*ORIGINAL  ARTICLE*

# Impact of L1 Use in L2 English Writing Classes

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*Abstract*

*This experimental study endeavored to assess the impact of $L_1$ use in pre-writing (idea-generating) stage on L2 writing. The participants of the study were grade 11 students in Belay Zeleke Preparatory School, Bichena. A comparison between the participants' (control and experimental groups) pre-and post-writing test' results was made. T-test was employed as statistical tool of analyses. Besides, interviews were conducted to see participants' reflections concerning the use of $L_1$ during the idea-generating stage. The latter was analyzed qualitatively. The results of the study showed that the experimental group significantly exceeded the control group due to the post-test content results. The interview result unveiled that the majority of the participants had preferred to use their $L_1$ for discussing ideas at a pre-writing stage of L2 writing. Finally, it was concluded that $L_1$ use at pre-writing stage helps participants produce better content during their writing in an $L_2$. On the basis of the findings and the conclusions made, a judicious and cautious employment of the $L_1$ during the idea-generating stage in $L_2$ writing was suggested as a pedagogical implication.*

## BACKGROUND

There has been a fervent dichotomized contention concerning whether or not mother tongue ($L_1$) should be used in second or foreign language ($L_2$) classrooms. One of the extremes of the dichotomy postulates that $L_2$ should exclusively be used (Chamber, 1991; Halliwell & Jones, 1991; Macdonald, 1993) because it assumes that $L_1$ use undermines the learning process (Chambers, 1991; Halliwell &Jones, 1991; Macdonald, 1993) and cuts down on exposure to $L_2$ (Cook, 2001); while using only $L_2$ makes the language real, and develops the learners' own in-built

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language system. These positions support Krashen's (1981) hypothesis of comprehensible input and natural order of acquisition. In Krashen's terms, learners should be catered with comprehensible input in the target language so that they can acquire and develop competence in this language.

The other extreme explicates the deployment of the $L_1$ as expedient to mastery of an $L_2$ (Cambra & Nussbaurn; Castelotti & Moore, as cited in Thompson, 2006; Duff & Polio, 1990). Despite the argument, it has been inevitable to deploy it in second (or foreign) language classrooms for psycholinguistic reasons like reducing students' memory constraints (Harbord, 1992; Kern, 1994); for initiating and sustaining verbal interaction (Brooks and Donato, 1994); for enhancing. Students' linguistic and cognitive abilities (Scott, 1996); and for scaffolding and lowering their affective filters (Meyer, 2008). Atkinson (1987) and Macaro (2001) consider $L_1$ use as a learning tool. Others (Philipson, 1992; Stables and Wikeley, 1999; Van de Walt, 1997) even consider its avoidance as sheer 'linguistic imperialism'.

Research has shown that $L_1$ is used in an $L_2$ classroom to maintain discipline (Lin, 1990), to compensate constraints of the teaching-learning process teachers and students may face (Hu, 2006) and to facilitate communication (Pennington, 1995); Mee-Ling, 1996). It has also shown that $L_1$ is used as a resource for learning (Cook, 2001), as a means of social equality in the $L_2$ classroom (Adendorff, 1996; Auerbach, 1993), as a social and psychological tool (Anton and DiCamilla, 1998) and as a facilitator of cognitive processing (Brooks and Donato, 1994; Swain and Lapkin, 2000) as well as a tool for task management.

Different language teaching methods, except the direct and the audio-lingual methods, utilize $L_1$ in an $L_2$ classroom for different purposes. For instance, it was used as medium of taught in the Grammar Translation Method; for providing instruction and feedback along with teaching contrastive phonology in the Silent Way; for clarity of dialogues in Suggestopedia, and for giving equivalent word meanings and directions in Community Language Learning. It is also suggested to judiciously be utilized in the communicative approaches (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

In Ethiopia, studies in the area focused on teacher and student perceptions (Nuru, 2008; Kenenisa, 2003) and frequency of use (Abiy and Mohammed, 2011) of the $L_1$ in an $L_2$ classroom. However, the impact of $L_1$ use in an $L_2$ writing has been little or not studied. Thus, the focus of this study and its results seem to be relevant to the practical classroom application. Investigating the issue may help students fill their gap of linguistic dearth and deftly juxtapose appropriate content in their compositions. It is assumed that high school students in Ethiopia have deficiency of the English language to compose up to the expected level (Amlaku. n.d; ETEP, 1994).

## $L_1$ usage in an $L_2$ writing classroom

- *Benefits of $L_1$ use in an $L_2$ writing instruction*

Writers (Scott, 1996; Wang, 2003; Wang and Wen, 2002; Woodall, 2002; and others) believe that $L_1$ is fundamentally beneficial to students' $L_2$ writing in generating ideas; that is at pre-writing stage. As Scott (1996), for instance, says, the pre-writing stage conjures up complex cognitive skills that

involve both idea generation and linguistic information. This complexity plunges the $L_2$ writers, particularly those with limited $L_2$ competence, into utter exertion because they may find it difficult to distinguish between their previous knowledge regarding the topic(s) of writing and 'information on the language expression' (Stapa and Abdulmejid, 2009: 42). Scott contends that the complexity becomes more severe if the topic given is culture-orientated with $L_2$ and is unfamiliar to the students, which, as a result, hampers their idea generation. Research findings also support Scott's views indicating that $L_2$ writers switch to $L_1$ to generate and organize ideas (Wen, 2002) especially when they face challenging tasks (Woodal, 2002). Therefore, Woodal strongly recommends the use of $L_1$ at the pre-writing stage of $L_2$ writing. Wang (2003) also asserts that less proficient $L_2$ writers switch to $L_1$ during writing.

• *Previous research findings*

Several studies have looked into the effects of composing in the $L_1$ and then translating into the $L_2$ (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992). These studies have indicated that lower $L_2$ proficiency writers benefited from composing in the $L_1$ and then translating into the $L_2$, a result that highlights the importance of using $L_1$ composing strategies for lower $L_2$ proficiency writers. Similarly, Woodall (2002) found that $L_1$ use is determined by the learners' $L_2$ proficiency level; i.e. less proficient learners repeatedly switch to $L_1$ while writing in an $L_2$ when they face task difficulty. Wang (2003) has also asserted that less proficient students frequently switch to $L_1$ while writing in an $L_2$ writing classes.

Weijen *et al* (2009) have indicated that $L_1$ is used in $L_2$ writing for different purposes: generating ideas (See also Beare and Bourdages, 2007), planning (See also Akyel, 1994; Friedlander, 1990; Lally, 2008; Jones and Tetrone, 1987), and meta-comments, solving linguistic problems such as vocabulary issues for back-tracking, stylistic choices and as a means to prevent cognitive overload. Their research, however, did not corroborate the contribution of $L_1$ use to text quality and meta-comments.

Jones and Tetroe (1987), Friedlander (1990), Paiz (2011), Stapa and Abdulmejid (2009) and Wang and Wen (2002) have studied the effects of $L_1$ use at $L_2$ pre-writing stage. While Friedlander unraveled the positive effects of $L_1$ use in the planning process of $L_2$ writing, Jones and Tetrone found that the lower $L_2$ proficiency writers who used their $L_1$ produced more details and abstract thoughts during the planning stage of $L_2$ writing than those who did not. Paiz (2011) and Wang and Wen (2002) also agree with Jones and Tetrone that language use at pre-writing stage correlates with students' level of language proficiency. Stapa and Abdulmejid (2009:45), in a related endeavor, found that $L_1$ use helped students generate ideas and 'produce better quality essays in terms of overall score, content, language, organization, vocabulary and mechanics'.

This study attempts to assess if students' $L_1$ use during the idea-generating stage could help students compose quality paragraphs in English (an $L_2$). It bears a resemblance to Stapa and Abdulmejid's (2009) study but significantly differs in context, methodology and variables considered. These researchers studied students with low proficiency in Malaysia, while the participants of this study are second cycle secondary school students with assorted proficiency levels in Bichena, Ethiopia.

The study also exhibited intra-and inter-group comparisons between their overall results and their results in *content* and *form* categories. Therefore, the study endeavors to respond to the following hypotheses and research question.

> *Null hypothesis:* The use of $L_1$ at pre-writing (idea-generating) stage does not affect the overall score as well as the forms and contents of students' writing;

> *Alternate hypothesis:* The use of $L_1$ at pre-writing (idea-generating) stage affects the overall score as well as the forms and contents of students' writing;
>                      and
- What are the feelings of students about using $L_1$ at idea-generating stage of their $L_2$ composition?

**Rationale**

Despite the vehement contention scholars have regarding whether or not $L_1$ should be used in an $L_2$ classroom, it has been a glaring fact that its use has become unavoidable for the various reasons stated above. Therefore, the issue of how to use it effectively seems to be mandatory. This study thus aims at responding to this requirement.

Its results may provide teachers with information about why and when they can use Amharic ($L_1$) while teaching writing in English (an $L_2$). One of the criticisms concerning $L_1$ use is its overuse and impact of overdependence on $L_1$. This study, therefore, informs classroom practitioners when they should allow their students to employ $L_1$ in $L_2$ writing practices. Besides, it is deemed worthy to forward redolence why one can use $L_1$ while teaching writing.

The study may also be important to enhance students' thinking ability and gaining of topic familiarity through cooperative learning with their peers. This has the implication that they can produce accurate and appropriate English when they write on areas they know well about. This skill can be transferred to their writing of reports, making notes, and other writing based academic activities in the other subjects they study in schools.

**METHODOLOGY**

- *Design*

The impetus of this research was to assess the effectiveness of $L_1$ (Amharic) use in an $L_2$ (English) writing classes on grade 11 students at Bichena Preparatory School. The main focus was to unveil how the information gathering stage (pre-writing stage) can help students to write accurate composition with adequate information (substance, idea). An experimental research was conducted to achieve this goal. The experimental type was imperative to assess the impact of using Amharic in English writing classes.

- *Participants*

Two sections were selected using simple random sampling method from the ten grade 11 sections in the school. The total number of the participants of the study was 108 (56 experimental and 52 control groups); however, nine participants from the experimental group and five participants from the control group were cast off because they missed either the pre-test, the post-test or any one of the four writing practice activities. Therefore, 94 participants, 47 in each group, were studied. All the participants were between 15 and 19 years old. They all speak

Amharic as their first language, and almost all have studied English for ten years, beginning from the first year of schooling. The students almost exclusively utilize Amharic for everyday communication; that is, they have little or no exposure to English outside the classroom. They use English merely for academic studies (particularly from grade seven upwards) and as a subject.

- *Data gathering instruments*

Writing tests and interview were used as data gathering instruments.

**Writing tests**

The participants (students) composed on common topics that included 'environmental degradation, population growth and its consequences, HIV and AIDS and women rights'. The topics were assumed to be familiar to all of them, because all were selected by the participants themselves from ten given topics. The participants of the two groups (control and experimental) were given a pre-test so that their results could be compared with their after-treatment results. In addition to the pre-and post-tests, they were given four other writing tasks as a practice. In all the four writing practice activities, the experimental group initially conferred ideas, gathered information, and outlined jointly in Amharic, and then wrote paragraphs in English individually. The control group, on the other hand, discussed ideas, gathered information and outlined in English together, and then composed paragraphs in English individually. The time given for discussion and composing to each of the groups was equal: 15 minutes for discussion and the rest of the period for composing.

**Interview**

A total of ten randomly selected participants (five from the experimental and five from control groups) were interviewed by the classroom teachers. The purpose of the interview was to assess students' feelings about their use of first language or English during the pre-writing activity. The interview question focused on whether or not their discussion in Amharic (experimental group) or in English (control group) during the pre-writing stage hasdhelped them to write well in English. They were also asked why they could say 'yes' or 'no' to the question posed.

- *Procedure*

Students of two grade 11 sections from the total of 10 in Belay Zeleke Preparatory School, Bichena, were randomly selected of which one was an experimental and the other a controlled section (group). After the sections had been selected, a pre-test was given to students in both sections. Then, four writing tasks meant for practice, in addition to the pre-and post-writing tests, were given to each of the groups at different times. All the practice writing tasks were individual tasks, but the pre-writing stage, the idea generating stage, was held in groups. While doing the writing tasks, the controlled section (group) students were advised to discuss and outline ideas in English during the pre-writing stage and finally compose in English individually. On the other hand, the experimental group students were advised to discuss and outline in Amharic while they did the pre-writing task in groups, and finally compose in English individually. All the participants composed on the same topics, and each of the students' writing test results were recorded against the code given to each of the students. Finally, a

similar final test (post-test) was given to both sections (groups).

The experiment took one and a half months. Two teachers, both experienced and with high caliber (BA holders in English), corrected each of the students' compositions using the guide and the criteria given to them for correction. Teachers' correction focused on *content* (ideas and idea organization, etc.) and *form* (grammar, mechanics, etc). Thus, marks were given to *form* and *content* separately by the teachers, and the average of the marks given by the two teachers was used for ease of analysis. The experiment was carried out with the consent of the classroom teachers and students, and with the knowledge of the school director.

The interviews were conducted for five minutes each after the testes had taken the post-writing test. The participants' test results were analyzed using t-tests, while the interview data were analyzed qualitatively. To assess the level of competence of each of the groups before the treatment, the groups' pre-test writing results were gauged by t-test statistics; and this procedure was also employed to compare their post-test writing results. In addition, t-test was also employed to see the intra-group results as total and as classified between *form* and *content*.

**FINDINGS**
In this study, independent t-tests were computed to delve the inter-group difference between the pre-and post-test aggregate results of the experimental and the control groups. Furthermore, the groups' pre-and post writing tests results were categorized between *form* and *content* so that they could unveil in which of the categories the groups showed more competence. Paired samples t-tests were also used to probe if there were differences between intra-group pre-and post-test writing results. Besides, the intra-group pre-and post-test writing *form* and *content* results were also computed.

The pre-and post-test results of the experimental and control groups are indicated in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1:  Descriptive statistics between the pre-and post-test results of the control and experimental groups

| Test results | Group | N | Mean | Std |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test | Control | 47 | 46.6915 | 8.81670 |
|  | Experimental | 47 | 48.3191 | 10.43115 |
| Post-test | Control | 47 | 75.5957 | 5.89089 |
|  | Experimental | 47 | 78.3191 | 6.89867 |

As shown in the independent samples statistics in Table 1, the mean for the control group's pre-test results was 46.69 (std. 8.82), while that of the experimental group was 48.32 (std. 10.43). The means for the post-test results for the control and the experimental groups were 75.60 and 78.32 with std. of 5.89 and 6.90, respectively. The means for the pre-test and post-test results of the experimental and control groups showed a difference between the groups; however, the independent samples t-test has unearthed a significant difference only in the inter-group post-test results (See table 2).

Table 2:  Independent samples t-test between the pre-and post-test results of the control and experimental groups

| Test results | Mean difference | t | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test results: control &Experimental | - 1.6276 | .817 | 92 | .416 |
| Post-test results: control &Experimental | -2.7234 | 2.058 | 92 | .042* |

*The mean difference is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

The results indicate that there are differences between the means of the groups in both tests, but further examination using the independent samples t-test statistics revealed that the difference was significant only in the post-test results (.042) at alpha 0.05 level with a degree of freedom of 92. As indicated in Table 2, the computed independent samples t-test of the post-test revealed that the mean difference between the two tests was around 2.72, and this was statistically significant. This result occurred ostensibly because of the intervention the experimental group received. The standard deviations of the experimental and control groups indicated that the subjects vary in their writing competence very largely both in the pre- and post-tests, the most being exhibited among the experimental group.

*Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the intra-group test results of the experimental and control groups*

| Group | Test | N | Mean | Std. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Control** | Pre-test Form | 47 | 23.4149 | 4.49313 |
| | Pre-test Content | 47 | 23.3404 | 4.80048 |
| | Post-test Form | 47 | 37.6489 | 2.89286 |
| | Post-test Content | 47 | 37.9468 | 3.21213 |
| **Experimental** | Pre-test Form | 47 | 24.2021 | 5.31268 |
| | Pre-test Content | 47 | 24.5638 | 5.60242 |
| | Post-test Form | 47 | 37.9681 | 3.67483 |
| | Post-test Content | 47 | 40.3511 | 3.45611 |
| **Control aggregate** | Pre-test Aggregate | 47 | 46.6915 | 8.80048 |
| | Post-test Aggregate | 47 | 75.5957 | 5.81670 |
| **Experimental aggregate** | Pre-test Aggregate | 47 | 48.3191 | 10.43115 |
| | Post-test Aggregate | 47 | 78.3191 | 6.89867 |

As the figures in Table 3 signify, the participants in the experimental and control groups had means of 48.32 (std.10.43) and 46.69 (std. 8.80) in the pre-test respectively, indicating that both had slightly below average results before the intervention. Their post-test results were improved and they had means of 78.32 (std.6.90) and 75.60 (std. 5.82), which were above average (50%). The pre-and post-test *form* and *content* results also showed differences between the intra-group results. Accordingly, the pre-test mean scores of *form* and *content* of the control group were 23.41 (std.4.49) and 23.34 (std.4.80), while the post-test had 37.65 (std.2.89) and 37.95 (std.3.21), respectively. The experimental group had means of 24.20 (std.5.31) and 24.56 (std. 5.60) for the pre-test *form* and *content* results; and 37.97 (std.3.67) and 40.35 (std. 3.46) for the post-test results, respectively.

*Table 4: Paired Samples T-test results of all the tests results of the experimental and control groups*

| Group | Variables | Mean difference | t | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Control** | Pre-test Form and Content results | .07447 | .200 | 46 | .843 |
|  | Post-test Form and Content results | -.29787 | -1.250 | 46 | .218 |
|  | Aggregate Pre-and post-tests | -28.90426 | -29.505 | 46 | .000 |
| **Experimental** | Pre-test Form and Content results | -.36170 | -.813 | 46 | .421 |
|  | Post-test Form and Content results | -2.38298 | -9.151 | 46 | .000 |
|  | Aggregate Pre-and Post-tests | -30.00000 | -31.460 | 46 | .000 |

*The mean difference is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

To investigate whether or not there exists a significant difference between the intra-group results of the experimental and control groups in the pre-and post-tests as well as pre-and post-tests *form* and *content* results, paired samples t-tests were computed. The results indicated that both the groups had improved in the post-writing tests. When a paired samples t-test was computed between the intra-group means of the pre-and post-test results, both groups showed statistically significant differences (See Table 4 above).   As indicated in Table 2 above, the inter-group post-test results of the groups were also significantly different.

Further, as stated above, paired samples t-tests were also computed to investigate whether or not there exists a significant difference between the intra-group pre-and post- tests *form* and *content* results. The descriptive statistics (See Table 3 above) showed that there is a difference between the means of the groups' pre-test and post-test *form* and *content* results, but the paired samples t-test did not evidence statistically significant differences for each of the groups except between the post-test *form* and *content* results of the experimental group. Similar to the inter-group aggregate pre-test results, the groups' *form* and *content* results were slightly below the average before the intervention had taken place. The *form* and *content* results of both the experimental and control groups, however, were improved in the post-writing tests.

*Table 5: Descriptive statistics for pre-and post-tests* form *and* content *results of the experimental and the control groups.*

| Tests | Group | N | Mean | Std |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test Form | Control | 47 | 23.4149 | 4.49313 |
| | Experimental | 47 | 24.2021 | 5.31268 |
| Pre-test Content | Control | 47 | 23.3404 | 4.80048 |
| | Experimental | 47 | 24.5638 | 5.60242 |
| Post-test Form | Control | 47 | 37.6489 | 2.89286 |
| | Experimental | 47 | 37.9681 | 3.67483 |
| Post-test Content | Control | 47 | 37.9468 | 3.21213 |
| | Experimental | 47 | 40.3511 | 3.45611 |

As indicated in Table 2 above, there is a significant difference between the means of the control and the experimental groups (0.042) at alpha 0.05 level. What has brought the difference, however, was not clear since the comparison was made between the aggregate mean results of the groups. Thus, independent samples t-tests were calculated to see if there were significant differences between the inter-group *form* and *content* pre-test and post-test results.

Accordingly, as indicated in Table 5, the average pre-test *form* results of the experimental group participants had a mean of about 24.20 (std. 5.31), while the control group had a mean of about 23.41 (std. 4.49). The pre-test *content* results were also almost akin to the *form* results. Hence, the experimental group had a mean of about 24.56 (std.5.6), while the control group had a mean of 23.34 (std.4.8). The participants' post-writing test *form* results for the experimental and the control groups, a mean of 37.97 (std.3.67) and 37.65 (std. 2.89), respectively; and *content* results, a mean of 40.35 (std. 3.45) and 37.95 (std.3.21) were clearly higher than their scores in the pre-writing tests.

*Table 6: Independent samples t-test results between the pre-and post-test* form *and*

content.

| Tests | Mean difference | df | t | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pre-test  Form: Control& Experimental | .78723 | 92 | .776 | .440 |
| Pre-test  Content: Control& Experimental | 1.22340 | 92 | 1.137 | .259 |
| Post-test  Form: Control& Experimental | .31915 | 92 | .468 | .641 |
| Post-test Content: Control& Experimental | 2.40426 | 92 | 3.493 | .001* |

*The mean difference is significant at $p < 0.05$ level.

Further, the independent samples t-tests of the pre-and post-writing tests *form* and *content* results between the experimental and control groups were computed to see if their differences were statistically significant. The results indicated that there were no significant differences between the *form* and *content* results of the groups except in the *content* post-writing test. In other words, the independent samples t-test between the control and experimental groups pre-test *form* and *content* as well as post-test *form* results indicated that their differences were not statistically significant. However, it was observed that there was a statistically significant difference between the *content* post-test results of the control and experimental groups at alpha 0.05 level with 92 degree of freedom; the experimental *content* results exhibiting higher than the control group's results. Table 6 above shows the summary of the results.

Therefore, what has brought the difference between the aggregate results of the control and experimental groups (See Table 2) is the difference between the post-test *content* results of the control (37.95) and the experimental (40.35) groups, the latter

significantly exceeding the mean of the former.

**Participants' views about using L₁ during the pre-writing stage**

As stated above, ten randomly selected participants (five Å›ÑŸ each group) were asked about their interest in using Amharic or English in the pre-writing stage. The interviewees were required to justify their positive or negative responses to the probe. Therefore, among the interviewees, two (a girl and a boy) from the control group and all the five (three boys and 2 girls) from the experimental group said that discussion in Amharic during the pre-writing stage would help them enhance their writing ability. Those from the experimental group said the cause for their preference was that using Amharic during pre-writing stage helped them discuss ideas deeply, and abled to think about only language use during writing rather than thinking about what they should write about. Two participants from the control group also assumed that L₁ could be of help serving the same purposes stated by the students

from the experimental group. Two other students (both boys), however, liked to discuss in English because they assumed they would share vocabulary and structures from their peers when they discuss in English. A female student who did pre-writing practice activities in English expressed her resentment in group discussion whatever the medium is since she has fear to express herself among people. She preferred individual work.

## DISCUSSION

As reported in the findings, a comparison of the pre-test results of the control and the experimental groups was made. The t-test has unveiled that there was no statistically significant difference between them. This result informs that the two groups of participants of the study had a similar capability in writing before the treatment. The t-test for the aggregate post-writing tests results, however, showed a significant difference between the experimental and the control groups of the study; the experimental group showing better results. This finding is in conformity with the findings of Stapa and Abdulmejid (2009) that participants who used $L_1$ during the pre-writing stage outdid significantly in their post-test writing results compared to those who used $L_2$. The experimental group participants' post-test writing results exceeded the results of the control group presumably because the pre-writing discussion (the idea-generating stage) held in Amharic ($L_1$) during the four writing practice tasks could positively contribute to the expected goal, idea generation, better than the discussion conducted in English could.

As researches divulged, the quality of the English language in Ethiopia has dwindled

through times (Amlaku, n.d:10). As Amlaku stated:

English in Ethiopia is a medium of instruction from secondary school through higher education but the learners proficiency remains always poor and the effectiveness of English language teaching remains always questionable, despite the efforts being undertaken by the Ethiopian government and concerned institutions.

This fact is also maintained in the 1994 Education and Training Policy of Ethiopia, and it is suggested that necessary steps be taken 'to strengthen language teaching at all levels' (p.24). The cause for less performance of the control group compared to the experimental group in the post-writing test could, then, be the low sharing of ideas among the group members using English as a medium of discussion, since the participants of the study can also be subject to low capacity in English. Conversely, the experimental group participants outperformed the control group participants in the post-writing test most likely because they mustered sufficient ideas during the idea-generating stage (pre-writing stage) in their groups during practice; and probably they focused much on the 'how' of writing rather than the 'what' in their writing.

This finding can be considered as consistent with the views that $L_1$ can be used as a resource for learning (Cook, 2001); a facilitator of learning (Mee-Ling, 1996) and cognitive processing (Brooks and Donato, 1994; Swain and Lapkin, 2000). It also goes in line with Scott's (1996), Wang's (2003), Woodall's (2002) and Wen's (2002) ideas that $L_1$ is fundamental in generating ideas while writing in an $L_2$. Weijen *et al's* (2008) finding is also worth mentioning which

claims that $L_1$ is crucial for generating ideas in $L_2$ composition.

The interviewees in this study, particularly those who were in the experimental group, also witnessed that the $L_1$ (Amharic) was of a great help for them to generate ideas, and they could use much of their time allotted for searching the linguistic requirement to express their ideas. The responses the interviewees gave support the statistical findings reported above.

As the findings revealed, statistically significant differences were not also observed between the participants' (both control and experimental) in-group and across-group *form* and *content* scores during the pre-test, but this was not true for all the post-writing test scores. In the post-writing test, a significant difference was not observed between the *form* and *content* scores of the control group participants. Similarly, there was no significant difference between the *form* scores of the control and experimental groups. What caused disparity was the *content* test score of the experimental group compared with the *form* score of the group and the *content* results across the groups. In both cases, the *content* result of the experimental group was found to be better. This may be judged as the superlative role of the $L_1$ in idea generation, content development, while composing in an $L_2$ (Stapa and Abdulmajid, 2009; Jones and Tetrone, 1987; and Friedlander, 1990). From this, it may be possible to conclude that the $L_1$ use at the pre-writing stage contributes more in content development or idea generation. In other words, its impact on the improvement of *form* is limited. Stapa and Abdulmajid (2009:45), in a related endeavor, however, found that $L_1$ use helped students generate ideas and 'produce better quality essays in terms of overall score, content, language, organization, vocabulary and mechanics'.

Unlike the findings in this study, these researchers disclosed that $L_1$ use brought significant improvements in both *form* and *content* of students' L2 writing. It was also witnessed by the interviewees in this study that their discussion in Amharic could help them share ideas without difficulty. The linguistic development of the control and the experimental groups, however, was not affected much by the language of discussion at the pre-writing (idea generating) stage. This is true probably because their previous English language proficiency has influenced their writing performance.

A significant difference was observed between the pre-and post-writing intra-group results of    the groups. The experimental group has shown the difference presumably because of the $L_1$ mediation at the idea generating stage during the four intervening writing practice activities. The difference observed between the pre-and post-tests writing results of the control group most likely came about as a consequence of the natural development of repeated practices in writing. Despite this result, as reported above in Table 2, the computed post-writing aggregate results (inter-group results) of the experimental and the control groups revealed a significant difference. The interpretation to this complex finding could be that the experimental group outsmarted the control group in the quality of writing, although improvements were also noticed between the intra-group pre-and post-writing results.

## CONCLUSION

This experimental study disclosed that $L_1$ (Amharic in this case) use during the pre-writing (idea generating) stage in an $L_2$ (English in this case) composition writing has an impact on participants' writing

development, particularly in idea development or in incorporating sufficient content in their writing. This fact has been exhibited in the participants' post-writing tests results. So, the employment of an $L_1$ for generating ideas in groups while composing in an $L_2$ may be desirable.

**Pedagogical implications**

This study has elucidated the influence of using Amharic ($L_1$) on students' writing in English ($L_2$), especially in incorporating sound *content* in their writing. This is a finding which is also true in other similar researches in different countries (**Stapa and Abdulmajid, 2009**). Current approaches in language teaching also acknowledge the relevance of $L_1$ employment, but it should be used cautiously as it may result in total dependence on the $L_1$ and hamper $L_2$ development. Based on the current findings, the author of this research views that $L_1$ needs to be incorporated to scaffold students' generation of ideas during the pre-writing stage; and it is mainly important if students are engaged in group discussion because they share ideas without being hampered by the $L_2$ linguistic barrier. The discussion in the language they are comfortable with may also be important to transfer the skill and strategy of gathering ideas in an $L_2$ when their competence develops and use the target language in discussion, outlining and composing. This implies that the use of the $L_1$ should not last long; it has to serve only the purpose of gap filling for the students' $L_2$ linguistic deficiency, which may change through time. In other words, it may be used with low English language proficient students (See also Jones and Tetrone; Paiz, 2011; Wang and Wen, 2003). Therefore, teachers who teach composition at secondary school level can carefully allow students to discuss ideas in groups in their first language

before they write the actual composition individually.

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