Visuality in Academic Writing: Reading Textual Difference in the Work of Multilingual Student Writers

Amy A. Zenger
American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract

With the growth of the teaching of English globally and increasing numbers of students in English language medium universities, students in academic English classrooms can be expected to be literate in two or more languages. Multilingual writers in the university engage in high stakes academic writing even as they navigate differences among languages and academic writing systems.   While research and pedagogies addressing the question of difference in the writing of multilingual students in English have focused primarily on verbal features, writing has come to be conceptualized in terms of multimodality. Writing is also a visual mode, and multilingual writers draw on their knowledge of different conventions and writing systems as they compose. To reflect on the visuality of writing, this article considers examples of textual difference in the English writing of multilingual university students in Lebanon. Multilingual approaches to teaching writing are developing quickly, but instruction in visual aspects of writing is still predominantly prescriptive. Instructors of academic writing have a responsibility to contextualize visual dimensions of academic writing, especially for multilingual writers. Qualitative studies will help understand the perceptions and experiences of multilingual academic writers as they negotiate all of the modes of writing, including the visual.

Introduction

With the growth of the teaching of English globally and increasing numbers of students in English language medium universities, students in academic English classrooms can be expected to be literate in two or more languages. As Canagarajah and Jerskey (2009: 473) point out, 'Whatever their proficiency level in English, advanced multilingual writers are faced with the complex linguistic act of shuttling between multiple languages and discourses as they write in English'. Decrying a monolingualist ideology and its effect on teaching, scholars have called for instructors of academic writing to develop pedagogies and policies that are better suited to multilingual writers (Horner et al 2011).

At the heart of teaching approaches that acknowledge and value multilingualism is the question: 'How do teachers and researchers of English writing orient to linguistic and cultural difference in the essays they read?' (Canagarajah 2006: 589). Canagarajah and Jerskey (2009: 481) claim that 'writing research has so far treated the first language as a hindrance to the acquisition of English literacy'. This underlying assumption has led, in their view, to academic literacy teaching practices that frame 'linguistic and textual difference in terms of deficiency or error'; 'compartmentalize different literacy traditions'; and are prescriptive, committed to inculcating normative rules and conventions (Canagarajah and Jerskey 2009: 482). A more appropriate pedagogy for multilingual writers, they argue, would not focus on asserting conventions and rules a-contextually, but would instead aim to encourage writers to be aware of the rhetorical and textual conventions that exist in different contexts, and to

develop strategies for using them according to their purposes in relation to particular audiences.

Research and practice in multilingual writing pedagogy focuses necessarily on linguistic aspects. In this essay, I reflect upon a non-verbal dimension of the writing of multilingual students in the English academic writing classes I teach: the visual mode. My university is situated in Lebanon, and, like a number of universities in the region, it models its mission and its curriculum on American liberal arts approaches to higher education. The language of instruction is English, and students are required to complete academic writing classes in English and in Arabic, which is the spoken home language of the majority of the students. The educational landscape in Lebanon is very complex; while public education is primarily in Arabic, private schools may follow French, American, or British systems, and a strong Armenian minority also supports the teaching of Armenian language and culture for children in this community. Whatever the primary language of instruction, all schools are required to teach all three principal languages: Arabic, French and English.

Visuality and Writing

Writing has been, and largely continues to be, conceptualized primarily in its verbal mode (Lillis 2013). Linguists and literacy theorists have privileged oral forms of language, conceiving of writing as a representation of speech and situating it in binary opposition to the spoken (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, Olson 1994, Roberts and Street 1997). Theorists have problematized the assumed binary between oral and written language; however, language continues to be privileged even as theorists turn to the study of writing and texts as they are produced and circulate in social contexts (Barton, Hamilton and Ivanič 2000, Lillis 2013). While the verbal dimension is fundamental to writing, theories of multimodality have also challenged an 'overemphasis on the verbal as the key or primary mode' (Lillis 2013: 14). Texts are organized according to both linguistic and visual logics, and other dimensions of writing, such as materiality, inscription, or spatiality, may assume greater importance within a particular text or context (Lillis 2013). The boundaries of modes are not firmly fixed — line spacing or paragraphing might also be defined in terms of space (see Lillis 2013). While discussions of the visual in writing often focus on the relationship between text and images (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006), in this essay I refer simply to such features as scripts and fonts, line spacing, capitalization, punctuation, and paragraphing.

Writing systems and academic literacy conventions, including visual elements, are shaped according to the dynamic needs of the members of the societies using them. Most obviously, scripts differ from one context to another, and they differ in forms, directionality, and type (alphabetic or pictographic, for example) (Olson 1994). Kress (2009: 79) rightly points out: 'critically, cultures may use different script systems. That makes it problematic to speak of *writing* as such; instead we need to say, *writing* in this culture or that'. As Stuart Hall has argued, culture is not a collection of cultural objects but 'a process, a set of practices':

> Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings — the 'giving and taking of meaning' — between the members of a society or group …Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways (Rose 2001: 6).

Hall's observation holds true for academic writing and writing genres; communities of readers and writers socially determine how graphic elements like lines, bolding, italicization, color, spacing, or blocking of text signify meaning. Similarly, these textual structures facilitate and shape particular actions among users. The conventions of textuality in English have developed over centuries of standardization, particularly after the advent of print culture (Leith and Graddol 2007). Arabic textuality and standardization have followed their own historical process of development (Versteegh 1997).

The term 'visuality', drawn from the discourses of art and art history, where it denotes socially constructed visual regimes, may also be relevant for the study of literacy. Hal Foster (1988:

ix) defines visuality as 'a difference, many differences, among how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing or the unseen therein' . He explains how the term has been adopted to articulate a distinction between the visual, 'the mechanism of sight...the datum of vision' and visuality 'its historical techniques…and [the visual's] discursive determinations' (Foster 1998: ix). Visuality depends upon the fact that its action is obscured from the one seeing; it aims 'to make of its many social visualities one essential vision' (Foster 1998: ix). Blommaert (2004: 655) argues that

> Every written document is a visual document, and when we write we continuously deploy a wide range of meaningful visual tactics (differences in font and size, lines, arrows, indentation, etc.). Reading, similarly, involves the visual decoding of the document. Thus, visuality is not lost in PRACTICE, but it is lost in the IDEOLOGICAL CONCEPTION of the writing and reading process [emphasis in original].

Theories of visuality suggest that reading depends upon the suppression of writing's own visual mode. As texts move into the margins of a writing system, or as they are viewed by readers outside of a given writing system, they become less and less readable. They become, rather, more visible as artifacts, and readers become more likely to look at them than to read them.

Despite the insights of literacy scholars and research into multimodality, the teaching of the highly regulated forms of writing in academic domains lends itself to prescriptivist approaches, especially when it comes to the visual aspects of writing, approaches reflected in academic writing manuals, textbooks, and handbooks. In an overview of their approach to academic writing provided in the introductory chapter of their well-known textbook, for example, Swales and Feak (2004: 7) state that 'academic writing is a product of many considerations: audience, purpose, organization, style, flow, and presentation'. Within this comprehensive overview of academic writing, visual elements are categorized within the topic of 'organization', which includes rhetorical patterns and presentation, which is concerned primarily with reviewing a text to eliminate error as much as possible to make a good impression on the reader. To work with writing at the level of presentation, Swales and Feak advise the student writer to carry out three main tasks. In the first task, they are prompted to 'consider the overall format of your work' by responding to these questions:

- Does your paper look as if it was carefully prepared?
- Are there clear paragraphs?
- Is the line spacing appropriate?
- Have you used standard fonts and font sizes? (Swales and Feak 2004: 41)

Additional tasks in this category address the correction of grammar and spelling mistakes.

Similarly, an essay feedback checklist presented by Ferris (2003) generally associates visual aspects with "mechanics" of writing. The checklist is composed of five main categories: 'Response to Prompt/Assignment', 'Content/Ideas', 'Use of Readings', 'Organization', and 'Language and Mechanics' (Ferris 2003: 120). The third category, 'Use of Readings', includes the following point: 'The writer has mastered the mechanics of incorporating ideas from other texts', in reference to the conventionalized visual markers that indicate quotation and citation (Ferris 2003:120). In the fifth category on the checklist, 'Language and Mechanics', the suggested points to review address correctness in punctuation, spelling, typing, and grammar, as well as line spacing and margins, which are visual elements in texts (Ferris 2003:120). When genres are regulated according to academic style guides such as those of the American Psychological Association (APA), Modern Language Association (MLA) and innumerable others, writers have little or no choice in terms of the design of textual elements, since styles standardize fonts, spacing, margins, documentation style, and a myriad of other details. Constraints on writers' options do not mean, however, that these prescribed elements are less significant in terms of how texts construct meanings.

In the sections that follow, I reflect on visuality in relation to writing in the multilingual context of my university. The discussion is based on examples drawn from published texts,

ephemeral public writing, and student writing composed in classes that I taught. Extracts of student writing, which emerged in regular classroom practice are presented anonymously and with the explicit permission of the writers.

Reading Student Writing (1)
Documentation

Documentation systems consist of 'the visible traces of other texts—in the form of notes, quotations, citations, charts, figures, illustrations, and the like' (Harris 2006: 2). Perhaps because citation systems are precise and complex, and because being able to perform them is a high stakes matter, the teaching of documentation may offer the clearest examples of a strong focus on reproducing signs as a skill, connecting them only weakly to the deeper intertextual work that is at the heart of most academic writing. Harris (2006: 2) has made this point in *Rewriting*:

> This kind of work often gets talked about in ways—avoiding plagiarism, documenting sources, citing authorities, acknowledging influences—that make it seem a dreary and legalistic concern. But for me, this misses the real excitement of intellectual writing—which is the chance to engage with and rewrite the work of other thinkers. The job of an intellectual is to push at and question what has been said before, to rethink and reinterpret the texts that he or she is dealing with.

Historical research reinforces the perception of academic writing that Harris puts forward. In her study of the early centuries of print culture and the effects that the coming of the book had on social and intellectual life in Europe, Eisenstein (1983: 24) writes that printing 'changed relationships between men of learning as well as between systems of ideas' . In a videotaped interview with a rare books librarian, William Cope similarly remarks on the far-reaching effect of the invention of the page number: because it allowed scholars for the first time to cite the exact spatial location of a statement of an idea or of a specific passage, it changed scholarly practices profoundly (Cope n.d.). Early print books resembled manuscripts in their lack of textual apparatus—features such as title pages, chapters, sections headings or subheadings, paragraphs, page numbers, indices. Cope traces how the evolution of textual forms over the course of centuries mirrored and also shaped practices of learning and scholarship. The visual and graphical elements that are invented or borrowed from manuscript culture and developed further make it possible for the first time to conceive of 'knowledge as a system grounded in textual authority' (Cope n.d.). Furthermore, in his book-length study of the history of the footnote in historical scholarship, Grafton (1999: 5) documents how 'the footnote is bound up, in modern life, with the ideology and the technical practices of a profession'.

For some students, a university is the first occasion when they are introduced to writing intertextually as a concept or as a set of practices and conventions. For example, I once worked with a student writing an extensive final year project report who (knowing the importance of documenting his source, but having no formal instruction in documentation) invented his own complete documentation system with in-text citations and final references. Other students may be well versed in a formal set of conventions for quoting, citing, and referencing that emerged in a different academic context and that the instructor has not encountered before. For example, some students at my university who have been educated in a French-language medium system reported to me that their practice in quoting passages from sources has been to simply write the first and last phrases in the passage within quotations, and separating them by an ellipsis. The assumption is that the reader will be familiar with the passage in question and therefore not need it to be quoted verbatim in full.

As visual traces of academic practices of reading, documentation has come to bear the heavy burden of being the means through which academic integrity is assessed. Student writing is scanned for violations of academic integrity (sometimes through the use of plagiarism detection software) and universities have developed policies and procedures for administering disciplinary action when expectations are violated. Some institutions (including my own) have invested in a compulsory 'plagiarism test' that may include some conceptual questions about plagiarism, but for the most part assesses the ability to recognize correct and incorrect

examples of citation and paraphrasing (for example, Indiana University's guide 'How to recognize plagiarism' (Indiana University 2015)).

Paragraphing

Practices around paragraphing are shaped by readers' expectations in a particular environment and by writers' conceptions of how paragraphs are organized and formatted. The paragraph in Figure 1 blocks a group of sentences into one unit that is distinguished from the surrounding text by double line spaces above and below. Line breaks within the paragraph signify logical shifts within a single coherent and unifying idea. This paragraph follows a pattern that the writer learned in previous schooling and university study in French-language medium institutions. In discussing different approaches to composing paragraphs, this writer said, 'it is hard [to write paragraphs using a structure following North American academic writing conventions] because I was taught that it was wrong'.

> Granny gives commands to the girls, she makes sure the house or "hut" is running like it should be, she tries to do everything herself, because she takes the role of both the older woman of the house, and also tries to make up for the unfitting behavior of all the men in the household. "Granny puts Sasha by her kitchen-garden and told her to keep watch that the geese did not go in." (p.178).
> Even the grown women act like children in the presence of Granny: "I don't want the old folks to see me" Fyokla says, coming back in the middle of the night, naked, afraid of the old couple's judgment, and specially Granny's, because the latter is known to take disciplinary measures with the girls: "Granny proceeded to whip Motka" (p.180) . When Nikolai, the father of the girl protested: "You must not beat her! You have no right to beat her" (p.180) Granny ignores his demands: "You lie rotting on the stove, you wretched creature!"(p.180). Again, since his sickness had damaged his "usefulness" as a peasant, his authority becomes discarded. We can clearly see how anyone who is not contributing to the income of the house, becomes worthless and annulled by the power of "doxa".
> Usually the men are the ruling peasants in their family, but a change of system occurs when the doxa isn't fully met. In a society struck by poverty, the person in charge becomes the person who is able to provide: The lazy, (old Osip), the drunk (Kiryak), the sick (Nikolai), are all undermined and put aside, and in this is why, In the case of this text, an Old Woman: Granny becomes the head of this Doxa structure.

Figure 1. Paragraphing. An example from a student text. Within the visual block of the paragraph, line breaks signal shifts in logic or topic, but these are still subsumed within the main focus of the paragraph. In rhetorical terms the paragraph is structured inductively, building evidence for the central claim in the final sentence.

The writer of the paragraph in Figure 2 explained that she inserted a line break each time she started a new idea; paragraphs should contain 'a single idea'. Her paragraphs consist of only one or two sentences, which is not typical of academic writing or the models of paragraphs presented in handbooks. Nevertheless, her choice echoes the language of advice presented for organizing paragraphs, to limit paragraphs to one idea. The handbook used in this academic writing program included small tips directed to English as a Second Language (ESL) writers. This is the ESL Tip for paragraph writers:

> ESL Tip: Indent the first line of each paragraph one-half inch. Set the margins at one-half inch, and press the return key on your computer every time you start a new paragraph. Do not add extra space between paragraphs (Howard 2010: 76).

The tip offers explicit information to writers who may have learned paragraph building within a textual environment with reading and writing expectations that differ from those defined for American academic writing, as referenced in this handbook. It does not refer to any other system of paragraphing, however, which may suggest that the model presented is the only form. The specificity of the instructions in the tip clearly indicate that they are addressing familiar moves that ESL writers might make: for example, adding extra space between paragraphs or failing to indent five spaces at the beginning of the paragraph.

The author continues by saying that a false analogy doesn't exist. Information and details can cause some differences and analogy might be false in respect to other factors.

However, "drawing a false analogy" is the confusion between homology and analogy. Homology is the resemblance between the two species, characters but not organs.

Lorenz deep discoveries have led him to conclude that analogy and homology concepts are applicable on behaviors and morphologies.

The author wanted to illustrate the existence of cultural homology as well. He gave the example of the medieval armor that was made to protect the throat and chest and gradually became a status symbol. The rail-way carriage was also replaced by a longitudinal corridor. This shows that historical features are still there but are improved.

Figure 2. Paragraphing. An example from a student text. Each line break represents the start of a new idea.

I turn now to a published text written in Arabic to consider the practices of paragraphing in evidence. Figure 3 reproduces a paragraph from the introduction to a textbook on composition for Arabic students (Bandari 2009: 4). In the paragraph reproduced here, phrases are demarcated by commas; the only full stop punctuation appears at the end of the selection. The English translation of the passage, on the other hand, uses full stops in places where the original used commas. In the English version, commas would be incorrect. Furthermore, it can be seen that in this example commas and periods are not inserted directly after the preceding word, but have an additional space intervening. These practices do emerge in English written by students who are skilled in Arabic composition.

لا بد من التدريب أولا على المهارات التعبيرية قبل الدخول إلى كتابة موضوع تعبير جيد
ومتميز ، ذلك أن أي عمل من الأعمال يتكون من عدة مهارات لا بد من إتقانها أولا للخروج
بالعمل إلى الصورة الكاملة المرجوة ، ولعل الجديد في هذا الكتاب التدريبي أنه يتناول مهارات
تعبيرية تجعل من الدارس إنسانا قادرا على التعبير عن الأفكار في أبسط وأدق صورة ، ولعل
التحدي الأكبر في هذا الكتاب هو أنه يتناسب مع معظم الفئات العمرية للدارسين ، ذلك أن تناول
المادة العلمية فيه يخرج بالدارس إلى آفاق جديدة ومتطورة تجعله ينظر إلى عملية كتابة
موضوع تعبير على أنها نزهة لغوية بين الكلمات والمرادفات والتعبيرات البسيطة والتعبيرات
المركبة وغير ذلك مما يتطلبه موضوع التعبير الجيد .

English Translation: Practicing writing skills is a must before one could come up with a well-written and unique composition. This is because any undertaking whatsoever is comprised of a number of skills that have to be mastered before arriving at the desired final outcome. Perhaps, what is new about this exercise book is that it tackles composition skills that make the students capable of expressing thoughts in the simplest and most accurate manner. The most challenging thing about this book was perhaps that it is suitable for students of different age groups; the material contained herein opens up new and elaborate horizons for students, allowing them to consider the process of writing a composition a linguistic picnic among words, synonyms, simple expressions, complex expressions, and other such requirements of a well-written composition. (Translation from the Arabic by Dima Mouallem.)

Figure 3. Paragraphing and punctuation. The English translation below the original Arabic text shows differences in practices of punctuation; commas are used in the original, at the points where full stops are inserted in the translation.

Text production

Handwriting has an important place in university writing classrooms, as a mode typically used for notes, freewriting, and other less regulated forms that are valued as places where students can draw on their own languages, habits of organization, and rereading to shape meaning. In unregulated forms of writing, writers seem to be less likely to compartmentalize the different languages and scripts available to them than they are when they compose more formal documents. In Figure 4 the arrows between bits of information recorded from sources, notes to self commenting on the information ('comment on this'), and use of Arabic ('b3d' written in Latin letters and numerals—a texting language) show that the writer freely shapes the space of the page and visual symbols to engage with her reading of a text.
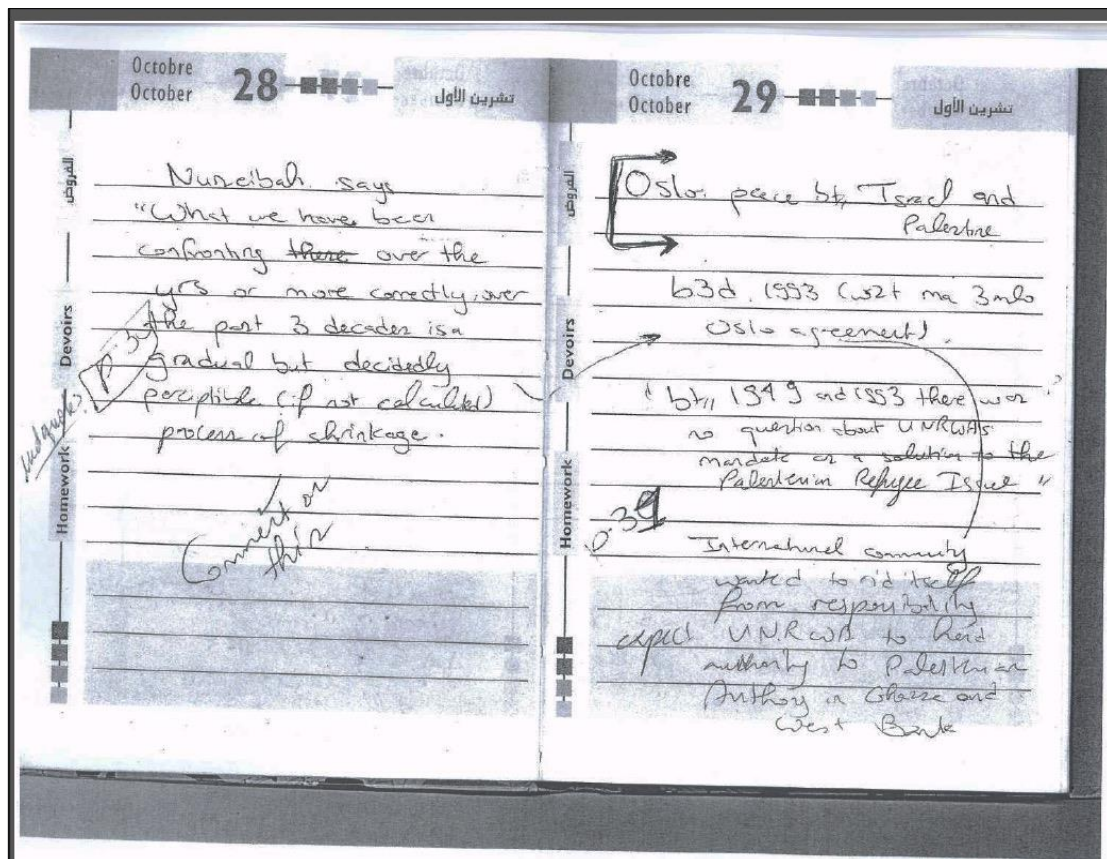

Figure 4. Visual resources in an informal text. Example from a student text.

It is not uncommon for students at my university to only have produced handwritten academic texts in school, composed and revised within the time and space of the writing classroom. Writers who have only written by hand in the past may not be familiar with the myriad expectations that readers have for formal typewritten texts in English. The typing of formal texts can present a technical challenge, if the skills of typing and using computer software are new to the writer, and the difficulty can be compounded when writers are switching between writing systems on their computers. For writers who are used to writing in a different script, writing in English also entails knowing how to change directionality, script and other settings in the computer. Figure 5 shows a text in English produced in Latin script, while the document elements are set for Arabic writing. The left justification required by the English text was implemented by clicking on the right justification icon.

Finally, the example shown in Figure 6, an informal sign posted on the library stacks in my university, points towards ways that writing systems function as organizational tools. The

directionality of script can carry over to other contexts to signify 'before and after' or 'old and new', for example. Here, the sign makes explicit the alphabetic principle, based on the Latin alphabet, used to organize books on library shelves: left to right, and top to bottom. The need to make this explicit points towards the fact that the organization can be confusing to library users accustomed to alphabetization following the Arabic script, following a right-to-left direction.
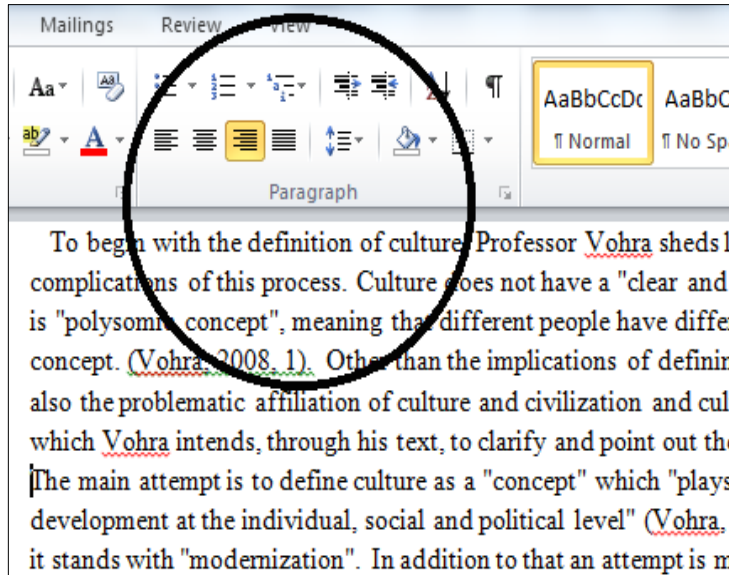
Figure 5. Directionality: Shifting between Arabic and English in the electronic construction of a document. Example from a student text. The document settings indicate right justification, as required for Arabic texts; the text on the page is right justified and uses the Roman alphabetic script, suggesting underlying technical difficulties involved in shifting across writing systems.

Figure 6. Directionality. A notice posted in the shelving area of a university library makes explicit the organization of books according to directionality of Latin alphabetization, from left to right, as opposed to organizing right to left, as would be expected in a system based on Arabic alphabetization.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through my discussion of textual difference in English writing in one multilingual context, I intend to make a case for paying closer attention to the visual mode in writing. Writing is always visual and multimodal, even in its most conventional or most highly regulated genres. In formal academic writing, seemingly very minor differences in texts can be flagged as error and reflect negatively on the writer. By centering this discussion on how we, as instructors, perceive textual differences in multilingual student writing, I aim to foreground the power dynamics at work in reading student texts, as others have done before me (Canagarajah 2006, Li 2014, Pratt 1991). As instructors it is our responsibility to be aware of the complexity of the different textual systems that multilingual student writers may be navigating.

As instructors it is also desirable for us to contextualize how academic texts work in the visual mode, as well as in the linguistic mode. Prescriptive approaches to teaching writing, including the visual forms of writing, represent a missed opportunity for greater depth in our instruction. Given that visuality functions by making the visual ground of writing transparent to the reader, textual differences are opportunities to foreground the visual and to see its functions in writing.

This reflective analysis supports the need for more formal qualitative research that might disclose the perceptions or intentions of writers, or provide insights into multilingual writers' experiences of writing across different textual and writing systems. While Canagarajah (2006) proposes 'shuttling' as a metaphor for acts of composing by multilingual writers (with its links to the weaving of texts and with moving between one place and another), this term assumes an ease that depends on knowledge of the systems and audiences involved, an ease that may or may not be the experience of a student writer.

Acknowledgements

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