Indirectness Features in Argumentative Essays of Costa Rican EFL University Students

Studies of intercultural communication and contrastive rhetoric have provided evidence for the existence of different discourse patterns across cultures (Connor, U., 2011; Bennet, K. & Muresan, L.; 2016; Kaplan, R., 1966; among many others). Abdulkareem (2013) and Singh (2015) also pointed out that using an appropriate style involves a significant level of difficulty for second language writers in English. Thus, writers in a second language may not be fully aware of the particular expectations of the target culture, and as a result, produce texts not reflecting their expected patterns of discourse. Uysal (2014) has listed a number of cultural differences in a range of genres including rhetorical structures such as argument structure, coherence, straightforward versus flowery language style, among others. Similarly, an extensive study of discourse features in Mexican Spanish by Montaño-Harmon (1991) has pointed to the languages' strong penchant for a fancy style containing digression and lengthy non linear developments. English, on the other hand, has been characterized as direct, concise, and explicit in showing the relationship between all parts of an academic text (Swales and Feak, 2012). As for the specific features that cause indirectness, Hinkel (1997) has classified indirectness markers and strategies into three categories: rhetorical, lexical, and syntactic

In a preliminary study of cause-and-effect, comparison-contrast, and argumentative essays with a smaller comparable population, the authors found that the argumentative texts examined contained an overall higher rate of occurrence of selected indirectness features. The current study emerged as a follow-up with the purpose of looking deeper into the use of unnecessary indirectness in the argumentative genre. The authors expect to identify the areas where the students' writing most frequently diverges from the expected direct and concise academic English style and to use these results to help focus the teaching of academic writing more closely on the most pressing aspects.

A first examination of the writing samples and a review of the indirectness features proposed by the literature led to the selection of a set of indirectness features for scrutiny. The samples consisted of 30 essays from the course IO-5230 Written Communication IV at the Western Branch of the University of Costa Rica. The approach used for data analysis was a descriptive statistical study. The researchers counted occurrences of the chosen indirectness features in the essays and calculated an average of the total number of occurrences of each. The researchers then found the average of the total number of all features. Next, they calculated the percentage of each individual feature compared to the total number of occurrences of all features. The resulting percentages were analyzed to identify the most prevalent indirectness trends. The results reveal a high incidence of unnecessary adjectival clauses, delayed claims with expletives and long nominalizations, and hedging with modal auxiliaries. The conclusions pointed to a need for raising awareness of English rhetorical patterns beyond teaching the basic aspects of a text, for fostering a better understanding of the audience, and for examining direct and indirect language samples along with the students.

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