

Literature review on the use and effect of L1 in L2 writing

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Abstract: This paper gives an overview on the research of the use and effect of L1 in L2 writing over the past twenties years. Different focuses have yielded varied viewpoints, i.e. the researchers have emphasized either L2 writing processes or production, and observed L2 writers switch to L1 frequently for strategic purposes and L1 plays a prominent role in L2 writing. The transfer of L1 in L2 composing might be positive in deep structure and negative in surface structure.

Key words: first language; second language writing; positive transfer; negative transfer

Researches on the L2 writing have thrived since the early 1980s. Different focuses have yielded varied viewpoints. Most of the former studies emphasized on 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. The current studies, however, 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. L2 writers are more likely to rely on L1 when they are managing their writing processes. The paper reviews the development of the use and effect of L1 as Chinese in L2 (English) writing and displays them from three aspects: traditions of Chinese and English writing, language switch in the writing process, and language transfer.

1. Traditions of Chinese and English writing

In writing traditions based on Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist philosophical precepts, rhetorical indirectness has the goal of maintaining harmony and avoiding impoliteness so that their L2 writing appears vague and indirect to create solidarity between the speaker and the hearer. Direct argumentation and persuasion are not common in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese written discourse; rather, a piece of writing is structured around a theme with the rhetorical purpose of causing the reader to contemplate an issue. However, in Anglo-American writing, explicit points and direct support are expected (Hinkel, 1997). Usually in written academic discourse, explicit discussion of the central ideas related to the thesis of the text and overt explication of the writer's views are considered requisite. It is common that in academic writing, English speakers expect an essay to contain explicit points explicitly supported and to demonstrate a great deal of structures, text progression, and clarity-characteristics which occupy a prominent place in the teaching and testing of non-native speaker writing.

However, the findings associated with indirectness in the L2 academic writing of Chinese students do not appear to be definitive. Mohan and Lo examined the organizational structure of ESL essays produced by Chinese students and compared it to that in both English and Chinese rhetorical organizations. They found that the

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rhetorical paradigms and frameworks in English and Chinese texts are similar. In their view, following the Chinese organizational essay structure should help non-native speaker students rather than hinder because Chinese writing does not exhibit “preference for ‘indirectness’” (cf. Kaplan, R, B. 1996).

Different viewpoints on Chinese and English writing traditions resulted in discussions about the TRANSFER of mother tongue as Chinese in ESL writing, does the positive transfer overwhelm the negative transfer or vice versa?

2. Language transfer

There have been three great schools in the theoretical development of the transfer of L1 in L2 writing process. The first one based on contrastive analysis and represented by James (1980) who found that the negative transfer of L1 were more powerful than positive one in L2 writing, and L1 always interfered in L2 writing, and the way of thinking in L1 culture paradigm influenced the pattern of the text organization in L2 writing, so the learners should try to overcome the influence of L1 in L2 writing (Kaplan, 1966). Writing is the process of expressing discourse from deep structure to surface structure. During the transitional process, L2 writers may make much mistakes among which 51% come from the L1 interfere (SHU, 1996). The researchers also believed that differences between languages caused difficulty, and difficulty caused errors in L2 learning and writing. The more the differences were, the more the difficulties became, and at the same time more errors took place. The second one, however, based on creative construction hypothesis and represented by Dulay & Burt, (1974a, 1974b), Corder (1981) and Norrish (1983), which emphasized that L2 acquisition conditioned by Universal Grammar, and L2 writers with different L1 background used similar processes and order in L2 writing and did not rely very much on the L1 rules, so the effects of L1 could be ignored. The third one based on CUP which underlined the deep structure of the two languages is dependent on each other and the positive transfer of L1 is much greater than the negative one. L2 writers are more likely to rely on L1 when they are managing their writing processes (WANG & WEN, 2004). A more current study appeared in the shadow of the development of cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology, which made the recognition of the effects of L1 in L2 learning more thoroughly. L1 had both positive and negative transfer and the two transfers took effects interactively in L2 learning and writing.

Chinese culture and language are different from English ones, and the Chinese ESL students have already built up systematic mother tongue knowledge before they begin to learn English, so they always use their mother tongue knowledge, i.e. language rules, structures and habits in the writing processes, which results in positive transfer and negative transfer interactively. WANG & WEN (2004) made a study on the effects of L1 literacy capabilities on L2 writing ability of Chinese EFL learners and yielded two important findings. First, the whole-group analysis showed that Chinese vocabulary and Chinese writing were found to have direct as well as indirect effects on English writing, while Chinese discourse, indirect effects. These three L1 literacy variables could account for about 71.8% of the variance of L2 writing. Second, the between-group analysis indicated L2 literacy level constrained the relationship between L1 literacy variables and L2 writing ability. For the high-ability learners, Chinese writing showed direct effects on English writing, while Chinese vocabulary displayed indirect effects. These two L1 literacy variables together could account for 62.3% of the variance of L2 writing of the high-ability group. For the low-ability learners, Chinese discourse had a direct effect on English writing while Chinese vocabulary showed indirect effects. Altogether, these two L1 literacy variables could predict 21.6% of the variance of L2 writing of the low-ability group.

It is evident that language transfer is inevitable in L2 writing. Similarities and differences of the two languages may result in either positive transfer or negative transfer according to different learning stages and language environment. In short, the transfer takes effects both in surface structure and deep structure, and the negative transfer overwhelms the positive transfer in surface structure and vice versa in deep structure.

3. Language switch in the writing process

As the above studies show, L1 plays an important role in L2 writing, L2 writers switch to L1 frequently in the process of writing. In fact, the use of L1 is a fairly common strategy among L2 writers. Numerous studies have revealed that L2 learners used their L1 and L2 interactively for various strategic purposes while composing in L2 (Arndt, 1987; Boshier, 1998; Cumming, 1990; Raimes, 1987; Sasaki, 2000; Uzawa, 1996; WANG & WEN, 2002; Woodall, 2002; Zamel, 1983).

In the domain of L2 writing, a consensus has been reached that one consistent and salient characteristic, which is fundamentally distinct from L1 writing processes, is that L2 writers, either “skilled” or “unskilled,” switch back and forth between their L1 and L2 in order to work through a particular problem that they are struggling with while composing in the L2. As several studies have reported, L2 writers use their L1 to plan their writing for text generation (Cumming, 1990), transfer their L1 knowledge to L2 writing contexts and develop ideas and produce text content and organization (Lay, 1982), conduct heuristic searches and make evaluations of their texts (Cumming, 1990). Moreover, these researchers have pointed out that L2 proficiency may exert effects on varied aspects of writers’ composing processes and the quality of L2 writing (ibid), such that it is a determining factor distinguishing good from weak writers. For example, Jones and Tetroe (1987) found that L2 proficiency constrained the amount of writers’ planning while composing in the L2. Their further observations show that the amount of L1 use was reduced when written tasks were facilitated by providing relevant vocabulary for the students with a low level of L2 proficiency. However, Cumming (1990) found that there was not any relation between the extent of the use of L1 while composing and people’s proficiency in the L2. Nonetheless, these studies all suggest that using the L1 can be an efficient and effective behavior while composing in L2.

In Lay’s (1982) case study of four native Chinese-speaking ESL writers, the writers’ think-aloud data revealed that they use their L1 to “get a strong impression and association of ideas for the essay.” A study made by WANG & WEN (2002) showed that L2 writers were most likely to rely on L1 when they were controlling their writing processes, generating and organizing ideas, but more likely to rely on L2 when undertaking task-examining and text-generating activities. Their 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” (ibid). These results seem to suggest that L2 proficiency determines the focus of concerns of strategy use in L2 composing.

Studies made by Uzawa (1996) and Woodall (2000) have also implied that such strategic use of L1 in L2 writing may be determined by L2 proficiency. L2 writers adopted less and less L1 for generating text as they become more and more proficient in their L2, and more difficult tasks increased the duration of L1 use in L2 writing (Woodall, 2002). Based on quantitative and qualitative analysis, WANG Lu-rong (2002) suggested that L2 proficiency might determine writers’ approaches and qualities of thinking while composing. L2 writers are most likely to rely on L1 when they were controlling their writing processes, generating and organizing ideas, but

more likely to rely on L2 when undertaking task-examining and text-generating activities.

4. Conclusion

Above all, L1 plays an important role in L2 writing and L2 writers switch to L1 frequently for strategic purposes. L1 influences the generation and organization of ideas, as well as the composing processes in L2 writing. The transfer of L1 in L2 composing might be positive or negative due to the writers' L2 proficiency. In fact, the deep structure of the two languages are dependent on each other and the positive transfer overwhelms the negative transfer in deep structure though the negative transfer is prominent in surface structure.

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