

Before, While, and After Writing: A Study on Mother Tongue Reliance and Native Language Transfer among Students at Various Levels of Proficiency

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Abstract

Writing stands out as an exceptionally effective means for articulating thoughts and emotions, assuming a crucial role in the evaluation of learners' overall competence and is considered an essential element in English examinations. Nevertheless, the performance of high school students in China frequently fails to meet the anticipated standards in this domain. The influence of native language transfer is proposed as a primary factor contributing to this less-than-ideal outcome. This study investigates the influence of native language transfer during the English writing process of high school students. The study employed quantitative research methodology, including a writing test and a questionnaire, and applied transfer theory, comparative analysis, and error analysis theory as the theoretical frameworks. The findings indicate the levels of reliance on the mother tongue and its transfer show differences before, during, and after writing among students with varying levels of second language proficiency. This bears noteworthy pedagogical implications for the development of intervention or remedial programs for high school students.

Keywords: *language transfer; EFL writing; mother tongue influence; proficiency levels*

Introduction

English holds a significant importance in China, being a mandatory subject from primary to postgraduate education. Chinese high school students undergo formal English education for at least nine years and are expected to excel in vocabulary and grammar. Despite adequate input, many struggle to proficiently apply their English skills in speech and writing. This dilemma renders them susceptible to the influence of native language transfer, a widely studied phenomenon in second language acquisition.

Research has shown that learners often rely on the structure and semantics of their mother tongue when producing utterances in the target language, which may promote or hinder the language learning process (Ellis, 1994). According to Hu (2021), high school students frequently adopt a Chinese thinking pattern when tackling essay writing tasks, perceiving it as easier to comprehend than adjusting to the organisational framework of English. This reliance on their native language often leads to negative transfer, hampering the

development of their English skills. Therefore, researchers have been increasingly concerned about finding effective strategies for learners and educators.

In the field of second language acquisition, researchers have noticed that second language acquisition is strongly influenced by the learner's first language (Lado, 1957; Selinker, 1969; Odlin, 1989). Native language transfer is one of the principal factors leading to various kinds of errors in lexicon, syntax, and discourse in their writings (Wu, 2023). Many empirical studies involving contrastive analysis and error analysis emerged in the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., Dušková, 1969; Richards, 1974; Selinker, 1969). Over the past decade, a significant amount of research has been conducted on EFL students' error analysis and native language transfer in English learning, especially in English writing (Cen, 2023; Liu, 2021). Different types of errors in EFL students' writing have been investigated and analysed (Sun, 2023; Chen & Zhang, 2022; Wei, 2022). However, these studies have predominantly concentrated on native language transfer within the framework of error taxonomy made by EFL learners. Studies that examine the impact of reliance on the mother tongue at various stages of writing have been scarce. There is also a lack of comprehensive analysis on the transfer among Chinese high school students of different proficiency levels. Thus, the current study intends to fill this gap and seek answers to the following research question:

- i. How do the levels of involvement of the native language transfer vary across different stages of the writing process, i.e. before writing, while writing, and after writing?

Literature Review

Second Language Acquisition and Native Language Transfer

Understanding second language acquisition (SLA) is crucial for studying native language transfer in EFL writing. Researchers such as Muriel Sacille-Troike (Cook, 2016) have emphasised the relevance of early linguistic approaches to SLA. The theoretical foundations of SLA provide insights into how learners acquire a second language and how aspects of their native language may influence this process.

Language transfer, a key concept in second language learning, refers to the influence of a learner's native language on their target language production (Odlin, 1989). Corder (1981) categorised language transfer as a crucial aspect of applied linguistics, emphasising its significance in understanding language-related challenges faced by learners. Jarvis (2000) suggested that to identify first language (L1) influence reliably, there must be a significant statistical connection between L1 background and interlanguage behaviour. This connection can be established through comparing the L1 and interlanguage behaviour within a learner group or between different learner groups. Jarvis (2000) states that the following three types of evidence should be examined when evaluating whether certain learner behaviour is caused by transfer: i) intra-L1-group-homogeneity in learners' interlanguage performance, ii) inter-L1-group-heterogeneity in learners'

interlanguage performance, and iii) intra-L1-group congruity between learners' L1 and interlanguage performance.

As also discussed in Jarvis (2000), the methodological approach outlined above applies to an ideal investigation of L1 influence. Identifying all these three transfer effects constitute the most convincing evidence for transfer, but two of these effects, intra-L1-group-homogeneity in learners' interlanguage performance and intra-L1-group congruity between learners' L1 and interlanguage performance, are sufficient for verifying the presence of L1 influence. This study, thus, combined evidence from these effects to demonstrate the impact of mother tongue transfer on the Chinese high school students' English writing.

Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis

Corder's framework of applied linguistics introduces essential methodologies for investigating language transfer. Contrastive analysis, error analysis, and transfer analysis are tools that have been extensively employed to examine how learners' native language influences their target language production (Corder, 1981). These approaches offer valuable insights into specific linguistic challenges encountered by EFL learners and help identify patterns of native language interference in written expression.

Contrastive Analysis emerged for the pedagogical purpose, as mentioned by Larsen-Freeman (1991). Fries (1959) argued that teaching materials should be designed based on a careful comparison between the learner's native language and the target language. Lado (1957) also emphasised that teachers who made this comparison would have a better understanding of their students' real challenges, thus, enhancing the effectiveness of second language (L2) teaching. Consequently, Contrastive Analysis was developed to identify potential errors, aiming to determine what aspects need to be learned and what aspects do not need to be learned in L2 learning situations (Douglas et al., 1994). According to Karim and Nassaji (2013), the productive and receptive skills of L2 learners are influenced by their L1 patterns, and the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 play a crucial role in predicting the ease or difficulty of L2 learning. When similarities exist between the two languages, positive transfer occurs, while differences can lead to negative transfer or interference.

Error Analysis (EA) has evolved as a prominent tool in applied linguistics, supplanting Contrastive Analysis (CA) in the 1970s. CA, focused on predicting errors by identifying linguistic differences between learners' native language (L1) and the target language (L2), assumed that errors resulted from interference when L1 habits were transferred to L2. However, this assumption faced challenges, leading to the rise of EA. Unlike CA's exclusive focus on fully formed languages (L1 and L2), EA introduced a comprehensive methodology for investigating learners' language. It became an essential starting point for studying learners' language and second language (L2) acquisition. Although not entirely new, EA gained recognition in the 1970s, notably influenced by the work of Corder (1981). In an influential article, Corder (1981) highlighted

three significant roles of errors: informing teachers about learners' progress, providing researchers with insights into language acquisition, and serving as tools for learners to discover target language rules. Corder (1981) proposed a systematic approach for EA research, involving the collection of learner language samples, error identification, error description, error explanation, and error evaluation. These steps aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of errors in language acquisition. While the traditional role of EA centered on informing teaching practices, Corder's emphasis on error analysis as a tool for L2 researchers marked a paradigm shift. Researchers in the 1970s, motivated by a dual purpose of enhancing pedagogy and understanding L2 acquisition, laid the foundation for the systematic study of learner errors in applied linguistics.

Research on Native Transfer in English Writing

The influence of L1 on L2 language production, especially on L2 writing, has drawn considerable attention of generations of linguists. Gayo and Widodo (2018) investigated the errors that occurred on students' English writing at the morphological and syntactical levels and the factors that caused these errors by qualitative descriptive research. Chaudhary and Zahrani (2020) examined linguistic errors in EFL students' writings at a Saudi university, identifying interlingual and intralingual interference as the main error sources. Alotaibi (2023) revealed that a large percentage of errors in students' writing could be attributed to L1 transfer, emphasizing the importance of understanding linguistic differences between Saudi students' L1 and English to address first language interference in writing.

Due to various factors such as history and social development of China, research on language transfer and English writing teaching started relatively late. However, in recent decades, many Chinese researchers have identified the influence of negative transfer of first language on English writing. Liu (2021) examined the relationship between mother tongue negative transfer and English writing, comparing vocabulary semantics, syntactic function, discourse structure, and writing habits in English and Chinese to enhance vocational college students' English writing skills and suggested strategies to mitigate negative transfer interference. Guo et al. (2022) discovered that obstructive interference from negative transfer of the mother tongue occurs at a significantly higher rate than intervention interference. Li and Wang (2023) analysed the types of errors made by third year English major students in writing classroom tests and found that negative transfer of mother tongue is one of the important sources of errors.

To sum up, the current research on language transfer is relatively rich and diverse. Some empirical studies are conducted from the perspective of language and learners itself, while there are relatively inadequate studies on examining the errors in writing among English learners of varying proficiency levels influenced by their mother tongue, as well as the extent of mother tongue influence at different stages of the writing process.

Methodology

This study employed quantitative research methods on essay analysis and questionnaires to examine the relationship between the reliance on mother tongue and native language transfer in the English writing among high school students. The subjects involved were the Grade 2 students from Jigang High School, Shandong province, China.

Data Collection and Analysis

A total of 912 students' compositions were collected from a city-wide simulated joint examination in Jinan. The task in the examination requires participants to read a narrative material and then continue writing two paragraphs based on the content they have read. The first sentence of the two paragraphs that need to be continued is provided. It is worth emphasising that the paper requirements, evaluation criteria, and scoring procedures implemented in this English examination adhere rigorously to the protocols outlined in the Chinese college entrance examination. The test papers underwent a standardised evaluation process by two examiners and the overall score was determined by the average of the scores. Instances where the score disparity between two examiners amounted to three points or more required a subsequent re-evaluation. This measure ensures the reliability and robust standardisation of the materials amassed in the present research. The compositions were then categorised into three levels based on their respective results: 1) very proficient, 2) proficient, and 3) less proficient. Following this, a comprehensive sample of 60 compositions was selected using a simple random sampling method, with 20 drawn from each level.

To achieve a better understanding of the students' use of writing strategies and investigate to what extent Chinese high school students of different proficiency levels rely on their mother tongue in terms of lexis, syntax, and discourse, as well as at different stages of English writing, a student questionnaire adapted from Wen Qiufang (2003) was utilised with some appropriate modifications. The questionnaire consisted of two sections: i) participants' background information, and ii) strategies utilised across the entire writing stages. The Five-point Lickert scale of i) Never; ii) Rarely; iii) Sometimes; iv) Often; v) Always was employed. To avoid misunderstanding of the questions and ensure the accuracy of the data, the Chinese version of the questionnaire was also provided. The reliability and validity of test of the 23-item questionnaire yielded a Cronbach's Alpha score of 0.846, signifying high reliability. The questionnaire was made available online and the students were invited to take part in the survey right after the examination.

To find out the extent to which the students relied on their mother tongue and the evidence of the native language transfer in their writing, this study adopted Corder's (1974) error analysis method and Dulay et al.'s (1982) surface strategy taxonomy in classifying the errors. Errors evidenced in the students' composition were categorised under James' (2013) three classifications of errors: lexis, syntax and discourse. To

estimate the number and frequency of errors and native language influence, mathematical calculations were employed to demonstrate the percentage (Sudijono, 2018):

$$P = F/N \times 100\%$$

Note:

P is the percentage of errors

F is the frequency of errors

N is the total number of samples

Following error classification, participants' error descriptions served as a foundation to elucidate the reasons behind their occurrences.

Data from the survey questionnaire were used to confirm the findings from the writings, figure out the extent to which high school students resort to their mother tongue and investigate how much native language transfer involvement varies across distinct stages of the writing process, i.e. before writing, while writing, and after writing. To facilitate the description and analysis of the data, the enumeration of errors in compositions and the examination of responses in the questionnaire were then tabulated.

Findings and Discussions

Speech Act Native Language Transfers and Errors in English Writing

The analysis of the data shows that the students' compositions contain all the three categories of errors with the lexical errors being the most prominent ones. This is shown in Figure 1 below.

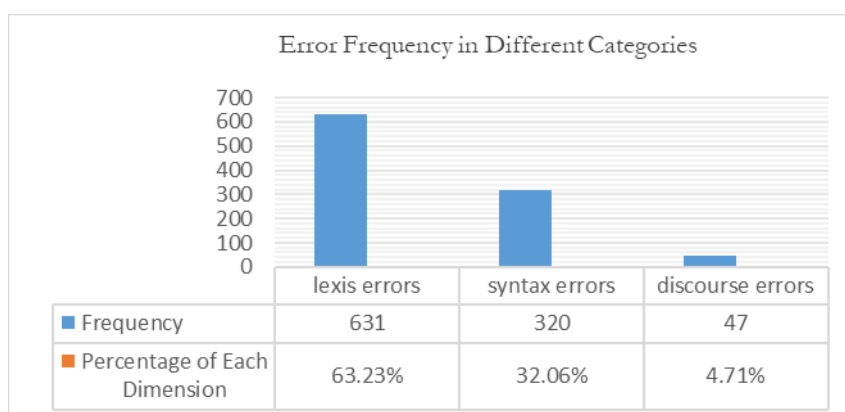


Figure 1: Error Frequency in Different Categories

From Figure 1, it is evident that among the three primary error categories, students' compositions exhibit the highest frequency of lexis errors, comprising 63.2% of the total errors, followed by the syntax er-

rors which account for 32.1%. In addition, errors ranking the third are those at the discourse level accounting for 4.7%. This study's results align closely with Duan's (2019) research on mother tongue transfer in high school English writing, where lexical errors accounted for 45.29%, syntax errors for 29.89%, and morphology errors for 24.82% due to mother tongue transfer. Both studies underscore the significant impact of mother tongue transfer on students' writing errors, particularly in lexis and syntax. While the quantity of errors in this category may not be as substantial as in the empirical studies, it still highlights the errors that students commonly commit in their writing.

According to the Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2020) formulated by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, high school students are expected to demonstrate proficiency in at least 3,000 words and a comprehensive understanding of English grammatical rules. However, upon analysing the data, it becomes apparent that despite acquiring a certain level of vocabulary mastery and a systematic grasp of grammar, students' overall written expression falls short of the expected standard. A scrutiny of the 60 written texts from students across different proficiency levels, encompassing those classified as very proficiency, proficiency, and less proficiency, highlights notable errors in both vocabulary and grammar.

Table 1 provides insights into the analysis of 60 paper samples, revealing a total of 998 errors. Notably, students at the proficient level (PL) exhibit the highest total errors among the three proficiency levels, reaching 402, constituting 40.28% of the overall errors. Following are students at the less proficient level (LP), with a total error count of 358, accounting for 35.87%. The students with the lowest total errors belong to the very proficient level (VPL), tallying 238 errors, making up 23.85% of the total errors.

Table 1: Errors caused by Negative Language Transfer across Proficiency Levels

Variable	Number of Students	Number of Errors	Ratio to Total Number of Errors	Total Number of Words	Average Error Rate
VPL	20	238	23.85%	3134	7.59%
PL	20	402	40.28%	3130	12.84%
LPL	20	358	35.87%	2031	17.63%
Total	60	998	100.00%	8295	/

*VPL=Very Proficient Level PL=Proficient Level LPL=Less Proficient Level

Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that while the total number of errors made by students at the proficient level exceeds that of their less proficient counterparts, this discrepancy is partly attributable to the composition sample's higher word count for proficient-level students, which stands at 3130 words, resulting in an average error rate of 12.84%. In contrast, the total word count for essay samples from less pro-

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efficient-level students is only 2031 words, with an average error rate of 17.63%. Additionally, for highly proficient students, the total word count in their essay samples is 3134, leading to an average error rate of 7.59%. Based on the data analysis, it becomes evident that students at three distinct proficiency levels are subjected to varying degrees of influence from mother tongue transfer in their compositions.

The Influence of Native Language during the Writing Process

The study also explores the influence of the native language during the process of writing. Specifically assesses the extent to which the students rely on their mother tongue in the aspects of vocabulary, syntax, and discourse, and to determine the frequency of native language transfer across different stages of writing: pre-writing, while-writing and after-writing.

The Before-Writing Stage

The analysis indicates that students at all levels of proficiency rely on their native language before writing the composition. At this pre-writing stage, they analysed themes, constructed frameworks and organised the content. As shown in Table 2, students at the very proficiency level rely more on their native language at these tasks in the pre-writing stage compared to their counterparts. Conversely, students at less proficiency level tend to engage less in thematic analysis, framework construction, and content organisation before writing.

Table 2: The Influence of Native Language during the Before-Writing Stage

Question Responses	Q1			Q2			Q3		
	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL
A. Never	0%	7%	0%	0%	13%	50%	0%	5%	25%
B. Rarely	10%	2%	25%	20%	17%	25%	10%	10%	25%
C. Sometimes	30%	22%	0%	10%	15%	0%	10%	12%	25%
D. Often	30%	35%	50%	30%	35%	0%	40%	48%	25%
E. Always	30%	35%	25%	40%	20%	25%	40%	25%	0%

**Q1. Before English writing, I use Chinese to analyse and determine the topic and the writing task.*

Q2. Before English writing, I use Chinese to organise the structure and the outline of the article.

Q3. Before English writing, I use Chinese to brainstorm the general content of each paragraph.

Qin's 2017 study highlighted that low-proficient English majors heavily rely on their native language before writing, with a significant portion resorting to Chinese both in analysing writing tasks and planning

content. Furthermore, the study indicated that these students tend to formulate their opinions in their native language despite reading instructions in English. These findings are consistent with the results of this study, emphasising the prevalent dependence on the native language in pre-writing stage among students, especially with lower English writing proficiency.

The while-writing stage

The analysis at the while-writing stage gauges the extent to which students depend on their native language in terms of lexis, syntax, and discourse. The results are generated under 3 different aspects; i) vocabulary translation, word formation, and memorisation as shown in Table 3a, ii) word form, meaning and parts of speech as shown in Table 3b, iii) verb usage, word combination and tenses as shown in Table 3c, iv) syntax as shown in Table 3d, and v) discourse as shown in Table 3e.

Table 3a: The Influence of Native Language during the while-writing stage
(vocabulary translation, word formation and memorisation)

Question Responses	Q4			Q5			Q6		
	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL
A. Never	0%	3%	0%	20%	12%	0%	20%	13%	0%
B. Rarely	20%	7%	0%	50%	23%	25%	60%	28%	25%
C. Sometimes	10%	20%	25%	30%	35%	25%	20%	37%	0%
D. Often	40%	40%	0%	0%	12%	25%	0%	12%	0%
E. Always	30%	30%	75%	0%	18%	25%	0%	10%	75%

**Q4. During the process of writing in English, I first think of Chinese vocabulary and then translate it into the corresponding English words.*

Q5. During the process of writing in English, due to insufficient English vocabulary, I may create words, for example: using "fire stick" instead of "match."

Q6. In the process of learning English vocabulary, I only memorise the meaning of the Chinese language, and do not consider its use in the English context.

As can be seen from Table 3a, students in the low proficiency group rely more on their native language in the aspects of vocabulary translation, word formation and memorisation. Specifically, 75% of low proficiency students tend to think in Chinese first and then translate into English, compared to 30% in the other two proficiency groups. In terms of word formation, 50% of low proficiency students often create new words due to limited vocabulary, such as using “fire stick” instead of “match,” while this occurs only 30% among the students at the proficient level. High proficiency students experience this occasionally (30%) or

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rarely/never (70%). As for vocabulary memorisation, there are notable differences among the three groups of students. 75% of less proficiency level students only remember Chinese meanings without considering English usage. In contrast, 22% of proficient students and 20% of highly proficient students sometimes face this issue, emphasising the importance of contextual vocabulary acquisition in English learning.

Table 3b presents the analysis on the extent to which high school students are influenced by their native language in terms of word form, meaning, and parts of speech during the writing process. The survey results reveal significant differences among students at the three proficiency levels in these aspects.

Table 3b: The Influence of Native Language during the while-writing stage
(word form, meaning and parts of speech)

Question Responses	Q7			Q8			Q9		
	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL
A. Never	60%	18%	0%	40%	17%	0%	40%	10%	0%
B. Rarely	30%	45%	25%	50%	23%	25%	50%	25%	0%
C. Sometimes	10%	30%	25%	10%	47%	25%	10%	53%	25%
D. Often	0%	5%	0%	0%	10%	25%	0%	8%	25%
E. Always	0%	2%	50%	0%	3%	25%	0%	3%	50%

**Q7. In English writing, I often make errors in word form changes due to the influence of Chinese thinking, such as mistakenly using "their" instead of "them".*

Q8. In the process of English writing, I often use the "word-to-word" literal translation method of Chinese and English due to the influence of Chinese thinking, resulting in the wrong choice of words, such as: a big (large) number of

Q9. In English writing, influenced by Chinese, I tend to simply compare the meanings of English vocabulary, neglecting the changes in word forms.

Students at lower proficiency levels exhibit a notable influence of their native language on word form, meaning, and part of speech, with rates of 50%, 25%, and 50% respectively. In contrast, students at the intermediate proficiency level show less influence of their native language in these aspects, with rates of 2%, 3%, and 3%, respectively. 10% of high-level students reported that they sometimes make errors in word form changes and part of speech due to the influence of Chinese thinking, as well as using the word-to-word translation writing method, resulting in vocabulary selection errors. In Liu's study (2020), it was found that the proportion of individuals not considering the part of speech of words was 78.10%, the proportion of individuals overlooking singular and plural forms of words was 74.29%, and the proportion of individuals us-

ing Chinese vocabulary combinations was 84.76%. The findings of this study are largely consistent with those of the previous study. The analysis also yields the influence of the native language in terms of verb usage, word combinations and tenses in the students' writing. This is shown in Table 3c.

Table 3c: The Influence of Native Language during the while-writing stage
(verb usage, word combination and tenses)

Question Responses	Q10			Q11			Q12			Q13		
	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL
A. Never	60%	27%	0%	60%	18%	25%	60%	20%	25%	60%	8%	0%
B. Rarely	30%	45%	50%	30%	38%	0%	30%	58%	0%	20%	35%	0%
C. Sometimes	10%	20%	0%	10%	37%	25%	10%	20%	50%	20%	52%	25%
D. Often	0%	7%	0%	0%	5%	25%	0%	2%	25%	0%	5%	50%
E. Always	0%	2%	50%	0%	2%	25%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	25%

**Q10. In English writing, influenced by Chinese, I tend to have instances of verb concatenation. For example: "I like play the piano."*

Q11. In English writing, I make errors by directly fitting Chinese vocabulary combinations into English sentences (e.g., eat lunch).

Q12. In English writing, I make grammar mistakes by trying to apply Chinese grammar directly into English sentences. For example: "Although..., but..."

Q13. In English writing, I overlook verb tenses due to the influence of Chinese.

As can be seen from Table 3c, students in the very proficient group are minimally influenced by their mother tongue in verb usage, word combinations, and tenses, whereas those in the proficient group are slightly affected. In contrast, the students in the less proficient group are significantly impacted in these areas, with rates of 50%, 25%, and 25%, respectively. This study aligns with the findings of Wen and Guo (1998) that students with lower English writing proficiency rely more on native language thinking in English composition.

Along the same line, the analysis also shows the native language influence on syntax during the writing process. This includes examining the construction of negative sentences, coordination of structures, clauses, and various sentence structures.

Table 3d: The Influence of Native Language during the while-writing stage (syntax)

Questions	Q14			Q15			Q16			Q17		
Responses	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL
A. Never	40%	17%	0%	70%	7%	0%	40%	12%	0%	20%	7%	0%
B. Rarely	50%	43%	0%	20%	30%	0%	40%	27%	25%	30%	22%	0%
C. Sometimes	10%	30%	25%	10%	47%	50%	20%	37%	25%	50%	37%	50%
D. Often	0%	8%	50%	0%	13%	25%	0%	22%	25%	0%	28%	25%
E. Always	0%	2%	25%	0%	3%	25%	0%	3%	25%	0%	7%	25%

*Q14. In English writing, I often organise negative sentences with Chinese thinking, neglecting the specific structure of negative sentences in English. For example: “I not like English.” / “I think he will not join us.”

Q15. In English writing, I make mistakes due to the inability to distinguish between compound sentences and complex sentences.

Q16. In English writing, I tend to organise sentences according to the word order in Chinese.

Q17. In English writing, my English sentence structure may have similarities to Chinese sentence structure.

Table 3d shows that 25% of less proficient students always use Chinese thinking to structure negative sentences in English writing, potentially overlooking English-specific characteristics. In comparison, only 2% of the proficient students and 10% of the very proficient students always do this. It is also found that the less proficient students are always confused with the coordinate and compound sentences in English writing compared to the proficient and very proficient groups (25%, 3% and 0% respectively). This suggests that with improved second language proficiency, errors in complex sentences influenced by their native language gradually decrease.

The analysis data also demonstrate that the students’ writing is also influenced by the native language in the aspect of discourse. This includes the use of transitional words, transitional sentences, sentence style, and article structure. However, as illustrated by Table 3e, this influence gradually decreases to varying degrees as their second language proficiency improves. In Wu’s study (2021) on language errors in high school students’ compositions caused by native language interference, it was found that discourse errors reached 27.69%. However, the study did not delve deeply into analysing the changes in discourse errors as English proficiency improves.

Table 3e: The Influence of Native Language during the while-writing stage (discourse)

Questions Responses	Q18			Q19			Q20		
	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL
A. Never	20%	8%	0%	20%	8%	0%	30%	12%	0%
B. Rarely	40%	33%	0%	70%	32%	0%	30%	25%	0%
C. Sometimes	40%	45%	50%	10%	40%	25%	30%	43%	50%
D. Often	0%	12%	25%	0%	20%	50%	10%	18%	0%
E. Always	0%	2%	25%	0%	0%	25%	0%	2%	50%

**Q18. In English writing, I tend to overlook the inappropriate use of transitional words or sentences between sentences due to the influence of Chinese.*

Q19. In English writing, I am influenced by the Chinese writing style, leading to the stacking and listing of simple sentences in my writing.

Q20. During the process of English writing, I tend to neglect the differences in writing structures between English and Chinese.

The analysis shows that nearly all the students in the less proficient group admitted that they neglect the use of transitional words or sentences between English sentences. This is because the use of transitional words in sentences is not common in their native language. On the other hand, the other groups rarely do so. In the same vein, almost all the students in the less proficient group adopt the Chinese sentence structure in their English writing. In contrast, only 60% of the students from the proficient group and 10% from the very proficient group do so.

The After-Writing Stage

The study also investigates the students' effort in improving their writing. This includes revising the content, grammar, and sentence construction in their compositions. The results are shown in Table 4.

The analysis points out that the majority of high school students use their native language to modify or correct the content they have written. The results suggest that the influence of their native language on content and grammar correction decreases as their proficiency in the second language improves. However, when it comes to constructing more complex sentence structures, the trend of relying on their native language increases with the improvement of their proficiency in the second language. A survey conducted by Liu (2020) revealed that 85.71% of individuals rely on Chinese to check the completeness of their English writing expressions, a proportion that closely aligns with the findings of this study. The results suggest that the influence of their native language on content and grammar correction decreases as their proficiency in the second language improves. However, when it comes to constructing more complex sentence structures,

the trend of relying on their native language increases with the improvement of their proficiency in the second language.

Table 4: The Influence of Native Language during the after-writing stage

Questions Responses	Q21			Q22			Q23		
	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL	VPL	PL	LPL
A. Never	60%	35%	25%	10%	7%	25%	0%	10%	25%
B. Rarely	20%	20%	0%	10%	18%	25%	10%	20%	25%
C. Sometimes	10%	35%	25%	10%	37%	50%	50%	45%	50%
D. Often	10%	8%	25%	50%	28%	0%	40%	20%	0%
E. Always	0%	2%	25%	20%	10%	0%	0%	5%	0%

*Q21. *After English writing, I usually translate the composition into Chinese for editing.*

Q22. *After English writing, I usually make revisions using the English grammar knowledge I have learned.*

Q23. *After English writing, I usually use Chinese to participate in sentence construction and transform simple sentences into complex sentences.*

Pedagogical Implications

The present study has provided some insights into the impact of mother tongue reliance in the EFL writing process where there is a consistent pattern of errors that can be attributed to LI interference across varying proficiency levels. However, the analysis points out that the extent of mother tongue reliance depends on the learners' proficiency. While the proficient learners use their L1 as a cognitive tool in the before and after writing stages, the less proficient counterparts rely heavily on the L1 throughout the writing process, often resulting in the syntactic and lexical errors due to the structural differences between the languages. Another significant finding is that, the influence of L1 transfer, particularly in lexis, syntax, and discourse is less evident as the learners' English proficiency improves, suggesting that language proficiency can act as a mediating factor in the learners' ability to write in English.

The findings, thus, have significant pedagogical implications on EFL education. First, differentiated instruction based on learners' proficiency should be employed in the classroom. Teachers may guide the lower-proficiency level students away from too much reliance on their mother tongue by providing support in the pre-writing stage. This can include activities such as brainstorming strategies, use of visual organizers, and sentence-level scaffolds. Teachers can also reduce the students' LI reliance by teaching them English-mediated thinking. This can be done by encouraging them to plan, write and revise in English. By having regular practice and providing consistent feedback that highlights and corrects L1-influenced errors, teachers

not only mitigate negative transfer from the mother tongue, but also enhance students' writing competence in English.

Conclusion

This study has investigated how native language transfer influences the English writing among Chinese high school students at varying language proficiency levels. It draws on language transfer theory, contrastive analysis theory, and error analysis theory, building on previous theoretical and empirical research. Employing a blend of qualitative and quantitative research methods, the study reveals some important findings that are worth noting.

Firstly, lexical errors remain the primary issue for students, with syntactical errors closely following. This indicates a need for both teachers and learners to focus more on lexis, which has traditionally been considered the easiest aspect of English learning. In terms of lexis transfer, the most prominent error is functional transfer, followed by semantic extensions, morphological transfer, and collocations, all with significant error rates. According to Nation (2010), "knowing a word" entails three distinct aspects: understanding the form, meaning, and usage of words. Therefore, both teachers and students should emphasise the comprehensive mastery of vocabulary in teaching and learning. Among the errors caused by syntactic transfer, tense and voice errors are the most prominent, followed by comma-splices, incomplete sentences, and issues with parallel structure. While discourse transfer errors are not as prevalent as lexical and syntactic errors, coherence and text cohesion errors are still noticeable in student texts. Therefore, in the teaching and learning process, it is also essential to emphasise the contrastive analysis of English and Chinese texts.

Secondly, students at all proficiency levels, whether very proficient, proficient or less proficient, to varying degrees, rely on their mother tongue throughout the entire process of English writing - before, during, and after writing. This reliance is particularly noticeable during the writing process, where students with different levels of proficiency heavily depend on their mother tongue, from lexis to syntax to discourse. Before writing, students in the very proficient group rely more on their mother tongue to organise the framework, outline, and content of the article, followed by students in the proficient group. In contrast, students in the less proficient group engage in less brainstorming before writing. As for after-writing, the proportion of students relying on their mother tongue to correct content and grammar decreases as their second language proficiency increases. Conversely, after writing in English, the proportion of students using Chinese to construct sentences and transform simple sentences into complex ones increases with their second language proficiency improvement. This phenomenon also indicates that students in the low-level group are significantly weaker in constructing complex sentences.

Finally, consistent results from text analysis and questionnaire surveys suggest that as second language proficiency improves, high school students are less influenced by native language transfer in lexis, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2025

syntax, and discourse. Integrating the research findings with the teaching insights emphasises the crucial need for educators to prioritise vocabulary mastery, syntactic analysis, and discourse cohesion in English language teaching. Addressing common errors such as functional transfer, tense inaccuracies, and coherence issues is essential. By incorporating contrastive analysis of English and Chinese texts, instructors can assist students in overcoming challenges posed by language transfer. Tailoring instruction according to students' proficiency levels, promoting independent brainstorming in English, and reducing reliance on the mother tongue for corrections can significantly enhance students' writing skills. As proficiency levels increase, students exhibit reduced influence from their native language, underscoring the significance of targeted support to enhance overall language proficiency. Educators should adopt a balanced curriculum that combines explicit language instruction with authentic practice opportunities to cultivate students' ability to effectively navigate between languages, thereby improving their English writing proficiency.

In conclusion, this study extends the existing knowledge on error types due to native language transfer by offering understanding of how mother tongue reliance can operate throughout different stages of the writing process and across different levels of proficiency. While previous studies on negative transfer mostly focus on the final written product, this research employed a process-oriented approach, examining learners' use of their L1 during the pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing stages. Ultimately, the study suggests the importance of instructional scaffolding based on learner proficiency, which can effectively bridge the error analysis and instructional design.

Author contributions

Gai, M. and Fang, Y. conceived, planned and wrote the manuscript. Ariffin, K. and Ahmad, B.E provided feedback and contributed in shaping the study, analysis and manuscript as well as contributed to the supervision of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.

Conflicts of interest

The authors certify that there is no conflict of interest and the article is the authors' original work. The article has not received prior publication and is not under consideration for publication elsewhere. This re-

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