

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Impact of L1 Use in L2 English Writing Classes. September 2012, Abiy Yigzaw, *Ethiopian Journal of Education and Science*. 8 (1), 11-27.

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The article presents a clearly written report of an experimental study whose objective was to investigate the impact of first language use in foreign language writing classes and also to find out the students' beliefs about using first language in foreign language writing. The study was conducted in Belay Zeleke Preparatory School, Bichena Woreda, which is found in Amhara Regional State, Ethiopia where English is used as a foreign language. The investigation involved 94 Grade 11 students, all of whom speak Amharic as their mother tongue.

Non-randomized pretest posttest control group design was employed. One half of the participants were assigned to an experimental group in which the participants, at the pre-writing stage, brainstormed for ideas, collected information, and made outlines in a group using Amharic and then individually wrote paragraphs in English during four writing tasks. The remaining half, comprising the control group, were made to use English throughout the writing tasks. Both groups were made to write a composition before and after the intervention. Two experienced English language teachers scored the participants' compositions by using a rubric to score the content (ideas, organization, etc.) and the form (grammar, mechanics, etc.) separately and the average scores of the two raters were computed and used as the final data for the study. An independent sample t-test was applied to determine whether there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups in their pretest and posttest writing scores.

The test result confirmed there was a significant difference only in the post-test scores, which helped to conclude that using students' L1 to generate ideas at the planning stage of EFL writing could help them to write better. Furthermore, majority of the interviewees confirmed that that using Amharic (L1) in the pre-writing phase would help them discuss

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ideas without difficulty and generate more ideas and it would enable them to write better even though a few participants preferred to discuss in English because they thought that they would share vocabulary and structures of English language from their peers.

Some scholars believe that using students' L1 to generate ideas at the planning stage of EFL writing could help them to write better, but others argue that allowing them to employ their L1 in EFL writing classes hinders their proficiency of English, and it does not help to improve the quality of a piece of writing. Meaning, the latter believe that using L1 in foreign language writing reduces the progress of students' fluency and accuracy of writing. Also, except the grammar translation method which lacks theoretical basis, all other language teaching methods hardly support L1 use in foreign language classes. Thus, for English language teachers to decide to use the students' first language in EFL writing classes or to think otherwise, they could not get conclusive evidences on it (Khodareza, M. & Kahiani ,M.,2016).

This study investigated the impact of L1 (Amharic) use in L2 (English) writing classes and it indicated that using Amharic during the pre-writing phase in English classes helped students to generate more ideas. In fact, in order for learners to get emotionally attached to their cultures, they should stay linked with their native language; employing one's L1 helps to hold on his/her own culture (Al Sharaeai, 2012, Behjat, F., Dastpak, M. & Taghinezhad, A. , 2018).

By contrast, the history of language teaching indicated that L1 use in foreign language classrooms was hardly practiced. The only method, according to Freeman (2000), which allowed the use of L1 in L2 classroom, was the grammar translation method which was criticized, for it did not have any theoretical basis. Richards and Rodgers (2001) note that "*It [the grammar translation method] has no advocates: It is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it ...*" (p.7).

Moreover, the direct method, the natural approach, the oral approach, the situational language teaching method and the audio-lingual method encourage the exclusive use of the target language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). They forbid L1 use in L2 classrooms. Also the contemporary approaches such as the task-based approach, the genre-oriented approach,

the process approach, etc. favor communicative language teaching which aims at helping students to use the target language for communicative purposes; they disregard the use of mother tongue in a foreign language classroom.

On top of that, according to Friedlander (1990), accomplishing written works in L1 does not help students to learn the target language; also it interferes with the production of the English language structures. That is, firstly, L1 use will not develop the learners' ability and confidence to express their ideas in English. In fact, in Ethiopian context, most students who have completed Grade 12 could not express themselves in English, for they could not get adequate exposure of the language. According to B. Gardner and Gardner (2000), employing English as much as possible in an English class will help to uphold a good 'English-speaking' atmosphere which help students use the language; students who are able to communicate using English can their confidence to use the language. Similarly, Nation (2001) argues that in classes where learners all share the same first language, teachers should encourage students to use the target language as much as possible; in a foreign language classroom where students have very limited opportunity to use the target language outside the classroom, it is crucial to maximize the use of L2. Meaning, the only place where students are exposed to English is the EFL classroom, so students need to use the allotted time for practicing the target language.

Secondly, using L1 to generate ideas and then translating the information into the L2 make the students' short term memory become overloaded which again let them be inhibited from producing quality compositions (Friedlander, 1990). Also, B. Gardner and Gardner (2000) state that saying something in English saves time; indeed, to say it in a first language and then to repeat it in English takes twice as long; this also discourages thinking in English. This will also force students to develop the habit of translating everything into their mother tongue which is not a good learning strategy.

Also, for Cook (2001), thinking and writing in the target language promotes the authentic use of the target language. In fact, thinking in English while writing helps students to become fluent writers. According to B. Gardner and Gardner (2000), communicating entirely using English in an EFL lesson helps learners to start to think in English; translation

does not help students to think in the target language. This conception goes in line with Krashen's input hypothesis which argues that students who receive the target language input that is one step beyond their present stage of linguistic competence can show progress in their language learning (Krashen, 1981).

Abiy (2012) concluded that using L1 (Amharic) during the pre-writing phase in L2 composition writing helped students to produce better compositions. But it is also necessary to make it clear that whether these students did better in writing in terms of quantity or quality. In other words, it is essential to give answers to the following questions:

- (1) Does the use of L1 in L2 writing help students to produce compositions with rich information but poor language and organization or good language, organization and detail information?
- (2) Does L1 use in L2 writing classes help students to develop their fluency or accuracy or both fluency and accuracy of EFL writing?

Also, while appropriate use of Amharic (students' mother tongue) could be seen as valuable, students can get an opportunity to generate ideas only when a process approach to writing is used in side class and under the support of the teacher. But, in our context, this approach has a limited practical value. Practically, teachers prefer the product approach to the process approach, for the latter requires more time., Using L1 (Amharic) for generating ideas at the pre-writing stage and writing it in English at the drafting phase may lack practical significance as the process approach to teaching writing is less in use in the part of teachers. The study also did not address the question of how L1 can be employed in EFL writing instructions when other approaches such as the product approach, the task-based approach, and the genre-based approach to writing are employed. This implies that further investigation is required to get a clear answer to aforementioned questions.

Furthermore, the study revealed that there was no significance difference between the scores for *form* of the control and the experimental groups; using L1 in L2 writing has insignificant benefit for the students' language development. Stapa and Abdulmejid (2009) also note that using L1 in L2 classes is useful for students with low proficiency of English language than for mixed classes which involve high, average and low achievers.

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