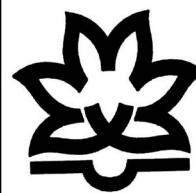




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## First language transfer in second language writing: An examination of current research

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### ABSTRACT

First language (L1) transfer has been a key issue in the field of applied linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA), and language pedagogy for almost a century. Its importance, however, has been re-evaluated several times within the last few decades. The aim of this paper is to examine current research that has investigated the role of L1 transfer in second language (L2) writing. The paper begins by discussing the different views of L1 transfer and how they have changed over time and then reviews some of the major studies that have examined the role of L1 transfer both as a learning tool and as a communicative strategy in L2 writing. The paper concludes with a number of suggestions for L2 writing instruction and future research.

**Keywords:** L1 transfer; L2 writing; interlanguage; L1 writing strategies; L2 writing strategies

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## Introduction

Language transfer is a major process in L2 acquisition. Its importance, however, has not been fully appreciated in SLA research, pedagogy, or classroom contexts. Although the notion has been around for almost a century, its significance has been reevaluated several times within the last few decades. Early research in language transfer can be traced back to the 1940s and 1950s, during which the field of linguistics was heavily influenced by Behaviorism, which viewed learning simply as a habit formation process. Transfer from the native language was, thus, considered as a form of influence of L1 habits on L2 learning. Fries (1945), one of the foremost behaviorists, argued that L1 interference is a major problem for those who are learning a second language. He further argued that comparisons between a learner's native language and the target language are essential for both L2 theory and pedagogy. Lado (1957) also stressed the importance of the native language, considering it a major cause of lack of success in L2 learning. He then proposed what has been known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) as a way of explaining the role that L1 plays in L2 learning. According to this hypothesis, L2 learners' productive and receptive skills are influenced by their L1 patterns and that similarities and differences between L1 and L2 are important predictors of ease and difficulty of L2 learning.

Claims about the predictive power of Contrastive Analysis (CA) and the behaviorist interpretation of L1-L2 relationship faced serious criticisms in the late 1960s. In particular, some L2 acquisition researchers, inspired by the Chomskyan Linguistics, voiced strong opposition to the early views of L1 transfer. Chomsky (1965) argued that children are born with a specific and innate capacity to learn language. Thus, their acquisition is not much affected by outside factors as it is governed by a series of universal and innate mechanisms. Following this perspective, several SLA researchers, such as Krashen (1984) and Dulay and Burt (1974), argued that adult L2 acquisition is very similar to child L1 acquisition and that this process is not much

affected by learners' L1 background. These researchers argued that L2 learning takes place mainly through what they called a 'creative construction hypothesis,' according to which learners gradually and inductively reconstruct rules of the language as they are exposed to it in the course of acquisition. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1981) further claimed that L2 acquisition follows not only the same path as L1 acquisition but that L2 learner errors are very similar to L1 learner errors; they are mainly developmental and not transfer errors. This perspective, thus, downplayed significantly the role and functions of L1 transfer and consequently considered it an insignificant factor in SLA theory and pedagogy.

Despite the oppositions to the role of L1 transfer in the early 1970s and 1980s, language transfer theory has seen a corrective movement in recent years with some researchers placing the study of language transfer within a cognitive approach to language learning. A cognitive approach questions the interpretation of transfer as habits and gives an important role to the learner as someone who makes a decision as to what should or should not be transferred to L2 learning (Gass, 2000). Working within an interlanguage theory, Selinker (1983), for example, presented such a mentalistic view of the role of L1 in L2 learning considering transfer as a major cognitive process in L2 acquisition. He distinguished between two major types of transfer: positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the processes whereby L1 knowledge facilitates the acquisition of an L2. Negative transfer refers to the processes whereby L1 knowledge interferes with and, thus, negatively impacts L2 acquisition. Selinker used the term 'interlanguage' to refer to the L2 learner's language, which he defined as a system between the learner's L1 and L2 language. In his view, L1 transfer plays an important role in the development of interlanguage. Odlin (1989) later viewed transfer as a cross-linguistic process, considering it to result from not only the influence of the L1 but also that of any other languages that the learner may have previously acquired. According to Odlin (1989), negative transfer may occur when the L1 form used in L2 production is not a part of the L2 norm. In

his view, the effects of L1 could be observed by studying learners with different native languages and by conducting learner comparisons.

In recent years, scholars have also interpreted the role of L1 transfer not only as a complex mental operation but also as part of a repertoire of strategies L2 learners use in the course of L2 acquisition (e.g., Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Mahmoud, 2000; Mu & Carrington, 2007; Raimes, 1987; Wolfersberger, 2003). Schachter (1983) pointed out that transfer is a strategy, with the learner playing a constructive role in the whole process. Bialystok (1983) noted that learners might use their native language as a tool to solve both learning and communication problems. Furthermore, with renewed interest in the view of the learner as an active participant in learning, language transfer has been seen as a learner-driven process similar to any other processes involved in language acquisition. In this view, in addition to L1-L2 differences and similarities, factors such as learner expectations, goals, attitudes and his or her learning style and preferences have all been considered to be important factors affecting the role of L1 transfer in the process of language learning.

Faerch and Kasper (1987) argued that transfer is a mental and a communicative process through which L2 learners develop their interlanguage skills by activating and using their previous linguistic knowledge. These researchers distinguished three types of production transfer: (a) strategic transfer whereby the learner assigns focal attention to a communicative problem and its solution; (b) subsidiary transfer which occurs when there is no focal awareness of the problem or transferred L1 knowledge; and (c) automatic transfer which takes place when the learner makes use of an L1 in a highly automatized manner, with attention completely diverted to other aspects in the production process.

### *L1 transfer in L2 writing*

In L2 writing, transfer can be considered both as a learning device and as a strategy to solve communication problems. As Mahmoud (2000) pointed out, when L2

learners attempt to compose a written piece, they might use transfer as a tool to learn or as a means to convey their meaning; they may use it to formulate hypotheses about target language and to test those hypotheses.

Many of the composing strategies are the same in the L1 and the L2, and thus, L2 learners may be able to transfer those from their L1 to their L2 writing. For example, learners who have already learned how to plan, develop ideas, revise, and edit their writing in their L1 may use the same strategies when they are composing in their L2 (Cumming, 1990; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989). Of course, for such composing strategies to be successfully carried over to the L2, L2 learners are required to have an adequate level of proficiency in the target language. Lower-level proficiency learners may not be able to successfully transfer such L1-based strategies because they have not yet reached a level of linguistic knowledge where they can linguistically compose a text in the target language (Berman, 1994).

L2 learners may also resort to their L1 to compensate for their deficiencies in the L2 knowledge. As adult learners who are cognitively mature, they may have complex ideas to convey in their writings. In such cases, shortage of the target language knowledge may push them to rely on the L1 to express those ideas. For these learners, reliance on the L1 can have both positive and negative consequences. Errors might occur if the learner inappropriately transfers a linguistic form from one language to the other or if the learner is misled by the partial similarities between the two languages. As Eckman (1977) pointed out, there are some language features, such as unmarked features, which are more prone to be transferred. However, transferability of language forms may not always be predicted based on their linguistic features. There may also be psychological factors such as the learner's perception of the distance between the L1 and the L2 that may play a role in the transfer of a linguistic item from one language to the other (Kellerman, 1983).

In Addition, L1 can be used as a tool not only to compose but also to simplify the complexity of the L2 writing task (Ringbom, 1987). L2 writers, for example, may make use of their native language when planning and organizing their essay by talking to themselves in their L1 or by getting engaged in various forms of L1 private speech. The use of the L1 in such cases can make the task more manageable and may consequently have beneficial effects on the learners' writing product (see the next section for detail).

### **Studies of L1 transfer in L2 writing**

In this section we provide a review of the major studies that have examined the role of L1 in L2 writing. These studies have examined various issues such as similarities between L1 and L2 writing strategies, the use of L1 as a strategy to facilitate content, generating of ideas, organisation, planning, the role of L1 translation, the role of L2 proficiency, and also negative effects of L1 use.

#### *Similarities of L1-L2 writing strategies*

A number of studies have compared L1 and L2 writing strategies and have found many similarities between the two. Raimes (as cited in Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001), for example, investigated the use of writing strategies by 8 ESL students. The findings from the verbal report data demonstrated that the students used strategies for L2 writing very similar to those used by L1 writers (e.g., engaging in some pre-writing, use of rescanning, and planning). However, the study also revealed that ESL students used more editing and correcting strategies than the L1 writer. Furthermore, the kinds of composing strategies students used were found to be more related to the experience they had with the target language and with their writing instruction than with their language proficiency. In a similar vein, Kubota (1998) investigated whether students transfer the discourse patterns developed in the L1 when they write in the L2. Participants were 46 graduate and undergraduate students in Japan who wrote one essay in Japanese and another in English. Twenty two students wrote essays on

an expository topic, and 24 students wrote on a persuasive topic. Kubota evaluated both Japanese and ESL essays in terms of organization and rated ESL essays in terms of language use. The location of the main idea and the macro-level rhetorical patterns were coded for each essay. Findings demonstrated that about half of the writers used similar patterns in L1 and L2. Results also revealed a positive correlation between Japanese and ESL organization scores, but there was no negative transfer of culturally unique rhetorical patterns. Thus, their study suggests that L2 writers may also transfer L1 organizational and rhetorical patterns when they write in an L2.

Several studies have focused on whether L2 writers use their L1 as a way of facilitating content, generating ideas or planning during writing. Uzawa and Cumming (as cited in Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001) compared the writing processes in Japanese and English of 4 intermediate learners of Japanese as a foreign language. The students wrote expository essays, one in Japanese and one in English, on the same topic. The students reported that they generally used the L1 (English) extensively for generating ideas, searching for topics, developing concepts, and organizing information. Writers 1 and 2 performed similarly on the essays. They used the same content information in the two essays, but simplified the target language (TL) Japanese version semantically, syntactically, and lexically. Writer 3, who had beginning-level proficiency in Japanese, relied heavily on the L1 essay and attempted to retain the L1 organization and information while simplifying the Japanese essay. The 4th writer could not produce an essay in Japanese and reported the use of translation in order to complete the homework assignments. These writers reported that they provided less information in the essay and simplified the syntax and the vocabulary during their composing process (Uzawa & Cumming, 1989). In another case study of 23 Francophone students, Cumming (1990) found that students switched frequently between English and French while composing aloud an ESL writing task. The students reported that they used their L1 to search out and to assess

appropriate word ordering, to compare cross-linguistic equivalents, and to reason about linguistic choices in the L2.

Bearé (2000) investigated writing strategies used by L1 and L2 students when they wrote in both L1 and the L2. Participants were eight proficient writers in both English and Spanish. Four were L1 speakers of Spanish whose English was a second language and the other four were L1 speakers of English whose Spanish was a second language. The researcher's aim was to find out: a) What writing strategies were used in facilitating content generating and planning during writing by proficient bilingual writers, and b) whether L1 and L2 writing strategies were different in the context of content generating and planning. The participants were interviewed before and after their two writing sessions. The students were asked to write one essay in their first and another in their second language. Think-aloud protocols were used during the writing sessions. For the first research question, it was found that the strategies used for content generation were writing drafts, brainstorming, rereading, asking the researcher a question, using the topic, and using both languages interchangeably. It was also found that conceptual planning strategies in native English speakers' writing were higher in L1 (19%) than L2 (8%) and in the native Spanish speakers' writing it was the opposite (L1 - 24% and L2- 34%). Rhetorical planning strategies of native English speakers were similar in L1 and L2, but native Spanish speakers spent more time on L1 than L2. The findings confirmed Berman's (1994) views that writing skills are transferred from L1 to L2 by writers and that the writer's thoughts are transferable from one language to another language.

Mu and Carrington (2007) investigated the writing strategies of three Chinese post-graduate students in an Australian higher education institution. The study was motivated by the scarcity of research on L2 writing strategies used by Chinese students in an authentic context. Sources of data were: a semi-structured interview, a questionnaire, retrospective post-writing discussion, and written drafts of papers. It was found that the three participants employed rhetorical strategies, metacognitive



strategies, cognitive strategies and social/affective strategies in their writing practice. Findings also revealed that learners transferred a number of their L1-based strategies including metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies to L2 writing, and these were transferred across languages positively. However, rhetorical strategies (organisation of paragraphs) were not transferred.

### *L1 translation as a strategy*

A number of studies have investigated the role of translation into L1 and the use of it as a facilitative strategy in L2 writing (e.g., Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Mahmoud, 2000; Uzawa, 1996). These studies have found that translation into L1 brings about some benefits in terms of organization and also the complexity of the target language essay, especially for students at lower levels of L2 proficiency. Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992), for example, examined whether students compose directly in their L2 or compose first in their L1 and then translate into their L2. Participants were 48 fourth-year Japanese university students of two L2 proficiency levels. One group first wrote their essay in Japanese (L1) and then translated it into the foreign language, English, and the other group wrote directly in English. The next day, the groups reversed tasks and wrote a second essay on another topic. The researchers reported that the compositions written in the translation mode demonstrated higher levels of syntactic complexity. Also translated compositions showed benefits in the areas of content, style, and organization, and had more clearly stated thesis statements. However, students at lower levels of L2 proficiency benefited more from translation than higher level students. When the students were asked for their writing preference, 77% reported preferring direct composition to translation. The students who reported preferring translation first felt that in the translated version they could develop their ideas easily and could express thoughts and opinions more clearly. The researchers also asked the learners to report on how much Japanese they thought they were using in their minds while they were writing directly in English. 55% of the higher-proficiency students and 87% of the

lower-proficiency students reported using Japanese half the time or more while writing directly in English. Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) concluded that, at least for students at a lower proficiency level, a translation strategy in writing might be beneficial.

Uzawa (1996) investigated writing and translating processes with respect to attention patterns and quality of language use of 22 Japanese ESL students studying at a Canadian college. The participants received training in thinking aloud and performed three tasks individually in a randomized order. The tasks involved: (a) writing an essay in Japanese, (b) writing an English essay on a different topic, and (c) translating a journal article from Japanese into English. Think-aloud protocols were coded according to metacognitive-level attention, discourse-level attention, linguistic-level attention, and personal comments. These think-aloud protocols, along with the observational notes and interviews were analyzed. The writing samples were also evaluated. Uzawa (1996) reported that most of the students used a 'what-next' approach in both the L1 and L2 writing tasks and a 'sentence-by-sentence' approach in the translation task. He found that attention patterns in the L1 and L2 writing tasks were very similar, but they were different in the translation task. Also, scores on language use in the translation task were significantly higher than those of the L1 and L2 writing tasks. Uzawa pointed out that the findings were consistent with the findings from the previously mentioned study conducted by Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) in that students with lower proficiency benefited most from the translation task. The translation approach, according to Uzawa (1996), constitutes a learning experience for students.

The role of translation has also been investigated with a focus on what writing strategies bilingual learners use in direct versus translated writing. In a study of the role of translation, Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001) explored this alternative approach in short essay writing. They asked thirty nine intermediate learners of French in a US university to perform two essay writing tasks: (a) writing directly in

French, and (b) writing in the L1 and then translating into French. Four multi-trait rating scales were designed to assess expression, transitions, clauses, and grammar and there were two raters. Retrospective verbal reports were also collected. The results indicated that two-thirds of the students did better on the direct writing task across all rating scales and one-third did better on the translated task. The raters found no significant differences in the grammatical scales across the two types of writing but differences did emerge in the scales for expression, transitions, and clauses. Retrospective verbal report data from the students indicated that they were often thinking in English when writing in French. As reported, 80% of the L1 learners reported thinking in English 'often' or 'always' while writing directly in the L2, which according to Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001), confirms the findings of Kobayashi and Rinnert's (1992) study. They added that the findings suggest that the writing tasks were not necessarily distinct in nature. As the study was intended to simulate writing situations that students encounter in typical classroom assessments, the findings also suggest that direct writing in French as a target language may be the most effective choice for some learners when under time pressure.

Studies that have addressed the use of L1 translation have also found important negative effects as a result of using such a strategy. Mahmoud (2000), for example, conducted an error analysis of Sudanese university students' writings in English as an L2. Mahmoud detected 35 interlingual grammar and vocabulary forms in their free compositions. He found that, Arabic-speaking students of English transferred various features from both modern standard Arabic and non-standard Arabic depending on the distance between these varieties and English. According to Mahmoud, one reason students do that is because the knowledge of L1 is most readily available as a linguistic resource and students use that knowledge to solve their learning and communication problems in their L2.

*L2 proficiency and L1 transfer*

As noted earlier, it has been suggested that an important requirement for the success of L1-based strategies in the L2 is having enough L2 proficiency. Recently, a number of studies have investigated this issue to find out what effects language proficiency has on the use of L1-based strategies in L2 writing. Wang and Wen's (2002) study is one of those, which investigated how ESL and EFL students use their L1 while composing in their L2 and how such L1 use is affected by L2 proficiency and writing tasks. Participants were 16 Chinese EFL writers, who were asked to compose aloud on narration and argumentation tasks. The analysis of the think aloud protocols revealed that the students relied on both L1 and L2 when composing in their L2. Furthermore, the L2 writers were most likely to rely on L1 when they were managing their writing processes, generating and organizing ideas, but more likely to rely on L2 when doing task-examining and text-generating activities. Their further examination indicated that the participants with low English proficiency levels tended to directly translate from L1 into L2 throughout their L2 composing processes. The advanced learners appeared to use their L1 strategically for idea-generating, monitoring, and lexical-searching purposes.

Wolfersberger (2003) investigated the degree to which low-level L2 proficiency writers transferred their composing processes and strategies from L1 writing to L2 writing. Participants were 3 native Japanese speakers from an intensive English program in the U.S. The researchers collected six think-aloud protocols while the subjects composed essays in Japanese and, then, in English. In two composing sessions, individual participants wrote an essay while thinking aloud. In the first session, participants wrote a Japanese essay and in the second session they wrote an English essay. The sessions were video and audio taped. It was found that, while some L1 strategies were transferred to the L2 writing processes, the learners struggled in utilizing all strategies that could have helped them in their writing process in the L2.

## **Conclusion**

This review of the literature suggests that L2 writers make use of their L1 when writing in the L2. They make use of the L1 as a composing strategy, to compensate for the possible deficiencies in their L2 proficiency, and also as a tool to facilitate their writing process. They use L1 for generating ideas, searching for topics, developing concepts, and organizing information and for planning purposes. Studies have also shown that learners transfer a number of other L1-based strategies including metacognitive, cognitive, and social/affective strategies to L2 writing, and that these are transferred across languages positively. However, L2 proficiency might mediate the successful transfer of L1-based strategies. Lower proficiency writers may not be able to easily transfer L1-based strategies when writing in an L2. Advanced level learners appear to be better able to use their L1-based strategies and are also better able to make use of their L1 resources for other matters such as generating idea, monitoring, and lexical-searching purposes. L2 learners may also use translation into the L1 as a strategy when composing L2 texts. Such strategies can have beneficial effects on L2 writing in terms of both content and organization, particularly for learners with lower-levels of L2 proficiency.

### *Pedagogical implications*

The studies reviewed above have several implications for instructional practices in the L2 writing classrooms. First, the finding regarding the similarities between L1 and L2 writing strategies and the transfer of L1 writing strategies into L2 writing suggests that helping L2 learners to develop writing strategies in their L1 can have positive consequences for their L2 writing. This, in turn, suggests that if L2 writers are assisted to develop various composing strategies such as planning, organizing, reviewing and editing in their L1, they may be able to make use of these strategies when writing in their L2. However, as reviewed, an important factor in determining how successfully L2 writers can employ such strategies in their L2 is their L2

proficiency level. The higher L2 learners are in their L2 proficiency, the more successfully they may transfer such strategies to the L2. This, then, suggests that L2 writing teachers should work with their students to improve their grammatical and lexical knowledge. As Beare (2000) pointed out, if writers are highly proficient in their L2, and in particular, knowledgeable about the rhetorical structures in their L2, and experienced in writing in their L1, transfer of skills may be expected. Low-level learners use L1 in their L2 writing too. However, they do so to compensate for their lack of L2 knowledge. The results would be code-switching or directly translating from L1 into L2, which may, then, lead to negative effects.

Students' success in using the strategies effectively will also be possible if they are aware of writing strategies in both L1 and L2. To this end, teachers can help students understand and assess their own writing strategies, and also provide them with strategy training exercises based on research findings. Teachers can demonstrate to students that all L1 strategies might not be useful and effective for successful L2 writing. Adult learners need to be trained to discover the strategies that work best for them through individualized and self-reflecting writing tasks. They can be trained to reflect on the way they process writing in both L1 and L2. Second language writing students, therefore, need to be equipped with proper means to understand and evaluate their own writing strategies to become successful writers.

#### *Implication for future research*

There are a number of implications that can be drawn for future research from the studies reviewed above. First, although many studies have been conducted on the use of L1 in L2 writing, most have been with adult L2 learners. More comparative research with both qualitative and quantitative designs is required to confirm present findings with other age groups. In particular, combining a qualitative and quantitative approach would provide a richer understanding of not only what strategies are transferable but also to what degree the findings shown in one context can be

generalizable to other contexts. More research is also needed with L2 writers from different levels of education, cultural backgrounds, and proficiency levels. As noted above, language proficiency is an important factor in how successfully L2 writers make use of their L1 strategies. However, how language proficiency interacts with other factors or different writing strategies has not been investigated, therefore, it warrants further inquiry. Lastly, research involving different writing types, tasks, and genres is also needed. Such studies provide a better picture of the processes involved in L1 strategic transfer and can, hence, enrich our understanding of the complexity of L2 transfer and how it is used in L2 writing.

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