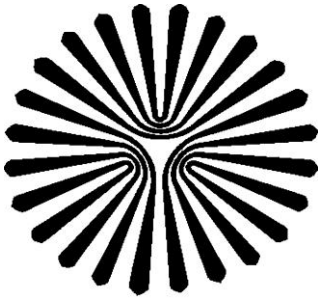
IN THE NAME OF GOD



Payame Noor University

School of Humanities

Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages

Title:

The effect of proficiency on language - switching in Iranian EFL learners' writing

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of MA in TEFL

Supervisor:
Dr.Fatemeh Hemmati
Reader:
Dr. Hasan Iravani
Examiner:
Dr.Masood Raee Shareef
By:
Siavash Amiri

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In the Name of God

The Compassionate, The Merciful

Dedicated To

My family

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Abstract

In a protocol analysis of second language writing from 20 adult English as a foreign language (EFL) Iranian students, this research observed how language-switching (L-S), i.e., first Language use in L2 writing, was affected by L2 proficiency.

Switching interactively between first (L1) and second (L2) languages has been recognized as one of the salient characteristics of L2 writing.

However, it is not clear how switching between languages is related to L2 proficiency or how switching to the L1 assists writers with differing L2 proficiency in their composing processes.

The present study investigated these issues with twenty adult Persian-speaking English as foreign Language (EFL) learners with two levels of proficiency in performing a writing task: an informal personal letter. Data were the students' think-aloud protocols and written compositions.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses of these data show that the participants' frequencies of language-switching varied slightly by their L2 proficiency, suggesting that L2 proficiency might determine writers' approaches and qualities of thinking while composing in their L2.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgement I

Abstract II

Table of content III

CHAPTER I

1.1 Introduction 1

1.2 Background 1

1.3 Statement of the problem 3

1.4 Research Question: 5

1.5 Research Hypothesis 5

1.6 Significance of the study 5

1.7 Definitions of key terms 6

1.8 Limitations and Delimitations 8

1.9 Overview of the study 8

CHAPTER II: Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Introduction 11

2.2 Bilingualism 11

2.2.1 Psychological Mechanism of Language - Switching and Translation……..15

2.3 Writing 20

2.4 Teaching writing 21

2.5 Composing vs. writing 24

2.6 Writing as a product 24

2.7 Writing as a process 25

2.8 Process vs. product 26

2.9 The relationship between product and process 29

2.10 Which one? Language - switching or code-switching 30

2.11 Previous Studies on Language Switching 31

CHAPTER III: Methodology

3.1 Introduction 38

3.2 subjects 38

3.3 Instrumentation 41

3.4 Procedure 43

3.4.1 Subject Training.....43

3.5 Data Analysis……..46

CHAPTER IV: Findings and Discussions

4.1. Introduction.....48

4.2. Data Analysis 48

4.3 The Effect of language proficiency on L-S 49

4.4. Discussion of The effect of language proficiency on L-S in writing 55

4.5 Discussions on the first finding.....56

4.6 Discussions on the second finding..... 59

CHAPTER V: Conclusions, Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for further research

5.1 Conclusion 64

5.2 Pedagogical implications 64

5.2.1 Pedagogical Implications for language teachers 65

5.2.2 Pedagogical Implications for material developers 67

5.3 Suggestions for further research 68

References.....70

Appendices

Appendix A: One of the students' mark list.....77

Appendix B: A sample form of L-S task.....78

Appendix C: Rating Form.....79

Appendix D: Critical value of T-test 80

Appendix E: Writing quality scale adapted from Carroll(1980).....81

Appendix F: Rated form of Nosrat's work.....82

Appendix G:Rated form of Maryam's work.....83

Lists of Tables

Table 3.1: Participants' profile.....40

Table 4.1: The frequency of L-S for the two groups.....50

Table 4.2: One sample Kolmogrov-Smirnov Test for low group 51

Table 4.3: One sample Kolmogrov-Smirnov Test for high group 52

Table 4.4: Group Statistics.....52

Table 4.5: Independent Samples Test 53

Table 4.6: comparisons of some researches' results 60

Lists of Figures

Figure 4.1: Comparison the mean between low and high group.....54

Figure 4.2: Fig 4.2. Coded protocol excerpt from Nosrat's letter (1±7 min). Each sections off by vertical bars (|) represent 57

Figure. 4.3 Coded protocol excerpt from Maryam's letter (1±6 min). Each section set off by vertical bars (|) represents 10 s..... 58

Payame Noor
University

دانشگاه پیام نور
دانشگاه علوم انساني
گروه علمي زبانشناسي و زبانهاي خارجي
عنوان:

تحلیل تا ثیر مهارت زبانی روی بازگشت به زبان اول در نوشتار دانشجویان ایرانی که انگلیسی را در محیط زبان اول خود فرا گرفته اند

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استاد داور:
دکتر مسعود راعی شریف

تهیه و تنظیم:
سیاوش امیری

زمستان 89

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This introductory chapter describes the background of the study, attempts to clarify statement of the problem, and presents the purpose and the significance of the study. It also specifies the research question that the study sets out to address as well as the hypothesis suggested to predict answer for the research question. The chapter closes with a preview of the organization of the thesis and definition of key terms.

1.2 Background

According to Jack C.Richards (2002) there is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to learn. Difficulty lies not only in generating and in organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into a readable text and also according to his idea the skills involved in writing are highly complex. L2 writers have to pay attention to higher level skills of planning and organizing as well as lower level skills of spelling, punctuation, word choice, and so on (ibid). The difficulty becomes even more pronounced if their language proficiency is weak. By increasing the pervasiveness of bilingualism and the projections for increasing the importance of writing skills, doing continued researches on the nature of bilingual writing is of crucial importance and has significant implications for educational research and bilingual classroom discourse alike.

Also research on second language (L2) writing in the last 20 years has supported the position that the process of writing in one's native language (LI) such as depicted in the Hayes and Flower (1980) model, is largely the same as that for writing in L2 (Krapels, 2005).

Although L2 writing researchers have identified some differences between writing in one's mother tongue and writing in a second or subsequent language , these differences tend to be quantitative, rather than qualitative (Cumming 1989 ; Jones 2003;Whalen 1995).

For instance, less skilled second language writers spend more time pausing while writing (Hall, 1990; Pennington & So 1993) ,write shorter texts (Berman, 2004; Fried Lander and Hall, 1990) and spend more time re-reading their texts (Pennington & So, 1993) than they do while writing in their mother tongue.

Although these quantitative differences between L1 and L2 composing are important for both theory and practice, if there is to be a theory of second language writing because we don't know exactly there is a theory or not , one would expect it to be based on both quantitative and qualitative differences (Krapels and Silva, 2000). This kind of qualitative difference between L 1 and L2 writing is that the L2 writer has two languages (or more) at his or her disposal. This feature of L2 writing naturally involves a behavior unique to L2 writing, that of language - switching (L-S). In spite of teacher admonitions to "think in your second language," second language writers sometimes switch to their native language during the writing process, something the monolingual writer does not do.

In this field there are many studies which refer to different aspects of language switching. For example Cumming (1989) viewed L-S as a unique L2 strategy for solving problems but his analysis was limited to what he called deliberate or "directed translation or code switching". This behavior was embedded in a variable called "heuristic search strategies" (p.49) which they are processes of conscious or unconscious inquiry or discovery and this variable was a composite of several behaviors and complex. Thus language switching itself, whether deliberate or non- deliberate, was left largely unanalyzed in his study. However, looking at a subset of the (1989) study, Cumming (1990) found that most of the episodes of concurrent thinking on linguistic forms and meaning involved L-S. He reported that this metalinguistic behavior (and by association, L-S itself) was related to the writers' L1 expertise, but not to their L2 proficiency (ranging from intermediate to advanced) or to the task (an informal letter, an argumentative essay, and a summary of a text).

Some other researchers (e.g., Heller ,1995; Hidalgo, 1986; Hornberger,1989,1998) consider the relationship between the two languages(cognate or non-cognate)and the effect

of this relationship on language switching but just two studies have specifically investigated the effect of proficiency on language switching (Woodall,2002; Wang, L. 2001).

These studies have provided a valuable but partial look at L-S behavior within sub – process of L2 writing.Qi's (1998) case study appears to be the only research specifically devoted to identifying the reason for L-S in L2 writing .Qi found that cognitive demanding tasks were associated with increased use of L1 in a variety of composing tasks performed by his informant, a highly proficient Chinese –English bilinguals .Qi identified four functions of L-S in the L2 writing of his informant. The L1 was used for initiating an idea, for developing a thought, for verifying the meaning of a word, and for compensating for working memory limitations due to the complexity of the task (Qi, 1998).Although Qi refers to these functions as "factors that have the potential to influence L-S behavior"(p.425), his case study lacks the ability to identify casual factors.

Numerous studies have examined the role of L2 proficiency in L2 writing, but the results have been mixed (Sasaki & Hiros, 1996). Some have found that L2 writing performance was unrelated to L2 proficiency (e.g., Cumming, 1990; Jones&Tetro, 2003; Raimes, 2001; Zamel, 1982). Others have found that L2 proficiency does influence the variability of L2 writing performance (Cumming, 1998; Pennington &So, 1993; Sasaki &Hirose, 1996). In the research mentioned here it was hypothesized that L-S would decrease as L2 proficiency increases (cf. ,Zimmerman ,2000), but that it would increase as task difficulty increases (cf., Jones& Tetroe, 2003; Qi, 1998).However, these factors taken together provide a complex picture, since the effect of task difficulty could be related to L2 proficiency .In other word, a higher L2 proficiency, in itself, may provide additional or more effective tools for problem solving .If L-S is related to L2 proficiency and task difficulty in this way, then it may provide a robust basis to development in L2 writing.

1.3 Statement of the problem

Switching interactively between first (LI) and second (L2) languages has been recognized as one of the salient characteristics of L2 writing. Language-switching in writing can be

defined as any non-instructed use of the first language in the L2 writing process, (Willy A. Renandya & Jack C. Richards 2002). In different forms of writing, L-S can occur and it is clear that it can happen for different levels of proficiency. However, it is not clear how switching between languages is related to proficiency or how switching to the L1 assists writers with different L2 proficiency in their composing processes.

Some researchers have reported that L2 writers think in their L1 much of the time and often resort to their L1 for problem solving and decision making while composing in their L2. Given the evidence suggesting that writers with differing proficiency levels in L2 may use their L1 in different patterns while composing in L2, it was assumed that L2 proficiency may be one important factor that generates the different process of switching languages in L2 writing.

Despite of the informative results that have emerged from different researches such as Qi's (1998)and Woodall's(2000) researches, their researches did not specifically investigate the effect of L2 proficiency on L-S, nor how writers with differing L2 proficiency switch to their L1 to produce their written text while composing in the L2.

In addition, writing is one of the most complex skills (Jack C.Richards, 2002) and Iranian students have big challenges in this skill and in their writing process, sometimes these challenges change the whole process of writing to a very problematic one.

Most of EFL students consciously or unconsciously mix up their L1 and their L2 and in their L2 written texts because there are some words, phrases or expressions that are clearly related to their L1; therefore, this kind of mixing is different according to their proficiencies.

Here it should be mentioned that in relation to this subject the researcher couldn’t find any clear and registered research or case study in Iran therefore this research is new for Iranian researchers.

In addition all of the conditions of this research are different from the previous mentioned researches because this research is designed for Iranian students and also the age of the subjects and the contents of the test and many other things were different from those other studies .L-S is a new subject in Iran because there is no record in this field so by this research it was decided to consider the situations of Iranian students and search about these students on L-S.

Therefore, the basic reason to do this research is to analyze the role of proficiency on the language switching in Iranian EFL environment of language learning.

1.4 Research Question:

To expand on our current understanding of L-S in L2 writing, this research is focused specifically on factors that might significantly affect language switching. There are certainly many factors that may influence L-S, but one was identified as having a theoretical and educational interest: "L2 proficiency".

With the above discussion, the question of interest in this study is:

1. Is there any relationship between language- switching while writing and the proficiency level of Iranian EFL learners?

1.5 Research Hypothesis

On the basis of the above question, the following null hypothesis was generated:

There is no relationship between language –switching in writing and the proficiency level of Iranian EFL learners.

1.6 Significance of the study

This study is an empirical study of language switching in Iran, and one of the few L-S studies that has employed quantitative data. This research provides strong research evidence of the proficiency effect on L-S in the Iranian subjects. Although this investigation provides actual data and evidence of the proficiency effect on L-S in a specific educational context, it should also contribute to the general understanding of L-S in education. It also offers some insights into English language teaching and learning in Iranian students. "To judge the value of an outcome or end, one should understand the nature of the processes or means that led to that end. It is not just that means are appraised in terms of the ends they lead to, but ends are appraised in terms of the means that produce them" (Hall, 1990, p. 6).

This study, at the important intersection of language teaching and teaching practices, presents theoretical, methodological, and practical guidance for current and future L-S studies in Iran. This research serves more essential significance by:

*providing an overview of the complexity of L-S and the various contextual factors relevant to testing, teaching, and learning; and

*presenting empirical studies from around the world that offer insights into the effects of L-S in specific educational contexts and models of research on which future studies can be based.

One of the main concerns of the EFL teachers in writing courses is unstructured using of first language in second language writing (language -switching).

L-S can change the grammatical structure of the sentence and also it can change the meaning of the whole sentence; therefore, it can change the whole meaning of the paragraphs and the texts in the higher levels (Cumming, 1990). In addition L-S can prepare a habit for L2 writers to use their L1 to fill the meaning gaps of L2 texts (Qi 1998).Therefore some researchers state that according to this matter L-S can make positive effects on the process of L2 writing and some of them state it can produce some negative effects on this process.

According to these considerations L-S in writing is one of the salient characteristics of L2 writing process (Cumming, 1989) and regarding the general effect of L-S on writing process, the findings of this research are expected to be useful for EFL researchers, material developers and also educational designers in order to help Iranian EFL learners to develop their proficiencies in writing skill and to reach autonomy in this special and difficult skill.

Therefore, the present study can have important theoretical and practical implications.

1.7 Definitions of key terms

There have been used some key words throughout the study, for more clarification they are described and defined as the following:

Language switching (L-S): Language switching may be defined as any non - instructed use of the first language during the L2 writing process (Cumming 1989). This point requires some clarification. The act of translating a previously written L1 text into an L2 text might be construed as an instance of using the first language during the production of L2 text, but since it is an essential part of the defined task (Cr, Friedlander, 1990; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992) it is instructed use of the Ll.

Language switching (L-S) in this paper refers to the spontaneous non- prescribed use of the L1 in L2 writing. The switches occur privately (even though others may be present) and often sub- vocally, i.e., L-S during L2 writing is an example of talking; i.e. mental operations used to control or regulate difficult mental processes (Antoân & DiCsmills, 1998; McCafferty, 2006; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Although language switching is defined as any non - instructed use of the first language during the L2 writing process (Cumming, 1989) which is an expression in writing and that is different from code- switching which is used in speaking. For bilingual interlocutors, code-switching often has an augmentative purpose.

Code-Switching: It is a term used to describe the switching done in conversational exchanges between interlocutors who share two languages (Qi.1998). For bilingual interlocutors, code-switching often has an augmentative purpose, Such as for marking group membership or for marking the status of an idea (Odlin, 1989), but its main function

is communicative. The L-S of the L2 writer working independently does not have a communicative function; it is usually done instrumentally to compensate for difficulties encountered in using the second language (Cumming and Qi.1998).

Second language proficiency: It is a person's skill in using second language for a specific purpose (Jack C .Richard, John Platt, 1985).

Bilingualism: Also here bilingualism should be defined as any proficiency level in more than one language (Lay,1982; see also,Krapels,2005).For this term there are many definitions in different sources but this specific definition according to researcher's idea is quiet matched with this research concept.

Think aloud: Sometimes some learners need to give a verbal report of the process of their thinking. One of the levels of verbal report is "think- aloud" which is a report that is concurrent with a given mental task but where the information is not already linguistically encoded and thus requires linguistic encoding for verbalization (Ericson&Simon.1980).

Although think-aloud protocols have been criticized for causing problem of validity (e.g. Pennington & So, 1993; Smagorinksy, 1994) and reliability (e.g. Bracewell & Breueux, 1994), when carefully conducted they remain useful for obtaining data on writing processes like code-switching (Smagorinsky, 1994).

1.8 Limitations and Delimitations

Here some limitations and delimitations of this research will be sited. Smallness of sample size and its selective nature had some problems for generalizability of the results. The main reason for small number of subjects is that the nature of think aloud researches doesn't let any researcher to choose too many subjects because by doing this analysis would be very hard procedure.

Also doing this research was limited on writing not other skills such as reading and speaking. Also this research was done on Iranian students and it was not possible for the researcher to do it on other EFL students from other countries.

Another related problem which had made some limitations was the only choice of Persian first language speakers. It was impossible for the researcher to select other first language speakers.

Here it should be noted that some subjects had some limitations in their companionship because of their times and other related problems but the researcher and the subjects decided to spend more time to compensate the wasted time.

1.9 Overview of the study

This study has been organized in a thesis with the following chapters:

The first chapter of this research will be devoted to general introduction of the main idea which was language switching and then the main problem will be stated after that research question which will be:" Is there any relation between language- switch while writing and the proficiency level of Iranian EFL learners?" will be stated. And also according to that question a null hypothesis will be generated: "There is no relationship between language –switch while writing and the proficiency level of Iranian EFL learners". The significance of the study and the definitions of key terms and also the limitations and delimitations of this research will be stated after that.

The second chapter will be started by a general view over the bilingualism as a basic concept for language switching and then it will be followed it by writing as a fundamental skill and in this domain some related aspects of writing will be discussed and after that the role of writing process and product and their relation to L-S will be analyzed.

In the third chapter after a short introduction the research question and the hypothesis will be stated then in methodology part the subjects will be introduced. In the instrumentation part the ways of gathering the information will be introduced. After that the procedure of doing this research will be stated. Then some statistical analysis will be stated.