

## **Transferability of Writing Through Languages: A Study of English and Persian**

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In this study the English and Farsi written products of 100 EFL subjects were analyzed in order to determine whether the literacy skill of writing is transferable from L1 to L2 and if the level of L2 proficiency is a determining factor in this transferability. The participants were 100 EFL junior students of Kurdistan University of Sanandaj and Razi University of Kermanshah in Iran. The subjects, mainly native speakers of the Kurdish language, were asked to work on two written tasks, one in English and the other in Persian, the formal language of education in Iran. A standard test of TOEFL was also administered to the subjects to determine the participants' level of proficiency. The written tasks were scored according to the criteria in Jacobs, Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel and Hughey (1981). After some correlational analyses, independent sample t-tests and analyses of variance were utilized. Results indicated that L2 proficiency is a determining factor for the transfer of literacy skills.

Writing is not a natural activity. All physically and mentally sound people learn to speak a language, but all people have to be taught how to write a language. This is an important difference between spoken and written forms of a language.

As one of the four language skills, writing has traditionally occupied a place in most English syllabi. However, arguments are sometimes put forward for not teaching writing to students, because it is claimed that a command of spoken language and reading is more important. Even so, because of the importance of English as an international language, more and more people need to write English for occupational and academic purposes. Thus, writing has an equal role compared with the other language skills.

In recent years, a significant body of research has been carried out within the framework of contrastive writing studies, which is called *contrastive rhetoric*. Contrastive rhetoric was introduced by the American applied linguist Robert Kaplan in 1966 to demonstrate how a person's first language and culture influence his or her writing in a second language or culture. According to the proponents of contrastive rhetoric, written English is characterized by a concise, subordinated, and linear style, which may be strange to some ESL/EFL learners. For these students, linguistic and cultural patterns of their mother tongue may transfer into their writing not only at the word and sentence level but also at the discourse level.

However, research on writing in a second language (L2) has been neglected in many parts of the world including Iran, and now the need to have a better understanding of L2 writing is felt. The present study was carried out in the *comparison and contrast* mode of writing and the following null hypotheses were proposed:

H1. Those who are proficient in writing in a first language (L1) in the genre of comparison and contrast are not necessarily proficient in L2 writing.

H2. The level of L2 proficiency of Iranian EFL students (advanced vs. intermediate vs. low-intermediate) does not play a significant role in the L2 manifestation of writing ability.

### Review of the Related Literature

The term *rhetoric* is derived from the Greek word *rhetor*, meaning “speaker in the assembly.” Robert Kaplan, in his self-initiated study of international students’ writing in English concerning contrastive rhetoric, demonstrated how a person’s first language and culture influence his or her writing in a second language or culture (Kaplan, 1966). According to the proponents of contrastive rhetoric (CR), written English is characterized by a concise, subordinated, and linear style, which may be strange to some ESL/EFL students (Morgan, 2000). For these students, linguistic and cultural patterns of their mother tongue may transfer into their writing not only at the word and sentence level but also at the discourse level. However, modern views of contrastive rhetoric deal with the whole study of creative discourse in both speech and writing.

#### *The Theoretical Foundation for Contrastive Rhetoric*

It is widely accepted that CR is anchored in linguistic relativity to the mild version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Hostler, 1987; Kaplan, 1988). This hypothesis was introduced by Benjamin Lee Whorf, under the guidance of Edward Sapir. One of Whorf’s major studies in linguistics was an analysis of how people’s mental images of the world around them are affected by language. As a fire insurance examiner, he had seen how people carelessly smoke near empty gasoline drums and cause fires because they have a mental image that the drums are empty, although the gasoline fumes can cause them to explode. Whorf’s ideas of linguistic relativity did not emerge in a full-fledged form until he began to analyze the Hopi Indian language, when he began to appreciate that the notion of linguistic relativity could be developed by recognizing the differences not only in lexicon but also in grammatical structure. Later he appeared to believe that the content of thought influences the process of thought, or that differing content produces differing species of process so that generalizing about process is impossible without the content being taken into account. He believed that differences in thought content, and their corresponding effects on the thought process and behavior in general, would be revealed by comparison of different language structures (Carrel, 1982).

#### *Approaches to Cross-Cultural Writing*

There are three main approaches in cross-cultural writing analysis:

1. Examination of L1 text: According to Leki (1991), the dominant line of inquiry in contrastive rhetoric has been to look at discourse in L1 and compare it with L2 (English).

2. Examination of L1/L2 writing: The same individuals produce written texts in their L1 and L2. The researchers try to detect systematic textual differences in the learners' written English style and that of the native speakers, and to determine the transfer of writing abilities across cultures.
3. Examination of ESL/NES writing: The writing of ESL/EFL writers are compared with the writing performance of the native English speakers.

### *Transferability of Writing Ability*

Is second or foreign language writing related to first language composition? Are they similar or different? Are good writers in the first language also good writers in a second or foreign language (Kamimura, 1996)? Definitive answers to these questions have not been obtained, but there are two main trends in this regard. The first acknowledges the positive effects of first language writing on second language writing. Edelsky (1982) investigated bilingual children's composing processes in first (Spanish) and second language (English) composition and found some evidence of transfer of both explicit and implicit knowledge about first language writing to second language writing. Cumming (1982) investigated how first language writing expertise and second language proficiency are related. His finding was that writing expertise was the major factor which affected the writer's second language composing process, with second language proficiency acting as an additive factor. Thus, he came to the general conclusion that writing expertise seems to be a specially-developed intelligence with unique cognitive characteristics that can be applied across languages. From his perspective, writing ability is a central cognitive ability and in order to write in a second language, people only need to gain proficiency over syntactic and lexical aspects of the second language.

Odlin (1989) believed that individuals with more developed L1 literacy skills perform better in second language writing. Some studies show that second language writers employ their L1 to get a strong impression and association of ideas and produce better quality and more detailed texts (Lay, 1982, as cited in Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992).

The second trend in research on L2 writing disagrees with the notion of writing as a central cognitive ability. This trend questions the validity of the assumption that L1 and L2 writing are of a similar nature. Silva (1990) clearly states that "L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different in important ways from L1 writing" (p. 669). He claims that there are very distinct differences between L1 and L2 writing with regard to both composing processes and features of written texts. From the viewpoint of CR, language and writing are cultural phenomenon and, therefore, each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it which makes one's L1 writing different and distinct from his/her L2 writing (Connor, 1996; Kaplan, 1966).

## Methods

### *Participants*

The participants of this study were 100 junior students, studying English in Kurdistan University of Sanandaj and Razi University of Kermanshah in the west of Iran in 2007. A limited number of these participants were native speakers of the Kurdish language and the remaining were Farsi native speakers. These students had passed at least two composition courses in English.

### *Methodology*

In this study, materials consisted of two different writings written by the participants, one in Persian and one in English, designed to assess the general writing ability of the English major participants. The topics of the written products for English and Persian were not the same, but each language had the same topic of composition for all the participants. A standard test of English proficiency (TOEFL 2004) was administered to the participants to assess their proficiency.

### *Scoring*

To minimize subjectivity in the evaluation of compositions and to maximize inter-rater reliability, each of the Farsi and English compositions was scored by three raters and a mean score of these raters was regarded as the main score for each subject.

In order to have a specific criterion for assessing compositions, the ESL composition profile by Jacobs et al. (1981) was employed for scoring the English compositions, and due to lack of any reliable criterion for scoring Farsi compositions, this profile was translated into Farsi and used to score compositions.

### *Data Analysis*

A number of correctional analyses were utilized to compute the inter-rater reliability for all groups of English and Farsi composition raters. The correlations between English proficiency and English and Farsi compositions of advanced, intermediate, and low-intermediate students were computed.

The scores were also analyzed using some independent sample t-tests to compare the mean scores of English and Farsi compositions for advanced and intermediate proficiency levels. Finally, in order to determine whether L2 proficiency level (advanced vs. intermediate vs. low-intermediate) has any effect on the quality of the written products of EFL subjects, an analysis of variance was calculated.

The significance level for all statistical decisions was set at 0.05, and the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software was used to perform all computations.

Table 1.  
*Correlation Matrix for English Composition Raters*

	ER 1	ER 2	ER 3
ER 1	1.000	0.934*	0.916*
ER 2	0.934*	1.000	0.926**
ER 3	0.916*	0.926**	1.000

*Note.* N = 100; (ER 1 = English Rater 1; ER 2 = English Rater 2; .....)  
\* and \*\* indicate respective significance at .05 and .001.

Table 2.  
*Correlation Matrix for Farsi Composition Raters*

	FR 1	FR 2	FR 3
FR 1	1.000	0.815**	0.615*
FR 2	0.815**	1.000	0.587*
FR 3	0.615*	0.587*	1.000

*Note.* N = 100; (FR 1 = Farsi Rater 1; FR 2 = Farsi Rater 2; FR 3 = Farsi Rater 3)  
\* and \*\* indicate respective significance at .05 and .001.

## Results

### *Transferability of Writing from L1 to L2*

As the first step, the inter-rater reliabilities, that is the degrees of correlation or togetherness between the scores assigned by English and Farsi raters for the general writing ability of the participants in the comparison and contrast genre of writing, were computed. This is very important because according to Brown (1991), "The results of a study can be no more reliable than the measures upon which it is based" (p. 592). The correlations between English and Farsi composition raters are reported in Tables 1 and 2.

As can be observed from Tables 1 and 2, the correlations between English raters are higher than between Farsi raters. This can be attributed to the fact that the criterion used to rate the compositions was originally English but was translated into Farsi. Consequently, English raters may have been able to apply the criterion better than Farsi raters.

The second correctional analysis examined the degree of correlation between writing ability in English and Farsi, and English proficiency for the participants.

As can be observed from Table 3, all correlations are seen to be significant at 0.01 and 0.05 levels when computed for all proficiency levels. A point which is worth mentioning is the very high correlation that exists between L2 proficiency and English writing. This can mean that being more proficient results in better written products in English and being less proficient results in worse written products in English.

Table 3.

*Correlation Matrix for English and Farsi Writing and TOEFL*

	ENC	FC	L2P
ENC	1.000	0.529*	0.962**
FC	0.529*	1.000	0.495*
L2P	0.962**	0.495*	1.000

Note. N = 100; (ENC = English composition; FC = Farsi Composition; L2P = L2 proficiency)

\* and \*\* indicate respective significance at .05 and .001.

Table 4.

*Correlation Matrix for English and Farsi Composition and L2 Proficiency for Advanced and Intermediate Participants*

	ENC	FC	L2P
ENC	1.000	0.559*	0.938**
FC	0.559*	1.000	0.519*
L2P	0.938**	0.519**	1.000

Note. N = 78.

\* and \*\* indicate respective significance at .05 and .001.

To determine the correlation between English and Farsi written products and English proficiency for the advanced and intermediate participants together, another correctional analysis was performed. The results can be seen in Table 4.

All correlations were significant at 0.01 and 0.05 levels. The correlation between L2 proficiency and English composition for the advanced and intermediate levels is very high again, but is lower compared with Table 3. This is because the low-intermediate group, which had lower scores in both L2 proficiency and English composition, was excluded. English and Farsi compositions were seen to be significantly correlated at the 0.05 level. This amount of correlation may be due to the fact that the number of more proficient participants was much higher than the number of less proficient or low-intermediate groups.

To determine the degree of correlation between English and Farsi writing and L2 proficiency for each of the advanced and intermediate groups separately, two correctional analyses were performed. The results appear in Tables 5 and 6.

As can be observed from Table 5, the relatively high correlation of 0.518 between English composition and Farsi composition which is significant at the 0.01 level of significance for advanced participants compared with much lower correlation of 0.274 (significant at the 0.05 level). This can mean that the degree of language proficiency is the most important factor for the transfer of literacy skills across languages, and that advanced participants can write compositions in L2 as well as in their L1. The low degree of correlation

Table 5.

*Correlation Matrix for English and Farsi Writing Ability for Advanced Participants*

	ENC	FC	L2P
ENC	1.000	0.518**	0.654**
FC	0.518**	1.000	0.406*
L2P	0.654**	0.406*	1.000

Note. N = 24; (ENC = English composition; FC = Farsi composition; L2P = L2 proficiency)

\* and \*\* indicate respective significance at .05 and .001.

Table 6.

*Correlation Matrix for English and Farsi Writing Ability for Intermediate Participants*

	ENC	FC	L2P
ENC	1.000	0.274*	0.853**
FC	0.274*	1.000	0.169
L2P	0.853**	0.169	1.000

Note. N = 54

\* and \*\* indicate respective significance at .05 and .001.

for intermediate participants can be interpreted that being intermediate, one cannot write a composition as well as he/she can in his/her first language.

Another piece of evidence for this is the negative correlation of -0.259 between writing in L1 and L2 for the low-intermediate participants, which can be seen in Table 7.

Another point which can be understood from Table 7 is the negative correlation of -0.187 between L2P and Farsi composition. This can be interpreted as natural, because the participants' scores in Farsi composition were high, but their scores in language proficiency test were low.

The high correlation of 0.808, which is significant at 0.01 level, indicates that as participants' scores in L2 proficiency were low, their scores in English composition, which were closely related to their L2 proficiency level, were also low.

In order to determine whether the two group means of language proficiency, advanced versus intermediate (81.88 vs. 57.07) writing English compositions, are statistically different or not, an independent sample t-test was calculated. But before this calculation, it was necessary to determine whether the two groups' variances are equal or not. This is necessary because equality or non-equality of variances determines the method of calculating an independent sample t-test. Therefore, to determine the equality or non-equality of variances, an F-test was computed. By comparing the amount of F observed and F critical, it was observed that F critical was lower than F observed. Thus at the 0.05 significance level, the assumption of equality of variances is rejected. With the assumption of non-equality of

Table 7.

*Correlation Matrix for English and Farsi Compositions for Low-Intermediate Participants*

	ENC	FC	L2P
ENC	1.000	- 0.259	0.808**
FC	- 0.259	1.000	- 0.187
L2P	0.808**	- 0.187	1.000

Note. N = 22

\* and \*\* indicate respective significance at .05 and .001.

Table 8.

*Writing Ability Independent Sample t-Test to Compare Advanced and Intermediate L2 Level*

ENC	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		Sig.				
	F-cr	F-ob		t-ob	df	t-cr	Sig.
Equal Variances Assumed	1.72	7.005	0.012	11.439	76	3.19	0.000
Equal Variances not Assumed				13.574	67.171	3.2	0.000

variances, the amount of T observed was 13.574 with 67.171 degrees of freedom. Its relative significant level was seen to be 0.000. Therefore, the difference between the two group means at the significant level of 0.001 is significant, as shown in Table 8.

Another independent sample t-test was calculated to determine whether the group means of the two levels of language proficiency, advanced versus intermediate (80.68 vs. 70.62), for Farsi composition are statistically different or not. Again it was necessary to determine whether the two groups' variances are equal or not. As was mentioned before, this is necessary because equality or non-equality of variances determines the method of calculating an independent sample t-test. Therefore, to determine the equality or non-equality of variances, an F-test was computed. By comparing the amount of F observed and F critical, it was observed that F critical was higher than F observed. Thus at the 0.05 significance level, the assumption of equality of variances is not rejected and therefore equal variances for interpretation is taken into consideration. The results appear in Table 9.

Considering the assumption of equality of variances, the t-observed amount was 4.922 and its relative degree of freedom was seen to be 76. The relative significance level was observed to be 0.000. Therefore, the mean difference of the two groups was seen to be significant at the significance level of 0.001. It can be interpreted that writing ability, which was high in Farsi for advanced level of proficiency, can be transferred to L2 if the participants have an acceptable degree of proficiency. The same is true for intermediate levels.

Table 9.

*Independent Sample t-Test to Compare Advanced and Intermediate L2 Proficiency Levels, Writing Farsi Compositions*

FC	Levene' s Test for Equality of Variances		Sig.	t-Test for Equality of Means			
	F- cr	F-ob		t-ob	df	t-cr	Sig.
Equal Variances Assumed	1.72	0.138	0.712	4.922	76	3.19	0.000
Equal Variances not Assumed				4.846	43.243	3.3	0.000

Table 10.

*Analysis of Variance for Equality of Means at Three Levels of L2 Proficiency for English Compositions*

	Sum of Square	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	25148.907	2	12574.454	182.049	0.000
Within Groups	6699.975	97	69.072		
Total	31848.882	99			

Note. N = 100

In order to determine whether language proficiency has any effect on English composition, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated for different levels of proficiency (low-intermediate, intermediate, advanced). In this test, L2 proficiency was the independent variable which had three levels: advanced, intermediate, and low-intermediate, and the sets of scores obtained on English compositions served as a dependent variable. Table 10 indicates the results.

As can be seen, the difference between group means is statistically significant at the significance level of 0.01. Thus, it can be concluded that L2 proficiency is a determining factor in writing composition in L2 and the means of the three groups of proficiency levels are statistically different.

### Conclusions

Contrastive writing served as the main focus of this study. The results indicated that, in the comparison and contrast mode of writing, advanced and intermediate participants could transfer their writing abilities from L1 to L2. The most important result was the near-

complete transfer of writing skill of advanced participants and lack of such transfer in the case of the low-intermediate participants. A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that L2 proficiency is a determining factor for this kind of transfer, and the evidence for this was transferability of writing for more proficient participants and lack of transferability for less proficient participants.

There are some logical follow-up questions from the present study, which can be the basis of further research:

1. The design of this study could be used to explore other modes of discourse (i.e. description, cause and effect, etc.).
2. The design of this study was product-oriented and no studies have been done on a process orientation of writing. Any study in this field is valuable.

A pedagogical implication is that the results of the present study can be useful for teachers of English as a second or foreign language, especially those who are teaching composition courses, in that they may be aware of the point that transfer of literacy skills from L1 to L2 is possible if the students have a good command of English.

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