

Investigating the Efficiency of Two Writing Strategies Among Iranian EFL Learners: Translated Writing vs. Reading to Write

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Abstract

This study explored the effects of 2 different types of strategies—translated writing vs. reading to write—in the writings of some of Iranian EFL learners in Esfahan Payamenoor University. The results showed no significant differences in the students' writings (in the 2 experimental groups and 1 control group) for the pretest topic. With respect to the posttest, the results, however, indicated that the experimental groups who received treatment managed to write better in comparison to the control group who did not receive any treatment. Moreover, it was found that the experimental group who received treatment via the translated strategy managed to write better than the group who received treatment via the reading to write strategy. Also, the *t* test results for the components of students' writings showed that both structure and content in the writings of the translation group improved more than the reading to write group. Moreover, the reading to write group showed better performance in the organization of their writings.

Keywords: Translated Writing; Reading to Write; Writing Strategy

1. Introduction

Writing is a complex activity both from the viewpoints of teaching and learning. The most difficult job for learners is expressing themselves through writing in a second language. On the other hand, some teachers do not know enough about teaching writing to their learners. Ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices, in formal

instructional settings or other environments. Writing skill must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing.

Formulating new ideas can be difficult because it involves transforming or reworking information, which is much more complex than writing as telling. It is undoubtedly the act of composing which can create problems and anxiety for students especially for those writing in a second or foreign language in academic contexts (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001). Thus, generating new ideas can be difficult because it involves transforming or reproducing information in second language composing context.

According to Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001), translation is a compensating strategy; hence, lower L2 proficiency writers first write a draft in their L1 in order to solidify content and organization before dealing with the L2 issues of translation and theoretical style. Further examination indicated that the participants with low English proficiency levels tended to directly translate from L1 into L2 throughout their L2 composing processes, whereas the advanced learners appeared to use their L1 strategically for idea-generating, monitoring, and lexical-searching purposes, although they still relied largely on their L1. These results seem to suggest that L2 proficiency determine the focus of concerns of strategy use in L2 composing (Xiao-Xia, 2008). Therefore, L1 plays an important role in L2 writing and L2 writers switch to L1 frequently for strategic purposes. L1 can influence the generation and organization of ideas, as well as the composing processes in L2 writing.

Also, reading to write prepares students for better writing particularly when their schemas are activated on the topic. The reason is that reading and writing are not treated as separate skills, but are integrated at all stages and clearly linked, in accordance with the whole language philosophy (Smalzar, 1998). Thus, reading to write strategy can activate students' schemata through personalization strategies and

familiarization with the topic. Schema theory research has shown the importance of background knowledge within a psycholinguistic model of writing.

This study aims at investigating to what extent using L1 in translated writing and also having a prereading accompanied by writing can be helpful for learners to generate new ideas in the foreign language, reduce anxiety, and enhance an effective environment for writing. Therefore, investigating strategies which can facilitate the process of composing is a necessary task. On the other hand, teachers are willing to integrate writing strategies in their content area instruction especially when they see how these strategies can support their goals for student's improvement.

As English is the first language of the world for international communication, training English users is very important. Although during the history of language teaching the emphasis has generally been on oral proficiency, the ability to express one's ideas in written form in a second or foreign language is a major achievement. Moreover, with so much writing in foreign language classes in many years, one would expect to find effective methods for teaching this skill and marked success in learning it. According to the importance of writing as an effective means of communication, more and more studies are needed to explore ways to better instruction and better achievement. Considering a lot of research on other aspects of writing, it will be significant to consider learner's writing products once with regard to the strategies they use in the process of writing.

In this research, the researchers investigated the role of translation and prior knowledge and their use in foreign language writing classes. Doing so, the present study attempted to raise the teacher's awareness of the methods and techniques which they use in teaching writing. It will also help students better understand which strategies are more helpful and can facilitate the process of writing.

Acquiring a native like or near-native proficiency has always been considered an ideal for a language learner and has been the stated goal of language courses. Accepting the fact that most learners never achieve that level of proficiency in a foreign language persuades researchers to become interested in investigating

EFL learner's problems in the production of a foreign language. Writing as a productive mode of the language is the focus of attention in this study. Historically the foreign language teaching profession has given little, sustained attention to the development of writing ability in students' target languages.

But how teachers can develop this skill in learners is a controversial issue. As a matter of fact, writing in L2 is a challenging and complex process. Whereas the L1 writing process includes producing content, drafting ideas, revising writing, and choosing vocabulary and editing text, writing in L2 involves all of these elements mixed with second language processing issues (Wolfersberger, 2003). So, writing as a communicative activity needs to be encouraged during the learner's course of study.

According to Hawks (2001) the current theories suggest that use of the L1 "reduces anxiety and enhances the effective environment for learning, takes into account sociocultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learner's life experiences and allows for learner centered curriculum development" (p. 8). Some researchers (Cole 2001; Hawks 2001; Krashen 1984) believe that using L1 in the EFL classrooms may be helpful in providing students with a secure learning environment. The advantage of L1 using with respect to reducing anxiety reminds us of Krashen's affective filter hypothesis. In this affective filter hypothesis, Krashen (1984) states that allowing students to use L1 helps them lower their affective filter.

Also, by building and activating student's background knowledge, teachers may be able to indirectly influence writing performance. For example, Davis and Winek (1989) found that students felt better prepared to write, when they took part beforehand in an extended course of building background knowledge through prereading activity, in-class sharing and discussion. Prereading can help to clarify the meaning of difficult words or complex structures. Intuition and experience suggest that if students write about a topic which they know a great deal about, then the language, organization and unity of their work are likely to be good. Conversely, if students know little about a topic, then their language, organization, and

coherence are likely to seem tight, restricted, and contrived or to fall apart altogether.

When students have little knowledge or are unwilling to risk stating the ideas they do have, their writing may rely on glib generalizations, unsupported by argument or enriching illustrations. When their knowledge is fragmentary, their writing may become little more than a list of vaguely associated items of information with few explicit connections among their ideas.

Thus, teachers should be aware of the goal of prereading in order to reduce the students' reluctance, to motivate them and heighten their interests. Therefore, teacher should expose students to a variety of strategies for getting started with a writing task and to encourage each student to try to discover which strategies (in which circumference) work best for him or her. An important point to be investigated is to what extent writing a composition in mother tongue and then translating into L2 and also reading accompanied by writing can be helpful for learners to write in L2 and also which aspects of a writing product can be affected by using these approaches.

2. Literature Review

Several studies (e.g., Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1994) have looked at the effect of composing in the L1 and then translating into the L2. These studies have found that the lower proficiency writers benefited from composing in the L1 and then translating into the L2, a result that highlights the importance of using L1 composing strategies for lower L2 proficiency writers. Jones and Tetroe (1987) did a study on the effect of L1 use during L2 writing. They found that the lower L2 proficiency writers who did not use their L1 were less effective in their planning. The writers who did use their L1 produced more details during the planning stage of L2 writing. Furthermore, the L2 facilitated more abstract thought during planning.

Some studies by Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) lead to the speculation that for some lower proficiency nonnative writers, trying to think directly in the L2, whereas writing may actually result in a lowered standard of writing than that which

can be produced by both thinking and writing out the text in the L1, and then translating it into the L2. Of course, any of such conclusions need to be tempered by considering the linguistic and sociolinguistic relationship between the two languages involved (e.g., is it an L2 or FL situation?), the learner's control of their L1 and the TL (e.g., are they lower or higher proficiency writers?) the learner's motivation to write in the language, and the genre of the writing (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001). Also, most of the abovementioned studies emphasized the L2 writing production and found that the negative transfer of L1 is much more powerful than positive transfer in L2 writing, and the opinion was based on contrastive analysis.

However, the current studies (e.g., Auerbach, 1993; Cole, 2001) focus on the L2 composing process and observed that the deep structure of the two languages are dependent on each other and the positive transfer of L1 is much greater than the negative one. Thus, L2 writers are more likely to rely on L1 when they are managing their writing processes. Some researchers (e.g., Xiao-Xia, 2008) believe that, the transfer of L1 to L2 composing might be positive or negative due to the writer's L2 proficiency.

Also, several studies (e.g., Langer, 1983; Ringler & Weber 1984) have looked at the effect of prereading and background knowledge on better writing performance. Background knowledge will be of primary importance for ESL writers, and schema-based prereading should be used for activating and constructing such background knowledge (Ajideh, 2003).

This strategy which often called integrated or read-to-write strategy, have become popular in language testing recently. They require students to write a paragraph or an essay after reading a text. Ringler and Weber (1984) call prereading activities 'enabling activities', because they provide necessary background to organize activity. They say that reading to write strategy elicit prior knowledge, build background, and focus attention. Irrespective of student's writing ability, high prior Knowledge of a subject area or key vocabulary for a text often means higher scores on writing measures. In addition, high correlations have been found between

prior knowledge and speed and accuracy of writing as well as student interest in the topic (Langer, 1983).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants consisted of 60 male and female EFL learners, selected from a larger sample of EFL learners in Esfahan Payamenoor University studying in the first semester of 2012 academic year. They, aged 18-25, were all native speakers of Persian. The sampling selection was done based on their English proficiency scores on the Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (Section 3000D).

3.2 Procedure

This study investigated the effects of two different strategies, Translated writing versus Reading to write, on some of Iranian EFL student's writings in Esfahan Payamenoor University. To that end, during a period of five weeks, these two strategies were practiced by the two experimental groups, whereas the control group did not receive such treatment.

For the purpose of this study, 60 students from Esfahan Payamenoor University studying in first semester were used. In order to include the subjects from the same level of language proficiency, a Nelson English Language Proficiency Test (Section 3000D) was assigned and 45 students with the same level were selected. Two topics were used, one as a pretest and one as posttest, for all the three groups. The prompting question for the pretest for all groups was "*How mobile phone has transformed the way we live and has caused social or medical problems as well.*" After five teaching sessions for experimental groups, posttest was assigned for the three groups. The topic for the posttest for all groups was "*The quiet revolution: telecommuting.*" These topics were clarified to make sure that the students had no problem comprehending them. Meanwhile, two English teachers with more than 15 years of experience marked the papers. The inter-rater reliability of the writing scores was found to be above 0.70, which was acceptable.

3.2.1 The Control Group

For the control group, including 15 subjects, the pretest topic was assigned to the students to write essays in English. After the writing assignment, the papers were collected. Six weeks later the posttest topic was introduced to the same students and the previous steps were followed.

3.2.2 The Reading to Write Group

In this group, the same steps were followed. During a period of five weeks, the researchers carried out the treatment. Every session took about 35 min for teaching. In these sessions, the instructor taught the students some basic points and rules of writing and practiced this mode of writing with them.

At the last session, the posttest topic was introduced to the students. Because they used the prereading writing strategy, the researcher distributed a related text among them. Then, their papers were collected and corrected by the same raters.

3.2.3 The Translation Group

In this group, the same steps which were used for the above two groups were followed. All the pretests in the three groups were scored by the same two raters. Then, during a period of five weeks, the researcher carried out the treatment. Every session of teaching took about 35 mins. In these sessions, she taught the students some basic points and rules of writing. This was the same as what had been done for the 'reading to write' group. Everything was said in English, but if they had problems in understanding them, the researcher used Persian, too. Also, the structures of two languages were compared with each other. In these sessions the instructor practiced this mode of writing with the students. In the last session, the posttest topic was given to the students to write an essay. They were asked to write their essays first in Persian and then translated them into English.

4. Results

The statistical operations utilized were the computation of correlation coefficient, two one-way ANOVAs for the pretest and posttest, and six *t* tests; also, post-hoc test was performed to find out precise location of the differences.

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the three groups of the study in the pretests and posttests, that is, before and after the treatments were done. In the pretests, the mean score of reading to write group was a little higher than the other two groups, but the difference in pretest mean scores were not great. However, in the posttests, the mean difference between the reading to write group and the other two groups was high. Also, the mean scores of all the three groups increased from the pretests to the posttests:

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest and Posttest Scores of Writing Task*

Groups	Pretest					Posttest				
	<i>n</i>	Min.	Max.	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Min.	Max.	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Control	15	3.00	6.25	4.65	0.825	15	3.75	6.25	4.98	0.690
Translated	15	3.75	6	4.8	0.739	15	10.75	16.00	13.6	1.549
Reading to write	15	4	6.25	5.00	.661	15	9.50	14.00	11.98	1.255

Table 2 summarizes the findings of one-way ANOVA to see whether three groups were different before the treatment was done. The comparison of the means in the pretests shows that there was not a significant difference among the three groups:

Table 2. *One-Way ANOVA for the Pretest Writing Scores*

Source	Sum of Squares	<i>df</i>	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
Between Groups	0.648	2	0.324		
Within Groups	23.375	42	0.557	0.581	.000
Total	24.023	44	-		

According to Table 2, the obtained *F* is 0.581. As the value of the observed *F* is lower than the *F* critical ($*p \leq .05$), there is no significant difference among the groups.

In order to examine the differences between the means in the posttests and decide whether those differences were likely to happen by chance or by the treatment effect, a one way ANOVA was conducted. Table 3 summarizes the findings of the ANOVA. The

comparison of the posttest means showed that there was a treatment effect; in other words, the differences between the groups were not by chance.

Table 3. *One-Way ANOVA for the Posttest Writing Scores*

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Between Groups	629.303	2	314.651		
Within Groups	62.342	42	1.484	211.983	.000
Total	691.644	44	-		

The F observed being 212 and the p value being .000 show that there is a significant difference among the three groups involved in this study ($*p \leq .05$).

In order to find out the precise location of the differences among the three groups, a post hoc test was conducted. The post-hoc test allowed us to compare one mean with a combination of other means. The results are reported in Table 4:

Table 4. *Post-Hoc Test for the Posttest of Writing Task*

Group	Group	Mean Difference	Std. Error	Sig.
1	2	1.6167*	.44487	.002
	3	8.6167*	.44487	.000
2	3	-1.6167*	.44487	.002
	1	7.0000*	.44487	.000
3	1	-8.6167*	.44487	.000
	2	-7.0000*	.44487	.000

As Table 4 indicates, all the differences between the translation group (1), reading to write group (2), and control group (3) were statistically at .05 level ($*p \leq .05$). According to Table 4, the experimental groups benefited from the treatment. On the other hand, the comparison of the experimental groups indicates that the difference was also significant (.002). This means that the type of strategy (translated-reading to write) affected the student's writings as well.

After understanding that the type of strategy used affected the students' writings, to find out which components of writing had been more affected by these strategies, *t* tests were run. That is, *t* tests were conducted to examine if there were significant differences between means of subdivisions in the two groups (translation and reading to write groups). Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics for the two groups, and Table 5 summarizes the findings of the *t* tests for all subdivisions in posttest writings:

Table 5. *Descriptive Statistics for Different Components of Posttest Writing Task*

Component	Research Group	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Content	Translation	15	3.0333	.41043	0.11
	Reading to Write	15	1.7167	.41043	0.11
Structure	Translation	15	2.7664	.38344	0.10
	Reading to Write	15	1.8500	.33806	0.09
Organization	Translation	15	2.1167	.37639	0.9718
	Reading to Write	15	2.9167	.34932	0.9019
Punctuation	Translation	15	3.0667	.33363	0.08614
	Reading to Write	15	3.0000	.32733	0.08452
Style and Quality of Expression	Translation	15	2.6167	.38807	0.10020
	Reading to Write	15	2.5000	.35355	0.09129
Total	Translation	15	13.6000	1.54919	0.40000
	Reading to Write	15	11.9833	1.25523	0.32410

As Table 5 illustrates, the t value for the content component was 7.386, and the significance was .000. This means that there was a significant difference between the content of students writings in the two groups. In other words, the content component improved in writings of the translation group much more than what was the case in the reading to write group. Also, the t value for the structure component was 6.545 and significance value was .000, which shows that the translation group improved in this part of writing too. With regard to the organization component, as can be seen, the t value was -6.034, and the significance was .000. This indicates that the reading to write group improved more than the translation group in this component of writing. Table 5 shows no significant difference for the punctuation and style and quality of expression component between the two groups. The t value for the punctuation, spelling, and mechanics component was 0.552, which is not significant. For the style and quality of expression component, the t value was 0.861 which is not significant either. The last comparison is the t value for the total mean scores of the two groups which is 3.140. As the significant level (.004) indicates, the translation group generally got much more benefit from their writing strategy and their writing skill improved more than the reading to write group.

In sum, as the above results showed that there was a significant difference between the performances of three groups. The results of this study indicated that the experimental groups had significant improvement in the writing mean scores in the posttests. A detailed investigation of the data indicated that at the beginning of the experiment there was no difference among the groups with respect to their proficiency level. After doing the treatment during a period of five weeks and giving the subjects the opportunity to use their first language and reading the related texts, it was found that the students' writing intensely improved. The results of analysis of variance suggested that using these strategies (i.e., translated or reading to write) led to improvement in the students' writings as well. Also, the results of the post-hoc test and t tests showed a significant difference between the translation and reading to write groups, with the translation group having a better performance in writing scores.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the present study can lead to several important conclusions. The most important one is that writing skill and teaching writing, aside from any special strategies or techniques, seem to have been neglected in most classes. One of the advantages of this study was that it was done in a real setting and the subjects were motivated because they were allowed to express their ideas in the prewriting phase and use them in the writing phase. Besides, it allowed them to use reading before writing.

Also, it may be helpful to reassure learners that it is not necessary to wait until they can write perfectly; they are persuaded to write and rewrite until their writings become as perfect as they can manage. Another conclusion is that writers may need to be exposed to a variety of strategies so that they can select strategies that match their individual preferences and writing styles.

Moreover, the findings indicated that, contrary to the common sense view by many teachers and students, thinking through the first language and writing out a text first in the L1 and translating it into L2 could enhance the production of good writing in the L2. As Qi (1998) states, “it could be extremely misleading to advise our L2 students to refrain from using their L1 in L2 performance.” And, as some L2 acquisition theories have suggested, students can “use L1 in some ways and not others if we do not have a clear understanding of important factors that affect language-switching by a fluent L2 speaker.” The last part of Qi’s sentence also supports the results of this study that translation strategy improved the content of the students’ writings. Also, Langer’s (1981) view that when students write about a topic they know a great deal about, the organization and unity of their work will improve, has been supported by the results obtained in the translation and reading to write groups of the present study.

The above results of the present study imply that teaching strategies in the process of language learning generally and specifically with respect to writing skill in second language is of great importance. Also, the findings advocate the use of translation and reading to write as helpful strategies in writing process of EFL

learners. By implication, generating or preparation of materials dealing with translation and reading to write strategies is an essential need for those who want to apply these strategies in teaching writing. In addition, in teaching writing, teachers should not expect instant fluency; instead, they should build up student's confidence little by little. Finally, EFL writing teachers should strive to provide the instruction which best meets the real needs and abilities of individual students.

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