

A Study of L2 Writers' L1 in L2 Writing: Performance and Strategies

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Abstract

This study explores how Korean EFL writers use their L1 when they composing in their L2 by analyzing their writings, the questionnaire and interviews. Nineteen college students performed four writing tasks in class and completed the questionnaire with five out of them joined the interview sessions. Analyses of their writings revealed that there were not any statistically significant differences between the two writing mode (direct vs translated mode), regardless of the genre of writing. The responses to the questionnaire and interview reflected that college students were inclined to prefer the direct mode to the translated mode, and that they “visibly or invisibly” used their L1 as a useful resource when composing in L2, though the extent and manner of L1 use varied with the learners’ L2 proficiency and learning experiences. Some pedagogical suggestions are addressed in the end.

Keywords

L1 use, direct writing, translated writing

1 Introduction

More attention has been drawn to studies in L2 writing and practices to better understand the L2 writing process for better teaching of writing in English. Research has been done on what processes the L2 writers go through during writing in L2 (Bae & Choe, 2013; Wang & Wen, 2002) and what factors have an influence on L2 writing. Among many issues related to L2 writing in L2 writing practice and studies, the use of L1 has been in the center of contention.

The study had the following as the research questions:

1. Are there any differences in L2 writers’ writing performance between the direct and

translated modes?

2. How do L2 writers use their L1 during their L2 writing process?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Nineteen college students participated in the study: 18 females and one male student. According to the pre-survey, the TOEIC scores of the participants ranged from 500 to 965. All of the students except one did not have any experiences of staying in the US or any English-speaking countries.

2.2 Procedures

The participants were requested to write four writing tasks as in-class activities during the semester. The four writing tasks were carefully sequenced to limit the influence of any ordering effect every other week. The interviewees were selected based on their English proficiency and writing skills and the interview sessions began from the middle of the semester. On average each interview lasted for 30 minutes per person. At the end of the semester, a questionnaire was administered to gather participants’ perception, behaviors, and preferences about L2 writing process, writing mode and genre.

2.3 Data Analysis

Two raters took part in the assessment of the participants’ writings. Inter-rater reliability was calculated for the writings, and Cronbach α was .720, which secured further analysis. The scores of writings were coded and analyzed using the statistical package SPSS 22.0 version. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the writing samples, and then t-tests were conducted to

check if there were any differences in writing performances according to the writing modes and genres. The responses to the questionnaire were calculated and analyzed. The interviews were first recorded and transcribed in an attempt to find out how L2 writers use their native language when composing in L2.

3. Results

3.1 L1 on L2 writing performance

Table 1: Direct vs Translated Mode

	<i>D</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
N	76.56	77.12	-.437	.668
A	81.68	82.56	-.555	.587
Total	79.13	79.84	-.718	.478

Note: N narrative writings, A argumentative writings
D directive mode T translated mode

The participants' L2 writing performance in the direct and the translated mode was compared to examine whether their "visible" use of L1, or translation makes any effects on L2 writings. As shown in Table 1, their writing performance in the translated mode was slightly better than that in the direct mode regardless of the genre, but there were no statistically significant differences between the two writing modes ($t = -.437$, $p = .668$ for narrative writing, $t = -.555$, $p = .587$ for argumentative writing).

3.1 L1 in L2 writing processes

In a specific example of using L1, some mentioned that as the ideas were too complex for writing in English, it was more helpful to switch to L1 and think in Korean. Others responded when they looked for a key word or suitable word, Korean was useful and help save time. Still others commented they used Korean for gathering and organizing ideas before writing in English. On the other hand, some answered when they generated ideas with less demanding contents, they wrote directly in L2, which meant a kind of single brainstorming strategy of idea generation.

In general, they first generated ideas in L1, and organize them in L1. After that, they tried to translate the organized ideas into English, L2. While they were generating texts in L2, which were too demanding for them, they first depended on their L1 to search for suitable words or phrases in L2. Likewise, participants

employed their native language as cognitive strategies such as idea generation, idea organization, and lexical search before composing in L2. In addition, it emerged from the interviews that L2 writers' language proficiency and beliefs could make a difference in the amount of the dependence on L1 use.

4. Conclusions

The present study did not endorse the findings of the previous studies with Korean students, which showed that the students' writing performance was significantly better in the direct writing mode. This leads us to rethink the use of L1 in writing L2. Based on the results of the study, it can be drawn that it is not harmful for L2 writers, though it is not greatly beneficial for improving the quality of L2 writing. The survey and interview revealed that L2 writers' L1 played a crucial role in L2 writing processes as cognitive strategies. Almost all the participants "visibly or invisibly" used their native language during their L2 writing process. Thus, it is suggested that students be encouraged to employ their L1 writing strategies as one of effective writing strategies.

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