A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE TEXTUAL FEATURES OF IRANIAN AND ENGLISH RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

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Abstract. *Analysis of different academic writings to obtain cross-cultural differences, Recommendation Letters (RL) is still considered as a Cinderella among Iranian scholars. Adopting the Clyne's (1991) framework to analyze English recommendation letters written by Iranian, American, Canadian, and British university professors, to see if there is any significant difference between these two types in terms of digression, textual symmetry, integration, advance organizers, enumerative sentences, bridge sentences, and topic sentences, forty-seven RLs were collected in total, 27 of which were written by Iranian university professors and 20 by those native speakers of English. Having analyzed the letters according to those features, a Chi2 test was conducted to demonstrate the results statistically. It was found that there are significant differences between these two groups of letters regarding textual symmetry and topic sentences, while there were no significant differences regarding digression, data integration, advance organizers, enumerative sentences, and bridge sentences.*

Key words: *Genre-analysis, Recommendation letters, ESP, Cross-cultural differences, Clyne's framework*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'genre' stemming from the word genus is defined by different scholars in the fields of literature, sociology, and rhetoric, as Martin (1985) elucidates genre as a staged, goal oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture. The culture in these terms can be defined as a set of generically interpretable activities. According to Swales (1990), a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some sets of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and constrains choice of content and style.

There are mainly three schools of thought on genre theory (Hyon, 1996). The New Rhetoric Group comprising North Americans dealing with a rhetorical tradition is concerned with the works of Miller (1984), Bazerman (1988), Freedman and Medway (1994), and Kotter and Huckin (1995). According to Coe and Freedman (1998), genre is regarded as a socially standard strategy, embodied in any typical form of discourse that has evolved from responding to a recurring type of rhetorical situation. Methodologies are preferred to be ethnographic, as they have the tendency to reveal the communities' beliefs and values through the text. Based on this approach, the classroom is regarded to be unauthentic since it has the shortage of negotiation. However, some scholars such as Adam and Artemeva

(2002) and Coe (2002) have proposed pedagogic applications of academic writing which has been of great help.

The rhetorical work of Michael Halliday's (1994) Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is considered as the second basis of genre theory. It is known as 'Sydney School' in the U.S. which has focused on the prominence of social goals of genres and defining the rhetorical structures in order to serve these goals. Genre is seen as a staged, goal-oriented social process accentuating the purposeful, interactive, and sequential character of different genres and the ways that language is systematically linked to the context (Martin, 1992). The most important contributions in this area include Cope and Kalantzis (1993), Martin (1992, 1997), and Christie and Martin (1997).

The third orientation, referred to as the ESP approach, is considered as the middle point of pendulum between these two points of views. The same as the New Rhetoricians, it deals with Bakhtinian ideas of intertextuality, it is also based on Systematic Functional comprehension of text structure, and on Vygotskian principles of pedagogy. As Bloor (1998) pointed out, in fact, with its emphasis on communicative purpose and the formal properties of texts, the ESP approach might be seen as an application of SFL, although it lacks a systemic model of language and does not make extensive use of a stratified, meta-functional grammar. There have been some scientific works in this regard such as Swales (1990, 1993), Bhatia (1993, 1999), and Johns (1997).

1.1. Meta-genre

Giltrow (2002) defines meta-genres as "atmosphere surrounding genres". He adds that the same as genres, meta-genres have "semiotic ties to their context of use". In fact, they provide guidelines to show the way of producing applying genres. For example, physicians share the same language in their writing. There can be meta-genres in various communities, as Giltrow described:

> Meta-genres flourish at those boundaries, at the thresholds of communities of discourse, patrolling of controlling individuals' participation in the collective, foreseeing or suspecting their involvements elsewhere, differentiating, initiating, restricting inducing forms of activity, rationalizing and representing the relations of the genre to the community that uses it. This representation is not always direct; often it is oblique, a mediated symbolic of practice. He points out that meta-genres can be durable, sometimes opposing genre changes in a genre system, sometimes carried by people beyond their context which influence the engagement of people in different activities. In any situation, meta-genres are involved in genres. They are prominent in forming genre systems to activate meaningful and effective performances (pp. 187-205).

1.2. Discourse community and genre

Following Swales' definition, there have been many attempts to redefine discourse community, as it is described by Barton (1994) - a discourse community is a group of people who have texts and practices in common, whether it is a group of academics or the readers of teenage magazines. In fact, discourse community can refer to several overlapping groups of people. It can refer to the people a text is aimed at; it can be the people who read a text; or it can refer to the people who participate in a set of discourse practices both by reading and writing.

1.3. ESP approaches to genre analysis

An ESP approach to genre analysis, for instance, initiates recognizing a genre through a discourse community and clarifying the communicative purpose for which the genre is opted for. From that point, genre's organization entailing the structure that is characterized by "moves" is taken into account, and then textual and linguistic features such as grammar and syntax identifying the rhetorical moves are considered. As Flowedew (2002) pointed out, the process is by no means linear or static, but generally speaking, it has tended to move from context to text, with context providing knowledge of communicative purpose and discourse community members' genre identifications.

The general approach to genre analysis within ESP comprises recognizing the aim to analyze a genre's rhetorical moves and showing how these moves are done from the aspect of text and linguistics. As Swales (1996) pointed out, knowledge of discipline-specific genres, especially research articles, as well as occluded genres (genres such as book reviews, recommendation letters, weblogs, and etc.) have made it conceivable for non-native speakers of English to deal with and take part in academic discourse community.

2. RECOMMENDATION LETTERS

Cross-cultural differences are explored in diverse academic writings such as abstracts, CVs, job applications, cover letters, grant proposals, and book reviews. Being considered private documents, these are somehow influenced by the writers' cultural ideologies, as accentuated by Swales (1996), the rhetorical patterns of the L1 would possibly be more applicable to these private writings which might lead to some worthwhile cross-cultural studies, as Recommendation Letters (RLs) enjoy the same confidentiality features of these writings. Having the same purpose, all the RLs are totally different concerning how they are written to support the candidates in different cultures. It is also indicated by Bouton (1995), as there are prominent differences in the structure of RLs written by scholars from Asia and US, so, RL is considered as a befitting representation of the rhetorical structures, patterns, and formulas for a specific context. Elements of spoken and written discourse including form, structure, and content are included in the discourse of letters, so it might help to scrutinize the cultural values in different parts of the world. Clynbae (1991, 1994), for example, proposed traits concerning the differences between German and English texts as linearity, early advance organizers, data integration, and symmetry. While there is a framework propounded by Purves and Hawisher (1990) consisting factors such as relevance, grouping, relationships among items, metalanguage, and framing; Kaplan (1995), on the other hand proposed a framework comprising directionality, rhythm of discourse, and form vs. content. Finding no prior investigation of differences among RLs in an Iranian context, researchers' concern is to dissect the textual features of RLs written by native and non-native speakers of English from Iran and US, based on Clyne's (1991) framework to analyze the texts quantitatively in terms of digressiveness, symmetry, data integration, advance organizers, enumerative sentences, bridge sentences and topic sentences.

Recommendation letters are exhaustively investigated in fields of Education, Psychology, English, Sociology, Linguistics, etc. from miscellaneous perspectives in different contexts, but still there is a need to fill the gap in the literature to investigate the RLs being brushed aside by Iranian scholars, as the researches' goal is to spark off further investigations on this cultural-oriented phenomenon.

Reviewing the literature on RLs, researchers came up with prominent investigations of recommendation letters concerning, for example, reliability (Hatcher, 1983; Morisett,1935; Tommasi et al., 1998), role of recommendation letters for examining candidates (DeLisa et al., 1994), weaknesses in recommendation letters (O'Halloran et al., 1993), cross-cultural comparisons (Bouton, 1995; Gayed, 1991; Precht, 1998), determining features of positive and negative interpretations (Greenburg et al., 1994), and sex-related characteristics (Bell et al., 1992; Eger, 1991; Hatcher, 1993;Watson, 1987).

Adopting Myers Briggs personality assessment, Eger (1991) profiled 12 male and 12 female authors of recommendation letters. He gave each author documents of six applicants being totally divergent in gender and personality for whom they were supposed to write recommendation letters. Eger (1991) proposed 'advocacy factor' in which people would write superlative letters for those who were more similar in personality, gender and ideologies. Considering sex as a contributing factor, Watson (1987) analyzed 80 recommendation letters for graduates in social sciences (40 letters written by males: half for males, half for females; 40 letters written by females: half for males, half for females). She unearthed that the longest letters were written for female applicants by female recommenders, while the males preferred to use gender identifications with female applicants more than females did. Using first name of females was more frequent among females than men.

Tommasi et al. (1998) explored the effect of content and personal rater differences on decision making to choose among candidates. They ferreted out that the recommendation letters involved both relevant and irrelevant information about the job candidates. The professionals were inconsistent in evaluating candidates. Furthermore, there were some sex differences while decision making. Conducting a comparative study of recommendation letters in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany and Eastern Europe via both quantitative and qualitative analysis, Precht (1998) found cross-cultural differences in the quantitative analysis, and diverse methods of support along with organizational patterns.

Clyne (1987) intended to describe differences in discourse patterns between two groups of German and English letters. He analyzed 52 texts in total, 17 in German, written by German speakers, 9 in English by German speakers, and 26 in English by English speakers. The corpus included texts by American, British and Australian academics as well as West and East German scholars. Later on, in his 1991 study he used various traits such as linearity, early advance organizers, data integration, and symmetry. In the German texts, there was no significant correlation. He pointed out that German academics had the tendency to follow German textual patterns while writing in English, especially regarding sociocultural patterns, such as linearity and symmetry. In fewer sociocultural patterns such as data integration, sentence types and advance organizers, German academic writers were willing to follow English patterns. Reviewing and finding no investigations on the comparative analysis of RLs written by Iranian and native speakers of English, researchers' goal is to embark on investigation of digressiveness, textual symmetry, data integration, advance organizers, enumerative sentences, bridge sentences, and topic sentences by adopting Clyne's (1991) model to make a comparison on textual features.

3. CORPUS

Forty seven RLs written for different applicants including 27 Iranian, 11 American, 5 Canadian, and 4 British writers were received. All the university professors were assured concerning the confidentiality of all the features such as applicants' names, universities,

and faculties during our correspondences. Concentrating on such a corpus enables researchers to thoroughly compare the textual features in texts of various cultures. In spite of the fact that the corpus of the present study is small, the narrow focus of this group of letters creates a specialized corpus (Renouf, 1987), appropriate for contrastive rhetoric research. All RLs had been written by university professors. Iranian RLs were written by native speakers (NS) of Persian in English and the rest by native speakers of English. For the purposes of identification, each RL has a code identifying first the applicant by letter (A-T) the author of the letter (1-47) and third the country which the letter comes from (I for Iran, A for America, C for Canada and E for England).

3.1. Procedures

Having correspondences with different university, Iranian professors and those abroad, researchers received a total number of 47. There were twenty-seven Iranian letters ranging from 60 to 334 words. Concerning those written by native speakers of English, twenty RLs ranging from 85 to 507 were received. They had been written by university professors of America, Canada and England. As time goes on, genres might differ, thus, the corpus had to be chosen during a specific period of time, so all those letters were written after 2000. Consulting different models for such a comparative analysis of textual features, Clyne's (1991) framework was adopted with some modifications to analyze digressiveness, textual symmetry, data integration, advance organizers, enumerative sentences, bridge sentences, and topic sentences between Iranian and English RLs.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Analyzing RLs concerning digression, researchers unearthed that professors stated not so pertinent information for applicants. Since the frequency of this feature was less than 5, a chi square test could not be conducted. So, there was no significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding digression.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics comparing Iranian and English RLs in terms of digression

	Iranian N=27	English N=20
Digression	2	3

Regarding textual symmetry, the letters were supposed to have short introductions and conclusions, but longer bodies. Those written by Iranian professors were considered as less symmetrical texts. Most characteristics were included in the first and second paragraphs. The first paragraphs were usually longer. Even, some of the letters consisted of one lengthy paragraph, whereas most of the English letters comprised three paragraphs and were more symmetrical. As there was a significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding textual symmetry, a chi square test was used to show the difference statistically.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics comparing Iranian and English RLs
in terms of textual symmetry

	Iranian N=27	English N=20
Symmetry	5	14
Asymmetry	22	6

Table 3 Chi-square test of textual symmetry

Significance level	Degree of freedom	Amount
.039	1	4.263

While analyzing the texts from the aspect of data integration, English letters showed more integrated texts than Iranian ones. It was expected that English texts were integrated. Most of the applicants' characteristics as well as accomplishments were stated in body paragraphs. Actually, the related phrases and concepts were all put in one category. Concerning Iranian texts, some of the characteristics were mentioned in the first paragraphs, while others appeared in the second and last paragraphs. Iranian texts were mostly non-integrated. Finding no significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding data integration, Chi-square test was conducted.

Table 4 Descriptive statistics comparing Iranian and English RLs in terms of data integration

	Iranian N=27	English N=20
Integration	8	16
Non-Integration	19	4

Table 5 Chi-square test of data integration

Significance level	Degree of freedom	Amount
.102	1	2.667

Considering advance organizers, Iranian letters were quite similar to those of English. The writers started the letters by the use of signals to announce what they were going to do for the applicants. Nearly all of the letter authors took these metalinguistic cues into account. The Chi-square test was conducted as there was no significant difference between Iranian and English RLs concerning advance organizers.

Table 6 Descriptive statistics comparing Iranian and English RLs
in terms of advance organizers

	Iranian N=27	English N=20
Advance organizers	26	16

Table 7 Chi-square test of advance organizers

Significance level	Degree of freedom	Amount
.123	1	2.381

Enumerative sentences were not frequently used in Iranian letters as well as English ones. The categories were not linked very often in any of the groups of letters. Based on the findings, a Chi-square test was conducted to show that there is no significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding enumerative sentences.

Table 8 Descriptive statistics comparing Iranian and English RLs
in terms of enumerative sentences

	Iranian N=27	English N=20
Enumerative sentences	8	8

Table 9 Chi-square test of enumerative sentences

Significance level	Degree of freedom	Amount
.593	1	.286

English letters had more bridge sentences in comparison with Iranian ones. In some texts, the English writers finalized the first paragraph by using a relevant sentence to the next paragraph. This type of sentence was rarely seen in the Iranian texts.

Table 10 Descriptive statistics comparing Iranian and English RLs
in terms of bridge sentences

	Iranian N=27	English N=20
Bridge sentences	1	5

Having the frequency of less than 5 in Iranian RLs, a chi square test could not be conducted. Though based on the descriptive analysis, there was no significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding bridge sentences. Regarding topic sentences, Iranian letters were far different from English ones. Most of the English texts had topic sentences which held the controlling ideas. On the contrary, the Iranian texts had a few topic sentences, so a Chi-square test was conducted to show that there is a significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding topic sentences.

Table 11 Descriptive Statistics Comparing Iranian and English RLs
in Terms of Topic sentences

	Iranian N=27	English N=20
Topic sentences	6	16

Table 12 Chi-square Test of Topic sentences

Significance level	Degree of freedom	Amount
.033	1	4.454

4.1. Discussion

Concerning digression as shown in the result section, based on descriptive statistics, there is no significant difference between the two groups of letters. It is not so prevalent in Iranian texts. This might be due to having short paragraphs. In such short texts, there is not much opportunity to have digression, while that was too pervasive in English texts due to longer texts. This feature is crucial in letters since it helps the reader make a connection between different parts. There was no significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding textual symmetry. Writing symmetrical texts was not so prevalent among Iranian writers. Some of the texts had short introductions, long bodies and short conclusions. The introductory paragraphs, which held most characteristics, were usually longer. In English texts, the paragraphs on accomplishments overweighed other sections. The professors accentuated the students' potentials and successes in details. At the same time, there was no significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding data integration. The overt intention of recommendation letters is evaluating applicants. Of course, this evaluation occurs through the interpretation of data which mainly focuses on the applicants' accomplishments as well as abilities. In some of Iranian texts, the characteristics were scattered in different paragraphs, while English texts demonstrated more on integration. Advance organizers were the next feature that finds no significant difference among Iranian and English recommendation letters. Nearly all of Iranian writers used this feature in order to aver all what they prefer for the applicants at the very beginning sentences to clarify the purpose of the text. Most of English writers applied this feature while starting the letters as well. Finding no significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding enumerative sentences, researchers found this kind of sentence lists various types in one group that are going to be examined in letters. It was included in either Iranian or English texts very often. Bridge sentences linked opinions from the end of one paragraph to the beginning of the other one. A bridge sentence is the initial one starting a paragraph and going on from the ideas in the previous paragraphs. Neither Iranian nor English writers used this feature very often, so there was no significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding bridge sentences. And finally, topic sentences provide the controlling and main idea of a paragraph. English authors used this kind of sentence in most of the letters while it was not found in Iranian RLs, so there was a significant difference between Iranian and English recommendation letters regarding topic sentences.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The present study emphasized the textual features of the two groups of recommendation letters comprising 27 Iranian and 20 English texts. In order to analyze these texts, Clyne's (1991) framework was adopted. This framework consisted of seven features named digression, textual symmetry, data integration, advance organizers, enumerative sentences, bridge sentences, and topic sentences. The results showed that

regarding textual symmetry and topic sentences, there were significant differences between Iranian and English letters, while there were no significant differences between these two categories of letters regarding digression, data integration, advance organizers, enumerative sentences, and bridge sentences, so the findings almost fall in line with Pretch's (1998) cross-cultural comparison of recommendation letters.

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of such a comparative study can contribute to material preparation. Being aware of the conventions shared by a community leads one to provide authentic materials. In this regard, ESP instructors as well as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers can apply the materials to teach writing. The conclusions demonstrate the way through which academics communicate what they mean in order to support applicants and state their potentials as well as accomplishments. Knowing the features which English authors use while writing recommendation letters is helpful for academic writing instructors to prepare students to undertake such a task. While preparing materials, these letters can be appropriate samples.

7. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The present study was conducted to compare the textual features of Iranian and English recommendation letters, as there was no analysis on comparing Iranian recommendation letters with those of English using Clyne's framework. This study used the framework proposed by Clyne (1991) quantitatively. Other studies might use a qualitative analysis or both. Moreover, just English texts were used in this research, as Persian recommendation letters can also be analyzed in addition to English ones. Regarding comparative studies, there are other frameworks such as Purves and Hawisher's (1990) and Kaplan's (1995) which can be consulted while analyzing letters.

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