

UNIVERSITI TEKNOLOGI MARA

**NEGATIVE LANGUAGE TRANSFER
IN EFL WRITING ACROSS
PROFICIENCY LEVELS AMONG
SENIOR MIDDLE SCHOOL
STUDENTS IN CHINA**

GAI MEIJUAN

Thesis submitted in fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Applied Language Studies)

Academy of Language Studies

February 2026

ABSTRACT

Writing serves as a fundamental medium for expressing ideas and assessing learners' linguistic competence. In the context of China's English education system, writing occupies a critical position in language assessments. Nonetheless, many senior middle school students fail to meet expected standards in this domain, with negative transfer from the first language (L1) identified as a principal contributing factor. This study aims to examine the extent and nature of L1 transfer in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing among Chinese senior middle school students across varying proficiency levels and stages of the writing process. It further investigates English teachers' awareness of L1-induced errors in student writing. Anchored in transfer theory, contrastive analysis, and error analysis, this research employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating writing tasks, student questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews with students and teachers from Jigang Senior Middle School in Shandong Province, China. A total of 60 student writing samples were analysed using qualitative content analysis and quantitative frequency analysis; 362 student questionnaires were processed via descriptive and inferential statistics to explore correlations between proficiency, writing stage, and L1 reliance; and semi-structured interviews with 30 students and 6 English teachers were analysed through thematic analysis to extract key perceptions and pedagogical practices. The findings indicated that L1 transfer diminished as students' English proficiency increased. Learners at lower proficiency levels frequently committed grammatical and semantic errors, particularly in verb tense, voice, and word choice, due to heavier reliance on their native language, while higher-proficiency learners exhibited fewer L1-induced errors in lexis, syntax, and discourse. Moreover, the influence of L1 transfer varied across writing stages, with the pre-writing stage showing the highest degree of dependence. Across all proficiency levels, students demonstrated substantial reliance on their L1 during this stage, particularly in tasks such as topic analysis, idea generation, and content organisation. With respect to teacher awareness, although teachers at different stages can recognise L1-related errors, novice teachers, advanced beginner teachers and even competent teachers demonstrated a lack of effective pedagogical interventions. Proficient and expert teachers were able to employ certain remedial strategies, though these tended to lack systematic implementation. Based on these findings, specifically the proficiency-related variation in L1 transfer patterns and stage-dependent L1 reliance, combined with gaps in teachers' systematic error intervention strategies, the SPOT-WRITE model (Stage and Proficiency Oriented Model for Reducing Negative L1 Transfer in EFL Writing Instruction) was developed to integrate stage-specific instructional design and proficiency-targeted error mitigation strategies. By providing actionable frameworks for tailored instruction and stage-specific error mitigation, this study offers practical implications for enhancing EFL writing pedagogy in Chinese senior middle schools, alongside empirical insights for curriculum refinement and teacher training.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the process of completing this research, I received selfless help and unwavering support from many individuals. Without their encouragement and assistance, I cannot imagine how I could have made it this far. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to them.

First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Kamisah Ariffin. During my doctoral studies, she fell into a coma for over two months due to a COVID-19 infection. Even after she regained consciousness and despite not fully recovering, Dr. Kamisah continued to work tirelessly, enduring various pains to maintain regular contact with me, providing invaluable guidance and emotional support. Her patience, wisdom, resilience, unwavering spirit, and continuous concern for my academic growth have given me immense warmth and strength. I will carry this kindness with me forever.

I also want to extend special thanks to my co-supervisor, Dr. Badli Esham Ahmad, for his indispensable assistance during my research and for the tremendous support he provided during my most challenging times. His expertise and rigorous approach significantly contributed to my growth and development.

Additionally, I must express my most sincere gratitude to my husband, Jiang Zhiqiang. During the years I pursued my PhD abroad, he not only shouldered the financial burden of our family but also took meticulous care of our two children, allowing me to focus on my studies without worrying about family matters. His love and understanding were my greatest motivation to persevere. I also want to thank my two adorable and sensible sons, who have been the driving force behind the pursuit of my dreams.

My mother-in-law, father-in-law, Jiang Xijia, also deserve my deepest thanks. They selflessly took on the responsibility of caring for our household, enabling me to concentrate on my academic pursuits. Their support and dedication have been the solid foundation for my success.

I must also thank my mother, who has always been my strongest supporter. No matter when or where, she has always given me the greatest encouragement and the warmest embrace. Her love is the source of my strength to keep moving forward.

Finally, I want to thank all my relatives and friends who have shown care and support. Every message and every word of encouragement from you has been a precious treasure on my journey. Thank you for extending a helping hand when I needed it most; your companionship has made this journey all the more beautiful.

I dedicate this work to all those who have helped me along the way; it is you who have made all this possible. May our future paths be filled with light and hope!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CONFIRMATION BY PANEL OF EXAMINERS	ii
AUTHOR'S DECLARATION	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	vi
LIST OF TABLES	x
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	xv
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Introduction	1
1.2 Background of the Study	1
1.3 Problem Statement	5
1.4 Purpose of the Study	9
1.5 Research Objectives	9
1.6 Research Questions	10
1.7 Significance of the Study	10
1.8 Scope and Limitations of the Study	11
1.9 Definition of Key Terms	13
1.9.1 Language Transfer	13
1.9.2 Negative Language Transfer	13
1.9.3 Positive Language Transfer	14
1.9.4 Native Language	14
1.9.5 Error Analysis	15
1.9.6 Contrastive Analysis	16
1.9.7 Teachers' Cognition and Pedagogical Responses	16
1.10 The Conceptual Framework of the Study	17

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter first presents the background context of the research, then articulates the core research purposes, specific objectives, and key research questions. It further elaborates on the theoretical and practical significance of the study, clarifies the delimitations and inherent limitations of the research scope, and concludes with a concise definition of the key concepts and terms involved.

1.2 Background of the Study

Since China launched its Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978, this landmark national strategy has driven the country's transition from a closed planned economy to an open market-oriented system, with international exchange and cooperation in economy, science, and education becoming central to its development agenda (Chen & Zhang, 2020). To facilitate global integration, English was identified as a critical tool for accessing international knowledge, technology, and diplomatic communication, laying the foundation for its designation as a core subject across China's K-12 education system. This 12-year compulsory education framework comprises 6 years of primary school (ages 6-11), 3 years of junior middle school (ages 12-14), and 3 years of senior middle school (ages 15-17). Beyond being mandatory at all K-12 stages, English is also one of the three core components of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), also named Gaokao, alongside Chinese and mathematics (Sun et al., 2022). Over the past four decades, as China's global engagement deepened, English's prominence in education has further grown: its curriculum hours and exam weight often match or exceed those of science subjects like physics and biology, reflecting its role as a foundational skill for academic and professional success.

Against this backdrop of English's paramount importance in Chinese education, writing, as a crucial productive skill within the English curriculum, has garnered significant attention. Writing is viewed as a complex skill requiring the