An Investigation of L1 Effects on Macao Cantonese English Learners in Their English Writings

Ngan Leng Mak

(University of Science and Technology, Macao)

Abstract: English maintains to be a de facto language within the educational system in Macau, a Cantonese-speaking region, making the city a special context to study first language (L1) effect on second language (L2) learning. The fact that L2 learners' assumption of word-for word translation from L1 to L2 rendered the language transfer inevitable yet could be detrimental to the less capable L2 learners in particular.

A small scale study was conducted from March to December in 2013. 200 pieces of English writings collected from the university 2012/2013 admission examination were studied to identify tokens of word-by-word translation. "Word-by-word" translation was found in over 70% of the writings. 30 Macau students who were weak in their L2 writing were then interviewed. 70% reported that L1 has negative effects on their English learning. 1/3 described themselves as a "translator" instead of a writer, and that they realized they somehow lost the train of learning an L2 but simply another version of their L1.

The present study suggested that word-by-word translation, evidently and inevitably a consequence of learners' L1, is extremely salient among low proficiency Macau ESL learners. Equally significant, the researcher called for the attention of Macau students' general poor performance in English writing and their losing train of learning an L2 (English), which appeared to be detrimental to the written output.

Key words: L1 effect, L2 learning, word-by-word translation

1. Introduction

Being the official language of 73 countries, English enjoys absolute superiority over other languages. It is the most learned language and in fact, a world-wide, or the so-called universal language that each and every man is expected to know a little, if not a lot. This is particularly paramount in a globalized era when an individual's livelihood no longer limits to his or her own birth place but stretches out, and a country's survival depends no more only on domestic growth but intertwines with policies and interests of its counterparts from the rest of the world.

The learning of English as a second language or foreign language is evidently important. For many Asian countries, English is a required subject in their primary and secondary curriculum, and it is as well a stated test subject for university entrance exam. Macao is no exception. Situated at the Pearl River Delta of the south-eastern coast of Mainland China, the Cantonese-speaking region demonstrates prominent demand and application of

Ngan Leng Mak, Lecturer, Department of General Education, Macau University of Science and Technology; research areas/interests: SLA, SLW, adult English education. E-mail: gogoiris125@yahoo.com.

English in various respects. Cantonese remains the lingua franca among Chinese in the region on one hand while English, on the other, maintains to be a de facto official status within the civil service and educational system in Macao.

1.1 English in Macao: Status and Functions

Chinese and Portuguese are specified as the official languages of the region according to the Basic Law of the Macao Special Administrative Region (SAR) (Chinese Government, 1993), however, there is a prevalent use of English among government departments, business sectors, and local populace within the territory. The Basic Law of the Macao SAR per se offers an English version along with the two official languages. Moody (2008) reported that about 70% of the government websites provides in English additionally to the public. And among all civil servants in Macao, more than 58% has fair command of English (SAFP, Macao, 2008). The prevalence of English is also illustrated by the English ability of its local residents. In 2011, more than 113,000 Macao residents (21.1% of the population) are able to speak English, almost five times the number and percentage ten years ago (Statistics and Census Service, 2011). All suggest to the fact that English permeates official and daily operation and as well fulfill a wide range of functions within the region.

1.2 English Education in Macao

A brief review of the Macao schooling system is necessary prior to a closer look of its current English education and its teaching and learning practice. Viewing from history, Macao has been a Portuguese colony for more than four hundred years before it was handed over to Mainland China in 1999. This tiny fishing village was almost left unattended by both countries until the signing of the Joint Declaration in 1987 which implied the end of Portuguese colonial rule and obliged the colonial government to pave the way for China's takeover of the territory's sovereignty (Vong, 2006, 2007).

Macao-Portuguese government's laisser faire attitude and non-intervention policy exerted profound influence to the region's development, and education is the best-case scenario. For long, Macao's educational landscape has been characterized by a huge majority of private schools and a "self-reliance" culture. A total of 119 schools are officially registered in Macao region-wide (DSEJ, 2012) and of which 107 are private schools. About half of the private schools are run by religious bodies, associations and individuals, and the rest are patriotic schools run by traditional pro-China organizations. The majority enjoys considerable self-autonomy over curriculum, teacher recruitment, school policy-making and the like. The government has little say over education affairs, restricting its involvement to the level of financial assistance (Vong, 2006). Public schools are, on the other hand, owned by the government and adopt the Portuguese education system. Diverse and disorganized as mentioned, the education system in Macao has never been universal. By and large, schools employ the Chinese, Portuguese or British education systems in accordance with their own missions and philosophies. No standardized curriculum and school-leaving examination hitherto have been established even though the Education and Youth Affairs Bureau successfully standardized the number of years attended by students from different education systems with the implementation of Law No.9/2006 "Fundamental Law of Non-tertiary Education System" (MSAR Government, 2007).

Among the sizeable proportion of private schools, only 13 (12%) of them are English-medium. These commonly-called "private English-medium schools" instruct all subjects (except Chinese) in English and typically carry prestige since parents, more often than not, believe that a fluent command of English guarantees their children a better future. Some 13% of Macao students were enrolled in such English medium schools in 2009

(Moody, 2009). Meanwhile, all private Chinese-medium schools specify English as a compulsory subject and require teachers to lecture in English as much as they can. That is often not the case, however. In most cases, low-end private Chinese-medium schools found themselves trapped in a vicious circle — unenviable reputation and meagre resources attract no quality teachers, mediocre or inferior quality of teaching team results in low proficiency students which in turn labels the schools a poor reputation. English is taught in students' mother tongue, Cantonese, in quite a lot of these schools and students are deprived of listening and speaking English in a context to which they have extremely limited exposure.

In this sense, English education in Macao appears to be even more complex and highlights the fact that almost all students in Macao are English-knowing yet their proficiency level varies widely (Education and Youth Affairs Bureau, 2001). A report revealed by the ETS (Educational Testing Services) in 2011 with Macao ranking at 117th among 163 countries in the TOEFL test could be a clue to this. Macau test-takers' scores in the four skills — listening, speaking, writing, and reading across-the-board were below the average.

As mentioned, researches on English teaching and learning in Macao were scarce, much less those targeting in SLW. The paucity contributed to a fairly strong rationale for the present study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 SLW Framework

Second language writing (SLW) is a complex activity. It requires not only linguistic skills but also challenges learners cognitively. Characterized by its multifaceted nature, SLW has gained its significance more than three decades ago (Cumming, 2001; Leki, 2000; Matsuda, 2003a; Tanova, 2012) and developed into an independent field of study that drew much attention in language teaching practicum as well as the second language acquisition (SLA) discipline.

Theoretical framework of SLW was shaped conventionally upon views of seeing L2 writing as a product and influenced much by linguistic trend and research. In late 1960s and early 1970s, L2 writing was no longer studied through the "product" perspective but a "process" point of view, accompanying by a research shift from composed product to the composing process (Matsuda, 2003b). Flower & Hayes (1981), advocators of the cognitive process theory, demonstrated profound influence in SLW research among the predecessors (Atkinson, 2011; Raimes, 1985; Zamel, 1985). They proposed that writing theory to be developed on four premises: "(a) writing is a cognitive activity of organizing different processes; (b) these processes are hierarchical; (c) it is goals-oriented; and (d) goals are also hierarchically orchestrated by the writer into high-level goals and subgoals." Regarding the composing process, Flower & Hayes identified three elements namely (a) planning (i.e., generating ideas, goal setting, and organizing), (b) translating (i.e., putting ideas into words or linguistic signs), and (c) reviewing (i.e., evaluating and revising).

Drawing upon Flower & Hayes' model, Wang & Wen (2002) further advanced an L2 composing process model which consists of three parts: the task environment, the composing processor, and the writer's long-term memory. The major difference yet a contribution as well of this model were the detailed dissection of writing process. Wang & Wen proposed five elements namely (a) task-examining, (b) idea-generating, (c) idea-organizing, (d) text-generating, and (e) process-controlling. Interrelation among the five activities was emphasized to depict the recursive nature of SLW and the effect of L1 to SLW was repeatedly mentioned.

2.2 Previous Findings on SLW

Substantial studies pertinent to SLW have made constant attempts to draw out a whole picture of the language transfer (L1 to L2 or vice versa) took place within learners when writing. Lay's (1982) case study of four native Chinese ESL writers revealed the language use during the composing process and concluded that better compositions in terms of ideas, organization, and details could be a result of abundant language switches. Quite a number of subsequent studies gave L1 credit to L2 writing particularly in learners' "planning" process that involved "generating ideas, searching for topics, developing concepts, and organizing information" (Uzawa & Cumming, 1989, p. 180; e.g., Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Kobayashi & Rinner, 1992; Wang & Wen, 2002). The benefit of L1 was more than ever true and salient for low proficiency L2 learners as more researchers (e.g., Cumming, 1990; Friedlander, 1990; Karim & Nassaji, 2013; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989) discovered it a composing strategy and in fact a tool these less skilled L2 learners relied on (van Weijen et al., 2009) to facilitate the writing process.

A coin has two sides and so does the function of L1. It could be a facilitating effect to SLW in a way but a hindrance in another. Less capable L2 learners might fail to escape from L1 thinking and trap in L2 syntactic concepts and its application. Neither could they produce grammatically correct sentences nor could they sense the accurate L2 grammar structures. L1 influence or interference has been substantially investigated and widely discussed in literature, more importantly, the fact that L2 learners' assumption of word-by-word translation from L1 to L2 rendered the language transfer inevitable, thus, to think in their L1 and change the ideas into L2 were implicitly encouraged and allowed.

A handful of studies have been conducted to look into the written errors made by Cantonese ESL learners (e.g., Budge, 1989; Chan, 2010; Green, 1991; Webster et al, 1987 etc.) and all reached consensus that the errors could be attributed to mother tongue influence. An in-depth study was carried out by Chan (2010) to investigate the written errors of Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners. In her study, some 700 pieces of untutored free-writings were examined and a range of lexicogrammatical error types were identified which were later developed into a proposed 32-item taxonomy of written errors aiming to shed more lights on the nature, sources, and prevalence of learner problems. Of the 32 types of identified errors, more than half were consequences of L1 interference in which Cantonese has been at work in an adverse way. L1 influence was evident to be an inevitable cause, more importantly, "Calquing", which was defined as "word is translating into the equivalent morpheme or word in another language" or simply understood as "word-by-word translation" was the most frequently spotted errors among Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners' L2 written output. There was a risk that L2 learners, less proficient ones of particular, relied too heavily on such "word-by-word" translation that their L2 awareness was being weakened or even eradicated. Learners might forget they were in fact acquiring a new language but perceiving themselves learning a translated version of their L1. The consequence could be detrimental to English learning.

To the author's knowledge, neither any local research has been done to understand Macau Cantonese ESL's SLW performance nor has any attempt been made to discern their written errors and its cause. The present study whereupon aimed to address the following research questions:

(1) What types of written errors are commonly found among less capable Macau Cantonese EFL learners?

(2) Is word-by-word translation notable in Macau Cantonese EFL learners' English writings?

(3) What are the perceptions of Macau Cantonese EFL learners on L1 effect and L2 writing?

3. Procedure

Taking a qualitative approach and be in line of Chan's (2010) taxonomy, the current study examined 236 pieces of English writing of college admission exam of the scholastic year 2012/2013 to address research questions 1 and 2. Moreover, 39 students from the Macau University of Science and Technology (MUST) who were fairly weak in their L2 writings were interviewed to elucidate informative data for the last research question.

The collection of data began with randomly selecting a stack of writings from the collected admission exam paper. A total of 236 pieces of writings were picked. The full score for the writing session was 20 and learners that earned less than half of it were considered to be less capable L2 writers in this study. Thus works that were marked a "10" or above and a "0" were sorted out. 200 pieces were now singled out to identify "word-by-word translation". Next, 100 pieces of writings were randomly picked from these 200 for two purposes: (a) calculated "word-by-word translation" frequency as well as (b) identified written errors on the basis of Chan's (2010) framework. Finally, 39 students (out of 42 invited) consented to do a semi-structured interview with each lasted for an average of 15 minutes.

4. Findings

In phase I, of the 236 randomly selected writings, 11 had a score of "10" or above and 25 scored a "0". Amazingly, "word-by-word translation" was found in 142 pieces of works out of the remaining 200, which was more than 70%. In phase II, 100 writings were randomly picked from the 200 and findings were reported as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Frequency of "Word-By-Word" Translation Found in the 100 Writings

	No. of writings	Percentage
word-by-word translation	45	45%
writings that scored a "3" or below	32	32%
writings that scored a "9"	6	6%

Almost 50% of the writings produced "word-by-word translation" and a notable data was that writings that were poorly graded a "3" or below accounted for 32%. Taking a closer look of these inferior works, students either provided an incomplete, incomprehensible passage or simply an off-the-track one which would undoubtedly be granted a failing score. 17 pieces, on the other hand, were found to be "word-by-word translation" free yet scored fairly low. Simple sentences, loose content as well as missing main idea were the possible reasons for the poor scores; unfortunately, they were the shared weaknesses among less capable Macau EFL learners who generally suffered from little or no awareness of grammar norms.

Regarding Chan's (2010) taxonomy of written errors, there were 13 items (as shown in Table 2) possibly resulted from L1 interference. Table 2 also indicated the number and types of errors spotted out in the 100 pieces of writings.

Surprisingly, out of the total 322 identified errors, 259 fell into groups of errors that caused by L1, or what Chan called "L1-related" error. In other words, about 80% of written errors made by Macau EFL was a consequence of their mother tongue. Furthermore, "omission of subjects" was the most frequently found error where low proficiency L2 learners tended to word-by-word "translating their ideas" or to be worse in this case, "translating spoken Cantonese" rather than "writing their ideas". The example in #456 shown in Table 2 was a

typical one. Cantonese EFL learners produced subjectless or fragmented sentences under an L1-interferred condition coupled with negligence of grammatical norms.

Table 2   No. and Types of Errors Identified

L1-related error	Freq.	Example
inaccurate directionality	13	*#440 He borrow to me the swim suit
Synonym confusion	15	#417 According my question, I know her family live without her, always fight her…
Vocabulary compensation	9	#489 We should touch more different anything.
Pseudotough movement	12	#404 It can let us easy to solve problem
Misuse of conjunctions	5	#471 Although in community was happened more thing it's sad, but I can see this thing to make me feel I grow up…
Independent clauses as objects or subjects	16	#421 I should know my mother is so hard
Pseudopassives and undergeneration of passives	7	#392 I dance I feel very happy any problem will solved
Omission of subjects	52	#456 use our eyes, see anywhere, is very bright, very white save our life
Existential structures	34	#491 There has an extracurricular activity that I thought that is the most significance
Serial verb constructions	20	#464 Father go take me to swimming
Transitivity pattern confusion	40	#473 listen their say thank you to our
Omission of copulas	49	#506 I will happy everday

Finally, the quantitative data presented in Table 3 illustrated opinions on L1 effect and SLW of the 39 interviewed students. Almost all interviewees reported to think in their L1 as the very first step when asked to do English writing. The only exception had experience of studying abroad for a semester, and that changed his usual "habit" to generate ideas in L2 rather than L1. In addition, over 75% of participants reported to undergo "word-by-word" translation in the process of writing, conforming to the high recordings of this straight forward translation coded in their works.

Table 3   Learners' Perception of L1 Effect and SLW

	No. of learners	Percentage
Think in L1 when writing English	38 (39)	97.4%
Word-by-word translation in English writing	30 (39)	76.9%
Agree that L1 has negative effect on English writing	21 (39)	53.8%
Being a "translator" rather than a writer in the process of English writing	14 (39)	35.9%
Somehow lost the train of learning an L2	10 (39)	25.7%

5. Discussion

The current study was motivated twofold; the insufficient research on English education in Macao and the general poor performance in English of Macao Cantonese EFL learners. Cantonese is a minor dialect — only limitedly and natively spoken in a few Asian regions including Macao, Hong Kong and Guangzhou. Yet the impact of the mother tongue to L2 learning was overt and perhaps detrimental. "Calquing", or what hereby referred as "word-by-word" translation could be one of the most disadvantageous. As mentioned in Chan's (2010) study, Hong Kong Cantonese ESL learners suffered from L1 influence which appeared to be an important source of the lexicogrammatical error types identified in their English writings. In light of this concern, the present paper

investigated Macao students' English output in terms of written error type on the basis of its counterparts as well as students' perception on L1 influence.

Statistically shown, "word-by-word" translation was salient among Macao low proficiency EFL learners, and that L1 interference was evident in their L2 writings. L1 influence was negatively at work in at least two aspects: Cantonese L2 learners thought in L1 at the very stage of writing, i.e., they generated, organized, and drafted their ideas in L1 before they "translated" into L2; Cantonese L2 learners tended to choose to work in L1 at the expense of L2 grammar or any other syntactic norms. As several interviewees reported, "I didn't care about the grammar when I write", "I translate my ideas into English, word by word, and that's it." The vice of ignoring grammar among Macao low proficiency L2 learners during writing could be a consequence of a phenomenon the researcher suggested — the losing train of learning a language. Almost 1/3 of participants mentioned that they regarded English as a "subject" rather than a "language" and their misconception of treating English as a "version" of Chinese drove them to produce the grammarless "Chinese English". One typical example was, "You have not feel?" when in fact should be correctly written as "Do you have the feeling (of)..?" The segment "You have not feel" was straightly a Chinese version (translation) of 你(You)有(have)沒有(not)感覺(feel).

"Word-by-word" translation or "Chinese English" were not unusual and negligible L2 learning obstacles, which have possibly turned SLW a challenge or even a threat for Macao students. And that fear could partially explain the relatively high rate of the empty writing (section) found in the study. More than 10% (25 out of 236) of writings were left blank and over 30% were incomplete, scrabbled up or unreadable. The percentage of test-takers' abstaining from writing was indeed alarming.

6. Conclusion

The study aims to take the initiative to closely look into English learning in Macao, herein reporting a genuine condition in SLW performance among Macao Cantonese EFL learners and at the same time opening up various aspects for further investigation. It has to be cautious, however, that the findings should not be over-generalized due to the small size of this study. Finally, the researcher believes the academical glimpse of Macao's current English learning is of value to follow-up researches and significance to the development of coping pedagogies and remedies.

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