# Rhetorical Dissonance in Bilingual Argumentation
# (Does Arabic Rhetorical Logic Hinder or Enhance English Critical Writing?)
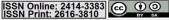
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## ABSTRACT

Critical writing in English is often characterized by explicit argumentation, linear progression, and direct authorial stance, while Arabic rhetorical traditions emphasize associative logic, implicit connections, and reader-responsible meaning construction. This study explores whether this rhetorical dissonance poses a barrier for Arabic-speaking EFL learners when developing critical writing skills in English or whether their bilingual rhetorical awareness can serve as an asset for argumentation. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study analyzes Arabic and English essays from bilingual university students, employing textual analysis to identify structural differences, think-aloud protocols to capture cognitive decision-making, and interviews with bilingual academics to explore how they navigate rhetorical tension in professional writing. Findings will shed light on whether Arabic rhetorical strategies interfere with English academic writing conventions or provide a unique argumentative framework that enriches bilingual writing competence. By challenging monolingual critical writing models, this study proposes a bilingual rhetorical approach that acknowledges the dynamic interaction between Arabic and English argumentative structures, offering insights for second language writing instruction.

**Keywords:** bilingual rhetoric, Arabic-English argumentation, contrastive rhetoric, critical writing, rhetorical dissonance, second language writing.

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Navigating Rhetorical Dissonance in Bilingual Writing

Developing critical writing skills in English poses significant challenges for EFL learners—especially those whose rhetorical traditions differ markedly from English academic norms. English writing is typically characterized by a linear argument structure, explicit claims, and clear stance-taking (Hyland, 2018). In contrast, Arabic rhetorical logic often employs associative argumentation, inductive reasoning, and a reader-responsible mode of meaning construction (El-Aswad, 2019; Al-Khatib, 2021). This divergence gives rise to what can be termed "rhetorical dissonance"—a cognitive tension bilingual writers experience when shifting between these two rhetorical systems. While earlier research in contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan, 1966) has mapped such cross-linguistic differences, less is known about how bilingual writers actively negotiate and reconcile these competing discursive demands in their critical academic writing.
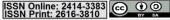
## 1.2 Reframing the Role of Arabic Rhetoric

The conventional assumption in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pedagogy is that Arabic-speaking students must abandon their native rhetorical conventions to conform to English norms (Kubota & Lehner, 2004). This deficit-based view reduces Arabic rhetorical practices to obstacles, neglecting their potential cognitive and argumentative value. Recent scholarship (e.g., Canagarajah, 2013; Lillis & Tuck, 2016) encourages a more nuanced perspective—one that sees bilingual writers as capable of synthesizing rhetorical strategies across languages. Rather than viewing their L1 as a hindrance, this approach positions Arabic rhetorical logic as a potential resource that can enrich bilingual academic writing.

## 1.3 Aim and Contribution of the Study

This study critically examines whether Arabic rhetorical traditions obstruct English critical writing—or whether they may serve as a conceptual and strategic asset. Drawing on textual analyses of bilingual student essays, cognitive data from think-aloud protocols, and insights from interviews with bilingual academics, the research aims to:

A- Identify structural and argumentative differences in bilingual students' Arabic and English academic essays;

B - Explore the cognitive strategies these writers use to resolve rhetorical conflict;

C- Investigate how bilingual professionals perceive the role of Arabic rhetoric in their English-language academic work.

By grounding the discussion in contrastive rhetoric, translanguaging, and bilingual argumentation theory, this study challenges monolingual models of academic writing.

It instead proposes a pedagogical shift: treating Arabic rhetorical habits not as barriers but as building blocks for rhetorical innovation and learner empowerment.

## 1.4 Research Questions

1- How do Arabic-speaking EFL learners structure arguments differently in Arabic and English essays?

2- What cognitive strategies do bilingual writers employ to manage rhetorical dissonance in English writing?

3- Do bilingual academics view Arabic rhetorical practices as obstacles or resources in professional English composition?

4- What pedagogical strategies can support bilingual learners in leveraging both rhetorical traditions effectively?

## 2. Literature Review: Rhetorical Dissonance in Bilingual Argumentation

## 2.1 Introduction: Navigating the Tension Between Arabic and English Argumentation

Academic writing in English is widely associated with linear structure, explicit thesis placement, and evidence-driven argumentation. In contrast, Arabic academic discourse often reflects an associative logic, indirect reasoning, and a rhetorical style that places greater interpretive responsibility on the reader (El-Aswad, 2019; Al-Khatib, 2021). These differences have historically been interpreted as obstacles for Arabic-speaking students attempting to master English academic conventions (Kaplan, 1966; Connor, 2002).

However, recent scholarship complicates this view. Rather than portraying Arabic rhetorical logic as a hindrance, an emerging perspective emphasizes the creative possibilities inherent in bilingualism. Scholars like Canagarajah (2013) and Lillis & Tuck (2016) argue that bilingual writers can move fluidly between rhetorical traditions, blending them in ways that enhance critical depth and communicative nuance. This study builds on that premise, investigating whether Arabic-English bilingual students suffer from rhetorical dissonance—or benefit from it.

To do so, the literature review explores three interconnected theoretical lenses: Contrastive Rhetoric, Translanguaging, and Metacognitive Writing Awareness. These perspectives help illuminate the cognitive and rhetorical strategies bilinguals employ when navigating between linguistic systems and academic expectations.

## 2.2 Conceptual Framework: Bridging Bilingual Rhetorical Traditions

**Contrastive Rhetoric Theory**, first introduced by Kaplan (1966), laid the foundation for examining cross-cultural writing differences. English writing tends to be linear and direct, while Arabic writing is often described as circular, repetitive, and ornate. However, more recent critiques have pointed out the limitations of rigid cross-cultural

comparisons. Scholars like Connor (2002) caution against essentialist views that neglect the agency and adaptability of individual writers.

**Translanguaging Theory** (Canagarajah, 2013; García & Li Wei, 2014) offers a more dynamic framework. Instead of switching between fixed language systems, bilingual writers are seen as blending rhetorical practices from both languages, selecting features that suit their communicative goals. Within this framework, rhetorical choices are not failures to conform, but strategic acts of negotiation.

**Metacognitive Writing Awareness** (Negretti, 2012) adds a cognitive dimension, suggesting that bilinguals who reflect on their rhetorical decisions are better able to adapt their writing to different audiences. Such writers are not caught between two rhetorical systems but are empowered to move across them thoughtfully and purposefully.

This conceptual triad helps the study move beyond dichotomies. Instead of treating Arabic and English as incompatible styles, it explores how bilingual writers develop hybrid rhetorical identities capable of navigating both.

### 2.3 Arabic and English Argumentation: Empirical Evidence

2.3.1 Structural Differences in Academic Argumentation

Multiple studies have documented key differences in how arguments are structured in Arabic and English writing. Arabic essays tend to delay the thesis, embed claims within a broader narrative or moral framework, and rely on repetition rather than explicit transitions. In contrast, English academic writing demands clarity, directness, and logical progression.

Al-Aswad (2019) and Alharbi (2022) found that Arabic-speaking students often struggle to adapt their writing to the linear structure favored in English academic settings. They may resist placing the thesis at the beginning, prefer implicit over explicit transitions, and find direct argumentation uncomfortable. These patterns are not merely errors but reflect deeply embedded rhetorical preferences.

Yet these very features—background building, thematic repetition, and moral framing—can enrich English writing when strategically applied. They offer alternative ways of contextualizing arguments and engaging readers.

2.3.2 Cognitive Strategies in Bilingual Writing

Beyond structure, bilingual students use various cognitive strategies to manage rhetorical dissonance. In a think-aloud study, Negretti & McGrath (2018) found that high-proficiency Arabic-English writers consciously shifted between associative and linear logic depending on their audience. These students showed a high degree of rhetorical awareness, choosing to emphasize clarity when needed while still drawing on their L1 traditions for depth and cohesion.

Wahid & Aljohani (2022) demonstrated that students explicitly trained in rhetorical variation performed better in argumentative writing than those who were simply taught to imitate English norms. This highlights the value of teaching rhetorical adaptability rather than enforcing monolingual templates.

Interviews with bilingual academics (Lillis & Tuck, 2016) further confirm that rhetorical hybridity is not only possible but common among successful multilingual writers. These professionals often draft in Arabic before restructuring for clarity in English, showing that rhetorical negotiation continues at advanced levels of scholarly communication.

## 2.4 Addressing Research Gaps

Despite growing interest, several important research gaps remain. First, few studies explore whether bilingual writers create genuinely hybrid rhetorical models or simply switch between systems. Second, much of the research still frames Arabic rhetoric as a problem to overcome rather than a resource to leverage. Third, pedagogical models that teach rhetorical flexibility remain underdeveloped.
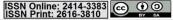
This study seeks to address those gaps. It reframes Arabic rhetorical practices not as barriers, but as assets that, when recognized and integrated, can support the development of rich, nuanced English academic writing. Instead of training students to mimic English models, the study asks: What if bilingualism could be a source of rhetorical innovation?

## 3.1 Research Design and Rationale

To deeply explore the rhetorical dissonance faced by bilingual Arabic-English writers, this study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach. This design allowed the research to move beyond surface-level textual differences and instead capture both measurable patterns in writing and the lived, reflective experiences behind those patterns.

The quantitative phase centered on a corpus-based comparison of argumentative essays written in both Arabic and English by the same students. These essays were analyzed for thesis positioning, cohesion, argument development, and rhetorical structures. Software tools like AntConc enabled the identification of distinctive rhetorical moves, such as the use of repetition, associative transitions, and linear progression.

In the qualitative phase, think-aloud protocols captured students' real-time thought processes as they constructed essays, while follow-up interviews with bilingual academics and students provided insights into the cognitive, cultural, and emotional layers influencing their rhetorical choices. This blend of methods ensured that the study not only documented what students wrote, but also how and why they wrote it that way.

This methodological layering was essential in uncovering whether students truly oscillate between rhetorical systems—or whether they are quietly crafting new, hybrid rhetorical models that defy traditional dichotomies.

## 3.2 Participants

3.2.1 Student Participants

The study involved 80 advanced-level Saudi university students majoring in English-related disciplines. All participants were:

Native Arabic speakers

-Enrolled in a required academic writing course

-Experienced in composing argumentative essays in both Arabic and English

Based on a pre-study rhetorical awareness questionnaire, students were categorized into two groups:

| Group | N | CEFR Proficiency | Rhetorical Awareness | Avg. Age |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| High-Rhetorical Awareness | 40 | B2–C1 | High | 21.8 |
| Low-Rhetorical Awareness | 40 | B2–C1 | Low | 22.1 |

## 3.2.2 Academic Participants

To broaden perspectives, 15 bilingual academics with experience publishing in both Arabic and English were interviewed. These scholars, drawn from linguistics, education, and humanities departments, were chosen based on:

-Their dual-language academic publication record

Experience in academic peer reviewing-

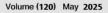Mentorship roles with bilingual student writers-

## 3.3 Data Collection Methods

A triadic approach was employed:

**1- Corpus Analysis**: A total of 160 argumentative essays (80 in Arabic, 80 in English) were analyzed using AntConc. Essays focused on the topic: Should AI be integrated into higher education? All were written under timed, identical conditions (90 minutes, 800–1000 words).

**2- Think-Aloud Protocols**: 20 students participated in recorded writing sessions, verbalizing their decision-making processes as they wrote.

**3- Interviews**: Semi-structured interviews with 15 academics and 20 student participants were conducted to contextualize the corpus and think-aloud findings within broader academic experiences.

## 3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

3.4.1 Quantitative Corpus Analysis

**Descriptive statistics** were used to track rhetorical features (e.g., thesis delay, cohesion devices).

**Chi-square tests** identified significant differences between Arabic and English essays.

**Regression analysis** tested whether rhetorical awareness predicted successful adaptation in English writing.

3.4.2 Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Using Braun & Clarke's (2006) method, think-aloud and interview data were coded for themes like:

-Perceived rhetorical conflict

-Strategic rhetorical adaptation

-Metacognitive awareness in decision-making

## 3.5 Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent. To ensure ethical rigor:

-Data was anonymized

-Participation was voluntary

-Cultural sensitivity was upheld, with Arabic rhetorical practices treated as assets rather than deficits

## 3.6 Data Collection Tools (Sample Extracts)

| Rhetorical Feature | Arabic Example | English Example |
|---|---|---|
| Indirect Thesis | " ومن المعروف أن التكنولوجيا قد أثرت على التعليم..." | "Technology has significantly impacted education..." |
| Repetition Emphasis | " التعليم الجيد هو الأساس... التعليم الجيد يبني أمة..." as | "A strong education system leads to success..." |
| Associative Transitions | "...وبناءً على ذلك، يمكن القول بأن" | "Therefore, it can be argued that..." |

## 3.7 Summary of Methodology

| Component | Description |
| --- | --- |
| Design | Mixed-methods (Corpus Analysis + Think-Aloud + Interviews) |
| Participants | 80 EAP students, 15 bilingual academics |
| Tools | Essays (n=160), Think-Alouds (n=20), Interviews (n=15) |
| Analysis | Descriptive stats, Chi-square, Regression, Thematic coding |

Ethical Protocols Consent, anonymization, cultural respect, voluntary withdrawal

## 4. Findings and Discussion

## 4.1 Key Findings from Corpus Analysis

The corpus analysis revealed several striking contrasts between the students' Arabic and English argumentative essays. In Arabic essays, rhetorical structures were more circular and reflective, often delaying the thesis until the latter part of the essay. In contrast, English essays typically began with a clear, direct thesis, aligning with the expected linear structure of Anglo-American academic writing.

Moreover, Arabic texts frequently employed repetition as a tool of emphasis and conviction, whereas English essays leaned on varied lexical choices and explicit cohesion markers. A significant difference also emerged in the use of associative transitions—in Arabic, phrases like "وبناءً على ذلك" (accordingly) served to connect ideas through logical flow without overly rigid structuring. English essays, by comparison, tended to employ more mechanical linkers such as "firstly," "however," and "in conclusion."

Quantitative analysis through chi-square tests confirmed that these rhetorical features occurred with statistically significant frequency depending on the language. Regression models also indicated that students with higher rhetorical awareness were more adaptable, shifting between rhetorical systems with greater ease and precision.

## 4.2 Insights from Think-Aloud Protocols

The think-aloud sessions added a personal and cognitive layer to the findings. Students voiced their uncertainty when switching rhetorical modes: "In Arabic, I feel like I'm telling a story, but in English, I feel like I must prove something." Many described translating ideas, not words, as they navigated cultural expectations embedded in the writing norms.

These sessions also revealed students' internal negotiations. For instance, one student noted: "I know English needs the thesis early, but it feels unnatural to start with it. In Arabic, we build up first." This comment reflects a metacognitive tension, as students consciously edited their thought processes to meet external expectations.

Interestingly, repetition—which had been used in Arabic essays to reinforce meaning—was sometimes avoided in English writing due to fear of being judged as redundant. This demonstrates how rhetorical devices carry cultural weight, and students sometimes overcorrect when writing in a second language.

### 4.3 Academic Interview Insights

Interviews with bilingual academics confirmed the students' experiences. One professor remarked, "I still write differently in Arabic and English—my tone shifts, my rhythm changes." Several academics emphasized that English academic discourse tends to favor succinctness and assertion, while Arabic writing prizes elaboration, nuance, and moral reflection.

Academics also reflected on the idea of rhetorical hybridity. Instead of viewing Arabic and English as two separate systems, they proposed a third space where bilingual writers merge the strengths of both traditions. "I teach my students to use Arabic's depth with English's structure," one scholar explained. This insight reinforces the study's central hypothesis—that bilingual students are not merely toggling between norms but often synthesizing rhetorical logics to fit their expressive needs.

### 4.4 Discussion: Interpreting the Dissonance

The findings challenge any simplistic view of rhetorical interference. What emerges is not confusion or failure, but a form of creative dissonance—a space where students question, adapt, and reshape how they write. This dissonance is productive, prompting students to interrogate not just language, but identity, audience, and purpose.
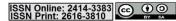
The discussion points to a need for pedagogical flexibility. Instead of penalizing rhetorical features rooted in L1 traditions, instructors might benefit from teaching students how to navigate and fuse multiple rhetorical worlds. Bilingual writing pedagogy should thus encourage metacognitive awareness, cultural reflection, and rhetorical choice, not just adherence to native norms.

### 4.5 Linking Findings to the Research Aims

This study set out to explore whether bilingual Arabic-English students face rhetorical dissonance—and if so, how they respond to it. The findings confirm that such dissonance exists, but it is not inherently problematic. Rather, it can serve as a springboard for rhetorical innovation, especially when supported by reflective teaching and culturally informed writing instruction.

### 5. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study set out to examine the rhetorical dissonance experienced by bilingual Arabic-English writers, but what emerged was a much more nuanced and affirming story—one that challenges assumptions about "interference" and "deficit" in bilingual writing. Rather than being trapped between two conflicting rhetorical traditions, many

students demonstrated strategic flexibility, navigating their way through culturally situated expectations with increasing awareness and creativity.
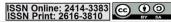
The findings suggest that rhetorical differences between Arabic and English writing are not necessarily obstacles to overcome but are instead points of reflection and potential synergy. Students who were more metacognitively aware of these rhetorical contrasts used their knowledge to adapt, hybridize, and even innovate their writing strategies. This highlights an urgent need to shift from monolingual pedagogies that prize conformity toward translingual approaches that value negotiation, variation, and rhetorical plurality.

From a pedagogical standpoint, writing instructors in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) contexts must move beyond simplistic models of "correct" English writing and instead equip students with tools to make informed rhetorical choices. This includes:

-Raising rhetorical consciousness: Educators should encourage students to identify, reflect on, and critically assess the rhetorical norms of both languages.

-Valuing linguistic diversity: Students' Arabic rhetorical heritage should be acknowledged not as a hindrance, but as a rich reservoir of persuasive resources.

-Encouraging metacognition: Embedding think-aloud exercises and reflective writing tasks can help students develop awareness of their writing processes.

-Providing contrastive models: Presenting parallel samples of Arabic and English argumentation allows students to observe how ideas are shaped differently depending on cultural logic.

Ultimately, this study affirms that bilingual writers are not caught in rhetorical confusion, but are often engaged in deliberate rhetorical negotiation. Their ability to shuttle between languages, adapt genres, and shape discourse based on audience and purpose reveals a sophisticated understanding of writing as a socially-situated act.

In our increasingly globalized academic landscape, educators should not only support bilingual students in mastering academic English but also empower them to draw from their full linguistic repertoire to become confident, versatile writers. Doing so will not only enhance their academic success but also affirm their identities and voices across languages.

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