

The Role of L1 Use in L2 Writing Processes by Chinese EFL Students: Six Cases of Non-English Majors

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Abstract

A number of studies have attempted to probe into the second-language (L2) writing processes of EFL students. Studies concerning L1 use in L2 writing processes are relatively few. Studies focusing on Chinese non-English majors' L1 use in L2 writing processes are even fewer. The present study was designed to examine six non-English majors in China at different levels of L2 proficiency, to describe their writing processes in terms of their use of first language (L1) as shown in think-aloud protocols. Data were the students' think-aloud protocols, together with retrospective interviews and their composing products. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of these data indicated that the students' L1 use facilitated their L2 writing process. They used L1 in L2 writing process due to restraints of inadequate L2 proficiency, accustomedness of L1 thinking and lack of L2 writing practice. Non-English majors with higher scores on composition used more L1 than those with lower scores in terms of the total amount. Considering the six purposes of the students' using L1 identified from the data, the higher proficient students employed more L1 for idea generation and lexical searching, whereas the lower proficient students adopted more L1 for language use and meta-comments. Significant differences did exist between the two proficiency groups with regard to the four purposes of L1 use: idea generation, discourse, lexical searching and meta-comments.

Possible implications of the study findings for second-language writing instruction to non-English majors are finally discussed.

Key words: L1 use; L2 proficiency; think-aloud protocols; L2 writing processes.

I. Introduction

Over the last decade or two, numerous studies on second language (L2) composing have focused on L1 use in ESL writing processes. Consequently, studies and discussion concerning L1 use in EFL writing processes are not adequately addressed. With the development of studies on L1 use in EFL writing processes, studies on Chinese EFL writers are still relatively rare, compared with those concerning EFL writers in other contexts, such as Japan. In fact, Chinese EFL learners and writers make up a large proportion among all the EFL learners and their writing characteristics deserve exploration.

This article is to explore the use of the L1 in the L2 writing processes of Chinese non-English majors. By examining the relationship between L1 use and L2 proficiency, it is hoped that findings of the study could contribute to a better understanding of the roles L1 plays in L2 writing in particular, and help to develop adapted teaching approaches for Chinese EFL writers.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

As previous studies have reported, L2 writers use L1 more or less to work through problems that they are confronting with in the L2 composing (Cumming, 1989; Friedlander, 1990; Guo & Liu, 1997; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1982; Qi, 1998; Raimes, 1985; Wang, J., 2005; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wang, W., 2004; Wen & Guo, 1998; Zamel, 1982). The purposes of using L1 in L2 writing may vary with regard to different studies: L1 thinking may occur when L2 writers plan writing for text generation (Cumming, 1989; Jones & Tetroe, 1987), transfer their L1 knowledge to L2 writing contexts (Edelsky, 1982; Friedlander, 1990), plan ideas (Lay, 1982), and control the writing procedures (Wen & Guo, 1998). Specifically, Wen and Guo's (1998) study identified five functions of L1 thinking in L2 writing. The L1 was used for transformation, confirmation, generating ideas, retrieving L2 forms, and controlling the writing procedures. Qi's (1998) study observed four functions of L1 use in L2 composing as follows: initiating an idea, developing a thought, verifying the meaning of a word and compensating for working memory limitations due to the complexity of the task. Moreover, another six categories of L1 functions in L2 writing were classified as discourse, idea generation, language use, translation, lexical searching and meta-comments, based on Cumming (1989) and Swain & Lapkin (1995).

As for the factors that might affect L1 use in L2 writing, three were identified as having a theoretical interest: L2 proficiency, task difficulty, and the genetic relationship between the L1 and the L2, i.e., whether the native and target languages are cognate or non-cognate (Woodall, 2002). Zimmermann (2000)

found that the use of L1 would decrease as L2 proficiency increases, but that it would increase as task difficulty increases based on Jones & Tetroe (1987) and Qi (1998). However, some other researchers found that there was not any relation between the extent of the use of L1 and learners' L2 proficiency while writing (Lay, 1982; Zamel, 1982; Cummings, 1989; Friedlander, 1991).

To summarize, the findings from the studies reviewed above have confirmed that L2 writers have two languages (i.e., L1 and L2) at their disposal when composing in L2 and they often resort to L1 for problem solving while composing in their L2. Most of the studies suggest that using L1 can be an effective behavior in the process even though writers with different L2 proficiency levels adopted L1 to varied extents and in particular situations. However, few studies have ever been conducted to explore the particular characteristics of Chinese non-English majors on their use of native language in English writing processes. This has left research gaps to be filled up and investigations into this issue will enrich the repertoire of L1 influence on L2 writing.

Motivated by the research gaps, the present study aims at extending research on L1 use in L2 composing by examining relations between L1 use and L2 proficiency with respect to Chinese non-English majors' performance in their L2 writing and investigating different purposes of L1 in their L2 writing in terms of L1 use categories based on Cumming (1989).

III. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Participants

According to the subjects' performance in the training of think-aloud composing, six non-English majors from Linyi Normal University were selected to participate in this study. They were divided into two

Table 3.1 Information of the two groups of participants

Name	Gender	Age	Years of English Study	Bands in CET
A (Du)	F	22	9	Band 6
B (Li)	F	21	9	Band 6
C (Wang)	F	22	9	Band 6
D (Huang)	F	20	9	Band 4
E (Chen)	F	21	9	Band 4
F (Lv)	F	22	9	Band 4

groups: the lower proficient group and the higher proficient group, based on Wang, J.'s (2005) identification of different levels of English proficiency. Table 3.1 provides detailed information of these students, including their gender, age, years of

English study, and the bands that they got in CET tests.

3.2. Sources of Data

The sources of data for this study are multiple, including think-aloud protocols, a questionnaire, observations and interviews.

The think-aloud method was employed in this study to elicit the verbal reports of what was going on in the writer's mind during the second language composing process. There was only one compose-aloud task: an English argumentative writing. The topic for the argumentation was about the writers' views on advertisement. And then The participants were asked to complete a brief post-writing questionnaire about their views on the writing task and their perceptions about the think-aloud method, which was based on those used by other researchers (e.g., Wang & Wen, 2002). During the writing session, each participant was observed when she attended the writing task and field notes were taken. Interviews were conducted after the participants finished the writing task to explore the participants' attitudes toward the use of Chinese in English composing.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data analysis was based on the think-aloud protocols, written products and interview transcriptions. The data were processed with SPSS for descriptive analysis, independent sample t-tests, and correlation analysis. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were taken to analyze L1 use in the L2 writing process.

Qualitative analysis of the protocols was conducted to find out the difference of purposes for L1 use. Quantitative analysis was aimed to count the amount of L1 used in the L2 composing process and then to examine the possible relationship between the use of L1 and the L2 proficiency. The researcher identified the purposes of the participants' use of L1 into six categories: discourse, idea generation, language use, translation, lexical searching, and meta-comments, based on Cumming (1989) and Swain & Lapkin (1995). Two Chinese EFL teachers in Foreign Language School of Linyi Normal University were invited to mark the six written products. The correlation between the rank order of each written product and the percentage of L1 use in the protocols was made to examine the possible relationship between L1 use in the L2 composing and the quality of the written products. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed. The reasons and purposes for the participants' use of Chinese were then categorized.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The participants held various views on their use of L1 in the L2 composing process. L1 was sometimes used

because of the constraints of their inadequate L2 proficiency, sometimes was employed spontaneously due to mother tongue intuition and experience, and sometimes was adopted by the influence of the lack of L2 writing practice. As for the role of L1 use, all the participants mentioned that L1 thinking facilitated them to maintain a clear mind in the course of composing. Meanwhile, they admitted that thinking in L1 might lead to "Chinglish" in L2 writing.

No matter for what purposes, the higher proficient group employed longer utterances in Chinese than the lower proficient group. The higher proficient writers reverted to sequential Chinese strategically to achieve their different goals; however, the lower proficient writers frequently produced Chinese fragments in coping with their problems. Independent-sample T-test between the two groups was shown from Table 4.1. Significant differences did exist between the two groups with regard to the four purposes of L1 use: idea generation ($T=-2.53$, $p=0.05$), discourse ($T=-0.91$, $p=0.05$), lexical searching ($T=-2.76$, $p=0.05$) and meta-comments ($T=2.55$, $p=0.04$).

In contrast to previous studies which have observed that the amount of L1 use decreased as the writers' L2 proficiency developed, the key finding of the study suggested that the amount of L1 use was not reduced when their L2 proficiency developed with regard to Chinese non-English majors. In addition, it supposed that the higher proficient participants adopted more L1 strategically than did the lower proficient participants while composing the writing task.

Concerning the reasons why the lower proficient group might adopt less L1 than did the higher proficient group in general while composing in L2, the research observed that the lower proficient participants' underdeveloped L2 proficiency restrained their approach to the L1 for problem solving in an efficient and strategic way, so they tended to simplify their content-generation process without paying much attention to lexis and semantics in order to compensate for their L2 linguistic deficiencies. Conversely, the higher proficient participants were inclined to revert to L1 for high-level writing goals pursuit by considering the overall aspects of language generation, such as discourse plans and rhetorical choices.

V. CONCLUSION

Findings of this study challenge the complete rejection of L1 in L2 teaching and learning again. Desirable or not, the L2 knowledge created in their mind is closely related to their L1 knowledge in any ways. Therefore, decisions on whether to encourage or forbid L1 use in L2 teaching and learning should be made with learners' L2 proficiency taken into considerations. It seems necessary to allow L1 use in Chinese non-English majors' classroom since their L2 input is limited, compared with English majors,

Table 4.1 Independent-samples T-test between the Two Groups

Category	Higher proficient group (n=3)		Lower proficient group (n=3)			
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.	T-value	P
Discourse	26.7	1.5	21.3	10	-0.91	0.05*
Idea generation	32	3	16	10.5	-2.53	0.05*
Language use	3.7	1.15	11	6.25	2	0.11
Translation	10.3	3.21	9	2	-0.61	0.58
Lexical searching	11.33	2.52	5.67	2.52	-2.76	0.05*
Meta-comments	11	3.6	22	6.56	2.55	0.04*

resulting in their inadequate L2 proficiency. Teachers should be tolerant with non-English majors' dependence on their L1 because it is too demanding for them to resort to L2 for cognitive processing. As the learners' L2 proficiency advanced to a higher level, they should be encouraged to think in their L2 as much as possible.

In the Chinese context, the teaching and learning of English writing is focused on preparing for examinations. In this sense, students are bored with monotonous writing routines. Hence, students are lack of interests and motivations to approach English writing. A number of writing researchers and teachers have recognized the importance of making writing a genuine communicative experience (e.g., Applebee, 1982; Raimes, 1985, quote from Wang, J., 2005), but how to nurture such improvement of English writing application remains a problem. If more chances are created on campus in extra time for students, especially for non-English majors, to convey their meanings and feelings through English writing, the students will be more motivated to engage in English writing. In this way, English writing will be more involved in students' daily practice

This study is vulnerable to criticism with a small sample size, so the findings from the study can only be taken as hypotheses for future study. Future studies can address this issue with more L2 learners involved.

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