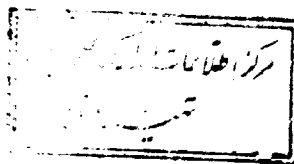


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**EFFECTS OF FIRST LANGUAGE ON
SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING - A
PRELIMINARY CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC
STUDY OF FARSI & ENGLISH**

BY KOBRA DERAKHSHAN

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in
Teaching English as a Foreign Language**

Advisor: Dr. S. M. Ziahosseini

Reader : Dr. M. Norouzi

**Faculty of Persian Literature & Foreign
Languages**

Allameh Tabatabai University

TEHRAN September 1996

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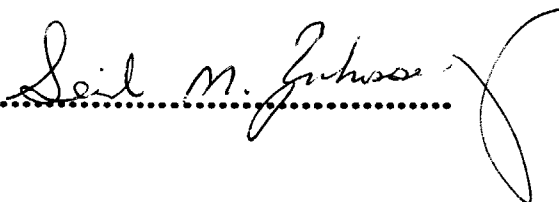
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To: Christine Carrigg, my Mother, and Rouzhin

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1. Background And Purpose

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, as Leki (1991) believes, served "in establishing contrastive rhetoric as a new field of inquiry" (p.123). The main concern of contrastive rhetoric 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 dimensions as research on second-language composing processes has gained momentum and has identified similarities in the behaviors and strategies of L1 and L2 writers with regard to developmental and cognitive factors (Ringbom, 1987; Cumming, 1989; Kobayashi and Rinnert, 1992). Study of texts produced by writers composing in their first and second/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 has delineated that L1 expertise has a constructive effect on the quality of L2 writing. Ringbom (1991) 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 and 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 have been controversy, however, in regard to certain issues of this theory 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 tongue in L2 performance-espoused in audio-lingual methodologies and theories of linguistic transfer or contrastive rhetoric - appear misdirected in view of the present study of learners' performance" (pp. 127-128). Other theorists, Mohan and Lo (1985); Corder (cited in Cumming, 1989); Raimes (1991), raise the same objections. "The nature of

transfer in L2 writing remains under debate" (Raimes, 1991, p. 417).

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Students learning English as a foreign/second 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 even 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 second 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 L2 learners who have overcome the difficulties of such a challenge once already in their mother tongue. 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 acquired in L1 be beneficial in L2 or will they add to complexity by posing cross-cultural barriers?

1.3. Significance of the Study

Extensive research has been conducted on these issues and the effects of L1 writing, on both product and process levels, in the last 30 years (Kobayashi and Rinnert, 1992). But as far as research on L2 rhetoric in our country is concerned, it has been evaluation oriented, concerning itself mainly with different aspects of evaluating written texts (Sadati, 1993; Farzanehnejad, 1992). It is with regard to this lack of evidence of previous research in this area that the present study is undertaken. The major issues to be addressed in this study include the following research questions:

- 1- Is there a significant correlation between Farsi and English writing abilities and strategies of Iranian students who are learning English in an EFL context?
- 2- Is the quality of students' written texts in English affected by those of Farsi? i.e. Is there a significant difference between the mean performances of Iranian students composing in their mother tongue and English?

1.4. Hypothesis

By and large, it is the inclination of this study to expect positive answers to both questions. However, in order to be able to rely more confidently on the results obtained, the project will be based on these null hypotheses:

- 1- There is no significant correlation between L1 and L2 writing abilities and strategies of Iranian students in an EFL context.
- 2- There is no significant difference between the mean performances of these students composing in Farsi and English.

1.5. Delimitations of the Study

In any research procedure there exist some kinds of limitations to help the researcher come up with a reliable and valid result. These limitations would prevent unexpected problems. In this research the following limitations were noticed before the commencement of the research process.

The first limitation concerned the subjects of the study. The researcher was confined to university students studying English translation. In this regard, the composition tests were administered to female freshman and senior students only.

Another limitation of the study was that of scoring. Different scales and measures of writing tests for scoring compositions may be employed by the raters. In this study, ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981) was used as an objective measure. This scale focuses on writing components. The rationale behind using this scale is discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 2

Review of Related

Literature

2.1. The Significance of Writing

Writing skill is viewed as a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning a second language (Chastain, 1988).

The ability to write is of considerable importance for consolidating learning in the other skill areas.

Sometimes learning to write is regarded as the acquiring of basic skills on which other, later, and probably more important skills can be built and without which further education may be largely impossible (Freedman et al, 1983). For centuries the ability to write something has been assumed as a demonstration of learning, although this cannot be a sound base for judgement, since there are many highly articulate persons who express themselves very inadequately in writing in their native language.

For several centuries, the written language held a preeminent place. It was the medium of literature, and, thus, a source of standards of linguistic excellence. It was felt to provide language with permanence and authority. The rules of grammar were, accordingly, illustrated exclusively from written texts.

By contrast, spoken language, was ignored or condemned as an object unworthy of study, demonstrating only lack of care and organization. It was said to have no rules, and speakers were left under no illusion that, in order to 'speak properly', it was necessary to follow the 'correct' norms, as laid