

Model Text „MA Thesis proposal“ (German: Exposee)

Obligatory parts:

- Title
- Research overview
- Research question
- Experimental design
- Methods of analysis
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Success of L1 usage during L2 composition: Advanced Students of English and Translation Studies Compared

Research overview

Translating from the L1 has been seen rather negatively in most foreign language instruction paradigms from the humanistic approach until today and has more or less been banned from L2 teaching (see the research overview in Liu 2009: 2 ff.). Such negative attitudes towards translation in L2 learning and writing based mainly on the assumption that maximum exposure to the L2 was the best way to learn an L2 and that use of the L1 interferes negatively with the L2 may explain why translation had received little attention in L2 writing research until the 1980s and is still rarely addressed today (Liu 2009: 12). The few empirical investigations of translation in L2 writing processes have revealed, however, that translating from the L1 is a process that occurs naturally in L2 writing (see, e.g., Cumming 1989; Roca/Murphy/Manchón 1999; Cohen/Brooks-Carson 2001; Wang/Wen 2002; Sasaki 2004; Liu 2009). Moreover, not only negative transfer from the L1 to the L2 composing processes has been observed but also positive transfer, especially at the stages prior to formulating the actual text, such as idea generation, organization and elaboration (Uzawa/Cumming 1989; Cumming 1989; Kobayashi/Rinnert 1992; Uzawa 1994; Woodall 2002).

Liu (2009) was able to show that the functions for which the L1 is used in L2 composing processes depends on the writers' L2 proficiency. In an experimental study, six native speakers of Chinese who had been educated in Taiwan, had learned English since the age of 12 and had not lived in other countries for more than a year had to compose a text in their L2 English while thinking aloud. The topic they had to write about was a comparison of American Christmas and Chinese New Year. Liu assumed that her participants had acquired knowledge about this topic basically in their L1 Chinese so that the writing assignment would evoke more L1 concepts and thus induce the participants to translate from their L1 into their L2 during the composing process (Liu 2009: 43). The participants were encouraged to take as much time as they needed to complete the assignment and were requested to verbalize anything that crossed their minds during the composing process in whatever language it occurred to them. Three of the six participants had TOEFL scores of 590 and above (high-proficiency group), the other three had TOEFL scores of 570 and less (low-proficiency group). Their think-aloud was transcribed into protocols and segmented into units. The units were classified into four categories: 1. thinking aloud in English only (L2 only), 2. thinking aloud in Chinese only or Chinese first and then translating into English (L1 only or L1 --> L2), 3. thinking aloud in English first and then repeating in Chinese (L2 --> L1) and 4. thinking aloud in unidentifiable chunks (Liu 2009: 45). In addition, she conducted cued retrospective interviews.

In accordance with Hirose & Sasaki's (1994) findings obtained from Japanese EFL writers and Wang & Wen's (2002) results obtained from Chinese ESL/EFL writers, Liu (2009) found that the low-proficiency group used their L1 significantly more during the L2 composing process than the high-proficiency group. Furthermore, Liu observed that the low-proficiency group also relied more often on their L1 to reconfirm or monitor ideas expressed in their L2 than the high-proficiency group (Liu 2009: 54) and that the low-proficiency L2 writers translated significantly more at the syntactical level during the L2 composing process than at the semantic level, whereas more proficient L2 writers translated significantly more at the semantic level than at the syntactical level. In other words, low-proficiency L2 writers were more fixed on L1 syntactical structures whereas high-proficiency L2 writers more or less just retrieved concepts via their L1 and then went on composing directly in their L2.

The typical procedure of a low-proficiency L2 writer is reflected by the following statement: "Usually, I use Chinese to generate ideas, and if I like the idea, I will try to translate it into English... If I don't use Chinese to lead the phrase or words, I'll forget about what I want to say in English." (Liu 2009: 68). Liu (2009: 68) explains this observation as follows:

"This quote suggests that the L2 operation consumes too much cognitive energy and produces too much mental load for the unskilled writers to conceive of semantic formulations as well as to organize them with syntactic structures for textual production. Therefore, unskilled writers tend to rely on L1 to generate and form ideas in words and phrases. Once the idea has been well formulated semantically and has been represented by L1 syntactic structures, unskilled L2 writers may finally translate the L1 idea into L2 with L2 syntax. In other words, the unskilled L2 writers use L1 to take care of as many cognitive subprocesses as possible to reduce their mental loads. As a result, the L1-L2 code translation may take place at the level close to the textual output, i.e., the syntactic level. Since most of the semantic-level concerns have been taken care of by L1, unskilled L2 writers may primarily pay attention to the use of L2 for the syntactic and lower level activities, such as orthography, grammar, equivalent lexical choices, and local changes. In a nutshell, skilled L2 writers tend to have more semantic transformation, whereas unskilled L2 writers tend to have more syntactic translation."

Liu (2009: 69) also observed that skilled L2 writers may resort to the strategies of unskilled writers whenever they encounter difficulties, and that unskilled writers make use of the strategies of skilled writers when they are capable of doing so. The participants of the high-proficiency group mainly used their L1 for higher-order processes such as planning, for controlling the incoming information and editing the written text whereas the intended meaning was expressed directly in the L2 (Liu 2009: 58 f.).

Wang & Wen (2002) also analyzed L1 and L2 use in different subprocesses of writing by means of think-aloud protocols of 16 Chinese EFL students. They differentiated between process controlling, idea organizing, idea generation, task examining and text generation. For each subprocess they determined the ratio of the words in their participants' think-aloud that were uttered in connection with this subprocess in each language and the entire number of words uttered in connection with this subprocess in both languages. In process controlling processes, L1 use dominated with on average 81.5%. For idea organization, their participants used their L1 to an extent of on average 70%, and for idea generation, to an extent of on average 61.5%. Task examination was carried out in the L1 to an extent of on average only 21%, and text generation, the most language-close process, to an extent of on average only 13.5% (Wang/Wen 2002: 234). In line with Liu's findings, Wang & Wen also found that the language of text generation depends on the writers' L2 proficiency: "less proficient writers construct sentences through L1-to-L2 translation, while proficient writers generate text directly in L2" (Wang/Wen 2002: 240). In the other subprocesses examined, the decline in the use of the L1 that could be observed with increasing L2 proficiency was less salient among their participants (Wang/Wen 2002: 241). With regard to these subprocesses, however, the question remains to be answered whether L1 use in these subprocesses declines to a more considerable extent as well once the participants have exceeded a certain L2 proficiency threshold level (Wang/Wen 2002: 241).

In order to get more insight into the occurrence of translation in L2 composition, its positive and negative effects on the composition subprocesses and final L2 text quality and thus the role or desirability of translation subprocesses in L2 text composition and multiliteracies instruction, we need investigations which, apart from L2 language proficiency, also take other variables into account such as, for example, the type of bilinguality, composition competence, L1 language proficiency, the type of cognitive operations in which translation is used, the language in which knowledge required for completing the writing assignment has been acquired or is provided, the language of the writing prompt and translation competence (cf. also Hirose/Sasaki 1994: 220).

[Research question:] In the present study, the impact of translation competence on the success with which a writer's L1 is used in L2 composition will be investigated. It is hypothesized that the less translation competence L2 writers have acquired, the more prone they will be to interference from the L1 due to fixedness on the L1 text surface structure and a lack of flexibility involving departure from surface-level expressions in favour of more language-distant representations. Writers with limited translation competence can thus be assumed to have more linguistically-determined or L1 language-related mental representations which may be in the way of finding idiomatic L2 expressions (Mandelblit 1994; Bayer-Hohenwarter 2012; Göpferich 2013). Highly proficient translators, on the other hand, can be assumed to generate mental representations of what has to be verbalised in the target text that are similar to the mental representations that writers have when composing in their L1.

Experimental design

Two 6th-semester bachelor students of English and two 6th-semester bachelor students of intercultural communication will be required to compose a 300-words travel report of their last journey abroad in their L2 English. No time pressure will be imposed on them. During the composition process, the participants will be requested to think aloud in the language of their choice.

Methods of analysis

The think-aloud will be transcribed. Following the classification introduced by Wang & Wen (2002), the segments of text generation will be identified in the transcripts. For those segments which were originally generated in the L1, the quality of the resulting L2 equivalents will be determined with a focus on interference from the L1. For both the students of English and of Translation Studies the percentage of text generation (counted in words in the think-aloud protocols) that occurred in the L1 in relation to the overall text generation will be determined. Subsequently, the target-text segments that resulted from L1-L2 translation will be analysed for phenomena of L1 interference for both groups of participants.

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