

The Relationship between First and Second Language Literacy in Writing

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This paper explores the ways in which the transfer of assumptions from first language (L1) writing can help the process of writing in second language (L2). In learning second language writing skills, learners have two primary sources from which they construct a second language system: knowledge and skills from first language and input from second language. To investigate the relative impact of first language literacy skills on second language writing ability, 60 EFL students from Tabriz Islamic Azad University were chosen as participants of this study, based on their language proficiency scores. The subjects were given two topics to write about: the experimental group subjects were asked to write in Persian and then translate their writing into English. The control group wrote in English. The results obtained in this study indicate that the content and vocabulary components of the compositions were mostly affected by the use of first language.

Keywords: Literacy Skills, Content, Organization, Language Use, Mechanics, Vocabulary, First Language, Second Language

The field of EFL writing and composition have drifted apart in recent years. Disjunctions have arisen about the roles and types of research and theory, the uses of textual analysis, the role of first language on second language writing, and about critical pedagogy, etc.

Writing is considered as an instrument through which people communicate with one another in time and space, transmitting their accumulated culture from one generation to another. “Writing in one’s mother tongue is a demanding task that calls upon several language abilities, as well as upon more general (meta) cognitive abilities” (Shoonen, et al., 2003). When we view writing in this broad perspective, we can see how vitally related our written language is to the life of the individuals and to the total life of the community as well.

Writing is an important experience through which we are able to share ideas, arouse feelings, persuade and convince other people (White & Arndt, 1991). It is important to view writing not solely as the product of an individual, but as a cognitive, social and cultural act. Writing is a journey of self discovery, and self discovery promotes learning. “When teachers set up imaginative writing tasks so that their students are thoroughly engaged, those students frequently strive harder than usual to produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language than they might for more routine assignments” (Harmer, 2001, p. 259).

Halliday (1975) refers to writing as learning how to mean. Candlin (1987) remarks that writing is a negotiative and explanatory act requiring great judgment. Writing is an act that takes place within a context, that accomplishes a particular purpose and that is appropriately shaped for its intended audience. (Hamplyons & Kroll, 1997).

Relationship between L1 and L2 Writing

One of the on-going debates among language teachers is that of whether or not to use the students’ first language in foreign language learning environments. “Battles in second language writing research have been pitched between first language and second language composition theories, and between process and product-oriented writing paradigms since the early 1980s” (Dyer, 1996). Generally, few instructors feel that the primary language of instruction should be the learners’ first language. However, there seems to be a wide range of opinions on the degree of L1 use.

One end of this spectrum favors banning the L1 from the classroom totally; the remainder (a fairly large number) proposes various types of L1 use or limitation. Factors which affect these decisions include such things as social and cultural norms, student motivation and goals, whether or not English is a primary means of communication in the environment external to the classroom (ESL) or not (EFL), age and proficiency of the students, and the linguistic makeup of the class (monolingual or multilingual as relates to L1), among others. One interesting point is that the same factors may lead to different conclusions and methodologies for different teachers, and even when different policies and practices are implemented in the classroom, all of them may well lead to successful results.

Adult language learners have two primary sources from which to construct a second language system: knowledge of their first language and input from the second language. Those adults who are already literate in their first language have these same sources available to them as they develop literacy skills in their second language. They can draw on their literacy skills and knowledge of their literacy practices from their first language (interlingual transfer), “when one is writing in an L1, words and grammatical structures may be readily available in an automatized way, as they are in speaking” (Shoonen, et al., 2003). They can also utilize the input from literacy activities –reading and writing (intralingual input)- in their developing second language.

There is evidence that second language learners utilize both of these sources in acquiring second language literacy skills. Cummins (1981) makes the strongest case for interlingual transfer of literacy skills. Some empirical studies have supported Cummins’ claims. Mace-Matluk, Domingues, Holtzman, and Hoover (1983) studied English literacy among students of Cantonese language background and found a significant correlation between literacy acquired in English and the literacy level achieved in Cantonese prior to English instruction. It has been proved that L1 thinking plays a multi-faceted effect in EFL composing process (Wang, 2002) and the effects of L1 on L2 composing cannot be oversimplified as negative or positive.

Most ESL literacy teachers would agree that learners who are literate in their first language generally make better progress than those without native language literacy. However, few teachers are confident that they understand exactly why or in which ways L1 literacy helps the development of L2 literacy. The great majority of literate learners have developed their L1 literacy in formal educational settings, so it is possible that their relatively rapid progress in ESL classes reflects, at least in part, their comfort and familiarity with classroom routines and ways of learning (Scriber & Cole, 1981) rather than a direct transference of their literacy skills.

Drawing on first language studies in the area, research on second language essay processes has identified similarities in the behaviors and strategies of L1 and L2 writers. In particular, within-subject comparison of writers composing in their first and second language have revealed the positive transfer (rather than interference) of knowledge about first language writing. (Edelsky, 1982).

Another study revealed the positive transfer of planning skills (Jones & Tetroe, 1987), that is, those who planned little in L1 writing, planned little in L2 writing as well. In fact, the quality of planning skill in L1 writing transfers to L2 writing, and interestingly enough, language proficiency merely affects the quantity, not the quality, of planning. Moreover, transfer of thinking and revising strategies into second language writing has been studied. (Cumming, 1989, & Hall, 1990).

In their recent work about the uses of first language, Swain (1995; 1999; 2000) and Swain and Lapkin (1998; 2000) have shown how collaborative dialogue in L1 or L2 mediates L2 learning. Anton and Dica-milla (1998) in their study specifically focused on the use of L1 in the discourse of L2 learners while they engaged in L2 writing tasks. Their obtained data demonstrated the critical importance of L1 as a psychological tool enabling learners to perform the important functions of L2 properly.

Villamil and De Guerrero (1996) in their examination of the discourse of Spanish speaking university students, as they engaged in peer revision of their L2 (English) writing, found that these

students used their L1 in ways similar to those found by Anton and Di Camilla.

In contrast to the substantial body of research on the relationship between reading and writing abilities in L1, little has been done to explore this connection for second language learners. Krashen's (1984) claims that second language learner's writing competence derives from large amounts of self-motivated reading for interest and/or pleasure remains largely untested and unsubstantiated. Still, it is difficult to imagine that second language input would not play a significant role in developing literacy skills in L2. "Students learning English composition as a second or foreign language struggle with many structural issues including selecting proper words, using correct grammar, generating ideas and developing ideas about specific topics" (Kim, & Kim, 2005). So one must take into account not only the learner's L2 language proficiency, but also the possibility of the interaction of first language literacy skills with second language input.

An analysis of second language literacy development, then, must consider both interlingual transfer and intralingual input; it must describe what learners utilize from their first language and what they utilize from second language input as they develop L2 literacy skills like writing. Experimentation of L2 development must also include analysis of the relationship between literacy skills across languages (from L1 to L2). As Swain and Lapkin (2000) maintain, the use of L1 should not be prohibited in Immersion classrooms. "To insist that no use be made of L1 in carrying out tasks that are both linguistically and cognitively complex is to deny the use of an important cognitive tool" (p. 268).

Students may feel it is easier to think deeply, organize their language, select words and express their thoughts and opinions clearly in their first language. Some of the students may view the translation approach in L2 writing as a helpful and valuable strategy. Certainly with the rising of their language proficiency level they may switch to direct L2 writing.

This study was designed to investigate the role of first language on second language writing and writing abilities through the use of translation from first language as a device. As a teacher of EFL writing classes, the researcher has observed that majority of Iranian EFL students are poor writers in English and most of the EFL teachers in general give less attention to how students approach the act of writing in both L1 and L2. Their attention is directed more towards the surface aspects of writing, such as grammatical structures, spelling and word choice. The researcher believes that this common phenomenon can be attributed to the way Iranian EFL students are taught to write in both L1 and L2.

There are two principle research questions addressed by this research:

- 1- Do the first language writing abilities affect second language writing?
- 2- Are different aspects of a piece of writing (content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics) affected equally by the use of first language?

Method

Participants

The subjects involved in this study were 60 Iranian EFL undergraduate students from Islamic Azad University, Tabriz Branch, majoring in ELT. Subjects were predominantly last term students, male and female, in their late twenties. The subjects were assumed to be able to write essays on the grounds that they had passed two courses in paragraph and essay writing.

All the subjects were nearly at the same language proficiency level. Their language proficiency level was measured using a TOEFL test. Among 150 students who took the TOEFL test, 60 students who had obtained 65 or more out of 100 were selected for the study. They were randomly divided into two groups, each consisting of 30 participants: the experimental group and the control group. In order to know whether there were

significant differences in English proficiency among the members of two groups, an independent t-test was computed between the proficiency scores of two groups. As the results of the t-test in Table 1 show, there has not been a significant difference between the two groups according to their proficiency level ($t(58) = .320$, $p = .750$)

Table 1

Descriptive data and independent sample t-test for proficiency scores

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
TOEFL	1	30	80.66	7.87	-.320	58	.750
	2	30	81.40	9.77			

Instrumentation

Materials

The proficiency test employed in the present study was adopted from Nelson's TOEFL test. It included 100 items in vocabulary, reading comprehension, structure and written expressions. For practical and administrative reasons, this test lacked a listening comprehension section. The subjects' scores were out of 100. Those who were chosen for the study had obtained more than 65 in this test.

Writing Tasks

In this research project, the students were assigned to write about the following topics:

- *Teachers should make learning enjoyable and fun for their students. Do you agree? Use special reasons to support your opinion.*
- *Some businessmen now say that no one can smoke cigarettes in*

any of their offices. Some governments have banned smoking in public places. This is a good idea but it also takes away some of our freedom. Do you agree or disagree? Give reasons for your answers.

The researcher chose these topics because they were familiar topics for the students and they did not need any background knowledge for writing about these topics. The control group wrote about the topics in English, but the experimental group subjects were first asked to write about the mentioned topics in Persian and then translate their writings into English. The subjects were normally given 50 minutes to complete their writing in each topic. They did their writing in normal class conditions.

Procedure

The data were collected in April 2006, during the academic term. The subjects were given 50 minutes for writing about each topic. No dictionaries were allowed, and subjects were given some instructions before writing about the task.

Scoring

Both of the writings, i.e., the compositions written in English and the translations from Persian, were evaluated by two raters who have been teaching writing for many years in Tabriz Islamic Azad University. The score for each essay was the average of two raters' scores. The inter-rater reliability of the essay scores was computed through 'a coefficient alpha'. The inter-rater reliability for the scores of the English essays and the translations in both topics were acceptably high as follows:

The English essays: first topic (alpha = 95.82)
second topic (alpha = 94.49)

The translations: first topic (alpha = 95.32)
second topic (alpha = 95.12)

The essays were scored using the analytic scoring, in which

scripts are rated on several aspects of writing rather than giving a single score. For this purpose, the scoring profile suggested by Jacob et al. (1981, cited in Weigle, 2002) was chosen. Following this scale, five aspects were differentially weighted to emphasize first content (30 points), and next language use (25 points), with organization and vocabulary weighted equally (20 points), and mechanics receiving very little emphasis (5 points). For a complete rating scale see Appendix.

Data Analysis

The data obtained through the procedure described above were analyzed by using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) to answer the research questions. The analyses conducted in this respect are as follows:

Analysis #1: An independent t-test was carried out using the total scores of the subjects of two groups to find out the relationship between L1 essay writing and L2 essay writing.

Analysis #2: As the results of the t-test indicated that there is a significant difference between the writing scores of two groups, a one way ANOVA was employed to show

the significance of the difference in various components of the writings. Some graphs were also drawn to illustrate the results.

Results

Analysis 1

To determine whether there is a significant difference between L1 and L2 writing, a t-test was conducted. The results of the t-test are shown in Table 2. The t-test results show that the difference between the mean score of the two groups is meaningful ($t_{(58)} = 5.450$, $p = .000$). Group 1 who translated their compositions from Persian into English, with a mean score of 80.63, outperformed group 2 with a mean of 80.63, who wrote in English.

Table 2
Descriptive data and independent sample t-test for two groups' writings

	Group	N	Mean	Std.deviation	t	df	Sig.(2 tailed)
Total	1	30	80.63	3.27	5.450	58	.000
	2	30	75.36	4.15			

Analysis 2

For answering the second question, i.e. finding out which components of writing differ significantly over the use of first language, an ANOVA was computed to show where the difference is the most significant. As the results in Table 3 and 4 show, the content ($f_{(1,58)} = 38.729$, $p = .000$) and vocabulary ($f_{(1,58)} = 30.631$, $p = .000$) components of the writings were mainly affected through the use of first language. Other components, i.e., organization, language use and mechanics, did not show any significant difference between the performances of two groups.

Table 3
Descriptive data for the ANOVA test

		N	Mean	Std.deviation
Content	1	30	25.86	2.67
	2	30	21.46	2.80
Organization	1	30	15.93	1.36
	2	30	16.33	1.15
Vocabulary	1	30	17.26	1.28
	2	30	15.53	1.13
Language use	1	30	19.06	1.46
	2	30	19.80	1.56
Mechanics	1	30	2.46	.94
	2	30	2.23	.67

Table 4

ANOVA: comparison of components of writing

		Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Content	Between groups	290.400	1	290.400	38.726	.000
	Within groups	434.933	58	7.499		
	Total	725.333	59			
Organization	Between groups	2.400	1	2.400	1.504	.225
	Within groups	92.533	58	1.595		
	Total	94.933	59			
Vocabulary	Between groups	45.067	1	45.067	30.631	.000
	Within groups	85.333	58	1.471		
	Total	130.400	59			
Language use	Between groups	8.067	1	8.067	3.527	.065
	Within groups	132.667	58	2.287		
	Total	140.733	59			
Mechanics	Between groups	.817	1	.817	1.204	.277
	Within groups	39.333	58	.678		
	Total	40.150	59			

The following graph represents the major findings.

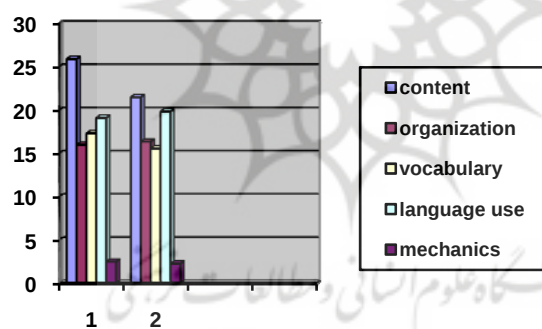


Figure 1. The comparison of two groups' performance regarding the components considered in writing

Discussion

First language influence appeared as an important research topic in the field of language teaching in the 1950s, mostly focusing on the negative transfer of L1 writing patterns, essay structures, words selection, etc. However, since the 1980s with the rising of the L2 writing process studies more positive aspects of the role of L1 on the L2 writing have been recognized and acknowledged.

The most important research question motivating this study was whether the use of the first language helps second language writing or not. The results of the t-test procedures suggest that, in general, adult L1 writing has an impact on L2 writing; students who had used first language in their writing outperformed those who had written directly in second language. So during the L2 writing we can benefit from L1 knowledge of writing.

To answer the second research question, a one way ANOVA was computed to show the relative importance of different components. According to the results of this study, not all of the components of writing were affected equally through the use of first language. The most strongly affected component was content, and the second one was vocabulary. It shows that students, elaborating the topic in their native language, provide better content for their writing.

Following the content development, the vocabulary use of the experimental group was richer than the control group.

In the case of organization and language use, although there wasn't a significant difference between groups, the mean score of the controlled group was slightly more than the experimental group, indicating that in L2 writing, students are more sensitive to the correct use of grammatical structures, logical sequencing, cohesive ties, word order, tense and agreement. In the case of mechanics both groups' performances were the same.

It seems that L1 can have an irresistible influence on the input as well as output processes in learning an L2. So teachers should provide the learners with guidance to take advantage of the positive influences of the first language and minimize the potential negative influences to the lowest level. Correlating the

characteristics in certain mode of writing and the students' composing strategies may give us more understanding of the benefits which translation-based composing strategy may produce to some EFL learners.

Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

This study has presented some support for the assumption that the use of L1 may facilitate L2 writing. The findings of this study presented some recommendations that might help in teaching writing to EFL students in general and to Iranian EFL students in particular. The findings of this study can be useful for foreign language teachers. They may need to reevaluate their previous assumptions that the transfer of some knowledge from L1 may hinder second language learning.

The aforementioned findings in the present study can give curriculum and syllabus designers as well as language teachers the orientation that for EFL program of paragraph and essay writing, the first language related skills, particularly L1 essay writing processes, can be considered as significant facilitators. In teaching English writing courses, teachers can take the students' abilities in L1 writing into account.

In fact, students' capability in L2 essay writing can be predicted from their L1 writing.

The Author

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Appendix

Jacobs et al.'s (1981) scoring profile

ESL Composition Profile			
Student	Date	Topic	
Score	level	Criteria	Comments
Content	30-27	Excellent to very good: knowledgeable. Substantive. Thorough development of thesis. Relevant to assigned topic.	
	26-22	Good to average: some knowledge of subject. Adequate range. Limited Development of thesis. Mostly relevant to topic. But lacks detail.	
	12-17	Fare to poor: limited knowledge of subject. little substance. Inadequate development of topic	
	16-13	Very poor: does not show knowledge of subject. Non-substantive. Not pertinent. OR not enough to evaluate	
Organization	20-18	Excellent to very good: fluent expression. Ideas clearly stated/ supported. Succinct. Well-organized. Logical sequencing. Cohesive	
	17-14	Good to average: somewhat choppy. Loosely organized but main ideas stand out. Limited support. Logical but incomplete sequencing	
	13-10	Fair to poor: non-fluent. Ideas confused or disconnected. Lacks logical Sequencing and development	
	9-7	Very poor: does not communicate. No organization. Or not enough to evaluate	
Vocabulary	20-18	Excellent to very good: sophisticated range. Effective word/ idiom choice and Usage. Word form mastery. Appropriate register	
	17-14	Good to average: adequate range. Occasional errors of word/ idioms form choice, Usage, meaning confused or obscured	
	13-10	fair to poor: limited range. frequent errors of word/idiom form, choice, usage. Meaning confused or obscured	
	9-7	Very poor: Essentially translation. Little knowledge of English vocabulary. Idioms, word form. Or not enough to evaluate	

Language use	25-22	Excellent to very good: effective complex constructions. Few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/ function. articles, pronouns, prepositions
	21-18	Good to average: effective but simple constructions, minor problems in complex Constructions. Several errors of agreement, tense number, word order/ function,articles, pronouns, prepositions but meaning seldom obscured
	17-11	Fair to poor: major problems in simple/ complex constructions. Frequent errors of Negation, agreement, tense, number, word error/ function, articles, pronouns, prepositions and/ or fragments, run-ons, deletions. Meaning confused or obscured
	10-5	Very poor: virtually no mastery of sentences construction rules. Dominated by Errors. Does not communicate. Or not enough to evaluate
Mechanics	5	Excellent to very good: demonstrates mastery of conventions. Few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing
	4	Good to average: occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, Paragraphing but meaning not obscured
	3	Fair to poor: frequent errors of spelling punctuation, capitalization paragraphing. Poor handwriting. Meaning confused or obscured
	2	Very poor: no mastery of conventions. Dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, paragraphing. Handwriting illegible. Or not enough to evaluate
TOTAL SCORE		REDEAR COMMENTS

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