



The Influence of First Language Interference on ESL Writing Skills

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Abstract: First language (L1) interference plays a critical role in shaping the writing skills of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. This article explores the influence of L1 interference on grammar, vocabulary, and discourse structure, highlighting how negative transfer from learners' native languages affects their writing in English. By analyzing case studies of Arabic- and Chinese-speaking ESL learners, the article demonstrates common errors stemming from L1 interference and provides practical strategies for addressing these challenges in the classroom. The importance of raising learner awareness, employing targeted instructional techniques, and offering consistent practice with authentic English writing is emphasized as key to minimizing L1 interference and improving ESL writing proficiency.

Keywords: L1 interference, ESL writing, negative transfer, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), one of the most persistent challenges ESL learners face is the interference of their first language (L1) in acquiring and mastering writing skills in English. First language interference occurs when the linguistic structures of the learner's L1 influence their use of the second language (L2), often leading to errors in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and organization. These errors, commonly referred to as "transfer errors," are especially prevalent in ESL writing, where the cognitive process of writing in a new language can be heavily shaped by the learner's L1. As ESL learners attempt to convey their ideas in English, they may inadvertently apply the grammatical rules, sentence structures, and cultural conventions of their native language, resulting in writing that deviates from standard English norms.

This phenomenon is not limited to specific L1 backgrounds but is common among learners from various linguistic and cultural contexts. For example, studies have shown that Malaysian tertiary ESL students frequently make errors in sentence structure and word order due to the influence of their L1, which differs significantly from English (Mehat & Ismail, 2021). Similar patterns are observed among learners from other L1 backgrounds, where the distance between the native language and English exacerbates these transfer issues. As a result, understanding the nature of L1 interference and its impact on ESL writing is crucial for both educators and learners in overcoming these obstacles and achieving higher proficiency in writing.

This article explores the influence of first language interference on ESL learners' writing skills, examining common areas of interference and strategies that can help mitigate its effects. By identifying



the root causes of common errors in ESL writing and proposing effective instructional strategies, this study aims to contribute to more effective English language teaching practices.

2. Understanding First Language Interference in ESL Writing

2.1 Definition of First Language Interference

First language (L1) interference, also known as language transfer, refers to the influence that a learner's native language has on their acquisition and use of a second language (L2). This interference can occur at multiple levels, including grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and discourse. When learners attempt to write in English, they may unconsciously apply the rules and structures of their L1, resulting in deviations from standard English usage. The degree of interference often depends on the linguistic similarities or differences between the learner's L1 and English. For instance, learners whose L1 has different sentence structures, grammatical rules, or word order from English may struggle more with writing accurately in the target language (Biglari & Struys, 2021).

Language interference can manifest in several ways. At the grammatical level, learners might apply L1 sentence patterns directly to English, leading to errors such as improper word order or incorrect verb tense usage. At the lexical level, learners may rely on direct translations from their native language, resulting in incorrect word choices or awkward phrasing. Discourse-level interference can also affect the organization and flow of writing, as different cultures often have distinct conventions for structuring arguments or organizing ideas. These challenges are particularly evident in ESL learners' writing, where the need to express complex ideas often reveals deeper L1 interference.

2.2 Cognitive Process of Writing in a Second Language

The cognitive process of writing in a second language is inherently complex, as it involves managing multiple cognitive tasks simultaneously. In writing, ESL learners must not only generate ideas and structure their arguments but also navigate the linguistic rules of a foreign language. For many learners, the mental effort of organizing thoughts in English is influenced by the cognitive habits formed through their L1. This phenomenon is known as linguistic transfer, where learners apply familiar L1 patterns to facilitate writing in English.

There are both positive and negative transfers in this process. Positive transfer occurs when L1 structures are similar to those in English and can be used successfully in L2 writing. However, negative transfer—where L1 structures conflict with English norms—often results in errors. For example, an ESL learner from a language with flexible word order may produce sentences in English that lack the rigid subject-verb-object structure required in standard English. Research has shown that this cognitive interference can persist even at advanced stages of language learning, making it a significant barrier to achieving proficiency in ESL writing (Castaño, 2021).

By understanding the cognitive processes involved in writing and the role of L1 interference, educators can better address the specific challenges faced by ESL learners. This understanding is critical for designing effective teaching strategies that focus on reducing the negative impacts of L1 interference while enhancing learners' ability to write fluently and accurately in English.

3. Common Areas of L1 Interference in ESL Writing

3.1 Grammar and Syntax Interference

One of the most significant impacts of L1 interference on ESL writing is seen at the grammatical and syntactical levels. Learners often apply the grammatical rules and sentence structures of their native language when constructing sentences in English. This can lead to several types of errors, particularly in subject-verb agreement, word order, and verb tenses. For example, ESL learners from languages that do



not use a fixed subject-verb-object order, such as Arabic or Korean, may struggle with English's relatively strict word order. This often results in confusing sentence structures that deviate from standard English syntax. Additionally, differences in verb tense usage between L1 and English can cause learners to misuse tenses, leading to sentences that are grammatically incorrect but reflect the logical structure of their native language (Govindarajoo et al., 2022).

Other grammatical issues commonly associated with L1 interference include the omission or overuse of articles (e.g., "the" and "a") and pluralization errors. In languages where articles are absent or used differently, learners might omit articles in English sentences or apply them inappropriately. For instance, a Chinese-speaking ESL learner might say, "I go to school" without using an article, as their L1 does not require one. Likewise, students from languages with different pluralization rules might fail to pluralize nouns correctly, leading to errors such as "two book" instead of "two books."

3.2 Lexical Interference (Vocabulary Transfer)

Lexical interference occurs when ESL learners directly translate words or phrases from their native language into English, often resulting in awkward or incorrect usage. This type of interference is especially prevalent in learners who are at a lower proficiency level and are more reliant on their L1 vocabulary. For example, a Spanish-speaking learner may use a false cognate such as "actual" in place of "current" because in Spanish, "actual" means "current" or "present." This results in an error that stems from lexical transfer, where the learner assumes the words have the same meaning in both languages (Biglari & Struys, 2021).

In addition to false cognates, learners may also overuse literal translations. A learner might try to convey idiomatic expressions from their native language by translating them word-for-word into English, leading to phrases that sound unnatural or confusing to native English speakers. This issue is compounded by the fact that idiomatic expressions often do not have direct equivalents between languages. Educators working with ESL learners should focus on developing their vocabulary through exposure to authentic English texts and context-based learning to help students avoid these common pitfalls.

3.3 Discourse and Organizational Structure

L1 interference also affects the way learners organize their writing. Different cultures have unique norms for structuring ideas, building arguments, and organizing texts. For example, in English academic writing, the standard structure typically follows a linear, thesis-driven approach where ideas are clearly stated and followed by evidence and analysis. However, in some Asian cultures, writing tends to be more circular, with ideas introduced indirectly before arriving at a main point. This contrast can result in ESL learners organizing their essays in ways that are difficult for native English speakers to follow (Mehat & Ismail, 2021).

The differences in discourse patterns can also affect paragraph organization and coherence. Learners from cultures that favor a more narrative or descriptive style may have difficulty adapting to the more analytical and direct style favored in English writing. As a result, their paragraphs may lack clear topic sentences, transitions, and logical flow, making it challenging for readers to grasp the central argument. Educators can address these challenges by teaching explicit writing structures and emphasizing the expectations of English discourse, particularly in academic contexts.

4. Factors That Influence the Degree of L1 Interference

4.1 Proficiency Level in English

The proficiency level of an ESL learner plays a critical role in determining the extent to which first language interference affects their writing. Learners with lower levels of English proficiency tend to rely more heavily on their L1 when constructing sentences, as their familiarity with English grammar, syntax,



and vocabulary is still limited. This reliance on L1 as a cognitive tool for generating ideas and forming sentences often results in more frequent transfer errors. These learners are more likely to directly translate their thoughts from their native language, which can lead to errors in sentence structure, word order, and overall coherence.

As learners develop higher proficiency in English, the degree of L1 interference typically decreases. With greater exposure to English grammar, vocabulary, and writing conventions, learners begin to internalize the rules of the target language, reducing their reliance on L1 structures. Proficient learners are better equipped to navigate the complexities of English and apply appropriate syntactical and grammatical rules without reverting to their native language. However, even at advanced proficiency levels, some residual L1 interference may persist, particularly in more nuanced areas such as idiomatic expressions or discourse organization (Castaño, 2021). Understanding this progression is crucial for educators, who can adjust their teaching strategies based on the learner's proficiency level to address specific challenges related to L1 interference.

4.2 L1 and L2 Linguistic Distance

Another critical factor influencing the degree of L1 interference is the linguistic distance between a learner's native language (L1) and English (L2). Linguistic distance refers to how different or similar two languages are in terms of their phonology, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. The greater the linguistic distance between the L1 and L2, the more likely learners are to experience interference, as they must navigate unfamiliar structures and rules that do not align with those of their native language.

For example, learners from Romance language backgrounds, such as Spanish or French, may find certain aspects of English easier to grasp due to similarities in vocabulary (cognates), verb conjugation patterns, and sentence structure. However, learners from Asian languages like Chinese, Japanese, or Korean, which differ significantly from English in terms of syntax, tense, word order, and the use of articles, may experience greater difficulty. These learners are more prone to errors related to sentence structure and grammatical rules due to the stark contrast between their L1 and English. For instance, the absence of articles in Chinese can lead Chinese-speaking learners to omit articles in English sentences, such as "I went to store" instead of "I went to the store" (Govindarajoo et al., 2022).

On the other hand, similarities between L1 and L2 can sometimes facilitate positive transfer, where learners apply native language rules that align with English structures. This is more common when the L1 and L2 share grammatical or syntactical features. For example, Spanish and English both use subject-verb-object word order, allowing Spanish-speaking learners to more easily form grammatically correct sentences in English. Conversely, when languages are more dissimilar, learners must make a more conscious effort to internalize new language patterns, which increases the likelihood of negative transfer and interference.

By recognizing the linguistic distance between a learner's L1 and English, educators can better anticipate areas where interference is likely to occur and tailor their teaching strategies accordingly. This understanding allows for targeted instruction that addresses specific linguistic challenges and provides learners with the support they need to minimize L1 interference.

5. Strategies for Overcoming L1 Interference in ESL Writing

5.1 Raising Learner Awareness

One of the most effective ways to mitigate first language (L1) interference in ESL writing is by raising learners' awareness of the differences between their native language and English. When learners are conscious of the linguistic structures and writing conventions of both languages, they can begin to recognize potential areas of negative transfer. Educators can encourage students to identify common



errors that arise from direct translation or interference, allowing them to develop strategies to avoid these pitfalls.

Metacognitive strategies are particularly useful in this regard. Learners can be taught to reflect on their own writing habits and consider how their L1 might be influencing their English writing. For example, teachers can ask students to review their writing for typical errors related to L1 interference—such as incorrect word order, verb tense usage, or literal translations—and make the necessary corrections. This type of self-monitoring fosters greater language awareness and enables learners to gradually adapt their writing to fit English conventions. Over time, learners can develop a more intuitive understanding of how to switch between languages without relying on L1 structures that do not align with English (Castaño, 2021).

5.2 Instructional Techniques for Teachers

Teachers play a crucial role in helping learners overcome L1 interference through targeted instructional strategies. Focused grammar instruction can be particularly effective, as it allows teachers to address specific errors commonly caused by L1 interference. For example, teachers can design lessons that emphasize the correct use of English articles, verb tenses, or word order—areas where interference is most likely to occur. By reinforcing these grammatical rules through exercises and practice, learners are better equipped to internalize English structures and apply them accurately in their writing.

Another useful technique is contrastive analysis, where teachers explicitly compare and contrast the grammatical and syntactical rules of the learner's L1 and English. This approach helps students understand why certain errors occur and gives them tools to avoid making similar mistakes in the future. Providing explicit feedback on writing errors is also key. Rather than simply correcting mistakes, teachers should explain the nature of the error and its connection to the student's L1, offering suggestions on how to rephrase or restructure the sentence. This individualized feedback helps learners become more aware of their own writing patterns and enables them to make lasting improvements (Govindarajoo et al., 2022).

The role of process writing and peer review is equally important in addressing L1 interference. Process writing encourages learners to engage in multiple drafts of their work, with each revision focusing on improving different aspects of the writing. This gradual refinement allows learners to identify and correct L1-related errors over time. Peer review, where students provide feedback on each other's writing, can also help students become more critical readers and writers. By analyzing their peers' writing, students can better recognize similar errors in their own work, contributing to a more reflective writing process.

5.3 Practice and Exposure to Authentic Writing

Consistent practice and exposure to authentic English writing are essential for ESL learners to internalize proper language conventions and reduce L1 interference. Reading native English texts, such as essays, articles, short stories, and narratives, allows learners to observe correct sentence structures, vocabulary usage, and discourse patterns in context. Exposure to such texts helps students understand how native speakers organize their ideas and build arguments, which can serve as models for their own writing.

Frequent reading of authentic materials also aids in vocabulary acquisition, helping learners avoid direct translation from their L1 by familiarizing them with the natural use of English expressions and idioms. Additionally, practice in writing allows students to apply the structures they observe in reading, reinforcing correct usage through repetition and self-correction. Teachers should encourage students to engage in various types of writing tasks—academic essays, personal narratives, opinion pieces, etc.—to build confidence and fluency in English.

The combination of reading and writing practice, along with targeted feedback from teachers, helps learners gradually move away from relying on L1 structures. With time and effort, learners can



internalize English conventions, making their writing more coherent, accurate, and reflective of native English usage (Biglari & Struys, 2021).

6. Case Studies and Examples

6.1 Case Study 1: L1 Interference in Grammar (Arabic-Speaking ESL Learners)

Arabic-speaking ESL learners often face specific challenges related to grammatical interference due to the significant structural differences between Arabic and English. One of the most common errors involves word order. In Arabic, the default sentence structure often follows a verb-subject-object (VSO) order, whereas English primarily uses a subject-verb-object (SVO) order. This difference leads to frequent errors in sentence construction, such as "*Came the teacher*" instead of "*The teacher came*." These errors occur because learners instinctively apply the grammatical rules of their native language when forming sentences in English.

Another area of difficulty for Arabic-speaking learners is the use of verb tenses. Arabic has fewer tenses than English, and its tense system operates differently. For example, the future tense in Arabic does not require auxiliary verbs like "will" or "going to," leading learners to produce sentences like "*I go to the market tomorrow*" instead of "*I will go to the market tomorrow*." This omission reflects the influence of the simpler Arabic tense system on English sentence construction.

Additionally, article usage poses challenges for Arabic learners, as Arabic does not have an indefinite article equivalent to the English "a" or "an." As a result, learners often omit these articles or use them incorrectly, producing sentences like "*I bought book*" instead of "*I bought a book*." These grammatical challenges are typical examples of L1 interference, as learners apply Arabic rules in contexts where English norms require different structures. Addressing these issues requires focused grammar instruction that highlights the specific differences between Arabic and English (Govindarajoo et al., 2022).

6.2 Case Study 2: Lexical and Discourse Interference (Chinese-Speaking ESL Learners)

Chinese-speaking ESL learners experience substantial lexical and discourse interference, stemming from both linguistic and cultural differences between Chinese and English. One of the primary challenges in vocabulary usage is the frequent reliance on direct translation. Chinese-speaking learners often transfer vocabulary and idiomatic expressions from their native language into English, resulting in awkward or incorrect phrasing. For example, a Chinese learner might write "*He eats vinegar*" to mean "*He is jealous*" because the Chinese idiom "吃醋" (chī cù) literally translates as "eat vinegar" but conveys the emotion of jealousy in Chinese. These direct translations make the writing sound unnatural to native English speakers.

In addition to lexical interference, discourse and organizational differences pose significant challenges. In Chinese, writing tends to be more indirect and implicit, with ideas often introduced subtly before arriving at the main point. This contrasts sharply with the linear and explicit organizational style favored in English writing, where clarity and directness are key. As a result, Chinese-speaking learners may struggle to adapt their essay structures to meet English academic writing conventions. For example, they might delay presenting a thesis statement until later in the essay, whereas English academic writing typically requires the thesis to be stated upfront.

These organizational challenges also extend to paragraph structure. Chinese learners may write lengthy paragraphs with multiple ideas and limited transitions, making it difficult for readers to follow the argument. This is partly due to cultural writing norms that value depth and exploration of ideas over the succinct, topic-centered paragraphs common in English. To overcome these challenges, teachers should



provide explicit instruction on English writing conventions, helping Chinese-speaking learners understand the expectations for clear, structured writing in English contexts (Mehat & Ismail, 2021).

7. Conclusion

L1 interference significantly affects ESL learners' writing skills, manifesting in areas such as grammar, vocabulary, and discourse organization. Grammatical errors, including word order, tense usage, and article application, often arise when learners apply rules from their native language to English. Lexical interference, such as the use of false cognates and literal translations, leads to awkward phrasing or incorrect word choices. Additionally, discourse interference, where learners struggle with different organizational norms between their L1 and English, can result in unclear or convoluted essay structures. These challenges are common across various linguistic backgrounds, as demonstrated in the case studies of Arabic- and Chinese-speaking learners.

Addressing L1 interference is crucial for helping ESL learners develop proficient writing skills. By raising learner awareness of the differences between their native language and English, educators can empower students to recognize and correct errors rooted in L1 interference. Effective teaching strategies, such as focused grammar instruction, contrastive analysis, and consistent feedback, are essential in helping learners overcome these challenges. Additionally, regular exposure to authentic English writing and structured practice provides learners with the tools they need to internalize proper language conventions.

Ultimately, overcoming L1 interference requires a combination of awareness, practice, and instructional support. By implementing these strategies in ESL classrooms, learners can gradually minimize the influence of their native language on their English writing, leading to greater fluency and accuracy in expressing their ideas. As educators, fostering this growth is key to helping learners reach higher levels of proficiency and confidence in their writing.

8. References

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