



Language transferability in a process-based writing course

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Abstract

The writing process is founded principally upon language learners' decision-making behaviors that are believed to be under the influence of their first language experiences. Hence, the main objectives of this study are to investigate the extent to which activating cognitive processing strategies can improve second-language learners' writing skills, and to explore whether first-language writing experiences are transferable to second-language writing situations. Therefore, a class of 33 sophomore students, in the Advanced Writing course were selected as participants to the study. Through a Time Series Design, it was revealed that triggering the proper cognitive processing and planning strategies would ameliorate the quality of written texts with various rhetorical purposes. However, the findings did not support the second objective of the study, that is, first language/second language transferability. This indicates that teachers should focus on developing several strategies, keeping in mind that resorting to first-language composing abilities may not be the only and the best solution.

Keywords: Cognitive processing strategies; first language; second language; L1 ; L2; writing skills

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, learning second/foreign language (L2) writing has followed a product-oriented approach in which the learners are guided from the perfect sentence through the paragraph to the composition. Overall, focusing primarily on the sentential features such as the number of words per *t-units* along with the accuracy and/or the complexity of clause structures, the product-oriented approaches tend to sensitize L2 learners merely to formal linguistic aspects of the writing process, where the primary goal is to manipulate surface structures irrespective of the intended audience for whom a given text is produced.

Consequently, debates about the inadequacy of product approaches have been raging unabated for a very long time. It has been contended that product-oriented writing has at least two main drawbacks. First, as Halliday (1985) states, the total meaning of a text (such as a paragraph) is not arrived at only by sequencing unconnected sentences. Sentences are micro-level structures the selection of which is governed by macro-level or pragmatic aspects of writing (Marjokorpi, 2023). In this regard, Eggins (1994) further asserts that various ways of using language evoke different choices of lexicogrammatical entities, and as a result, the type of words and structures used in various rhetorical/organizational patterns may noticeably differ. This idea is defined by Swales (1990) as the “socio-rhetorical grouping” by which the students can be taught the conventions and the ways of using language in its social context to make the audience think and act in a desired way. This means that the learning-to-write process, through which students’ cognitive skills are developed, must enable the L2 learners to prepare the sociopragmatic background of a given text type to create meanings that are relevant to the particular contexts (Tardy, 2011; Teng & Yue 2023). Such an outlook emphasizing the significance of organization above the sentence level has long been dominated by functional linguistics and contrastive rhetoric. In this new perspective, any particular communicative purpose activates a generic structure with a specific organizational template that is staged and purposefully goal-oriented.

The second drawback of the product-oriented approach toward writing is that it does not account for what Connor (1996) explains as the mental state of writers, their problem-solving strategies, and decisions about the writer’s focus, audience, and language use. Unlike weaker writers in the initial stages of their L2 writing, skilled writers rely more on the mental aspects of the writing process. The reason is that the former tends to focus largely on the surface forms and the mechanics of the writing task. Here, writing is considered as a practice in language usage rather than organizing ideas, and consequently, only the linguistic awareness of the L2 writer is raised. Contrary to the product-approach to writing in which a great focus is placed on the logical development and organization of ideas, the process approach concentrates more on developing and enhancing the writers’ linguistic competence and correct language usage. However, writing about a particular topic encompasses a wide range of strategies that go beyond the mere linguistic level.

Not surprisingly, a shift of focus in the teaching of writing was evoked (Ramies, 1991). Karples (1990) maintains that writing teachers should make use of the underlying merits of composing competence in general and genre-based teaching in particular. As a consequence, practitioners like Nunan (1997) state that strategy training in language classrooms can help EFL writers utilize the skills and tactics needed for planning, monitoring, and assessing the writing assignments at hand (Huyh-Cam et al., 2024). Similarly, emphasizing the usefulness of learning strategies in L2 writing classrooms, Graham and Perin (2007) suggest that developing these strategies should be the main concern of all EFL teachers.

Chamot and O’Mally (1996), Shanahan and Beck (2006), and Conley (2008) strongly assert that strategy use would facilitate language learning. On this basis, this study addresses L2 writing teaching by concentrating on generic and/ or composing competence using the overall model of learning proposed by O’Mally and Chamot (1990). These authors have identified three main types of strategies used by L2 students:

a) *Metacognitive strategies* involve planning and thinking about learning such as planning one's learning, monitoring one's speech or writing, and assessing the quality of one's performance.

b) *Cognitive strategies* involve conscious ways of tackling learning such as note-taking, resourcing (using the required reference materials such as dictionaries, grammar books, etc.), and elaboration (relating new information to the old).

c) *Social strategies* denote learning the ways students interact with others such as working with peers or asking for a teacher's help.

It seems that L2 writers' awareness of their mental potential and their recognition of rhetorical organizational patterns or composition templates underlying different texts (expository, argumentative, political, historical) can most likely improve their use of linguistic knowledge for creating audience-related ideas and meanings. This conceptual approach to studying writing is primarily concerned with the individual writers' internal capabilities and their interactions with the social nature of the writing. In this view, the interrelation between the three dominant forces of cognition, context, and language is of prime importance. This suggests a new perspective on L2 writing in which two basic operating elements; that is., the writers' cognitive strategies as well as the social and contextual nature of writing, are believed to serve a leading role in improving the quality of the writing process. Notably, the present study only focuses on the former- that is, the writers' composing strategies.

Given its complexity, a large number of writing theories and models have been suggested among which the cognitive-based approach is quite dominant since it emphasizes the activation of writers' mental processing mechanisms as they are performing a task (Graham & Harris, 2005). It is widely acknowledged today that exposing L2 writers to cognitive strategies may be of great help to them in mastering the writing conventions (August and Shanahan, 2006; Chandrasegaran, 2013; Teng, 2022; Fillmore and Snow, 2003). Explicit instruction of cognitive strategies, as Montague and Dietz (2009) suggest, makes novice writers strategic and flexible in handling a writing task. This simply means that activating writers' meta-cognitive and self-reflection strategies should be valued as an efficient pedagogical procedure that EFL teachers may employ to improve the learners' writing performance (Baker, 2008; Baker & Beall, 2009; Soto et al., 2023). Such an effective instructional approach towards L2 writing can encompass interactive and guided practices in the writing process, which may contribute to the development of writers' creative thinking, their internalization of strategic patterns, and logical generation and organization of ideas within the text.

1.1. Literature review

There has been a large volume of studies advocating the potential of L2 writers, such as planning, reasoning, and analyzing the writing task (Guo et al., 2021; Keen, 2017; Kim et al., 2021; Lei, 2008; De Silva & Graham, 2015; Storch, 2005; Tabari, 2022; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Surprisingly, such potentialities can be under the influence of learners' L1 experiences and may transfer to L2 writing situations (Matsuda, 2003).

The concept of language transfer as a major issue in ESL has received a lot of ink in the review of literature (Perkins & Zhang, 2022). In L2 writing, rhetorical transfer has been acknowledged as a common phenomenon (Wei, 2020). When L2 writers attempt to create a particular type of text, they might utilize the strategy of transfer as a means of expressing certain intended meanings. In other words, L1 can be used as a resource for composing L2 meanings when other writing resources have not fully been developed yet (Woodal, 2002) and the writer may tend to simplify meaning by resorting to his or her potential abilities in L1.

L2 writers who have acquired the resources for planning and developing ideas in their L1 may similarly utilize them when composing L2 topics (Cumming, 1990; Wang & Wen, 2002). Several studies have investigated the notion of strategy transfer from L1 to L2 writing (Gao & Min, 2021; Sevgi, 2016; Wei, 2020). The types of strategies that ESL learners employ in their writing processes have been

investigated by Ramies (2001). Based on the results of the study, Ramies (2001) concluded that the participants very often utilized their L1 strategies for producing L2 texts. The findings also revealed that ESL students used revising, editing, and correcting strategies more in L2 than in their L1 writing. In another study, Van Weijen et al., (2009) tried to find out the extent to which learners used the strategy of transfer for extending L1 discourse patterns when writing in L2. The results illustrated that almost half of the L2 writers employed similar discourse patterns in both L1 and L2 and there was a positive relationship between learners' scores on L1 and L2 writing. Overall, the study predicted that L2 learners may transfer L1 organizational and rhetorical patterns to L2 writing processes. Motivated by the scarcity of research on L2 writing strategies used by Chinese students in an authentic context, Mu and Carrington (2007) also found out that the participants under investigation utilized rhetorical, cognitive, metacognitive, and social/affective strategies in their L2 writing practices.

Finally, in research on L1/L2 transferability, Karim and Nassaji (2013) studied the role of L1 transfer in the second language writing process. Consistent with the findings of previous studies, the results indicated that L2 writers made use of their L1 when writing in L2. They used L1 for generating ideas, searching for topics, developing concepts, and organizing information as well as for planning purposes.

1.2. Purpose of study

Considering these facts, this study was designed to address the following questions:

- 1) To what extent does teaching cognitive strategies improve the L2 writing skills of Iranian EFL learners?
- 2) Are composing processes in L1 writing transferable to L2 writing?

2. METHOD AND MATERIALS

2.1. Participants

Thirty-three sophomore Iranian students studying English Translation participated in this study. The selected sample was an intact class comprising 30 girls and 3 boys, aged between 18 and 25. These students had all passed the pre-requirement courses such as *Grammar and Writing I and II* essential for enrolling in the *Advanced Paragraph Writing* course. To gauge the linguistic knowledge of the participants before the experiment, their scores on *Grammar and Writing I and II* tests were received from the student's educational files.

2.2. Data collection instruments

The materials used in this study consisted of *Academic Writing: from Paragraph to Essay* by Zemach and Rumisek (2010), which was supplemented by *Grammar Trouble Spots* written by Ramies (2004). The textbook provides step-by-step guidelines for developing various kinds of sentence and paragraph patterns. In addition, a typed model paragraph of appropriate difficulty level was also given to each student after or during the relevant lesson to expose them to sample templates reflecting the rhetorical structures of particular paragraph development patterns.

2.3. Procedure

Before the beginning of the class, the participants were briefed about the course objectives. Then, on two consecutive days, in a relaxed, tension-free atmosphere, they were asked to write a short Persian (Farsi) paragraph on six different topics, three on each day, using different methods of paragraph development such as description, narration, process, classification, cause and effect, and comparison and contrast. The students were given ample time, and at the end, the test papers were collected. The scores on this test could be significant because they sensitized the experiment to the second variable of the study; namely, transferability of L1 composing strategies to L2. A high premium was placed on composing processes in the scoring grid. The scores on the Farsi Paragraph Development Test (FPDT) with their respective mean and standard deviation values served as a target reference, which could later be compared with learners' writing performance in the L2 context.

The whole term was divided into two main teaching periods: the Baseline and Treatment phases. Each teaching period consisted of three-time intervals. Each interval lasted for two weeks during which a particular type of paragraph development (similar to those in FPDT) was practiced. To avoid order effect, the paragraph types assigned to the Baseline and Treatment phases were randomly selected and assigned to the Baseline and Treatment phases. As such, paragraph types *description*, *process*, and *cause and effect* were used for the Baseline intervals (INT1 through INT3), while *narration*, *classification*, and *comparison and contrast* were administered during Treatment intervals (INT4 through INT6).

The teaching activities utilized for the Baseline intervals were as follows:

A. Week one:

1. Special concepts such as topic sentence, paragraph purpose, and type of development (i.e., *description*, *narration*, etc.) were identified, explained, and clarified.
2. Exercises relevant to each concept in step one were practiced and useful hints, if needed, were supplied.
3. The structures and words essential for the development of each paragraph type were provided and practiced.
4. The participants were advised to read the model paragraph in the book and the typed model paragraph given to them. They were then given a general topic to write about at home.

B. Week two:

1. Home assignments were discussed and problems were explained. These assignments were not corrected.
2. The students were asked to prepare for a test. Care was taken not to create any anxiety. The participants seemed to be relaxed and could use their books or dictionaries if they wanted to.
3. At the end of the class period, the papers were collected. At least three raters were asked to correct the papers. The scoring procedure was the same for both the Baseline and Treatment phases. The spelling or deviant grammar forms received a much lower rating than organizational and composing problems. The scores given by the raters were pooled and used as the final score for each participant.

By contrast, the procedures utilized for Treatment intervals focused more on learning strategies and cognitive aspects of L2 writing. Instead of explaining the structures and lexical items required for developing each paragraph (enriching writers' linguistic competence), the teacher concentrated on the cognitive processing strategies.

A. Week one:

1. A model paragraph was given to the students. They were then asked to compare and contrast it with the model they were given before.
2. They were asked to explain the similarities and differences.
3. Focusing on differences, the participants came to realize that every paragraph type was organized in a certain way and that the organization was the most basic foundation required for conveying a specific type of purpose rather than another.
4. The students were given a new topic and were asked to provide an organizational skeleton showing how the idea was developed.
5. The students were urged to exchange their work with a fellow student, discuss the quality of their work, and decide on modifications, if any. In this stage, disagreements were settled by the teacher's intervention.
6. As in the Baseline phase, the students were free to use source materials (their notes, model paragraphs, dictionaries, grammar books).
7. Similarly, they were given a topic to develop at home. However, they were told to have their work checked and evaluated by a fellow student before coming to class the week after.

B. Week two:

1. The finished, evaluated, and modified works were discussed and likely problems were clarified.
2. As in the Baseline second week interval, they were asked to sit for a test.
3. Again, the testing session was relaxed and tension-free. At the end of the class period, papers were collected. The same raters using the same scoring system rated the participants' tasks. Finally, each participant's score was determined by pooling the scores provided by the raters.

It can be seen that steps 1 through 7 used during week one at each interval in the Treatment phase are in line with the model proposed by O'Mally and Chamot (1990). In effect, steps 1 through 4 encouraged the participants to use thinking, planning, and monitoring strategies. Additionally, the main objectives in steps 5 through 7 were to develop a basis for monitoring and evaluating as well as involving social strategies of group work. Steps 3 and 6 helped the activation of resourcing and elaborating skills.

2.4. Data analysis

This study has a time series design through which the performance of a specific group of participants was measured over time. To compensate for the shortcomings of time series design such as lack of an independent control group as well as practice effect, a repeated measures statistical procedure was utilized. This procedure is often employed when each participant receives all levels of at least one independent variable. The major advantage of repeated measures statistical procedure is that it has the capability of assessing subject differences as realistically as possible. This enhances the rigor of the research design because the rejection of the null hypothesis (H_0) is facilitated.

However, one problem associated with repeated measures is the undesirable influence of particular effects. This drawback was taken care of by using a conservative procedure suggested by Greenhouse and Geisser (1959) $df_{error} = (w-1) \times (n-1)$. By using this procedure for computing the degree of freedom (df) and by employing a protected t -test procedure, it was further safeguarded that there were no significant carryovers from previous intervals to the next.

Ultimately, a correlational analysis was utilized to examine whether there was any correlation between students' achievement on FPDT and their corresponding writing scores on the tests administered during the Treatment phase in the L2 writing context. This procedure was important because it could fathom the likelihood of composing skills transferability from L1 to L2, if any.

3. RESULTS

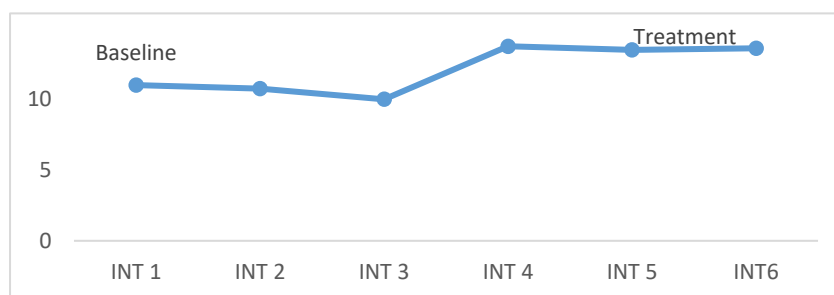
The initial examination of the results produced by descriptive statistics indicated that the means for the Treatment phase were higher than those for the Baseline intervals (see Table 1 and Figure 1) below:

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for baseline and treatment test scores

Teaching phase	Time interval	Mean	Standard deviation
Baseline	INT 1	10.9	2.13
	INT 2	10.7	1.20
	INT 3	10	1.39
	INT 4	13.67	2.61
Treatment	INT 5	13.23	2.47
	INT 6	13.33	2.80

Figure 1

The learning curve showing students' performance differences on Baseline and Treatment phase tests



It was necessary to examine whether the data could be truly taken as an improvement in the L2 paragraph writing of the students or if the improvement was merely due to chance factors (error). Two analytical statistical techniques were used in this regard. First, a repeated measures procedure was used to isolate subject differences from random error. Table 2 presents sources of variability for subjects, Baseline and Treatment intervals (weeks), and error. The observed F was 15.53, meaning that overall gains from Baseline to Treatment trials were significant for using strategy training in teaching paragraph writing to EFL learners. The observed F was well over the critical F value at df (5, 29) for both 5 percent and 1 percent confidence levels.

Table 2

Summary table for different sources of variability

Source	df	SS	MS	F
Subjects	29	205.226	7.076	
Intervals (weeks)	5	337.16	67.432	15.53
Error	145	629.674	4.342	
Total	179	1172.06		

*p< 0.05

Second, a protected *t*-test procedure was equally essential because the researchers wanted to be sure that there was no improvement even before the Treatment phase began, simply as a result of learners' presence in an experimental situation. The observed *t*-values between X1 and X2 and X2 and X3 in the Baseline phase were 0.36 and 1.28, respectively. Since the MS error was dealt with, the df error from Table 2 had to be used. Checking the F Table, there was no reason to suspect an improvement or carryover effect preceding the Treatment phase. In addition, averaging the mean scores for the Baseline and Treatment phases, the protected *t*-procedure was used again and the observed *t* at df (5,29) was significant at ($\alpha = 0.05$, $\alpha = 0.01$), indicating a difference in the mean duration of the method shift between the Baseline and Treatment phases of the study. The observed *t* happened to be 9.32.

Finally, a correlation analysis was used to measure the relationship between students' scores obtained on FPDT and those obtained during the Baseline and Treatment phases. It revealed that the correlation coefficients reported for the pairs of means (DES1 vs. DES2, NAR1 vs. NAR2) were not significant, thus ruling out the cross-linguistic transferability of composing strategies. Had they been significant, they should have been high for all pairs consistently or at least the ones for which the subjects had received a high mean score on FPDT (DES1, NAR1, and PRO1 with the mean scores of 13.71, 11.67, and 10.7, respectively). Table 3 indicates the correlational analysis between various means.

Table 3

The correlation between pairs of means for Farsi and English paragraph development test scores

English \ Farsi	DES ₂	NAR ₂	PRO ₂	C&C ₂	C&E ₂	CLA ₂
DES ₁	.6241 (30) P=.000					
NAR ₁		.0439 (30) P=.818				
PRO ₁			.1310 (30) P=.490			
C&C ₁				.2326 (30) P=.216		
C&E ₁					.0723 (30) P=.704	
CLA ₁						.0683 (30) P=.720

[Coefficient/ (Cases)/ 2-tailed Significance]

4. DISCUSSION

The statistical analysis of the data indicates that in ESL/EFL writing composing competence is more important than linguistic competence. Activating students' cognitive skills during writing would be of great help in enhancing their composing competence. Deliberate teaching of cognitive strategies during the Treatment Phase substantially improved the writing quality of the participants. This mentalistic view towards teaching second/foreign language writing assumes L2 writers to be active strategy users while negotiating these strategies with the teacher and peers during composing. Examples of some strategic behaviors that the participants exhibited during the Treatment Phase included thinking, planning, and monitoring as well as elaborating skills. As a case in point, monitoring and evaluating the tasks (step 5 of week one in the Treatment Phase) were among the mental strategies the students employed during their group work. Using this strategy, the teacher managed to stimulate the students' higher levels of thinking and enhance their deeper understanding. Alternatively, students were able to redraft and revise their work in a collaborative activity within the group, while negotiating with their peers and teacher the reasons behind their revisions. As Liu (2005), Beiki et al., (2020), and Pham (2023) claim, this process will force the students to discuss the similarities and differences existing between their writing and those of their peers, which would be of great help to the students in recognizing their problems and discussing them in the group until they reach an agreement and improve the quality of their writing. Such being the case, students gradually become more and more independent writers with the ability to develop and organize high-quality texts.

Overall, the results of the study revealed that raising students' consciousness about the process-related strategies in an L2 writing context would facilitate their writing abilities. The findings are, to some extent, theoretically justified and experimentally consistent with Harris's (1997) and Chamot and O'Mally's (1994) predictions about the importance of developing L2 writers' cognitive composing strategies during the writing process. This approach has proved to be a successful evidence-based practice, which can be used for a variety of academic tasks and L2 writing is by no means an exception.

5. CONCLUSION

The foregoing research illustrated two major interesting points about strategy training in teaching EFL writing to EFL learners. It was first discussed that focusing on cognitive aspects of the L2 writing process, as an underlying feature of composing competence, is more effective in EFL writing approaches than concentrating on linguistic competence. Using their cognitive processing skills, the participants of the present study experienced a conceptual understanding of the writing task, which reinforced their creativity and self-directness. It was observed that during the Treatment Intervals, participants performed much better than the Baseline intervals during which a product-oriented approach was employed. This has useful implications for EFL teachers teaching writing so they should focus on developing several recursive strategies, which scaffold the writing for the learners.

On the other hand, cross-linguistic and/or composing skills transferability between L1 and L2 was not materialized in this study. Many of the mental activities are identical in both L1 and L2 writing processes. As such, second language writers may unconsciously convey their L1 experiences to the L2 writing contexts. The mental operations like generating ideas, making meaning, reasoning, revising, and redrafting a given writing would exemplify the writers' utility of cognitive strategies shared between L1 and L2. Accordingly, the role of L1 transfer is respected as part of the repertoire of strategies that L2 writers employ in the course of the composing process. The use of L1 in collaborative activities is considered as a prevailing strategy of semiotic mediation which would be of great help in scaffolding students' learning. The findings of the current study, however, did not take sides endorsing L1/L2 cross-linguistic transferability to L2 writing contexts. The finding of the present believes that the rhetorical organization of paragraph patterns differs cross-culturally. Furthermore, the negative relationship between L2 text quality and L1 use during L2 writing (at least for Metacomments), may account for the observed lack of L1, and L2 transferability in this study.

But on the whole, how can an EFL teacher teach such strategies? A review of over 20 studies in which teachers used instructional procedures to teach cognitive strategies revealed that successful teachers usually undertake the following steps:

- Activate and develop students' background knowledge;
- Describe and discuss the strategy;
- Model the application of the strategy within a specific context;
- Use scaffolds to support students' learning of the skill;
- Practice the strategy until students become able to use it independently.

For example, to help students write an opinion essay, the teacher may implement a strategy called POW plus TREE, which stands for Picking some ideas, Organizing the ideas, writing about the ideas, Topic sentence, Reasons (usually three), Explaining each reason, and Ending (conclusion paragraph).

In a nutshell, the findings of the study reflected while strategy training may lead to the improvement of EFL learners' writing performance, cross-linguistics and/or composing transferability did not work in the expected direction in the present study. This conclusion indicated that similar studies on L2 composing are sometimes contradictory because of such issues as the small sample sizes or the nature of the tasks utilized in these studies. A process-oriented approach is more effective in teaching EFL writing compared with traditional product-oriented approaches. Indubitably, explicit instruction of cognitive strategies is the main component of the process-oriented approach, which tends to focus on macro strategies such as planning, drafting, and revising. In short, the improvement in EFL learners' writing may not be limited to the teaching of composing strategies. However, concerned researchers must carefully investigate all those variables that may improve the writing skills of foreign language students.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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