Academic Education Publishing House

Higher Education and Practice Vol. 3 No. 8, 2026

A Study of L1 Negative Transfer in Junior High EFL Writing Based on Error Analysis

Xiaoyu Sun, Fengying Wu
Lingnan Normal University, Zhanjiang, Guangdong, China

Abstract: Negative transfer of the mother tongue (L1) is a persistent obstacle in junior high school English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing. Grounded in Odlin's (1989) theory of language transfer and adopting Corder's (1967) Error Analysis framework, this study investigates the patterns and causes of L1-induced errors in the English writing of 45 ninth-grade students from Zhanjiang No. 8 Middle School. Through systematic error identification, classification, and descriptive statistical analysis, the study categorizes errors at lexical, grammatical, and discourse levels. Quantitative results reveal that tense errors (21.03%) and spelling errors (16.67%) are the two most frequent types, collectively accounting for over one-third of all identified errors, with tense errors being the most prominent. The analysis attributes these dominant error patterns to three underlying causes: cross-linguistic structural asymmetries between Chinese and English (e.g., the absence of inflectional morphology and tense markers in Chinese), students' insufficient English input and strong L1 thinking sets, and inadequate explicit contrastive instruction in current teaching practice. Pedagogically, the study proposes four targeted strategies—contrastive teaching, intensive error-correction drills, thematic corpus accumulation, and individualized feedback—to mitigate L1 interference and enhance the quality of junior high school writing instruction.

Keywords: Negative Transfer; Error Analysis; EFL Writing; Junior High School; Teaching Strategies

1. Introduction

With the in-depth development of globalization, English, as a common international language, has become increasingly prominent in basic education [1]. Junior high school English writing, as a core module for measuring students' comprehensive language application ability, is not only a concentrated embodiment of students' logical thinking and expression skills, but also a key link between primary school English learning and senior high school language application. However, in current teaching practice, the problem of non-standard L1-induced expressions is widespread in junior high school English writing, which has become a major bottleneck restricting the improvement of students' writing proficiency. The core cause of this problem is the interference of negative mother tongue transfer. In the process of English writing, junior high school students often unconsciously transfer Chinese vocabulary collocation habits, grammatical structure rules, and discourse logical thinking to their target language production, resulting in systematic errors.

Chinese and English belong to different language families, with significant differences in their essential linguistic features [2]. At the lexical level, Chinese emphasizes image integration and literal correspondence, while English stresses fixed collocations and contextual appropriateness. For example, students often ignore the authentic English expression "achieve immediate success", but use the literal expression of "horse arrives to success". At the grammatical level, Chinese is characterized by topic-prominence and lacks strict morphological changes, whereas English has clear requirements for subject-predicate structure, tense, and number agreement, which leads junior high school students to frequently make subject-verb disagreement or tense errors. At the discourse level, Chinese thinking presents a spiral and divergent pattern, with discourse cohesion relying on semantic implication, while English discourse emphasizes linear logic and explicit transitions. This difference results in students' compositions often lacking transitional words and sufficient paragraph coherence [3]. According to existing research, errors caused by negative mother tongue transfer are extremely common in junior high school English writing, particularly among Grade 9 students. During this

critical period of transitioning from language input to output, students' English knowledge system has not been fully constructed, and their understanding of target language rules remains relatively vague. Once a language system is already mastered, the thinking and expression habits of the mother tongue significantly interfere with English writing. This negative transfer not only leads to low writing scores but also solidifies incorrect language use habits, hindering the long-term development of students' cross-cultural communication ability. This situation is clearly inconsistent with the goal of cultivating students' comprehensive language application ability required by the new curriculum standards. Therefore, it is both urgent and necessary to systematically investigate the phenomenon of negative mother tongue transfer in junior high school English writing.

The significance of this study is reflected in both theoretical and practical dimensions. Theoretically, this study aims to enrich the application of Language Transfer Theory in basic English education. Most existing relevant studies focus on college or senior high school students, while research targeting junior high school students remains relatively insufficient. By collecting and analyzing the writing corpus of Grade 9 students, this study supplements empirical data for this specific age group and systematically explores the negative transfer phenomena in their English writing under the guidance of Language Transfer Theory. Practically, the research findings can benefit both teachers and students. For teachers, the study helps identify typical negative transfer errors in students' compositions and provides a clear error distribution pattern, enabling more targeted writing instruction. The proposed teaching strategies offer concrete and feasible guidance for reducing L1-induced expressions in the classroom. For students, this study can help raise their awareness of mother tongue interference, improve the accuracy and coherence of their writing, and further promote their overall English proficiency.

Although previous studies have extensively examined negative transfer in college and senior high school students' English writing, empirical research targeting junior high school students, especially those at Grade 9, remains insufficient. Moreover, most existing studies describe error types separately without systematically linking them to specific cross-linguistic differences between Chinese and English. To fill these gaps, the present study systematically investigates the manifestations, causes, and pedagogical implications of L1 negative transfer in Grade 9 students' English writing.

2. Literature Review

Negative transfer has long been a core issue in second language acquisition (SLA), and decades of research have produced a relatively systematic theoretical framework. The theoretical foundation can be traced back to Lado's [4] Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which posited that differences between the mother tongue and the target language directly predict learning difficulties and negative transfer. This strong deterministic view was later softened by Odlin [5], who redefined transfer as a multidimensional phenomenon involving not only grammar but also lexis, pragmatics, and discourse. Ellis [6] further situated negative transfer within a broader SLA framework, identifying it as one of the major sources of learner errors, particularly in writing. Taken together, these three milestones mark a clear theoretical evolution: from prediction (Lado) to description (Odlin) to explanation (Ellis). In recent years, research has gradually shifted toward automated detection and computational analysis. Karimiabdolmaleki et al. [7], for instance, applied machine learning models to automatically identify L1 interference in English writing, confirming that grammatical and lexical features can effectively signal mother tongue transfer. Although the present study does not adopt automated tools, such findings validate the significance of systematic manual error analysis at grammatical and lexical levels, and thus provide methodological justification for the classification approach employed in this research. Empirical studies have consistently confirmed that negative transfer is prominent at lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels, mainly reflected in collocation errors, tense confusion, subject-verb disagreement, and incoherent discourse. Qiu et al. [8] focused on verbal negative transfer and identified subject-verb disagreement, tense errors, and non-finite verb errors as the most common types. Yuan [9] linked these errors to the essential structural differences between Chinese and English, while Pan [10] noted negative transfer impacts multiple dimensions including phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatics. Collectively, these findings suggest that negative transfer is not a random phenomenon but a

systematic reflection of cross-linguistic asymmetry.

Focusing on basic education, scholars have also examined the current situation of junior high school English writing and its connection with negative transfer. Studies show that mother tongue interference has become a key obstacle to improving writing quality, resulting in a large number of non-standard L1-induced expressions (Feng, 2023). At present, junior high school writing instruction generally faces the dilemma of emphasizing form over connotation and results over process. Most classrooms adopt a "proposition writing + mechanical correction + sample explanation" mode, lacking process guidance and targeted training. Students in this critical transition period have pronounced L1-based cognitive patterns and insufficient English input, so they tend to construct English sentences through literal translation from Chinese, which further intensifies negative transfer.

Existing studies have proposed strategies such as comparative teaching, increased authentic input, and error feedback. However, most of these strategies remain at the level of general suggestions and lack systematic, operable designs specifically for junior high school students. Nevertheless, two deficiencies remain in existing research. First, most studies focus on college or senior high school students, while empirical research targeting Grade 9 students—a critical transition period from basic to advanced English learning—remains insufficient. Second, most existing studies describe error types separately without systematically linking them to specific cross-linguistic differences between Chinese and English. As a result, the field still lacks a fine-grained, data-driven analysis of how L1 negative transfer operates at lexical, grammatical, and discourse levels in junior high school writing, and what targeted pedagogical responses can be derived from such analysis.

To fill these gaps, the present study addresses three research questions:(1)What are the specific manifestations and distribution characteristics of errors caused by negative mother tongue transfer in Grade 9 students' English writing at the lexical, grammatical, and discourse levels? (2)What are the underlying causes of these negative transfer errors from linguistic, cognitive, and instructional perspectives? (3)What targeted and feasible teaching strategies can be proposed to effectively reduce the negative interference of mother tongue transfer on junior high school English writing?

3. Research Design

3.1 Participants

The participants are 45 students from Class 6, Grade 9 at Zhanjiang No. 8 Middle School. These students have learned English since primary school and have mastered basic English knowledge, but their vocabulary reserve is limited and their grammatical system remains unstable. Their English performance is distributed evenly across excellent, medium, and lower levels, which makes the sample representative. In total, 45 valid compositions were collected as the research corpus.

3.2 Instruments and Data Collection

The writing task required students to write an email to a pen pal introducing their changes in appearance, personality, and study life during junior high school, with a length of about 80 words. Students were asked to avoid copying the prompt mechanically and to ensure coherence and reasonable content extension. The compositions were collected immediately after a regular in-class writing task, ensuring that all writing was produced independently without access to dictionaries or online tools.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The research adopts a mixed research design integrating literature research, text analysis, error analysis, and descriptive statistical analysis. Literature research serves as the foundational method, establishing the theoretical framework and identifying the research gap. Text analysis examines linguistic features of the 45 samples to grasp the overall performance of negative transfer at lexical, grammatical, and discourse levels. Error analysis, drawing on Corder's framework, serves as the specific analytical tool for identifying, classifying, and describing L1-induced errors. Descriptive statistical analysis serves as the quantitative method, counting the frequency and percentage of different error types to provide objective data support.

3.4 Research Procedure

The research procedure follows Corder's Error Analysis framework. First, the scope of the corpus and the overall research framework are defined, focusing on negative transfer phenomena at lexical, grammatical, and discourse levels. Second, typical transfer errors in the compositions are identified one by one, with

regular language biases marked and occasional careless mistakes excluded. Third, all identified errors are classified into specific categories according to the three dimensions, including spelling errors, word choice errors, collocation errors, tense errors, sentence structure errors, preposition/article errors, logical cohesion errors, content redundancy/incompleteness, and pragmatic inappropriateness. Finally, each type of error is interpreted and analyzed on the basis of the linguistic differences between Chinese and English, preparing for the data statistics and cause analysis in the following chapters.

4. Research Results and Discussion

4.1 Overall Distribution of Negative Transfer Errors

A total of 252 L1-induced errors were identified across the 45 compositions. As shown in Table 1, grammatical errors were the most frequent (92 cases, 36.51%), followed by lexical errors (85 cases, 33.73%) and discourse errors (75 cases, 29.76%).

Table 1. Distribution of L1 Negative Transfer Errors

Error Level	Error Type	Specific Examples	Number	Percentage
Lexical (85, 3.73%)	Spelling errors	"litter" → "little"; "tennis" → "tenis"	42	16.67%
	Word choice errors	"short hair" → "start hair"; "shy" → "shyness"	28	11.11%
	Collocation errors	"help mother cleaning"; "spend time to watching"	15	5.95%
Grammatical (92, 6.51%)	Tense errors	"when I am a little kid" → "when I was little kid"	53	21.03%
	Sentence structure errors	Subject missing ("very brave and outgoing"); "I has changed"	21	8.33%
	Preposition/article errors	"In the weekend" → "On weekends"; "a long hair"	18	7.14%
Discoursal (75, 9.76%)	Logical cohesion errors	Content jump; "Beside" → "Besides"	35	13.89%
	Content redundancy/incompleteness	Repeated "don't like"; incomplete ending	28	11.11%
	Pragmatic inappropriateness	"look cool" in formal email; theme deviation	12	4.76%
Total			252	100%

At the sub-category level, tense errors (21.03%) and spelling errors (16.67%) were the two most prominent types, together accounting for over one-third of all errors. This distribution suggests that L1 negative transfer is concentrated in specific grammatical and lexical areas rather than evenly spread.

4.2 Manifestations of Negative Transfer at the Lexical Level

A total of 85 lexical errors were identified, accounting for 33.73% of all errors.

Spelling errors (42 cases, 16.67%) were the most frequent lexical error type. Three mechanisms can be identified. First, high-frequency word interference: "litter" is misspelled as "little," and "grasses" as "glasses." Second, failure to master consonant doubling rules: "tenis" is misspelled as "tennis," where the learner omits the double "n." Third, suffix omission: "meaningful" is miswritten as "meaning," with the adjective suffix "-ful" dropped. These errors are rooted in the mismatch between Chinese logographic writing and English alphabetic orthography.

Word choice errors (28 cases, 11.11%) mainly result from the direct transfer of L1 lexical meanings. A typical example is "shy" being misused as the noun form "shyness," because in Chinese “shy” and “shyness” are expressed in the same word, while English requires a strict distinction. Similarly, "meaningful" is miswritten as "meaning," failing to distinguish the noun "meaning" from the adjective "meaningful."

Collocation errors (15 cases, 5.95%) result from transferring Chinese collocation habits to English. For example, "help mother cleaning" incorrectly applies the Chinese structure without mastering the fixed English collocation "help sb. do sth."; "spend time to watching" ignores the rule of "spend time doing sth."

4.3 Manifestations of Negative Transfer at the Grammatical Level

A total of 92 grammatical errors were identified,

accounting for 36.51% of all errors.

Tense errors (53 cases, 21.03%) ranked the highest among all sub-categories. Chinese has no verb tense inflection; time is marked by adverbials such as “yesterday” and “today”, while English requires verb morphological changes. For example, "when I am a little" is used to describe past experiences, while the correct form is "when I was little."

Sentence structure errors (21 cases, 8.33%) are mainly affected by the topic-prominent structure of Chinese. Chinese allows subject omission, whereas English requires an explicit subject. For example, "very brave and outgoing" lacks the subject and linking verb "I am." Some students also make agreement errors such as "I has changed." Furthermore, Chinese paratactic structures cause sentence-pattern mixing, such as "Because I like reading, so I often go to the library."

Preposition and article errors (18 cases, 7.14%) stem from the fact that Chinese does not have a complete preposition and article system. For example, students write "In the weekend" instead of "On weekends," and "a long hair" instead of "long hair."

4.4 Manifestations of Negative Transfer at the Discourse-Level

A total of 75 discourse errors were identified, accounting for 29.76% of all errors.

Logical cohesion errors (35 cases, 13.89%) were the most prominent discourse-level problem. Chinese discourse relies on implicit semantic logic for cohesion, while English requires explicit logical relationships through connectives. Students often transfer Chinese paratactic thinking into English writing, leading to logical breaks. For example, they jump directly from "afraid to speak" to "watch TV on weekends" without necessary transitional cohesion.

Content redundancy and incompleteness (28 cases, 11.11%) result from the transfer of Chinese discourse habits. Some students repeatedly express the same viewpoint, such as using "don't like" many times without specifying the object. Others write only "I am very happy" at the end without echoing the core theme of "changes in junior high school."

Pragmatic inappropriateness (12 cases, 4.76%) mainly results from the transfer of Chinese pragmatic rules. Junior high school students often use colloquial expressions such as "look cool" in a formal email. Some students insert irrelevant content, such as suddenly mentioning "My feet are on the ground" in a composition about "personal changes."

5. Causes and Targeted Teaching Strategies

5.1 Root Causes of Negative Transfer

L1 negative transfer in writing is not caused by a single factor, but by the joint action of cross-linguistic differences, learners' cognitive characteristics, and the external teaching environment.

Linguistic differences between Chinese and English are the most fundamental cause. As two distinct language systems, they differ greatly in vocabulary, grammar, and discourse rules, which directly lead to transfer errors when students rely on Chinese rules to construct English expressions. This is reflected in the 252 errors found in the 45 compositions. Lexically, Chinese characters are logographic and have no letter-to-sound mapping, while English words have abundant part-of-speech changes and fixed collocations, leading to 42 spelling errors (16.67%) and 28 word choice errors (11.11%). Grammatically, Chinese is theme-prominent with no strict subject-predicate structure or tense/number changes, while English is subject-prominent with rigorous grammatical rules, resulting in 53 tense errors (21.03%) as the most frequent type. Discoursally, Chinese spiral thinking relies on implicit parataxis, while English linear thinking depends on explicit hypotaxis, causing 35 logical cohesion errors (13.89%).

The cognitive characteristics of ninth-grade students and insufficient language input further worsen negative transfer. With limited vocabulary and unstable grammatical systems, these students rely mainly on textbook input, lacking exposure to authentic English, which hinders their interlanguage development. Proficient in Chinese and with underdeveloped metacognitive ability, they unconsciously use Chinese rules and thinking modes in writing, forming a "Chinese thinking + English vocabulary" pattern. The data support this: tense errors appeared in 28 out of 45 compositions (62.2%), indicating that students have not yet internalized English tense as an obligatory grammatical category. Rote memorization also leads to confused words and grammar, and error fossilization.

Deficiencies in junior high school English writing teaching are another key factor. In terms of

content, teachers focus on separate vocabulary and grammar teaching but lack systematic Chinese-English contrastive teaching, leaving students unaware of cross-linguistic differences. In teaching methods, the "writing + mechanical correction + model essay" mode lacks process guidance and theme-specific scaffolds, forcing students to rely on L1 transfer. In feedback, teachers only correct surface errors without analyzing the root cause of negative transfer, leading to repeated mistakes. Moreover, targeted training for frequent errors is lacking, failing to help students overcome L1 interference.

5.2 Corresponding Teaching Strategies

Combined with the Chinese-English linguistic differences, the cognitive characteristics of junior high school students, and the current teaching situation, this section constructs a targeted and operable teaching system including comparative teaching, special training, corpus accumulation, and precise feedback. The four dimensions cooperate with each other to form a complete teaching loop, which can effectively reduce the influence of L1 negative transfer on junior high school students' English writing.

First, comparative teaching should be emphasized throughout writing instruction, taking the high-frequency transfer errors identified in this study as the main breakthrough point. In vocabulary teaching, teachers should highlight the differences between Chinese logographic writing and English alphabetic orthography. For spelling, teachers can design minimal pair exercises (e.g., "litter" vs. "little," "grass" vs. "glass") to help students notice form differences and reduce high-frequency word interference. For word choice, teachers can compare Chinese and English collocation patterns, using typical cases such as "help sb. do sth." to clarify the boundaries of English vocabulary usage. In grammar teaching, emphasis should be placed on error-prone points identified, particularly tense (21.03%), subject-verb agreement, prepositions, and articles. With the help of time axes, teachers can explain the application of present and past tenses under the theme of personal changes, and distinguish the structural differences between Chinese and English sentences. In discourse teaching, aiming at the logical cohesion errors (13.89%), teachers can contrast Chinese spiral thinking with English linear thinking, illustrate the usage of common connectives, and cultivate students' awareness of explicit logical connection.

Second, targeted special training is necessary to tackle typical negative transfer errors in spelling, tense, diction, and discourse cohesion. At the lexical level, teachers can design spelling correction exercises focusing on high-frequency word interference (e.g., "little/litter," "glasses/grasses") and consonant doubling rules (e.g., "tennis," "running"). Collocation filling tasks can help students consolidate fixed expressions, so as to reduce the 42 spelling errors and 15 collocation errors identified. At the grammatical level, themed tense-matching and sentence-completion exercises can be arranged around the writing topic of personal changes, allowing students to select correct tenses and supplement missing sentence components such as subjects, prepositions, and articles. At the discourse level, connective filling and paragraph reorganization activities are helpful for improving logical expression and addressing the 35 logical cohesion errors. Imitation writing based on authentic model essays is also an effective way to help students learn native-like collocations, sentence structures, and discourse modes.

Third, sufficient authentic language input is an essential prerequisite for reducing L1 negative transfer. It is necessary to guide students to establish a systematic corpus accumulation mode centering on mainstream junior high school writing themes. For common topics such as introducing personal changes, teachers can sort out relevant vocabulary, fixed sentence patterns, and logical connectives to form thematic learning materials for students to memorize and apply. Appropriate reading passages and model essays are also recommended to broaden students' exposure to authentic expressions. Students are encouraged to keep personal accumulation notebooks to record useful collocations and sentence patterns for regular review. Model essay recitation can help internalize language sense, while teachers' timely thematic language support can provide effective writing scaffolds and further narrow the space for L1 transfer.

Fourth, reasonable and efficient writing feedback plays a vital role in avoiding repeated negative transfer errors. Teachers should not only correct superficial mistakes but also label error types and analyze underlying L1 interference, so that students can understand the essential causes behind their mistakes. It is advisable to combine face-to-face individual tutoring with collective classroom comments. Typical errors in the

collected compositions can be analyzed collectively by comparing incorrect and standard expressions, enabling students to deepen their understanding of Chinese-English differences. Students can be guided to keep error journals to record transfer mistakes, summarize correction rules, and conduct periodic review. Peer evaluation can also be organized to let students check compositions following unified error analysis criteria, which helps strengthen their sensitivity to linguistic differences and enhance autonomous error-correction ability.

6. Conclusions

Through the corpus analysis of 45 ninth-grade students' compositions from Zhanjiang No. 8 Middle School, this study explored the manifestations, causes, and coping strategies of L1 negative transfer in junior high school English writing. Three core conclusions were reached. First, L1 negative transfer presents differentiated characteristics at lexical, grammatical, and discourse levels, with tense errors (21.03%) and spelling errors (16.67%) as the most prominent types. Grammatical errors were the most frequent overall (36.51%), followed by lexical errors (33.73%) and discourse errors (29.76%). Second, L1 negative transfer arises from the combined effect of three factors: cross-linguistic differences between Chinese and English as the fundamental cause, students' insufficient English input and strong L1 thinking sets as aggravating factors, and deficiencies in current teaching practice. Third, a four-part coping strategy system was proposed: comparative teaching, special training, corpus accumulation, and precise feedback, forming a closed teaching loop for junior high school English writing instruction.

The study has several limitations. The sample is limited to 45 ninth-grade students from a single school, and the corpus only includes compositions on one theme. Future research can expand the sample scope, cover different genres, and conduct teaching intervention experiments to verify the effectiveness of the proposed strategies.

Acknowledgments

2026 Project of Teacher Education Innovation Mechanism Reform, Lingnan Normal University: "First-class Curriculum Ideology and Politics Construction for Basic Education — The Course of Intelligent Foreign Language Teaching Design and Resource Development" (Project No.: 2026JSJY63)

References

[1] Feng, A. P.Negative Mother-tongue Transfer in English Teaching: Its Impacts on Junior High School Students' English Writing and Improvement Strategies. English Journal for Middle School Students, 2023, (42):29-30.

[2] Dai, W. D., & Shu, D. F. Some Issues in Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage Research — Part Two of Studies in Foreign Language Teaching Theories. Journal of Foreign Languages, 1994(4):1-7.

[3] Cen, Y., Zhang, X. Y. A Study on Negative Mother-tongue Transfer in College Students' English Writing. Overseas English, 2023(23):7-10.

[4] Lado, R. Linguistics Across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957.

[5] Odlin, T. Language Transfer: Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

[6] Ellis, R. Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

[7] Karimiabdolmaleki, M., Wanderley, L. F., Cutumisu, M., Rezazadeh, M., & Demmans Epp, C. Negative Language Transfer Identification in the English Writing of Chinese and Farsi Native Speakers. International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education, 2025, 35(4): 2215-2253.

[8] Qiu, Z. Y., Su, S., Zeng, Y. X. Verbal Negative Transfer in Native Chinese Speakers' IELTS Writing//Proceedings of the 2021 3rd International Conference on Literature, Art and Human Development (ICLAHD 2021). Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, 2021, 594: 575-582.

[9] Yuan, Y. H. Influence of Native Language Transfer on Senior High School English Writing. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2021, 11(2): 170-175.

[10]Pan, J. H. A Study on the Formation Mechanism and Breakthrough Path of Fossilization in Second Language Acquisition from the Perspective of Negative Mother-tongue Transfer. Modern English, 2026(7):103-105.