

An analysis of negative transfer made by Chinese non-English major students in IELTS Writing Task 2

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Abstract: The phenomenon of negative transfer between languages has been a hot topic in second language acquisition. It can have an important impact on students' second language acquisition. Understanding the phenomenon of negative transfer through errors that occur during language learning can better regulate language acquisition in the process of second language learning and improve students' cognition of second language acquisition. The writing part of the IELTS test is a major difficulty for Chinese non-English majors to overcome. Then understanding the negative transfer phenomenon that occurs in their writing process is particularly important for them to improve their scores. This research is dedicated to the research and analysis of the types of errors and the reasons why Chinese non-English major students make mistakes in IELTS writing task 2. The study found that Chinese non-English major students experienced negative transfer between languages in IELTS writing task 2, which resulted in four main types of errors, namely errors in subject-verb agreement, double-predicate errors, and errors in tense of verbs and incomplete sentence structure. By summarizing and analyzing the types of errors caused by these negative transfers, this research hopes to provide corresponding guidance and inspiration for IELTS writing teaching and English writing for non-English major students.

Keywords: Chinese non-English major students; IELTS writing; errors; negative transfer

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1. Introduction

In the 1950s, the concept of mother tongue influence was introduced into the field of second language acquisition, and language transfer theory gradually came into people's field of vision. Summarizing previous research on language phenomena, Odlin in his book gave a concise definition of language transfer, which refers to the effects caused by the similarities and differences between the target language and any other acquired language [1]. Now language transfer is one of the most important research areas in applied linguistics. Many studies have shown that the L1 has a certain transfer effect on the L2 acquisition. The preconceived way of thinking in the L1 affects the acquisition and development of the L2 in some way. Researchers like Weijen et al. and Bagherian indicate that L1 has a direct impact on L2 writing [2,3]. In terms of a review by Yang, "the current review focuses on the errors caused by the negative language transfer." [4] This study aims to investigate how L1 affects L2 in writing skills. And based on the huge differences between Chinese and English, in order to better understand the negative effects Chinese brings to English on writing, it is necessary and important to explore the sentence structure errors in Chinese students' English writing. Therefore, this study started with IELTS writing tasks and analyze a certain number of sentence structure errors. From the sentence level, we discussed the frequency and classic types of common sentence structure errors in Chinese students' IELTS writing, and briefly analyzed the reasons for such errors, and what can be improved from learners' perspective.



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2. Background about IELTS

IELTS is an international standardized test of English language proficiency for non-native English language speakers. The IELTS test is very important for people from many non-native English-speaking countries, because in the international academic, professional and immigration fields, IELTS scores are often used as one of the standards for measuring English language ability.

In recent years, IELTS is gaining popularity in China with more and more people taking this exam. The writing test is considered as the most difficult part of IELTS. That's why research interest always focuses on the analysis of the linguistics feature of students' IELTS compositions.

According to IELTS official data in 2017, despite the increase in the number of IELTS tests, the average writing score of Chinese students is still low at 5.37 points, which is even lower than the minimum language entry requirements of most Western universities.

3. Literature Review

It has been proved that language transfer happens in the second language acquisition process. Alkhateeb found three dynamic relationships (positive, negative, and neutral) between Arabic (L1) and English (L2) writing [5]. The linguistic characteristics of the mother tongue are so deeply ingrained and practiced for so long that they are automatically present in the learner's brain, just as they are in a computer. As a result, students' native language vocabulary recognition and writing is faster and there are less errors in most cases. But L2 acquisition will be seriously hindered by this [6]. Compared with the speed of acquiring linguistic knowledge, it was also found that metacognitive and linguistic knowledge is more crucial during L1 writing [7]. An empirical study was carried out to investigate the main types and reasons of errors in English writing by Chinese college students majored in German. According to the findings, grammatical errors are found to account for the highest error proportion, then followed by substance errors, and the last is misspelling. In addition, the main cause of those errors is related to language transfer, no matter the transfer of L1(Chinese), L2(English) or L3(German) [8].

Li has found that the most common errors by Chinese students in their English writing are the misuse of verbs and articles [9]. The misuse of tense is also the most frequent one by Duan and Zhan [10,11]. Concerning IELTS, sentence types show a direct affect on the band score in writing task 2. According to Sun and Ni, Chinese sentence patterns have a negative transfer effect on English sentence translation [12,13]. A study was carried out by Al-Khairy found that students showed some weakness in writing skills, mainly at the sentence level [14]. Tran and Truong concluded the frequency of single-clause sentences has an insignificant negative relationship with the IELTS writing task 2 band score [15]. Alsalamy said a wrongly written sentence makes a misinterpretation of the intended message that is to be conveyed [16]. And syntactic relationships play an important role in determining the semantics of language units at the syntactic level [17]. However, researchers like Weijen et al. indicate that L1 has a direct impact on L2 writing, and L2 text quality was found to have a positive association with goal setting, producing ideas, and structuring, but a negative association with self-direction and Metacomments [2]. Wei et al. revealed that Chinese-to-English rhetorical transfer caused trouble for Chinese EFL student writers to perceive their English writing [18]. According to Ellis, errors inevitably arise from our previous experience [19]. The gaps in languages' ability can be reflected by errors [20]. Sabbah pointed out that errors are considered as warning signals and they give learners the evidence of lack in the acquisition of their second language [21].

Based on the importance of sentence types and structures, even though many studies have shown that the L1 has a certain transfer effect on the L2 writing, few of them focused on only the L1-to-L2 negative transfer in sentence types and structures as well as how it happens. Therefore, this study will concentrate on sentence structures in IELTS' writings

and categorize errors found in them, through the error analysis, to find out the L1-to-L2 negative transfer in term of syntactical structure.

4. Research Objectives

To investigate the frequency of different sentences used by Chinese IELTS test-takers from non-English majors in writing task 2.

2) To study the common errors which might impact the band score in this section made by Chinese college IELTS candidates.

5. Research question

1) What are the frequencies of different sentences used in IELTS writing task 2 written by the non-English major candidates?

2) What are the typical errors of English sentences use in college students' IELTS writing task 2?

6. Methodology

6.1. Participants

The subjects in this research are 8 students from one university in northern part of China majoring in Education, international law and civil engineering.

They all have learned English in the same English training school specialized on IELTS for three months.

They chose the IELTS writing tasks by themselves with different topics.

All of them volunteered to participate into this research and sent their compositions to researchers via WeChat (a social platform used mainly in China).

6.2. Instruments of Research

The content analysis was adopted in this research to analyze these eight compositions.

The qualitative method was used to find the subjects' common use of sentences and main errors in IELTS writing task 2.

6.3. Data Collection

In order to facilitate the smooth progress of the research and analysis and the in-depth understanding of the composition, after the 8 participants submitted their compositions, the researcher sorted out the corresponding basic data of the 8 compositions, including the number of words in each composition and the number of different sentence structures that appear in each composition. There are total 134 sentences are found in these 8 compositions, with 58 simple sentences and 76 complex sentences. The specific data content of each composition is shown in the following **Table 1**.

Table 1. The Basic Data of Each Composition

Writings	Word Count	Sentences Used	Simple Sentences	Complex Sentences
1	256	15	8	7
2	361	16	8	8
3	247	20	7	13
4	217	14	5	9
5	239	16	6	10
6	226	17	9	8
7	213	15	6	9
8	315	21	9	12
Total	2074	134	58	76

The analysis of syntactic errors in English writing requires a detailed sentence structure analysis of each sentence. In this research, the syntactic analysis of the 8 collected compositions is carried out. According to the two major structures of English sentence structure, this research finds two types of simple sentences and seven types of complex sentences in the 8 compositions. The type of S+V+O in simple sentences occupied the most. In addition, relative clause and adjunct clause are the most frequently appeared types in complex sentences. The specific number of each sentence can be presented in **Table 2** below.

Table 2. The Number of Different Sentence Types

Structures of Sentences	Types	Number
Simple Sentences	S+V+O	42
	S+V+SC	14
	That-clause	8
	Nominal relative clause	10
Complex Sentences	Relative clause	16
	Adjunct clause	18
	To clause	12
	Postponed subjects	8
	There-be sentences	6
Total		134

8. Data Analysis

Through the analysis of the collected data, this study mainly found four types of syntax errors, which are Errors in subject-verb agreement, Errors in tense of verbs, Double-predicate errors and Incomplete sentence structure. Then based on specific practical examples, the researchers will analyze the four typical mistakes that Chinese non-English major students often make in IELTS writing task 2.

8.1. Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

Example:

(1). First of all, spending too much time doing this take a lot of energy which to do other things.

(2). Studying abroad and living in a non-native country has been recognized as an effective way to acquire foreign language and different cultures in education system.

(3). A: There are much more information on the Internet than in newspapers.

B: Some rubbish and unhealthy information spread quickly through the Internet, which have a very bad impact on society.

(4). A: The disadvantage outweigh its possible disadvantage.

B: Some people is that playing computer games can provide players with much pleasure.

In example (1), the correct one should be "takes". Example (2) need to be replaced by "have been". They should be "is" and "has" in example (3). Example (4) should be "outweighs" and "are". From the four examples, it can be seen that the Errors in subject-verb agreement mainly focus on the singular and plural of the verb to be consistent with the subject. It is a relatively common problem for Chinese students to have subject-verb inconsistency in English writing, which may involve the following reasons. English subject-verb agreement is one of the basic grammatical rules, but for students who do not major in English, they may not have fully grasped this concept, and it is easy to make mistakes in writing. There are great differences in grammatical structure between Chinese and English. For example, the subject-verb agreement in Chinese is not as obvious as in English. This may lead to the interference of Chinese students' mother tongue in writing, and the

problem of subject-verb inconsistency. Different languages and cultural backgrounds may affect students' understanding and application of grammatical rules. Certain grammatical rules may be important in English but may not have a corresponding concept in the student's native language. When writing, students may focus more on conveying meaning than on grammatical correctness. This may result in them not checking the sentences carefully for subject-verb agreement issues. What's more, learning a language requires constant practice, especially when it comes to grammar. If students lack enough practice, it is easy to make grammatical mistakes in writing.

8.2. Errors in Tense of Verbs

Example:

(1) With the development of science and technology, people will be gradually more and more dependent on electronic products.

(2) Once they get used to the local thinking patterns, it would be much easier for them to learning language and culture.

(3) Newspapers had gradually moved away from the mainstream media.

(4) It is unwise to allow those who were in the formative years to overindulge in on line games.

According to the context, it should be "are" in example (1). In example (2), "will be" is more suitable for the context. Due to the difference between past perfect and present perfect, example (3) should be "have". And the correct one should be "are" in example (4). Chinese students often make some mistakes in verb tense in English writing, most of these mistakes may be caused by language differences, study habits, mother tongue influence and other reasons. The subject-predicate structure in Chinese is relatively simple, and usually does not involve tense, voice and complex verb structures in English. This may lead students to neglect the consideration of tense when writing. There are certain differences between Chinese and English verb tenses and voices. The tense and voice expressions of verbs in Chinese are relatively few, which is different from the rich tense and voice system in English. Students may get confused when using English tenses and voices, and thus make errors in inconsistent tenses.

Inconsistent use of tense is common among these errors. The word order of Chinese and English is very different, which may cause tense problems in sentence structure for Chinese students. Sometimes, Chinese students use inconsistent tenses in sentences, it may be because in Chinese, tense consistency is not emphasized as much as in English, and students often ignore this in IELTS writing. Sometimes, because the tense conversion rules of Chinese and English are different, Chinese students may inappropriately perform tense conversion in sentences, resulting in improper tense conversion. At the same time, Chinese students lack practical contextual practice. Some Chinese students may not have enough practical contextual practice when learning tenses, making it difficult for them to understand when to use different tenses.

8.3. Double-Predicate Errors

Example:

(1) However, I think that children are spend too much time watching TV and playing computer games have negative impact on children's mental abilities.

(2) Because of they are study and live in an unfamiliar country, those overseas students can make friends with foreigners which can help them to study language and the local culture.

(3) Nowadays people mainly is use the Internet to get information.

(4) Many parents worry that their children is spend too much time playing computer games.

In English writing, Chinese students often have double verbs, that is, two verbs appear in one sentence. There are many differences in grammatical structure and expression between Chinese and English, and these differences may affect the occurrence of double-

predicate verbs in English writing by Chinese students. Students may sometimes perform a word-for-word translation, directly translating the structure and components of a Chinese sentence into English, regardless of the English expression. This can lead to problems with double predicate verbs. Most of this is caused by literal translation thinking. Influenced by Chinese thinking, Chinese students may directly translate Chinese sentences into English, resulting in unnatural sentence structures. In some Chinese sentences, it may be necessary to use two predicate verbs, but in English usually only one is required. Students may not be familiar with the variety of expressions in English, especially in sentence structure and the use of predicate verbs. In complex sentence structures, students may be confused by complex grammatical structures, resulting in redundant predicate verbs.

There are many function words in Chinese, such as "is", "have", etc., which are different from the content verbs in English. Students may use function words when translating, resulting in errors of double predicate verbs. In addition, in Chinese, a certain action or state can be emphasized by repeating verbs or verb-object structures. Students may be inclined to apply this emphasis to English writing, resulting in redundant predicate verbs.

8.4. Incomplete sentence structure

Example:

(1) (Being) Addicted to watching TV and playing computer games may hinder progress in school.

(2) (When they are in) a different country, they must follow the local tradition and behave decently.

(3) (People) Only need to log on different Internet websites to learn different information.

(4) A: playing games is an effective (way) to relax one's body.

B: Some people is (believing) that playing computer games can provide players with much pleasure.

In example (1), there is a loss of "Being" to be a correct sentence. "When they are in" or only "in" needs to be added in the sentence of example (2). Obviously, there is a loss of subject in example (3). The noun "way" and the verb "believing" should appear to make up a complete and correct structure and sentence. Under the time pressure of an exam or writing assignment, students may rush through their writing, leading to neglect of accuracy in sentence structure. The reasons why Chinese students have incomplete sentence structures in English writing may involve the following aspects. First of all, there are great differences in sentence structure and grammar between Chinese and English, and Chinese students are often influenced by Chinese thinking. In Chinese, the subject, predicate and other components are often omitted, because in Chinese, the context can clearly imply such information. This may cause students to unconsciously omit key components in English writing, resulting in incomplete sentence structures. Chinese allows omission of the subject or other components, while English requires a more complete sentence structure. Chinese students may be influenced by their mother tongue, resulting in incomplete sentences in their writing. Secondly, the word order of Chinese is different from that of English. The modifiers in Chinese are usually placed after the modified word, while in English they are usually placed before the modified word. Students may have retained Chinese word order in their English writing, resulting in incomplete or confusing sentence structures.

For non-native speakers, sense of language is the key to forming correct sentence structure in writing. A lack of sufficient sense of English language may cause students to be unable to accurately construct complete sentences when writing. In addition, students may not have sufficient grasp of different types of sentence structures to know how to properly construct complex or multi-layered sentences. Sometimes students may pay too much attention to the content of the expression, while ignoring the accuracy of the sentence structure. This also leads to incomplete sentence structures in their writing.

9. Findings

There are 134 sentences total in the eight compositions, 56 for simple sentences and 78 for complex sentences. The structure 'S+V+O' is used 42 times, which is more frequently in simple sentences. Aside from that, the 'S+V+SC' structure is used 14 times. The adjunct clause is the most common type of complex sentence, accounting for 18 of them. The relative clause, which is used 16 times, is the second most common. Furthermore, the postponed subject structure and There-be sentence structure appeared in the data for 8 and 6 times, respectively.

The most typical errors written by those 8 subjects are as follows: Subject predicate agreement errors, Tense errors, Double-predicate errors and Incomplete sentence structure. And the percentages of different error types are shown in the **Table 3** below:

Table 3. The Percentages of Different Error Types

Types of Errors	Number	Percentage
Errors in subject-verb agreement	19	28.8%
Errors in tense of verbs	15	22.7%
Double-predicate errors	18	27.3%
Incomplete sentence structure	10	15.2%
Other errors	4	6%
Total	66	100%

After analyzing the errors in the 8 compositions of IELTS task 2 written by the eight participants, it was found that among the four most typical types of mistakes, the subject-verb agreement made the most mistakes, which accounts for 28.8%. Followed by the 27.3% appearance of double-predicate, and then the misuse of verbs' tense takes up 22.7%. Finally, the occurrence of incomplete sentence structure accounts for 15.2%. The other types of errors occur less frequently, only 6%. It can be seen that the four typical types of errors in the writing of IELTS task 2 by non-English major students are ranked from high to low as: errors in subject-verb agreement > double-predicate errors > errors in tense of verbs > incomplete sentence structure > other errors.

This study also analyzed and discussed the reasons that caused these types of errors. And the researcher found for the most frequent errors in subject-verb agreement, it mostly can be caused by the habit that Chinese does not undergo this transition. And for the errors in tense of verbs, it can be found that although both Chinese and English verbs contain tense and voice form in their grammar, the forms of the verbs used in their expression are fundamentally different. The function words in Chinese, such as "is", "have", etc., are different from the content verbs in English. They always exist in Chinese expressions. This always leads to the double-predicate errors. Due to the difference in sentence structure between Chinese and English and the influence of literal translation thinking, non-English major students will also have incomplete sentence structures in IELTS writing task 2.

All in all, obviously there is a transfer relationship between L2 (English) writing performance and L1 (Chinese) proficiency and L1 affects L2 in writing skills. That is, the negative-transfer can be found in the non-English major students' writing in IELTS writing task 2. The more complex the target structures are, the more obvious the syntactic transfer is [22]. Thus, in order to get high score with complex sentences, Chinese L2 learners could find out the most frequency of their sentence errors by these results, and pay more attention to those negative transfer during their writing.

9.1. Limitation

- Eight participants and their text analysis cannot confirm the credibility of the dynamic transfer, more different L1 proficiency levels should be included to build its effects on L1-to-L2 transfer.

- The fact that the participants have similar level of English proficiency and only argumentative essays were involved, makes the findings generated in this article impossible to generalize across genres.
- Being Lack of generalizability, findings are limited to specific kind of tasks and ratings, (IELTS writing tasks and grammatical errors rating), more factors should be included.

9.2 Implications

- Different L1 proficiency levels should be considered as a variable in the future research to establish its effects on L1-to-L2 transfer because language proficiency is pivotal in language transfer.
- Future research should delve deeper into the reasons why Chinese students make these typical sentence structure errors. Exploring negative transfer can help students gain a deeper understanding of the differences between Chinese and English, and promote their cognitive development of language. This helps to increase students' language awareness and intercultural awareness.
- Understanding the phenomenon of negative transfer can help teachers provide instruction and support in a more targeted manner. They can specifically explain and correct students' common mistakes, as well as provide students with strategies to improve their writing. Furthermore, knowing the areas in which students are more prone to negative transfer, teachers can adjust instructional strategies and allow teachers to tailor instruction, especially when explaining grammatical rules, sentence structure, and expressions. Future research can focus on how English teachers can help students improve these typical mistakes.

10. Conclusion

By analyzing the IELTS writing tasks of Chinese English learners, we focus on sentence level and find that complex sentences are more frequently used, especially the adoptions of adjunct clause and relative clause. Besides that, there are four typical sentence structure errors which are more often appear in the IELTS writing tasks, subject-predicate disagreement, tense error, double predicates, and incomplete sentence structure. We also simply discussed the possible reasons of forming these errors in IELTS writing tasks, and found that the phenomenon of negative transfer between languages exists in the IELTS writing of non-English major students. The limitations of this study also have been given. Through the discussion and analysis of the types of errors and the causes of errors in IELTS writing by non-English major students, this research has certain reference value and significance for IELTS writing teaching and the process of students' writing learning.

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