

## Investigating Translanguaging Practices and Attitudes of International Students in Higher Education at an American University

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### Abstract

Using all linguistic repertoires is an advantage for bilinguals. Students have different attitudes towards using their first language (L1) in a second language (L2) instructional setting. This explanatory sequential mixed-methods research paper investigated the students' perception with regards to the use of their L1 to facilitate their writing in the L2 (English) and examine its influence on the quality of their writing. For this study, the participants were seven learners in tertiary level education from different social sciences majors who voluntarily agreed to participate in the survey and the semi structured interviews. The researcher analyzed seven writing samples collected from the participants. The findings of this study indicate that most participants believe the use of first language has a negative impact on the second language (English) improvement. However, four of the participants who stated that they usually use their first language at the composing stage had a different perception; they perceived their L1 as a supportive element to writing in L2. Additionally, this study concluded that the use of the first language is a helpful strategy that helps students generate ideas, understand the content and get deeper in a topic. Furthermore, the use of first language does not weaken the quality of the learners' writing in most cases.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism, first language (L1), second language (L2), translanguaging

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## 1 Introduction

A number of studies of bilingual writing explored and concentrated on interference, the negative transfer from the first language (L1) to the second language (L2). Some researchers reveal that developing a bilingual's writing can be negatively affected by the linguistic characteristics of their L1. Therefore, L2 learners are discouraged by their teachers from using L1 in the writing process to avoid the occurrence of such interference. Instead, teachers require them to “*think in English*” or follow good writing models (Matsuda, Cox, Jordan, & Ortmeier-Hooper, 2010). The research study conducted by Karim and Nassaji (2013) conclude that the use of L1 for the incipient bilingual may not be appropriate or helpful because, at this stage, the use of L1 as a “composing strategy” can cause a negative transfer between the mother language and the target language. Also, literal translation may inevitably occur (Samingan, 2017). Alhawary (2018) states that:

The influence of the learner's first language plays a role in all levels of the acquisition and learning of the L2. This influence is known as “transfer.” The interference of L1 in the process of second language learning is regarded as negative (p.114).

However, other researchers suggested that advanced L2 learners are better users of their L1 sources while preparing, planning, brainstorming and thinking about a topic to write for in L2 (Scott & Fuente, 2008). The use of L1 to write in L2 may include translation which Kobayashi and Rinnert (2013) argue, does not improve L2 writing and impedes writing fluency. Additionally, translation causes syntactical issues and inappropriate word choices (Lai & Chen, 2015). However, translanguaging, allowing students to use their L1 as a first step to write about a topic in L2, will allow them to use their experience, knowledge, and resources in their L1. As a result, they will be able to generate new ideas, so using L1 promotes “cognitive fluency.” As such, this study stems from previous research that claims that translanguaging is helpful for advanced users in their second language. It focuses on exploring the practices of international tertiary level learners who speak English as their second language, their attitudes and usage of translanguaging and its influence on the quality of their writing.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Bilingualism and Bilingual Education

According to Verplaetse and Schmitt (2010), the term bilingual is defined as: “a speaker's ability to use two languages for communication. Due to the complexity of its nature, the study of bilingualism relies on several fields within linguistics, anthropology, psychology, neuroscience, and education” (p. 355). Vidal, Juan-Garau, and Gaya (2008) define a bilingual learner as: “someone who is fully competent in two languages” (p.19). Grosjean (1989) believes that a bilingual can use and switch between the two languages based on the situations (as cited in Bialystok, 2001). Thus, bilingualism means the ability to use two languages spontaneously.

Bilingual education has been evoking a strong debate (Karayayla & Schmid, 2018; Macedo, Dendrinis, & Gounari, 2015). It has existed in the American education landscape in one form or another since 1974, when the federal 10th Circuit Court of Appeals in *Portales v. Serna* allowed bilingual education for children with low proficiency in English (Spolsky, 2017). For example, in traditional bilingual education, students received separated bilingual instruction.

There was a particular part of the day when students were taught in their L1, and the rest of the day, the medium of the instruction, however, was English. The goal from this system was to facilitate the learning process using L1 and then move gradually to the target language (English only) instruction. In fact, the percentage of bilinguals is a large part of the world's population. The number of bilingual students is increasing every day. Therefore, issues specific to bilinguals have been addressed in linguistic research for a long time (Porter, 2017).

## 2.2 Translanguaging

The idea of translanguaging emerges from Welsh literary traditions (García & Lin, 2017). The use of Welsh language decreased in Wales, especially at schools. This is due to the fact, since English is the dominant language, most Welsh speaking students are taught in English. Baker (1995) argues that only a few number of the students are literate in both English and Welsh (as cited in Hornberger, 2003). A number of instructors in Wales recognize the importance of 'transliteracy'. In 1996, the educator, Cen William, coined the translanguaging theory (*trawsieithu* in Welsh), which implies the ability of biliterate students to use both languages effectively to better understand the content and improve both languages (García & Wei, 2014). To illustrate, a teacher may require Welsh students to read in English and write Welsh and vice versa (Baker, 2006). Velasco and García (2014) state that:

The term [translanguaging] stresses the flexible and meaningful actions through which bilinguals select features in their linguistic repertoire in order to communicate appropriately. From this perspective, the language practices being learned by emergent bilinguals are in functional interrelationship with other language practices and form an integrated system (p. 7).

Thus, translanguaging allows the student to have input with a language and produce an output with another language. Baker (2011), who translated the term translanguaging, explains it as: "the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge through the use of two languages" (p. 288). Thus, translanguaging is a strategy that bilinguals use to enhance learning and knowledge by using the sources in both languages. According to translanguaging theory, the bilingual individual does not have two systems of languages. Instead he/she has one complex and dynamic system (García & Wei, 2014).

## 2.3 Translanguaging and Writing

Writers who practice translanguaging try to express themselves and communicate their ideas clearly in a meaningful way (García & Leiva, 2014). Translanguaging makes a connection between the two languages. It gives the bilingual a chance to not only develop the L2, but also develop the L1 (Lust et al., 2016). According to Cummins (1979)'s Interdependence theory, the level of proficiency and competence in L2 is a result of the level of development of L1. Therefore, Cummins's Interdependence Theory influences the translanguaging approach (García & Wei, 2014). Despite the fact that, for bilingual teachers, the term interference is still a concern, Edelsky (1982)'s research on Spanish-speaking children's writing in English revealed that their knowledge in Spanish helped in learning English. He looked at 500 writings from first, second, and third grade at a semi-rural, migrant school. He found that students wrote only in English in spite of using their Spanish sources (García & Wei, 2014). Those children used their own strategy,

connecting what they know in their home language to the target language, to produce a piece of writing.

### 3. Methodology

This research study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed study design (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The first phase involved a short questionnaire (quantitative data) and the second phase utilized semi-structured interviews (qualitative data). The semi-structured interviews were conducted on campus and audio recorded and at a later stage, transcribed verbatim to facilitate thematic coding of the transcribed texts.

#### 3.1 Participants:

The number of participants in this study was seven learners at tertiary level education. These participants were all international learners and were registered at Arkansas Tech University. They studied different majors, such as Emergency Management, Multimedia & Journalism, Psychology and English and were all of the same proficiency level. Participants are from different countries: China, Brazil and Saudi Arabia who, respectively, spoke Chinese (Mandarin), Portuguese and Arabic as their first language.

#### 3.2 Method of Data Collection:

The data collection instruments used in this study were: a custom designed questionnaire, semi-structured interviews as well as samples of writing scripts from the learners. The questionnaire and the interview questions were written in English since it was the second language for all participants. The participants were given the questionnaire that had five close-ended questions. The questionnaire mainly aimed at investigating the frequency of using the first language before beginning the writing process (See Appendix A). Thus, the interviews later examined the learners' attitude towards using their first language at the composing stage and their strategies. Samples of participants' writings were collected to compare the level of influence of the strategies they used on the quality of their writing.

#### 3.3 Method of Data Analysis

The simple statistical analysis method used was conducted to analyze the primary data collected from the questionnaires. All the participants fully completed the questionnaires, which were each checked manually in order to learn the frequency the learners used the first language to prepare for writing in the second language.

## 4.0 Findings and Discussion

### 4.1 Findings from the Questionnaire

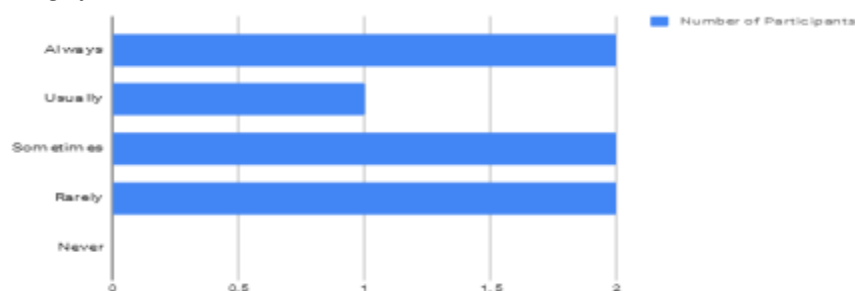


Figure 1. How often do you brainstorm before you start writing?

As can be seen from the figure 1, the number of participants who brainstorm before they start writing is the same in the three frequency markers - always, sometimes, and rarely. In general, the chart indicates that most participants do the brainstorming as a basic step in the writing process.

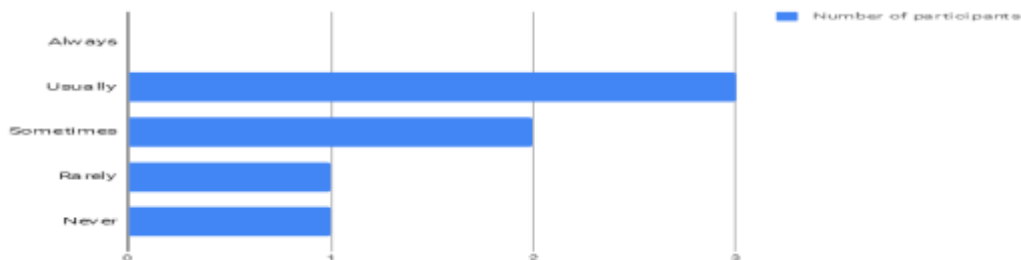


Figure 2. How often do you use your first language while brainstorming?

Figure 2 shows that the majority of the participants routinely use their first language while they are brainstorming; whereas the other two do not use the first language in brainstorming very often.

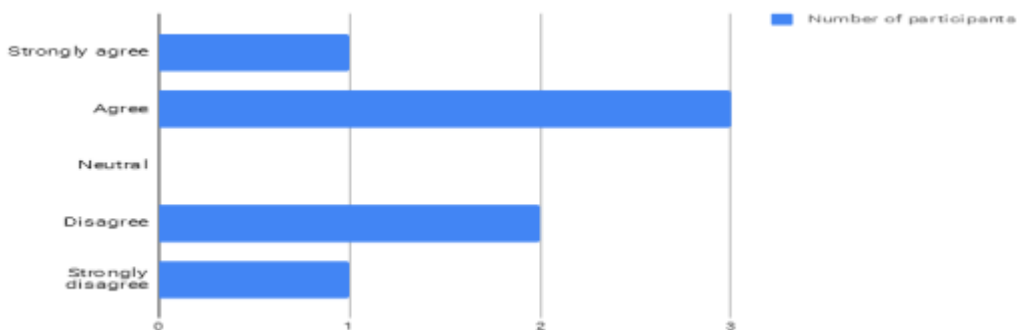


Figure 3. I think using the first language is helpful in planning for writing in the second language.

Figure 3 illustrates the controversy of using the first language and its impact on second language writing. Half of the participants agree with the statement that the first language is helpful in the composing state of writing. On the other hand, the other half of the participants disagree with the statement.

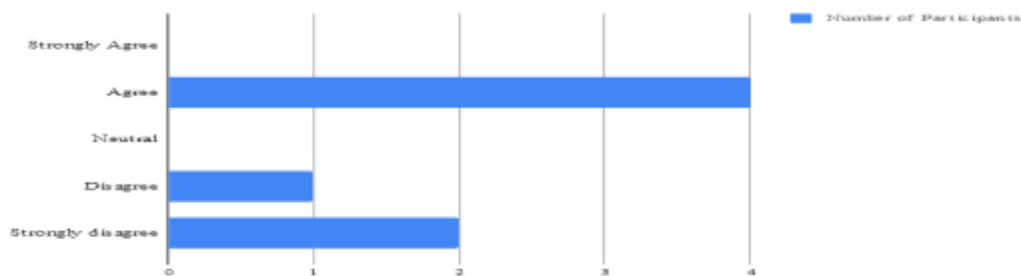


Figure 4. I use the first language in doing Google search about the topic.

Most participants use their first language in carrying out Google research, but two of them do not support the idea of using first language for Google research.

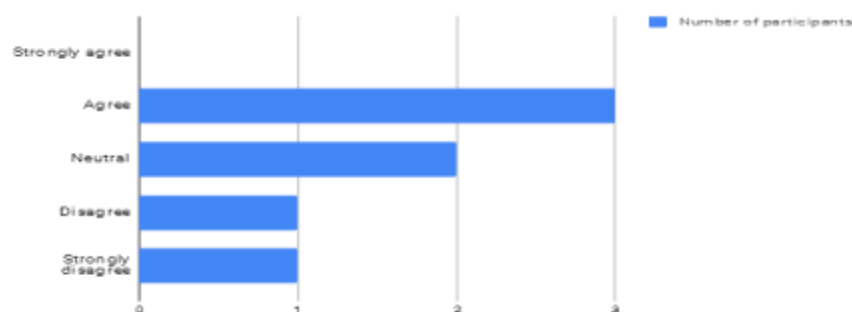


Figure 5. I think using the first language has a negative impact on improving the writing skill.

Also, most of the participants believe that using the first language has a negative effect on writing in the second language.

#### 4.2 Findings from the Interviews

The first question in the interview aimed at investigating the different strategies that students used before they started writing. The thematic data analysis revealed a number of different strategies that the participants used in their L2 writing. For example, a number of learners started with gathering information and looking for sources online. Some of the participants started with brainstorming using their first language. Also, there was one participant who mentioned that he started by creating an outline, writing a rough draft, or asking his classmates. One of the interviewees stated: "I just start writing to put the sentences in order as I go to make sense". The second question in the interview was about the learners' attitude towards using the first language while they are planning to write in the second language or if they read articles in the first language. Participants' responses were varied. Three of the participants believed that it was helpful to use the first language at this stage. For example, one of the participants answered, "I think using my first language when I plan to write any paper or assignment is a very helpful tool to enhance my writing and get deeper in the research...". On the other hand, there were four participants who argued that using the first language is not helpful, and it impedes improving the second language. This is highlighted in one of the participant's account who stated: "I do not think it is helpful as much as you immerse yourself in English the better". Another participant's answer was "I did that one time when I was in the ELI. I was not satisfied with what I wrote." Also, there is a participant who uses the first language only when he does not know the word in English. For the third question in the interview that asked participants about the different strategies they use other than using their first language, most participants responses include reading about the topic in the second language, brainstorming and creating an outline. Two of the participants use their first language every time they write.

#### 4.3 Findings Related to the Writing Sample

After reading the writing samples of the participants, some observations have emerged. In general, since those writings are for advanced English learners, their writings, as graded by their teachers, are in the advanced level, but there are number of minor writing issues in most of their writings, as observed by the researcher and other EFL teacher colleagues. All participants used

the three types of sentences: simple, compound and complex. Simple sentences were the least type used. The level of the complexity of the vocabulary that is used by the participants varies based on the topic they wrote about. However, most participants used high level academic vocabulary in their writings.

There were three participants who used their first language before they wrote this sample. The use of the first language is shown in some areas of their writing, such as using expressions that are commonly used in their first language. For example, "Saudi Arabia is the heart of Arab peoples and the belief of Islam". This first participant used the same expression that has been written and said for a long time in Arabic culture. Also, this participant used the passive voice many times in her writing. The use of the first language in the writing of the second participant was not clear. There is no indication that the first language was used. However, in the writing of the third participant, the use of the first language was obvious in her writing - "we have four of techniques." It is clear that this participant translated her ideas from Arabic to English because it is in the same order as Arabic writing. This example illustrates Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992)'s point of view mentioned earlier, which claims translation can cause syntactical issues. For those participants, the use of L1 did not affect the complexity of the structure of the sentences they wrote. The rest of the four participants did not use the first language and they do not support the use of it. Their writings have some of the minor writing issues that the first group has. Also, the Chinese participant used the passive voice as often as the first Arabic participant did. There are two participants whose writing is very advanced and has no mistakes. They did not sound like second language learners in their writings.

## 5. Discussion of the Findings

It is clear from the percentile and thematic data analyses above that most participants do the brainstorming before they start writing. One of the suggested reasons for carrying out the brainstorming is that all participants are second language (English) learners, so they were enrolled in an English language program before they are enrolled at the university. In these programs, they were taught to brainstorm before they started writing. The importance of brainstorming is usually stressed in most programs. Additionally, the gathered data from the interviews indicated that different strategies, other than brainstorming, which the learners used before they started writing, such as looking at different sources, writing a rough draft, and creating an outline, especially for a long paper. For the second question in the questionnaire, the data frequency data analysis indicated that most participants use their first language to a varying degree. The reason behind using the first language is usually explained in some participants' responses for the second question in the interview. They use the first language because they feel it helps them to generate more ideas. This is supported by the frequency calculations revealed in the third statement in the survey. One of the participants indicated that when she said: "I think using my first language... is a very helpful tool to enhance my writing and get deeper in the research...". For the same reason, they use the first language when they do Google research. They will get more details about the topic associated with their knowledge, so they can produce more ideas and details. That proves the usefulness of using L1 for advanced second language users (Karim & Nassaji, 2013). However, for those who rarely use their first language or do not use it at all, they believe that using the first language will have a negative impact on their second language, and that would impede their improvement in English. That attitude is clearly shown in the last statement in the

questionnaire. Most participants think that the use of their first language would have a negative impact on their second language because most ESL teachers discouraged their students from using their first language and told them the use of the first language would weaken their writing. This was evident in one of the participant's accounts who stated in the interview that: "When I first learned English, I was recommended to not use Arabic as much as possible because it may slow the improvement of my English". Therefore, there are some learners who are concerned that using the first language would affect the improvement they have reached in their second language. However, there is a participant who stated that "I could not stop the use of Arabic totally and my English has improved anyway". She keeps using the first language because it helps her to better understand the content, as she explained: "I use Arabic too while searching for high level academic words for the paper". That is what Nimmrichter and Hornberger (2013) explained about the importance of using L1 to understand the content. On the other hand, there was one participant who used the L1 to write an essay in L2 when she was in the English Language Institution, and the result was weak writing with which she was not satisfied. That is because what she did is a literal translation for the ideas. As a result, there were wrong word choices and incorrect grammatical structure. This is exactly what ESL teachers try to avoid. To avoid the literal translation, they ask their student to think, research and write in English only to minimize the mistakes that result from the interference.

The writing sample of the participants show the quality of the writing for those who use the first language is very similar to the quality of participants who do not use L1. The use of the L1 did not have a negative impact on most of the writings, but there was wrong use of prepositions as a result of the influence of L1. Also, thinking in L1 affects the style of the writing. For example, in Arabic writing, Arabic speakers usually use emotional and figurative language more than in English. One of the participants uses the same style of Arabic in writing in English and uses the word "heart" as a symbol to indicate the importance and the location of Saudi Arabia. In fact, she translated this common thought from Arabic to English, but it was not wrong, and it makes sense in English. Additionally, there was excessive use for the passive voice in the writing of one of the Arab writers who practices translanguaging. This is likely due to the effect of the passive voice in Arabic. In Arabic language, the use of the passive voice shows the eloquence and the academic power of the writer. However, there was the same amount of passive voice usage in the writing of a Chinese student who does not use the L1 to write in L2. That means it can be just the personal style of both students and not necessarily the influence of L1.

### **5.1. Summary of the findings**

Thus, from the data collected, it was evident that the new practice of translanguaging has been used by some students. They transform their knowledge and the sources in their L1 to their L2. As a result, translanguaging allows them to generate more ideas and write about a topic thoroughly. The use of translanguaging shows part of their identities and culture in their writing. The use of L1 does not weaken the writing in most cases; instead, it is a powerful tool that helps participants to improve their writing. Also, the level of the writing of those who do not use L1 is not higher than those who do.



## 6. Conclusion

This research study explored the use of translanguaging and the participants' attitude towards using it at an American University. The study concluded that the use of L1 is beneficial and can help improve the writing of those at a suitable level of English proficiency. Also, the study supports the previous research that claims the use of L1 at an early stage of learning a second language is not appropriate. Moreover, the use of translanguaging can add new features to the English writing style. Finally, it can be said that this research study reveals the support of integrated bilingual education instead of isolating the two languages completely. The latter can be an important factor to consider in the certain contexts, such as the Saudi context, where the students might initially struggle with learning English and the use of translanguaging might help them overcome certain obstacles when learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

## 7. Limitations

Due to the time constraints, this study was done with only seven participants from different higher education programs. Participants are not at the same level of English proficiency, so that makes a difference in the attitude and the use of L1. Also, the collected writing samples are assignments that were already submitted to their professors. Therefore, some editing might have been done to those samples.

## 8. Recommendations for Future Research

Translanguaging in writing is a new strategy that deserves more attention and research to help students use all the knowledge and the linguistic sources they have and to learn how one linguistic repertoire can serve to improve the other one. ESL, as well as EFL teachers should think of applying translanguaging with their students at the appropriate level with caution for literal translation.

### About the Author

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Survey Questions**

- 1- How often do you brainstorm before you start writing?  
Always                      Usually                      Sometimes                      Rarely                      Never
- 2- How often do you use your first language while brainstorming?  
Always                      Usually                      Sometimes                      Rarely                      Never
- 3- I think using the first language is helpful in planning for writing in the second language  
Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Neutral                      Disagree                      Strongly Disagree
- 4- I use the first language in doing Google research about a topic.  
Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Neutral                      Disagree                      Strongly Disagree
- 5- I think using the first language has a negative impact on improving the writing skill.  
Strongly Agree                      Agree                      Neutral                      Disagree                      Strongly Disagree

**APPENDIX B**  
**Interview Questions**

1. How do you often plan for your writing assignment?
2. What do you think of using the first language in the planning stage to write in the second language? When researching, do you use articles in your first language?
3. If you do not use your first language in planning, what strategies do you use?