The Impact of First and Second Languages on Azerbaijani EFL Learners' Writing Ability

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Abstract

There has always been a debate whether or not the learners' first language (L1) can facilitate the process of learning foreign language. Since foreign language writing (FL) is a complicated process, it seems that the role of the learners' L1 and its effect on FL writing is of great importance in this regard. The present study aimed at investigating the role of Azerbaijani EFL learners' L1 and L2 (Persian) on their FL writing. To meet the purposes of the study, 30 female EFL upper-intermediate students were selected (through running an OPT), who were native speakers of Azerbaijani, with Persian as their L2 and official language of Iranian context. The data were collected through running three writing sessions (in which the participants wrote three essays in each session using Azerbaijani as L1, Persian as L2, and direct writing) using the think-aloud protocol, through which they were asked to report their thoughts loudly to record using a tape recorder. In addition, a survey was used to ask their perceptions towards each writing task. The analysis of the data obtained from the evaluation of learners' writings indicated that the mere use of their L1 or L2 in foreign language writing was by no means helpful for them and they performed better on direct writing task in comparison with the two other ones. It was also found that the majority of the learners (70%) had difficulty in generating their ideas using Azerbaijani as their L1. In addition, nearly 77% of them claimed that even in direct writing mode, they made use of their L2 (Persian) on the occasions they could not find a proper word or phrase in English. As the implications of the study, it seems that the present study can bring helpful insights for both FL teachers and learners about the roles that Azerbaijani and Persian languages play as the students' L1 and L2 in FL writing.

Keywords: Writing ability, first language, second language, foreign language

1. Introduction

Writing is a system of communication which signifies language through the writing of signs and symbols. It is an important tool which makes the students to think and organize their mind and understand ideas and concepts. Foreign language writing has always been a difficult area for foreign language learners and an interesting research area for researchers. In fact, foreign language writing is an area which affects the lives of many language learners specially those who must submit high quality written work in a language which is not their native language. Historically speaking, foreign language writing originates from teaching writing to the international ESL writers at institutions of higher education in North America in the late 1950s and early 1960s and researches on FL writing process have started from the early 1980s (Jun, 2008).FL writing differs from L1 writing because FL writers are previously equipped with another language that is their native language or L1 (Wang & Wen, 2002; cited in Salmani, 2007).

It seems the studies which believe L1 and L2 or FL writing are different are based on quantitative rather than qualitative data (Cumming, 1989; Whalen, 1995). On the other side of the coin, there are some other studies which claim that the process of writing in L2 or FL is the same as that for writing in L1 (Krapels, 2005; cited in Amiri, 2011). So, it can be of great importance for researchers to investigate the role that learners' L1 plays on their L2 or FL writing, that is, it should be investigated whether the use of L1 and L2 can facilitate FL writing process or it makes the writing task just as mere translation from L1 which is far from that of native like writing in FL.

The present study seeks the role of FL learners' L1 (Azerbaijani) and their L2 (Persian) on their writing in English as a foreign language, and to provide helpful guidelines for both language teachers and learners to reach desirable proficiency in FL writing, so the following questions are addressed:

1. Are there any significant differences in the upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing when they use L1 (Azerbaijani), L2 (Persian), and FL (English) in preparing their writing?

2. Are there any significant differences in the upper-intermediate EFL learners' perception towards the use of L1 (Azerbaijani), L2 (Persian), and FL (English) in preparing their writing?

The following null hypotheses are also proposed:

1. There are not any significant differences in the upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing when they use L1 (Azerbaijani), L2 (Persian), and FL (English) in preparing their writing.

2. There are not any significant differences in the upper-intermediate EFL learners' perception towards the use of L1 (Azerbaijani), L2 (Persian), and FL (English) in preparing their writing.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Translation

Some researchers such as (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Mahmoud, 2000; Uzawa, 1996) studied the role of translation from L1 as a facilitating strategy in L2 writing. The findings revealed that translation brings some benefits especially for the students with lower proficiency level in L2. Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) conducted a study to investigate whether students compose first in L1 and then translate it into L2 or FL. They selected 48 Japanese university students who were at the fourth year of their study. They divided the students to different groups based on their proficiency level in L2 and compared them in terms of translation from L1 to L2. They asked the first group to write their essays first in Japanese (L1) and then translate them into English (FL); in contrast the second group was asked to write directly in English. The same task was repeated the next day for another topic as well. The researchers found that those compositions which were written using translation mode, showed higher level of strategic complexity. In fact these types of writings showed benefits in the areas of content, style and organization and had clearer thesis statements. A similar finding was that the students with lower proficiency level in FL used to translate while writing than higher level students. However, in general, 77% of the students reported preferring direct composition to translation. What's more, the participants were asked to report on how much Japanese they guess they were using in their mind while direct writing. Fifty-five percent of the higher-proficiency students and 87% of lower-proficiency students reported on using Japanese half or more the time of their writing in English. The role of translation has also been investigated by Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001) using an alternative approach in short essay writings. The participants were 39 intermediate learners of French in a US university. They were asked to write a) directly in French, and b) first in their L1 and then translate into French. Two raters tried to analyze the writings based on the expressions, transitions, clauses, and grammar. During the writing tasks, verbal reports also were collected. The findings showed that two-third of the students performed better on the direct writing task and one-third did better on translation. The analysis of verbal reports showed that most of the students were often thinking in English while writing in French. According to students' reports, 80% of them were thinking in English while writing directly in L2.

A number of studies which have tried to investigate the use of L1 translation have also found some negative effects as a result. For instance, Mahmoud (2000) performed a study to analyze the errors made by Sudanese university students while writing in English. He detected 35 interlingual grammar and vocabulary forms in the students' free compositions. He also found that, Arabic-speaking students of English transferred different features of their L1; no matter it is modern standard Arabic or non-standard Arabic. He claimed that one reason for such a transfer is that the knowledge of L1 is much more available than L2. So, they use this knowledge to solve their learning problems and facilitate communication in FL or L2.

2.2 Language Transfer

Jones and Tetroe (1987) investigated how writers generate texts in their first and second languages; the findings indicted that ESL writers transferred writing skills of their first language which are both good and weak, to their writings in English. They found that this event is independent of language proficiency, and influenced just the quality of planning. They suggested that switching from first language to second language can play an important role in retrieval of topic information. Bear (2000) tried to investigate the writing strategies used in L1 and L2 while the students were writing in both languages. He selected eight proficient writers in both English and Spanish. Four of the students were Spanish native speakers and English was considered as a second language for them and the other four students were English native speakers for whom, Spanish was as a second language. The researcher tried to find out what kind of writing strategies were used during writing by proficient bilingual writers and to see whether these strategies were different considering two languages. The students were asked to write one essay in their native language and the other in their second language. Bear used think-aloud protocol during writing sessions. What was found confirmed the findings of Berman (1994) who claimed that writing skills were transferred from L1 to L2 or FL by writers and their thoughts can transfer from one language to another.

A number of studies (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Arndt, 1987; Cumming, 1989; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Akyel, 1994) have tried to investigate the role of L2 proficiency on the amount of use of L1 while composing in L2. The findings obtained from these studies showed different amount of L1 use depending on the students' different proficiency levels. Generally, those learners with higher level of proficiency in L2 did not depend on their L1 heavily, while they were writing in L2. This was due to the fact that they were equipped with sufficient level of L2 knowledge to think and plan in L2 (Jones & Tetroe, 1987). However, those with lower level of proficiency in L2 tended to rely more heavily on their L1 during writing in L2 in order to continue the process of writing and to prevent a breakdown in language (Arndt, 1987; Cumming, 1989; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989).

3. Method

A mixed-methods study was carried out to answer the research questions. As such, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered. Think-aloud procedure was utilized to record the participants' thoughts in three writing sessions in which they were asked to write three English essays using Azerbaijani as their L1, Persian as their L2 and English as their FL. In a survey, the participants were asked about their perceptions towards each writing task to find whether such writing was easy or difficult for them.

3.1 Participants

The participants of the present study were a group of 30 female students at upper-intermediate level of English who were selected from an English department in Ardebil (one of the Azerbaijani speaking cities of Iran), through a quick placement test. To be more exact, from among the 60 learners who took part in the placement test, proficiency level of forty three learners was upper-intermediate. Finally 30 learners out of forty three upper-intermediate learners were selected based on convenience sampling as the participants of the study. Due to the nature of the study which tried to investigate the influence of first and second language on the learners' writing in English, and because of the fact that this study was going to be performed in a Azerbaijani speaking community of Iran (Ardebil), the researchers selected those participants whose native language was Azerbaijani, that is, they used it in their daily communications with family members and friends. On the other hand, they were equipped with Persian as their second language which is used in educational setting as the official and formal language of the country.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments used in the present study consisted of a quick placement test (OPT) which was divided into two parts. Part one included questions 1-40, and questions 41-60 belonged to part two. The format of all questions was multiple-choice. From among 60 English learners who took the test, 30 of those who obtained the scores from 37 to 47 were chosen to participate in the study as the upper-intermediate English learner.

Since the purpose of the study was to determine the influence of the learners' first and second language on their writing in English, we used 'think-aloud' protocol introduced by Clayton Lewis (1982). A merit of this method is that it helps the researchers to get a more direct view of mental process in which the writers are engaged (Rankin, 1988).

We also prepared a survey to ask the learners' perceptions towards the difficulty of each task, that is, they were asked whether the task they conducted was easy or difficult based on their attitude. Finally a rubric was used by the researchers to evaluate the written compositions by the participants. So, four instruments: 1) a placement test, 2) the think-aloud protocol, 3) a rubric, and 4) a survey were used in this study to collect the data. Instruments 2, 3 were used to answer question 1 and instrument 4 was employed to answer question 2.

3.3 Research Procedure

In order to meet the purpose of the study, all 30 students were asked to write about three cause and effect topics out of twenty topics given to them. To be more exact, the researchers proposed 20 topics to the students and asked them to mark those topics which are known to them. Then, the known topics were removed and three of those which were less known to the students were selected. All in all, the current research was conducted in four phases:

Phase 1: A Placement Test which was given to the participants;

Phase 2: Subject training phase: Prior to perform the project, the researchers designed a session with all 30 participants in order to give them enough information about the project, to make them familiar with think-aloud method and the way to conduct it, and to give them enough confidentiality about keeping their information secret;

Phase 3: Pilot study of think aloud protocol: In order to ensure the clarity of instructions given to the students about the think aloud protocol, five students were selected to conduct the method prior to starting the main task; and

Phase 4: Writing tasks: Each participant was asked to attend in three different writing sessions each of which took about 50 minutes. As mentioned earlier, three different cause and effect topics were chosen and they were expected to write a five-paragraph essay on each topic once thinking in their native language (Azerbaijani), reporting their thoughts loudly to record, meanwhile change their thought into English and compose, then thinking in their second language (Persian) again reporting their thoughts loudly to record, meanwhile change their thought into English and compose, and finally writing directly in English and reporting their thoughts in English to record. At the same time the researchers were recording their thoughts via think-aloud protocol using a tape recorder.

3.4 Data Analysis

Once the data was collected, the researchers used a standard rubric published by AUR (American University of Rome) in order to assess the written compositions. The scoring procedure conducted in two steps. First by two raters, one of the researchers and another expert rater, in order to ensure inter-rater reliability and a second evaluation of the essays again by the same researcher with one week interval to ensure the intra-rater reliability. The Spearman-Brown statistics was used to ensure the consistency of the ratings. The obtained value for inter-rater reliability was ($r = .95$) which confirms that there exists a strong positive correlation between the two sets of scores obtained from the evaluation of two raters (one of the researchers and another rater). Accordingly, the intra-rater reliability index was ($r = .94$) which confirms that there exists a strong positive correlation between the two sets of scores obtained from the evaluation of essays by the same rater at two time intervals. The SPSS statistical package; version 20 was used to examine the normality of scores which was checked through Shapira–Wilk statistic. And finally One-Way ANOVA statistics was used to compare the results.

4. Results

4.1 Exploratory Data Analysis Results

In order to ensure the normality of distribution, we used the Shapira–Wilk statistic. Table 1 shows the result of this test:

Table 1. Test of Normality (Shapiro-Wilk)

Statistic	df	Sig.
.974	90	.066

According to table 1, the index of normality obtained for the scores in present study (*Sig* = .06) is higher than .05 and shows that the scores obtained from the assessments, are normally distributed.

4.2 The Comparison of the Three Writing Tasks

Since there were three different writing tasks in which three different languages were used (Azerbaijani, Persian, and English), a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the effect of the use of first, second and foreign language on writing in English.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

Task	N	Mean	SD	SE	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
a	30	21.60	2.207	.403	20.78	22.42
b	30	24.30	2.654	.485	23.31	25.29
c	30	29.23	1.924	.351	28.51	29.95
Total	90	25.04	3.897	.411	24.23	25.86

According to table 2, the learners' performance in which the Azerbaijani language was used (task a), was in lower level than two other writings (*M* = 21.60, *SD* = 2.20).Their performance using Persian (task b) was better than their first performance, however; it was not as much good as direct writing (*M* = 24.30, *SD* = 2.65). In sum, they performed better on direct writing (task c) in comparison with two other writing tasks (*M* = 29.23, *SD* = 1.92). Table 3 presents the results of one-way ANOVA:

Table 3. One-Way ANOVA test of scores

	Sum of squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between groups	898.956	2	444.478	86.349	.000
Within groups	452.867	87	5.205		
Total	1351.822	89			

Based on table 3, there was a significant effect of the use of first, second and foreign language on writing in English at the *p* <.05 level for the three writing tasks, $F (2, 87) = 86.34$, *p*=.000. Tukey's HSD test was used to compare the mean difference of the tasks. Table 4 shows the results of comparisons:

Table 4. Multiple comparisons Using Tukey's HSD test

(I) Task	(J) Task	Mean	SE	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower bound	Upper bound
a	b	-2.700*	.589	.000	-4.10	-1.30
a	c	-7.633*	.589	.000	-9.04	-6.23
b	c	-4.933*	.589	.000	-6.34	-3.53

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

This table shows the results of Tukey's test. If we look at the table first, it is clear that each task is compared with two other ones. For each pair of comparisons, the difference between group means, the standard error of that difference, the significance level of that difference and a 95% confidence interval are displayed respectively.

As mentioned the index of (*Sig* = .00) shows that there exists a significant difference between three writing tasks. Also in this table the mean index of three tasks are compared: The table shows that, the mean index of task 'a' is about (*M Dif* = 2.70) points lower than that of task 'b' and it is (*M Dif* = 7.63) points lower than the mean index of task 'c'. Accordingly, the mean index of task 'b' is (*M Dif* = 4.93) points lower than the mean index of task 'c'.

In sum, it can be said that: The mean index of task 'c' > the mean index of task 'b' > the mean index of task 'a'. In other words, the mean index of scores obtained from the compositions written by the learners shows that their direct writings were more satisfactory than their writings in which they used their second (Persian) or native language (Azerbaijani). It also indicates that the learners performed better when they used their second language rather than using their native language. In addition, the mean index of task 'c' was higher than that of the two other tasks. That is, the mean of task 'c' is (*M* = 7.63) points higher than the mean index of task 'a' and is (*M* = 4.93) points higher than that of task 'b'. So, it can be concluded that the learners performed better on task 'c' (direct writing mode) compared with two other composition tasks.

4.3 The Learners' Perceptions towards the Writing Tasks

As mentioned earlier, the learners were asked about their perception towards each task. That is, they were asked whether or not the task of writing through the use of L1, L2 or FL was easy or difficult for them. Table 5 shows the distribution of answers obtained from the participants:

Table 5. Language perceptions Crosstabulation

Language	Perceptions		Total
	Easy	Difficult	
Azerbaijani	9	21	30
Persian	17	13	30
English	23	7	30
Total	49	41	90

According to this table, the majority of the learners (21 of them) claimed that the task of writing through the use of L1 (Azerbaijani) was so challenging for them and they had difficulty in generating their ideas first in their L1 and changing them into English. In addition, most of them (23 learners) claimed that they preferred direct writing mode since it was much easier for them. The Chi-Square statistics was run to determine the significance of the differences in the perceptions towards the tasks. Table 6 presents these statistics:

Table 6. Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	13.260[a]	2	.001
Likelihood Ratio	13.752	2	.001
Linear-by-Linear Association	13.024	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	90		

a. 0 cells (, 0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 13. 67.

According to this table, there exists a significant difference among the perceptions of the learners towards three writing tasks using the learners' L1, L2, and FL, x^2 (2, $N = 30$) = 13.26, $p = .001$. That is, the majority of them (77%) found the task of direct writing much easier than the two other ones. Accordingly they expressed that the use of their L2 (Persian) in FL writing was more favorable for them than using their L1 (Azerbaijani).

Table 7. Perception towards Language crosstabulation

		Language			
		Azerbaijani	Persian	English	Total
Easy	Count	9	17	23	49
	% within Language	30	56.7	76.7	54.4
Difficult	Count	21	13	7	41
	% within Language	70	43.3	23.3	45.6
Total	Count	30	30	30	90
	% within Language	100	100	100	100

Table 7 shows the percentage of the number of participants who expressed their perceptions towards the difficulty of the tasks. According to this table, 70% of participants reported that the task of FL writing through the use of L1 (Azerbaijani) was so challenging for them and they had difficulty in generating their ideas first in L1 and changing them into English. In addition, 76.7% of them preferred direct writing mode, since they thought that such writing was easier for them. They also claimed that even on direct writing mode, they made help of Persian as their L2 on the occasions that they could not find any proper word or phrase directly in English.

5. Discussion

Descriptive and inferential analysis of compositions revealed that the learners' performance on direct writing mode was better than their performance on writings in which they had mere use of Azerbaijani and Persian as L1 and L2. In addition, the comparison of the essays written with the help of Azerbaijani and Persian indicated that the results were in favor of Persian language. Also, the evaluation of compositions in which Azerbaijani language was used showed some traces of complexity in terms of the structures, which caused the learners to get lower scores in comparison with two other writing tasks.

The results of the present study are consistent with those of Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) who found that those compositions which were written using translation mode showed higher level of strategic complexity. In this study also, 77% of the students reported preferring direct composition to translation. The findings seem to correspond with the results of a study by Qiufang and Guo Chunjie (1998) through which they found that the students who got higher scores on their compositions used L1 far less than those who got lower scores. Similarly, Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001) found that two-third of 39 intermediate French students performed better on the direct writing task and one-third did better on translation. The results of the study are also in line with a similar research by ModirKhamene (2011), who explored the nature of transfer among bilinguals vs. trilinguals with varying levels of competence in English and their previous languages, through which she reported that highly proficient participants with Azerbaijani (L1), Persian (L2), and English (L3) linguistic backgrounds utilized 32.72% Persian as their L2 in their thought processes while writing. However, she found that contrary to some high proportion of L2 use in writing TL of the trilingual participants, their L1, that is, Azerbaijani did not appear to be called upon as frequently as their L2. According to her findings, 15.55% of the thought processes in L1 of the trilinguals was involved in their TL production.

It seems that the explanation provided by Sanz (2007; cited in ModirKhamene, 2011) could be reasonable. He asserts that the EFL writers with different proficiency levels in English as FL tend to think in language in which they receive formal instruction, especially in literacy skills, that is their language of education is mostly called upon while composing in TL. In addition, Hufeisen and Marx (2007) and Jessner (2008) proposed that the L2 being typologically closest to the new target language has taken over the role of a bridge or supporting language and functions as a kind of matrix against which the new language system is compared and contrasted. However, since there is no direct evidence to suggest that language typology plays a role in the results observed, further investigation in this respect is recommended.

The participants of the present study were 30 female English learners at upper-intermediate level of proficiency. It accounts for why they preferred direct writing to the other writing modes relates to their level of proficiency in English as EFL. This fact is shown by a number of scholars (Arndt, 1987; Cumming, 1989; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Kobayashi &Rinnert, 1992; Uzawa, 1996) whose examination of the differences in TL use among writers with varying levels of TL proficiency revealed that the higher-level writers tend to depend less on their previous languages than the lower level writers. In other words, TL writers adopt less and less L1 for generating text as they become more and more proficient in their TL. So, it could be concluded that since the participants of the present study were at somehow higher

level of language proficiency, they preferred to think and write in FL. Composing through the use of translation from first or second language was by no means helpful for them and downgraded their writings.

6. Conclusions

On the basis of the findings of the present study it was revealed that, there were significant differences in the upper-intermediate EFL learners' writings when they use L1 (Azerbaijani), L2 (Persian), and FL (English) in preparing their writings. In fact, results of one-way ANOVA showed there was a significant effect of the use of first, second and foreign languages on writing in English at the $p < .05$ level for the three writing tasks, $F (2, 87) = 86.34$, $p = .00$. So, the first hypothesis which claimed that that there are not any significant differences in the upper-intermediate EFL learners' writing when they use L1 (Azerbaijani), L2 (Persian), and FL (English) in preparing their writing cannot be verified. Considering the second research question, the findings revealed that the participants had different perceptions toward each writing task. In other words, the results of Pearson Chi-Square statistics and cross-tabulation of data displayed that, 70.0% of the participants found task a difficult, 43.3% of them claimed that task b was difficult and 23.3% found task c difficult. In other words, task c was found easy for 76.6% of them and they preferred this type of writing. So, the second hypothesis which claimed that there are not any significant differences in the EFL learners' perception towards the use of L1 (Azerbaijani), L2 (Persian), and FL (English) in preparing their writing cannot be verified.

The findings of the present study can bring helpful insights for both FL teachers and learners about the roles that Azerbaijani and Persian languages play as the students' L1 and L2 in FL writing. The present study is limited in a number of ways. First of all, since the present study was conducted in a Azerbaijani speaking community of the country, further research can be carried out to study some other languages. Another issue is that the present study was a small scale research consisting of 30 participants. Therefore, if the study is done at larger scale with more participants, the researchers might come up with more generalizable results. The other point is that we conducted our study using a single gender (females) as the participants of the study. Further research can be conducted to include males as well in order to come up with more generalizable findings.

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