

**The Relationship between First and Second Language  
Composition Writing**

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## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGE COMPOSITION WRITING**

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the ways in which the transfer of assumptions from L1 writing can sometimes help the process of writing in L2. In learning a second language writing skill, learners have two primary sources to construct a second language system: knowledge and skills from the first language and input from the second language. The present study was conducted to investigate the relative impact of first language literacy skills on second language writing ability. To carry out the research, sixty EFL students from Tabriz Islamic Azad University were chosen and divided into two groups. After being sure about the groups' homogeneity, they were given two topics to write about: the first group wrote in English about the topics, the second group was asked to write in Persian about the same topics and then translate their writing into English. The data were analyzed by using a t-test and other subsequent analysis. The results may help the teachers to reevaluate their views about the role of first language in second language teaching and they must consider both inter-lingual transfer and intra-lingual input in their analysis of second language literacy development.

### **INTRODUCTION**

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

Writing is concerned as an instrument through which people communicate with one another in time and space, transmitting their accumulated culture from one generation to another. When we review writing in this broad perspective we can see how vitally related our written language is not only to the life of the individuals but to the total life of the community.

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. Arapoff (1965) defines writing as:

Writing is much more than an orthographic symbolization of speech. It is most importantly, purposeful selection and organization of experience. By experience I

mean all thoughts, facts, opinions or ideas- whether acquired first hand ( through direct perception and/or actions) or second hand (through reading or hearing).

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 (Hamplions & 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 (L1) in foreign language (L2) classrooms or learning environments. Generally, few instructors feel that the primary language of instruction should be the L1. 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 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 make up 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 literacy practices from their first language (interlingual transfer), and can also utilize the input from literacy activities- reading and writing (intralingua 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.

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 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 (Scribner & 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 from first language writing (Edelsky, 1982).

In another study, it showed 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 contrast to the substantial body of research on the relationship between reading and writing abilities in a first language, little has been done to explore this connection for second language learners. Krashen's (1984) claim 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. One must take into account not only the learner's L2 language proficiency, but also the possibility of 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. Examination of L2 development must also include analysis of the relationship between literacy skills across languages.

## **THE STUDY**

Research on L1 writing processes conducted through the past dozen years has gradually influenced L2 research, leading to new insights into the nature of language learner's needs, difficulties and development in written language production.

This study was designed to investigate the role of the 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 I have observed that majority of Iranian language learners are poor writers in English and most of the EFL teachers in general give less attention to how the students approach the act of writing in both L1 and L2 respectively. Their attention is directed more toward 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.

We are interested, then, in the following basic research questions:

1. Does first language writing 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

### Subjects

The subjects involved in this study were from Tabriz Islamic Azad University, majoring in English language. Subjects were predominantly last term students, male and female, in their late twenty four up to twenty nine. The subjects were assumed to be able to write essays because of having passed the course of paragraph writing and essays writing.

Before the research began, at first 150 students were chosen and a TOEFL proficiency was administrated to them. Among students taken TOEFL test, 60 students who had obtained 65 or more out of 100 were selected for the study. they were divided into two groups each consisting of 30 members: experimental group and controlled group. In order to investigate whether there were significant differences in English proficiency among the two groups. A t-test was computed between these two groups and the results did not indicate a significant difference between the TOEFL test score means: Mean of first group= 80.66, and the mean of second group= 81.40. Sig= .750 which is more than 0.05 indicates the homogeneity of the groups. There is not a significant difference between the groups. The complete results are in the following tables.

T-Test

Group statistics

	GROUP	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
TOEFL	1.00	30	80.6667	7.8798	1.4387
	2.00	30	81.4000	9.7754	1.7847

## Independent Sample test

	Learner's Test for Equality of variances		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed	Mean difference	Std.error difference	95% confidence interval of the difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	3.219	.078	-.320	58	.750	-.7333	2.2924	-5.3220	3.8554
Equal variances not assumed			-.320	55.499	.750	-.7333	2.2924	-5.3264	3.8598

## Materials

For pretest material consisted of a TOEFL test administered to investigate the homogeneity of the groups. This test was taken from Nelson's TOEFL test included 100 items in vocabulary and reading comprehension, structure and written expression. The students' scores were out 100. Those who were chosen for the study, had obtained more than 65 in this test.

## Writing Tasks

In this research the two following topics were assigned for the students to write about: *(Teachers should make learning enjoyable and fun for their students: Do you agree or disagree? 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 all 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 answer.)*

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

## **Procedures**

The data were collected in April 2004, during academic term. 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 writings, i.e, composition writing in English and Translation from first language, were evaluated by two raters (the English teachers in Tabriz Islamic Azad University who have been teaching writing for many years in this university. The score for each essay was the average of two raters.

The essays were scored using the analytic scoring, in which scripts are rated on several aspects of writing or criteria rather than given a single score. For this purpose Jacobs et al. 's (1981) scoring profile quoted 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 A)

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

In this study, first of all as two independent raters were used to rate each writing sample, the inter-rater reliability of the essay scores was computed through “a coefficient alpha”. The inter-rater reliability for the English and translation essay scores in both topics were acceptably high as follows:

The English essay:

First topic: ALPHA = 95.82

Second topic: ALPHA = 94.49

The translations:

First topic: ALPHA = 95.32

Second topic: ALPHA = 95.12

The data obtained through the procedure described above were analyzed by using the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS, 11.5) to answer the research question. The analysis conducted in this respect are as follows:

*Analysis #1:* A t-test was carried out using the total score of the students of two groups to find out the positive or negative 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 two types of writing, a one way ANOVA was computed to show that in which components of the writings. The results of these analyses are reported in the next part.

## RESULTS

### *Analysis#1*

To determine whether there is a significant difference between first language writing and second language writing, a t-test was conducted. The results of the t-test is shown in tables below. The t-test results (test of significance of difference between two means) show that (sig. two-tailed) is less than 0.05 indicating that the difference between the mean score of the two group in meaningful. The group 1 who had written in Persian and then translated it into English with a mean of 80.63 outperformed group 2 who had written in English with a mean score of 75.36.

t-test group statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std.deviation	Std. Error Mean
Total	1	30	80.6333	3.2772	.5983
	2	30	75.3667	4.1563	.7588

Independent sample test

		Learner's test for equality of variances		t-test for equality of means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Differences	Std.error Difference	95% confidence	
									Lower	Upper
Total	Equal variances assumed	1.344	.251	5.450	58	.000	5.2667	.9663	3.3323	7.2010
	Equal variances not assumed			5.450	55.007	.000	5.2667	.9663	3.3301	7.2033

For answering the second question about finding out which components of writing differ significantly by the use of first language an ANOVA was computed to show that where most of the difference exist. As shown in the following Tables only between the content and vocabulary components the difference is meaningful: sig. is less than 0.05, in the



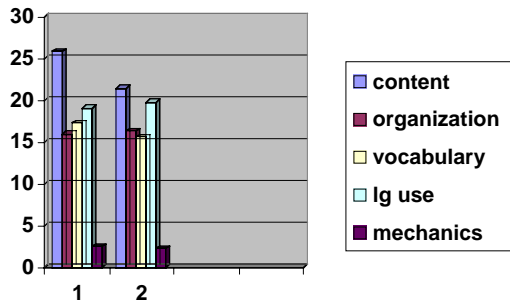
case of other component i.e, organization, language use and mechanics there is not a significant difference between the two groups: Sig, is more than 0.05.

We conclude that the use of first language in second language writing mostly affects the content and vocabulary parts of the writing than the other parts.

Oneway-ANOVA

		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			

To have a complete view of the comparison of two groups' performance regarding the components considered in writing the following graph is represented.



## DISCUSSION

The most important research question motivating this study was whether the use of 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 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 are affected equally through the use of first language. The most strongly affected component is content, the second one is vocabulary. It shows that students elaborating the topic in their native language provide better content in their writing.

Following from the content development, the vocabulary use of the experimental group also was richer than the controlled group.

## 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 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 courses, the first language related skills, particularly L1 essay writing processes can be considered a significant facilitator. Indeed, students' capability in learning essay writing can be predicted from their capability in first language essay writing.

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