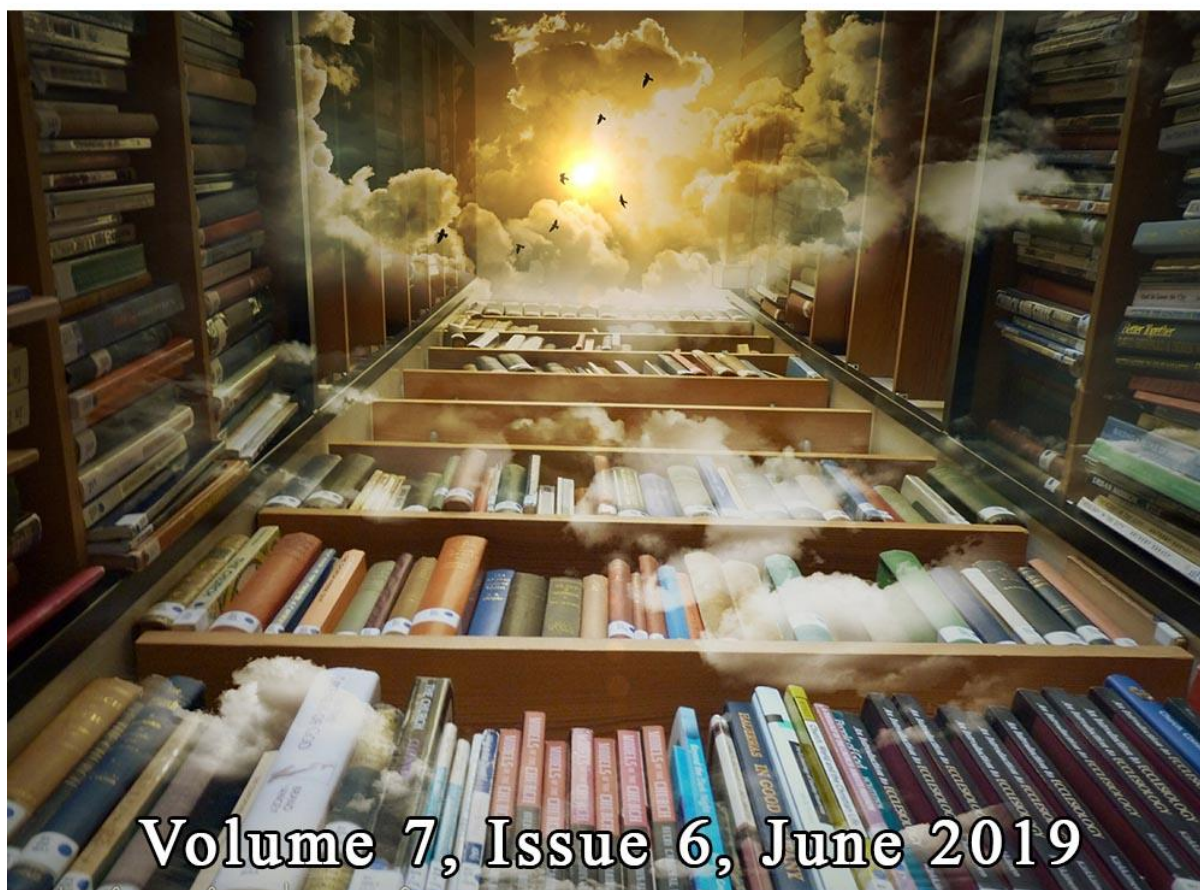


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Are Esl Learners Proficient Writers In Their L1 If Not In L2?

An Evaluative Study across Two Languages: English And Telugu

Abstract

In a bilingual Language setting like India, communication is possible in two or more languages with lesser/greater degree of proficiency. Students from regional background quite often seem to have difficulty with their writing in English. The present article makes an attempt to find out whether regional medium students find it problematic to write in English if not in their L1. For this purpose, two tests in writing, one in English and the other in Telugu have been conducted for degree level, regional medium students to evaluate their writing skills at both L1 and L2 level.

Keywords: Language learning, Regional language, writing skills, ESL learners

Introduction:

Students from regional background quite often seem to have difficulty with their writing in English. They are therefore considered to be ‘bad writers and are often taken to be

incompetent in writing. However, it is felt that they ought to be skilled writers at least in their L1, i.e., their mother tongue. This is ore true of students who come from an Open University scheme of education with not much prior education.

In a bilingual /multilingual Language setting like India, communication is possible in two or more languages with lesser/greater degree of proficiency. This is true of all language skills, but in this project, attention is focussed only none specific skill, the testing of writing. An attempt has therefore been made in this project to find out whether regional medium students find it problematic to write in English if not in their L1. To do this, two tests in writing, one in English and the other in Telugu have been conducted for degree level, regional medium students. These tests attempt at evaluating the writing skill of the students in their L2 as well as in L1 and finding out if it a language problem or skill problem These tests were evaluated with similar writing criteria, which include aspects of content, fluency, organization and mechanics of writing.

Theoretical Framework:

Multilingualism:

India is a sociolinguistic giant with multilingualism being the soul of the giant. It has existed from the beginning of the country's recorded history and has been perceived, not as good or bad, but as normal and natural phenomenon of day-to-day life.

Individual Bi-/Multilingualism:

In this multilingual setting, languages in contact form a system of network. Individuals are either bi or multilinguals depending on the social milieu and the languages needed in that society for day-to-day interaction.

According to Bloomfield, “A bilingual is one who has a native-like command over two languages”. Bilingualism is the ability to produce ‘complete meaningful utterances in the other language’ [Haugen]. Weinreich defines bilingualism as ‘the practice of alternately using two languages- and the persons involved, Bilingual’. Bilingualism has been identified as a social or societal phenomenon rather than in terms of a speaker’s proficiency in more than on language.

The language contact situations are always characterised by different degrees and kinds of bilingualism. The degree will be the same in different media and roles, at different formality/informality levels, and in different domains. What we have today in India is trilingual situation-

- a. Regional language
- b. Local lingua-franca and
- c. English

The regional language is for inter-group communication. The local lingua-franca is used in education and administration, but which has not yet been given a full chance to cover all settings of a modern technological culture. English is used as a tool for interstate and international communication, while the advent of bilingualism in India is the result of socio-political-economic necessities, besides being a ‘historic relic’ of the British Raj, it has, nevertheless taken strong roots in the sub-continent for various reasons.

Since the Indian System of Education has adopted a three-language formula, the system has by its own decree, created the Indian bi-/tri-/multilingual setting. In other words, all those who study in the Indian schools are by definition are Bilinguals. (Rajagopal, G, 1992: Developing a Bilingual by using the Learners L1 resources: An Experiment. An unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, CIEFL, Hyderabad. Pp 2-6). The use of different languages by Indians at different points of time in their day-to-day life has therefore to be examined

with reference to a general question-WHO speaks WHAT language to WHOM on WHAT occasion? As such if they are educated in the regional medium, they should be communicative in their L1 but may have problems in L2. While writing in English, they face the questions- WHO writes, WHAT language, to WHOM and on WHAT occasions? (Verma, S.K., 1977. Remarks on Bilingualism, pp 34-36).

Language Education:

Language functions as a tool for three purposes:

- i. Interpersonal communication
- ii. Individual tool for the organisation of knowledge
- iii. It is the medium through which education is provided to almost all people all over the world.

Bilingual education is concerned with the question of who is to be educated through which language and its aim is to provide vernacular and standard education for all those who need it. The student population elected for this study receives vernacular education and is taught English only as a second language.

Bilingual Education In India:

The system of education that most Indian students receive is that they are taught through home language which is also the mother tongue and English is only a second language.

Construct Of Language Proficiency:

Within this Indian educational framework, the construct of language proficiency that underlies the theoretical assumptions made in this study needs to be understood. The concept that is to be highlighted in this project is the distinction between the Separate Underlying

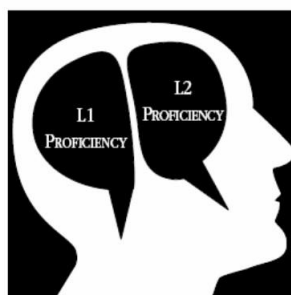
Proficiency and Common Underlying Proficiency and within it the distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency. (Cummins, Jim, 1996. Linguistic Interdependence: A Central Principle of Bilingual Education)

Cup Versus Sup:

In the case of Indian English which has been described as a non-native institutionalised variety, the norms of use are likely to be not very different from L1 norms in the country and so will exist in the user's mind even if the norms of usage do not. This concept is made clear with reference to Cummins' distinction between CUP and SUP.

The Separate Underlying Proficiency (SUP) argues that the Proficiency in L1 is separate from L2 (English) and that there is a direct relationship between exposure to a language (in home or school) and achievement in that language. If L1 and L2 proficiencies are separate, then content and skill learnt through L1 cannot be transferred to L2 and vice-versa. It is thus illogical to argue that one can better inflate L2 balloon by blowing into L1 balloon)

THE SEPARATE UNDERLYING PROFICIENCY (SUP) MODEL OF BILINGUAL PROFICIENCY

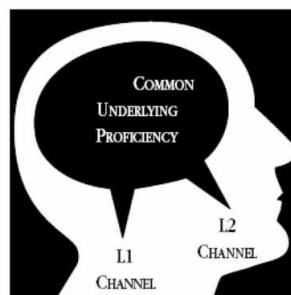


The Separate Underlying Proficiency Model (From

Cummins, 2005, September)

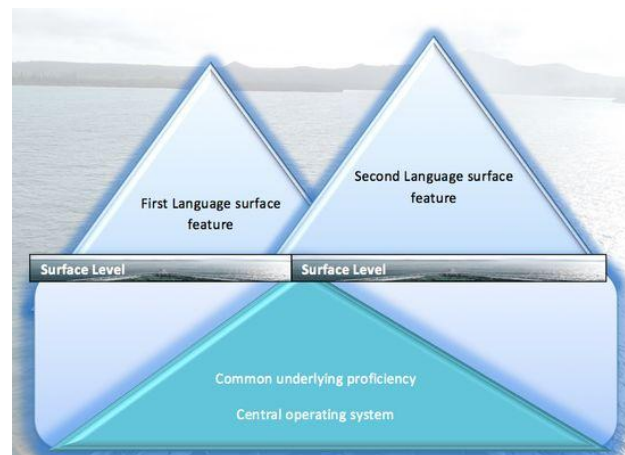
The Common Underlying Proficiency Model argues that experience with either language can promote development of proficiency underlying both languages, given adequate motivation and exposure to both either in school or at home.

**THE COMMON
UNDERLYING PROFICIENCY
(CUP) MODEL OF
BILINGUAL PROFICIENCY**



The Common Underlying Proficiency Model (From
Cummins, 2005, September)

The ‘dual iceberg’ model also explains the same concept. It says that common cross-lingual proficiencies underlie different surface manifestations of each language.



The Dual-Iceberg Representation of Bilingual Proficiency (From Cummins, 2005, September)

BICS & CALP:

Cummins stated that CUP could be divided into Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (hereinafter referred to as CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (hereafter referred to as BICS). He assumed that BICS was already available to the learner, irrespective of the nature of language proficiency and tried to find out whether CALP was language interdependent or not.

An attempt is therefore made in this project to find out whether regional medium students of English do possess 'Underlying Proficiency' abilities, specifically in writing in their L1 (Telugu) if not in their L2 (English).

Assessment of Language:

All language assessment is indirect because, through performance competence is judged. With the language assessment as a system, tasks indicate mastery of the system. When it is language assessment for communication, the judgement about competence is even more indirect. This is especially true in Communicative Language Testing where other performance factors intrude.

Communicative Language Testing (Clt):

Communicative Language Testing should

- Be as direct and performance based as possible.
- Test whether the learner has the knowledge of how to use the language forms appropriately in contexts of use (competence) and
- Test whether the learner is actually able to demonstrate this competence in a meaningful communicative situation (performance), by being able to communicate with ease and effect in specified sociolinguistic settings. (Morrow, 1979; Wein, 1990; Wesche, 1981)

The ability to communicate effectively involves the assessment of real time performance which may be affected by a large number of non-linguistic variables. These variables can convert ‘a typical performance’ situation into becoming ‘a maximum performance’ situation (Cronbach, 1970). Such a ‘performance testing’ is the only basis for the inference of competence levels for competence per se in a direct assessment. The tests that are created and administered in project are ‘performance based’, i.e., they attempt to tap typical performance as far as possible.

In Communicative Language Testing, one should

- start from somewhere
- concentrate on content
- have bias for best and
- work for washback

The tasks were created on the principle of ‘start from somewhere’ principle. The writing test in both the languages were created on the basis of the assumed prior knowledge of the world; about the issue of dowry deaths. The other two principles, viz., ‘bias for best’

and work for washback' were the general guiding principles governing the test creation and administration.

Description Of Test(Ee)S:

The testees are from regional medium background. The Centre for Distance Education, Osmania University, Hyderabad, offers courses under Open University Scheme in English and Telugu media and has various study centres in Hyderabad and Secunderabad. Railway Degree College is one of the study centres which was chosen as an ideal situation to administer the 'writing test' in both languages.

The testees come from a mixed educational background as the Open University scheme does not demand formal education. As such the testees' level of prior education ranged from Class V to class X. Ten (10) students took the English Test on the first day but only six (6) of them took the Telugu test. A gap of one week was maintained between the two tests to ensure that the Telugu test was not affected by the English test.

Description Of The Tests (Tasks):

English Task:

The testees were required to write a short argumentative essay in about 400 words, on a topic of interest to them. The task is reproduced below:

Writing Test-English

You have recently attended your cousin's wedding. You found that a lot of money had been spent on unnecessary things like-

- expensive hall
- elaborate ceremony

- extravagant dinner

Keeping this in mind, write an essay in not more than 400 words, what in your opinion ensures the success of a marriage? How far is it advisable to spend so much money on marriage function?

Think on the following hints:

- Why a ceremony at all?
- What are the essentials of a marriage ceremony?
- How much should we spend on such occasions?

TELUGU TASK:

The testees were required to write another similar argumentative essay after a gap of one week. The transliterated version is given below: (for the original version pl refer to Appendix 1)

WRITING TEST IN TELUGU:

Meeku atyanta aathmeeyudaina bandhuvu intilo, mitrudi intiko vivahaniki aahwaanam raavatamtho meeru vellaranukondi, akkada anukokunda peetala meeda pelli jarige koddi kshanala mundu godava praarambham ayyindi. Katnam dabbulu srigga andaledani aadapilla thandri kaaboye viyyankudini entha praadheyapadina sasemira oppukodu. Pelli aagipoye paristhithi vachesindi. Meeremi chestharu?

Santhalo pasuvu beram laanti ee varakatna vidhananni saaswathamga tharimikottadam ela?

Diguva icchina amsaalani pariganaloki theesikoni 400 padaalaku minchakunda charchneeyaamsamaina vishayam meeda vyasam vraayandi:

- Mangalasuthram aadavaallaki gurthimpu aithe, magavaallaki gurthimpu emaina undala?
- Varakatnam thappadu anukunte daanilki oka chattabaddhamaina parimithi, prabhutva aamoda mudra undaala?

- Varakatnaanni tharimikottadaaniki mundhadugu veyyavalasindi evaru?
- Aadapilla?
- Aame thallidhadrula?
- Aadarsha yuvakula?

Test Administration:

The writing tasks were administered one at a time with a gap of one week. For various extraneous reasons beyond the researcher's control there was some difficulty in administering the test. As a result only a limited group of testees took the test. Of the ten (10) students who took the English test, only six (6) of them wrote the Telugu test. The scripts of the students who did not write the Telugu test were exempted from the analysis. However, this did not hamper the thinking process or answering technique of the students.

Description Of The Evaluators:

The answer scripts were evaluated by the researcher first. They were counter-evaluated by a teacher-trainee in the same field in order to avoid subjectivity in evaluation and facilitate inter-rater reliability.

Data Analysis And Interpretation:

Analysis:

As has already been described, there were two evaluations of each of the writing tasks. Writing criteria were formulated before analysing the answer scripts. Common writing

criteria and common scoring key ensures objective evaluation and inter-rater reliability. The writing criteria for both the tests and the scoring key are given below:

S.No.	Criteria	Scoring key
1.	Content (relevance of the topic, idea etc.)	4 marks
2.	Fluency (Communicative efficiency)	2 marks
3.	Organisation	2 marks
4.	Mechanics of writing • Spelling – 0.5 mark • Punctuation - 0.5 mark • Grammar - 0.5 mark • Handwriting - 0.5 mark	2 marks
Total		10 marks

Since the writing test aims at communicative ability of the learner, accuracy was given least importance. However, importance has been given to the content, fluency and organisation.

The results of the test are enumerated in the tabular form as mentioned below:

(The scores in the table are the average marks taken from the marks allotted by the two evaluators. For more details refer to appendix 2)

S.No.	Testees	Medium of criteria	WRITING CRITERIA				Total
			Content	Fluency	Organisation	Mechanics of writing	
1.	I	English	2.5	1.25	1.25	0.75	5.75

		Telugu	4.0	2.0	2.0	1.0	9.0
2.	II	English	1.25	0.5	0.5	0.5	2.75
		Telugu	3.5	2.0	2.0	1.25	8.75
3.	III	English	2.5	1.25	0.75	0.25	4.75
		Telugu	3.5	1.5	1.25	1.25	7.5
4.	IV	English	3.0	0.75	1.25	1.5	6.5
		Telugu	3.75	2.0	2.0	1.75	9.5
5.	V	English	1.75	0.5	0.5	0.25	3.0
		Telugu	3.75	2.0	2.0	1.75	9.5
6.	VI	English	0.375	0.0	0.25	0.125	0.75
		Telugu	3.75	1.75	2.0	1.75	9.25

Interpretation:

The data given above clearly shows that the students have performed well in Telugu test than in the English test. It is felt that their lower performance in the English test is due to their inability to express their ideas in English.

One or two students felt that it was very difficult for them to express their ideas in English. They were struggling for words which would fit their ideas. Hence, they took more time to write a small essay. In fact, one student has readily agreed that he does not have language available with him to express his thoughts.

It was quite contrary in their written expression in the Telugu test. Those testees who took more time to write in English took relatively lesser time to write in Telugu. Since their ideas and expression of thought were clear, it was quite an easy job for them to write in Telugu.

If we take a careful look at the table above, we find that the testee VI was unable to write even ten lines in English. When he was not able to present the content properly where

can he make use of criteria like fluency, organisation, mechanics of writing etc? Most of the testees have secured 3/4/4.5 marks in the Telugu test. Testee IV was the only exception who fared equally well in both the tests.

The marks distributed in the content criterion shows that, the students had a fairly clear idea of what they were required to write and what are the relevant ideas that they have to express. They had a fairly good idea of the content to be presented but they felt handicapped due to lack of English language. If we take 'fluency' into consideration, we can understand it better. The fluency with which they were writing the Telugu test was incomparable with the fluency with which they were writing the English test. Because they were not fluent in their expression, the content was not expressed clearly. Similarly, the organisation of the essay in Telugu was much better than the organisation in English. This in any way did not hamper their ability to use the mechanics of writing.

Limitations of Study:

While creating, administering and evaluating the writing tests, the researcher found that there were certain limitations to this study which can be raised later as research issue. They are listed below:

1. Creation: While creating the tests, hints given might be a boon/bane to the learners. The hints might be of a great help to some of them. But for some of those who are at a greater level of proficiency, would have to restrict themselves to a limited range of hints. Should the hints be provided or not is a question to be raised. The nature of the topic would either be helpful or harmful. If the students find it interesting, they would perform well. But if they do not find it interesting their performance might be affected. The choice of the topics. i.e., providing more than one sample would at least help the take topics of their choice.

2. Administration: Here again, the two possible limitations are (a) time constraint and (b) re-drafting time or revision time.

a) If the time was restricted, would the learners have performed in the same way?

b) If the learners were given time to re-draft their 1st writing tasks, would their performance improve?

It would be interesting to probe into these issues because one cannot judge the performance of the learner by evaluating the first draft as the final draft. The ideas would be spontaneous, and it might negatively affect the organisation and coherence of their written text.

3. Evaluation: During evaluation also, it was found that there were variations while interpreting. The criteria were given but were interpreted differently by the evaluators. Hence, it was felt necessary for providing training sessions for the evaluator or assessor in order to erase the variations.

The above issues could be raised for further research and it would be an enriching experience to probe into such issues.

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Appendix I

WRITING TEST IN ENGLISH:

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(Meeku atyanta aathmeeyudaina bandhuvu intilo, mitrudi intiko vivahaniki aahwaanam raavatamtho meeru vellaranukondi, akkada anukokunda peetala meeda pelli jarige koddi kshanala mundu godava praarambham ayyindi. Katnam dabbulu srigga andaledani aadapilla thandri kaaboye viyyankudini entha praadheyapadina sasemira oppukodu. Pelli aagipoye paristhithi vachesindi. Meeremi chestharu?

Santhalo pasuvu beram laanti ii varakatna vidhananni saaswathamga tharimikottadam ela?

Diguva icchina amsaalani pariganaloki theesikoni 400 padaalaku minchakunda charchneeyaamsamaina vishayam meeda vyasam vraayandi:

- Mangalasuthram aadavaallaki gurthimpu aithe, magavaallaki gurthimpu emaina undala?
- Varakatnam thappadu anukunte daanilki oka chattabaddhamaina parimithi, prabhutva aamoda mudra undaala?
- Varakatnaanni tharimikottadaaniki mundhadugu veyyavalasindi evaru?
- Aadapilla?
- Aame thallidhadrula?
- Aadarsha yuvakula?)

Appendix II: Marks awarded by Evaluator 1

S.No.	Testees	Medium of test taken	WRITING CRITERIA				Total
			Content	Fluency	Organisation	Mechanics of writing	
1.	I	English	2	1	1	0.5	4.5
		Telugu	4		2	1	9
2.	II	English	1.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	3
		Telugu	4	2	2	1.5	9.5
3.	III	English	2	1	0.5	0.5	4
		Telugu	4	2	1.5	1.5	9
4.	IV	English	3	1	2	2	8
		Telugu	4	2	1.5	1.5	9
5.	V	English	1.5	0.5	0.5	0.5	3
		Telugu	4	2	2	2	10

6.	VI	English	0.25	0.0	0.0	0.25	0.5
		Telugu	4	2	2	1.5	9.5

Performance (Total marks obtained in English and Telugu)

Subjects	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
English	4.5	3	4	8	3	0.5
Telugu	9	9.5	9	10	10	9.5

Marks awarded by Evaluator II:

S.No.	Testees	Medium of test taken	WRITING CRITERIA				Total
			Content	Fluency	Organisation	Mechanics of writing	
1.	I	English	3	1.5	1.5	1	7
		Telugu	4	2	2	1	9
2.	II	English	1	0.5	0.5	0.0	2
		Telugu	3	2	2	1	8
3.	III	English	2.5	0.5	1	0.0	4
		Telugu	3	1	1	1	6
4.	IV	English	3	0.5	0.5	1	5
		Telugu	3.5	2	2	1.5	9
5.	V	English	2	0.5	0.5	0.0	1
		Telugu	3.5	2	2	1.5	9

6.	VI	English	0.5	0.0	0.5	0.0	1
		Telugu	3.5	1.5	2	1	8

Performance (Total marks obtained in English and Telugu)

Subjects	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
English	7	2	4	5	3	1
Telugu	9	8	6	9	9	8