

Is There a Role for the First Language in Collaborative Writing?

Meixiu Zhang

Northern Arizona University

Abstract

The role of learners' L1 in L2 collaborative activities has been of great interest to researchers and teachers. Much effort has been devoted to examining learners' interactions during collaborative work. However, little attention has been paid to how the shared L1 may affect the text features of the written production in collaborative writing. The present study examined this issue by comparing the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of the essays by students who share the same L1s with those by students who had different L1s. Ten pairs of intermediate-low ESL learners formed two groups: the group of shared L1s and the group of different L1s. Each pair wrote a cause-effect essay on a topic of their own choice. The essays were analyzed in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. The results indicated that learners' shared the L1s have beneficial effects on the complexity of their essays. Also, sharing L1s in collaborative writing did not result in lower accuracy and fluency of learners' written production. Reasons accounting for the results and pedagogical implications were discussed.

Keywords: first language, collaborative writing, complexity, accuracy, fluency

Epistemic and Root Modals in Chinese Students' English Argumentative Writings

Background

The question whether the first language (L1) plays a beneficial or detrimental role in second language (L2) learning has been examined over the last two decades by researchers in the second language acquisition (SLA) domain. Opposing to English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' negative attitudes toward L1 use in these settings (Duff and Polio, 1990; Levine, 2003), many studies in collaborative learning found that learners' shared L1 might benefit the task completion (e.g. Scott & de la Fuente, 2008; Storch and Wiggleworth 2003;). Although much effort has been devoted to examining the functions served by the L1 in pair talk during writing, only limited research investigates how the shared L1s may affect the features of students' written production. To better understand the role of the L1 in collaborative writing, the effects of shared L1s on the features of jointly written products need further investigation.

Research Questions

The current study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) Do learners' shared L1s affect the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of essays produced in a collaborative writing task?
- (2) If yes, what factors account for the possible effects of learners' shared L1s on the collaborative writing task?

Methods

Twenty participants coming from diverse language backgrounds formed two groups—the group of shared L1s (n=5) and the group of different L1s (n=5). Participants were

paired by the class teachers based on the principle that students who could work together without disturbing each other were paired together. Each pair wrote a cause-effect essay on a topic of their own choice. The writing task was the first draft of a process-based writing task which contained three drafts in total. The collaborative writing task was administered by a class teacher and the researcher in a regular classroom. Students were given 60 minutes to write their essays by hand. Students were required to work with their partners on every single sentence. Also, pairs with the same L1s were allowed to use the L1 while discussing with partners.

The essays were analyzed in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Fluency was measured by text length, i.e., the total number of words produced, and the number of words produced per minute. Lexical complexity was measured by type token ratio, which was calculated in the Wordsmith. To better gauge syntactic complexity, three different measures were used: (1) the mean lengths of independent clauses, finite dependent clauses, and nonfinite dependent clauses; (2) the number of clausal coordinators and phrasal coordinators; and (3) the ratio of dependent clauses to independent clauses. Regarding accuracy measure, a five-band holistic scale and the number of errors per sentence were adopted. Two independent raters coded the errors and graded the essays. The two independent raters' scores were highly correlated ($r = .91$). The percentage of agreement for error coding was 80.3%. In cases where two raters disagreed with each other, agreement was reached through discussions after the independent coding process.

Results

The independent sample Mann Whitney *U* test showed a significant difference in one syntactic complexity measure—the mean length of independent clause—between the two groups ($z=2.61, p=.009$), with a big effect size ($\eta^2=.76$). In other words, pairs who shared the same L1s produced significantly longer independent clauses than pairs who had different L1s. A further examination of the independent clauses by the two groups revealed that adverbials and embedded clauses in the independent clauses mainly contribute to the difference in complexity between the two groups. There was a statistically significant difference in the total words of adverbials in the independent clauses between the two groups ($z=2.31, p=.02$), with a moderate effect size ($\eta^2=.59$). In terms of accuracy and fluency, there was no difference between the two groups. In other words, sharing the L1s in collaborative writing did not result in lower accuracy and fluency of learners' written production.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

These findings challenge the deep-rooted belief that L1 use should be banned at all costs in ESL classroom. Echoing to previous studies (e.g., Storch and Wiggleworth, 2003; Swain and Lapkin, 2000), the present study suggests that learners' shared L1s could be useful in collaborative writing tasks. Pairing students with the same L1s together might afford them more resources at their disposal. These findings may inform teachers that it is not necessary to purposefully pair students with different L1s together. While pairing students on collaborative writing tasks, instead of giving much weight to learners' L1, maybe teachers should consider more about other factors that may affect task completion, such as learners' proficiency levels and the relationship pairs may form during writing

References

- Duff, P. A., & Polio, C. G. (1990). How much foreign language is there in the foreign language classroom?. *The Modern Language Journal*, 74(2), 154-166.
- Levine, G. S. (2003). Student and instructor beliefs and attitudes about target language use, first language use, and anxiety: Report of a questionnaire study. *The Modern Language Journal*, 87(3), 343-364.
- Swain, M., & Lapkin, S. (2000). Task-based second language learning: The uses of the first language. *Language Teaching Research*, 4(3), 251-274.
- Storch, N., & Wigglesworth, G. (2003). Is there a role for the use of the L1 in an L2 setting?. *TESOL quarterly*, 37(4), 760-769.
- Scott, V. M., & de la Fuente, M. J. (2008). What's the problem? L2 learners' use of the L1 during consciousness-raising, form-focused tasks. *The Modern Language Journal*, 92(1), 100-113.