

## THE USE OF FIRST LANGUAGE IN LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY CLASSES: GOOD, BAD OR UGLY?

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### Abstract

There has been an ongoing debate among language teachers on whether to use students' first language (L1) in second language (L2) teaching. Nevertheless, the use of L1 in L2 teaching has been advocated with grounded theory as far as it merits the situation. This research article aims to investigate the effectiveness of the use of L1 to generate ideas for second language writing among low proficiency ESL learners. The study employed the experimental research design where students in the experimental group used Bahasa Melayu in generating ideas before they resumed writing their essays in English. Students in the control group used English. Two independent raters graded the essays and the scores were analysed using the paired t-test. The findings showed a marked improvement in the writing performance of students who used their first language to generate ideas before using their second language for writing. Based on the findings, we recommend that teachers encourage the use of first language before writing or composing in English especially among low-level proficiency ESL learners.

*Keywords: First Language, Second Language, Limited English Proficiency, Process Approach*

### Abstrak

Guru-guru bahasa telah sekian lama berdebat sama ada bahasa pertama (Bahasa Ibunda) boleh digunakan dalam pengajaran bahasa kedua (Bahasa Inggeris dalam konteks makalah ini). Makalah ini berdasarkan kajian meneliti keberkesanan penggunaan bahasa pertama untuk mengeluarkan idea dalam proses mengarang dalam bahasa kedua di kalangan kalangan murid yang lemah penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris. Kaedah eksperimen digunakan di mana pelajar kumpulan eksperimen menggunakan Bahasa Melayu untuk mengeluarkan idea sebelum meneruskan penulisan karangan dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Pelajar kumpulan kawalan pula menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris semasa proses mengeluarkan idea dan proses mengarang. Kesemua karangan tersebut disemak dan dinilai oleh dua orang pemeriksa bebas. Skor dianalisis menggunakan ujian t-bebas. Dapatan analisis menunjukkan peningkatan dalam keupayaan penulisan karangan murid yang menggunakan Bahasa Melayu untuk mengeluarkan idea sebelum menulis dalam Bahasa Inggeris berbanding dengan murid-murid yang mengeluarkan idea dalam Bahasa Inggeris dan seterusnya mengarang dalam Bahasa Inggeris.

*Kata Kunci: Bahasa Pertama, Bahasa Kedua, Kurang Kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris, Pendekatan Proses*

## INTRODUCTION

Getting students to write in the second language can be a daunting task. This situation is brought about by several factors, among others, writing apprehension or fear for writing (Siti Hamin Stapa 1998). The fear for writing may be caused by the Product Approach that emphasizes on the product alone and not on the processes of writing. In order to overcome this fear, the curriculum specification for the teaching of writing explicitly states the application of the Process Writing Approach in the teaching of writing (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia 2003).

The application of the Process Approach is recommended because it presents solutions to writing problems. It considers the writer's thoughts, experience and prior knowledge before the actual writing begins. Writers move recursively through a series of stages in the process writing activity i.e. prewriting - writing – evaluating – revising. To stress the importance of the prewriting stage, Thompkins (1990) points that 70% of writing time should be spent in prewriting. Having in mind the amount of time that should be spent on prewriting, one cannot agree more that this stage of the writing process cannot be taken lightly. Generating ideas, which falls in the realm of the prewriting stage has been a big hurdle for many L2 writers. This stage invokes complex cognitive skills. As students try to decide what they want to write about, they use long-term memory to retrieve information about the topic. In the L1 writing, this long-term memory retrieval is likely to be related to the topic. In other words, ideas come from stored knowledge and experiences directly related to the topic. These ideas may be stored in the long-term memory in the form of language, or they may be stored as concepts and kinetic images not yet formulated in words. Furthermore, if the topic is familiar to the writer, there will be more ideas than if the topic is unfamiliar.

On the other hand, in L2 writing, the process of the idea generation and long-term memory are far more complex. This is because students are unlikely to consciously distinguish between long-term memory information on the topic and information on the language expression. In fact, the writer considers the linguistic information more important than the ideas on topic. This clash of topic and grammar information in long-term memory may hamper the idea generation phase of the second language writing

process. Additionally, if the topic is not culturally related and somewhat unfamiliar to the writer, generating ideas will be even more difficult, since the writer will have less related information stored in the long-term memory (Scott 1996).

Halim (2004, 20) has marvelously postulated the importance of generating ideas before we write. According to Halim, ideas are the key to beginning to write. It is the catalyst to get the pen moving, the fingers typing and a story out of nothing. This suggests that ideas are crucial for writing. Therefore, we may say that the activity in generating ideas, which is the first step in the writing process, is a fundamental step. It is at this stage that the writer decides what to say about the topic. Often, this is more difficult than determining how to say it (Scott 1996). Idea generation may be done in several ways: making notes, reading, or even brainstorming about the topic.

According to Scott (1996), in L2 or FL writing, the process of idea generation and the use of long term memory are more complex. Students are confused between long-term memory information (ideas) on the topic and the language of expression. This confusion, Scott argues, hampers the process of idea generation (see Figure 1).

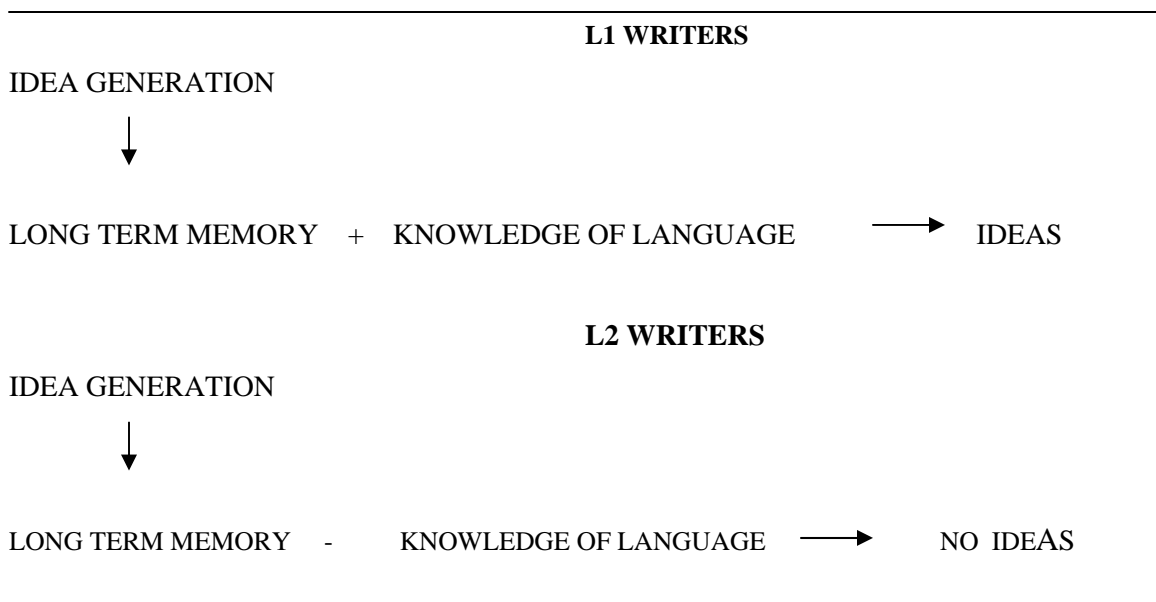


Figure 1. Ideas Generation Process in L1 and L2 (adapted from Scott 1996).

Generating ideas in the L2 writing can be a very complex activity due to the reasons mentioned above. Therefore, students need explicit guidance in this undertaking. During the prewriting stage, while students are engaged in some kind of brainstorming activity, they must be taught to distinguish between ideas on the topic and language of expression. At lower levels of proficiency, there is always the possibility of allowing students to generate ideas in the L1 and then help them to identify the linguistic structures that will transfer their ideas into the L2. By doing so, students may be able to come up with more ideas as they are not bogged down by the confusion between linguistic information and ideas on the topic (Scott 1996).

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this paper are:

1. to investigate if students with low English proficiency are able to generate more ideas if they use L1 (BM) as opposed to English.
2. to investigate if students with low English proficiency are able to produce a qualitatively better developed written product in terms of a) content, b) organization, c)vocabulary, d)language use, e)mechanics and f)overall score if ideas are generated in L1 as opposed to L2.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: RESEARCH USING L1 FOR L2 TEACHING AND WRITING INSTRUCTION**

Language teachers have been debating whether or not to use the students' L1 in the L2 teaching. Some teachers have the opinion that L1 may be used under certain limitations and others feel that L1 should not be allowed at all. Nevertheless, the use of L1 for L2 teaching has been advocated with grounded theory for as it merits the situation.

Reineman (2001) proposes that there is no hard fast rule for when a first or common language should be allowed or prohibited in the classroom. She further says that the use of L1 should be allowed conditionally. When introducing new vocabulary, in which meaning can be expressed through drawings, pantomimes, noises or the likes, target language can be fully used. However, when communicating ideas that are abstract, first language can be permitted or used. Reineman adds that input needs to be

comprehensible. When using materials that are familiar, the target language should be used but with new materials L1 can be used. This will allow students the ability to tap into their prior knowledge. Nevertheless, students should not be allowed to hold on to the security blanket of their L1 far too long and neither should they be thrown out with the bath water too early. According to Connick-Hirtz (2001), as a general guide, the following factors should be taken into account when we decide to use L1 for L2 instruction:

- i. What is the learner's first language?
- ii. What is the learner's age?
- iii. Are we teaching beginners of advanced levels?
- iv. What is the ratio of students/teaching time per one class?
- v. How long is the learner going to study the second language?
- vi. What are his/her learning purposes?
- vii. Is it a one nationality or mixed nationality group?
- viii. What is the institution's pedagogical policy?
- ix. What kind of educational background does the learner have?
- x. In what kind of social context is the teaching of L2 taking place?

Wang (2003) has proposed that writers with differing L2 proficiency switch from L2 to their L1 during their writing process. In agreement with Wang, Woodall (2002) has stressed that less proficient L2 learners switched to their L1 more frequently than more advanced learners and that more difficult tasks increased the duration of L1 use in L2 writing. Wang and Wen (2002) discover that less proficient writers rely on L1 when they were managing their writing process, generating and organizing ideas; L1 use decreased with the writers' L2 development but the extent of the decline of the L1 use in individual activities varied. Papamihel (2001) claims that L1 has aided in L2 skills in a way that the use of the former is a support for the acquisition of the later.

In another debate on the use of L1 in L2 instruction, Lucas and Katz (1994) claim that for students with little or no proficiency in English, their native language is the only effective means for providing access to content area development. By discussing content

in their native language, students can interact more effectively about more sophisticated content and have greater access to their own knowledge and experience.

A study that discusses the use of L1 in L2 composing is the one conducted by Friedlander (1990), which focuses on the effects of L1 on L2 composing. The data in this study indicate that, during the planning process, when students use language that they associated with the topic, they produce texts with better content.

### **SAMPLE OF POPULATION**

Sixty Form 4 students from Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Jalan Bukit, Kajang were selected for this study. There were 30 subjects in the experimental and control group respectively. The selection of subjects was done at random regardless of gender and race. The subjects were students with low English language proficiency (most of these students obtained grades C and D in their Penilaian Menengah Rendah English language paper).

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

In this experimental study, the subjects were divided into two groups: the experimental and the control. A training session was carried out in order to familiarize the students with the procedures. The research started by giving both groups a reading passage (in English) related to the essay topic a day earlier so that they could gather some ideas on the topic. On the first day of the treatment, the experimental group is allowed to generate ideas using their L1 while the control group was told to generate ideas in L2. The study continued in stages as follows:

#### **The Pre-Writing Stage – Generating Ideas**

Subjects were informed that they were to write an essay entitled “The effects of pollution on the environment” and they were to generate ideas by means of quickly listing ideas in a note form or mind mapping in L1. They were given only ten minutes for this session as the idea generation phase of the writing process should not take too long. Furthermore,

since writing is a recursive process, they could always come back to the stage at a later time.

### **The Writing Stage – Drafting and Revising**

The ideas written by the students were then written on the board. These ideas were later discussed and reshaped into English. The subjects were told to write the first draft of the essay. At the end of the period, the drafts were collected. Some general comments were made on the essays without adding any new ideas. These drafts were returned on the following day.

The students were asked to start writing their second draft on the second day. They were allowed to discuss with their peers but writing was done individually. At the end of the period, the second draft was collected.

### **The final stage – Post writing**

The third day was centred on the subjects' writing and revision. Subjects were briefed about the importance of contents, organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics in coming up with a good piece of writing. The essays from both groups were collected at the end of the period and given to two independent raters for the purpose of grading.

## **METHODS OF DATA ANALYSIS**

Descriptive analysis is used to compare the distribution of mean scores and standard deviations as well as inferential analysis (independent samples t-test) to test the research hypotheses for both the experimental and control groups. The data for these analyses were gathered from the ideas generated by students and compositions written by them, which were assessed using ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et. al. 1981).

### **Discussion of the findings**

#### **1. Descriptive analysis on quantity of ideas**

The number of ideas produced by the subjects in both the experimental and control groups were tabulated and illustrated as in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Quantity of Ideas

<b>CONTROL</b>	<b>EXPERIMENTAL</b>
Total no. of students: 30	Total no. of students: 30
Total no. of ideas: 85	Total no of ideas: 166
Mean: 2.8	Mean: 5.5

Table 1 shows that the experimental group that used L1 to generate ideas, produced a higher quantity of ideas as opposed to the control group, which used L2. Individual students were able to produce more ideas when they did not face confusion between linguistic structures of the target language and could concentrate on the content information, as expounded by Scott (1996).

## 2. Inferential Analysis on quantity of ideas

The test used in investigating the quantity of ideas is the independent samples t-test, and the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Independent Samples Test for Quantity of ideas

		Independent Samples Test						
		Test for Equality of Variances			t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff	Std Error Diff
Content	Equal Variance assumed	.001	.976	-17.97	58	.000	-2.700	.15022

The independent samples t-test in Table 2 reveals that the critical value for t at 0.05 significance or 95% significant is  $t(58) = -17.973$  and  $p < 0.05$ . Since  $-17.973$  is



lesser than 0.05, the result shows that the experimental group has written better quantity ideas compared to the control group.

### 3. Descriptive analysis on overall score, content, organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics

This study also aimed at finding out if students in the experimental group who generated ideas in L1 were able to produce better essays in terms of overall score, content, organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics. The findings are shown in Table 3:

Table 3 Mean Score and Standard Deviation of Overall Scores, Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language and Mechanics

	Experimental		Control	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Overall	57.4667	8.05898	44.8667	7.33312
Content	19.3333	2.95172	13.7333	2.67728
Organization	11.0000	2.02314	9.5000	1.99569
Vocabulary	11.3333	1.84453	9.6333	1.61743
Language	11.3667	2.00832	9.6333	2.04237
Mechanics	3.5333	0.507135	2.7333	0.58329

Table 3 above shows a significant difference especially in the mean scores for overall achievement and content for subjects in the experimental group who utilized their L1 in generating ideas before writing their essay in the L2 compared to the control group who gathered ideas using L2. The findings also revealed that the students in the experimental group produced better quality essays in terms of organization, vocabulary, language and mechanics in comparison to the students in the control group.

#### 4. Individual Scores of students in Experimental and Control Group

After being graded by the independent raters, the scores of both groups were compared in order to investigate the effectiveness of the use of L1 in L2 writing classroom. The results are presented below.

Table 4 Individual Scores

Experimental	Control
Lowest score: 32	Lowest Score: 23
Highest score: 68	Highest score: 53

The table above reveals that when the individual scores were compared, the students in the experimental group outperformed those in the control group. This finding suggests that the use of L1 in L2 writing classroom with limited proficiency students produces better quality essays.

#### **PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS: GOOD, BAD OR UGLY?**

The findings of the study suggest that generating ideas using L1 among students with low English Language proficiency helps them to produce higher quantity of ideas compared to the use of L2 in generating ideas. Additionally, the study also clearly suggests that the use of L1 to generate ideas among students with low English Language proficiency helps them to produce better quality essays in terms of overall score, content, language, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics.

The use of L1 to generate ideas for L2 writing, especially among the low English Language proficiency learners is indeed very helpful because in L2 writing, the process of idea generation and long term memory are far more complex than L1 writing. Firstly, students are not able to consciously distinguish between long-term memory information on the topic and information on the language of expression. In fact, the writer may consider that the linguistic information is more important than the ideas on topic (Scott

1996). This clash of content and grammar information in the long-term memory hampers idea generation in the second language writing process. To overcome the problem of distinguishing between ideas on the topic and information on the language of instruction, Scott (1996) suggests the use of L1 for generating ideas. The ideas can be refocused in L2 and the writing process can go on. This notion has been tested and found to be valid as seen in the earlier sections of this paper.

The findings of this study recommend the use of L1 for L2 writing as it can trigger background knowledge among the learners. In support of this, Kamhi-Stein (2003) finds that the use of L1 compensates low foreign language proficiency students. Additionally, Lucas and Katz (1994) claim that the use of L1 in L2 instruction for students with little or no proficiency in English is the only effective means for providing access to content area development. By discussing content in their native languages, students can interact more effectively about more sophisticated content and have greater access to their own knowledge and experience.

## CONCLUSION

The research findings reveal that it is by no means harmful to use L1 in teaching L2 writing especially among the low proficiency students. The important issue is really when to use L1 rather than whether to use it or not. As Corder (in Snyder 2001) says, learners are not slaves to their L1 in learning L2, but use it selectively, in situations where they feel it will be helpful based on various considerations. Therefore, classroom teachers should use their discretion on deciding when to use L1 and when not to. Since writing involves complex cognitive skill, every effort to facilitate the learning of writing should be given to the students. Hence, it is hoped that the findings of this study with regards to the use of L1 to generate ideas in L2 writing will throw some light for classroom practitioners in teaching writing for students with low English language proficiency.

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