless the level represents a coordinate series, which, theoretically at least, can have any plural number of members. And at any given level, the blocs will be related according to one of the four possible broad relations - two vertical (superordination and subordination and two horizontal (coordination and complementation)” (p.142). Pitkin further defines vertical relations as those involving a move from genus to species, which is called *subordination* and also those involving the move from species to genus, which is called *superordination*. Horizontal relations involve *coordination*, where there are two units equal in relation to a common superordinate category (as *rose* and *daffodil* in terms of *flower*), and *complementation*, where the two units are meaningful only in terms of the relation they bear to each other e.g., a cause is meaningful only in terms of its effect and vice versa.

According to Kaplan (1972), whenever a topic appears, it creates a new discourse bloc. It is emphasized that the thesis statement is the most general idea which the entire essay will support. A thesis statement contains two main components: the first component refers to subject of the essay and the second component refers to the way the writer of the essay has limited the subject.

Coordinate clauses: Crystal (2008) defines a coordinate clause as a clause belonging to a series of two or more clauses which are not syntactically dependent on one another, and are joined by means of a *coordinating conjunction* (e.g. and, or, but) or a *connective* (e.g. however, moreover, indeed).

Therefore, to bridge the existing gap in the literature, this study is intended to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there any difference in distribution of T-units in paragraph development of argumentative essays between English native speakers (NSs) and Iranian students (ISs)?
2. Is there any difference in distribution of discourse blocks in paragraph development of argumentative texts between English native speakers (NSs) and Iranian students (ISs)?
3. Is there any difference in distribution of coordinate clauses in paragraph development of argumentative texts between English native speakers (NSs) and Iranian students (ISs)?

METHOD

Participants

The study involved 50 participants. Twenty-five participants, all of them MA students of TEFL and Translation Studies with an average TOEFL score of 600, were Iranian EFL learners (both male and female) from Shahid Beheshti and Allameh Tabataba'i Universities. The other 25 participants were English native speakers who were studying Social Sciences at various UK universities. The participants in each group were both male and female with an average age of 27. All of the participants were asked to write an argumentative essay. They took part in the study on a voluntary basis and were offered an assessment of their writing ability as an appreciation of their cooperation. It might be stated that the number of participants was low; however, as Ostler (1987) has shown in her study of rhetorical differences between Korean and English rhetoric, the data obtained from 22 short argumentative essays are enough to derive meaningful results. The total number of essays mentioned here also coincides with what Converse and Presser (1986) describe as a usual, but not ideal, practice for this purpose.

Instrument

Each participant was asked to write an argumentative essay in 40 minutes on the following topic selected from the TOEFL bulletin issued by Educational Testing Service (ETS):

Do you agree with this statement: the most important aspect of a job is money a person earns. Use specific reasons and examples to support your ideas.

Procedure

All of the participants were asked to write an essay on the above topic. The number of T-units, discourse blocs, and coordinate clauses of essays from both groups were counted in order to analyze the corpora. Thus, each essay got three scores according to these three units of measurement, and then the scores of both NSs and ISs were converted to three different ranges (low, medium, and high) to be compared. For each type of measurement, the following scores were counted as low, medium, and high: for T-units 8-10 (low), 10.5-12 (medium), and 12.5-15 (high); for coordinate clauses 10-13 (low), 13.5-17 (medium), and 17.5-20 (high), and for discourse blocs 1-2 (low), 2.5 - 3 (medium), and 3.5 - 4 (high).

Two raters were invited to judge and analyze the features of the sample essays in both groups. They were a Ph.D. and an MA student of TEFL who had long experience of teaching writing courses in different colleges and institutions and rating students' compositions was their favorite research topic. The essays were randomized and the raters were not informed that they were dealing with two different groups. The specific purpose and details of the research were not revealed until after all the ratings had been completed.

First, the researchers explained the criteria for analyzing the sample essays to the raters. To ensure that they understood the procedure for analyzing the essays, they analyzed several sample essays in collaboration with the researchers.

To illustrate how the corpus was analyzed, two paragraphs of sample essays, one from each group, have been selected and are explained below. A data sheet including the results of the quantitative analysis follows each of the essays.

A Paragraph of a Native Speaker's Sample Essay

Discourse bloc : (**bloc 1:**{ **T-unit 1:** In the richer countries, a myth has developed that the ultimate dream would be to become so rich that you could live off interest on accumulated wealth if you no longer needed to work to survive.} **bloc2 :**{ **T-unit 2:** **But** (bloc signal) *since money spells independence and freedom*, including the freedom to donate part of your salary **and** (bloc signal) *to grow on a personal level*, I believe that money is indeed a powerful motivator.} **bloc3:**{ **T-unit 3:** It is then left to individuals how they deal with the money, whether they choose to hang on to their integrity, whether they allow the people working for them to achieve the same security, insights and dreams of self-fulfillment that they are enjoying in their jobs.})

There are three instances of T-units in the preceding paragraph. This paragraph functions as a discourse bloc of the essay that contains 3 sub-blocs. By considering the number of conjunctions, the coordinate clauses of the paragraph were determined.

Data Sheet for a NS' Essay

Criteria	Paragraph 2
T-unit	3
Bloc	3
Coordinate clauses	2

A Paragraph of an Iranian Student's Sample Essay

Discourse bloc: (**bloc1 :**{ To agree, it is undeniable, **T-unit 1:** any one recruited in a job has an eye out for the payment the job offers, because simply he is going to run his life on it. No one prefers a sweetshop only for little amount of money.} **bloc2 :**{ **T-unit 2:** Let's overview some forces that reinforce the idea of having a job with a high payment. *Life is harsh and puts a pretty heavy burden on people's shoulder and to cope with economic hardships people have to even take double time to win bread for their families.*} **bloc3 :**{ **T-unit 3:** Another force is social context a society that has its own demand s people. **T-unit 4:** We as members of a society have to move along with some unwritten rules and regulations and obeying those regulations might cost us a lot. **So we need a well-paid job to keep the pace.**} **bloc4 :**{ **And** the last is

family responsibilities inspires an inner drive in people to have job with a good payment. We can not do away with responsibilities as fathers or mothers; we need to provide ample amenity for our family to live comfortably. See how important this aspect of a job is.})

Data Sheet for an IS' Essay

criteria	Paragraph 2
T-unit	4
Bloc	4
Coordinate clauses	4

RESULTS

The data collected for this study were analyzed by employing a one-way chi-square test. In order to be as precise as possible in analyzing the data obtained, The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 9) was utilized to do all the computerized analyses with alpha set at .05.

Individual frequencies for each of the subcategories (T-units, discourse blocs, and coordinate clauses) in both groups are compared below.

Table 1: Frequency Categories for T-units

	Low	Medium	High	Total
Non-natives	10	82	235	327
Natives	184	56		240
Total	194	138	562	

Table 2: Chi-square Test for T-units

	Value	df	significance
Pearson chi-square	391.83	2	.001

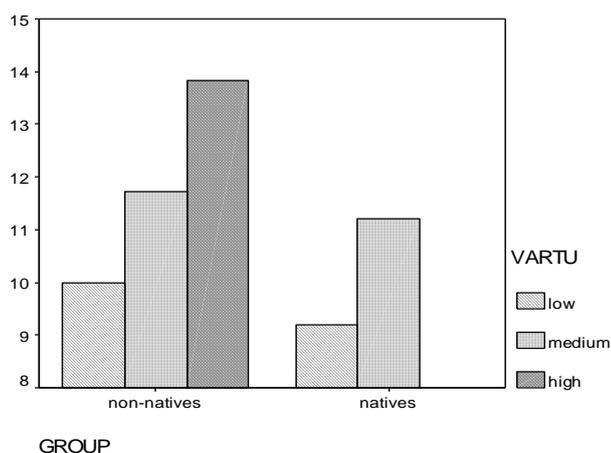


Figure 1: The Frequency of T-units

The different frequency of T-units between both groups is shown in Table 1 and Figure 1. High frequency is not seen among the NSs, which means that they used fewer T-units than the ISs.

Table 3: Ranges for Coordinate Clauses

	Low	Medium	High	Total
Non-natives		161	286	447
Natives	181	143		324
Total	181	304	286	771

Table 4: Chi-square Test for Coordinate clauses

	Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-square	460.15	2	.000

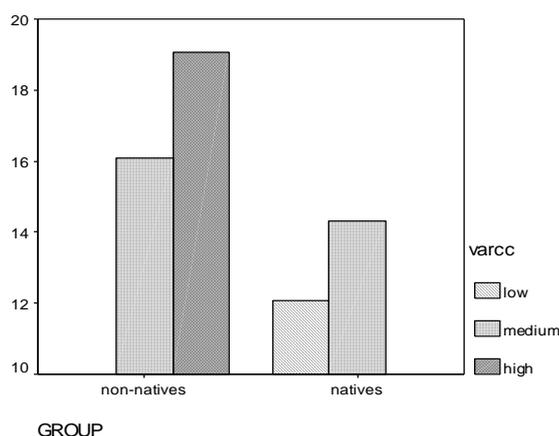


Figure 2: The Frequency of Coordinate clauses

The different frequency of coordinate clauses between both groups is illustrated in Table 3 and Figure 2. High frequency is not seen among the NSs, which means that they used fewer coordinate clauses than the ISs.

Table 5: Frequency Categories for Discourse Blocs

	Low	Medium	High	Total
Non-natives	12	36	28	76
Natives	35	15		50
Total	47	51	28	126

Table 6: Chi-Square Test for Discourse Blocs

	Value	df	Sig.
Pearson Chi-square	44.42	2	.000

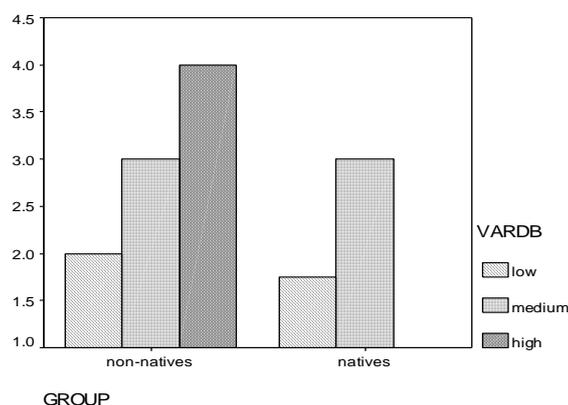


Figure 3: The Frequency of Discourse Blocs

The different frequency of discourse blocs between both groups is shown in Table 5 and Figure 3. High frequency is not seen among the NS, which means that they used fewer discourse blocs than the ISs.

DISCUSSION

Writing is undoubtedly an indispensable part of any language learning and teaching program. Recent trends in language teaching tend to view writing as a process of expressing and developing ideas as a writer goes through different phases of processing to explore and express meaning (Kobayashi, 1984). For a student to produce a good composition, steps such as thinking, analyzing, and planning are necessary.

A case similar to that of Iranian students investigated here was observed by Ostler (1987), who hypothesized that the rhetoric of Classical Arabic is closely tied to the system of that language differing in several ways from that used by native English writers. Ostler further maintained that the differences between the rhetoric used by English writers and that used by Arabic-speaking students in English can be shown quantitatively, such as by T-unit analysis.

The data which Ostler analyzed by T-units supported a tendency of the Arabic-speaking writers to strive for a balance between clauses by means of a native-language tendency to coordination when writing in English. A comparative T-unit analysis of native speakers indicated that there was a reluctance among the NSs of English to use clausal modification in coordinate clauses.

In the present study, the Iranian writers' corpora show a logical relationship between the topic sentence of the paragraph and the controlling purpose of a longer work. Each essay has a topic or basic idea and a predication or comment on that subject, so that there is justification for counting them both as controlling concepts. Word count of the two groups of essays is another criterion to compare them. The average for English essays is 118 words, that for Farsi papers is 165. There is thus a 30% difference in word count.

In order to pass the MA entrance exam (general English questions), Iranian students had to attend to grammatical, syntactical, and lexical concerns, but they probably did not concern themselves with rhetorical arrangement. Berman (1980) noted that rhetorical arrangement is the most difficult feature to change, because it is one of components language learners are not even aware of. These skills are rarely taught in language classes.

Iranian and native English students' essays were different in their use of T-units, discourse blocs, and coordinate clauses. Therefore, it can be concluded that the "non-native quality" of English essays written by Iranian students is to be attributed not only to inadequacy of their grammatical and lexical knowledge but also to non-native rhetorical patterns. The most dramatic differences between the two corpora, clearly seen in figures of this study, are fewer subdivisions in the English-speaking students' papers than in the Farsi-speaking students' ones. No NSs' essays contained more than three blocs in a discourse bloc, while 60% of the ISS' essays had more than three blocs per discourse bloc.

An even more definitive contrast between the two groups of essays can be found in the development of main and coordinate clauses. In the category of main clauses, under total number of dependent clauses per T-unit, the means of the two sets of essays showed only a 30% difference. In sharp contrast, in coordinate clauses under the same classification, not a single occurrence of an English coordinate clause was modified by a dependent clause.

CONCLUSION

When individuals write in a language other than their native language, they tend to transfer the rhetorical patterns of their native language to the target language. What is important regarding this study is to analyze the cultural and educational origins which seem to have influenced paragraph structure in Farsi. The rhetorical tendencies exhibited by the student writers of two different language backgrounds in this investigation are significantly different from each other, so there is no doubt that the cultural patterns injected into the two sets of paragraphs have yielded different products. The findings of this study revealed a strong possibility that people in these two different cultures think and organize their ideas differently. Thus, it could be argued that these differences in essay structure arise because they have different world views and cultural backgrounds, which is what contrastive rhetoric deals with.

The main concern of this research was that the rhetorical style of the Farsi is closely tied to the linguistic system of that language. Because of this, the prose style of Iranian students writing in English has been shown to be quantitatively different from that of English native speakers.

These findings lend support to the existence of cross-cultural differences between Farsi and English. So this study supports the claims made by previous research (Kaplan, 1966; Regent, 1985; Vahapassi, 1982; Hassani, 2004; Moradian, 1999) that writing is a cultural phenomenon. This is indicative of the fact that different cultures have different rhetorical tendencies.

A possible cause supporting the difference between the rhetorics of these two language is that Farsi prose of nearly all text types is heavily influenced by poetry so that Iranian prose writers more or less follow the conventions of the poetic style. Tabatabaiee (2006) mentions the dominance of poetry over prose in Persian language history. He states that Saadi was one of the greatest men who combined poetry with prose in his great work the Gulistan. One reason that he combined poetry with prose was that he was criticized for writing prose, since during those days it was beneath great writers' dignity to create their works in prose form. That is why most of the famous literary works are poems rather than prose.

The use of more blocs in a discourse bloc is also related to the system of education of writing conventions taught in schools, although it is done implicitly in the Iranian educational system. The Western educational materials designed to teach writing, preach the linear writing style including limited discourse blocs claiming that one and only one main idea should be developed in a paragraph. They contain writing activities which help English language learners to master the process of writing according to Western rhetorical canons. Some of these writing activities include pre-writing activities such as planning an outline as a blueprint of the idea which is to be developed in a paragraph. Then, the writer makes a topic sentence or a thesis statement which bears the main idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence is supported by some sentences which are called supporting ideas. There is a close relationship between the main idea and the supporting ideas in the text so that they together make a cohesive and coherent paragraph having unity and clarity in a Western style of academic writing. All of these characteristics neatly woven together in an English paragraph are in line with the development of a paragraph organization with few discourse units.

The same issue, i.e. teaching students the importance of unity in paragraphs should be extended to EFL contexts where students should be trained to follow the same route. Iranian students, for instance, ought to be exposed to writing skills which lead to the development of a paragraph by knowing the difference between English and Farsi rhetoric and applying them in correct contexts so that they can convince an English-speaking reader. As Leki (1991, 1996) maintains, English-speaking readers can be convinced by facts, statistics and illustrations in arguments; they move from generalization to specific examples and expect explicit links between main topics and subtopics.

In contrast with English written rhetoric, Farsi written rhetoric is nonlinear, i.e. Iranian writers have a tendency to write multi-topical, long paragraphs to get their points across. This, as mentioned earlier, is

deeply rooted in the dominant influence of oral discourse on written language. Therefore, Farsi native speakers while writing English essays use more words, coordinate clauses, and dependent clauses because they think that this form of writing is not only impressive but also persuasive. Methodologists and researchers have suggested many different approaches for teaching composition in EFL classes, such as the process approach, but the process approach is rarely used in Farsi composition classes (Hassani, 2004). Instead, it is the product approach which is widely used through which students do not get much chance of having their essays redrafted and revised to get the necessary feedback on rhetorical differences between English and Farsi.

Iranian students are not taught to take the paragraph as a unit of ideas in the English language, so they think in Farsi and write in English. They are taught in English classes how to write grammatical sentences and how to choose the correct words. But they do not know anything about the differences between the English and Farsi rhetoric. For example, they know nothing about the linear style of English and the non-linear style of Farsi (Tamri, 2007), monotopicality in English and multitopicality in Farsi (Moradian, 2006), or as was shown in this study about the number and distribution of T-units, coordinate clauses, and discourse blocs in these two languages.

The findings of this study have numerous implications for instructional practice in EFL writing classes. It is likely that these students use similar writing strategies to compose in their first and second language. Their writing behaviors suggest that Iranian English teachers will need to devote more time and attention to strategic, rhetorical, and linguistic concerns for writing in English. English writing instructors must let their EFL students recognize that their own ways of thinking and organization patterns of their essays in their native language are different from those of native English speakers. The concepts of thesis statements, topic sentences, and relevant details, which are arranged in a causal relationship, may be new to them (Ostler, 1987). These concepts and their relationship, therefore, must be illustrated explained to them in a clear way. Showing them several samples of well-written English essays by native English writers along with the teacher's detailed explanation might be a good way to help them understand the rhetorical pattern of an English essay. Eastern EFL writers are advised to learn how to write English essays by plunging into an actual English writing context as a process of imitating the "sound" of the academic prose (Matsuda, 1997).

Leki (1991) maintains that the results of contrastive studies are useful for teachers, especially when they learn that "particular options ESL students choose in their writing are not random but may come as result of rhetorical constraints not shared by English speakers" (p.130).

It can be argued that this research is a new step in making students familiar even with paragraph structure of their mother tongue. A cursory glance at the Iranian national textbooks intended to teach Farsi reveals the fact that they lack activities and exercises which will ultimately lead to the development of reading and writing skills at the rhetorical level. The same problem exists with EFL textbooks in Iran. Writing is the skill which receives a minimum amount of attention. It should be noted that this problem is probably dominant in most ESL/EFL contexts all over the world. Of the two productive skills, primary attention is paid to speaking. Consequently, writing demands serious consideration on the part of Persian theoreticians, researchers, and syllabus designers (Hassani, 2004). The writing materials should include activities which will lead to the development of all the rhetorical skills and components.

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