Transfer of First Language of Foreign Language Writing: A Contrastive Rhetoric Study of English & Farsi

Dr. S. M. Zia Houseini[1]

K. Derakhshan[2]

Abstract

This study aimed at finding whether the performances of the Iranian students studying English in an EFL context are consistent in L1 and L2 writing tasks and whether there is a cross-linguistic transfer in this respect. In this regard, the subjects were instructed to write four compositions—two in English and two in Farsi-which consisted of an argumentative and a narrative task in each language. The compositions were then rated by three readers according to ESL Composition Profile. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences was then used for the process of data analysis. The results confirmed that such a correlation exists and is significant, indicating that there is a systematic difference which pointed in the direction of transfer from L1 to L2.

1. Associat Professor of Allame TabaTabai University. email: Ziahosseini@yahoo.com
2. MA in TEFL, Islamic Azad University, Central branch email: gity-d@yahoo.com

Background

Research on first-language writing and the influence it exercises on second/foreign language writing goes back to 1966,when Robert Kaplan's study of some 600 L2 student essays served "in establishing contrastive rhetoric as a new field of inquiry",(Leki 1991,p.123). The main concern of contrastive studies has been to investigate the similarities and differences between writings in a first and second language in order to understand the interrelationship of L1 and L2 writing patterns and strategies."Writing in a second language is thought to be influenced to some extent by the linguistic and cultural conventions of the writer's first language" (Richards,Platt & Platt, 1992).

However,the study of this cross-linguistic influence in writing instruction which started within the realm of contrastive rhetoric(Kaplan,1983),has taken new dimentions as research on second-language composing processes has gained momentum.This increase in research has also resulted in identifying similarities in the behaviors and strategies of L1 and L2 writers with regard to developmental and cognitive factors (Ringbom,1992; Cumming,1989; Kobayashi & Rinnert,1992). Study of texts produced by writers composing in their first and second/foreign languages has revealed the transfer of knowledge about L1 writing (Edelsky,1982),and thinking and revising strategies (Hall,1990) into the second-language writing.Cumming(1989) in an extensive research study delineated that L1 expertise has a constructive effect on the quality of L2 writing.Ringbom (1992) has shown that many foreign language learners have a well-developed knowledge of L1 skills which can be

put to good use in the L2. He finds writing to be "an area in which the foreign language learner may compare quite favorably to many native speakers,who have problems in writing,but no problems in oral fluency"(p.104). Lay (cited in Kobayashi &Rinnert,1992) has observed that L2 writers employ L1 to "get a strong impression and association of ideas for essays" and produce essays "of better quality in terms of ideas,organization and details" (p.186).

There has been controversy,however,in regard to certain issues of this thoery of cross-linguistic,cross-cultural influence in rhetoric. Cumming (1989) agrees that "many of the processes of writing in a second language are comparable to those of writing in a mother tongue"(p.83). Moreover,he believes "students' mother tongues prove to be an important resource in their continual processes of decision-making while writing". But on the basis of his study he claims,"pedagogical prescriptions about the interference of learners' mother tongues in L2 performance – espoused in audio-lingual methodologies and theories of linguistic transfer or contrastive rhetoric – appear to be misdirected in view of the present study of learners' performance "(pp.127-8). Other theorists,Mohan and Lo (1985);Corder (cited in Cumming, 1989); and Raimes (1991),raise the same objections. "The nature of transfer in L2 writing remains under debate" (Raimes,1991: 417).

Statement of the problem

Students learning English as a foreign language will probably find writing a more difficult task than the other skills.This claim can be verified and more vividly presented when we consider the fact that writing in L1 is not very easy for the majority of native speakers of

any language;whereas comprehension and speaking pose little or no problem at all.This complexity in learning to write in a foreign language can also be shown when it is compared with reading which does not extend much beyond deciphering signs and getting the writer's intended meaning. At the other extreme,writing is usually considered the ability to produce major creative works of literature or long research studies. This complexity of 'creating meaning' is perhaps the reason for the claim by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1983) that "writing a long essay is probably the most constructive act that most human beings are ever expected to perform"(p.20).

Taking this factor into consideration,it can be rightly asked how this complexity is tackled by foreign language learners who have overcome the difficulties of such a challenge once already in their mother tongues. What role does their linguistic and rhetorical knowledge of first-language play in accomplishing this new formidable task? Will the writing strategies and skills they have aquired in their mother tongue be beneficial in composing in a foreign language or will it add to its complexity by posing cross-cultural barriers?

Hypothesese

The project has been based on the following null hypotheses :

1) There is no significant correlation between first language and foreign language writing abilities and strategies of Iranian students in an EFL context.

2) There is no signigicant difference between the mean performances of these students composing in English and Farsi.

Method

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of first language on foreign language writing.To materialize this objective,the subjects were asked to write four compositions ,two in their first language ,i.e. Farsi, and two in English. Following is a description of the steps taken in this study.

Subjects

From a total pool of 120 students with shared L1 background ,i.e. Farsi, studying English Translation at Allameh Tabatabaii University,60 students were selected. To create two groups of low advanced and intermediate level subjects, and to ensure homogenity ,a version of Michigan test was administeres to 60 freshmen and 60 senior students. The mean scores of the groups were calculated and 30 scores around each mean score were selected as our test groups. The subjects aged between 20 and 31,but the mean age was 26. These individuals , all female, took part in the research on a voluntary basis and were offered an assessment of their writing ability as an appreciation of their cooperation.

Instrumentation

The first testing instrument was Michigan test (1966) form E. Based on this test , two levels of EFL proficiency were distinguished—intermediate and low advanced. Intermediate participants received scores of 59 to 70 (out of a maximum of 100).Low advanced participants received scores greater than 80 on the same test. For ease of reference, the individuals with higher

proficiency in English will be refered to as the High Group (HG) and the ones with lower proficiency level,the Low Group (LG).

The second testing instrument included four composition tasks,two in Farsi , and two in English. Two topics (an argumentative and a narration) were chosen to be written in each language.The purpose was to see whether differing rhetorical contexts would lead to differing amount of planning and writing. Argumentation was chosen because "it is common in the academic disciplines,and it is sensitive to task,audience,and community, and it is particularly difficult for non-native speakers,"(Ann Johns,1993:76).

The subjects were asked to write the four take-home compositions at time intervals. They were instructed to write between 250-350 words for each composition. They were given two days for each paper to be handed in .The reason for this was that time is argued to be a factor affecting the students' performnances.Coffman,1971,(quoted in Caudery ,1990) states " What an examinee can produce in a limited time differs from what he can produce in a longer time,..."(p.267). Along the same line,Raimes (1983) suggests that students must be provided with the opportunity for paying attention to the writing and revising process and " they must have time to work on an essay,time alone,and time with each other,time to deal first with content,then with organization." Thus the effects of time restriction on the quality of the written products were minimized. Care was also taken to make the subjects realize that they had a free hand to write on any aspect of the composition topics.

Scoring Procedure

The compositions were collected within the set time,and rated by three experienced raters. The English compositions were rated by EFL teachers at university level, and the Farsi ones by highly qualified high-school teachers of Persian Literature and Writing.

A briefing session was held with each rater to fully explain the evaluation procedure and to establish the criteria to focus raters' attention on significant aspects of the compositions. The raters were also periodically monitored during the evaluation to check their consistency in applying the standards and criteria of the evaluation (Jacob et al.,1981). They were allowed as much time as was necessary ,hoping to improve the overall reliability among the raters by eliminating time pressure.

All the 240 compositions were blind-coded, so that the raters would not know if a given composition was written by a freshman or a senior student. The raters had neither information on the students' backgrounds or EFL proficiency,nor any access to information about the prior classifications of participants in the study.

The distribution of compositions was random to minimize discernable patterns. The raters were not informed that they were dealing with two levels of proficiency.The specific purpose and details of the research were not revealed until after the ratings had been completed.

The approach for the evaluation of the papers was based on ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel and Hughey, 1981:30) for analytical scoring. The rationale behind using this scale was that Jacobs et al. had reported high correlation coefficient with Michigan Battery Test. Therefore,it could serve as a

reliable measure of writing and its components. The scale is claimed to be an index of the writer's communicative ability and it is weighed according to its approximate importance of written communication.

Since there is no established criteria for evaluating papers and texts written in Farsi, a slightly modified version of ' ESL Composition Profile (1981)',by Jacobs et al. was adopted for evaluating the L1 papers. Keeping the content and organization components,we combined the vocabulary and language use components into a third component of style and dropped the mechanics component and slightly modified the writing evaluation criteria under each of the components (see Appendix).

Thus the 120 Farsi texts were rated for three major components of writing:1)content , 2) organization and 3) style (language use). Ratings consisted of holistic judgements for 11 analytical subcomponents :1) content : specifics,development of ideas ideas ,overall clarity, interest,and thesis, 2) organization: introduction, logical sequence of ideas,conclusion,and unity, and 3) style: vocabulary use and variety of form.

The compositions having been evaluated and the three scores for each composition obtained, the mean score for each composition was calculated which constitued the score for that composition. Thus the two sets of scores for each genre (argumentation and narration) on the English and Farsi compositions served as the two variables throughout the study. The scores on English compositions are assumed to be the dependent variable and those on Farsi ones the independent variable.

A parallel comparison of texts written on each topic has been adopted throughout the study, i.e. the narrative texts written in Farsi are compared with narrative text written in English , and the

argumentative texts in Farsi with argumentative texts written in English.

Analysis of Data

To conduct an ideal analysis for the collected data,statistical package for social sciences SPSS was used. " Since the results of a study can be no more reliable than the measures upon which is is based," (Brown, 1991:592), the issue of inter-rater reliability was dealt with first. The inter-rater correlations were found to be significantly different from zero.

The second analysis was carried out to investigate the issue of correlation as raised in null hypothesis No.1. A moderate correlation of 0.5361 was shown to exist between the two English and Farsi variables for the first task of the High Group,significantly high correlations between the two variables for the second task of the High Group, (0.8438) and both tasks of the Low Group , (0.6609 and 0.6556).

Finally, to investigate the difference between the mean performances,a matched t-test was carried out.The observed t-values are 2.071 , 2.541, 2.355, and 2.154 , all of which exceed the t-critical (p<.05, based of two-tailed test) providing enough ground to reject the null hypothesis. There is indeed a significant difference between the mean performances of students composing in Farsi and English which is systematic and can not be attributed to chance. Hence, we believe it is due to the effects of Farsi writing ability transferred to English writing.

Strategies,Summary of The Findings

The study revealed composing strategies common to both language proficiency levels and to Farsi and English writing tasks. An examination of the students' written products which included all of their written attempts on each topic, from their first notes to the final copy,attested to the creative nature of the writing process. All of the students wrote several drafts, indicating their struggle to discover and approximate meaning. Some students utilized certain symbols to indicate where they wished to add or delete information.

The first drafts mostly contained sentences,paragraphs and even clauses which were placed as if randomly together,because in some of the second drafts some rearrangement of the material from the initial drafts could be detected.

Parts of sentences were deleted,or added to . Final parts of sentences were crossed out and reworded as if the writers realized in midstream that what they ended up expressing ,was not what they had intended. Some sentences were totally rewritten so that the relationship between the preceding sentence and the one that followed became more logical and clearer. Punctuation was not focused on as much as vocabulary or tense. All in all, a transient look at the drafts, revealed a tangible record of how their ideas got generated, clarified, rearticulated and refined.

The English compositions were apparently more challenging,since there were more than two drafts for each, as compared to the Farsi compositions with only two drafts (and an exceptional three-draft composition).

The comparison of the drafts also revealed that the writers did less articulated planning for Farsi composition tasks than for the English

ones,i.e. there was not much working out what to do in the piece of writing. Only a few students made a rough outline before they wrote.

Almost all of the initial drafts of the English compositions contained questions to be answered ,single phrases and lexical items for later inclusion and utilization,compare and contrast outlines,and numerical sequencing.

Linking of arguments was less effective in the English texts of the intermediate group. The initial drafts of the English compositions contained the numerous alternative lexical items and phrases which the writer considered equally suitable, and the final drafts contained the one(s) the writer had persumably considered the best.

Some of the final drafts of Farsi compositions contained phrases and sentences that were not included in the initial drafts.

Necessary syntactic corrections occurred in the final drafts. Overall revisions in the Farsi and English final drafts,which seemed to be spontaneous, were the cause of most of the syntactic errors. In some cases underlining certain words and phrases to attract (perhaps) more attention from the reader, was a common feature of both Farsi and English writings. Most of the revisions at the intermediate level were lexical , syntactic, and phrasal.

Exaltation (in cultural,religious, and political aspects) was another common feature of most papers.

Translation was used ,apparently when the students had encountered a loss of lexical knowledge of English, e.g. ' I have become familiar...' for ' I met..'.

Some initial drafts contained blanks which were later filled in the subsequent drafts. Also, some final drafts included revisions of lexical items and syntactic constructions that seemed to be the writers'

spontaneous choice at the last moments of writing. Some others tended to end their papers with   something

'nice', 'polite' or 'religious'.

Despite the findings highlighted in this synopsis,no general pattern of strategy employment could be detected. The writers all used similar strategies for both Farsi and English writing tasks,irrespective of their language proficiency level.

Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to find whether the performances of the population of Iranian students learning English in an EFL context are consistent in Farsi and English writing tasks and whether there is a cross-linguistic transfer in this respect.

The results confirmed that such a correlation exists and is significant . The findings also indicated that the differences in performing Farsi and English writing tasks could not be due to chance and there was a systematic difference which pointed in the direction of transfer from Farsi to English. However, due to the small number of subjects and observations, the results should be interpreted with caution. Thus, although the study provided ground for rejecting both hypotheses, the differences between t-observed and t-critical were not very large to make strong claims. The same is true for the correlation coefficient which was only moderately sisgnificant in one occasion, but highly significant on others.

Implications

The findings have numerous implications for instructional practices in the L1 writing classroom. It is quite clear that these student writers

use similar strategies to compose in Farsi and English. Their writing behaviors suggest that Farsi composition teachers will need to devote more time and attention to strategic ,rhetorical and linguistic concerns. They need to include more work on planning – to generate ideas, text structure and language. They must encourage students to draft in stages, for example , to focus on content and organization in one draft and on linguistic concerns in a subsequent draft, or to separate their treatment of revising (rhetorical) and editing (grammatical).These teachers should adopt approaches to the teaching of composition which may be effective and fruitful for foreign language (in this case English) writing abilities as well and consequently,ameliorate the communicative competence of Iranian English learners. Writing, unfortunately – even in Farsi _ is not emphasized in Iranian schools, and at university level;expository writing is exclusively focused on. To improve the present conditions, students should be allowed to explore ideas and to write about them. They need to be taught how to make use of pre-writing strategies or invention techniques. "Instruction in writing must begin with the more fundamental processes whereby writers get their thoughts in the first place and then get them underway", Shaughnessy (1977,cited in Zamel,1982).

There also seems to be a clear need for English language teachers and instructors to treat other genres as extensively as they do the expository writing. They also need to familiarize their students with English audience expectations and provide them with strategies for dealing with other unfamiliar English textual patterns.

Composition teachers play an important role in the development of students'communicative competence. They can prepare students for

authentic writing experiences, experiences that their students may confront later in their academic and professional lives.

If EFL writing classes are to prepare students for approaching a variety of rhetorical situations,then teachers and researchers must examine critical writing tasks in specific communities ,and they must use their insights form these studies to provide students with opportunities to write real texts for a variety of real audiences.

As a final note,the study has shown that more research is still required to investigate the effects of first language in learning to write in a foreign language. The similarities and differences involved in composing written texts in first and foreign languages and the impact of first language on foreign language,remain intriguing proposals in need of further study and rightly call for more attention on the part of researchers. Exploration of these issues should help to clarify the notion of transfer in writing and its relationship to the composing processes of non-native language writers and the quality of their writings, which should lead to a better understanding of a judicious role of the first language in foreign language writing.

References

Bereiter,C. & Scardamalia, M. (1983), Does learning to write have to be so difficult? In A. Freedman,I.Pringle,& J.Yalden (Eds.), Learning *to write: First Language/Second Language.* pp.20-33.London : Longman.

Brown, J. D. (1991). Do English and ESL faculties rate writing samples differently? *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(4),587-603.

Caudery, F. (1990), The validity of timed essay tests in the assessment of writing skills, *ELT Journal*, 44, pp. 122-131.

Cumming, A. (1989), Writing exercise and second language proficiency, *Language Learning*, 39(1),pp.81-141.

Edelsky, C. 1982. Writing in a bilingual program: the relation of L1 and L2 tests. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16(2),211-228.

Hall, C. (1990), Managing the complexity of revising across languages.*TESOL Quarterly*, 24(1),43-60

Jacobs, H.L., Zinkgraf, S.A.,Wormuth, D.R., Hartfiel, V.G.& Hughey, J.B. (1981), *Testing ESL Composition: A practical approach*, Rowley, MA : Newbury House Publishers.

Johns, Ann M. (1993), Written argumentation for real audiences: suggestions for teacher research and classroom practice.*TESOL Quarterly*, 27(1), 75-90.

Kaplan, R. (1983), Contrastive rhetorics : Some implications for the writing process, In A. Freedman, I. Pringle & J. Yalden (Eds.), *Learning to Write : First language/ second language* (pp.139-161).

Kobayashi,H. & Rinnert, C. (1992), Effects of first language on second language writing: translation vesus composition. *Language Learning*, 42(2) 183-215.

Leki, I. (1991), Twenty-five years of contrastive rhetoric: text analysis and writing pedagogies, *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(1),123-143.

Mohan, B. & Lo, W. (1985), Academic writing and Chinese students : Transfer and development factors. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 19, 515-534.

Raimes, A. (1983), *Techniques in teaching writing*, Oxford : Oxford University Press.

Raimes, A. (1991), Out of the woods : Emerging traditions in the teaching of writing, *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(3),407-430.

Richards,J. C.,Platt, J. &Platt, H. 1992. Dictionary of language teaching & applied linguistics (2nd ed.). Essex : Longman Group.

Ringbom, H. (1992), On L1 transfer in L2 comprehension and L2 production, *Language Learning*, 42(1),85-112.

Zamel, V. (1982), Writing: The process of discovering meaning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16(2), 195-210.

Appendix
Criteria for Evaluating Papers Written in Farsi

Categories	Criteria	
A) Content	55	
1- Specifics		Vivid examples,supporting details
2- Developed Ideas		Explanation or elaboration of the main idea, ideas relevant to the given topic
3- Overall Clarity		Presentation of ideas easy to understand, easy to follow,not confusing
4- Interest		Writing capturing readers' attention with imaginative,insightful, unusual perspective
5- thesis		Main idea/point of view of writer clear, reasonable and representing the text (may be explicit or implicit thesis)
B) Organization	30	

6- Introduction — Opening focusing or pointing to what the writer will talk about, appealing to reader, preparing for what is coming

7- Logical Sequence — Ideas following logically within paragraphs

8- Conclusion — Synthesis of entire paper through summary, suggestions or predictions based on what has been said, strong finish preferred

9- Unity — Ideas throughout paper relating to main point

C) Style   15

10- Vocabulary — Sophisticated range, variety, appropriate register

11- Variety of Form — Variety of sentence beginnings, discourse markers, and coordinate clauses.