

**CLOSE ANALYSIS: AN ACTIVITY FOR USING
TRANSLATION IN TEACHING WRITING FOR
STUDENTS OF ENGLISH AT UNIVERSITY LEVEL**

Ramadan Ahmad Shalbag

Assistant professor; Faculty of Education
Al-Mergeb University
Khoms- Libya

1. Introduction

The teachers of English language (EL) and students encounter certain difficulties in teaching and learning writing. Zheng 1999 states that acquiring the writing skill seems to be more laborious and demanding than acquiring the other three skills. Nunan (1999:271) considers writing an enormous challenge to produce a "coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing" in one's second language. Thus, teachers of writing started thinking of combining more than one approach in order to suit all writing tasks and prepare the students for the writing that they have to do after they graduate.

The collaboration of adopting more than one approach is one of the changes that happened in English language teaching (ELT). One of the greatest changes was the shift in English language teaching, from a teacher-centered, to a learner- centered approach.

Throughout my experience in teaching English as a foreign language, it has been observed that the first year university students of English Department at Almergeb University have encountered difficulties in writing effectively. Some of these difficulties are in: vocabulary use, grammatical use such as word order, subject verb agreement; fragments, repetition of the subject, mechanical considerations such as spelling, punctuation and capitalization, as well as in content and organization. Unity and coherence are mostly found lacking.

These difficulties may be due to the interference of first language (L1 hereafter). In negative transfer, for example, an Arab learner of English may write a sentence in English such as “I a boy.” The student is transferring the utterance from his first language here and because the form in his first language is different the performance will be, of course, wrong. Thus, the methodology used in teaching language skills is a combination of the grammar-translation, reading and audio-lingual methods. The activity in this paper is an attempt to utilize the translation as a technique in teaching process.

2. Literature Review

Most of the studies that have been conducted on comparing L1 and L2 writing have found that there are similarities among strategies used for the two processes. Both English as a foreign language and first language studies point to a transfer of writing strategies from L1 to L2 writing especially for planning and revising strategies. (Raimes, 1987)

The source of errors as identified by Brown (1980 : 84) include: (1) interlingual and intralingual transfer. They are considered learning strategies, (2) context of learning, and (3) communication strategies. Ellis (1999: 299-300) defines learning strategies as strategies that “account for how learners accumulate new L₂ rules and how they automatize existing ones..... Learning strategies contrast with both communication strategies and production strategies, which account for how the learners use their rule systems, rather than how they acquire them”. Typical communication strategies are paraphrases and mime. In this study, interlingual transfer is one of the important strategies used by an L2 learner. Ellis (1999: 299) defines transfer as “the process of using the knowledge of the first language in learning a second language”. Transfer can be positive or negative. It is negative when a first language pattern is different from the target-language pattern is transferred.

USING TRANSLATION IN TEACHING WRITING

Interlingual transfer is different from Intralingual transfer. The latter refers to the learners' use of the previous knowledge of the second language itself in the process of learning the second language. Transfer from the second language is the same as the L1 transfer, it can be either positive (i.e. generalization) or negative (i.e. overgeneralization). Accordingly, errors of overgeneralization suggest that although the learner has mastered the mechanics of a particular rule of the target language, he has not yet learned the exceptions where the rule does not apply.

Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) explored an alternative approach to essay writing tasks which was writing directly compared to writing a translated text. They conducted a study on two groups of Japanese students. One group was asked to write their first essay in their L1 (Japanese) and then translate it into TL, English, while a second group wrote directly in English (TL) first. The next day the groups reversed tasks and wrote their second essay on another topic. The compositions written in the translation mode demonstrated higher level of syntactic complexity, showed benefits in the areas of content, style, and organization, and had more clearly stated theses. Students at lower level of proficiency benefited from translation whereas those at higher levels did not. In another words, Kobayashi and Rinnert suggested on the basis of their results that, at least for students at lower level of proficiency, a translation strategy in writing might be beneficial and that as their proficiency improves, they would switch more to direct FL writing, depending on what they were writing.

Brooks (1996) also carried out a study on the use of translation in writing. The subjects were thirty-one intermediate level students. They were instructed to prepare the two essays out of class, first in draft form, and then in revised one. They had therefore, spent a considerable amount of time. The first form was written directly in the

TL (French); the other one was translated from a rough draft (in all cases, English.)

The findings of the study showed that participants received higher overall scores in the translated mode than in direct writing mode. When ratings of performance were broken down by categories (accuracy/cohesion, coherence, and argument), the translated versions of the essay were rated significantly higher on the cohesion/coherence dimensions (i.e. the extent of cohesion as contributor to coherence). These results may be illustrated by an analysis of syntactic complexity in the writing, where higher levels of subordinations and coordination were viewed as indicators of "good writing" (Andrew et al, 2001)

3. The Study

3.1 The Questions of the Study

- 1- How does writing an essay directly in a L2 differ from translating the essay from the L1 into the L2?
- 2- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the direct and the translated modes?

3.2 The subjects of the Study

The subjects chosen for this study were of two groups: 10 students of the first year university students and 10 students of the fourth year. Both of them were studying English as a major specialization at the Faculty of Education- Al -Mergeb University. Thus, the total number was 20 students chosen by their teacher of writing Dr. Mohan as fast learners' students. (i.e. the 10 top students in each group). They were female students, their age ranged between 18-19 years .The case study took two days. In the first day, the participants were given a topic in the first language (i.e. Arabic), and asked to translate it into the target language TL, i.e. English. On the next day, the participants were asked to write the second version which was in the target language (English). The topic was about Frederick Baily (1817-1895) a character born in the south of

the USA, and struggled against slavery. The students were asked to write an essay directly about this character.

3.3 Data Collection

In this paper, the researcher assisted and measured the students' ability in using translation as a technique in learning writing. Thus, two versions of writing were presented to 10 students. The subjects were asked to write two versions: in the first version, the subjects were given a text in their L1 (i.e. Arabic). The topic was about Bilal Ibn Rabaah a historical religious character who was born into slavery during the time of the Prophet " MOHAMMED". Then they were asked to translate the written text into the target language (i.e. English). The second version was in the target language (English). The topic was about Frederick Baily (1817-1895) a character born in the south of the USA, and struggled against slavery. The students were asked to write an essay directly about this character. The aim of this activity is to compare between direct writing tasks and a translation writing tasks and whether the students use the same writing strategies for the direct writing and a translation writing or not. The subjects were given 20 minutes for each version and no time was given for revising. Some information and key words about the two characters were also given to the subjects. Directions were given to participants to include an introduction, transitions, a conclusion, and to use a paragraph structure in their writing.

3.4 Data Analysis

For the first year group, the participants did not do better with direct text. Most of the students' errors with the second version (i.e. TL) were syntactic and semantic. However, students with higher level (i.e. Fourth year students) prefer direct essay writing rather than a translation one. They base their assumption on the difficulty of conveying subtle nuances of meaning when translating, and on the tendency to use familiar words and structures and simpler ideas when writing directly in the TL. These

findings were noticed by previous researchers as indicators of "good writing".

The findings also showed that the students of the first year did better in translation and they committed fewer mistakes especially with coherence and cohesion. Most of the students’ mistakes were in grammar, spelling and articles. In other words the participants received higher overall scores in the translated mode than in direct writing mode. When ratings of performance were broken down by categories (accuracy/cohesion, coherence, and argument), the translated versions of the essay were rated significantly higher on the cohesion/coherence dimensions (i.e. the extent of cohesion as contributor to coherence). These findings resemble some previous studies (Kobayashi & Rinnert (1992); Brooks (1996)).

3.5 Results

3.5.1 Research Question1

1- How does writing an essay directly in L2 differ from translating the essay from the L1 into the L2?

From the questionnaire submitted to the first group, it is clear that the mean performance on the translated writing mode was significantly better than performance on the direct writing modes especially in the headings coherence, cohesion and vocabulary (see table1):

Headings	Translated Writing Mode				Directed Writing Mode			
	Correct	Incorrect	Percentage of correct	Percentage of incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Percentage of correct	Percentage of incorrect
Spelling	4	6	40%	60%	4	6	40%	60%
Grammar	4	6	40%	60%	3	7	30%	70%
Coherence	7	3	70%	30%	3	7	30%	70%
Cohesion	7	3	70%	30%	4	6	40%	60%
Articles	4	6	40%	60%	3	7	30%	70%
Vocabulary	6	4	60%	40%	4	6	40%	60%

TABLE 1

The above table shows that there are significant differences between the two modes especially in the headings: coherence, cohesion and vocabulary

USING TRANSLATION IN TEACHING WRITING

However, the mean performance of the second group on the direct writing mode was significantly better than performance on the translated writing modes especially in the headings spelling, grammar, coherence, cohesion, articles, and vocabulary (see table 2):

Headings	Translated Writing Mode				Directed Writing Mode			
	Correct	Incorrect	Percentage of correct	Percentage of incorrect	Correct	Incorrect	Percentage of correct	Percentage of incorrect
Spelling	4	6	40%	60%	7	3	70%	30%
Grammar	5	5	50%	50%	6	4	60%	40%
Coherence	6	4	60%	40%	6	4	60%	40%
Cohesion	4	6	40%	60%	4	6	40%	60%
Articles	4	6	40%	60%	6	4	60%	40%
Vocabulary	4	6	40%	60%	6	4	60%	40%

TABLE 2

3.5.2 Research Question2

2- What are the advantages and disadvantages of the direct and the translated modes?

Table 1 shows the results of the first group which is clear that the participants do better in the translating writing mode than the direct one. The advantages and disadvantages were as follows:

- Found that translating the essay from their first language to the target language brings better organization to the target language in coherence and cohesion.
- Faced difficulty in both spelling and grammar.
- Changed the organization of the L1 essay somewhat to fit the TL.
- Had better vocabulary when translating the essay from their L1 to the TL.
- Felt that they had time pressure to complete the translation in English.

Table 2 shows the results of the second group which is clear that the participants do better in the direct writing

mode than the translating one. The advantages and disadvantages were as follows:

- Felt that writing in English directly helped them learn the TL.
- Felt that writing in English helped them to focus on English expressions.
- Found it easier to write directly in English than to translate.
- Felt that writing in English directly is faster than translating.
- Dislike being required to use translation as a technique.

It should be noted that these findings would be an indication that initial thinking about the topic written in the L1 may actually support the production of the foreign language, despite the admonition that such cognitive behavior encourages negative transfer and is, thus, counterproductive.

3.5 The activities

Writing Prompt 1 (Translated Text)

Translate the following text into English.

بلال بن رباح

هو بلال بن عبد الله بن رباح، وكنيته أبو عبد الكريم، و أمه حمامه .ولد في الحجاز، وهو مؤذن رسول الله عليه الصلاة والسلام. يرجع أصوله إلى الحبشة وكان عبدا مملوكا لأحد سادات قريش، أعتقه سيدنا أبوبكر الصديق و قال عنه الصحابة إن رسول الله بشره بالجنة. عن انس أن النبي عليه الصلاة والسلام قال: أن السباق أربعة أنا سابق العرب، وسلمان سابق الفرس، وبلال سابق الحبشة، وصهيب سابق الروم. من الحديث السابق يتضح أن بلال أحد السبعة اللذين اظهروا إسلامهم وهم رسول الله عليه الصلاة والسلام، وأبوبكر، و عمار وأمه سمية، وبلال، وصهيب، والمقداد.

و(إما) سائرهم فاخذهم المشركون فألبسوهم ادراع الحديد وصهروهم في الشمس، فما منهم من احد إلا وائاهم علي ما أرادوا إلا بلال فانه هانت عليه نفسه وهان على قومه فأعطوه الوالدان فجعلوا يطوفون به في شعاب مكة وهو يقول: أحد أحد. عاش بلال بضعا وستين سنة وفي وفاته أقوال كثيرة، إحداها : انه توفي يداريا بأرض الشام في سنة عشرين.

Writing Prompt 2 (Writing directly)

Write a three paragraph essay about **Frederick Bailey** (1817-1895) a character born into slavery in the south of the USA, and escaped to freedom in the North when he was young, then he started struggling against slavery and became a famous writer.

References;

1. - Andrew, D. Cohen and Amanda (2001).The modern language Journal V85 N2
2. Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1980). Discourse Analysis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Brooks, A. W.(1996). An examination of native language processing in foreign language writing. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Vanderbilt University, Nashvilli.
4. Ellis, R.(1999) Understanding Second Language Acquisition. London: Oxford University Press.
5. Kobayashi, H. and Rinnert, C. (1992). Effectives of first language on second language writing. Translation versus direct composition. Language learning,42,183-215.
6. Nunan, D.(1999) Second language teaching and learning. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publisher.
7. Raimes, A. (1987) Anguish as a second language? Remedies for composition teachers. *In learning to write: First language/second language*, ed. A. Freedman, I. Pringle, and J. Yalden,258-72, New York: Longman.
8. Zheng,Y.(1999) Providing students with effective feedback in the writing process. Teaching English in China, (36)41-45.