The Effect of Arabic Proficiency on the English Writing of Bilingual- Jordanian Students

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between first language (Arabic) proficiency and second language (English) performance in the writing skill of Jordanian bilingual second secondary school students. Despite the linguistic distance between English and Arabic, it is postulated that Arabic writing skills can be transferred positively to the target language (English). The researchers used the composition prompt tests instrument for this purpose; one test was in Arabic and the other was in English. The data was collected in the second semester of the academic year 2005-2006. **The population was from two leading public secondary schools in the First Directorate of Amman in Jordan. The participants were 20 male students who were chosen on the basis of the students' achievements in the previous years. As a result of the study, a significant relationship was found between the two languages. Those students who got high marks and were proficient in Arabic writing performed well in the counter skill (English). This result**

supports the theoretical views of Cummins' threshold hypothesis and Chomskian's Interdependence theory. Results of the study indicate that there is a need for integrating the instruction of writing skill between the two languages in textbooks so that the writing level of students in L2 (English) can be improved. It is recommended that future research examine the relationship between Arabic speakers' reading and speaking skill alongside with writing skill and to compare Arabic groups with other linguistic groups in order to establish clarity about the relationships between the different linguistic backgrounds. The present study supports the notion of L1 transfer. It is hoped that this knowledge will assist students learning a new language. This paper contains three tables, thirteen references and two test instruments.

List of Key Words:

ESL - Jordanian - Performance - Proficiency - Writing

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Introduction

The transfer of skills between languages has always been the concern of many linguists and educators. For the writing skill, it is remarkable that most students of the *Jordanian General English Examination* (an exam held by the Ministry of Education) don't even try to write a single word. When asked for reasons, they mostly had a typical answer, "I'm not any good at writing" or "English is not one of my good subjects". They imply that they simply do not have a talent for writing. Langan (2000) stressed that unless students change the predominant idea about writing as being "a natural talent" rather than a skill that can be

acquired through learning, they will not learn how to write effectively. Langan (2000) also states that writing is a process of discovery that involves a series of steps starting by discovering a thesis often through prewriting, developing support for the thesis, organizing the thesis by making a first draft, revising and then editing to ensure an effective, error–free paper. This leads us to investigate the transfer of writing skills between the two languages (Arabic and English). Actually, it is commonly known among researchers and linguists that the similarities and differences between the two languages decide the degree and nature of transfer (positive or negative transfer). (Odlin 1989, Ellis 1986, Dweik 1986)

Odlin (1989) investigated the relationship of transfer between L1 and L2 and referred to the effects of both negative and positive transfer which are only determinable through comparisons of two different groups of speakers with different native languages .Such comparisons often show that the cross linguistic differences or similarities between L1 and L2 can produce negative or positive transfer. Ellis (1986) stated that the similarities or the differences in the linguistic system could contribute to positive or negative transfer between the two different language groups. For instance, despite the degree of similarity in some linguistic structures between English and Arabic such as the existence of the relative clauses in the two languages, negative transfer can take place. The absence of relative clauses in the Chinese language tends to transfer positively. Adult EFL learners transfer their knowledge of their L1 to the L2 context. Those linguistic systems and subsystems that are transferable linguistically are the ones that play an important role in promoting L2 skills development. These systems are numerous and vary from one language to another. (Odlin, 1989)

Language transfer is an important area in second language (L2) acquisition research. The Contrastive Analysts' view of transfer states that the major obstruction to second-language acquisition stems from interference emanating from the first-language (L1) system and that the scientific and structural analysis

of the two languages allow prediction of areas where second language learners will have difficulties. In this behaviorist view of learning, language was regarded as a source of confusion. Dweik (2000) lists many cultural differences between the two languages that can bring about a negative transfer in the writing portion. According to Dweik (1986) "We the Arabs love repetition and alliteration. In English writing, they are precise, economic and to the point".

In the 1970s it became evident that a superficial analysis of the surface structure of the two language systems did not provide an adequate prediction of potential problems in second-language acquisition. The major fault of the CA hypothesis is its assertion that second language learning is essentially a process of overcoming differences in the two language systems. (Ellis, 1986)

Significance of the study

Although researchers in the area Carson et al (1990) have looked at transfer of language skills across languages, few have investigated this phenomenon among Arabic ESL learners despite the fact that Arabic-speaking students represent a large proportion of the ESL body all around the world. It is pedagogically insightful to the curriculum planners, the instructors, and the students to verify whether there is a correlation between the first and the second language of secondary school students' writing skill. Some researchers have investigated the writing skill of some linguistic groups such as Japanese and Chinese, but no study was found in the review of literature to have investigated the Arabic-speaking population in this area. Understanding the relationships is crucial to ESL curricula planners. If correlation between the performance of the writing skill in Arabic and English was found, it would help the planners to consider designing integrative texts that treat the writing skill in L1 as interrelated with L2 writing skill. In addition, teachers of the two languages may also cooperate with each other and agree on the best strategies in teaching interrelated texts. This study is important because it may facilitate the improvement of instruction,

increase the understanding of areas of difficulties in teaching and learning of the writing skill, and provide foundations for remedy of language problems. Also the findings are hoped to contribute to the understanding of the mechanism of writing in L1 which might in turn promote writing in L2.

Question of the Study:

The aim of the study was to find out if there was a relationship between the writing ability in L2 (English) and L1 (Arabic) and whether the proficiency in L1 writing and the degree of similarities or differences between the two languages affects the students' performance in L2 writing. As a result, the study attempted to answer the following main question:

"Is there a relationship between the writing performance and competence in L2 (English) and the Proficiency in L1 (Arabic) among Jordanian second secondary school students in Jordan?"

Hypothesis of the Study:

In this study, the researchers tried to find answers for the question raised. For this purpose, the researchers formulated the following hypothesis:

There is a positive relationship between the writing performance and competence in L2 (English) and the Proficiency in L1 (Arabic) among Jordanian second secondary school students in Jordan.

Review of Literature
Theoretical Studies:

The Chomskian influence on language learning theory resulted in L2 learning being regarded as an active process where the learner consciously constructs and tests hypotheses about the target language against available linguistic data. In

the Chomskian perspective, L1 is viewed as the critical basis for learning the new linguistic system rather than as interfering effect .Studies in the field suggest that various linguistic elements are transferred in both the oral and written forms for L2 linguistic production. For instance, elements transferred are morphosyntactic elements, communicative strategies, and pragmatics (Koda, 1988).

Cummins' (1979) threshold hypothesis postulates that a minimum level of linguistic competence in a second language must be attained in order to have a positive transfer which is also dependant upon the type of competence the learner has developed in L1 as proposed by Chomskian linguistic Interdependence theory. Actually this hypothesis sheds light on this relationship. It suggests that there may be a threshold level of linguistic competence that bilingual children must attain in order to allow the potentially beneficial aspects of becoming bilingual to influence their cognitive growth. Cummins assumes that the bilingual aspects that influence cognitive growth are unlikely to have an effect until the learner has attained a certain minimum threshold level of competence in a second language such as gaining the sufficient vocabulary repertoire which will enhance the learners' diction and enable him to encode and decode.

The other perspective through which Cummins (1979) has examined second language acquisition is the linguistic interdependence theory, which proposes that the level of L2 competence that a bilingual learner attains is partially a function of the type of competence the learner has developed in L1.

Such assumptions proposed by Cummins' hypothesis and Chomskian's linguistic Interdependence theory motivated the researcher to investigate the relationship between first-language writing skill proficiency and the performance in L2 writing skill. Thus, the need to provide support for the development of scientific research on writing skill is evident to improve learning of English. Despite the linguistic language distance between Arabic and English,

the researchers assume that we can bridge the gap if we enrich the learners' linguistic background alongside with first language linguistic competence.

Empirical Studies

Although research in this area started with correlating the overall native-language proficiency with second-language acquisition and development, it has now become more specific in terms of investigating the writing skill relating the rate of students' acquisition success in L2 to the success of learning their counterpart skill in the native language.

Torress and Fischer (1989) investigated the positive relationship. They conducted their study on Hispanic-speaking students whose overall native language proficiency is correlated significantly with L2 (English language) development. The study indicated that being fluent in one's native language increases the probability of becoming proficient in a second .It also indicates that in general, for Spanish speakers, English acquisition is strongly related to native-language proficiency.

On the other hand, Carson et al 's (1990) research on the relationships between writing in L1 and L2 threw some light on the possible differences among language groups. Their language groups (Japanese and Chinese students) demonstrated varying patterns with regard to transfer across languages .The writing transfer abilities were found to be harder to transfer from one language to another. Carsons et al (1990) reported weak to moderate correlations between L1 and L2 writing abilities .For Japanese students, L1 and L2 writing scores showed weak correlation and for the Chinese students was not significant.

Data Collection:

The data was collected in the second semester of the academic year 2005-2006. Students were asked to write two composition prompt tests (one in Arabic and the other in English).

Population and Sample of the Study:

The population of the study consisted of 850 students of second secondary grade aged between 17 to 18 years. The population was from two leading public secondary schools in the First Directorate of Amman in Jordan: (Al Shamleh Secondary School, Al Hussein Secondary School). The participants were made of 20 male students who were chosen on the basis of the students' achievements in the previous years. The subjects were at the intermediate level of English performance. The number of subjects was limited to 20 students because of the students' low level and achievements in the public schools in Jordan. The researchers checked back their achievements in the previous years as registered in the school records. In addition, the researchers asked the students to write a short paragraph about themselves to verify their levels .The researchers' volunteers teachers were school members with 10 year-minimum experience in teaching English for secondary school students.

Instrument of the Study

The Composition Prompt Test:

In this study a composition prompt test was used as an instrument to assess Arabic and English writing. The Composition prompt is similar to the instrument used by Carson et al (1990). Two topics, one in Arabic and the other in English, were chosen and they were suitable to the students' levels and appealing to the students' common knowledge so that the students would demonstrate interest while writing about the topics. In other words, the researchers took into consideration that the students were familiar with the topics and the two topics chosen were relevant to students' social life. The Arabic topic required the students to discuss their preferences about living in the city or the countryside "*Do you prefer to live in the city or the countryside? Discuss the advantages and disadvantages*"; the English topic required the

students to describe marriage traditions in their country *" Describe the marriage traditions in your country (how a couple gets married)".*

In the construction of the prompt test, the researchers adhered to the rules and criteria of the TOEFL test for written English (TWE) which uses composition prompts. Similar rating criteria were used in the Arabic composition. The criteria used were based on the scorer's personal holistic criteria and that criteria used by the Ministry of Education which are based on the following guidelines:

1-Did the students appropriately respond to the prompt or did they deviate from it?

2-Did the students organize their ideas well? And how logical was the progression of these ideas?

3-Were the structures sophisticated and accurate?

4-Did the students choose suitable vocabulary to express their ideas?

5- Did the students use accurate punctuation, spelling and other writing considerations?

6-Did the students use accurate paragraphing.

7-Did the students use classical or standard Arabic? Or did they use colloquial Arabic?

Although the instructions were available and easy to follow, both the researchers and the teachers went over the exams again and again. They discussed the instructions and the ways these tests would be conducted.

The scorer used the following Warriner's (1986, P438) guidelines in correcting the English composition prompts.

1-Did the paragraph have a topic sentence that clearly states the paragraph's main idea and arouses the reader's interest?

2-Were the structures, vocabularies, punctuation and spelling accurate?

3-Did the supporting sentences develop the paragraph's main idea with sufficient detail?

4-Would the paragraph be improved by adding a clincher, or concluding sentence that restates the main idea, summarizes specific details, or suggests a course of action?

5-Did every sentence in the paragraph directly relate to the main idea? Have all sentences that destroy the paragraph' unity been eliminated?

6-Were the ideas in the paragraphs arranged logically according to a definite plan?

7-Did the paragraph contain pronouns and transitional expressions that link ideas clearly to one another and make the paragraphs easy to follow?

Results of the study:

The results of the study are presented with respect to the research question:

"Is there a relationship between the writing performance and competence in L2 (English) and the Proficiency in L1 (Arabic) among Jordanian second secondary school students in Jordan?"

The analysis of data was conducted in order to investigate the issue of correlation between English writing skills with the same skills in the Arabic language. The researchers used Pearson's analysis for the tests and Chrombach "Alpha" for the validity of the test which was (0.7349). The analysis produced a correlation for the two tests. The correlation coefficient (r) was used to measure the relationship. This analysis was aimed at verifying the nature of transfer of the writing skill from L1 to L2. In other words, this research was designed in such a way to determine whether the achievement in writing in the L2 (English) is affected by the level of achievement in the L1 (Arabic) (as proposed by Chomskian Interdependence theory) and the competence in L2 (English) (as proposed by Cummins' Hypothesis).

The research question addressed the relationship between writing in the English language and the same skill in the Arabic language. The study revealed a significant relationship between the students' proficiency in Arabic writing and English writing. The scores of the two tests revealed this correlation

(as shown in Table 1)

TABLE 1: The Raw Scores of the English and Arabic Tests

Subj.No.	English Composition	Arabic Composition
1)	70	68
2)	65	63
3)	57	63
4)	70	63
5)	58	63
6)	**74**	**73**
7)	55	68
*8)	00	58
*9)	00	00
10)	**72**	**78**
11)	73	68
12)	77	78
13)	**85**	**83**
14)	66	71
15)	74	58
*16)	60	00
17)	**74**	**71**
*18)	72	00
19)	68	73
20)	67	63
Total No. of subjects	**16**	**16**
Scores' range	**55-85**	**58-83**

In addition, the statistical analysis in Table 2 and 3 displays a correlation for English and Arabic writing skill results

TABLE 2: Means and Standard Deviations for the Tests

Subject	Means	Std. Deviation	N
Arabic Comp.	69.00	6.84	16
English Comp.	69.06	7.80	16

 From Table 2 we can notice:

   The analysis of the raw scores showed the means: 69.00 for Arabic and 69.06 for English, *standard deviations*: 6.84 for Arabic and 7.80 for English .The

number of study subjects was originally 20 for Arabic and 20 for English, but the researcher excluded the subjects: 8, 9, 16 , 18 (see Table 1, subjects marked with *), so the number of subjects which were included in the analysis became 16 for the Arabic test and 16 for the English test.

TABLE 3: Correlative Coefficients for the Arabic and English Tests

Arabic Test	English Test	r	p
(n = 16)	(n = 16)	0.581	.018*

P ≤ .05, significant

From Table 3 we can notice:

Table 3 is a simplified summary of the correlation (correlation coefficient) showing the Arabic composition and English composition having the same correlation coefficient (r) = 0.581 in the two tests' results. The researchers made use of the composition prompt tests' correlation in Table 3 which revealed that the two writing skills had the same correlation and that was obvious from the students scores.

By examining the students' scores it was noticeable that students who got high marks in Arabic obtained very close marks in English (see the high scores of the study subjects No.: *6, 10, 13, and 17*).

From the results shown in the three tables we conclude the following:

1-The correlation coefficients for the two tests' results revealed the significant relationship between Arabic and English writing.

2-The analysis of the English composition (English writing skill) and the Arabic composition revealed the correlation. This relationship indicated that the Arabic composition (Arabic writing skill) and the English composition (English writing skill) had the same correlation coefficient (r) = 0.581

Discussion

This study provided an introductory set of data from which the researchers were able to draw up in order to develop strategies that support the notion of development of writing skills in English and Arabic as enhancers to each other. The results further provide a basis for secondary school students who are learning English as a foreign language and indicate a research need to provide an opportunity for development to a greater extent than has been available.

The findings revealed an important relationship. Results indicated that the more proficient those students were as writers in their first language, the better they were as ESL writers than those who were not or less proficient in L1 writing and had no competence in L2. This finding supports the notion that native-language writing skills transfer across the two languages and give the more proficient Arabic writer more skills to directly apply to English writing. This finding substantiates the importance of L1 (Arabic) writing abilities and L2 competence with regard to learning L2 (English) writing. Basically, the relationship indicated that teaching of L2 writing begins with L1 writing and L2 (English) competence.

This study also postulates that the strengths and weaknesses in L2 writing (L2 linguistic background) can affect the students' writing skill abilities. The data analysis presented conclusive evidence that a transfer of writing skills had begun at high level of English proficiency. This finding attests to Cummins' (1979) threshold hypothesis, which postulates that a learner must reach a certain level of proficiency before transfer can take place. In addition, the results of this study agreed with Perkin's (1988) research results which indicated that poor first-language writers will write poorly in the foreign language and vice versa; that is poor writing in a foreign language may be due to inadequate knowledge of the target language. However, the finding of this study was different from the established research finding between Chinese and Japanese students. Koda

(1988), studying students learning Japanese as a second language, found that the students who had identical orthographical backgrounds (i.e. Chinese and Korean) performed much better on the Japanese reading and writing composition test than students with different backgrounds did. However, the results of this study proved that L1 writing ability could have a positive effect on L2 English writing despite the difference in the orthographical backgrounds between the two languages (English and Arabic). Moreover, the results of this study attests with Canale, et al's (1988) research which aimed at examining the interdependence of the students' writing in a first and in a second language. The subjects were Francophonic students learning English as a second language. Each student wrote one narrative and one expository composition in English and in French .The analysis showed that there was a relationship between the students' writing in the two languages. The strength of the relationship was influenced heavily by the modes of writing (narrative or expository).This point was handled carefully by the researchers when they asked the students to write a topic that appeals to their knowledge and interests. The results of this study also attests to what Torres and Fischer (1989) came to; their study indicated that being fluent in one's native language increases the probability of becoming proficient in a second .It also indicates that in general, for Spanish speakers, English acquisition is strongly related to native-language proficiency. However, the results of this study didn't meet Carsons et al's (1990) results to great extent, but they showed weak to moderate correlations between L1 and L2 writing abilities which were similar to some of the results of this study.

Conclusions:

The correlation found between English and Arabic writing implies that students who were good Arabic writers transferred their knowledge to English writing which attests with Cummins' hypothesis and Chomskian interdependence theory. This finding requires EFL planners and curricula

developers to study Arabic composition to identify its relationship to English composition. Before ESL instructors start teaching English composition, they need to examine Arabic composition to acquaint themselves with students' strengths and weaknesses in order to compare and contrast their later ESL development.

This testifies the need for integrating the instruction of the two languages in ESL textbooks. This integration between the two languages makes the textbooks pedagogically sounder and more meaningful. In other words, in order to ensure good writing competence we should take into account teaching it alongside with Arabic in terms of teaching the writing strategies.

Recommendations

The present study supports the notion of L1 transfer. It is hoped that this knowledge will assist students learning a new language. It is recommended that future research examine the relationship between Arabic speakers' reading and speaking skill alongside with writing skill and to compare Arabic groups with other linguistic groups in order to establish clarity about the relationships between the different linguistic backgrounds. In addition, age should be considered as a variable in the future research to establish its effect on different age groups because proficiency of ESL skills may vary with age .Moreover, it is recommended that any researcher, investigating this topic more specifically, use more than one test to confirm the credibility of the research. Above all, it is recommended that future research would continue to examine these relationships for Arab ESL students at various proficiency levels, which might reveal different patterns of relationships.

The researchers considered that if correlation was proved to exist between the two languages, Arab students learning English as a foreign language (ESL) would be provided with instructions better suited to their ESL development.

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