## *ORIGINAL*

# High School Students' Writing Skills and their English Language Proficiency as Predictors of their English Language Writing Performance

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*Abstract*

*This study endeavored to find out whether or not grade 11 students' L$_1$ (Amharic, in this case) writing and their L$_2$ (English) proficiency could significantly predict their L$_2$ writing. It also investigated whether or not the students' L$_2$ reading, grammar and vocabulary knowledge could significantly determine their L$_2$ writing. To this end, students' first semester final English examination, and teacher-made writing (both in L$_1$ and L$_2$), English reading, grammar and vocabulary tests were given. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient and multiple regressions were used for analyses. The results indicated that all the predicting (independent) variables significantly correlated with the dependent variable (L$_2$ writing); however, only students' L$_1$ writing, first semester overall English and reading test scores were significant predictors of their L$_2$ writing. Finally, it was recommended that special attention be paid to the students' grammar and vocabulary leaning approach so that they will be able to apply them in their L$_2$ writing.*

*Key words: linguistic interdependence, threshold level, transfer, prediction*

## INTRODUCTION

One of the major weaknesses Ethiopian students exhibit at different levels is writing in English (L$_2$) (Solomon, 2001); and the situation is worse in secondary schools. The problem is acute even at post-secondary levels in which students fail to cope with the writing requirements in the courses they take. What are the causes for students' failure in writing? Is it a problem of using appropriate strategy or lack of adequate threshold L$_2$ proficiency? In response to these questions, scholars fall back on Cummins' (1976) linguistic interdependence and threshold level proficiency theories. These theories have been issues of contention; so, there is still a felt-need of investigating their impact on students' L$_2$ writing. This study, therefore, aims at investigating which of these factors significantly contribute to the students L$_2$ writing competence. Learner factors and the teaching/learning environment are not included in this study.

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- *Transfer of $L_1$ writing skills or $L_2$ threshold level?*

The transfer of $L_1$ skills to $L_2$ has been viewed differently by experts. On the one hand, the transfer is assumed as inhibitive to the development of learners' $L_2$ competence. This view is related to $L_1$ interference with $L_2$ learning 'resulting learner errors' (Witalisz, 2006:169). Xiao-xia (2008:50), in his review, has also indicated that 'former studies… on the $L_2$ writing production…found that the negative transfer of $L_1$ was much more powerful than the positive transfer in L2 writing.' For Xiao-xia, this was based on contrastive analysis. In line with the harmful effect of $L_1$ transfer to $L_2$ writing, Bennui (2008) found that the chronic writing problem exhibited in students' writing was caused by the interference of the $L_1$ (Thai, in this case). On the other hand, the $L_1$ writing skills are considered as relevant to enhance $L_2$ writing. Xiao-xia (2008) has reported that current studies on $L_2$ writing proved positive transfer of $L_1$ writing skills because of the dependency of the deep structures of the two languages. As cited in Bennui (2008), Cummins (1976) has provided explanations for the inconsistent findings on the issue. According to Cummins, there may be a threshold level of $L_2$ linguistic proficiency that learners should attain to gain advantages in their $L_2$ writing skills.

There still exists a strong argument concerning the impact of transfer of $L_1$ language learning strategies to $L_2$ learning. The contention mainly revolves around whether or not the transfer of the learning strategies in $L_1$ to develop $L_2$ skills' competence is adequate by itself or also requires a minimum level of competence in the $L_2$. This pertains to Cummins' (1979) Linguistic Interdependence and Threshold Hypotheses. The former hypothesis argues that learners' knowledge and skills of the $L_1$ can be instrumental and be positively transferred to the development of corresponding abilities in the $L_2$; while the latter emphasizes the need for threshold level proficiency in the $L_2$. A lot of researches (such as Bernhardt and Kamil, 1995) have been conducted in reading and writing since Alderson (1984) posed a controversial question of whether second language reading problem is a problem of linguistic interdependence or a problem of linguistic threshold, and others studied to respond to this question, and found varying results; some favoring either of the theories, and some others supporting both.

*Linguistic interdependence between $L_1$ and $L_2$ writing skills*

The Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis [LIH] (also called the iceberg hypothesis), developed by Cummins (1976), emphasizes the relationship (or influence) between $L_1$ and $L_2$ writing skills. The theory maintains the view that what appears to be different in the languages is superficial, but actually the skills in the two languages are interdependent. The LIH developed from Cummins' Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) theory– which is also called 'One Balloon Theory'– that purports cognitively demanding tasks, such as literacy, content learning, abstract thinking and problem-solving, are common across languages; and they are transferrable. Reading and writing as cognitive skills are deemed to transfer from $L_1$ to $L_2$ (Fitzgerald & Shanahan, 2000); and this parallels Cummins' (1994) linguistic interdependence theory. However, the transferability of writing skills across languages is inconclusive (Grabe, 2001). Some researchers (for instance, Okabe, 2004) have indicated that there was a weak or no correlation between $L_1$ and $L_2$ writing skills.

*The Threshold Hypothesis and transfer of writing skills from $L_1$ to $L_2$*

Exponents of the Threshold Hypothesis for a transfer of writing skills from $L_1$ to $L_2$

skills contend that a minimum (threshold) level of linguistic competence is compulsory for effective transfer of writing skills from $L_1$ to $L_2$ skills. Ito (2009) evinced that the transfer from $L_1$ to $L_2$ writing skills was short-circuited by limited $L_2$ (English) proficiency. In contrast, the study revealed that the better the $L_2$ proficiency level of the writing students, the higher transferability of the $L_1$ writing skills to $L_2$ writing could be. As Ito unveiled "…writers of intermediate and advanced proficiency may be able to transfer more $L_1$ writing skills to $L_2$ due to their better command of English than … EFL writers with lower $L_2$ knowledge" (p.8). Similarly, Berman (1994) also showed that proficient learners could transfer the skill of writing from $L_1$ to $L_2$. Both Ito's and Berman's findings, however, do not contradict with the concept of linguistic interdependence theory, but they indicated the need to boost up threshold $L_2$ competence. A similar result was arrived at by Sasaki and Hirose (1996). Sasaki and Hirose studied the $L_1$ and EFL writing performance of Japanese students modelling the interplay between EFL proficiency, $L_1$ writing ability and strategic knowledge and writing experience. The result showed that the students' foreign language ($L_2$) proficiency was the major predictor of their EFL writing performance.

### The roles of students' English language grammatical and vocabulary knowledge and reading ability in developing their writing skills

Students' writing skills in an $L_2$ can be influenced by their reading experience in the $L_2$ (Krashen, 1984). Students gain a wider exposure to the $L_2$ if they are reading various types of reading texts; and, as a result, they expand their vocabulary knowledge, implicitly learning grammar and the organizations of texts, and enrich their ideas in various walks of life. In order to write quality paragraphs (or essays),

students' lexical knowledge or vocabulary is also vitally important. Words carry meanings and help students communicate with their readers effectively. Lack of words usually creates a breakdown in communication. Researchers such as Laufer and Nation (1995) and Putra (2009) asserted that students' vocabulary knowledge and writing performance correlate significantly. As many agree, vocabulary knowledge alone, however, cannot end in accurate and effective writing. Communication demands the use of words in sentences; that is, the need for grammatical knowledge is also unquestionable.

This study attempted to investigate which of the variables- students' English language proficiency or their $L_1$ writing ability- can predict their $L_2$ writing ability. It also tried to find out whether or not students' English grammar and vocabulary knowledge as well as their reading ability could significantly predict their writing in English. As indicated in the introductory section of this paper, Ethiopian high school students have difficulties in English language writing, and therefore different methods should be devised to alleviate their deficiencies. One method might be having recourse to their $L_1$ writing strategy use; and the other could be developing their $L_2$ proficiency, or focusing on both. Which of these factors does predict students' $L_2$ writing significantly? Such a study was not conducted in Ethiopia to date. Therefore, this study endeavors to respond to the following research questions.

1. Is there a relationship between students' $L_1$ and $L_2$ writing scores?
2. Is there a correlation between students' overall first semester English language scores and their English writing scores?
3. Is there a relationship between students' English grammar, reading

and vocabulary scores and their English writing scores?

4. Which of the variables- students' $L_1$ writing or overall first semester English language scores- significantly predict students' English language writing scores?

5. Which of the variables- students' $L_2$ reading, vocabulary or grammar scores- significantly predict students' English language writing scores?

**METHODOLOTY**

**Design of the study**
This study aimed to investigate whether or not students' Amharic ($L_1$) writing ability and their overall English language ($L_2$) performance could significantly predict their $L_2$ writing. Besides, it also looks into whether or not their English grammar knowledge, their a reading ability and vocabulary knowledge significantly predict the development of their $L_2$ writing performance. Therefore a regression design was employed using students' $L_2$ writing as dependent variable and students' $L_1$ writing ability, their overall $L_2$ examination results, their $L_2$ vocabulary, reading and grammar knowledge as independent variables.

*Participants of the study*
The participants of the study were the 2011/12 Academic Year grade 11 students at Bichena Secondary School, East Gojjam, Ethiopia. Two sections were selected based on simple random sampling from the total 10 grade eleven sections (N=476); and 94 (47 from each section) students were randomly selected from the two sections. The researcher chose only two sections because he assumed that the total number of students in the sections is manageable, and the samples could be representative of group heterogeneity.

*Instruments used*
In order to look into whether or not the predicting variables (students' $L_1$ writing competence, $L_2$ proficiency, $L_2$ grammar knowledge, reading ability and vocabulary knowledge) impact on students' $L_2$ writing, their first semester English examination scores, their Amharic writing, English grammar, vocabulary and reading tests scores were used for the purpose. The tests used for data gathering were teacher-made tests in all cases because there were no standard tests as such in the Ethiopian schools, on one hand; and the teachers were well-experienced and deemed to be familiar with the curriculum objectives and the students' level of learning, on the other. Thus, it was thought that the teachers could prepare tests to the students' level based on the curriculum objectives and level descriptors in general, and lessons' objectives in particular.

*Students' first semester English language scores*
The first semester English ($L_2$) scores, which included results of the continuous assessments and the final examination, were taken to assess the students' proficiency level. The examination constituted items in Reading Comprehension, Vocabulary, and Grammar sections; and it was assumed to be free of bias in evaluating students' overall achievement in English. The examination, besides evaluating students' achievement in the semester curriculum content, is assumed to indicate the students' proficiency in the language. As stated above, there were no standard tests to gauge grade 11 students' proficiency. Application of international standard proficiency tests such as TOEFL were considered implausible because of the English language learning environment in Ethiopia, the general nature of TOEFL and IELTS and their inapplicability as specific at grade 11 level. Therefore, teacher-made tests were taken as measurements for

students' $L_2$ proficiency (and, of course, achievement). Such examinations (tests) in Ethiopia also serve as diagnostic proficiency tests for employment. The overall scores students achieved in the examination were taken out of 50.

*The writing, grammar, vocabulary and reading tests*

Teacher-made Amharic and English writing tests were given to the participants. This was preferred because the teachers, who were well-experienced and familiar with the curriculum objectives, were assumed to prepare 'standard' tests to the level based on the learning objectives and the level expected of the students. The tests were developed by Amharic and English teachers, the same teachers who taught the same groups of students who participated in this study. Both the Amharic and the English teachers selected topics which were familiar to the students; and the students were ordered to write freely on a 150 words level. The tests were given within a week time gap: the Amharic in the first week, then the English. The participants' Amharic and English writing scores were taken out of 50 each. Each of the writing tests was corrected by two teachers (raters) for validity of scores; thus the average scores of the raters were considered as students' writing scores.

Students were also given teacher-made English grammar, vocabulary and reading tests; and the reason for choosing teacher-made tests was teacher's experience and familiarity with the curriculum objectives. The tests were also evaluated by two other English teachers in the same school for validity. The tests items were similar to the

items given in the final English examination. These tests were given on different days two weeks before their final examination. The grammar and vocabulary tests also included items from their previous grade levels; and this made them different from the items included in the first semester final examination. The reading test was prepared based on the grade level of the students. The grammar, vocabulary and reading tests were developed by the English teacher separately who taught the groups of students selected for the study. This was done because the teacher had the experience and the knowledge about his students' level, the lesson objectives and the contents included in the textbook meant for the level. Each of the students' grammar, vocabulary and reading scores was taken out of 50.

***Methods of data analysis***

Descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviation as well as inferential statistics particularly Pearson's correlation and multiple regression were used to analyze data. Pearson's correlation was used to see the relationships between the independent variables (students' $L_1$ writing ability, their overall $L_2$ examination results, their vocabulary, reading and grammar knowledge ) and the dependent variable ($L_2$ writing results).  The independent variables which significantly correlated with the dependent variable were further analyzed using multiple regression statistics to see which of the independent variables significantly predict the dependent variable.  The findings are summarized in the tables below.

**The results of the study**
**Table1: Correlations among students' EW, AW and their OEL test scores and results from the regression analysis**

| Variables | Mean | S D | Correlation with EW | Multiple regression weights | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Beta | t | Sig. |
| EW scores | 22.9175 | 8.44303 | | | | |
| AW scores | 29.1340 | 7.00837 | .629* | .498 | 5.664 | .000 |
| OEL scores | 25.4691 | 5.76484 | .512* | .267 | 3.042 | .003 |
| | | | | | | $R^2$=.450* |

*significant at P< 0.05

Key:  EW=English Writing
            semester scores
         AW=Amharic Writing

OEL= Overall English Language

Table 1 indicates that the students' Amharic test result was greater than their overall English language examination result; and their English writing test result was less than their Amharic test result and overall English language semester result. The students' overall English language semester result was almost equal to half of the total score (50); their Amharic test result was their best result, but their English language writing test score was below average. All the scores have high standard deviations which show that the students' responses varied among individuals.

Pearson's correlation coefficient was computed to see whether or not there were significant relationships between the students' OEL, AW, and EW test results. As can be seen from Table 1, there was a significant positive correlation between students' EW and their AW test results (.63), and their EW and their OEL test results (.51) as well as their AW and their OEL test results (.49). In order to determine the significant predictors of the students' writing in English, a regression analysis was carried out. The results are summarized in Table 1 above.

As the $R^2$ result indicates both the students' AW writing skills and overall English language examination scores together determine (predict) their English writing scores by 45%; and this was significant at p< 0.05. As the multiple regression result for individual predicting variables indicated, both AW and OEL skills predict students' writing skills significantly at p<0.05, the Beta for AW results being .498 and for OEL being .267, with t-values of 5.664 and 3.042, respectively.

**Table 2: Correlations and regression analyses among students' EW, English language grammar, reading and vocabulary results**

| Variables | Mean | S D | Correlation with EW | Multiple regression weights | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Beta | t | Sig. |
| EW results | 22.9175 | 8.44303 | | | | |
| Grammar results | 25.0155 | 8.54353 | .285* | .089 | .823 | .410 |
| Reading results | 25.8866 | 7.37800 | .427* | .294 | 2.448 | .016 |
| Vocabulary results | 23.2423 | 6.64545 | .383* | .153 | 1.211 | .229 |
| | | | | | | $R^2$=.210* |

As indicated in Table 2, the descriptive statistics shows that students' English language grammar and reading results were almost half of the total score in each case (50), while their vocabulary result was a little below half. The standard deviations in all cases show that the students' responses have high deviations from mean scores. Pearson's correlation coefficient results indicate that students' English grammar test scores significantly correlated with their English writing scores ($r^2=.29$). Similarly, their English language reading and writing ($r^2=.43$) as well as their vocabulary and writing ($r^2=.38$) results significantly correlated.

These results were further investigated using regression analysis to see the significant predictors of students' English language writing performance. The students' English language grammar, reading and vocabulary results together predicted their English language writing results by 21%; and this was significant at $p<0.05$. The regression analysis for individual predicting variables (computing stepwise analysis), however, indicated that only the students' reading results could significantly predict their EW at $p<0.05$.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the study indicated that the students' $L_1$ writing results and their overall English language semester results were significantly positively correlated with their $L_2$ writing scores. This may mean the increase in their $L_1$ writing scores and their overall English language scores may increase their $L_2$ writing scores. Conversely, it may mean the less the students' $L_1$ writing test scores and their overall English language semester scores indicate the less their $L_2$ writing scores would be. This result implies that students' writing skill in their $L_1$ and their overall English language semester scores have an

*significant at $P< 0.05$

impact on their $L_2$ writing skill development. This can possibly be interpreted as the strategy transfer from $L_1$ to $L_2$ writing is preordained; and a threshold level of proficiency is crucial. The finding concerning $L_1$ skill transfer to $L_2$ writing is inconsistent with Okabe's (2004) finding which disclosed that there was a weak or no correlation between $L_1$ and $L_2$ writing skills, on the one hand; and consistent with Fitzgerald and Shanahan's (2000) finding that revealed positive writing skills transfer from $L_1$ to $L_2$, on the other. The findings are consistent with Fitzgerald and Shanahan's findings and different from Okabe's probably because of the students' familiarity with the topic they wrote about and/or their $L_2$ proficiency level. Both may impact on the transfer of $L_1$ to $L_2$ writing skills (Husien & Mohammed, 2010). The finding in this study testifies (parallels) Cummins (1994) linguistic interdependence theory. The fact that students' overall $L_2$ semester score influences their $L_2$ writing skill development can be taken as a proof for Cummins' (1978) hypothesis of the need for $L_2$ threshold level proficiency (See also Grabe, 2001) so as to compose in an $L_2$ effectively (and also fluently).

Similarly, the students' English grammar, reading and vocabulary scores were significantly positively correlated with their $L_2$ writing scores. This may mean the higher the students' scores in English reading, grammar and vocabulary tests, the higher their scores in their $L_2$ writing tests would be. On the contrary, the less the scores in the independent variables, the less their scores in their $L_2$ writing scores could be. This finding partly agrees with the assertion Laufer & Nation (1995) made that students' writing performance and vocabulary knowledge correlate significantly.

The regression analysis has disclosed that the students' $L_1$ writing score has significantly predicted their $L_2$ writing score (p<.05). This result suggests that students should be trained in their $L_1$ to apply the skill (strategy) in composing their $L_2$. Likewise, their overall first semester English language scores also predicted their $L_2$ writing significantly (p<.05). This also indicates the need for minimum level proficiency in the $L_2$ to effectively compose in the $L_2$. Both results show that $L_1$ reading skill and $L_2$ proficiency are crucial for students in the process of their $L_2$ writing skills development. These findings comply with Grabe's (2001) idea that both $L_1$ reading skill and $L_2$ proficiency are important; and these also prove Cummin's (1994) linguistic interdependence and linguistic threshold theories.

The regression analysis also divulged that students' reading scores were significant predictors of their writing scores. This result is in line with the view of Krashen (1984). As Krashen noted, students' reading experience can influence their $L_2$ writing ability. This sounds true because students in a foreign language environment get language input from their readings, and this input helps them develop their overall language ability, and particularly writing since they learn organization, structure and other elements of composition implicitly. On the other hand, students' grammar and vocabulary scores were not significant predictors of their writing scores. This result is unexpected because as Laufer & Nation (1995) have pointed out, students' vocabulary knowledge and their writing performance significantly correlate. In this study, despite the significant correlation they possess, vocabulary knowledge was not a significant predictor of students' writing. Kim (2008) also reported that students' with a good deal of knowledge of $L_2$ vocabulary had difficulties writing essays in the $L_2$. The cause for this might be

the vocabulary knowledge students have is knowledge of distinct terms alienated from contextual use. And, this assumption is likely to happen because the conception of learning vocabulary most Ethiopian students have is memorization (of words and even phrases) as some studies indicate (Abiy, 2005). They usually fail to apply what is learned (studied) into practice (in this case, failure to use their vocabulary knowledge in their writing).

The same is true with the grammar knowledge. Despite the tendency to apply communicative approaches, students in Ethiopia study the rules of grammar, rather than its application in oral or written communication; and this affects their use of the grammar knowledge in their $L_2$ writing. This was clearly indicated by Solomon (2001) that high school students' low achievement in English was caused by the 'grammar focused teaching approach' teachers employed. It also goes consistent with what Kim (2008:1) remarked as many L2 writers with adequate sentence-level knowledge of grammar fail to compose well-organized essays.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, it may be possible to conclude that students' $L_1$ experience in writing and their threshold $L_2$ proficiency are significant predictors of their $L_2$ writing. Similarly, students' reading skill in an $L_2$ also impacts on students' $L_2$ writing. However, students' vocabulary and grammar knowledge is not significant predictor of their $L_2$ writing. Therefore, it is recommended that teachers teach vocabulary and grammar through contexts so that students can learn how to apply their knowledge into practice; that is, in their $L_2$ compositions. As the study revealed, both skill transfer and $L_2$ proficiency have predicted the students' $L_2$ writing by 45%; therefore, it is also recommended that other factors (such as

socio-cultural vocabulary and students' writing experiences in $L_2$ etc.) than skill transfer and $L_2$ proficiency that predict students' $L_2$ writing should be investigated.

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