
WRITING STRATEGIES IN L1 AND L2: ARE THERE DIFERENCES?

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ABSTRACT

The following paper discusses the L1 and L2 writing strategies of a group of 'Licenciatura' Students. The in-class study focused on revision strategies. It was observed that in the L2, there was more revision at the lexical and syntactic level; whereas, in the L1, there was more revision at the level of the paragraph and idea organization. It was concluded, however, that more research needs to be done in this area in order to come to firmer conclusions.

Though we teachers worry a great deal about the final product of our students' written work, the processes our students employ when writing should interest us more. These processes are complex involving such steps as planning, re-scanning, revising and editing. Writing, however, is not necessarily a linear process produced in the order above. For many writers the ideas are discovered as they write. In fact, writing becomes the medium through which ideas are formulated and clarified. In later steps, the ideas are put together to form an ordered text (Krashen, 1984).

It is well to remember that writing is an act of communication between a writer and a reader. The reader is normally someone who is not physically present; thus, the message must be encoded clearly so that it may be understood without further help from the writer. The style and language used in writing are more formal than those used in speech. In speech, we are permitted to backtrack, repeat, expand and even commit grammatical errors. In writing our language must be grammatical and our text organized

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into a coherent whole with an orderly sequence that is easily followed by the reader.

Thus writing involves many complex sub-processes ranging from the generation of ideas to the final step of editing the text.

The composing process of second language writers according to studies conducted by V. Zamel are remarkably similar to those of first language writers (Zamel: 1981). Her study separated skilled writers from unskilled writers, finding that the skilled writers in L2 as in L1 had more flexibility in their plan-making devices and in their revision behaviour. The unskilled writers in L2 as those in L1 began attending to grammatical mistakes early on in the writing process and in this way they hindered their flow of ideas.

Keeping in mind V. Zamel's study of the L2 composing processes, the study related in this paper was done to discover and account for any differences or similarities in the writing strategies used by students when composing in their L1 and in their L2.

1. METHOD

1.1. Instrument

1.1.1. The students were asked to participate in two writing tasks: one in Portuguese and one in English. These tasks were done in class on two separate days. The time given for each task was twenty minutes. During this time the students were asked to write a description of their hometown. This topic was chosen with the students L2 language level in mind.

1.1.2. The students were observed as they wrote.

1.1.3. The students were told not to erase their revisions but to draw a line through them and to hand their paragraphs in to be examined.

1.1.4. A questionnaire was given to twenty of the students immediately after each writing task. The questions were designed to elicit students' opinions regarding their writing strategies. The contents of the questions were based on information taken from Krashen (1984), Bruce et al. (1983).

The first seven questions on both questionnaires were the same. On the L2 questionnaire, question 8 asked the students to mention any strategies used that were not covered on the questionnaire. On the L1 questionnaire, questions 8,9, and 10 were formulated for the student to describe any differences noticed in his writing strategies from the L1 task to the L2 task. Both questionnaires were in Portuguese so there would be no comprehension problems.

1.2. Subjects

The subjects were fifty students from Faculdade Cruzeiro do Sul in São Miguel Paulista in the city of São Paulo. These students were in their third year of a three year 'Letras' course. They were students in the night course and their English language class was held once a week, in a class period consisting of three hours. After observing three classes in a total of nine class hours, I concluded that the method used was grammar-translation. Though these students were in their final year, they were at the lower intermediate level.

1.3. Data Collecting Procedures

The writing tasks were given a week apart. The classroom teachers allowed me to use thirty minutes of their classroom time for this study. The L2 writing task was done on the first day and the L1 task on the second. This order was chosen to prevent the students from coming to class with their L2 task already planned or written.

Before beginning the task, the study was explained briefly to them. As many as wanted to participate in the writing task could but it was not obligatory.

Whilst the students wrote, they were observed to see how they proceeded in their writing task. Such outward behaviour as staring at their papers, using dictionaries, re-scanning was noted.

The questionnaires were given to the first twenty students who finished the writing task. It was explained that the questionnaire was designed for them to reflect on the strategies they had just used in writing

their paragraphs. Finally, after the task, the paragraphs written by the students were examined to see how they were edited and revised.

1.4. Findings

1.4.1. L2 Writing Task

1.4.1.1. Classroom Observation

Some students began to write immediately but the majority did not. Those who were not writing were staring at their papers or talking to their classmates about the task. Five minutes later most were writing.

Ten minutes into the task many had stopped writing and were once again staring at their papers. One girl was obviously re-scanning as she was running her finger along the lines and mouthing the words. As the task drew nearer the twenty-minute-mark, the frequency of people stopping their writing and staring increased. They now wrote a bit, stopped; then began writing again. Quite a few people were using dictionaries or asking their friends about words. Towards the end of the twenty minutes, the students for the most part, re-read what they had written but at this stage little revision seemed to be done.

1.4.1.2. The Paragraphs

Out of a total of fifty students, twenty-four handed in the writing task. Of these twenty-four paragraphs, one was incomprehensible. Three others were literal translations from Portuguese. The other nineteen had many problems in structure but the students were able, with various degrees of clarity, to transmit their ideas about their city. Most had written one paragraph.

Most of the paragraphs were edited as the students wrote. This is obvious from the words crossed out. The editing was done mostly at the level of the lexis and syntax. From the paragraphs handed in, there is no evidence that any revision was done at the level of meaning in order to make ideas clearer.

1.4.1.3. L2 Questionnaire

According to the answers given on the first questionnaire, 70% of the students did not begin to write immediately but took some time to think and plan what they were going to write.

95% of the students took time to revise. This revision was done by 36.8% at the end of the writing assignment. 15.7% did the revision at the end of the paragraphs and 21% said they revised at the end of each sentence. 10.5% revised at a combination of levels and 5.2% specified that they revised at the end of paragraphs and at the end of the writing.

Only 10.5% of the students said that when they revised they changed the ideas in the writing. 26.3% said they revised in order to make changes at all levels: vocabulary, sentence, and idea changes. 26.3% were very specific that they revised in order to check and change vocabulary. 36.5% said they made changes specifically at the level of sentences.

The majority, 90% stopped to re-scan as they wrote. 55.5% said they re-scanned in order to maintain coherence. Only 5.5% mentioned re-scanning as a strategy used specifically with the reader in mind. Only 11.1% mentioned problems with English as being a reason for re-scanning. The other reasons were insecurity - 11.1%; correction of errors - 11.1% and the incorrect use of words - 5%.

Whether the feeling of insecurity was related specifically to writing in English or generally to the task of writing was not made clear in the students' answers. It could be that the need to correct words used wrongly had to do with writing in English. Once again the student was not clear.

When the students were asked to add any other strategies used in the writing of English, 11.1% said they made a conscious attempt to use simple vocabulary. Another 11.1% said they paraphrased. 11.1% said they made an effort to think only in English. 11.1% said they used a roughdraft and 11.1% said they changed ideas between the roughdraft and the final draft.

1.4.2. L1 Writing Task

1.4.2.1. Classroom Observation

Quite a few students started to write immediately. Others stopped to think, but within a minute or two they were also writing.

Five minutes into the task, students were still writing. Ten minutes into the task most students had stopped writing and were re-reading their paragraphs. A few were staring at their papers. At this point the students began to hand in their paragraphs.

1.4.2.2. The Paragraphs

Forty-six were handed in out of a total of fifty students. Of these forty-six paragraphs, four showed that the writers had difficulties with the task of writing. They did not write paragraphs but they wrote loose phrases with no punctuation. Many words were spelled incorrectly or were illegible. The ideas were not clearly conveyed.

Ten of the paragraphs were written with style. One began with the lines, “Alguma coisa acontece no meu coração quando cruzo a Ipiranga com a Avenida São João”. Thirty were written competently, describing clearly the students’ hometowns.

There were few crossed out words or phrases. Most of the compositions consisted of two or more paragraphs.

1.4.2.3. L1 - Questionnaire

According to the questionnaire about writing strategies in the L1, 75% of the students stated that they did not begin writing immediately. 93.3% spent time thinking first in order to organize their ideas and 6.6% wrote a roughdraft in order to discover ideas.

Once again 95% of the students indicated that they took time to revise. Of these students, 36.8% revised after writing the entire composition; 26.3% after finishing each paragraph; 26.3% after each sentence and 10.5% at thought boundaries.

When these students revised, only 5.2% did so in order to make vocabulary changes. 31.5% did so to make changes at the sentence level; 26.3% in order to change ideas and 36.8% revised in order to make changes wherever necessary.

As they did the writing task, 80% of the students re-scanned what they had already written. Of these who re-scanned, 56.25% did so to maintain the coherence of ideas and 6.25% did so in order to keep within

the theme. 18.7% re-scanned to correct mistakes and 12.5% re-scanned because of a sense of not writing well enough. 6.25% mentioned re-scanning in order to put more emphasis where needed.

When the students were asked if they used the same strategies in the L1 as in the L2 (Question 8), 55% said they did and 40% said they did not. However, when asked if on doing the two writing tasks, they had noticed any differences (Question 9), 55% said they did notice differences and 25% said they did not notice any differences. (20% said they had not done the first task.) We can presume that the students made a mistake when answering Question 9, because the answers given in Question 10 are consistent with the answers in Question 8. As well we can see that exactly 55% answered 'yes' in both Questions 8 and 9 and exactly 45% answered 'no' or no comment in both Questions 8 and 9. It seems that the students exchanged answers in these two questions. The free comments in Question 10 are always consistent with the answers in Question 8.

The following comments taken from the answers given in Question 10 are representative of those given in the twenty questionnaires:

1. "O texto de inglês saiu mais rápido do que em português mesmo usando estratégias iguais."
2. "...em inglês as modificações no nível de idéias não me causam tantas dificuldades quanto em português. Em português o hábito de mudar frases e idéias são mais constantes."
3. "Em inglês as idéias eram mais gerais que específicas; em português mais específicas."
4. "Quando vou redigir algo em inglês, penso bem mais e faço uma revisão mais a nível de correção gramatical."
5. "Quando redijo em português tento buscar um vocabulário mais complexo e as idéias surgem mais facilmente e quando percebo uma certa dificuldade, tenho acesso a outras palavras para expressar as minhas idéias, porém em inglês eu tento resumir ao máximo estas idéias, tendo que analisar muito mais profundamente o vocabulário utilizado, sempre com cuidado para não me perder."

1.5. Discussion

There was an obvious difference in the observations made whilst the students were writing. Students re-scanned and revised from the beginning when writing in the L2; whereas in the L1 re-scanning was left towards the end of the writing task. The steps, write - stop - stare - re-scan - write, were far more evident in the L2 writing task than in the L1 task.

The paragraphs themselves showed this difference. The paragraphs in English have words and phrases crossed out. These revisions were made as the students were writing. In Portuguese, there are few revisions of this type. In fact, the students did little rewriting of any kind in the L1.

Going through the questionnaires we can see in Question 1, that the percentage of students who use the strategy of planning before writing is close in the L1 and in the L2; L1 - 75% - L2 - 70%. When the students were asked to describe what they did when planning the answers were similar. In the L2, 85.7% said they thought first in order to organize ideas as opposed to 93.3% in the L1 who said they used this same strategy. In the L2, 7.1% made an outline whilst 6.6% made a roughdraft in the L1. In the L2, talking to classmates to clarify the theme was also mentioned as strategy in 7.1% of the answers. As we can see the strategies mentioned by the students in the L1 and L2 are very close.

Ninety-five percent of the students revise in the L1 and in the L2. Thirty-six point eight percent revise at the end of the writing in both the L1 and the L2. The students when writing in the L2 revised at more levels than when they wrote in the L1. We can take the answers to Question 4 on both questionnaires and divide them into three main sections, based on when the revision was done:

Revision	L1	L2
at the end of the writing	36.8%	36.8%
at thought boundaries	10.5%	10.5%
at various levels within the text	52.6%	52.4%
	(letters b,c)	(b.c.d.e)

The difference in answers in L1 to L2 regarding letter c above is that, of the 52.4% in the L2 who do revisions at various levels within the text, 15.7% are aware of revising at more than one level at a time as they proceed in their writing. In the L2 the students are far more aware of revision than when writing in the L1.

In Question 5, we can see that 26.3% in the L2 revise specifically at the level of vocabulary. This is opposed to only 5.0% who revise at this level in the L1.

The revision at the sentence level is the same for the L1 and the L2: 31.5%. However, at the level of idea changes, we once again see a great disparity from the L1 to the L2. In the L2 10.5% revise at this level as opposed to a total of 26.3% in the L1. As well, 36.8% of the students stated that they revised at all levels as opposed to 26.3% in the L2.

From these percentages we can see that the students are very concerned with revising at the lexical and syntactic level in the L2. Writing in English appears to be an exercise in putting down the correct words in the correct order.

The number of students who re-scan as they write is higher in the L2 - 90% - than in the L1 - 20%. This is consistent with the students' preoccupation with error making in English. According to the L2 questionnaire 55.5% re-scan to make sure that their ideas are being put down in a coherent form. This percentage is similar in the L1 - 56.25%. But if we consider the answers given under Letters A and B as preoccupation with text organization we have a total of 62.5% re-scanning for this reason in the L1 as opposed to 55.5% in the L2.

If we consider the answers given under Letters D, E and F as a general preoccupation in correcting mistakes, we have a total of 27.7% re-scanning for this reason in the L2. In the L1, 18.7% re-scanned for this reason.

Once again from the answers given in Question 7 in the two questionnaires, we can see that the students are concerned about making mistakes in the L2. In the L1 there is a greater concern with getting ideas across clearly.

In Question 8 in the L2 questionnaire, 66.6% of the answers given (Letters A, B, C, D), concerned specific strategies relating to vocabulary. This is in opposition to 22.2% of the answers that are concerned with the text organization (Letters F and G).

In Question 10 in the L1 questionnaire, the students stated with great frequency, that they used more correction strategies in the L2 than in the L1. These strategies often had to do with using vocabulary correctly.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the students' stating in Question 8 that they use the same strategies in English and in Portuguese, it is apparent that in actual fact the strategies are different.

Though the students were relatively skilled writers in the L1, they showed that in the L2 they used unskilled writer strategies. In the L2 they over monitored their writing, editing right from the beginning. They blocked the flow of their ideas due to this editing done at an early stage. When writing in the L1, this early editing was not evident.

These students were different to the students in V.Zamel's study. That is, they showed 'unskilled' strategies in the L2 and 'skilled' strategies in the L1. This could be due to the following factors:

(1) The type of task given could have exaggerated the students' insecurity in writing in English. Since this task was a short in-class writing assignment, the students could have felt more insecure in the L2 because they did not have much time to think over their paragraph. The very fact that only twenty-four of the fifty students handed in the English paragraphs shows, in part, how they felt about having to do this task.

The task could have affected their writing processes in Portuguese. The fact that it was a small paragraph to be done in a limited time could have caused the students to eliminate to a great degree the steps of revising and editing. They wrote depending on their knowledge of their language, trusting that this knowledge in itself would eliminate errors.

(2) These different strategies could also be due to the way in which English has been presented to them. They have been translating and learning structures for two years. It could be too that when they write, their compositions are corrected at the level of vocabulary and grammar errors and not at the level of communication. Thus, the students see English as

a set of rules that have to be combined correctly. This attitude results in over monitoring and early editing.

In conclusion, in order to arrive at a more certain answer as to whether there are differences in strategies from the L1 to the L2, it would be necessary to conduct the study with other groups of English language students modifying the variables that could have affected the results of this study. That is, the students participating in the study should be at various levels of language learning. They should, also, be learning English through various methods and finally, should be given different writing tasks. In this way, it would be possible to see to what extent how other factors affect the strategies used in the L2 writing.

Thus, it is difficult on the basis of this study alone, to come to a conclusion as to whether there are indeed basic differences in writing strategies from the L1 to the L2. It is necessary for there to be more studies done.

ANEXO I

Questionário - Estratégias de Escrita - 2.^a Língua

1. Depois de ver o assunto da composição, você começou a escrever imediatamente? sim/não

2. Se a resposta for 'não', o que você fez?

3. Você revisou a sua composição? sim/não

4. Se a resposta foi 'sim', quando?
 - a. somente no final
 - b. depois de terminar cada parágrafo
 - c. depois de cada frase
 - d. outro _____

5. Se a resposta do número 3 foi 'sim', o que você fez quando revisou?
 - a. modificações no nível de vocabulário

- b. modificações no nível de frase
- c. modificações no nível de idéias
- d. outro _____

6. Enquanto você escreveu, você voltou atrás, relendo o que já tinha escrito?
sim/não

7. Se a resposta foi 'sim', por que você sentiu a necessidade de reler o que já tinha escrito?

8. Anote qualquer outra estratégia que você usou e que não foi abordado no questionário.

ANEXO II

Questionário - Estratégias de Escrita - 1.ª Língua

1. Depois de ver o assunto da composição, você começou a escrever imediatamente? sim/não

2. Se a resposta foi 'sim', o que você fez?

3. Você revisou a sua composição? sim/não

4. Se a resposta foi 'sim', quando?

- a. somente no final
- b. depois de terminar os parágrafos
- c. depois de cada frase
- d. outro _____

5. Se a resposta do número 3 foi 'sim', o que você fez quando revisou:

- a. modificações no nível de vocabulário
- b. modificações no nível de frase
- c. modificações no nível de idéias
- d. outro _____

5. Se a resposta do número 3 foi 'sim', o que você fez quando revisou:
- a. modificações no nível de vocabulário
 - b. modificações no nível de frase
 - c. modificações no nível de idéias
 - d. outro _____
6. Enquanto você escreveu, você voltou atrás relendo o que já tinha escrito?
sim/não
7. Se a resposta foi 'sim', por que você sentiu a necessidade de reler o que já tinha escrito?
8. Você usou as mesmas estratégias para escrever em português e em inglês?
sim/não
9. Você notou uma diferença no nível de estratégias ao escrever os dois parágrafos para esta pesquisa? sim/não
10. Justifique a resposta do número 9.

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