

Searching for words: One strategic use of the mother tongue by advanced Spanish EFL writers

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Abstract

Studies of cognitive processes in SL writing have paid attention to the strategies that writers use to tackle problems in composing. In text-generation, finding lexical items in the L2 to express their meanings is one of the most crucial problems writers have to face, for reasons related to the availability and accessibility of relevant linguistic knowledge. However, L2 writers have a resource at their disposal: their mother tongue. Our study used think-aloud (TA) protocols to explore the strategic use of the L1 by a group of seven advanced Spanish learners of EFL engaged in solving lexical problems in two tasks: a narrative and an argumentative essay. We analysed the effect of task difficulty on the number and type (compensatory/upgrading) of lexical problems these writers tackled using their mother tongue and attempted to categorise the specific purposes for which the L1 was used. Our results indicate that the cognitive difficulty of the task plays a role in determining the number of lexical searches (LSs) undertaken and the type of search in which the writer uses the L1. The amount of L1 use is also affected by task. These findings will be interpreted from a number of perspectives including individual differences and theories of cognitive task complexity, multicompetence, and the language learning potential of L2 writing.

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Introduction

In the last two decades or so there have been many studies that bear on the use of the mother tongue in second language writing (Akyel, 1994; Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Cumming, 1990; Friedlander, 1990; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Lay, 1982, 1988; Qi, 1998; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Smith, 1994; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Whalen & Ménard, 1995; Wolfersberger, 2003; Woodall, 2002). These studies have shown that the L1 is used during L2 writing for a variety of purposes which include generating ideas (Akyel, 1994; Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Friedlander, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1988; Qi, 1998; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003; Woodall, 2002), planning the organization of texts (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1988; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Woodall, 2002), evaluating the text produced (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1988; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003), process-controlling (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1988; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002;

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Wolfersberger, 2003), backtracking either to generate more text or, alternatively, to check back on the success of the match between expression and intended meaning (Cumming, 1990; Manchón, Roca de Larios, & Murphy, 2000; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003), or solving linguistic problems while formulating text (Cumming, 1989; Lay, 1982; Qi, 1998; Smith, 1994; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Whalen & Ménard, 1995; Woodall, 2002).

In formulating their texts, L2 writers are frequently beset by language problems, many of which are lexical in nature. While some studies have looked, albeit tangentially, at the role played by the L1 in accessing and retrieving lexical items in L2 writing (Cumming, 1989, 1990; Qi, 1998; Smith, 1994; Wang, 2003; Wolfersberger, 2003) and a few have documented the different types of lexical problems L2 writers have to face (Roca de Larios, Manchón, & Murphy, 1996), not much research has been undertaken to analyze specifically how L2 writers switch to their L1 when searching for appropriate lexical items in order to produce their written texts. Nor is it clear how these switches may vary as a function of the task type in hand. To address these issues, this study explored the strategic use that a group of Spanish university graduates made of their mother tongue when asked to produce argumentative and narrative essays in English, the language of their degree course. Using data from think-aloud (TA) protocols, we aimed to uncover the effect of task variation on the number and type of lexical problems these writers tackled when formulating their texts and attempted to ascertain the role the L1 played in solving them with the ultimate goal of broadening knowledge of L2 formulation processes.

Previous studies

In the best known models of composing—whether in L1 or in L2—it is posited that three main processes are responsible for the construction of texts: planning, formulation, and revision (cf. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1980, 1981; Hayes, 1996; Kellogg, 1996; Zimmermann, 2000). A fundamental feature of all three macro writing processes is the need to access and choose the necessary lexical items for the writer's intended meaning to be expressed in language and for the task demands to be fulfilled. When planning a text or a part of it, writers have to draw on, among other things, their knowledge of the topic, which is developed through the activation of lexical access and retrieval processes concurrent with the generation of ideas. It is precisely in this generation process that the L1 has been found to be mostly used (Akyel, 1994; Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Friedlander, 1990; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1988; Qi, 1998; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003; Woodall, 2002), as it seems to give faster access to the ideas stored in long term memory, producing richer associations between them. This seems to be particularly so if the content knowledge has been experienced in the L1 in the first place (Friedlander, 1990; Lay, 1988).

The complex interplay of reading and writing through which writers re-create in their minds a representation of their written texts in order to revise them also involves a great deal of lexical access and retrieval. In fact, research suggests that L2 writers' main concerns during the revision process tend to be lexical in nature, as attested, for example, by Porte (1996, 1997), who found that his student writers were mainly concerned with vocabulary when revising their compositions. In Hall's (1990) study, 59% of the informants' revisions in their L2 tasks centred on single words, and Whalen and Ménard (1995) also reported that their informants revised most at word level, while Stevenson, Schoonen, and De Gloppe's (2006) participants made more vocabulary revisions in the L2 than in the L1. As in the case of planning, one major aid in these cases is the mother tongue, which has been found to help writers produce evaluations (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Lay, 1988; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003), make metacomments leading to revisions (Wang, 2003), or check back on the success of the match between expression and intended meaning (Cumming, 1990; Manchón et al., 2000; Wang, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002; Wolfersberger, 2003). Backtracking, in particular, was the main focus of research by Manchón et al. (2000), who suggested in that study that the choice of language might depend on individual writer factors rather than on the writing task since those writers who generated text directly into the L2 also backtracked via the L2, while those who produced their L2 texts via the L1 and then translated it tended to carry out their reviewing through the L1, too. Moreover, these different types of behavior involved different degrees of sophistication, which seems to indicate that backtracking can be strategically deployed.²

² However, one should be cautious about the generalizability of these findings given that there were only three informants and they had a similar level of L2 proficiency.

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