

A Cultural Perspective on Knowledge Construction in Academic Research: Iraqi Professors' Attitudes towards *Copying* and *Imitation*

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Abstract:

This paper explores the way by which Arab-Islamic culture affects knowledge construction in L1 academic research writing in Iraq. In fulfilling this aim a semi-structured interview with ten well-published Iraqi university researchers has been conducted. Salient issues regarding dispensary knowledge construction are discussed, focusing on the controversial writing strategies of *copying* and *imitation*. Following a recursive abstraction method, reoccurring themes in participants' responses are identified. Findings reveal that the Arab-Islamic culture is to some extent responsible for shaping the way Iraqi academic researchers built knowledge in their disciplines. Responses also show great consensus among participants regarding the way copying and imitation are utilized in higher educational system. Finally an argent call for reconceptualizing these acts within the Iraqi educational system has been recommended.

Keywords: : Knowledge construction, cultural transfer, copying, imitation

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الملخص:

يستكشف هذا البحث الطريقة التي تؤثر بها الثقافة العربية الإسلامية على بناء المعرفة في الكتابة البحثية الأكاديمية باللغة الأولى في العراق. ولتحقيق هذا الهدف، أجريت مقابلة شبه منظمة مع عشرة باحثين جامعيين عراقيين منشورين جيداً. تمت مناقشة القضايا البارزة المتعلقة ببناء المعرفة في الصيدلة، مع التركيز على استراتيجيات الكتابة المثيرة للجدل للنسخ والتقليد. باتباع طريقة التجريد المتكرر، تم تحديد الموضوعات المتكررة في استجابات المشاركين. تكشف النتائج أن الثقافة العربية الإسلامية مسؤولة إلى حد ما عن تشكيل الطريقة التي بنى بها الباحثون الأكاديميون العراقيون المعرفة في تخصصاتهم. تُظهر الردود أيضاً إجماعاً كبيراً بين المشاركين فيما يتعلق بالطريقة التي يتم بها استخدام النسخ والتقليد في النظام التعليمي العالي. أخيراً، تم التوصية بدعوة ملحة لإعادة تصور هذه الأفعال داخل النظام التعليمي العراقي.

لكلمات المفتاحية: بناء المعرفة، النقل الثقافي، النسخ، التقليد.

1. Introduction

This paper sheds light on a crucial issue related to first/second language composition and which has been highly debated in the field of applied linguistics for a while now, specifically what is called "*cultural transfer*" (Wendland, 2012). Research in this area has tried to investigate how L2 students coming from different cultures write in English academically and whether cultural differences could, actually, shape their academic writing practices (Kubota, 1998; Stanley, 2002; Sowden, 2005; Connor, 2004). Part of the research has mainly focused on the textual practices of *copying* and *imitation* especially by Asian students who write in English as a second/foreign language (see Bloch, 2001). Researchers have often justified this inappropriate textual practice by what has been known as the *cultural excuse* (Pennycook, 1996; Bloch, 2001; Pecorari, 2008), stating that most *Asian societies* such as the Chinese society devalues individualism and put great emphasis on *imitation* in the production of new texts (Bloch, 2008: 219). Such cultures are said to promote collaborative knowledge building and to preserve, through imitation, the highly sacred and traditional texts they value. As a consequence of such a view, Asian writers have been put in the position of *imitators* and *copiers* rather than being *constructors* of knowledge in their academic fields.

Putting this in mind, this study aims at gaining a better understanding on the way Arab-Islamic culture could actually shape the way Iraqi academic discourse community members construct and transmit knowledge when writing academically in their *first language*. Although, much research has been conducted on the writing difficulties most Arab academic writers face in L1 and L2 academic contexts (see Yusuf, 2010; Anwar & Ahmed, 2016; Dhanapal & Agab, 2023), the cultural issue has been in some way overlooked, especially when related to the area of L1 academic

research. Thus, the purpose of this study is to fulfill this gap and to supply the body of literature with some explanations concerning the impact of the Arab-Islamic culture on the way knowledge is built in L1 academic research writing in Iraq.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Education in the Arab World: A Historical Overview

Going through literature on the history of education in pre-Islamic Arabia shows that knowledge was, in most cases, *orally* constructed (Lichtenstadter, 1945; Schwartz et al, 2009; Yusuf, 2010; Abdulelah, 2016). This is likely to reflect the "*nomadic*" nature of the society back then (Lichtenstadter, 1945: 32), which was mainly tribal and conditioned by constant moving from one place to another. Because of that, *memorization* and *repetition* were basic strategies used for *knowledge transmission* and *knowledge construction* at that time (Yusuf, 2010). What helped even more was the sharp memory pre-Islamic Arabs had, which made them resort to *poetry* and *prose* as main sources for keeping track of most of their information (Meisami & Paul, 2010). In this respect, Holes (2004:11) notably asserts that Arabs before the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) preserved the linguistic structure of their language through "orally composed and transmitted poetry."

As for prose, pre-Islamic Arabs employed various types of prose literature ranging from stories and lengthy speeches to short proverbs for documenting the major historical events they witness (Sami & Qurshi, 2022: 74). Memorizing lengthy prosaic paragraphs had been a common practice among most Arabia tribes and delivering speeches in public was a chance for showing how retentive their memories were (ibid).

Similarly, during the Islamic era, the habit of memorization, repetition, and imitation remained basic strategies through which knowledge was transmitted and

constructed. The *Quran*, which is the holy book of Muslims, was revealed *aurally* to the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him) and consequently delivered by him *orally* to others (Abdulelah, 2016). Thus, early Muslims needed to memorize and repeat the Quran in order to preserve it, not to mention reciting certain verses by heart in their daily prayers. Moreover, learning the Quran through memorization and repetition was a major pillar in the philosophy of education in Islam (Nasr, 1992). Seeking knowledge was, to some extent, related to *worshipping* and being educated meant being qualified in Quran and *Hadith*, which are statements said by the prophet (Kadi 2006). Through the middle ages of Islam, where knowledge was at its peak and writing developed significantly, education also was guided by memorizing the Quran and Hadith (Eickelman, 1978; Nasr, 1992; Abdulelah, 2016).

However, memorization, to this day, is still deeply rooted within the Arab educational approach (see Boyle, 2006; Abbas, 2018; Sahin, 2018). Learning is shaped at an early age by the importance given to this practice, especially memorizing verses of Al-Quran and Al-Hadith. Being part of the Arabian culture, Iraq, like most Arab countries considers memorization as a basic pillar in its educational system and from very early stages of learning. The next section sheds light on this crucial issue in an attempt to answer the following question:

- *To what extent do memorization, repetition and imitation guide the educational process in Iraqi schools?*

2.2 Memorization, Repetition, and Imitation in Iraqi Education

Sharing a similar linguistic and cultural background, Iraq like most Arab nations is to some extent influenced by Islamic education. Linguistically, the *medium of educational instruction* in Iraq and most Arabic countries is Arabic (Swales & Najjer, 1987; Najjer, 1990). Although there are several versions of Arabic, it is the *Modern*

Standard Arabic (MSA) that is used in education, news, formal communications, and modern literary works (El-Hasan,1977, as cited in Swales, 1990). Most educated people get to control this version gradually through their process of education.

MSA is a modernized version of *Classical Arabic* (CA) which is the "traditional, literary, and religious language" (Swales,1990: 104) found in the highly valued text of Al-Quran, Al-Hadith, and in most classical Arabic poems. However, these two formal Arabic versions differ in some way from the informal, colloquia, and daily used Arabic language, i.e. "local dialects, that a native speaker of Arabic gets to acquire naturally" (Abdulelah ,2016: 59). Therefore, most school students in the Arab world, from their early stages of learning, are required to learn and develop the two formal versions of Arabic language, i.e. MSA and CA, which differ considerably from their informal dialect. For gaining a sufficient grasp over these two versions, most school students in Iraq and other Arab countries are required to *memorize*, *repeat*, and to some extent, *imitate* highly valued classical Arabic texts (see Al-Jumaily,2004; Abdulelah, 2016; Ismael & Faraj, 2019). In fact, the school curricula in most of the Arab countries explicitly promote these learning strategies in their teaching and learning process.

As such, in Iraq children start their elementary education at the age of six and end this stage at the age of twelve. Still not being competent in reading nor writing, an Iraqi first year elementary student is required to memorize, through repetition, a considerable amount of Quranic verses along with a couple of prophet's sayings. Memorizing highly sacred texts are not all what Iraqi elementary children have to memorize, some rhyming poems and melodies are also required to be repeated orally and memorized by heart.

This approach to education stretches reaching the intermediate and preparatory stages, (each stage consisting of three years of study) where long versus of *classical*

Arabic poetry should also be memorized along with the Quran and Hadith. It is believed that by memorizing and repeating these highly valued texts, students will get to be familiar with their Arabic and Islamic historical civilization, as Bloch (2008: 223) put it "a kind of connection between past and present." Although such practices are also supposed to help increase students' repertoire and enhance their linguistic dexterity, students are not given an opportunity to use the language in a creative and innovative way (Ismael & Faraj, 2019). Thus, when reaching a point where students must use their language abilities in an original and creative way, all what most of them are capable of doing is repeating and imitating previously written texts and ideas.

Writing as a school subject is underestimated in the Iraqi education curriculum in general in such a way that memorization, repeating and imitation, which are supposed to be eliminated to the minimum in such a productive skill, are the bases of most students' writing habits (Al-Mesoody & Al-Mehdawy, 2017; Ismael & Faraj, 2019; Nasser, 2019). Instead of promoting the creative use of language, Iraqi school textbooks, which are concerned with teaching writing, seems to encourage repeating and memorizing.

Regarding the question imposed earlier of whether memorization, repetition and imitation guide the educational process in Iraqi schools, it could be concluded, but with caution, that they do dominate both the teaching and learning approach. However, what would be of more significant to the aim of the study is to find out whether these practices extend to more advanced levels of education. In fulfilling this aim a semi-structured interview was conducted with ten Iraqi experienced researchers, namely professors and assistant professors. The way data was collected, coded and analyzed is detailed next.

3. Methods

3.1 Participants and Data Collection

During the spring of 2024 semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten well-published university researchers working at several Iraqi universities. The participants' academic ranking was either assistant professors or full professors with slight variation in the length of academic teaching years. Six were from the areas related to humanities three from biology and one from engineering. Being all from Iraq and having Iraqi Arabic as their first language, interviews were conducted in Arabic. For the ease of reference, each participant was given a number along with the capital letter (P) which stands for the word *participant*, i.e. (P1-P10). An overview of participants is shown in table (1).

After taking permissions, all interviews were audio recorded. The length of each interview varied from 20 minutes to over half an hour. Each participant was interviewed twice except for (P2), who was interviewed once, because of having an urgent commitment which prevented her from being available for the rest of the summer.

The interviews were structured around the basic theme of the study, which aims at investigating the various practices involved in knowledge construction within the participants' academic discourse communities, specifically *coping* and *imitation*. In addition to responding to general questions, some participants spontaneously gave their opinions on other relevant issues regarding teaching in Iraqi schools and universities.

Table 1

An overview of Participants in the Study

Participants	Academic rank	Sex	Discipline
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P1	Full Prof.	Male	Sociology
P2	Full Prof.	Female	Sociology
P3	Full Prof.	Female	Psychology
P4	Full Prof.	Male	Philosophy
P5	Asst. Prof	Male	Linguistics
P6	Asst. Prof	Female	Archeology
P7	Full Prof.	Female	Biology
P8	Asst. Prof	Male	Biology
P9	Asst. Prof	Male	Biology
P10	Full Prof.	Male	Civil Engineering

3.2 Data Coding and Data Analysis

Following a *recursive abstraction method*, the audio recordings were all transcribed and coded. The recursive abstraction method has been considered a very useful method of analysis when dealing with rich interview data (Smith & Eatough, 2006; Polkinghorne & Arnold, 2014; Pecorari & Shaw, 2021). This method follows a number of steps in which major *themes* are extracted from the interviewees' responses; this mainly involved highlighting keywords and phrases of interest then paraphrasing them into various themes. Categorizing and coding these themes into basic ones were the final steps in the process. Furthermore, whenever a theme emerges in later responses the earlier ones were reexamined for the same theme. Because the interviews were conducted in Arabic, relevant responses appearing below have been translated into English.

In the next section, three themes are to be indicated. These themes were repeatedly identified throughout the transcripts. It should be noted that the researcher's interest was mainly to focus on the factors brought up by the participants when determining their comments on the various issues discussed in the interview.

3.3 Results and Discussion

In this section three main themes that emerged from the responses to the interview questions are presented. Although the participants had conflicting opinions on some issues regarding the issue of disciplinary knowledge construction, they did seem to agree on certain factors regarding the acts of *copying* and *imitation* in academic research. Putting this in mind, below are the themes extracted from the interview process and which carry great interest because they reveal how Iraqi academic discourse members respond to certain controversies related to knowledge building and knowledge transition in their disciplines.

A. Knowledge construction through legitimate academic acts

In stimulating discussions, the interview started by asking the participants' about the way knowledge is constructed in academic productions and what, in their opinion, would be good ways of constructing knowledge from previous work. Despite some conflicting views, all ten participants agreed to the fact that academic discourse is cumulative in nature, in the sense that depending on previous work when producing new ones is a legitimate academic practice:

Extract (1)

(P1) "Building on the work of others is inevitable in producing any academic genre, but pay attention to what I am trying to mean, I said *building* which means using my own bricks not stealing the whole building."

Extract (2)

(P6) "when we build knowledge in our academic fields, we definitely must rely on sources, otherwise what we are saying would not be labeled as academic."

Extract (3)

(P7) "New ideas in any academic discipline are actually born from old ones..... how can we fill a gap without relying on previous studies and research."

Moreover, the participants described some types of academic writing techniques as legitimate, such as *paraphrasing*, *summarizing* and *quoting*.

Extract (4)

(P1) "In my opinion, paraphrasing is a good tool of writing from sources...it could help us use our own blocks when constructing academic texts.. copying can never help in building anything academically.. copying is stealing the work of others"

Extract (5)

(P10) "in most of my research I depend of paraphrasing, I think that any academic writer should be able to paraphrase and write from a source using his own words.

As for *copying* and *imitating*, conflicting opinions among several participants can be recognized. This could be due to the fact that what falls in the common domain is how disciplinary specific. This means that some academic disciplines view certain information as being common knowledge which can be simply copied directly without documentation.

Extract (6)

(P2) "we must summarize from a source or use quotations when we want to copy directly...in my opinion copying *common knowledge* is okay in any discipline."

Extract (7)

(P7) "we should always follow a conventional way of writing academically... however common phraseology can be directly copied."

Extract (8)

(P8) "Some information don't need to be paraphrased...it is common knowledge for us in our domain...however for novice writers they must first imitate the way knowledge is constructed in their disciplines in order for them to discover what is common from what is not."

The issues mentioned above were recognized by nearly all participants. While participant did acknowledge the use of *copying* and *imitation* in some cases related to *common knowledge* and *formulaic expressions*, they did, however, express their concerns about what they have called "*an academic disease*."

Extract (9)

(P1) "we have something wrong going on recently, it is just like some kind of illness...it is spreading and it is dangerous.., students cannot write anymore they depend on copying and pasting"

Extract (10)

(P3) "sorry to say it, but knowledge is no more constructed on previous work...no no ..it is copied and this way of writing is spreading to advanced writers too"

Extract (11)

(P10) "I am a bit concerned about what is going on in our universities... can you believe it.. postgraduates are copying instead of writing in their own words!! This is a disease and I think it will not stop until we discover some recovery procedures"

As mentioned in the responses, this disease has been spreading in the Iraqi academic discourse community for a while now. One of the main factors recognized by the participants as being the main source of such a disease is the deficiency of

writing academically. As will be shown in the extracts below, most participants blame the Iraqi educational system for restricting the teaching of writing to the acts of copying and imitation.

Thus, a second theme emerged from the participants' responses regarding the issue of writing in Iraqi schools and universities.

B. The state of Writing in Iraqi education

Conforming to what has been mentioned earlier in the literature review, most participants expressed their concerns regarding the way writing is taught in Iraqi schools and universities. Participants saw that the academic writing issues we are facing in the Iraqi academic community today is, in some way, a natural outcome of a teaching process which gives more weight to *memorization* than *creativity* and *innovation*. Participant (P4) below notably states that teaching writing as a school subject is underestimated in the Iraqi education curriculum in such a way that memorization, repetition and imitation are the bases of most students' writing habits especially at the primary and secondary levels.

Extract (12)

(P4) "There is no *freedom of expression* in schools and this could actually impede the development of students' abilities to be creative... as you know children in schools, namely at the primary and secondary levels, learn to memorize long text in different subjects and then should write down what they have memorized by heart in the exam.. I have a nine year old daughter at the fourth stage, she tells me that she must memorize '*AL-Tabir*' (التعبير) can you believe it!!

It should be noted that one of the most important writing school subjects in Iraqi schools is called '*AL-Tabir*' (التعبير) which literary means *composition of expression*, or sometimes called '*AL-Insha*' (الانشاء) (*composition writing*), which is

taught from early stages of education to the preparatory stage. In the elementary levels, *Al-tabir* is taught through giving students scattered sentences and informing them to organize these sentences in a form of a paragraph (See *Qiraati* for the 3rd, 4th, and 5th classes). Students then should memorize this paragraph and write it down in their copybooks. For gaining a full mark on composition in their final exam, students should be able to write down any *tabir* they have studied and memorized throughout their school year. Although this way of teaching is not explicitly promoted, it has become a widespread teaching behavior and a widespread learning habit that is implicitly reinforced by educational authorities through giving full marks for verbatim copying from textbooks. This way of teaching *AL-Tabir* is also extended to *intermediate levels* as mentioned by (P5) and (P10) below:

Extract (13)

(P5) "At the primary and secondary levels, copying and memorization are encouraged by Iraqi educational authorities.. can you imagine!!....they give full marks for identically memorized and copied compositions.. my son had to memorize a readymade composition written in his Arabic textbook in order for him to pass his ministerial examination with a full mark"

Extract (14)

(P10) "how can we expect things not going this way in our universities.. the educational system encourages its members to memorize and nothing but memorization works"

Consequently, coming from an educational background which values, copying and imitation, most Iraqi academic community members may face challenges in developing certain knowledge building abilities such as: innovative reasoning, critical thinking, summarizing and synthesizing. What makes the matter worse is the limited

space given to academic writing lessons within the university's disciplinary curriculum if compared to other content subjects. Participant (P6) raises this issue:

Extract (15)

(P6)"Don't you agree with me that the way knowledge is constructed and transmitted are never taught in universities.. I mean graduates and postgraduates are left to figure out the way they should build their thoughts and present them.. even when taught how to write from sources this never extends teaching writing mechanisms such as: punctuation, grammar, spelling ..etc."

As responses show, previous learning deficiencies could be the major reasons for why *copying* and *imitation* are common practices in knowledge constructing . Nonetheless, these acts have not been viewed negatively by all participants. Conflicting views over these issues can be noticed throughout the coming responses. In order to elicit more comments about such type of acts and to directly address the aim of the study, the researcher followed up with more specific questions, regarding the Iraqi-Arab and Islamic culture. The responses revealed an important theme to be discussed next.

C. The State of Copying and Imitation in knowledge construction

In deciding whether these acts are legitimate or not, participants discussed their thoughts and specified the reasons behind their judgments. For some *imitation* could be an effective way of discovering how knowledge is constructed and transmitted in one's own discipline. Participant (P8) sees imitation as deeply rooted within our culture:

Extract (16)

(P8) I think imitation is a central part in Arab education...it is part of our culture too. I mean we learn at an early age by imitation and it is quite beneficial for novice academic members who are just learning the discourse of their disciplinesimitating but not copying"

Like (P8), participant (P9) and (10) agreed to the fact that memorization copying, and imitation are taught at early ages in Iraq.

Extract (17)

(P9) That is a good issue you have just bought up.. most Iraqis learn by memorization and copying...we must memorize AL-Quran, Al-Hadith and long classical Arabic poetry without even knowing the meaning of the words... then we copy long chunks of language in our copybooks we write and write copying from Arabic textbooks.. I think this would definitely affect the way we write and built knowledge"

Extract (18)

(P10) I think, imitation is important at a certain stage, copying is too...and at advanced level, imitation teaches a lot about how to write academically.. but at a particular stage it should be controlled"

Participants also expressed their concern regarding the negative consequences these acts might carry. As (P10) argues above, these acts should be guided; while such acts are likely to have positive impact on early stages of education, they can impede the construction of disciplinary knowledge if utilized at more advanced ones.

The cultural excuse was also bought up several times and by most participants. Professor (P7) declared the fact that Islamic culture values memorization repetition, and imitation:

Extract (19)

(P7) "We live in a culture that values the words... we have a rich language it is important I think at early ages to memorize the rich language of Quran...this can actually build our own language...But this practice should be restricted to sacred texts only."

However Professor (P5) argued for reconsideration such acts in the Iraqi educational system in general. What professor (P5) said was actually bought up by most participants at the end of their interviews.

Extract (20)

(P7) "The Islamic culture promotes memorization and imitation, that is okay I think.. but this state of affairs was relevant to pre-Islamic and Islamic ages...I mean a time when documenting, printing and all the technology we have did not exist. Today we need to reconsider these acts in our teaching and learning methods"

Finally it can be seen that all participants thought of *copying* and *imitation* nearly the same way. Although some conflicting opinions can be identified through the responses, still these opinions are believed to be the result of academic disciplinary variations, as Hyland (1999) notably argues "every discipline has its own unique way of knowledge constructing and expressing."

4. Conclusion

Knowledge construction is a conventional practice in any academic research and building on the work of others is an obligatory requirement for achieving this construction. Choosing how to draw on previous work can be influenced by many factors one of which is the cultural background of the researcher. Two of the major practices which could be involved in knowledge construction are *copying* and *imitation*. For such the present study discussed these acts in the light of silent notions of *culture* and *education* and within the Iraqi academic context.

The participants of this study all were L1 Iraqi teachers who work at various Iraqi universities and who hold advanced levels of academic ranking, namely assistant and full professors. Asking prominent university members to take part in this study came actually under the influence of what Pecorari & Shaw (2012:160) notably stated that university teachers "are inevitably gatekeeper" and from a believe that certain methods of teaching need immediate reconceptualizing.

Interviews with the participants revealed striking findings which conform most of what was mentioned earlier in the literature review that Arab-Islamic culture is to some extent responsible for shaping the way Iraqi academic researchers built knowledge in their disciplines. Analyzing the responses also showed great consensus among participants regarding the way copying and imitation are utilized in our educational system. Though admitting the importance of such practices during early stages of education, all participants revealed major concerns of a disease outbreak due to an overuse of such acts especially in more advanced levels of education and academic research.

