

Applications of L1 to Promoting the “Length Approach”

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Abstract

The past eight years has witnessed increasing use of the “Length Approach” (LA) proposed by Professor Wang Chuming within the context of foreign language learning in China. At present, it is generally accepted that L1 plays a significant role in learning how to write in an L2. How, then, should we employ the positive effects of L1 to further promote the LA in order to achieve the purpose of writing-to-learn? The useful and the positive effects of L1 in L2 writing are discussed and some suggestions about how to employ L1 to promote the LA are also proposed in this paper.

Key terms: “Length Approach,” effects of first language (L1), second language (L2) writing

1. Introduction

When writing in a second language (L2), it may be necessary to employ cognitive strategies acquired in the first language (L1). The L1 may function as a precious resource for overcoming a learner’s current limitations in the target language and can be employed to stimulate thinking when the communication cannot be achieved solely with the target language (Corder, 1980; Krashen, 1981)

Research also shows that the need for the L1 in L2 writing may also be attributable to the fact that the L2 writing process is a bilingual event (i.e., foreign language writers have both L1 and L2 at their disposal when they are writing in the L2 (Strauch, 1997; Wen & Guo, 1998). Others have pointed out that elementary writers are unable to carry out writing based on a ‘pure’ L2 thinking process, although foreign language students at lower levels of proficiency often rely on L1 thinking (Lay, 1982; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Guo & Liu, 1997). According to cognitive theories of second language acquisition, Chinese students at the lowest levels of L1 development are not able to perform well without the support of L1 thinking because their mother tongue is acquired in parallel with acquisition of conceptual development. Further acquisition of an L2 requires a transfer of L1 cognitive development and communication strategies that may be useful in the L2. Furthermore, Chinese students’ learning a foreign language are not likely to participate in *second language acquisition* since they are typically *acquiring a foreign language*, two processes that Chen (2001) has differentiated when he notes that “a language of other countries that Chinese are learning in the Chinese context should be referred to as a foreign language” (p. 9). Western Linguists also repeatedly emphasize the difference between *second language teaching* and *foreign language teaching*, pointing out that the L2 is learned in the environment of target language countries and involves unconscious and conscious psychological activities which are similar to those involved in L1 acquisition (Ellis, 1994; Stern,1983).

While a foreign language isn’t learned in the environment of target language countries, essential foreign language skills including listening, speaking, reading, and writing are not usually learned naturalistically. These skills do seem to require alternative approaches, including use of the mother tongue in the foreign language teaching environment. The mother tongue ought not to be considered a weakness, but rather a strength for

foreign language learners attempt to master a foreign language.

2. The Effects of L1 on L2 Writing

Since L1 thinking is to be involved in L2 writing, what then is the role of the L1 (see Zobl, 1982)? A number of ideas have examined this question, including several of the language transfer theories, including *Contrastive Analysis (CA)*, *Contrastive Rhetoric (CR)*, *Creative Construction (CC)* and *Common Underlying Proficiency Hypothesis (CUP)* (Wang & Wen, 2004). Among CUP holds that L1 and L2 proficiencies are interdependent and share a common, underlying ability. On the whole, the positive effects of L1 are far greater than its negative effects; enhancement of L1 proficiency will thus help improve L2 writing (Cummins, 1983). Other relevant empirical studies have also supported this perspective (Bhela, 1999; Jiang, 1999; Lay, 1982; Wen, 1993; Woodall, 2002; Cai, 1999; Ma & Wen, 1999; Wang, 2000; Wu, 2002).

Although there is yet not a definitive and satisfactory answer to the question regarding the role of the L1 in SLA raised by Zobl, we have already obtained a profound understanding of the role of the L1 in recent years with the development of cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology. There is no doubt that the L1 plays a dual role in L2 learning, as a foundation and as a strategic resource, so it is not a great leap to argue that L1 can play a positive role in L2 writing. In the context of China, we may as well make a good use of the positive role of L1 to promote L2 writing.

That L2 writing methods are strongly influenced by L1 has been supported by a series of studies on L2 writing. L1 and L2 writing share a similar process in that both employ the same way to generate ideas, modify articles and manage strategies and writing styles (Cumming, 1989; Lay, 1982). As L1 thinking cannot be avoided in L2 writing (Strauch, 1997; Wen & Guo, 1998), students with a higher proficiency in L1 writing usually perform better at the choice of words, use of grammar and structuring composition. It is therefore necessary to summarize key empirical studies with findings on the positive role of L1 in L2 writing and the positive effects of L1 in L2 writing in order to present a clear and coherent understanding of the relationship between L1 and L2 writing.

Lay (1988) reported a number of benefits from thinking through the L1, in which eight positive effects and method from the L1 are mentioned: (1) brainstorming; (2) raising questions; (3) working through complicated ideas; (4) recalling past experience; (5) evaluating organization; (6) enhancing self expression; (7) increasing lexical variety; (8) displaying cultural sensitivity.

Cumming (1989) categorized L1 writing strategies and knowledge of use in L2 writing into the following five aspects: (1) the transformation of writing strategies; (2) conceiving L2 compositions with L1 thinking; (3) generating contents and discourse patterns with L1 writing strategies; (4) expressing the contents conceived with L1; (5) choosing appropriate words with L1.

Guo & Liu (1997) advanced the understanding of L1 use and its role in the L2 writing process in their analysis of the results of L2 writing based on pictures produced by 12 Chinese EFL students (ten high school and two university students) with a think-aloud method. Qualitative protocol analysis identified three major functions of thinking in the L1: (1) L1 as an intermediary language in logical processing; (2) formal monitoring in target language output; and (3) retrieval of world conceptions and target language structures.

In order to present a clearer explanation of the role of L1 thinking in L2 writing, Wen & Guo (1998) selected six subjects' protocols for identification of five functions for the L1: (1) transformation, (2) confirmation, (3) generating ideas, (4) retrieving L2 forms, and (5) controlling the writing procedures. The study showed that students with higher compositions scores used much less L1 than those with lower scores. However, a

breakdown of the five functions showed that students with higher scores used more L1 for transformation and confirmation, but less L1 for the other three functions.

Besides, L1 literacy capability and L1 writing strategies can also contribute to L2 writing. Wang & Wen (2004) focused on the effects of L1 literacy capabilities on L2 writing ability among Chinese EFL learners. The study found that Chinese vocabulary, Chinese writing as well as Chinese discourse have direct as well as indirect effects on English writing. The study demonstrated that L2 literacy level constrained the relationship between L1 literacy variables and L2 writing ability. The Common Underlying Proficiency thus appeared to be the mechanism of language transfer, with mostly negative transfer occurring on the surface, but mostly positive transfer ($L1 > L2$) occurring at a deeper level of learning.

3. An Introduction to Length Approach (LA)

The Length Approach (LA), proposed by Professor Wang Chuming in the unique context of foreign language learning and the characteristics of Chinese students, is a new teaching method with great impacts on foreign language teaching in China. It is also an effective writing method.

Professor Wang holds that one of the distinctive factors for Chinese students to learn English lies in the fact that they have no chance to experience the environments of the target language countries. They don't have a natural communicative backdrop for use of English. In such circumstances, Chinese students heads are full of combinations of English forms and Chinese functional contexts. They feel it is difficult to employ English with the mismatches of language forms and functions (Wang, 2003a; Wang 2003b). Students usually feel that it is unnecessary or less motivating to use English, and it is also difficult for them to improve their oral and listening proficiencies because they would not like to speak due to either bad pronunciation or to fears of making mistakes. On the other hand, the reading and writing conditions in English are quite good in China. Especially for adults, learners with a reasonably good knowledge of English vocabulary and grammar have a strong desire to improve their English. Therefore, Professor Wang proposed the model, nominated as the Length Approach (LA), which aims to increase the learners' English proficiency through tasks that motivate learners to write increasingly long compositions. The resulting quantity of writing gives learners a good sense of achievement, which in turn boosts their confidence and motivates further learning, thus ensuring their progress in English learning (Wang, 2003c). LA deals with four approaches to foreign language learning: (1) foreign language learning should be promoted through emotional encouragement; (2) foreign language skills are obtained through learning, not only teaching; (3) long compositions can contribute language knowledge to actual use; (4) students should be helped to better themselves, broaden their ways of thinking and develop their potentials.

According to Professor Wang, LA should emphasize the following three qualities: (1) Essential to the LA is the design “tasks form the heart of writing teaching”. A good writing task can stimulate students to express their ideas and write long compositions. The tasks therefore should be capable of arousing learners' intrinsic interest and their desire to express themselves, suited to their level of English proficiency and relevant to their life experiences so that they can have a lot to write about. At the same time, tasks involving strong local cultural characteristics are avoided in order to prevent use of Chinese English. (2) Students are required to write long compositions each week; teachers manipulate length according to the students' foreign language proficiency. No maximum limit of words is imposed. Although the LA aims to improve the learners' English proficiency, it is the length component that is exploited for this goal. As the length requirement of a composition changes, learners are gradually pushed to write longer compositions. A marking scheme can be so devised that it divides the score percentage into four components: length (40%), organizational structure (20%), content (20%) and

accuracy (20%), with length carrying the heaviest weight. (3) Teachers should make the classroom atmosphere active, and encourage students to better themselves and learn from those with better writing; at the same time, students are allowed to enjoy their progress and have a sense of achievement so that they are willing to persist.

Since 1999, the “Length Approach” proposed by Professor Wang Chuming has become a successful methodology for foreign language learning. LA is a task-based, experiential, and write-to-learn approach to teaching English, with special attention paid to satisfying learners’ affective needs and the suitability of actual situations in China of use to English learners. Based on a motivating task, the length of writing is manipulated and emphasized, producing a chain of effects on L2 learning. Writing longer for each assignment gives learners a sense of achievement and thereby motivates more L2 use and absorption of L2 input. This “write-to-learn” method has resulted in great success and has been supported by a great number of empirical studies carried out by Wang Chuming and other experts and scholars in China, including Fang Lingling, Xu Zhujun (Fang, 2004; Xu, 2000) who find that LA can achieve the purpose of promoting learning.

4. Promoting the “Length Approach” by Employing L1

Since L1 thinking is a useful tool in the context of foreign language learning, and can play a positive role in L2 writing, the “Length Approach” is thus a potentially effective approach to improving L2 writing in China’s circumstances. How, then, can the positive effects of L1 be made use of while overcoming obstacles to the implementation of LA and promoting its application? In the following, six techniques for L1 thinking in L2 writing are suggested to promote LA.

1) *Retrieving and retrospection*: Students are required to retrieve in Chinese their life experience and backgrounds, to recall in Chinese their writing experience and writing skills as well as vocabulary, grammar, and the basic knowledge the learners have acquired. Wang Chuming chose *Tuesday with Morrie* (Zheng, 2003) as the writing task of the LA and required the students to write a *reading report* within two weeks. Before the report was done, students could make full use of L1 thinking to retrieve the main contents and plots so that a series of feelings and ideas would be stimulated. To write the reading report, a special genre of writing, the students had to recall in Chinese the techniques of writing reading reports and the reading reports they had written in Chinese. This way, their writing will not only be in line with norms, but also rich in content.

2) *Analysis and understanding*: Students are required to analyze and understand in Chinese the title of the composition, the relevant topics, the genre, and the requirements of the composition using L1 thinking. If the students are asked to write on a topic entitled *One Major Problem in the Process of Urbanization* (this topic is taken from one of the tests for English Majors-Band 8) (Yan, 2006) as a writing task of the “Length Approach”, it will be increasingly important for them to analyze the title of the composition with L1. If the students are asked to think in English what “urbanization” is, as many of them are familiar with the urbanization in western countries, they are likely to be rather anxious. This would violate the purpose of the LA. The teacher should encourage the students to think in the L1 and write down on a piece of paper “urbanization” and “one problem” (in Chinese characters) that they think is related to urbanization so that the requirements and thus the content of the article will be more clearly presented. Then the teacher and the students further analyze urbanization, and problems caused by urbanization, focusing on one or two key issues. As the discussion progresses the students will find what they can and would like to write about for this topic.

3) *Conceiving and scheming*: Students are required to conceive in Chinese their major ideas and arguments, and they are told how to start expressing their ideas, how to sum up, and how to organize the structure of their writing in Chinese. Taking *Life on Campus* for example (Zheng, 2003), students can list the main ideas and

arguments in Chinese and reasonably arrange the structure of their articles before writing. As they are very familiar with their campus life, it will be easy for them to write about their campus life from several aspects typical of Chinese culture or comment on their campus life in a coherent and logical way.

4) *Generating contents and deepening thoughts*: Students are required to generate the main content and relevant details, enhance the connotations of the topic and increase the depth and breadth of thinking. And this is done in Chinese. Let’s look at *One Major Problem in the Process of Urbanization* again. It is quite easy for students to generate the main ideas and details about urbanization such as population growth, environmental pollution, and traffic jams and so on. There is no doubt that these materials are available in Chinese. However, if the students employ L1 thinking to reflect further, or rather, to increase the depth and breadth of thinking, they will perceive the effects of urbanization on education and interpersonal relationships, so that their writing will be not only rich in content but also thoughtful.

5) *Language use*: This refers to how to select suitable words and sentences, enlarge choices of words and consciously vary sentence patterns to fully express one’s thoughts. As for the use of language, L1 can also serve a transformation role. When students have one word in mind, they can brainstorm a lot of relevant words and phrases. For example, it is not so easy for students to find relevant expressions through the word “friendship” in English. So it would be better to ask them to transform “friendship” to “*youyi*”, and then come up with as many relevant words and phrases as they can through use of “*youyi*” such as “companion”, “friend”, “colleague”, “cooperation”, “getting along well with”, “intimate”, “make friends with”, etc., in Chinese. Then they can choose the appropriate words and convert them into their English counterparts. It is also true of making sentences and varying sentence patterns. In this way, foreign language learners can acquire new knowledge and skills in their target language.

6) *Culture and affection*: Students are required to integrate L1 culture and express the true feelings and emotions so that their writing will be more vivid and affective. The topics closely relevant to the students’ life environment are likely to produce longer compositions. If students are allowed to introduce China’s holidays, they often have much to say. Taking *The Dragon Boat Festival* as an example (Zheng, 2003), the students know a lot about this festival and so they can write easily if they can use L1 thinking. Their writing will be vivid and lively. What is more important is that the students are willing to write about those topics which will contribute to the extension of the LA.

In fact, it is crucial for learners of English using the LA to write long compositions. For many foreign language learners, it is not easy to do in a foreign language and it is indeed rather hard for them to write very long compositions. At the same time, to ensure the success of the LA, Wang Chuming holds that students should be required to write a long composition each week and teachers should manipulate length according to a student’s foreign language proficiency. No maximum limit of words will be imposed. Although the LA aims to improve learners’ English proficiency, it is the length component that is exploited for this goal. As the length requirement of a composition changes, learners are pushed to write longer gradually. A marking scheme is devised with length carrying the heaviest weight (40%) to encourage students to write longer and longer. Therefore, writing long compositions is the key part of the LA. Of course, many techniques can contribute to extensive writing such as observing life and extensive reading. The employment of the positive role of L1 is also very effective. As described above, students can use the techniques to write long compositions. They can analyze the topics assigned and carry out narrations and expositions from various perspectives. They can also deal with information rationally and lay out the structure of the article to express their feelings. This is hard for foreign language learners to achieve solely with L2 thinking. Besides, foreign language learners may become

nervous and feel restricted due to the limitations of their L2 proficiency, which is harmful for their writing. As a result, it is necessary to encourage them to think with L1 in the native environment order to write in the L2.

What's more, the LA aims to increase learners' English proficiency through designing appropriate tasks that motivate learners to write increasingly long compositions with confidence. The resulting quantity of writing gives learners a good sense of achievement, which in turn boosts their confidence and motivates further learning, thus ensuring progress in their English learning. We hold that students should be allowed gain confidence before carrying out the LA. Students are usually more confident with their L1 proficiency than with proficiency in the foreign language, a level that will definitely be increased if they are told to think actively with their mother tongue. They will therefore not be afraid of the LA and their active cooperation will with the LA will intensify. Teachers should encourage students to think with their L1 and write with confidence so that their writing will not only be long and but also substantial in content.

It is thus necessary and helpful to actively employ L1 thinking in the process of applying the LA. Use of the L1 can not only contribute to the a better use of the LA, but will also allow students to write longer articles with better ideas and fuller meanings. At the same time, students can improve their language skills, and enhance self-confidence and determination to learn a foreign language so as to achieve the purpose of writing to learn.

5. How to Overcome the Negative Effects of L1 on L2 Writing

Negative effects accompanying the positive effects are also aroused to some extent by L1 thinking in the LA. The negative effects usually occur with choices of words and discourse arrangements, and the use of Chinese structures. This is natural because it is unrealistic to completely avoid the negative effects of L1 thinking in the course of foreign language learning. Therefore, teachers should encourage students to consciously overcome the negative effects of L1 thinking so as to avoid writing English compositions in a Chinese thinking way. The following are some suggestions and strategies.

1) It is necessary for teachers to provide students with dual roles of L1 in L2 writing and to introduce them to some theories of second language acquisition. In this way, students can understand the nature of the negative transfer and will try to overcome mistakes in writing with a positive attitude.

2) Reciting and reading. According to the principles of language input of Krashen (1982), students will not only deepen their understanding and accumulate target language knowledge by more frequently getting touch with the target language, but also overcome the negative effects of L1 and express themselves with more standard English through reciting and reading original English materials. Their sense of language will be improved greatly through reciting and reading, as will their ability to overcome the negative transfer of L1 into L2 writing. Students become more sensitive to the target language and their potential knowledge will be expanded with increasing input through reciting and reading.

3) It is necessary for teachers to make comparative analysis of vocabulary, sentence structures and discourse patterns between English and Chinese so that students can understand a variety of English discourse patterns and the differences with the Chinese counterparts. When teachers comment on compositions, it is helpful to point out the Chinese expressions and urge students to avoid the same mistakes in their future writing.

4) The LA allows for the writing tasks to be designed with less influence of Chinese culture to avoid Chinese English. Teachers can provide students with relevant reading materials, sentence patterns and vocabulary for students to employ and learn. (Wang, 2002).

In a word, many mistakes caused by L1 thinking will disappear with the continuous improvement of the English proficiency through a great deal of contact with the target language (Wang, 2002). The LA encourages

both teachers and students to focus on how to make good use of the positive effects of L1 rather than pay attention to the mistakes caused by L1 in order to maintain the enthusiasm and confidence of the students and enable them to continue to write long compositions. Students will gradually learn how to overcome the negative effects of L1 thinking and eventually write compositions in authentic English with the improvement of their L2 proficiency and writing skills.

6. Conclusion

Languages are to a great extent closely related with each other. A lot of research and several theories have pointed out the positive effects of L1 on L2 writing. Therefore, during L2 writing instruction, foreign language teachers should also attach importance to the L1 writing proficiency of students and their L1 writing strategies and skills, and encourage them to employ L1 to promote L2 writing. At the same time, the teachers should also improve their own L1 knowledge and L1 writing proficiency and reasonably guide their students to employ L1 thinking to contribute to L2 writing during L2 writing pedagogy. As we can see, the techniques suggested in this paper can also be used in the teaching of writing in other languages which are taught as foreign languages.

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