

Language-switching, Language Proficiency and Task Difficulty: A study on Writing Performance

Mohammad reza Afroogh

PhD in ELT, Faculty of Law and Theology, Islamic Azad University, Najaf Abad branch, Najaf Abad, Iran

Corresponding Author: Mohammad reza Afroogh, E-mail: afroogh100@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Language - switching in L2 writing may be defined as any non – instructed use of the first language during the L2 writing process (Cumming, 1989). In a protocol analysis of L2 writing from 20 adult EFL Iranian students, this research observed how language-switching (L-S), i.e., L1 use in L2 writing, was affected by L2 proficiency and task difficulty. ANOVA results suggest that language proficiency could not affect sharply on language-switching process when we consider it in the inter group relationship ($Z= 0.968$)¹ but when we consider language proficiency in the intra group relationship ($P=0.01$). On the other hand, more difficult tasks increased the duration of L1 use in L2 writing ($P=0.01$)

1. INTRODUCTION

Switching interactively between first (L1) and second (L2) languages has been recognized as one of the salient characteristics of L2 writing. We can define language switching writing as any non-instructed use of the first language in the L2 writing process, (Willy A. Renandya & Jack c. Richard 2002). However, it is not clear how switching between languages is related to proficiency or how switching to the L1 assists writers with differing L2 proficiency in their composing processes. Also, it is not clear how task difficulty affects L-S. With the above discussion, the questions of interest in this study are:

1. Does L2 proficiency level have any effect on language – switching?
2. Does task difficulty level have any effect on language – switching?

There is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master, the difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into a readable text (Richards,2002). 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 (Richards, 2002). The difficulty becomes even more pronounced if their language proficiency is weak. Given the pervasiveness of bilingualism and the projections for increasing the importance of writing skills, continued research on the nature of bilingual writing is of crucial

importance and has significant implications for educational research and bilingual classroom discourse alike. L-S in L2 writing 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 (cf., Friedlander, 1990; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992) it is instructed use of the L1. 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 to what Vygotsky (1978) called, private speech”.

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 (L1) such as depicted in the Hayes and Flower (1980) model, is largely the same as that for writing in L2 (Krapels, 1990). 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 and Whalen ,1990). For instance, less skilled second language writers spend more time pausing while writing (Hall , 1990 ; Pennington & So .1993) ,write shorter texts (Berman, 1990 ; Fried Lander & 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 , one would expect it to be based on both quantitative and qualitative differences (Krapels & Silva, 2000). One such qualitative difference between L1 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.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Subjects

The participants (n=20) in this study came from a low and advanced EFL students at Payam-noor university, Aligoodarz branch in Iran. We chose these students from among 36 EFL students in B.A level, then we divided them into two groups by using a proficiency test: 1) low group 2) advanced group.

Moreover, these students were mostly at the age range of 18 to 20. They were also in their seventh or eighth semester of English language translation in B.A level and the first language of all participants was Persian, whereas they studied English translation as a second language.

As we mentioned above, based on a proficiency test we chose 20 participants, this proficiency test consisted of 100 TOFEL test items with the score level of 100, the first 10 participants who got scores above the mean (68.58) of the test were selected as advanced group. In fact, they were two standard deviations over the mean of the test, then those who got the least scores of the test were selected as low group, they were also two standard deviations under the mean of the test. Table 1 shows us the related statistical data related to the proficiency test.

Table.1 Proficiency test table

participants	Selected participants	Mean score	S.D
36	20	68.58	17.22

2.2 Materials

To get language-switching data for the analysis, the participants were asked to think-aloud while producing two writing samples, a personal letter and a persuasive essay. Although think- aloud protocols have been criticized for causing problems of validity (e.g., Pennington and So, 1993) and reliability (e.g., Bracewell, 1994), when carefully conducted they remain useful for obtaining data on writing processes. Moreover, in this we have just concentrated on the number of switches not the kind of them and their classifications. We chose a personal letter as an easy task because, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) define an easy writing task as one in which the writer is expected to engage in "knowledge-telling", so we chose a personal letter as a suitable example. Moreover, we chose a persuasive essay as a difficult task because, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) again define a difficult task as one in which the writer is expected to involve in "knowledge-transforming".

Although think-aloud protocols have been criticized for causing problem of validity (e.g. Pennington & So, 1993; Smagorinsky and Zamel, 2000) and reliability (e.g. Bracewell & Breueux, 1994), when carefully conducted they remain useful for obtaining data on writing processes like language-switching (Smagorinsky, 1994). To minimize threats to validity, the participants were asked simply to reporting their thoughts. They were not asked to interpret or filter their thoughts through a secondary process, such as "report only those thoughts that are related to the task. Such a request would require a filter to assess if the thought was related to the task (Ericsson & Simon, 1980)". The recorded protocols show that the participants were successful at reporting their thoughts without any secondary filters.

As it was briefly mentioned, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1980) define an easy writing task as one in which the writer was expected to engage in "knowledge-telling", and a difficult writing task as one involving "knowledge-transforming". To increase the difference in difficulty between the two tasks, the instructions for them differed in both detail and character. Instructions for the easier letter task (see Appendix A) included a list of specific, personal information to be included in the text, such as age, gender. It was assumed that this information was readily available to working memory, and therefore the task could be easily performed through the knowledge-telling processes. Furthermore, instructions for the easier letter task provided an audience for the text and a suggested the length of only one page.

The instructions and topic for the more difficult essay writing task (Appendix B) were more abstract. The essay task was more likely to involve knowledge transforming because it required the writer to develop a problem space that creates the answer to the question, rather than a memory search that simply recalls the answer. Also, we did not have any suggestions about what to include in their writing. Moreover, to increase the difficulty of the task, no audience for the essay task was prescribed, and the suggested length was one to two pages.

2.3 Procedures

The writing sessions were conducted over the course of two weeks; each participant wrote individually and they were asked to think-aloud while writing. The think-aloud writing sessions were observed, tape-recorded and coded by the researcher.

At first, we gave a topic on personal letter to the students in the two groups (low & advanced). Of course, the researcher, by giving some examples showed them how to report their thoughts. Then, we asked them to think aloud while they were writing their tasks. At last, we specified where they had switched to the mother tongue based on what we had recorded before.

2.4 Data analysis

The main goals of this study were to determine whether language proficiency had any effect on language-switching or not, and also whether the task difficulty had any effect on language-switching. The data gathered through this study were then subjected to appropriate statistical analyses and the two groups' performances were compared.

3. RESULTS

Following the frameworks introduced above, both easy and difficult tasks were analyzed and coded in order to find out how often and where students had switched to their first language. Moreover, the relationship between language proficiency, task difficulty and language-switching process was investigated. The results are presented below:

3.1 Effect of language proficiency on L-S

Referring to the first research question, we tried to show if language proficiency could affect the rate of language-switching process.

Table.1 shows us all the frequencies of the two groups in the two tasks. Here, we tried to show the mean frequencies of the two groups. As the table shows, low group participants have had a range of

frequency more than advanced group participants; it is something 3 times that by the advanced group.

Table 1. Mean frequencies of the two groups in the two tasks.

Group	Difficult tasks L-S Frequencies	Easy task L-S Frequencies
Low N=10	9	6
High N=10	3	2

Then, by using correlational statistics we obtained the followings results on the effect of language proficiency on language-switching processes.

Table (2) shows that there is a meaningful relationship between the scores of proficiency test obtained by the advanced group and the rate of language-switches of this group, it is because the amount of correlation coefficient is 0.549, and also the amount of P is 0.01; in other words, it is significant.

Table 2. Correlation coefficient between advanced group scores and their language-switches

group	Proficiency test scores		Sig
	Correlation coefficient	probability	
Advanced	0.549	.05	0.01

Table (3) shows that there is a meaningful relationship between lowest scores of proficiency test obtained by low group and the rate of their language-switches of this group, it is because the amount of correlation coefficient is 0.568, and also the amount of P is 0.01; in other words, it is significant.

Table 3. Correlation coefficient between Low group scores and their language-switches

group	Proficiency test scores		Sig
	Correlation coefficient	probability	
Low	0.568	.05	0.01

Table (4) shows us there is not a sharp difference between two correlation coefficients of the two groups because here the amount of Z which stands as the difference between them is 0.968. Regarding the amount of Z which shows the difference between two correlations coefficients that is lower than the standard error level of percentage5 or critical amount of 1.960, we found that the difference between two correlation coefficients of the two groups is not meaningful.

Table 4. Difference between two correlation coefficients

Group	Correlation coefficient	Z
Low	0.568	0.968
High	0.549	

3.2 Effect of task difficulty on L-S

Referring to the second research question, "does task difficulty have any effect on language-switching"? Again, we tried to understand how often the participants have switched in their mother tongue in both tasks (easy and difficult tasks). Based on table (1) which showed all the frequencies, we obtained the following results on the effect of task difficulty on language-switching process.

Table (5) compares two groups' mean frequencies and in both personal letter as an easy task and persuasive essay as a difficult one. As we see, based on the findings in the table, in low group the mean frequency in easy task is 6.1 and in advanced group in the same case is 2. Whereas, in low group the mean frequencies in difficult task is 9.4 and in the same case it is 2.6. Referring to standard deviations, the two groups have almost similar performances.

Table 5. Mean frequencies comparison based on two tasks in two groups.

Kind	Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
easy	low	6.1000	.87560	10
	Adv.	2.0000	.66667	10
	Total	4.0500	2.23548	20
difficult	low	9.4000	.96609	10
	Adv.	2.6000	.51640	10
	Total	6.0000	3.56887	20
Total	low	7.7500	1.91600	20
	Adv.	2.3000	.65695	20
Total		5.0250	3.10077	40

Table (6) shows whether the difference between these two tasks is meaningful or not. According to the findings in this table which is based on the kind of task and group and also, the interaction between them, the level of P is .01; in other words, the difference between the two tasks is meaningful. As we see here in both low and advanced group, the effect of task difficulty on language-switching is meaningful because P is 0.01.

Table 6. Analysis of variance operant, mean frequencies comparison based on two groups and two tasks

Source	Type III sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	Sig(p)	Partial Eta squares	Observed power
Task: easy and difficult	38.025	1	38.025	63.083	0.01	.637	1.000
Group: low and advanced							
Interaction between groups	297.025	1	297.025	492.760	0.10		1.000
		1			0.10	.932	
	18.225		18.225	30.235		.456	1.000

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The effect of language proficiency on L-S

The results of this study suggest that L2 proficiency can not sharply affect the range of language-switching but on the other hand, task difficulty can

affect this process. One explanation for this reason is that without language-switching process in L2 writing they can not sometimes write anything.

In support of the claim by Jones and Tetroe (1982), the coded protocols show that low level writers often switched to their L1s more than advanced learners;

however, the correlation between the two does not indicate a sharp difference.

However, in support of findings by Cumming(1990), Manchon (2000),Whalen and Menard (1995), and Zimmemann (2000), the data also show that both low and advanced participants often resorted to their L1s for a host of purposes, for instance, in basic grammatical points (sentence structure,word order) or in paragraph writing. Of course, investigation about the purposes language-switching was not our concern in this study.

Now based on our statistical analysis we got such results as follow:

1. Less proficient L2 writers could have written their tasks but mostly by resorting to their L1s during L2 writing process. They switched to their mother tongue more frequently than more proficient participants, (3 to 1). More proficient L2 writers have also switched to their mother tongue but less than low group learners.

2. Based on the results of tables 2 and 3 the relationship between language proficiency and language-switching is meaningful. This is the intra group relation but intergroup relation does not indicate a noticeable difference.

4.2 The effect of task difficulty on L-S

Numerous studies have examined the role of task difficulty in L2 writing, but the results are not uniform (Saski & Hirose, 1996). Some have found that L2 writing performance is related to task difficulty (e.g. Cumming, 1990; Jones & Tetoe, 1987; Raimes and Zamel, 1989). In the present research, the results show that task difficulty can affect language-switching process. Statistical analysis showed us two main points as follows:

1. Based on the results of table 6 the relationship between task difficulty and language-switching is meaningful, because P is 0.01. Moreover, the differences between the two tasks are meaningful because again based on table (5) P is 0.01.

2. In easy task (personal letter), advanced group switched to their mother tongue nearly 3 times less than low group learners. It is perhaps because they are pretty quite aware of basic grammatical points (e.g. English sentence structures, Robert Crown, 1989) or perhaps they can not realize the similarities and differences between the two languages.

3. In difficult task, low group learners switched to their mother tongue 3 times more than advanced group learners, because the latter seems to be nearly quite aware of special and advanced grammar and paragraph development or perhaps low group are not able to well organize their thoughts because of the difficulty of the task.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master, the difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into a readable text. The skills involved in writing are highly complex. Our results suggest that language proficiency could not affect sharply on language-switching process when we consider it in the inter group relationship, but when we consider language proficiency in the intra group relationship.

5.1 Implication for EFL teachers

As the empirical evidence gained from this study supports the effect of task difficulty on language-switching phenomenon and ineffectiveness of language proficiency, EFL teachers who teach writing can make use of this excellent activity in order to prevent or improve language-switching process as much as possible in their class as a complimentary activity.

It was mentioned in chapter two (review of literature) that the goal of teaching writing is helping students gain autonomy in writing skill; therefore, asking them to do such activity (writing easy tasks as personal letter and difficult task as persuasive essay) during the course of study can be so exciting and useful.

University teachers who teach other subjects can also make use of this activity. They can prepare some language-switching samples of the other students and ask their students to specify language-switching places; these operations can be helpful.

5.2 Implication for EFL material developers

The findings of this study should encourage EFL material developers (designers) to pay particular attention to different kinds of writing activities. The textbook developers or writers assign appropriate post-writing activities such as writing a personal letter or a persuasive essay which can help students.

5.3 Suggestions for further investigations

The current results of the study indicate that writing and whatever belongs to this complex skill (e.g. language-switching) deserve more attention. The present study may serve to build up a momentum for

a further investigation to see whether the same findings are obtained if other language-switching cases are investigated in relation to other aspects of the language. Replicating this study using other aspects related to language-switching like cognate languages (e.g. English/German) is suggested.

5.4 Limitations

The small sample size and its selective nature may limit the generalizability of the result; thus, the findings should be supported with a larger sample of participants. It is also important to confirm the results with different topics or types of tasks other than personal letter and persuasive essay in a short period of time, or with different groups of students such as those with higher or lower L2 proficiency levels.

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