

# The Negative Migration of Mother Tongue and Coping Strategies in IELTS Writing of China International High School

-- Take an international department in Quanzhou as an example

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**Abstract:** This study takes the IELTS writing texts of some senior one students in an international department in Quanzhou as models, analyzes and studies the phenomenon of negative transfer of native language in the texts, and formulates relevant countermeasures with the purpose of minimizing the impact of negative transfer of native language in IELTS writing. It is hoped that this study can provide new ideas and suggestions for IELTS test takers and educators in related industries through the analysis of students' texts and the proposal of countermeasures.

**Keywords:** IETLS Writing; Negative Transfer of Native Language; Teaching Countermeasures; Text Analysis.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the "White Paper on the Academic Performance of IELTS Test Takers in Mainland China in 2018" [1], the main reason for most test takers to take the exam is still for the purpose of studying abroad and applying for colleges and universities, with a proportion as high as 88.6%. Moreover, the number of the second largest test group, that is, test takers under 18 years old, is still continuously increasing. In addition, as the most difficult item among the four IELTS tests, IELTS writing plays a crucial role in improving the total IELTS score. As the number of domestic high school students intending to study abroad is increasing, corresponding international schools have been established in various regions of China. Therefore, the education of international high schools in IELTS writing is very worthy of attention, and the research and practice of its educational plans and strategies are even more urgent.

"Chinese students generally have many problems in academic English writing, such as lack of expression, incoherent discourse, and unreasonable structure." [2]. These problems in academic writing are likely caused by negative transfer of native language. In the field of language education in the world today, the phenomenon of negative transfer of native language has long been a concern and research topic for educators. They explore educational and learning methods on how to better weaken the negative impact of this phenomenon on language learners during the language learning process. With the progress and development of society, people's understanding and mastery of national language and culture are becoming more and more profound. At the same time, the demand for mastering the language of other countries for purposes such as business and academics is becoming stronger. This also makes it increasingly difficult to effectively solve the phenomenon of negative transfer of mother tongue in language learning to a certain extent.

Loda believes that "negative transfer is the main obstacle to language acquisition." [3] This indicates that in the process of learning IELTS, negative transfer of native language is an

important phenomenon that both test takers and educators need to pay attention to. Thinking from this perspective can effectively improve IELTS scores. This study will start from the IELTS writing texts of IELTS test takers and analyze the main problems in two aspects: vocabulary and syntax. It will explore the problems and corresponding countermeasures of IELTS learners in Chinese international high schools in the above aspects due to the phenomenon of negative transfer of native language.

## 2. Literature Review

The American linguist Lado was the first person to propose the concept of language transfer. [3] He believed that language learners are often influenced by their native language in the process of learning a language, that is, they transfer the form, meaning, and cultural characteristics of their original native language to the learning of a second language. In addition, Loda also proposed an important formula in second language teaching, that is, "distance = difficulty", which shows that the similarity between the second language and the original native language largely determines the difficulty of the learning process. Loda first defined negative transfer of native language as "negative transfer is the main obstacle to language acquisition." [3] Odlin once gave the definition of language transfer: "Transfer means the influence formed by the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been acquired (or not fully acquired)." [4]

Selinker believed that while learners are learning a language, they will receive some new knowledge that is not closely related to language learning. [5] This is because the reception of these new knowledge has a certain degree of influence on the learning process of the second language. Aitchison believed that the native language will have an impact on the understanding of vocabulary by second language learners. [6] The results of his research showed that both advanced second language learners and beginner second language learners are easily influenced by the mother tongue

in their understanding of vocabulary, and the latter is more likely to be affected by negative transfer of native language. Kaplan pointed out that language learners will bring the writing rhetorical methods of their own native language into English writing, which to a certain extent makes the article cumbersome and complicated and does not conform to English expression habits. [7] Odlin proposed that the different results caused by the similarities and differences between the target language and the learned language lead to language transfer. [4] In the learning process of second language learners, they will use the pronunciation, meaning, structural rules or habits of their own native language to output the second language.

Wu Tong gave a simple definition of "transfer" from the perspective of educational psychology, that is, "the influence of one learning on another learning". [8] At the same time, he also gave a new explanation of "learning transfer", referring to the learner's acquisition of new meanings and deeper understanding of knowledge through thinking, understanding and practice in the learning process. It is a complex process of acquiring new knowledge. In addition, under "transfer", there are positive transfer and negative transfer. The former means that learners use their own knowledge and abilities to effectively learn and absorb new knowledge, while the latter can be understood as the learner's own knowledge and abilities becoming the main obstacle in the learning process.

Lu Wanyi pointed out the common negative transfer of native language in four dimensions according to the typical mistakes summarized from her teaching experience in Chinese-English translation, namely negative transfer of vocabulary, grammar, expression way and translation thinking. [9] Cen Yue and Zhang Xinyu conducted a study on the phenomenon of negative transfer of native language in the English writing texts of 138 sophomore non-English majors. [10] The common mistakes are divided into three aspects: vocabulary, syntax, and discourse. And it is pointed out that the frequency of vocabulary errors can reach more than half of the total. The more detailed error phenomena under each error are also pointed out. At the same time, countermeasures to reduce the impact of negative transfer on English writing

are also given.

Wu Tong pointed out the differences between English and Chinese from the aspects of thinking, sentence structure and vocabulary, analyzed the reasons for negative transfer of native language, and also provided corresponding countermeasures for teachers and students. [8]

### 3. Research Methods and Sample Sources

The research objects of this study are 20 writing texts from the final IELTS exam for the first year of senior high school students in an international high school in Quanzhou. It should be mentioned that this final exam is not an official IELTS exam. It is an IELTS exam organized by the school. The questions are all taken from those officially released by Cambridge IELTS. Moreover, this final exam is relatively strict in terms of examination room supervision, examination room layout, and time limits. This ensures that the obtained texts can to a certain extent guarantee the specific learning situation of students after a period of IELTS writing learning and can reflect the learning achievements and existing problems within a certain stage.

In addition, the selection of writing texts is averagely from two classes with different levels of English proficiency. The class with a higher level of English is named Class A in this study, and the class with a lower level of English is named Class B in this study. The basis for class division is according to the total scores of the 2023 junior high school academic proficiency test in Fujian Province. By analyzing the writing texts of an equal number of students with different levels of English proficiency, the writing texts have universality and regularity to a certain extent. This enables the provision of corresponding countermeasures for different levels of student groups.

After careful analysis and statistics of 20 IELTS writing texts from two different classes, a total of 237 errors in word meaning understanding errors in vocabulary and grammatical errors in syntax have been counted. The more detailed data would be revealed in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** the result of the analysis

MAIN ASPECTS	SPECIFIC ITEMS	NUMBER OF ERROES	PERCENTAGE OCCUPIED
VOCABULARY	UNDERSTANDING OF WORDS MEANING	80	33.7%
SYNTAX	GRAMMATICAL ERRORS	157	66.2%

## 4. Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in IELTS Writing

### 4.1. Manifestaion in Vocabulary

In the process of analyzing the vocabulary of students' writing texts in this study, it is found that students' mistakes in this aspect mainly focus on problems such as not mastering the meaning of words themselves, not being familiar with the official explanations of words, confusing parts of speech, and inaccurate use of words. The number of single-item errors is 80, accounting for 33.7% of the total number of problems. This indicates that to a certain extent, students' insufficient understanding and mastery of word meanings is one of the reasons for their relatively low IELTS scores.

Word meaning understanding refers to students' grasp of the exact meaning and connotation of words and phrases and

their usage methods in different contexts. In IELTS writing, students' understanding of word meanings is crucial. If students misunderstand the meaning of a word, they may use an inappropriate word, thus causing certain difficulties for readers. In-depth learning of word meanings helps students choose more accurate and appropriate vocabulary, increasing the authenticity and research nature of the article. In addition, understanding word meanings can also avoid grammatical errors, mainly manifested in the part of speech of words. Understanding word meanings can also be reflected in the understanding of key words in the topic. Some students, due to their inability to reasonably understand the key words of the topic, have problems in examining the topic, which eventually leads to the entire essay being off-topic.

(1) *More capable digital items changes our life.*

In example (1), for "capable", the Oxford Dictionary explains it as "having the ability or qualities necessary for

doing sth". Its subject is more often a person rather than an object. This belongs to the problem of insufficient thoroughness and familiarity in mastering word meanings. "Digital items" should be changed to "electronic devices", that is, electronic equipment. The former refers to digital objects and is more inclined to be movies, music, e-books, etc. that can be transmitted and traded through the Internet. Students understand the Chinese translation of this word and cause inappropriate use of the word.

(2) *It is quite warm heart because talk to others face-to-face are more vivid than talk to other by technology devices.*

In example (2), starting from the accuracy of the use of "vivid", the Oxford Dictionary explains it as "producing very clear pictures in your minds". It is not very appropriate to put it here. Students intend to express that face-to-face communication can bring a more real and sincere feeling. It can be replaced by "genuine", "real", etc. Students ignore the understanding of the English definition of the word and use it with Chinese thinking.

(3) *more and more people know and use like smartphones or other mobile devices.*

In example (3), "like" as a preposition means "like"; "as if", usually used to list several examples of the same kind. But in this sentence, students intend to express the meaning of "such as". It is more accurate to use "such as". In addition, the common meaning of "know" is "understand; know; be acquainted with", which focuses more on a general understanding of a certain fact, person or information. If it is changed to "be familiar with" or "be aware of", it emphasizes a deeper understanding and familiarity with things. These two errors respectively belong to the problems of insufficient mastery of the understanding and specific usage methods of prepositions and verbs in word meanings. Here, students directly use the conceptual meaning of words with Chinese thinking, resulting in inappropriate use of words.

To sum up, in the process of English learning, for the important part of word meaning understanding, students often unconsciously bring Chinese thinking into their understanding of word meanings. Due to the profound influence of native language thinking, they often have deviations when understanding and using English words. This deviation is specifically manifested as inaccurate use of words, that is, failing to correctly grasp the precise meaning of words in a specific context; inappropriate, that is, using a certain word in an inappropriate situation; and unauthentic, making the expression lack the natural and fluent feeling of native English speakers.

## 4.2. Manifestation in Syntax

In this study, the analysis of the syntactic aspect mainly focuses on grammatical errors. In the 20 student writing texts, there are a total of 157 grammatical errors, accounting for 66.2% of all discourse errors. The proportion is relatively large, indicating that students' mastery of grammatical errors is relatively weak, with low accuracy and they are prone to negligence.

The accuracy of grammar is also one of the scoring criteria in the official IELTS exam. First of all, correct grammar is the basis for ensuring clear expression in an article. If some articles have frequent grammatical errors, it will be difficult for readers to understand the author's intention. In addition, as one of the scoring criteria, the accuracy of grammar fully reflects the professionalism and credibility of students' articles. An article with fewer grammatical errors can largely

leave a good impression on the examiner, making the examiner think that the examinee has a relatively high language proficiency and writing ability.

Incomplete elements:

(1) Advanced fastely development of communication technology, that bring our social life more convenient.

In example (1), only in terms of sentence element analysis, students want to use the latter half of the sentence "that bring our social life more convenient" as a non-restrictive attributive clause to analyze and modify the preceding noun, but they have omitted the predicate that the noun should have, making these two sentences independent sentences.

(2) Though the smart items people do something more effient.

In example (2), in terms of sentence element analysis, the sentence lacks a predicate. It can be modified to "Though the smart items make people do something more efficient". Among them, "do something more efficient" is the object complement.

(3) if a single person get sick and live in a house which are full of technology that the person can call to these intelligence artificial to ask them for help, like washing clothes and bowls, having a water for drinking.

In example (3), from the analysis of sentence elements, this sentence uses a conditional adverbial clause, but it lacks a main clause. Students intend to express that "if a person living in a house full of technology gets sick, then he can call these intelligent artificials to ask them for help to do a series of things, such as washing clothes and bowls and having water for drinking." Perhaps due to the double use of attributive clauses, they forgot the main clause in the writing process.

Chinese thinking expression:

(1) The saving time can use in other way.

In example (1), students intend to express that "the saved time can be used in other ways". To a certain extent, the expression of "saving time" is a direct translation with Chinese thinking, and the past tense of "be used" is not reflected in the sentence.

(2) many thing can do on the phone.

In example (2), students intend to express that "many things can be done on the phone". First of all, "many" modifies countable plural nouns, so it should be followed by "things" instead of "thing". In addition, this sentence lacks a predicate verb. "Can do" is the predicate part, but there is no subject to match it. In terms of tense, the passive voice is not specifically reflected. "Can be" should be added before "can" to make the sentence structure complete.

Inappropriate collocation:

(1) Secondly, online chatting is too fast that people nearly cannot calm down to take place a peaceful conversation.

In example (1), there is an inappropriate collocation problem in this sentence. "Too...that" should be corrected to "so...that" to clearly express the meaning of "so...that...".

(2) Have some kids like to play games.

In example (2), students intend to express the disadvantages brought by smartphones by saying that "some children will play games excessively". Then, the "there be" sentence pattern should be used to express the meaning that students think "have" has here.

## 5. Copying Strategies

### 5.1. For Students

Enhance the depth of vocabulary learning by consulting English-English dictionaries. Using English-English dictionaries can help you accurately understand the English definitions, usages, and collocations of words. Moreover, through official English definitions, you can obtain more accurate connotative meanings of words, thus enabling you to choose them in different scenarios.

Learn vocabulary collocations. There are many fixed vocabulary collocations in English, which are different from Chinese expression habits. For example, "make a decision" (make a decision), rather than "do a decision". By learning common vocabulary collocations, the accuracy of vocabulary use can be greatly improved. In writing, you can convey your meaning more naturally and smoothly and avoid misunderstandings by readers due to incorrect collocations. In addition, learning vocabulary collocations can also enrich our language expression and make students' English more idiomatic. Moreover, reading English articles is a very effective method. In the reading process, you will encounter various vocabulary collocations. Through understanding the context, you can better master the usage of these collocations. At the same time, students can establish their own vocabulary collocation notebook. In the notebook, you can classify and organize according to different themes or parts of speech, such as verb phrase collocations, adjective and noun collocations. Whenever you encounter new vocabulary collocations, record them in time and attach example sentences and Chinese definitions for future review.

Seek the guidance of professional teachers and record effectively. After completing daily IELTS writing training, students can take the initiative to invite teachers to correct their writing content and can request not only an analysis focusing on discourse ideas. Reasonable writing training is not single. Instead, it needs to be combined with the guidance of teachers and students' recollection and thinking about their current writing state and consciousness. Continuously and subconsciously improve your sensitivity to sentence syntax when writing sentences. In addition, you should also record your frequently occurring syntactic errors, do more imitation writing, create single sentences, and try to avoid the same errors next time.

### 5.2. For Teachers

Optimize teaching plans and focus on comparative vocabulary teaching. In vocabulary teaching, teachers can help students understand the true meanings and usages of English words by comparing the differences between Chinese and English words. They can target near-synonyms such as "big/large/huge" and "small/tiny/little", and easily confused words such as "affect/effect" and "rise/raise/lift", and explain their different parts of speech, meanings, and usages. Or they can conduct comparative teaching of adjective-noun collocations. For example, "heavy rain" (heavy rain) cannot be said as "big rain"; "strong wind" (strong wind) cannot be said as "powerful wind".

Investigate the mastery status of sentence syntax of some students and conduct targeted teaching. Some students, due to their relatively weak English foundation, have a large number of problems in grammar, causing obstacles for readers to understand the students' writing content. Teachers need to carry out more targeted teaching for students at this level.

Even starting from the basics, they should guide students to construct an English grammar system step by step. For students with relatively high English foundations, because they have a relatively high level of grammar and hope to improve the diversity of sentence patterns in their articles, they may start imitating on their own, such as inverted sentences and subjunctive mood. For students at this level, since students in Chinese international high schools have not been exposed to relevant knowledge in junior high school, teachers need to conduct systematic teaching in this aspect to help students better use different sentence patterns flexibly.

## 6. Conclusion

This study takes the IELTS writing texts of senior one students in an international department in Quanzhou as models, deeply analyzes the phenomenon of negative transfer of native language in IELTS writing in Chinese international high schools, and proposes corresponding countermeasures.

In terms of vocabulary, students mainly have problems in understanding and applying words with the same conceptual meaning but different connotative meanings in Chinese and English, as well as differences in "wrong corresponding words". The reasons for these problems include improper learning methods, lack of understanding of the English cultural background, and the habit of understanding English vocabulary with Chinese thinking. Countermeasures include students enhancing the depth of vocabulary learning, consulting English-English dictionaries, and learning vocabulary collocations. Teachers should optimize teaching plans and focus on comparative vocabulary teaching.

In terms of syntactic and grammatical errors, the reasons for students' syntactic and grammatical errors include insufficient or negligent mastery of grammatical knowledge, reliance on native language thinking, and lack of timely writing training. Countermeasures include students seeking guidance from professional teachers and effectively recording errors. Teachers should investigate students' mastery of syntactic and grammatical knowledge and conduct targeted teaching. Through the analysis of students' IELTS writing texts, we can see that the phenomenon of negative transfer of native language is relatively common in IELTS writing and has a certain impact on students' writing scores. However, by adopting effective countermeasures, the interference of negative transfer of native language can be reduced to a certain extent and students' IELTS writing level can be improved.

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