

[DOI: 10.20472/TEC.2015.002.011](https://doi.org/10.20472/TEC.2015.002.011)

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THEIR CHOICE, THEIR VOICE: USING LINGUISTIC SUPPORT TO ENHANCE CHILDREN'S L2 WRITING

Abstract:

Writing is often regarded as the most difficult language skill to master because of the complex cognitive processes and higher level of productive language control that are involved when one is converting ideas and thoughts into readable text. Learning to write in a second language (L2) becomes even more challenging, given such additional concerns as different writing needs (which tend to be more academically-oriented in the L2), L2 linguistic abilities, language transfer and interlanguage development, motivation, and cultural and educational experiences, that come into play when L2 learners approach the expected literacy skills. There is thus a need to provide adequate support for them when they learn to write in the L2.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of providing linguistic assistance in narrative writing tasks to enhance children's L2 written performance. This paper argues that, rather than telling children what to write, it is more beneficial to incorporate the element of choice in the provision of written support, such that children can select and use appropriate words or expressions that they themselves feel are most helpful in helping them find their own voices in their story in the L2. A study involving 131 Year 5 (aged 10) learners was conducted over a period of three months to investigate the instructional potential of incorporating varying degrees of linguistic assistance into narrative writing tasks at the upper primary level. Specifically, the investigation compared the performance of two groups of children: one group received written linguistic assistance at word level, and the other group received written linguistic assistance at text (paragraphs of text) level. A pretest, interim test, immediate posttest and delayed posttest were administered. Partial correlation analyses yielded significant effects for treatment on only certain aspects of writing.

Keywords:

linguistic assistance, second language writing, young learners, narrative tasks

Introduction

Writing plays a critical role in the learning of a language. There is increasing awareness that learners need to not only learn how to write in a second language (L2), but also learn the target language through writing (Harklau, 2002; Williams, 2012). However, writing remains a challenging language skill to master for many L2 learners. In order to produce written text, learners need to be able to employ appropriate lexical, grammatical, orthographical and discourse features specially associated with the target language (text generation) and to put these in words on paper (transcribing). In addition, for L2 learners, there are other concerns such as different writing needs (which tend to be more academically-oriented in the L2), L2 linguistic abilities, language transfer and interlanguage development, motivation, and cultural and educational experiences, that come into play when they approach the expected literacy skills. There is thus a need to provide adequate support for these learners when they learn to write in the L2. While there have been studies that looked at how transcribing impacts writing (e.g., Berninger, 1999; Berninger et al., 2006; Bourdin & Fayol, 2002; Connelly et al., 2012), and at strategies which promote text generation (e.g., Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001; Graham et al., 2005; Paquette, 2009; Saddler & Graham, 2005), not many have specifically investigated the effects of providing additional linguistic support in writing tasks to help L2 learners to produce the target language.

The present study examined the possibility of providing young learners with appropriate linguistic assistance in order for them to participate successfully in an L2 writing task where the language required was beyond their current level of proficiency. Importantly, the study incorporates the element of choice in the provision of written support. Learners performing the writing tasks can select and use appropriate words or expressions that they themselves feel are most beneficial in helping them find their own voices in their story in the target language. Specifically, the study addressed the following research question: Do varying degrees of linguistic assistance impact the quality of writing of young ESL learners?

Support for L2 writing

Writing, according to Flower and Hayes (1981), is essentially a problem-solving and decision-making task. Their writing process model comprises three primary interactive and recursive processes: planning, translating and reviewing. *Planning* involves generating ideas that may be retrieved from learners' long term memory or obtained from the task input (or other sources), and selecting and organizing them in a coherent manner according to the writing goals set by the learners. *Translating* is the process of converting the planned, albeit often fragmented, ideas into conventional linguistic forms. To this end, two sub-processes are involved. The first concerns the selection and activation of available lexical items in learners' memory, the syntactic encoding of clauses and sentences and the establishing of cohesive links when organizing the text. Berninger, Fuller and Whitaker (1996) identify this sub-process as *text generation* and distinguish it from the second sub-process of *transcription*. The latter refers to the motor

task of putting down the text in the printed form. This second sub-process draws on orthographic and phonological knowledge and skills to translate linguistic representations into written symbols. To ensure goal attainment and accuracy and appropriateness in the expression of meanings in text, the process of *reviewing*, which includes reading and/or revising, is undertaken to evaluate what is written. Revising, an optional process in writing, allows learners to reflect, compare and match the mental representation of the text that they intend to compose and the actual realization of the text, both at the linguistic and semantic levels. As for the monitor, it plays the role of a strategist and coordinates all the main processes and sub-processes of writing. Although Flower and Hayes's writing process model is presented as a stage model, the processes do not occur in a fixed, linear order; instead, they may operate concurrently and in a recursive manner.

Essentially, writing has to be learnt, in particular the translating process. For young learners, when producing text, they need to be able to simultaneously handle the mechanical aspects of putting words on paper (transcribing), as well as draw on appropriate lexical, grammatical, orthographical and discourse features specifically associated with the target written language (text generation). Inefficiency in either sub-processes would result in lower quality of written performance. Poor spelling and handwriting skills, for instance, have been shown to limit the quality of text in children's writing. Basing on a capacity theory of writing, Bourdin and Fayol (1994, 2000) and Fayol et al. (2012) argue that this limitation occurs because the transcription process in young children, when not fully controlled by them, imposes higher working memory and attentional demands during writing, and as a result, less resources are available for other processes such as word retrieval. By Grade 4 (age 9 or 10), children typically develop adequate fluency in the transcription process such that it no longer exerts additional demands on working memory during writing (Bourdin & Fayol, 2000; McCutchen, 1996; McCutchen et al., 1994).

For text generation, however, it is a different case. According to McCutchen (1996), text generation continues to require working memory and attentional resources across age levels. This means that, regardless of age, if learners do not have fluency in lexical retrieval and in sentence building when translating their ideas into written language, their attention is likely to be diverted to focusing on accessing lower-level linguistic resources instead of higher-level processes in writing. This will inevitably affect the quality of their composition. Comparing the performance of 117 younger children in Grades 3 and 4 children and 93 older children in Grades 7 and 8 older children, McCutchen et al. (1994) found that older children generated individual sentences more fluently than did younger children, but at all grade levels, skilled writers were more fluent than less skilled writers. In terms of lexical retrieval, they also observed that the children in Grade 5 in their study who were skilled writers were faster and more accurate in accessing individual words than the less skilled writers. Put simply, the text generation process in skilled writers was more efficient. From this, it can be seen that in order to develop writing expertise, what is crucial is not only having the amount of linguistic

knowledge available to the learner, but also having fluent access to this knowledge (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001; McCutchen, 1996, 2000, 2011).

Linguistic assistance (my term) refers to a list of possible words, expressions or paragraphs of text given to learners in a task in order to help them express their ideas in the target language. It is selected as a component of support in the present study because it potentially equips learners with the necessary linguistic tools to engage in purposeful communication in the target language, and at the same time, to enable them to focus their attention on linguistic features during writing. Also, through linguistic assistance, learners can be exposed to new words or linguistic forms that they need in order to meet the demands of the task. With words and expressions that learners already know but are less familiar with, when provided to them in the form of linguistic support, it can facilitate the fluency of lexical retrieval and sentence construction during the composing process. In this way, learners are afforded the opportunity to focus on linguistic encoding of the task content at the Translation stage. Importantly, linguistic assistance is employed by learners on the basis of their need and choice to develop their thinking and the construction of their story. This implies that information from linguistic assistance, be it words, expressions or linguistic forms, can be integrated into the language production in progress.

A number of studies have looked at the effects of providing contextual support in tasks on learners' L2 performance, for example, Robinson's (1995) study which compared learners' production of a narrative with the help of a picture strip and those without the pictorial support, and Skehan and Foster's (1999) study which required learners to view a video and tell the story. Many of these studies were not looking specifically at additional linguistic assistance specially incorporated into communicative tasks to help to L2 learners produce the target language. The closest was a study by Swain and Lapkin (2001) which compared the effects of using pictorial support in an information gap and learner-produced written support (which were key words written by learners themselves as they listened to a text dictated to them) in a dictogloss task. Given the nature of a dictogloss task, however, which requires learners to perform the triple task of speedily taking down key words during a listening activity, accuracy notwithstanding (they are not shown the written text), trying to remember the content of the text, and working out the targeted grammatical structure(s) when reconstructing the text, it may be difficult to consider the words written by the learners as a form of support as they are not built into the task to intentionally ease the communicative burden of learners when they produce the L2. There is still a need to find out how written linguistic support impacts learner production and whether such linguistic assistance is useful for L2 learning.

The study

In order to find out the pedagogic potential of engaging L2 children in linguistic assistance during writing at upper primary level, a total of 131 Year 5 children (age 10) from six intact classes were involved in the present study. Most of these children came from similar educational backgrounds since kindergarten, and they shared a common

first language, i.e., Brunei Malay. Their English proficiency level was determined by their respective English language teachers and the researcher on the basis of their language performance in class.

Using a quasi-experimental design, the children were assigned to either a treatment group which worked in dyads and received basic linguistic assistance in their writing tasks (Treatment Group 1; $n = 61$), or to a treatment group which worked in dyads and received enhanced linguistic assistance in their writing tasks (Treatment Group 2; $n = 70$). The study took place over a period of three months. During the intervention, both groups of learners were given a two-hour treatment session per week. During each session, learners worked in dyads of similar L2 English proficiency levels to co-author a story using the linguistic support given to them.

Two varieties of narrative writing tasks were specially developed for this study: (i) tasks with basic linguistic assistance for Treatment Group 1; and (ii) tasks with enhanced linguistic assistance for Treatment Group 2. The stories that learners were asked to narrate were all based on sequences of pictures. For the narrative writing tasks with basic linguistic assistance, each one contained a list of eight content words and eight verbs that were related to the story, and learners in Treatment Group 1 could choose as many words as they needed in order to construct an interesting story. For the narrative writing tasks with enhanced linguistic assistance, paragraphs of text were presented to the learners in Treatment Group 2, and they could choose a maximum of ten words or expressions that they thought they needed to construct their story.

To track learners' L2 written performance, a narrative writing pretest was administered to learners in all six classes two weeks before the commencement of the intervention. This was followed by an interim test which was given four weeks into the intervention. At the end of the 8-week treatment, all learners were given an immediate posttest. Four weeks after the completion of the treatment, they were given a delayed posttest. These tests required learners to compose a narrative text based on a sequence of pictures. Four dimensions of narrative writing were considered when examining the writings of learners in this study: *Quality of ideas*, *Story shape and structure*, *Vocabulary and spelling*, and *Grammar*.

A partial correlation analysis was conducted in order to verify whether there was an association between treatment and learners' subsequent performance in the narrative writing tests at various points of the intervention, without the influence of learners' prior attainment.

Findings and discussion

In order to examine whether varying degrees of linguistic assistance impact the quality of L2 writing of young learners, comparisons were made between learners in Treatment Groups 1 and 2. In terms of *Quality of ideas*, the partial correlation analysis revealed strong significant associations between treatment and learner performance at interim test ($r = -.24$, $p < .01$) and immediate posttest ($r = -.31$, $p < .001$). For *Story shape and*

structure, there was also a strong significant association between treatment and learner performance at immediate posttest, $r = -.26$, $p < .01$. In addition, there were significant associations between treatment and learners' performance on *Grammar* at interim test ($r = -.18$, $p < .05$), immediate posttest ($r = -.31$, $p < .001$) and delayed posttest ($r = -.27$, $p < .01$). For *Vocabulary and spelling*, however, no significant association was found between treatment and learner performance at immediate posttest ($r = -.17$, $p = .06$) and delayed posttest ($r = -.06$, $p = .51$). What these indicate is that the learners in Treatment Group 2 were more likely to achieve higher *Quality of ideas*, *Story shape and structure* and *Grammar* scores in L2 narrative writing than their counterparts in Treatment Group 1. The results support the hypothesis that the provision of enhanced linguistic assistance in narrative writing tasks facilitates learners' L2 writing in terms of *Quality of ideas*, *Story shape and structure* and *Grammar* more than does the provision of basic linguistic assistance.

A plausible explanation for the improved learner performance in terms of *Quality of ideas*, *Story shape and structure* and *Grammar* is that enhanced linguistic assistance may have afforded the learners in Treatment Group 2 the needed linguistic resources to discuss, reflect on and co-construct L2 knowledge. This group was provided with paragraphs of text from which they selected expressions or individual words, depending on what they considered useful for their picture narration. In other words, they were given linguistic help in the form not only of word choice, but also of syntactic structure. With this, learners may have experienced, or possibly perceived themselves as experiencing, reduced linguistic demands at the linguistic formulation stage, and this may have enabled them to orient their attention to higher-order writing processes such as generation and evaluation of ideas for their story, and organisation of the story structure. This observation reflects the findings of Van Gelderen, Oostdam and Schooten (2011) which showed that in order for L2 writers to be able to attend to higher-level demands such as text organisation, they need to have automatised lexical and syntactic resources. If this is the case, then, the enhanced linguistic assistance may have afforded learners the opportunity to devote more of their attentional resources to organising the story structure and developing the story line.

The beneficial effect of the enhanced linguistic assistance is also reflected in the better performance of Treatment Group 2 on *Grammar*. This may have been due to, with enhanced linguistic assistance, learner attention was directed not only to the selection of appropriate verb tenses, but also to, *inter alia*, the formation of sentences and use of connective devices. In other words, this linguistic support potentially provided the necessary input for learners to focus on various grammatical forms. Moreover, because learners in Treatment Group 2 were provided with paragraphs of text as their linguistic assistance (as opposed to words in the basic linguistic assistance), it seems reasonable to suggest that these learners had more linguistic resources to share between them (e.g. collocation of words, sentence opener, choice of tense, sentence structure) during peer interaction. Thus, compared to learners in Treatment Group 1, learners in Treatment Group 2 may have been more able to provide assistance to their partners. Previous research, whether framed within a cognitive or sociocultural perspective, has

shown that some form of expertise is required in an interaction, be it from a teacher, a more competent peer or an artefact, in order for assisted performance and co-construction of knowledge to occur (e.g. Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Ohta, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). In the case of the present study, enhanced linguistic assistance appears to have provided a knowledge base to learners for further reflection and discussion.

Conclusion

The present study has examined whether varying degrees of linguistic assistance facilitate young learners in their L2 narrative production. Results suggest that the provision of enhanced linguistic assistance appears to promote different aspects of the L2 written performance of young learners.

Further studies in the area of linguistic assistance in L2 writing, including amongst adolescent and adult ESL learners, would be valuable in determining whether the present findings can be generalised across other populations.

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