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EFL Learners' Perspectives on the Use of Vietnamese for Brainstorming in English Writing Classes

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Abstract
In the era of globalization, language contact is inevitable, necessitating guidance on using a learner's native language to support second language acquisition effectively while minimizing drawbacks that could hinder progress. This study aims to investigate how Vietnamese university students perceive the use of their native language during the brainstorming phase of English essay writing classes. To do that, it is necessary to understand what makes second language learners employ their mother tongue in their study and their perception of doing so. The study participants included 42 university students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam who learned English as their major. A survey and in-depth interviews were the research instruments used to analyze their attitudes toward using their first language for idea brainstorming during their writing lessons. The findings showed that English-major students had positive attitudes toward the roles of both Vietnamese and English brainstorming in improving writing performance. However, their Vietnamese use depended on the complexity and difficulties of the topics they had to deal with to support them with necessary ideas. Therefore, the first language could be a supporting method for developing second language essay writing.
Key words: Brainstorming, Native Language, Second Language, English writing, Vietnamese Learners

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Introduction

English has become a global language in the last century. It has opened opportunities for young people to challenge themselves in international environments. That is the reason why English has been a top concern in many countries worldwide nowadays, especially for those who speak English as a foreign language. For example, China has expanded and improved the English program since the mid-1980s, including innovations in textbooks, syllabuses, teachers' self-development and testing systems (Hu, 2003). Similarly, according to Kirkgöz (2014), English is an integral part of social, economic and political life in Turkey because the country is a "*physical and cultural bridge*" between Asia and Europe.

Language transfer occurs when learners use their first language (L1) while learning a second language (L2), often influencing each other's development (Gass, 1997). Specifically, employing the first language is a common strategy among learners of English as a foreign language during second language acquisition. (Lado, 1957) first defined the first language in the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, suggesting it can either facilitate or hinder second language learning success. Consequently, while the first language is often unavoidable in second language classrooms to some extent, its use remains controversial, with extensive research highlighting both its benefits (Cook, 2001) and drawbacks (Turnbull, 2007) in second language learning. The transfer of the first language can occur across all language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—but its role in writing has garnered significant attention, as second language writing is often considered the most challenging skill (Silva, 1992). Despite evidence that students with strong first language writing skills, such as planning and organizing ideas, may transfer these abilities to their second language (Cumming, 1989), a critical gap remains: there is limited understanding of how using the first language during the pre-writing stage, particularly in brainstorming, affects English writing performance among Vietnamese learners (Nguyen, 2015). This lack of clarity poses a problem for educators seeking effective strategies to support English as a foreign language writing, especially in contexts where the first language is frequently used, such as Vietnam, where English is a compulsory subject from primary to tertiary education (MOET, 2018).

Brainstorming is a pre-writing activity which provides learners with essential preparation, including generating, developing, and organizing ideas (Rashtchi & Porkar, 2020). Such planning steps create flows of ideas with related vocabulary, grammatical structures and other linguistic elements for the composing process. However, in specific EFL contexts, learners do not fully perceive the role of brainstorming. Instead of discussing ideas, they spend time chatting, telling jokes or prefer working on their own. In addition, most students may have difficulties generating ideas, which is a significant obstacle to start writing. Therefore, brainstorming in writing classes, individually or in groups, can support them with the necessary flow of information and motivate them to write.

Hence, L1 brainstorming expects to bring certain benefits. Researchers believe that when students activate their L1 background knowledge to generate ideas, they prepare and present the concepts better in L2 (Ismail & Ahsheikh, 2012). L1 knowledge can also act as motivation for L2 writing by allowing learners to think in their language without limitation in vocabulary and structures of the target language, therefore increasing their confidence, especially for L2 low level students. L1 brainstorming is especially beneficial for unfamiliar and complex topics because learners can explore ideas before transferring them into L2.

This research paper aims to investigate the effects of using Vietnamese during the brainstorming stage in English writing lessons for learners of English as a foreign language. The significance of

this study lies in its potential to inform educators about effective strategies for integrating the native language in second language writing instruction, thereby enhancing writing performance and addressing the challenges faced by Vietnamese learners in English essay writing. To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives: (a) to explore the attitudes of Vietnamese English-major students toward using their native language for brainstorming in English writing classes, (b) to identify the factors influencing their use of Vietnamese during the brainstorming process, and (c) to assess the perceived impact of native language brainstorming on their English writing performance. The guiding research question is: How do Vietnamese learners of English perceive the use of Vietnamese for brainstorming in English writing classes?

Literature review

Language transfer

In linguistics, language transfer is the process during which a language is affected by another. Selinker (1983) defined transfer as a cognitive process in language learning. According to him, L1 could positively facilitate the L2 acquisition process; however, L1 might interfere the L2 learning process and therefore might negatively affect L2 learning. The study addressed the benefits and drawbacks of language transfer due to the consideration of the similarities and differences between languages, which shed light on the study of transfer. Similarly, according to Faerch & Kasper (1987), transfer was a communicative process during which L2 learners activated their L1 background knowledge to develop their interlanguage skills. Both studies emphasized transfer as a cognitive process, suggesting further investigation in the field.

The use of L1 in L2 contexts has always been controversial. While some researchers believed that L1 could bring adverse effects on the learning process; others appreciated L1 use because of several significant roles. Firstly, Cook (2001) emphasized the role of bilingualism in language learning, which suggested that the collaboration of L1 and L2 could be more beneficial than in a monolingual context. Hall and Cook (2012) added that the use of the students' first language in L2 classrooms became a social and economic trend due to the "optimal" benefits. Both studies encouraged the integration of native language in teaching and learning for the overall advantages. On the other hand, regarding negative perspectives, the transfer from mother tongue to second language may slow down and prevent the development of L2 acquisition. The claim was particularly true because many languages had more differences than similarities, causing L1-related errors in the target language (Tran et al., 2024). People also believed that in a particular language classroom, the more L1 there was, the less L2 was used (Moafa, 2023). The two studies implied that although the native language was undeniably advantageous, it should be used with caution and under control to reduce errors and provide more L2 exposure.

The way that a language could influence another language may depend on various factors such as the different contexts, the distance between the languages, cultural identity, language proficiency or some psychological issues. In fact, many studies contributed to the literature. Worth being considered, Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008) suggested a conceptual framework of Cross-linguistic Influence (CLI) with five categories of factors, including: (1) linguistic and psycholinguistic factors such as the similarity between languages; (2) cognitive, mental, and developmental factors such as L2 proficiency; (3) age, the language exposure, residence time, language proficiency, and the number and order of acquired languages; (4) factors from the language learning environment which could be formal or natural contexts; and (5) the language use factors depending on social and situational contexts. The model seemed complicated; however,

it suggested promising research on what might cause the use of native language in foreign language learning to evaluate and support language learners.

First language use and Second language writing

Language transfer plays an important role in second language acquisition. For example, a study by Smagul (2024) revealed that teachers at a Kazakhstani secondary school allowed their students to translate from their first language to English, depending on students' English proficiency and class size. Although they prioritized English-only instruction, they believed it was effective to let learners translate from their first language.

Regarding to L2 writing, educators and researchers were concerned about how to help learners develop their writing performance. Ellis (2003) suggested two distinct methods: divergent thinking which welcomed different answers for a question; and convergent thinking which accepted only one possible solution to a problem. Both styles of thinking encouraged writers to be critical in different ways and had specific pros and cons. The study emphasized the idea generation process in the planning stage. On the other hand, some researchers provided clearer guidelines for the writing process including several stages: brainstorming, drafting, peer reviewing, draft revising, teacher submission, teacher feedback, revising and writing up the final first draft (Do, 2023; W. Zhang et al., 2020). The studies approved the process of conducting a writing lesson, including learners' activities before writing, techniques for while-writing and steps to take after finishing writing. During the process, L1 could occur at any stage and benefit L2 writing. As a result, L1 could be a strategy that was worth considering.

Brainstorming and its roles in writing

Brainstorming is one of the most popular activities in the pre-stage to get students involved in and well-prepared for writing. The first definition of brainstorming was by Osborn (1953) as a way to "think up." Many studies in the following century were affected by Osborn's theory. For example, Göğüş (2012) confirmed that brainstorming was a good technique that generated ideas among group members to find the best solutions. The definition seemed to be simple with no guidelines on how to conduct the brainstorming process. Therefore, Alrubaie et al. (2014) argued that brainstorming was a cognitive process with two stages: creative thinking for idea generation and critical thinking for idea evaluation. Adapting some theories, they introduced a brainstorming model including three stages: (1) Problem identification; (2) Idea generation - a phase in creative thinking; and (3) Idea evaluation - the critical thinking phase. In the final phase learners must think to decide whether the ideas are helpful, interesting, not applicable or excluded. As a result, they could have the suitable ideas for their writing.

Brainstorming could bring a lot of benefits to students' writing. For instance, Rao (2007) conducted research with Chinese students and found that the brainstorming process showed positive results on their writing performance. He believed that learners should take many steps to produce a good writing text. Hence, he emphasized the role of process-based learning because it could encourage creative thinking for writing ideas. The study supported the fact that language learners often face lots of obstacles in writing such as the lack of ideas and brainstorming activities might help them overcome those (Abd Karim et al., 2016).

L1 brainstorming in writing

Language transfer generally has specific effects and is vital in improving different aspects of language, especially developing writing skills. According to Cumming (1990), if students already had specific L1 writing skills such as planning, outlining, developing ideas, proofreading, editing, etc., they might have similar abilities in L2 writing. In line with that, Pathey et al. (2009) argued that those who had "*better academic literacy, even in another language, are more likely to acquire the written communication skills they need and succeed in college coursework.*" The two studies explained that in writing, language learners tended to apply L1 to suggest and confirm hypotheses to convey what they wanted to write in L2 (Minh Hung, 2023). By discussing in their native language, learners could simplify their ideas and manage the writing tasks effectively. Therefore, L1 transfer was considered as both a tool and a strategy to develop writing.

Studies particularly focused on the roles of L1 in different stages of L2 writing, especially at the first steps of the process. An experimental study by Tanış et al. (2020) examined the effectiveness of L1 in the pre-writing stage of the writing process. According to these authors, the students who planned in L1 received higher scores in L2 writing. The study also emphasized the role of the warm-up activities before writing, including generating ideas, organizing thoughts and planning for writing. This study was particularly true for L2 low-level students. Therefore, it raised the question of whether the finding applied to other groups of students. To answer the question, Zheng and Drybrough (2023) investigated translanguaging practice in thesis writing by Chinese postgraduate students in England, who had higher level of English proficiency. The findings showed that the students mostly used Chinese to activate their background knowledge, prepare the content and analyze the relationship between the received information. From the two studies, L1 seemed to be beneficial in the planning stage of writing, regardless of L2 proficiency level.

Previous studies

The roles of L1 brainstorming in the writing process include two aspects: the first one refers to brainstorming activities in writing performance, and the second is the use of the first language in the brainstorming process.

Regarding brainstorming, there could be some positive and negative effects on writing. According to an experimental study by Abedianpour and Omidvari (2018), thirty participants who received brainstorming practice got considerable improvement in writing in comparison with thirty other students who did not brainstorm before writing. Therefore, they believed it was a helpful technique in pre-writing. In line with the study, Shirvani and Porkar (2021) observed 16 learners brainstorming in their writing class and interviewed them afterwards. They added that although the students might be confused with different viewpoints, they could learn to be open-minded to generate more ideas, boost their writing motivation and create closed relationship with partners. Similarly, in the Vietnam context, Do (2023) conducted a qualitative study on the role of pre-writing tasks in developing writing performance. He interviewed 3 Vietnamese university students and found that the participants were positive about pre-task activities because they believed their writing quality was enhanced in both content and text organization. In general, the three studies shared the same findings, that brainstorming was a helpful technique supporting the writing process, except for the confusion that brainstorming might cause too many ideas.

Regarding L1 use during the brainstorming process, research has achieved significant findings. Zhang (2018) compared co-constructed English essays of 35 pairs of students using L1 and L2 for discussion and composing. He aimed to investigate the effects of language use on the complexity,

fluency, accuracy, and quality of the essays. The findings indicated that although there was no difference in fluency, accuracy and quality, L1 groups received more positive results in complexity. On the other hand, Gao and Min (2021) conducted an experimental study with 66 university students in China, divided into L1 groups using L1 during pre-writing discussion and an L2 group discussing in L2. The findings showed that L1 planning was more efficient in generating ideas while the other students found L2 discussion challenging to explain themselves due to their low level of L2 proficiency.

In conclusion, studies have focused on the L2 writing procedure in which brainstorming in the pre-writing was particularly concerned. L1 brainstorming was also noticeable because learners seemed to prefer spending time discussing in their mother tongue. This study is therefore significant to contribute to the literature on language transfer.

Methodology

Participants

The research took place at the Faculty of Foreign Languages (FFL), Saigon University (SGU), Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The university is one of the two public research and pedagogical institutions in Ho Chi Minh City that provide educational and training programs in the city. The FFL, where the participants were engaged, offers two majors of training: English Linguistics and English Pedagogy Training. Although the two programs have different career orientations, they include several common language skill modules during the first two academic years, such as English speaking, listening, reading and writing.

The author contacted a class of 42 EFL junior students at Sai Gon University during the first semester of the academic year 2024-2025 for the research, based on the convenience sampling method (Creswell, 2014). At the time of conducting the research, the students were taking their 15-week Writing Module 4 – the highest Module in their writing curriculum in which they learned how to write argumentative essays with a Vietnamese teacher of English. They were consented to complete a questionnaire including 40 items.

The participants ages ranged from 19 to 22. Nearly two thirds of them were female. All of them were born and grew up in Vietnam, using Vietnamese as their mother language. Moreover, all of them could write in at least two languages, including Vietnamese and another foreign language such as English and/or Korean. In terms of educational background, as their major at the university, English was taught in most subjects within at least 2 years of learning from the **time they attended** the survey, except for a few Vietnamese basic subjects. The special point was that Vietnamese teachers of English were in charge of all subjects, and the students had no experience learning with foreign teachers. In terms of L1 background, table 1 shows the participants' ability to use Vietnamese. In general, the students found it easy to speak, read and write in their mother language, either formally or informally. There were insignificant differences between the Mean values of the first three skills. Formal writing was the most challenging skill that received the lowest mean (*Mean = 3.14*) and the most significant variation in the data with *SD = 0.83*, higher than other skills, though there was not a considerable difference. While most of the students believed they could complete L1 formal writing essays easily or even with specific difficulties, one participant found it impossible to write such topics with supporting arguments such as politics, technology, etc.

Table 1. *L1 background*

	Mean	SD
L1 informal speaking	3.81	0.55
L1 formal speaking	3.38	0.69
L1 informal reading	3.83	0.48
L1 formal reading	3.69	0.56
L1 informal writing	3.74	0.66
L1 formal writing	3.14	0.83

After the survey, five of the students who volunteered to join further interviews shared more opinions on the issue.

Research instruments

The study used both qualitative and quantitative methods under a survey and interviews.

Survey

The survey adapted items from questionnaires by Joyce et al. (2021) and Slocum (2013) on L1, brainstorming, and its roles in writing. The survey included 40 items with six sections: (1) **Background information** including seven questions about their age, gender, country born, country growing up, languages used formally, informally and for writing; (2) **Education background** including five items for the students to write the number of years they experienced their study at university; (3) **L1 background** having six 4-scale items scaling the ability to perform several skills, ranging from *impossible* to *easy*, with two speaking and listening items: how easy/difficult for the person to speak or listen to some given activities in L1, such as introducing, talking about jobs, studies, or plans in the future; and two reading and writing skills items: how easy/difficult for the person to read about or write about some given activities in L1, such as textbooks, novels, stories, articles, letters, notes, or notices; (4) **L1 use and causes that affect students' choice of L1 in the L2 classroom** included six 7-point Likert scale items about students' perception of L1 use, ranging from totally agree to totally disagree; one open-ended question about factors affecting their L1 use; (5) **Benefits of brainstorming in L2 writing** included ten 7-point Likert scale items, ranging from totally agree to totally disagree; (6) **Benefits of L1 brainstorming in developing L2 writing** included six 7-point Likert scale items, ranging from totally agree to totally disagree.

In-depth interviews

Semi-structured interviews supported the data from the survey and analyzed further reasons behind the participants' choices in the survey. The questions were modified and differed from student to student, depending on their survey's feedback. The list of interview questions had three main parts: the reasons why L1 was employed; the benefits of brainstorming; and the benefits of L1 brainstorming.

Research procedure

The survey data was collected and transferred into charts according to the research questions and themes for evaluation, including the students' perception in the use of L1 in their L2 learning, the benefits of brainstorming generally and L1 brainstorming particularly. IBM SPSS Statistics 27.0 was used to calculate the values of Means and Standard Deviations to quantitatively measure the extent to which the students perceived L1 use. On the other hand, the item about the factors

affecting L1 use was transferred into a table of percentages to analyze the highest and the lowest elements.

The interview data was qualitatively analyzed in themes, with coded keywords found from the scripts transferred. The findings were to confirm and explain the quantitative data.

Results

Survey

The data from the survey was collected and analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings are as follows:

L1 use in L2 classroom

The results from Table Two showed slight preference but did not emphasize strong favor for the use of Vietnamese in EFL classrooms by English-major students. In terms of teachers' use of L1, items 1 and 2 showed that students slightly approved of L1 teaching (*Mean = 3.93*) and explanations (*Mean = 3.12*). Item 4 and 6, presenting classroom interactions, also received similar results (*Mean = 3.76; Mean = 3.98 respectively*), suggesting that learners somehow appreciated the chances to communicate and raise questions in Vietnamese with peers and tutors. The SD values, ranging from *1.32* to *1.66,* illustrated that there were moderate variations in the students' attitudes. Hence, some students might agree with Vietnamese use in their lesson while some other students might not. In addition, the students preferred to use an English-English dictionary rather than an English-Vietnamese dictionary (item 5, *Mean = 4.62, SD = 1.5*). Nevertheless, in terms of having an English-only classroom (item 3), students showed negative perspectives with *Mean = 4.29* and the highest variation with *SD = 1.67,* which means that although they did not strongly encourage Vietnamese use, the 100% English environment seemed unfavorable.

Table 2. *L1 use in L2 classroom*

	Responses	Mean	SD
1. My teachers should use Vietnamese in every lesson	*42*	*3.93*	*1.32*
2. My teachers should be able to give explanations in Vietnamese	*42*	*3.12*	*1.5*
3. I believe that an English-only classroom is the best way to learn English	*42*	*4.29*	*1.67*
4. The use of Vietnamese with my partners and/or group helps me learn English	*42*	*3.98*	*1.49*
5. I think it's better to use English-Vietnamese dictionaries than English-English dictionaries	*42*	*4.62*	*1.5*
6. It's important to me that I can ask questions in Vietnamese to my teachers	*41*	*3.76*	*1.66*

Factors that affect students' use of L1 in the L2 classroom

Table three illustrates the main factors of using Vietnamese when learning English. The two most popular reasons that fostered the learners to use L1 included: (1) Vietnamese was necessary when the students had problem explaining in English, and (2) Vietnamese made it easier for them to explain some ideas with approximately three-thirds of the options for each. English exposure

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was also a significant factor (31%) because even with English-major students, 100% English in the classroom could be challenging. The environment was the least influential factor, with only nine students choosing to speak Vietnamese because their teachers and friends also did it.

This part included a semi-ended question, which encouraged other ideas from the students. Two additional reasons, referring to the environmental and cognitive factors, were added by the students, including (1) some of the members in class were too shy to speak English so Vietnamese was preferred and (2) thinking in Vietnamese helped them have better ideas in English.

Table 3. *Factor affecting the use of L1 in L2 classroom*

Factors	Responses *(n=42)*	Percentage
1. I use Vietnamese when I don't know how to express an idea in English.	33	78,6%
2. I believe that Vietnamese and English are somewhat similar (vocab, structures, pronunciation…)	6	14,3%
3. 100% English lessons are difficult for me.	13	31%
4. I think I can express my ideas more easily in Vietnamese.	27	64,3%
5. I use Vietnamese because my teachers and friends do.	9	21,4%
Other ideas:	2	4,8%

Benefits of brainstorming in L2 writing

Table four presents the participants' attitude toward applying brainstorming in writing skill. Overall, the data showed a positive perception of the roles of brainstorming. The Mean values, ranging from *2.48* to *3.38*, indicated that the students particularly enjoyed brainstorming activities when interacting with mates, generating new ideas and having fun. They also agreed that such activities supported their L2 writing. In contrast, items 8 and 9 illustrated strong disagreement from the participants (Mean = 4.29 and 4.00 respectively). The SD values from *1.20* to *1.53* meant that the variation was not considerable, suggesting that only a few students found brainstorming challenging and uncomfortable. The results supported the overall findings.

Table 4. *Perception towards brainstorming*

	Responses	Mean	SD
1. I enjoy brainstorming activities	42	3.02	1.20
2. I enjoy talking with classmates during brainstorming activities	42	3.38	1.23
3. I'm interested in finding different ideas during brainstorming activities	42	3.00	1.32
4. It's more fun to brainstorm for writing than to write without any planning	42	3.02	1.44
5. Brainstorming is a valuable technique in writing	42	2.48	1.30
6. I could improve my writing when I was doing brainstorming activities	42	2.74	1.53
7. Brainstorming should be considered as a tool to promote learners' English writing ability.	42	2.69	1.45
8. I feel uncomfortable when doing brainstorming.	42	4.29	1.51
9. I find it challenging to work with classmates during brainstorming activities.	42	4.00	1.50

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Benefits of L1 brainstorming in developing L2 writing

As shown in Table five, there was slight agreement in the students' perception of L1 use for brainstorming. Items 1, 2, 3, and 4, showing positive attitude toward L1 brainstorming, received Mean scores from *3.07* to *3.86*, showing L1 preference for its ease and usefulness. Meanwhile items 5 and 6, showing negative perspectives, had Mean scores of *4.21* and *5.07*; the SD values were from *1.14* to *1.44*. The results consistently proved that the students preferred L1 for brainstorming because of potential advantages for their writing.

Table 5. *Perception of L1 brainstorming in L2 writing*

	Responses	Mean	SD
1. I enjoy brainstorming activities in L1	42	3.24	1.44
2. I enjoy talking with classmates in L1 during brainstorming activities	42	3.07	1.35
3. Using L1 for brainstorming is a helpful technique in writing.	42	3.48	1.28
4. I could improve my L2 writing when I was doing brainstorming activities in L1	42	3.86	1.23
5. I feel uncomfortable when brainstorming in L1.	42	5.07	1.14
6. I would choose L2 if the teacher didn't request me to brainstorm in L1	42	4.21	1.20

Interviews

Five participants from the survey consented to join in-depth interviews to further explain their insights and attitudes toward L1 use in brainstorming. Their responses were recorded and qualitatively analyzed under the following themes. Findings from the interviews were used to support conclusions of from the survey.

The roles of brainstorming in writing skill

Brainstorming activities helped to generate ideas. As presented from the survey's data, different ideas were constructed during the discussions. The students modified that after coming up with the ideas, they had to review, analyze and evaluate them to select the most supportive ones to use in the essays. The process was defined as critical thinking which encouraged the students to decide the suitable ideas they needed among a vast number of ideas.

> Student 1: *Brainstorming helps me have more ideas thanks to discussions with friends, so I think my essay writing skill gradually enhanced.*
>
> Student 2: *Brainstorming can give me many ideas, but I have to evaluate and edit them before use.*

The use of L1 in L2 classroom

The preference of Vietnamese

All of the participants agreed that Vietnamese was more useful for two reasons. Firstly, as a mother language, Vietnamese could be used to communicate with friends informally. Secondly, the use of Vietnamese especially supported ideas for the students when they had difficulty in English. These responses also aligned with the data from the survey. To clarify their answers, they explained that L1 was friendlier and more suitable for beginners. Therefore, it could prove that as

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English-majored students, they did not use L1 regularly.

Student 3: I*n my study, I only use Vietnamese when I don't know how to say it in English.*

Student 4: *I think the level of English proficiency decides the use of first language. Vietnamese can be integrated in English lessons to make sure low-level students understand the knowledge.*

Student 5: *oh, I love using Vietnamese to tell jokes with friends, or to discuss abstract or complex terms, such as methodology in my pedagogical lessons.*

The limitation of using Vietnamese

The interview also reflected the students' hesitation of overusing Vietnamese in English lessons. In their opinion, more English exposure was better for second language learning. Therefore, they used as much English as possible in the lessons with the aim to be more fluent in English. They even used English-English dictionaries to check for the meanings of a new word because that could help them avoid direct translation. The result matched the survey's data about the students' preference for monolingual dictionaries.

Student 1: *I try not to use Vietnamese as much as possible. I think more English is better.*

The roles of L1 brainstorming in L2 writing

The comfort of thinking and discussing in Vietnamese

With the seen perspectives on L1 use generally, the participants believed that brainstorming in Vietnamese was more comfortable, easier, and unavoidable. Thinking in Vietnamese also helped them have more ideas, especially with complex topics. They explained that they had used Vietnamese since they were little, making them more confident to discuss ideas with friends in Vietnamese. The finding clarified the survey that EFL learners preferred L1 to solve English difficulties easily and comfortably.

Student 1: *Vietnamese is undoubtedly easier and more comfortable to use.*

The use of Vietnamese in unfamiliar topics

However, the participants showed different viewpoints on using Vietnamese for brainstorming in writing. In general, they tried to think and discuss in English whenever possible. Vietnamese students would only apply their mother tongue if they could not generate ideas in English, especially with unfamiliar and complex topics. Brainstorming in English could save time and energy because there was no translation. Moreover, they were concerned that if students overused Vietnamese, it would prevent L2 acquisition.

Student 1: *I only use Vietnamese with too complicated topics.*

Student 2: *I major in English, so I think more English is better. I brainstorm in English to save time because I don't have to translate.*

Student 4: *I often think and discuss in English, except when it's too complicated. I guess I have more ideas for writing in Vietnamese. But I don't think we should do that regularly.*

Discussion

The study was to answer the research question: *"How do Vietnamese learners of English perceive the use of Vietnamese for brainstorming in English writing classes?"* Findings from the survey and the in-depth interviews supported each other showing that the students had a positive attitude but with cautious use when applying their mother tongue.

Firstly, there was a slight preference for using Vietnamese in English writing lessons by English-majored students at Saigon University. The students preferred Vietnamese for two reasons: classroom interaction and academic achievement. The first reason allowed them to communicate with their tutor and friends whereas the second one helped them get ideas for their essays. The attitude was not strong but emphasized the outstanding role of bilingual context over a monolingual environment as discussed by Cook (2001) and Hall and Cook (2012). That was to explain the next finding that although more English exposure, such as the use of an English-English dictionary, was recommended by the SGU English-majored learners, English-only lessons were not feasible.

In terms of causes that motivated them to use L1, the findings showed that it happened when the students failed to express themselves in English, which was the biggest reason. The findings deeply confirmed the theories. As discussed by Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008), L2 proficiency was one of the factors affecting L1 use. Accordingly, the English-majored students with higher level of English proficiency appreciated more chances to use English as the target language rather than employing the mother tongue regularly. The participants had no problems exchanging their ideas within the familiar topics. Therefore, they only conveyed their ideas in Vietnamese when they failed to do that in English. The least affected factor of L1 use was the assumption of the similarities between English and Vietnamese, which belonged to the linguistic factor. The finding aligns with the arguments by Tran et al. (2024) about the problems Vietnamese learners of English had due to the differences between the two languages. At this point, the participants were aware of the nature of the two languages.

The subsequent findings referred to the learners' perception of brainstorming in writing practice. It showed that the participants enjoyed brainstorming activities as a fun and effective way to generate different ideas supporting the writing process, as reviewed by Abd Karim et al. (2016) and Rao (2007). However, to have logical and well-organized ideas, they needed to take a vital step to analyze and evaluate the items carefully before use. The findings satisfied the literature that brainstorming was a cognitive process that included two basic stages: the first one was creative thinking generating ideas and the second was critical thinking evaluating the ideas (Alrubaie et al., 2014). The finding was significant because it suggested students' awareness that different ideas might be confusing without being reviewed, analyzed, and evaluated.

Finally, regarding the roles of brainstorming in L1, the findings illustrated and proved that L1 pre-stage discussion produced better idea productivity (Gao & Min, 2021; Tanış et al., 2020) According to the survey and the interviews, L1 brainstorming was enjoyable and helped improve L2 writing by providing more ideas than L2 brainstorming, especially with unfamiliar topics. However, the findings didn't emphasize a strong preference by indicating the concern of overusing Vietnamese with English-major students. They argued that although Vietnamese was helpful to some extent, English was their priority. This result explained the role of language exposure in second language learning (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). However, different from arguments by Zheng and Drybrough (2023) and Tanış et al. (2020) which showed that both low-level and high-level students used L1 to plan their writing, the finding from this study emphasized the cautious attitude

of first language use by English-majored students whose English level of proficiency was definitely high. The difference did not mean a negation, but a supplement to contribute to the literature of the language transfer study.

Conclusion

The research aimed to explore the EFL students' perspectives on L1 brainstorming in L2 essay writing. Conducted under a mixed-method survey with 42 English-major students at Saigon University and qualitative interviews with 5 of them; the research showed that although there was just a slight preference, Vietnamese was a helpful tool to support L2 learners in some instances. In addition, brainstorming proved to play a significant role in the writing process. By generating, analyzing, and evaluating ideas, brainstorming could enhance essay writing performance. As a result, L1 brainstorming was considered a comfortable, easy, and fun process that brought back better idea productivity. On the other hand, the research highlighted that English was a priority of the English-major students. While Vietnamese could be a supporting tool with unfamiliar topics, English should be exposed as much as possible.

The findings from the research suggested further study to explore non-English major students' attitudes toward using L1 in L2 writing. From that, a critical comparison can be made to evaluate the role of L1 on different groups of language learners.

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