

Review

The use of first language in developing ideas in second language writing according to Siti Hamin Stapa and Abdul Hameed Abdul Majid

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Accepted 22 November, 2012

The role of the student's native language (L1) in second language (L2) instruction has changed over time in significance and scope. It has also been a matter of contention among teachers. While some teachers believe that L1 plays a facilitative role in L2 learning and confidently translate their belief into classroom action, others stand contrary to this view and practice. And, a third group of teachers remain ambivalent about the role of L1 in L2 classrooms, perhaps because they feel that the research is not conclusive yet, or the peculiar characteristics of their contexts do not allow them to advocate a particular thought. This article reviews the work of Stapa and Abdul Hameed, which focuses on the use of first language in developing ideas in second language writing. The review begins with a brief introduction and then moves on to analyzing the research design adopted and the arguments forwarded by these researchers.

Key words: First language/L1, second language/L2, native language, target language.

INTRODUCTION

This section of the review traces the background of L1 use in L2 classrooms and highlights current research trends. In the history of language teaching, the role of L1 in L2 instruction ranged from being the primary medium of classroom interaction to playing virtually no role. For example, during the heydays of the Grammar-Translation Method, language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s, L2 instruction was conducted principally in the student's first language. Typical classroom activities involved translating sentences or texts into and out of the learner's native language (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). In other words, as Stern (1983) puts it, L1 enjoyed the status of being the reference system in the acquisition of L2. Following the decline of the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method emerged with its rejection of L1 use in L2 classrooms.

The 'direct method' advocated classroom instruction

that was exclusively carried out in the target language (Freeman, 2000). Since translation was forbidden, concrete vocabulary was taught via demonstration, real objects and pictures while the meaning of abstract vocabulary was made clear through association of ideas. Thus, this method required teachers who were native speakers or who had native-like command of the target language. However, whilst its ardent advocates severely downplayed the use of L1 in L2 instruction, its critics (Brown, 1973) pointed out that brief explanations in the student's native language could have been a better way to facilitate comprehension.

The methods that appeared next, (Situational Language Teaching and the Audiolingual Method) followed a similar trend (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

They promoted the use of the target language in the classroom. Since the aim was to help the learner to be

able to speak the target language, the learner's L1 was considered of no help to achieve this goal. Consequently, translation into and out of L1 was no longer considered worthwhile.

The preceding discussion shows that the role of L1 in L2 instruction was rejected following the decline of the Grammar-Translation Method. However, recently, language teaching research turned attention to investigating how the former can be utilized effectively in the teaching-learning of the latter. One of such studies is the one conducted by Stapa and Abdu Hameed (2009). The next sections will briefly review this important work on the efficient use of learners' L1 in L2 teaching.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stapa and Abdul Hameed (2009), in their review of the related literature, summarized the findings of seven studies. Accordingly, they bring to our attention the work of Pappamihel (2001), who discovered that L1 helped students considerably in developing L2 proficiency. This is partly supported by Krashen (1981) who maintains that L1 could be a useful utterance initiator when L2 learners are required to use the target language but have not acquired enough it.

Next, Stapa and Abdul Hameed cite Reineman (2001) as proposing that L1 be used conditionally to introduce new vocabulary and to clarify abstract ideas in order to make the input comprehensible and to allow students to utilize their schemata prior knowledge and experience. Although Reineman argues that there is no hard and fast rule concerning when to allow or prohibit the use of L1 in L2 instruction, Stapa and Abdul Hameed, drawing on the work of Susan (2001), recommend that certain factors should be taken into account when we decide to use L1 in L2 teaching. These include the learners' first language, their ages; their learning purposes, their educational background and the level of the learners (beginners or advanced). The ratio of teaching time per class, the duration of the second language program, the composition of the classroom (one nationality or mixed nationality group), the institution's pedagogical policy and the social context in which the teaching of L2 takes place are also worth considering.

The researchers also report that Lucas and Katz (1994), Woodall (2002), Wang and Wen (2001) and Wang (2003) had found out that less proficient L2 students rely more on their L1 than more advanced ones. In particular, Wang and Wen discovered that less proficient writers depend on L1 in generating and organizing ideas in the writing process. This finding is in agreement with those of Friedlander (1990), cited in Stapa and Abdul Hameed (2009) as well. This study showed that students who used the L1 during the plan-

ning stage of their writing produced texts with better content.

In sum, the literature review has highlighted relevant research findings regarding the beneficial use of L1 in L2 classrooms. It has some limitations, however. Firstly, it does not make the contexts of the above researches clear. The settings, the populations and the samples, the status of the L2 in a particular research context (whether it is a medium of instruction or is taught as a single subject) are not sufficiently elaborated. In some studies the L2 taught is not even mentioned, except in the discussion on Lucas and Katz's work (in which case the L2 is English). More importantly, the literature analysis failed to present and react to counter research findings (LoCoco, 1975; Duscova, 1969; Chan, 1975, which indicated that L1 use in L2 learning can result in errors that can arise from L1 interference with the L2 system. Because of these problems, this section appears to suffer from lack of comprehensiveness, depth, rigor and fairness.

Objectives

Stapa and Abdul Hameed aimed at investigating the use of first language during the brainstorming stage of second language writing. Specifically, their study tried to: 1) find out if students with lower proficiency were able to generate more ideas through L1 (Bahasa Malayu) than through L2 (English), 2) check whether low proficiency learners were able to produce better compositions in terms of a) content, b) organization, c) vocabulary, d) language use, e) mechanics and f) overall score when their writing is organized in their L1, if ideas were generated in L1 as opposed to L2.

STUDY CONTEXT

The study was conducted on 60 form 4 students (all spoke Bahasa Malayu and were learners of English as L2) recruited from a secondary school in Kajang, Selangor in Malaysia. They were selected randomly even though they all had low proficiency in English (they all had obtained grades C and D in their in-house English language examination). These subjects were then classified as experimental group (consisting of 30 students) and control group (consisting 30 students). The controls were also learners of English as L2 who were to use this language in the idea generation stage of their writing.

Subjects were divided into two groups: experimental and control. Before the experiment, subjects received training on the research procedure. In the beginning, both

groups were given a reading passage (in English) related to the essay topic discussed a day earlier to enable them to gather some relevant ideas. On the first day of the experiment, students were asked to produce ideas using their L1, while those in the control group were told to do so in their L2.

Next, students in the experimental group were to write an essay following the three writing stages: pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing. In the pre-writing phase, these students were told that they were going to write an essay on the topic: "The Effects of Pollution onto the Environment". Then, they were asked to generate ideas in their L1, and list them down in the form of notes or mind maps. During the writing stage, the ideas formulated were written on the board, and were later discussed and reshaped into English. Then, subjects were told to write the first draft of the essay. At the end of the session, the drafts were collected, and some general comments were made on the essays without adding any new ideas. Students were then asked to start writing their second drafts on the second day based on their first drafts (whether to discuss them with peers or to do individually was left to the students' discretion). At the end of the period, the second drafts were collected. At the post-writing stage, which was done on the third day, subjects were briefed on the importance of content, organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics in constructing a good piece of writing, and, on this basis, to revise and write the final versions of their essays. The final drafts from both groups were collected and given to two independent raters.

The researchers analyzed the data using statistical techniques. They used descriptive analysis to compare the distribution of mean scores and standard deviations and inferential analysis (independent samples t-test) to test the research "hypotheses" for both the experimental and control groups.

This being the context of the research, however, some limitations can be observed regarding the experiment and how it is reported. Firstly, whilst it seems that a single examination was administered to the subjects, how it had been validated to be a reliable measure of English language fluency is not indicated. Secondly, whether the test was meant to measure general proficiency or writing proficiency is not clear. Thirdly, while using experimental design is appropriate in this particular research, there are some setbacks in the description of the research procedure. On the one hand, only the sessions of the experimental group are explained; there is no indication on how the students in the control group were treated. It is only mentioned that their final essays were collected and given to the raters. How they were doing over the three days is not sufficiently elaborated and is left to the reader to guess. On the other hand, the issue of testing

the research hypotheses for both the experimental and control groups is indicated in relation to the use of inferential statistics in data analysis. However, the researchers did not indicate any hypotheses in the methodology section or elsewhere in the article. Thus, these drawbacks can reduce the validity of the entire experiment.

FINDINGS

As indicated above, the researchers analyzed the data, that is, students' results on the composition test rated based on ESL composition Profile (Jacobs et al., 1981), using mean, standard deviation and independent samples t-test. In the analysis, Tables 1 and 2 (Stapa and Abdul Hameed, 2009:45) indicated that the subjects in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group in producing ideas. In addition, the mean scores and the standard deviations in Table 3 depict that using L1 to generate ideas helped the former compose better essays in terms of overall score, content, organization, vocabulary and mechanics. This enabled the researchers to generally recommend appropriate L1 use during the idea-generation stage of L2 writing since it helps low proficient students develop better ideas based on their prior linguistic knowledge.

CONCLUSION

As discussed above, Stapa and Abdul Hameed (2009) found out that L1 use in the idea-generation stage of the writing process helps low proficient students produce quality pieces of L2 writing. While appropriate use of L1 in L2 learning can be considered worthwhile, three major questions can be raised at this point. Firstly, students get a chance to practice pre-writing (idea generation inclusive) only if they are encouraged to brainstorm for ideas, write first draft and revise this draft to compose an improved final version (Stanley et al., 1992) in their writing process. Stapa and Abdul Hameed's research did not address the question of how L1 can be useful in L2 writing when the product approach (the product approach focuses on the accuracy of a finished written product instead of the process students pass through to produce such a final work) is adopted. Secondly, the researchers found out that the students' native language is useful in L2 writing in monolingual classrooms, but they failed to recommend how L1 can be utilized in L2 writing classes to speakers of diverse linguistic backgrounds. Finally, the researchers did not take into consideration that language skills are learned integratively, not in isolation. Since students, working cooperatively through L2, can learn

Table 1. Quantity of ideas.

Control	Experimental
Total number of students:30	Total number of students:30
Total number of ideas:85	Total number of Ideas:166
Mean:2.8	Mean:5.5

Source: Stapa and Abdul Hameed (2009).

Table 2. Independent samples test for quantity of ideas.

Independent samples test						
Test for equality of variances			t-test for equality of means			
F	Sig	t	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean diff.	Standard error diff
0.001	0.976	-17.97	58	0.000	-2.700	0.15022

Adapted from Stapa and Abdul Hameed (2009).

Table 3. Means and standard deviations of overall scores, content, organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics

Parameter	Experimental		Control	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Overall	57.4667	8.05898	44.8667	7.33312
Content	19.3333	2.95172	13.7333	2.67728
Organization	11.0000	2.02314	9.5000	1.99569
Vocabulary	11.3333	1.84453	9.6333	1.61743
Language	19.3667	2.00832	9.6333	2.04237
Mechanics	3.5333	0.507135	2.7333	0.38329

Source: Stapa and Abdul Hameed (2009).

other skills during the idea-generation stage of writing, the use of L1 does not seem to provide them with this opportunity. In sum, these and other related issues should be addressed properly before a clear stance is taken about the role of L1 in L2 leaning in general and L2 writing in particular.

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