

# *The Influence of L1(Chinese) on Writing in L2(English): A Case Study*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore the influences of L1 in the aspect of writing in L2, and it serves as a qualitative case study to disclose how Chinese as L1 influences writing in English (L2) in the context of IELTS writing exercises as part of mock exams. The influences of concern include: First, the study objects' habitual or frequent misuse and mistakes of the L2 resulting from L1's existing language system; these errors can be grammatical, lexical, syntactic, structural, word choice, tense, etc.; and second, how the study objects' previous experience of writing similar texts in L1 is extending its influence in L2 writing. The data were collected from students who used to prepare for IELTS academic tests to achieve the ends mentioned above. Writing tasks prepared for IELTS mock exam were collected for error collection and in-depth word-by-word analysis. The data for the study were collected after the IELTS exam was taken; these essays were part of the preparation for the IELTS exam. Therefore, the analysis can be used as a good indicator of how students perform and write formally in an academic context, not to mention the pressure experienced during the exam. The data analysis shows that there is a wide range of mistakes or misuses in writing in L2, all of which show a link to the interference or transfer of L1 to writing in L2 in aspects of grammar, semantics, and syntax. The interference results in ungrammatical or broken English. The analysis also reveals that the differences between L1 and L2 language systems may have resulted in some common errors and the so-called Chinglish. On the one hand, the linguistic habits and thinking habits of L1 possibly interfere with writing in L2. On the other hand, students' unfamiliarity with the English language, including grammatical rules, semantic structures, and correct usage of words and phrases, also contributed to reduced efficiency or miscommunication of writing in L2. Based on the above-mentioned findings, suggestions are made for students on methods to improve L2 acquisition and application.

**Keywords:** L1 transfer, L2 writing, acquisition, errors, suggestions

## 1. Introduction

According to the British Council's statistics, there are an estimated 400 million English language learners in China [1]. Each year, hundreds of thousands of students in China sit in "English as a second language" tests for higher education purposes. The International English Language Testing System (IELTS), widely accepted in Canada, the UK, Australia, and New Zealand (as well as most of the European countries for international programs), occupies a giant footprint in China. According to statistics in 2017, Chinese students account for over half a million among the 3 million test takers.

Only 27 per cent of Chinese candidates for the IELTS exam score the benchmark of 6.5 or above overseas universities' admission requirements [2]. Regardless of the vast numbers of people who study English as their second language, Chinese people still have low proficiency in overall English levels, especially in speaking and writing.

Therefore, this research is carried out to explore the challenges and difficulties as well as influential factors of Chinese (L1) students in the acquisition of English (L2) and attempt to explain the potential reasons why the majority of Chinese students perform poorly in second language tests such as the IELTS. Another reason for being interested in carrying out this research is that the researcher herself has experienced the influences of her mother tongue (Chinese) during English (L2) acquisition. While some of these effects and influences of L1 are clear, others remain subtle. By examining and categorizing the most common and critical errors that students make during the mock exam of IELTS in the writing task, this study has the potential to reveal students' knowledge of L2 and their ability to use L2 in writing, as well as ways to improve in the later course of L2 acquisition and application. This study will be of similar pragmatic value for English teachers in assessing their teaching procedures more effectively and help students to improve and equip themselves with some knowledge of the causes of interference problems.

Extensive research and studies have been conducted on the native language's interference in the target or second language. According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), "errors were often assumed to be the result of transfer from learners' first language" [3]. At the same time, others argue that not all errors made by L2 learners can be explained in terms of L1 transfer alone. Studies have shown that many errors "can be explained better in terms of learners' developing knowledge of the target language's structure rather than an attempt to transfer patterns of their first language [3]. During the 1970s, many researchers steered their research approach to analyzing learners' errors, known as "error analysis". The goal of "error analysis" was to discover and describe different kinds of errors to understand learners' data in L2.

This research will adopt the idea that L1's interferences are present in writing in L2. Through error analysis, this study attempts to categorize the common errors and mistakes made by Chinese students in writing in English in several aspects, including syntax, semantics, word choice, tense and so on. There have been numerous studies about L1's interference in L2, and this study shares similar research of interest. However, this study has a more specific focus on examining the influence of L1 (Chinese) in L2 (English) writing, and it aspires to shed some light on future Chinese learners of English in aspects to preclude in order to achieve a successful second language acquisition.

## **2. Review of Literature**

This part of the thesis will be focusing on the following aspects. First is a review of the previous work on L1 influence in L2 learning; and specifically, on L2 writing. Second is the positive and negative influence of L1 on L2 writing.

### **2.1. Previous Work on L1 Influence in L2 Learning**

The influence of L1 in L2 has been widely explored by many researchers, and the role of mother tongue in L2 learning was raising awareness not only in the last decade or two. For example, Henry Sweet summarizes the link of the native language or L1 to the foreign language as "we are naturally inclined to assume that the nearer the foreign language is to our own, the easier it is...and Italian is very easy if you know Latin and French" [4]. However, it is also noted by Sweet that the very likeness between the two languages is often a source of confusion. And though there are initial difficulties to conquer in learning a remote and unconnected language, the learners will be significantly less disturbed by "cross associations" along the way. The concept of transfer was discussed in the 1930s

and the 1940s within the framework of behavioristic psychology and referred to “the influence of previously learned material on the learning of a new task” [4]. In the 1950s, the role of mother tongue was granted new importance manifested in a renewed interest in cross-linguistic influence. Contrastive linguistics were developed on the foundation and pioneering works of behavioristic transfer theory, where English was compared with several other languages, and at many different levels. However, as a branch originated from applied linguistics, the initial purpose of contrastive theory was to solve practical problems of language teaching. Namely, it believes that difficulties of learning a foreign language can be predicted based on contrasting and comparing the differences between L1 and L2. This theory was soon being criticized as “over-simplified”, “unrealistic” and “impracticable”. For instance, Wardhaugh comments that the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis does not predict difficulty, instead, it “requires of the linguist only that he use the best linguistic knowledge available to him to account for observed difficulties in second language learning” [3]. The Error Analysis similarly takes an oversimplified view of transfer since “all errors in learner language could not be explained as being due to transfer”. Under the Error Analysis theory, errors such as “transfer errors” and “overgeneralization errors” were also criticized as being “too convenient” [4]. Similarly, linguist S. Pit Coder stressed that the original theory of transfer “assigned too limited a role to the mother tongue”; and that the term should be abandoned, for that the complex process of second language acquisition requires a “more complex and richer picture of the influence of the mother tongue in second language learning” [5].

Examining the above-reviewed linguistic theories on L1’s influence in L2, it is noticeable that there was a lack of adequate treatment of cross-linguistic influence. One of the common and obvious shortcomings of these theories include an “emphasis on the negative aspects of transfer and the corresponding neglect of L1 as a variable facilitating L2-learning” [4]. Ringbom also notes the lack of attention paid to transfer in comprehension. Thus, Faerch & Kasper provided a more comprehensive theory, dividing transfer into overt and covert cross-linguistic influence. While the former depends on perceived similarities, the latter is resulted from a lack of perceived similarity. And overt cross-linguistic influence is further divided into transfer and borrowing involving an analysis of patterns from L1 to L2, and covert cross-linguistic influence results in avoidance of using certain elements of L2 due to gaps of knowledge.

## **2.2. The Positive and Negative of Influence of L1 on L2 Writing**

Language acquisition is defined by linguist S. Pit Coder as “a creative process in which learners are interacting with their environment to produce an internalized representation of the regularities they discover in the linguistic data to which they are exposed” [5]. Transfer, according to Ellis, is the influence that a learner’s L1 exert upon L2 acquisition; namely, in the acquisition of L2, learners establish interim rules with their L1 knowledge [6]. As Ringbom observed, positive L1 transfer means that the facilitating effect of L1 on L2 learning whereas negative transfer, or interference, causes errors in production in L2 [4]. There has been a historic exaggerated emphasis on negative effects of L1 influence because most of the linguistic discussion of transfer were conducted in the context of error analysis. Take L2 writing as an example, L1 transfer can be both considered a learning device and a strategy to solve communication problems [7]. Ringbom also points out that learners use L1 as a tool both for composition and “for sampling and for simplifying complexity of writing in L2” [4]. Studies also show that if students have discussion in L1 before a writing task in L2, they can perform better because of a better understanding of the writing tasks and contents of the writing task. It is also widely observed that multilingual writers use L1s for generating ideas. Other positive influences include using L1 to retrieve information during the planning stage of writing in L2. However, the negative and positive transfer will be unclear when learners experience the knowledge gap in L2 and resort to L1 knowledge to express his or her ideas. Therefore, as Ringbom notes, it remains an

extremely complicated task to specify exactly when and how learners of L1 have inhibited or facilitated L2 production [4].

### 3. Methods

This study is an exploratory case study conducted using qualitative data analysis. The data are IELTS practice essays written by Chinese students to prepare for the exam. These essays are written expecting the rules of an actual exam and were prepared within the time frame of what an actual exam will have. A total of ten essays were requested from two IELTS candidates. Both students speak Mandarin Chinese as their native language.

Moreover, they have been learning English as a second language since 5th grade for over ten years. Both students plan to pursue master's degrees in an English-speaking country. Interestingly, despite the long years of English acquisition, neither of the students feel confident about their L2 production, which is the essay. While they have no significant problem understanding English, they often find it difficult to express themselves, especially within an academic context, either in academic writing or using English in presentations for a particular subject.

It generally takes more than one exam for an average Chinese student to sit in an IELTS exam to get a score that meets the admission requirement of overseas universities. Furthermore, prior to the exam date, each candidate would usually practice and prepare for the exam with dozens of mock exams. All the data collected for this research are also prepared, especially for the writing tasks in the exam. Since these data are perfect examples of essays written in L2 by L2 learners, making them qualify as primary sources to answer the research questions - how does L1 influence writing in L2? A qualitative, in-depth analysis will be carried out on the collected essays of these two IELTS candidates; the paragraphs of these essays are analyzed for grammatical, syntactic, and lexical errors.

### 4. Presentation of Data

The examination of the paragraphs of the ten essays shows that the errors and mistakes that students make are various in nature, but both students' essays exhibited similarities in the mistakes they made. And the research noticed some interesting patterns of their mistakes and have thus made the following observations.

Most of the essays examined show a lack of effective communication in between the lines, and it is difficult to tell what the student wants to express. And misspelling or misuse of words exist alongside unclarity. For example, in an essay comparing young workers and elderly workers, the student wrote "...elder staffs, having been reported as high-risk groups for cancer and other sever diseases, are more likely to see health problems in their jobs-working", and "older people with more acquaintances are more proficiency". Also, "an average man can do only unnoticeable concentration" and "great changes can be seen if the actions of pretending the Earth have become a world-wide consensus". In writing on public transportation, student A wrote in her essay that "...individuals having the necessity to use public transport during the hours being not available in present could enjoy the convenience". Writing on digital technology, student B wrote "the progress of AI makes it possible for students to learn isolate at home". And he also writes on the advantage of teacher using "teachers have awareness of judgement".

There are also some bizarre words or wrong phrasal collocations noticed in both students' essays. Some of the examples include: "natural functional division of the city", "people resource", "none-charging galleries", "museums, whether public or private held", "the relics...promote some knowledge to the admirers", "have great effect to the masses", "receive noticeable outcomes", "every individuals is also vital to takes responsibilities...", "articles of law", "politicians' push and admission", "too much people", "to attract more audiences to use public transport", "less expend

would be spent on...". In student B's essay, for example, he wrote "...hot sellers on Amazon", "forge a system", "an artificial teacher", "self learners", "...adjusting their teaching methods for different kinds of students" and "observe the conditions and characters of them", "last but not the least", etc. There is a tendency of writing over-generalized statements in argumentative essays for both students. For instance, student A wrote "the more important the position is, the wider range of cooperation and communication it needs". The same student also generalized the cause of traffic with "generally, it is private motors that block the road".

The examination of the paragraphs also shows that several mistakes can be detected from one sentence. For instance, a sentence produced by student B is "it is true that leaning history is conducive to both students' and society's development". And "taking democratic system as an example, the fountainhead of morden democracy is ancient Greek".

Some sentences lack coherence and logic but not without errors. In another essay writing on job security, student A wrote "satisfying positions helps founding healthier mind. Carer life occuppies approximately half of employee's everyday lives. Thus optimistic emotions experienced during working is conducive for a stable mind situation". In another essay, the student wrote, "more passengers would have the opportunities to access these means of transportation and therefore give up private transport". And "...the cost of these transport would see a rise, owing to more salary payment and lower income".

There are also signs of Chinese expressions in English writing or the interference of Chinese sentence structure reflected in English writing. For example, student wrote about "considering the outcome for people and the nation", "larger crowd of people filled with different varieties of knowledge", "taking actions to care of the pollution". In another essay, student A wrote "...this is because that large quantities of knowledge and skills are being adaptable for criminals are exist, such as manual skills". And student B wrote "...people could earn living with their own hands and brains" as well as "science and technology can stimulate a country's power".

Some sentences lack consistency in sentence structure or misarrangement of sentences. For example, student A wrote on museums, "not only can the ancient treasures be defended more carefully and receive professional treatment, but also the more exquisite outlook of the museum would attract more visitors". In another essay, student A wrote the following long sentence which is lacking order: "this is for the reason that some professional information being necessary for an occupation, such as statistics and mathematics for being an accountant, is beyond their abilities, as a large amount of the criminals, according to the researchers, lack education, and thus are not acquainted with basic knowledge".

Both students make mistakes in subject-verb agreement. For example, "both politicians and common people are a significant parts in..." written by student A, and "these knowledge helps them to choose a better path of life".

The incorrect use of punctuation marks or lack of some punctuation marks also make occasional appearances in the students' essays. Student A, for example, wrote "common citizens do not have the opportunities to sign any of these only when they gain political power".

There is also overuse of passive sentences in a single essay. The following examples are extracted from one of student A's essay, such as "great changes can be seen", "...atmosphere of...would be created", "a wide range of areas and populations are influenced", "people have been involved". In student B's essay on the value of learning history, the following passive sentence are used, "less mistakes would be made", "people will be advanced".

The lack of transition words also exists in both students' essays. When both students make arguments concerning a specific topic, they tend to write down paragraphs made up of a combination of individual sentences. Transition words that can improve logical flow are either missing or are not



very often used. Some potential words that could be used include “however”, “hence”, “nevertheless”, “on the one hand”, “on the other hand”, “accordingly”, “since” and so on.

## 5. Analysis

It has been observed in the chapter of literature review that L1 transfer is valid since learners might use L1 as a tool to solve both learning and communication problems. Writing in L2, for example, students resort to L1 forms and structures for help when there is inadequate knowledge or certainty of L2. Moreover, L1 also helps students organize their ideas during the writing preparation process. For example, Timina notes that learners have more difficulties handling when there are more differences between L1 and L2 structures; as a result, there will be a more significant number of transfer errors in L2 [8]. Similarly, Brown also maintains that the difficulties for students with L1 to learn L2 is attributed mainly to the differences between L1 and L2 [9]. Bhela furthers the idea by stating that “the further apart L1 and L2 are structural, the higher the instances of errors made in L2 which bear traces of L1 structures [10]. The presentation of the data in Chapter 4 also revealed many such transfer errors resulting from the dissimilarities between L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English). For example, a typical error that both students make is word choice or word form, and occasional intertwining of wrong word choice and spelling. Due to significant differences between Chinese and English, students can be baffled when choosing the right word and phrases. In addition, English has clear morphological markers to differentiate verbs and nouns, nouns and adjectives, adverbs, and adjectives. Unlike English, Chinese has no markers to differentiate different words depending on the context; one word can be used in different parts of speech in a sentence.

Other common mistakes caused by differences between L1 and L2 include not respecting subject-verb agreement, missing determinants in front of nouns and numbers, and tenses. Take subject-verb agreement as an example. In English, the subject and the verb must agree in number, meaning that the subject in plural form corresponds to the infinitive verb form without “-s” or “-es” endings, whereas if the subject is in the singular form, then the verb must be added “-s” or “-es”. The Chinese language has no such rule as in English: there are no morphemes such as “-s” or “-es” to indicate the singularity or plurality of the subject or the verb. Similar differences also exist in the rules of numbers and determinants. In Chinese, nouns are used with “number + measure word + noun”, such as “1 zhi”, meaning “a...”, playing the role of articles. So, “an apple” in Chinese can be expressed as “1 zhi apple”. Comparatively, English has articles of “a”, “an”, and “the”, the uses of which depend on the number of the noun as well as whether the noun begins with a vowel or a consonant. Another difference between English and Chinese is reflected in the number of a noun or a verb. Under the English language system as mentioned before, “number”, signaled by morphemes of “-s” or “-se” indicates the singularity or plurality of the noun or the verb. In the Chinese language system, however, neither nouns nor verbs are pluralized. And plural nouns are expressed through using the formula of “numerals (1, 2, 3...) + measure word (“ge”/“zhi”) + noun”; so “3 dogs” would be “3 zhi dogs”. The tricky part is which word to use for different nouns. Some ambiguous plurals such as “yi xie”, “ji ge” can be used to express “some” and “several” in English.

Due to the above-analyzed difference in these two language systems, students tend to miss using morphemes of “-s” or “-es” in plural nouns or third person singular simple present tense. In short, errors in word forms and tense are identified as some of the most common mistakes that Chinese students make when writing in English. The two distinguishing language systems cause all of the errors mentioned above. Thus, it is fair to say that when there is little or no similarities in the structures of L1 and L2, more problems and errors occur in students’ production in L2 using L1.

Regardless of L1’s negative transfer due to its differences from L2 in structures and other aspects, L1’s positive transfer is also worth noticing. As explained in Chapter 2, there is excessive stress over the negative transfer of L1 in second language acquisition. For example, Lado stressed the importance

of one's native language and deemed it a major cause of lack of success in L2 learning. In recent years, however, many scholars have interpreted the role of L1 as "part of a repertoire of strategies L2 learners use in the course of L2 acquisition" [7]. L2 learners can play a constructive role in the whole process of L1 transfer, which is often used as a strategic tool in helping learners to solve learning and communication problems. Taking writing in L2 as an example, students might use L1 during the composition preparation, such as conveying meaning and formulating hypotheses and converting it to writing in L2. Other L1-based strategies can be used in the preparation process. For example, learners using L1 already know how to plan, develop, revise and polish ideas and opinions in composition tasks and can also use these strategies in L2 writing procedures. Regardless of the errors, both students' essays still demonstrate a moderate flow of logic, such as presenting their stance on a topic, stating reasons with supporting facts, and reaching a conclusion encompassing their arguments. All of these can be seen as positive transfers of L1 since a certain level of linguistic knowledge facilitates the students to compose an essay in the target language or L2.

In addition to L1-L2 differences and similarities, the role of L1 transfer during the process of language acquisition also includes various significant factors such as learner expectations, attitudes, learning styles and goals. These factors are worth noting because they are variables to consider when examining to what extent L1 influences L2 acquisition. For example, some researchers have observed that "cognitive maturity and metalinguistic awareness allow older learners to solve problems and engage in discussion about language" [3]. In this sense, differences in mental abilities that are specific to language learning, and other factors such as habitual differences, learning conditions, motivation, etc., can result in different influences of L1 on products in L2.

## 6. Conclusion and Methodological Implications

This research suggests that L2 writers will refer to the previous knowledge of L1 when writing in L2. The examination of the data collected for this study also proves that the L1 and the L2 language systems can contribute to some of the most common and apparent errors for students using Chinese as L1 and writing in L2, which is English. These differences can be structural, grammatical, habitual and norms. The study also reveals that there is not only negative and positive transfer of L1 in writing in L2. Moreover, while the negative transfer takes the form of common errors and mistakes appearing in L2 writing, the positive transfer involves applying L1-based strategies in the preparation of L2 writing, such as using L1 to formulate hypotheses, generate ideas, outline the structure of writing and so on. While L1 transfer in L2 writing exists, other variables and factors such as cognitive skills, mental abilities, and learning conditions, habitual styles can be neglected when it comes to verifying language acquisition. These are also the variables that regulate the L1 transfer on L2 writing and learning in general.

Success in acquiring L2 is a long-term goal requiring strategic learning and diligent practice. Examining L1's negative transfer on L2 writing, the following suggestions are made for students using Chinese to acquire English.

1. Instead of memorizing and habitually translating between the two languages, it is more important to enhance the understanding of vocabulary and grammatical rules and learn to think in the target language.

2. Learning about the difference between English and Chinese culture will help students improve reasoning and avoid thinking patterns of their mother language in productions of L2.

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