

# Literature Review: The Influence of Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue on the Syntax of Junior Middle School English Writing

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**Abstract:** This paper discusses the concept of language transfer of the mother tongue and reviews both domestic and foreign research on the negative effects of such transfer. The focus is on the relevant research in the field of English writing teaching for junior middle school students in China. These studies have shown that the negative transfer of one's native language has a detrimental impact on the acquisition of a second language. Despite the efforts of education experts and scholars to explore various teaching models and improve the situation of junior middle school English writing teaching, the teaching dilemma has not been significantly resolved. To overcome these obstacles, it is vital to investigate students' specific difficulties using quantitative and qualitative methods such as questionnaires and case studies, informing targeted teaching strategies. Additionally, a systematic examination of mother tongue transfer on English syntax, alongside evaluating current teaching methods, is crucial for effective instruction. Collaborative efforts among education experts, linguists, and teachers are essential to integrate findings into practical teaching approaches. Future research should emphasize identifying root causes, applying transfer theory, and continuously evaluating methods to enhance junior middle school English writing instruction.

**Keywords:** Junior Middle School Students English Writing; Negative Native Language Transfer; Literature Review.

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## 1. Introduction

In junior middle school, students' English writing ability is one of the important components of language learning. However, many beginners are affected by the negative transfer of their mother tongue in English writing, especially in the use of syntactic structures. Negative transfer of the first language refers to the phenomenon of language transfer caused by the acquisition of the first language, which leads to grammatical errors or improper structures in the writing of the target language. Many domestic and foreign experts and scholars have studied the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on second language writing, and junior middle school English writing has also become a hot topic in foreign language education research in China in recent years. Therefore, it is of great significance to review the literature on the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on the syntax of junior middle school English writing. Reviewing and discussing the syntax problems that students may encounter in the writing process and their causes, can provide effective teaching strategies and guidance for teachers to help students overcome the obstacles caused by negative transfer of their mother tongue and improve their writing level and language expression ability.

This paper mainly reviews the research on language transfer of the mother tongue, summarizes the domestic and foreign research status on the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue in second language learning, summarizes the current research status of junior middle school English writing teaching in China, and puts forward some suggestions to promote the improvement and promotion of junior middle school English writing teaching.

## 2. Definition of Language Transfer

Originally, "transfer" is a psychological term, and it means that the knowledge, ability, learning methods, and attitude to

learning we have acquired can affect our learning [1]. For language, it is difficult to define a language in detail and accurately [2]. Therefore, different linguists have different opinions on language transfer. The American linguist Lado is the first to propose the problem of language transfer. Lado suggests that in second language acquisition, learners rely on the mother tongue (MT) they have already mastered and often consciously or unconsciously use their knowledge of the mother tongue or original language to aid learning. This phenomenon results in students being affected by their mother tongue when learning English [3]. Odlin's view relatively conforms to most linguists. In 1987, He redefined the concept of language transfer, which points out that transfer was the effect caused by the similarity and difference between the target language and the language we have acquired or not acquired [2]. Ellis [4] believes that language transfer is a phenomenon in which previous (mother tongue) knowledge affects second language acquisition and development. According to the definitions of language transfer by various linguists above, it can be concluded that due to similarities and differences between the target language and the language have acquired or did not acquire, they have previously acquired language knowledge, abilities, learning methods, and learning attitudes will consciously or unconsciously have an impact on subsequent target language learning.

### 2.1. The Conception of Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue (NTMT)

Transfer is both a process and a result. When viewed as a process, it refers the actively changing [5]. When regarded as a process, transfer can be divided into two categories: positive transfer and negative transfer [6]. When the way to learn the target language is similar to the mother tongue, it means that this kind of impact is positive. Otherwise, it's the negative transfer of the mother tongue [7]. While writing English articles, NTMT has a great influence so this literature review

will focus on this phenomenon. While learning a second language, negative transfer is usually produced. It shows that MT sometimes cannot promote learners' foreign language learning. To some degree, it gets in the way of the mastery of a new foreign language. This kind of negative transfer can't be produced if there is no difference between the two languages. Foreign language learners inappropriately use the expression of MT to replace that of foreign language. The phenomenon above is mainly due to the different forms between them. When the second language is studied, positive transfer is useful for learners, while negative transfer is not.

### **3. Studies on Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue (NTMT)**

In recent times, investigations into the adverse effects of mother tongue transfer have garnered significant interest, demonstrating notable advancements. In the subsequent section, we will examine the research conducted on mother tongue negative transfer, both domestically and abroad.

#### **3.1. Previous Studies at Home**

Some scholars believe that the phenomenon of relying on native language thinking to explain a foreign language is very common, and even experienced foreign language learners cannot completely get rid of the influence of their native language. Learners' dependence on their native language is positively correlated with the difficulty of completing foreign language tasks [8]. Many scholars have found that the mistakes students make in writing are closely related to the negative transfer of the mother tongue [9-13]. Guo and Liu [9] explained the role of the mother tongue in foreign language writing as follows: formulating composition content; Analyzing and judging the language form; and Searching for relevant foreign language words, phrases, or sentences. Xu [13], through comparative analysis of some typical sentence patterns in Chinese and English, found that the differences in the two cultural thinking modes led to the differences in the syntactic level between the two languages. Liu [11] found that among 21 types of major mistakes in college students' picture writing, 16 were caused by negative transfer of mother tongue, which further revealed the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on English writing. Li and Wang [10] found that the results showed that the rigidity of interlanguage, negative transfer of the mother tongue, and unproficiency in the rules of the target language were the main causes of errors in English writing. Some scholars conducted studies on the reasons for relying on mother-tongue thinking in English writing, and the results showed that most English learners had already mastered their mother tongue before learning English, so they tended to use mother-tongue ideas when formulating compositions and organizing the contents of articles in English writing and then expressed them in English [14,15] Yu [16] pointed out in his paper that comparing the similarities and differences between a foreign language and the mother tongue to avoid mistakes is an effective method for foreign language learning. The most common mistake in Chinese-English translation is the improper use of grammar and sentence structure which is mainly due to the differences between English and Chinese word usage rules and syntactic structures, resulting in the negative transfer of the mother tongue [17, 18].

#### **3.2. Previous Studies Abroad**

Compared with China, studies on mother tongue transfer and second language acquisition have been conducted systematically and comprehensively in foreign countries. The main finding is that negative transfer of the mother tongue has a significant impact on the process of foreign language learning. Freeman [18] found that since there are no articles in Japanese, Japanese students are more likely to make mistakes in learning articles than learners with articles in their mother tongue. This result confirms that the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on the process of foreign language learning cannot be ignored. Some research confirms that learners tend to rely on native language expressions in the process of foreign language writing [20,21]. Uzawa and Cumming [22] studied the Japanese writing of American students whose second language was Japanese, and the results showed that 80% of these students tended to use their native language when formulating the text structure and content of an essay. Kobayashi and Rinner [23] specially studied the English writing of Japanese college students, in which 55% of the learners with higher English levels and 87% of the learners with lower English levels spent more than 50% of the time thinking about their foreign language writing in their mother tongue. Bhela [24] focused on the study of the influence of sentence structure on the negative transfer of the mother tongue in foreign language writing. He took four learners of English as a second language as research objects. The learners used English and their mother tongue to write picture compositions, and the results showed that in their compositions, more than 50% of the sentences were confused by the combination of native language and English sentence structure, which indicates that the subjects were disturbed by their native language when writing English essays. Graugerge [25] showed that 36% of the mistakes made by German adult English learners were caused by their mother tongue. In a study of English learners who graduated from universities with different native languages, it was found that the proportion of errors made by the subjects due to the influence of native language transfer was about 33% [26]. Dulay and Burt [27] studied the mistakes made by Spanish child English learners and found that only 3% of the mistakes made by learners were caused by the transfer of their mother tongue. Tran-Chi-Chau [28] found that adult English learners in China made 51% of mistakes because they were influenced by Chinese. Mukkatesh [29] studied adult Arabic English learners and found that 23% of their language mistakes were caused by mother tongue transfer. A study on college English learners in Italy found that almost half of the mistakes made by the learners were influenced by the transfer of their mother tongue [30]. Negative transfer of the mother tongue also can make students hard to think in the target language found that In the English language, for Turkish students, the most challenging part was Grammar, while the most difficult and influential skill was Speaking. In addition, participants had difficulty with speaking without any preparation. When it comes to having difficulty, participants had difficulty with determiners, English tenses, and articles.

Both domestic and foreign studies have confirmed that negative transfer of the mother tongue has a negative impact on second language learning. The learners in the above studies are different in age and from different countries, and their second language is also different. Although the proportion of mistakes made by learners due to the transfer of the first language is different, we can still see that the negative

transfer of the first language is a major cause of mistakes in the process of second language acquisition.

#### **4. Studies on Junior Middle School English Writing Teaching in China**

Writing requires the comprehensive use of various language skills. It is a complex language-thinking activity involving various factors such as language and culture knowledge and writing skills. English writing can objectively reflect students' comprehensive English language level and reflect their problems in English learning, and the feedback information in writing can promote and guide English teaching. Many English educators in China have long been committed to studying the characteristics of English writing and the practical difficulties of learners in English writing, and have been exploring strategies to improve English writing teaching methods and improve the effectiveness of English writing teaching.

In recent years, scholars have done a great deal of research on English writing teaching for junior middle school students [31-37]. Li [32], in his research on the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue in middle school English writing, pointed out that the errors of negative transfer of mother tongue in middle school students' writing are mainly concentrated at the morphological, lexical, syntactic, discourse and cultural levels, among which there are three types of syntactic levels: subject-verb inconsistency, word order confusion, and negative misuse. Wang [34] pointed out that English writing classroom instruction in China generally serves two purposes: practicing and consolidating newly learned words, phrases, and grammar; and teaching students communication skills. However, writing activities that lie between communication and practice are truly conducive to improvement. However, currently, teachers only focus on the writing tasks themselves, overlooking the communicative nature of task design and implementation. They often confine the writing classroom to the teaching and practice of grammar and vocabulary, lacking the introduction and simulation of real communicative contexts. Some researchers have investigated the recent situation of junior middle school English writing teaching in China. Wang [35] investigated the current situation of English writing teaching with 10 junior middle school students and 60 teachers as subjects and interviewed 5 teachers in depth. The results showed that junior middle school English teachers paid less attention to writing teaching, less guidance to the writing teaching process, and too much attention to writing texts. The method of English composition correction is too simple and the effect is poor. The common problems in students' compositions are as follows: the ability to examine the question, the ability to process information, the basic language knowledge is weak, the output ability is not strong, and Chinese-style English thinking is common. Li [31] found that the errors caused by the negative transfer of mother tongue in junior middle school students' English writing can be summarized into three levels: vocabulary, syntax, and discourse. Based on the statistical analysis of errors caused by negative transfer of mother tongue in junior middle school students' English compositions, it is concluded that the errors at the lexical level account for the largest proportion (52.1%), followed by errors at the syntactic level (37.6%), and errors at the discourse level are the least (10.3%). Zhang [36], in his research on the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue in middle

school English writing, pointed out that the errors of negative transfer of mother tongue in middle school students' writing are mainly concentrated at the morphological, lexical, syntactic, discourse and cultural levels, among which there are three types of syntactic levels: subject-verb inconsistency, word order confusion, and negative misuse. Wang [33] studied the negative transfer of mother tongue in junior middle school English syntax learning and found that the negative transfer of mother tongue in junior middle school syntax learning is embodied in the following aspects: sentence expression mode, means, sentence structure expression order, sentence composition, sentence level, sentence tense, voice, and typical English sentence pattern.

Besides, some scholars have explored how to improve the current situation of junior middle school English writing teaching. At the macro level, the discussion focuses on the correct handling of the relationship between teaching and learning in English writing, and the application of Task-based language teaching methods and Process teaching methods is the mainstream of the discussion. Many researchers and front-line teachers have also done research according to the guidance of scholars' writing ideas. Using questionnaire surveys, interviews, classroom observations, teaching tests, and other methods, Yang [38] found that TBLT can improve students' English writing ability in many aspects. However, teachers need to design specific and operable writing tasks for specific communication and language projects, and students can complete writing tasks through multiple language activities. To a certain extent, this method is conducive to the improvement of junior middle school students' English writing ability, but it is difficult to improve the teaching quality in a wide range at present because TBLT highly relies on teachers' teaching level and classroom control ability in the actual process of designing and implementing tasks. Zhang [39] conducted a study on the Process teaching method. After 16 weeks of teaching experiments, it was found that compared with the control class, the experimental class made great progress in terms of the fullness and accuracy of composition language content as well as the systematization and completeness of organizational structure. However, the Process teaching method also has disadvantages. Rodrigues [40] argued that the Process teaching method did not pay enough attention to the most basic syntactic structure, grammar, and writing skills of English writing. Li [41] points out that in the long run, frequent group assessment in the Process teaching method will eventually lead to students' inability to accurately evaluate their writing ability. All in all, these two writing teaching methods provide a certain theoretical reference for solving the current situation of junior middle school English writing teaching, but both have their limitations, so they cannot fundamentally improve the current situation of junior middle school English writing difficulties.

From the micro level, scholars and front-line teachers have applied a series of teaching strategies that might be helpful to improve students' writing. Many scholars believe that writing is a comprehensive application of students' language ability, so teachers should pay attention to teaching hearing, speaking, reading, and writing skills. For example, strategies such as mind mapping, brainstorming, peer patching, and automatic composition correction networks based on big data can provide a reference for English writing teaching to some extent. Wang [42] proposed that an effective way to teach English writing is to increase the amount of reading, in which learners can expand their vocabulary and accumulate a large

amount of writing materials. Li [43] pointed out that we should pay attention to the pertinence of teaching, strengthen students' cross-cultural awareness, and enable students to learn English change skills subtly. Zhang [37] suggested that teachers should try syntactic teaching strategies to overcome the negative transfer of the mother tongue. Zhang [36] proposed teaching strategies to improve the negative transfer error of the mother tongue, including improving students' cognition of the nature of mother tongue transfer error, sentence composition, and structure exercises, writing outline exercises, and native English expression training. Li [31] pointed out that students should pay attention to the accumulation and use of English vocabulary, to avoid the lack of corpus and seek the help of their mother tongue; Students should do a lot of writing exercises to cultivate their thinking in English writing and reduce the influence of their mother tongue. Students can constantly read classic texts to accumulate good words and sentences, get familiar with English writing methods, and improve their writing and expression skills. Although, the strengths of these studies lie in the exploration and application of various teaching strategies. However, these studies are limited by the absence of a systematic framework and guidance, an overemphasis on tools rather than substantive teaching goals, and a lack of personalized and targeted teaching approaches, resulting in potential neglect of individual student needs.

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

The research results of junior middle school English writing teaching in China show that there are still many problems in junior middle school English writing teaching, and the current situation of writing teaching is not optimistic. Although many researchers have devoted themselves to English teaching research, the current mainstream writing teaching method has not fundamentally improved the current situation of junior middle school English writing difficulties. Negative transfer of mother tongue has a great impact on junior middle school English learners, but there are few studies on the effective combination of negative transfer of mother tongue with junior middle school English classroom and the use of negative transfer theory to improve junior middle school students' English writing ability. Studies on the impact of negative transfer of mother tongue on the syntax of English writing are few and not systematic and in-depth. Some scholars have tried to explore the teaching strategy of "overcoming negative transfer of mother tongue", but they have not specifically analyzed the root causes of the problems or proposed specific countermeasures according to specific problems. The teaching strategies discussed in this paper have certain theoretical guiding significance for the teaching of English writing in junior middle schools. However, the practical guiding significance of teaching is extremely limited. The following aspects may need to be further explored in future research:

First of all, given the problems existing in junior middle school English writing teaching, it is necessary to further study the specific difficulties and obstacles of students in the writing process. This can be done through quantitative and qualitative research methods such as questionnaires, analysis of student writing samples, case studies, etc. Through an in-depth understanding of the problems students face in writing, we can develop targeted teaching strategies and provide effective help.

Secondly, a more systematic and in-depth study is needed

on the influence of negative transfer of the mother tongue on the syntax of English writing. This includes analyzing the writing performance of students from different language backgrounds, exploring the influence of their mother tongue on the formation of syntactic structures in English writing, and how effective teaching can help students overcome these difficulties.

At the same time, we should focus on how to combine the theory of negative transfer of the mother tongue with practical teaching and formulate practical teaching strategies and classroom activities. This requires the cooperation of education experts, linguists, and teachers to deeply discuss the teaching methods and the design of teaching materials to promote the improvement of students' English writing ability to the greatest extent.

In addition, it is necessary to evaluate and reflect on the existing writing teaching methods. We need to examine the current mainstream writing teaching methods, analyze their advantages and disadvantages, and explore their applicability and effectiveness in practical teaching. Based on the comprehensive understanding of different teaching methods, we can better choose and design the methods and strategies suitable for junior middle school English writing teaching.

To sum up, future research should focus on understanding the root causes of students' writing difficulties, exploring the application of the negative transfer theory of the mother tongue in teaching practice, and evaluating the effectiveness of existing writing teaching methods. Through continuous research and practice, we can continuously improve junior middle school English writing teaching and provide more effective support and guidance for students' language development and improvement of writing ability.

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