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A Comparison of the Cognitive Processes Involved in L2 Learners' Writing Process when They are Composing in English and in Their L1

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Abstract

This research investigates whether advanced-level language learners use similar cognitive strategies when they are composing a paragraph in their L2 (English) and L1 (Turkish). More specifically, the cognitive processes under investigation were grouped under two categories: Planning and Content Generation, and the investigation was designed to observe if there was a tendency to use any of these categories more than the other one while composing in a particular language. A mixed method was used to investigate the issue. Qualitative data was collected through think-aloud protocols during the participants' written composition process, and quantitative data was obtained by calculating the indicators of planning and content generating strategies on the coded data. Chi-square tests were used to see whether the difference between the strategies used in the composing process for two languages was statistically significant. The results showed no statistically significant difference ($p=.03$), which suggested that the participants were making use of similar cognitive strategies when they were writing a paragraph in their L1 and L2. This leads to a further suggestion that instruction in written composition in one language might affect the composition process in another language.

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Keywords: Writing; think-aloud; planning; content-generating; knowledge telling; knowledge transforming; L2 writing; cognitive processes

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1. Introduction

After the process approach in writing declared dominance over the product approach, any factor contributing to the composing process became a potential focus of investigation (Raimes, 1998; Badger & White, 2000). At cognition level, the writing process has been investigated mainly in L1 writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Raimes, 1987; Zamel, 1987; Odell, 1993; Levi & Ransdell, 1995; Deane P. et al. 2008), and in a smaller number of studies the cognitive processes involved in L1 writing was compared to those of L2 writing (Silva, 1993; Matsumoto, 1995; Beare, 2000). However, these studies remained inconclusive in their findings. While Silva (1993), and Beare (2000) suggested some differences in the way L1 writing and L2 writing is planned (L1 being Spanish and L2 being English), Matsumoto (1995) concluded that the processes are exactly the same in two languages (L1 being Japanese and L2 being English). This might suggest that the results would vary in line with the writers' L1 and L2.

These afore-mentioned studies which investigated L1 writing were all designed on the basis of the Cognitive Development Theory, and either developed or built upon different models for written composition. Different from Flower and Hayes' (1981) single-process model which was not considered to be sufficient enough in explaining the difference between the novice and the skilled writers, Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) two process model of writing that was composed of *knowledge telling* and *knowledge transforming* was able to make this distinction. This was because the *knowledge telling model* was a direct task execution model which did not employ any complexity or problem-solving activity on the writer's part; whereas, in *knowledge transforming model*, the writer was in a constant problem solving process which required continuous content generation and planning. To Bereiter and Scardamalia, the distinction between these two processes depend on the degree of expertise and knowledge of the author. The knowledgeable author is expected to use the long-term memory to directly transfer the already existing ideas related to the rhetorical goal into writing. The less knowledgeable author who lack expertise, on the other hand, falls into a stream of conflicts between the already existing ideas and the rhetorical goal. As a result of those conflicts, new ideas are generated (knowledge transforming). The newly generated ideas could be about content generation (what to write) or rhetorical planning (how to write) (See Fig.1). Based on this written composition model, the current study investigates how the presumably non-expert writers cognitively deal with the content generation and rhetorical planning processes within the knowledge transforming model which will set a framework to compare the cognitive processes of L1 and L2 writers. The reason behind this choice was the model's clear reflection of the recursive nature of writing which was non-existent in the earlier models. Gould (1980, p.112) highlights the importance of including recursiveness in explaining the writing process by stating that "Writers plan, then generate, replan, regenerate". Although Bereiter and Scardamalia's model was criticized due to not shedding light to the reasons behind the decisions of planning and content generating, this was not considered to be a limitation when the purpose of this current study was concerned.

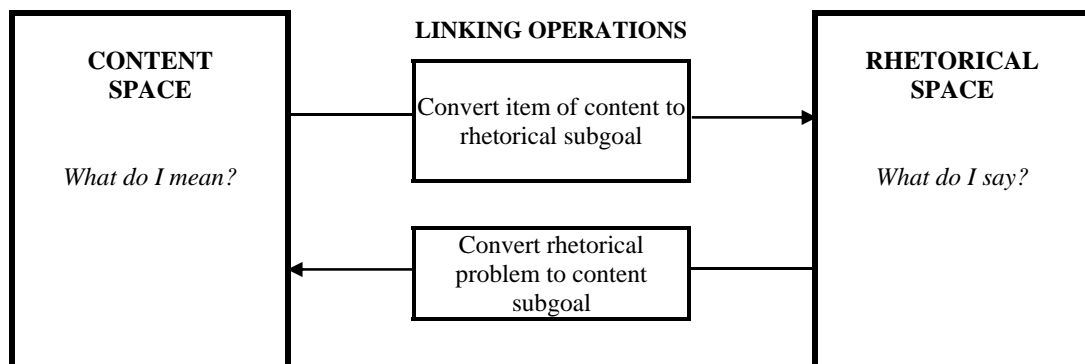


Fig. 1. Bereiter & Scardamalia's (1987) Knowledge Transforming Model

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