

## Using L1 as a Cognitive Support to Enable Writing Capability in English

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### Abstract

Writing in L2 is a comfortable bilingual activity involving both L1 and L2 for various cognitive operations. An examination of the previous research suggests that the use of L1 while composing in L2 was incidental and self initiated by students. However, hardly any studies have examined the deliberate and teacher initiated use of L1 in the ESL writing classroom.

Arguing L1 as a powerful resource available for learners in a grassroots multilingual country like India the study proposes for the deliberate use of L1 while composing in L2. L1 and the world knowledge as accessed through it has therefore been used consciously as a cognitive support to generate ideas, organize, plan and (re)write narrative opinionated essays.

Using qualitative and quantitative measures, the data collected by involving students of class IX regional (Telugu) medium with low L2 proficiency will be analyzed to show that the planned use of L1 has a positive effect on students' writing.

**Key-Words:** World Knowledge, Composing, Cognitive Operations, Generating Ideas, Organizing, Planning, and Rewriting.

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### Introduction

In second/foreign language contexts, the role of the mother tongue (hence forth referred as L1) in teaching English (hence forth referred as L2) writing is normally restricted to the translation of sentence structures and grammatical rules, but the pedagogic value of the cognitive aspect of L1 has rarely been exploited. In the past few years, this has changed and L1 with reference to the available world knowledge, knowledge of language and the language capabilities are being used either as an initiator of language learning process (writing) or to enable the learning of L2 in ESL classroom. In one research study of students with threshold proficiency in English, L1 has been used as a scaffolding device and as a device for feedback to trigger the process of thinking to perform descriptive tasks in L2. In the other, dealing with students at an earlier stage of education, available world knowledge and the knowledge of language in L1 has been used to enable the learning of L2.

In most second language writing classes, in this case English, all students, whether they have the capability or not, are expected to compose and write in that language. It needs to be remembered that in India, there are many students in English classrooms who do not necessarily have the capability to compose in that language. This demand makes them into ‘idiots’ who cannot write in English. But one forgets that there is another language in their minds and that they can compose and write reasonably well in that language which is their L1. Very few studies have focused on bridging this gap and used the language capabilities of L1 and tapped the knowledge of L1 enabling/facilitating writing in L2.

The present study, therefore, aims to use and tap the knowledge of L1 which can be accessed through using it for enabling writing in L2.

### Previous Studies

There are numerous studies that have examined the processes of composing in L2 writing but they draw their frameworks from L1 writing research. This is because, until recently, it was

presumed that both the processes of composing in L1 and L2 are identical. However, recent studies examining the nature of composing in L2 have argued that composing in L2 is significantly different from that of L1. It is posited that composing in L2 is a bilingual activity-writer has more than one language at her/his disposal; (s)he can use either L1 or L2 while performing cognitive operations during composing in L2 (Wang & Wen 2003). These operations may also happen simultaneously in the mind of the learner.

Research studies in the last decade or so have reiterated that while composing in L2, writers often switch to L1 which is a 'fairly common strategy' (Krapel, 1991; 49). In addition, these studies also proved successful in investigating the purposes for which L1 is used. Some of these purposes are; generating ideas (Akeyl, 1994; Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Friedlander, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1982; Qi, 1998; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003; Woodall, 2002), planning and organisation of texts (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1982; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Woodall, 2002), evaluating the text produced (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1982; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003), process controlling (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1982; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003), back tracking either to generate more text or, alternatively to check back on the success of the match between expression and the intended meaning (Cumming, 1990; Manchon, Roca de Larios, & Murphy, 2000; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003), or solving linguistic problems while formulating text (Cumming, 1989; Lay, 1982; Qi, 1998; Smith, 1994; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Whalen & Menard, 1995; Whalen, 2002).

Many of these studies have used think aloud protocols and have provided a wealth of knowledge about the use of L1 in the L2 classroom. However, this wealth is restricted to the incidental use of L1 by the students while composing in L2. An examination of these studies also reveals that the nature of use of L1 is student self initiated. There are hardly any studies that have investigated using deliberate and teacher initiated use of L1.

In the Indian context, particularly in rural areas, where students grow and live in a community surrounded by L1, it is felt that this L1, a powerful resource is unexplored and underexploited in the ESL writing classroom.

The objective of this study, therefore, is to explore the facilitative nature or the pedagogic value of L1 i.e. the use of the language capabilities, available knowledge, and world knowledge accessed through L1 to provide cognitive support to generate ideas, organise, plan and (re)write narrative opinionated essays enabling writing in L2.

### **Research Questions**

1. Will the use of the mother tongue, Telugu (L1) in different stages of composing; generating ideas, organizing, planning, writing, and rewriting, in English as L2, enable L2 writing capabilities?

2. How successful will the students be in transferring world knowledge accessed through L1 into L2 writing?

### **Hypothesis**

ESL writers will be able to generate more ideas, plan, organise, and write, and rewrite more effectively and produce texts with better quality when their L1; the available world knowledge accessed through L1, is consciously used by the teacher in the classroom. L1 can be effectively used to generate more no of ideas, and to write better quality essays in terms of language use.

### **Description of the Participants and their Teaching Learning Contexts**

16, class IX participants with an equal gender ratio from a regional medium school, irrespective of the proficiency have participated in the study. Of 16, 14 participants are first generation learners and 2 are second generation learners whose parents' education qualification did not go beyond school. This reveals that the children receive very little guidance from home. These students' exposure to English as second language ranges between five and six years. The source of exposure of L2 for these students is the teacher himself. Other sources, such as newspaper and TV, are not available because these students are living in rural areas. It can be concluded from the interview with the only source of exposure of L2, teacher that he is not aware of the process of writing. For him, writing is not more than advising students on improving their handwriting.

### **Tools**

1. A questionnaire was used to collect information regarding the students' personal, social, parental, and English education background.
2. Pre and post study informal group interviews were conducted to note their opinions, classroom procedures and practices of teaching writing. An interview with teacher was also conducted to know his beliefs and practices of teaching writing.
3. Pre and post tests were conducted to capture the entry level as well as exit behavior of the students in order to measure the growth, if any.

### **Tasks**

The tasks used were of the narrative opinion kind which required the students to take a stance and support that stance by citing reasons (adapted from **Bridges to Academic Writing** by Ann.O.Strauch). As narratives by themselves are considered to be 'cognitively less demanding' (Cummins, 1989), a component of opinion was added to suit the cognitive developmental level of the students.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

The procedure for data collection involved teaching of a sample task and also three practicing tasks for over a period of 8 days; each task was extended over a period of two days which

involved composing and writing a rough as well as a final draft. The classroom procedure adapted is as follows:

In the first stage, the students were given topics to brainstorm for ideas using mother tongue and also English. Then, the ideas i.e. words and phrases, which the students came up with, mostly in mother tongue with occasional English words, were listed on the board and were ordered using L1. In the next stage, these ordered words and phrases were translated into English. Then, the students were instructed to write individually with the help of the ideas (words and phrases) organised on the board.

On the following day, the students' scripts were returned with feedback provided in their mother tongue by the researcher. After that, a conscious raising session was conducted. Finally, they were instructed to write the final draft individually.

### **Data Analysis**

Data, pre and post test scripts, is analyzed both quantitatively as well as qualitatively.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

#### **Scoring**

The scale used to score is a modified version of ACTFL-2001 writing. Some of the rubrics for the scoring scale were also adapted from different scoring scales' descriptors such as New Jersey Registered Holistic Scoring Rubric, scale of Association of Language Testers in Europe, writing scale MELAB. The scripts were scored by three different raters including the researcher himself. But the scores taken into consideration for the analysis were of the other two raters so as to avoid the rater bias. Average of the scores of two raters was taken as the score for a script.

### **Scores Table**

Student code	Pre test score	Post test score	Difference between post-pre test scores
A	1	2	1
B	1	2.5	1.5
C	1	3	2
D	1	2	1
E	1	3	2
F	1	3.5	2.5
G	1.25	3.25	2
H	0.5	2	1.5
I	0.5	2.5	2
J	0	2.5	2.5

K	0.5	1.75	1.25
L	0	2.25	2.25
M	1	1.75	0.75
N	1	2.25	1.25
O	0.5	1.5	1
P	1	2.5	1.5
MEAN	0.765	2.390	1.625

It is evident from the above table that the students have shown a considerable improvement in composing in terms of scores. The lowest and highest scores of the pre test score are 0 and 1.25 where as those that of the post test are 1.5 and 3.5 respectively. Net gain in the scores, difference between post and pre test, ranges from 0.75 to 2.5. This improvement is also visible when the means of the scores are taken in to consideration. The mean score of pre test is 0.765 where as that of post is 2.390 which shows an increase or improvement of 1.625 from pre to post test.

### Qualitative Analysis

#### A Comparative Analysis of the Scripts of Pre- and Post-Test

A close analysis of the two scripts reveals patterns which show maturity in the scripts from the pre and post tests. In the analysis two aspects of writing, namely the kinds of statements and the kinds of phrases used are examined. Thus the focus is on intra paragraph and inter and intra sentence. At the paragraph level, three kinds of statements, namely introductory statements, reasoning statements, and concluding statements are analyzed. At the intra-sentence level, two types of phrases used are examined. The aspects examined to capture this maturity /growth are

#### Introductory Statements

In the pre test scripts of both the students, an appropriate introduction is missing. In one of the scripts, introduction is completely absent because hardly any meaning can be made out as it is a spelling mistake-ridden script (*Smokoivg is a bad hallofl*). In the other, the introductory sentence is written '*Smoking is a bad habit*'; but supporting details are missing. Another problem is that this introductory sentence is also not appropriate as the stance taken by the student is not made explicit.

By contrary, in post test scripts well written introductory statements are used by the students. An introductory statement with supporting details, in this case list of examples, is prominent in the first script (*Every child likes playing games. I like chess, skipping and kho-kho.*). Similarly, the second script also begins with an apt introduction, making the stance of the student explicit and clear followed by a list of examples (*Yes, Every child likes playing games. I like playing games. For example shuttle, skipping, chess, cricket and carrom.*).

#### Reasoning Statements

In the pre test scripts, reasoning statements used by the student to support the stance taken are very limited in number. In addition to that they are not elaborated with supporting detail. In the first script, the reasons are not intelligible (*smoking is a wetinee pallethion forms sallokivg It has bad Efocots somikg Is can It was a werthes devyed can was camves*). In the second script, very limited reasons are written in incomplete as well as run on sentences. These reasons are expressed in limited words and phrases which are interconnected (*It gives bad smell. Smoking because cancer and health problems it causes. because smoking causes lungs spoil.*).

On the contrary, in both of the post test scripts reasoning statements are not only well written and more in number but also very well elaborated with supporting details. In the first script, supporting details are explained in words and phrases. A significant variety is also seen in the reasons stated. (*First, I like play chess because in that peaceful, improve the knowledge and entertainment.*

*Next, I like playing skipping because in that enjoy and funny games, physical fitness and entertainment and hight growing.*

*Finally, I like play kho-kho because I practice running friends with enjoy and this games happiness. ).* In the other script, the reasoning statements are expressed in detail. These scripts also display a considerable variety in the reasoning statements as well as the supporting details (*First, my Fvourite game is shuttle because I meet my friends. I play shuttle. I spend time with my friends. I play shuttle with my playing friends.*

*Next, I got entertainment for playing shuttle.*

*After that, I play shuttle causes body fitness.*

*Later, I play skipping because physical exercise.*

*Before, mind power is increase so, I play chess.*

*Next, I play shuttle just for fun.*

*After that, I play cricket with my friends for entertainment.*

*Later, I play carom with my brothers and sisters for concentration. Concentration increase because play carom. ).*

### **Concluding Statements**

In the pre test scripts, similar to the introductory sentences, appropriate concluding statements are also missing. No concluding statement is seen in the first script as it is unintelligible. But in the second script, a concluding statement with mistakes is written (*so, smoking is Avoide.*).

By contrary, both of the post test scripts ended with well written concluding statements and these statements are of different nature. First script was concluded with a statement which includes a

summary of all the ideas expressed in the script. An appropriate use of the conjunction; *so* is seen in this conclusion. And the other script was concluded with a statement which is conclusive in nature (*because of all these reasons, Because of all these reasons every child likes playing games.*).

### Analysis of the Phrases

At intra-sentential level, two types of phrases are analyzed. Those are:

#### Noun Phrases

Very limited use of noun phrases is seen in both the pre test scripts. The only noun phrases which are intelligible in the first pre test script are *smoking* and *habit*, which were provided as input to write. In the second script very limited noun phrases are seen. These noun phrases are very limited in variety. Based on the structure, three different types of noun phrases are seen (*a bad habit* (article+adj+noun); *bad habit* (adj+noun); *health problems* (classifier+noun); *lungs, cancer* (Noun)).

By contrast, a considerable increase in the number as well as variety is seen in the used noun phrases in the post test scripts (*nouniness*). In these scripts, a varied range of structures of noun phrases are used by the student ( Noun (*entertainment, concentration, happiness, and friends*); article+noun (*the knowledge, the child*); adjective+noun (*funny game, physical fitness*); determiner+noun (*this game, my friends, my brothers*); classifier+noun (*body exercise, body fitness, mind power*); possessive determiner+adjective+noun (*my favourite game*); possessive determiner+classifier+noun (*my playing friends*)).

#### Verb Phrases

Just like noun phrases, a limited variety of verb phrases are used in both the pre test scripts. Verb phrases used in the first script are limited and are of a single variety; auxiliary verbs (*is, was, & has*). In this script, verb phrases with principal verb are completely absent. In the second script, very limited in number as well as variety of verb phrases are seen (auxiliary verb (*is*); principal verb (*gives & spoil*); or both without appropriate tense form (*is avoid*)).

On the contrary, an increased use of verb phrases in number and variety is visible in post test scripts (auxiliary verb (*is*); principal verbs (*improve, enjoy, meet, play, spend, causes, and like*); main verb+ gerund (*practice running, likes playing*)).

### Findings and Suggestions

The analysis of this data shows that there is a visible developmental difference between pre and post test scripts. Post scripts show growth/maturity in terms of ideas, and language use compared to the pre test scripts. The use of L1 during various stages of L2 writing has enabled these second language writers to write a matured composition which reflects a range of various developmental patterns.



In the idea generation stage, students were able to generate more content/ideas (which is evident in the increased number of reasons and supporting details). And also, students were able to introduce and conclude a piece of composition in a better manner (which is seen in the well formatted introductory and concluding statements). During the entire process of composing and writing, students were able to generate richer and more varied target language (which is apparent in the increased number as well as variety of the noun phrases and the verb phrases).

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that with teachers instructed and deliberate use of L1, the students were able to access and use, and transform their world knowledge of L1 as well as the language capabilities of L1 into L2. Thus, L1 proves beneficial while composing in L2 enhancing the L2 writing ability.

The findings of this study, hence, suggest that the teachers instructed use of L1 for idea generating, planning, organizing, writing, and re writing, during composing in L2 have a facilitative effect on the L2 compositions enabling and enhancing the L2 writing capability. This implies that the use of L1 should be encouraged in the ESL writing classrooms during different stages of composition.

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### **Internet Resources**

[http://academics.smcvt.edu/cbauer-ramazani/IEP/acad\\_skills/rubric\\_acad\\_writing.htm](http://academics.smcvt.edu/cbauer-ramazani/IEP/acad_skills/rubric_acad_writing.htm)