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First Language Transfer Among Chinese High School Students in the English Writing Process

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Aabstract
English learning surges around the world, while foreign language instruction in writing falls behind. The teaching of English emphasizes language input, yet writing skills lag. Such condition accentuates the need to develop English writing skills among English as a Foreign Language students, considering the intrinsic link between second language writing and their first language. Therefore, this study investigates the transfer of the first language during second language writing. It tries to answer: 1) When do learners transfer L1 the most in their English writings? 2) What are the reasons for using L1 at different writing stages? 3)How do learners perceive the influence of L1 use in L2 writing? To address these questions, this study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, which involved quantitative questionnaires followed by qualitative interviews. Sixty students participated in answering the questionnaire. Subsequently, four respondents participated in qualitative interviews. The results revealed that Chinese students tended to rely on their first language during the pre-writing stages the most. They mainly used their first language for ideation and lexical searching. In addition, students consider L1 as a cognitive scaffold as it helps them generate ideas, search for lexical items, and reduce cognitive load in second language writing. However, they are aware of the interference caused by literal translation. This study deepens our knowledge of how learners of English as a Foreign Language utilize their native language during the process of writing in a second language. It offers important insights for improving English writing skills. The results provide educators with useful guidance to develop writing instruction that better addresses the specific needs of second language learners.
Keywords: Cognitive load, first language transfer, mixed-methods research, second language writing, writing instruction, writing proficiency, Chinese learners

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Introduction

With China's economic rise, the demand for English learning has never been stronger. Foreign language teaching in China has its peculiarities. English is a foreign language in China. Chinese students only learn English for 45 minutes in the classroom, and even teachers only focus on grammatical knowledge (Chen & Li, 2016; Sun & Lan, 2023), so there is little communication in English in the classroom, let alone outside school. In addition, there is a vast difference between English and Chinese, which means that Chinese students face substantial difficulties learning English. Besides, Chinese English learners emphasize input over output, scoring higher in listening and reading but lower in writing and speaking (Moghadam et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2022). Therefore, studies should pay more effort to English writing among Chinese learners.

Research on second language (L2) writing has two major strands: one focusing on the written product and the other on the writing process. Since the 1980s, there has been a notable shift from a product-oriented to a process-oriented perspective, emphasizing the cognitive and strategic dimensions of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Initial research in this area focused on the writing processes in learners' first language (L1) (Abas & Abd Aziz, 2016; Abdi Tabari, 2022; Manchón et al., 2000; Sasaki, 2002), establishing a foundation for later investigations into second language (L2) writing. Subsequent studies identified both commonalities and distinctions between L1 and L2 writing processes.

An increasing number of studies indicate that writing in a second language (L2) presents greater difficulties than writing in a first language (L1) because it requires the simultaneous handling of two language systems (Cheong et al., 2021; Michel et al., 2020; Zhu, 2000; Zhu et al., 2022). In early theoretical frameworks, especially those influenced by behaviorism, the use of L1 during L2 writing was seen as interference and thus discouraged in instructional settings. Starting in the 1980s, the emergence of cognitive writing theories led researchers to reevaluate the function of the first language (L1), suggesting that it can positively impact second language (L2) writing by aiding in idea development, text organization, and planning strategies.

Despite this growing recognition, much of the existing research still tends to focus on either general cognitive strategies or broad comparisons between L1 and L2 writing. Less attention has been given to the specific influence of L1 on the writing process in L2, particularly how students employ L1 during different stages such as planning, drafting, and revising. Besides, research among high school students in English as a Foreign Language settings is scarce. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating how learners draw on their L1 during the L2 writing process, and what role it plays in facilitating or hindering their writing performance. This research examines how Chinese high school students use their L1 at various stages of the English writing process and investigates the effects of this usage on their cognitive engagement. It focuses on identifying stage-specific patterns of L1 use and understanding their influence on L2 writing performance.

The study adapted Wang and Wen's (2002) model of L1 use in L2 composing, which outlines how Chinese learners engage with their L1 during planning, formulation, and revision. Their model further refines the L2 writing process into five cognitive stages: task-examining, idea-generating, idea-organizing, text-generating, and process-controlling. Drawing on this framework, the present study adapts these stages to examine when and why Chinese high school students use their L1 while writing in English, and how this use shapes their composing behavior and performance.

The findings are expected to provide valuable insights into learners' cognitive processes and offer implications for more effective writing instruction. By aligning pedagogical strategies with students' natural composing behaviors, particularly their use of L1, this research aims to contribute to the development of more supportive and cognitively informed EFL writing pedagogy.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. When do learners transfer L1 the most in their English writings?
2. What are the reasons for using L1 at different writing stages?
3. How do learners perceive the influence of L1 use in L2 writing?

Literature Review

Cognitive Model of L2 writing

The exploration of L2 writing, dating back to the 1950s, has expanded since the 1990s, evolving into a robust, multifaceted field (Silva, 1993; Sun & Lan, 2023). L2 writing refers to the examination and understanding of writing in a language learned after one's native tongue. It covers a wide range of elements, including writing techniques, strategies, and cognitive processes used by individuals who are learning and using a second language for written expression (Nystrand, 2023). Researchers have scrutinized trends in L2 writing research to gain insights into the intricacies of the field. Literature reviews have mapped the historical evolution of L2 writing (Silva, 1993) and delved into pedagogical approaches and implications (Grabe & Kaplan, 2014). It shifted from focusing on the writing product to the writing process. Hence, a theory of the L2 writing process becomes essential.

This study adapts Wang and Wen's (2002) L2 composing model. Wang and Wen's (2002) L2 composing model extends Flower and Hayes' (1981) cognitive composing process model to incorporate language elements. Wang and Wen's (2002) L2 writing process model comprises three core components: the task environment, the composing processor, and the writer's long-term memory. The task environment encompasses the writing prompt and the existing written text. The composing processor delineates the cognitive processes undertaken by L2 writers during composition. The model outlines five stages in the L2 writing process: task examination, idea generation, idea organization, text generation, and process control. The authors also acknowledge the significant influences of both the L1 and the L2 on these processes. This model provides the theoretical foundation for analyzing how learners utilize their L1 at various stages of L2 writing, a phenomenon rarely examined in recent process-oriented writing studies.

L1 transfer in L2 writing

During the 1960s and 1970s, behaviorism influenced a strict avoidance of L1 in writing instruction (Choi & Lee, 2006). In Chinese English education, the practice of forbidding L1 transfer during writing lessons continues, with the goal of reducing errors and improving writing abilities. However, the rise of process-oriented teaching methods in the 1980s (Raimes, 1985) redirected attention to the writing process itself, prompting renewed interest in the role of L1 in second language writing. This study investigates how Chinese learners use their first language when writing in English.

Since the 1980s, the process-oriented approach has encouraged research into second language (L2) writing. Early studies compared the writing processes in L2 and first language (L1), identifying similar stages such as pre-writing, drafting, and revising (Uzawa, 1996; Arndt, 1987). Silva (1993) emphasized that L2 writing involves greater complexity. Conversely, Woodall (2002)

argued that using L1 can improve fluency and support idea generation, providing cognitive advantages. These differing views indicate that the role of L1 in L2 writing remains a topic of debate. Therefore, this study examines how Chinese learners incorporate their L1 during the writing process.

Employing L1 for L2 writing aids idea generation, topic search, and information organization. Students use L1's ease for coping with cognitive load (Al-Buainain, 2023; Bruen & Kelly, 2017) and enhancing analytical thinking (Tsuji, 2021). L1 aids idea generation, organization, and content improvement (Zhao& Hassan, 2024; Murphy & de Larios, 2010; Woodall, 2002; Wang & Wen, 2002). Recent studies support these conclusions, showing that purposeful use of L1 enhances writing fluency and coherence, particularly for learners with lower proficiency levels (Liu et al., 2024). For Chinese learners with limited language skills, L1 proves especially beneficial. Its role in L2 writing varies, including functions such as generating ideas, easing cognitive demands, assisting with vocabulary retrieval, and facilitating text revision.

Despite increasing recognition of the potential cognitive benefits of L1 use in L2 writing, existing research has primarily focused on university students or general writing behaviors, with limited attention to stage-specific L1 transfer in secondary education contexts. Furthermore, most research has focused on urban or well-funded educational environments, often neglecting learners in rural areas who may depend more on their first language due to limited English exposure. In China's EFL settings, especially in rural high schools, banning L1 use during writing instruction remains prevalent, reflecting outdated behaviorist views. However, recent studies indicate that strategic L1 use can aid various stages of the writing process, especially for students with lower language proficiency. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how rural Chinese high school students use and are influenced by L1 throughout different stages of English writing.

Research Methodology

This section outlines the research methodology employed in the study, including a description of the participants, data collection techniques, and analytical procedures. The research collected both quantitative and qualitative data through questionnaires and interviews to explore how Chinese high school students in an EFL context use and are influenced by their first language during the second language writing process.

Research Design

To address the research question, Table One delineates the research inquiries, the employed instruments, and the data analysis methods. This study embraced a mixed-methods approach, commencing with a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative one. The quantitative segment utilised a questionnaire as the primary tool for data collection, while the qualitative component employed interviews. The rationale behind opting for a mixed-methods design stems from the recognition that solely relying on one method may not yield a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon under investigation. A mixed-methods approach amalgamates the merits of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Consequently, it enables not only an extensive examination of students on a large scale through quantitative means but also a nuanced exploration of reasons and perceptions through qualitative methodologies. Thus, this investigation adopted a mixed-methods approach, employing a questionnaire followed by interviews, to acquire a thorough and insightful comprehension of the utilization of the first language (L1) in the English writings of Chinese students.

Table 1. *Research method of the study*

Research questions	Instruments	Data analysis
RQ1:When do learners transfer L1 the most in their English writings?	Questionnaire Interview	Descriptive analysis
RQ2:What are the reasons for using L1 in different writing stages?	Questionnaire Interview	Descriptive analysis Thematic analysis
RQ3:How do learners perceive the influence of L1 use in L2 writing?	Interview	Thematic analysis

In Table One shows that to address the initial research question, a questionnaire and an interview were employed. Following the prescribed sequence of the research methodology, which adhered to a sequential explanatory design, this study initially utilised a questionnaire as the research instrument. The questionnaire encompassed background information and the application of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) writing. Adapted from Stapa (Stapa, 2014), the questionnaire incorporated insights from pertinent literature to respond to the primary research question. A semi-structured interview was also adopted to explore the reasons why they transfer L1 at that time.

In addressing the second research question, the study combined quantitative and qualitative methods. Specifically, the researcher used a questionnaire to examine how students applied their first language. At the same time, the researcher conducted interviews to explore the reasons behind L1 use and the participants' perceptions of its impact on L2 writing. To answer the third research question, the researcher asked targeted interview questions to investigate perceptions of L1 transfer and its influence on L2 writing.

Participants

In this research, the researcher randomly selected 60 high school students from a rural high school in China. From this group, the researcher chose 6 participants with high English proficiency as the qualitative respondents. Details appear in Table Two.

Table 2. *Participants and sampling methods*

Instruments	Sample size	Participants	Sampling strategy
Questionnaire	60	High school students	Random sampling
Interview	4	Questionnaire respondents	Voluntary sampling

Table Two provides an overview of the participants, sample size, and the sampling strategy employed in this study. To gain insights into the transfer of the L1 among students, a cohort of 60 secondary school students in a rural area with varying English proficiency was selected. English proficiency was categorized based on students' final exam scores, as the exam follows a standardized format and administrators deliver it uniformly across schools, ensuring fairness and consistency. In this study, English proficiency was categorized based on the final exam, which has a total score of 150. Students scoring 120 and above were classified as the high-proficiency group, those scoring between 90 and 120 as the intermediate group, and those below 90 as the low-proficiency group. According to approximate equivalence, scores above 120 correspond to CEFR level B2, scores between 90 and 120 align with B1 to low B2 levels, and scores below 90 are close to A2 or lower.

The researcher based this choice on the notable disparities in English education between rural and urban settings in China. Rural areas often lack English communication opportunities and focus more on grammatical aspects, resulting in a deficiency in L2 writing skills and more reliance

on the first language for students in these regions. The decision to target second-year secondary school students is grounded in the observation that, despite hailing from different rural areas, they tend to adopt similar learning modes after a year of high school education. Consequently, they exhibit comparable approaches to English writing. The researcher determined the sample size of 60 students by considering the population of approximately 6,000 second-year secondary school students in rural areas and selecting 10% to ensure a representative sample. The researcher chose simple random sampling because it allows drawing participants from a large pool.

For the interview sessions, the researcher selected a subset of 4 students with varying levels of English proficiency through volunteer sampling. This approach acknowledges the substantial academic pressure faced by students, who are tasked with learning eight subjects, often leaving them with limited free time. Hence, fewer can attend for the qualitative phase. In addition, although the number of students was restricted, the data achieved saturation, indicating that the participants provided similar answers with no new information. Therefore, volunteer sampling was deemed appropriate to accommodate the availability and willingness of students to engage in the interview process.

Data collection

The questionnaires were distributed through the internet and were analyzed using SPSS. Descriptive analysis was adopted. Besides, after collecting quantitative data, those who were willing to attend the qualitative part were chosen as the qualitative respondents. The researcher called each participant individually to the office and conducted one-on-one interviews. The researcher audio recorded the entire process. Later, the researcher manually transcribed the audio recordings and conducted a thematic analysis.

Research instruments

The study employed two main instruments: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed based on Wang and Wen's (2002) model of the L2 composing process and previous research on L1 use in writing (Stapa, 2014; Murphy & de Larios, 2010; van Weijen et al., 2009). It consisted of items that assessed participants' use of L1 at different stages of the writing process (pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing). The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed with a high Cronbach's alpha of 0.947, indicating strong internal consistency. Construct validity was verified through exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using SPSS, with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy at 0.944, surpassing the recommended threshold of 0.75.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perceptions regarding the use of L1 in their English writing process. The interview questions focused on learners' perceived influence of L1 transfer on their writing performance.

Data Analysis

The researcher chose the data analysis methods to align with the specific research questions and the types of data collected.

For Research Questions 1 and 2 ("When do learners transfer L1 the most?" and "What are the reasons for using L1 in different writing stages?"), quantitative data from the questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) to identify patterns in L1 use.

Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to uncover deeper explanations and themes regarding learners' motivations and experiences.

For Research Question 3 ("How do learners perceive the influence of L1 use in L2 writing?"), the analysis focused on qualitative interview data through thematic analysis (Buaun& Clarke, 2006), enabling exploration of learners' attitudes and reflections on the impact of L1 use in their writing.

Findings

Stages of using L1 in L2 writing

Firstly, to answer the first research question "When do learners transfer L1 the most in their English writings?", the questionnaire result is analyzed as indicated in Table Three.

Table 3. *Descriptive analysis of L1 transfer in L2 writing*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-writing	60	3.8722	.93093
While-writing	60	3.3306	.48201
Post-writing	60	2.7444	.94354

The results indicate that Chinese high school students most frequently transfer their first language during the pre-writing stage, where the mean L1 usage score is 3.87. This finding suggests that learners rely heavily on L1 to support activities such as idea generation, planning, and understanding the writing task at this early phase. L1 use decreases during the while-writing stage, with a mean of 3.33, indicating that although learners still use L1 to some extent (likely for lexical retrieval or translating thoughts), their dependence on L1 lessens as they engage in composing their texts in English. The lowest mean score for L1 transfer appears in the post-writing stage (mean = 2.74), showing that learners seldom use L1 during revision and editing. This reduction might reflect time constraints or a greater focus on producing English output during finalization. Overall, the pattern suggests an apparent decline in L1 usage as the writing process progresses, with the highest reliance during pre-writing and the least during post-writing.

To further examine whether L1 use differs significantly among learners with varying L2 proficiency levels across these stages, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. The results of this analysis are presented in Table Four.

Table 4. *ANOVA of L1 transfer in L2 writing among different L2 proficiency*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Pre-writing	Between Groups	9.493	2	4.747	6.937	.002
	Within Groups	30.109	44	.684		
	Total	39.603	46			
While-writing	Between Groups	1.419	2	.709	2.867	.068
	Within Groups	10.888	44	.247		
	Total	12.307	46			
Post-writing	Between Groups	3.417	2	1.709	1.866	.167
	Within Groups	40.295	44	.916		
	Total	43.712	46			

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Table Four presents the results of a one-way ANOVA conducted to examine whether L1 usage across the pre-writing, while-writing, and post-writing stages differs significantly among learners with varying levels of L2 proficiency.

The ANOVA results show a statistically significant difference in L1 transfer during the pre-writing stage among learners with different L2 proficiency levels ($F = 6.937$, $p = .002$). This finding indicates that L2 proficiency is related to how much learners rely on L1 before they start writing.

Conversely, at the while-writing stage ($F = 2.867$, $p = .068$) and post-writing stage ($F = 1.866$, $p = .167$), no significant differences were found between proficiency groups in terms of L1 usage.

Further breakdown reveals that learners with lower L2 proficiency tend to use L1 more extensively during the pre-writing phase than their higher proficiency peers. This trend suggests an inverse relationship between proficiency and pre-writing L1 reliance.

Supporting these quantitative results, interview data provide illustrative examples. For instance, a high-proficiency student reported using L1 sparingly throughout the writing stages (20% pre-writing, 5% while-writing, and 10% post-writing). In contrast, a low-proficiency student described a persistent dependence on L1 during all stages, citing challenges with English language confidence and formulation.

Together, the questionnaire and interview findings underscore that L1 use is most prominent during the pre-writing phase and decreases during subsequent stages, with proficiency level influencing the degree of L1 transfer particularly at the outset of the writing process.

Reasons for using L1 at different writing stages

After analyzing the stage of L1 use, the study next explores the second research question: "What are the reasons for using L1 at different writing stages?" Learners transfer their L1 for various purposes depending on the writing stage. A closer examination of the questionnaire results, presented in Table Five, reveals these patterns.

Table 5. *L1 use at the pre-writing stage*

	N	Mean
Use L1 to think of the content	60	4.13
Use L1 to plan the structure	60	4.03
Use L1 to understand the writing task	60	3.45
Valid N (listwise)	60	

Table Five summarizes how Chinese high school students use their first language (L1) during the pre-writing stage. The data show that students most frequently rely on L1 for thinking about content ($M = 4.13$) and planning the structure of their essays ($M = 4.03$). Understanding the writing task itself also involves L1 use, though slightly less often ($M = 3.45$).

This pattern suggests that before starting to write in English, students lean heavily on Chinese to help generate ideas and organize their thoughts. This reliance on L1 for conceptualizing the essay is echoed in interviews. One student explained, "I first translate the writing prompt into Chinese to fully understand it. Then I plan my ideas and the structure in Chinese before I start writing." Similarly, Student 3 described her process as first thinking and composing sentences in Chinese, which she later translates into English. After finishing, she even translates back into

Chinese to check if the essay makes sense logically. Student 2 noted that brainstorming in Chinese helps her clear her mind and focus better on writing.

Together, the questionnaire and interview data confirm that using L1 at the pre-writing stage is a common and vital strategy for Chinese learners, supporting comprehension, structural planning, and content development. Subsequently, it delves into an examination of the reasons for using L1 by learners during the while-writing stage, as elucidated in Table Six.

Table 6. *L1 use at the while-writing stage*

	N	Mean
I come up with L1 words and translate them into L2.	60	4.13
I use L1 to search for specific words.	60	3.88
I compare L1 and L2 to find a suitable word.	60	3.47
I come up with L1 sentences and translate them into L2.	60	3.45
I compare L1 and L2 to find suitable sentence.	60	2.98
I compare L1 and L2 to choose the a suitable writing style.	60	2.72
Valid N (listwise)	60	

Table Six outlines L1 use during the while-writing phase. Here, the most common function of L1 is thinking in Chinese and translating thoughts into English (M = 4.13), followed by using Chinese to search for specific words (M = 3.88). Students also reported constructing sentences in Chinese first and then translating them (M = 3.45). Less frequent were activities involving comparing L1 and L2 to select suitable sentences or writing styles, both scoring below 3.0.

Interview insights support these findings. One student remarked, "When I'm actually writing, I try not to think in Chinese because this is an English task, but sometimes I can't help it. I often translate my Chinese thoughts into English." Student 4 shared a strategy of writing down difficult English words in Chinese to bypass vocabulary gaps and keep her writing flow.

Overall, L1 appears to function as a cognitive aid during writing—helping with translation and lexical retrieval, reducing the mental burden caused by limited English vocabulary. This use aligns with prior research emphasizing L1's role in easing working memory load during second language production. The subsequent delves into the examination of how learners employ L1 during the post-writing stage, as elucidated in Table Seven.

Table 7. *L1 use at the post-writing stage*

	N	Mean
I use L1 for backtracking.	60	3.02
I use L1 to control the writing time.	60	2.70
I use L1 to check the word number.	60	2.52
Valid N (listwise)	60	

Table Seven focuses on L1 use after writing. The results show limited reliance on L1 during this stage, with backtracking or reviewing the text being the most common use (M = 3.02). Other activities, such as controlling writing time or checking the word count, show even lower mean scores.

Interviews reveal that when students do have time to review, some use L1 by translating their English drafts back into Chinese to verify coherence and ensure they have addressed the prompt correctly.

The findings paint a clear picture of how Chinese high school learners strategically use L1 throughout the writing process. During pre-writing, L1 is heavily relied on for understanding the task, planning structure, and generating ideas. In the while-writing phase, L1 primarily supports lexical searching and translation to help manage cognitive load. Finally, in post-writing, L1 use declines but remains a tool for reviewing and revising content.

These stage-specific patterns reflect the unique challenges Chinese students face when writing in English and underscore the functional role of L1 in supporting their writing process within the Chinese educational context. In the next section, how students perceive the use of L1 is presented.

Learners' perception of L1 use in L2 writing

In response to the third research question, "How do learners perceive the influence of L1 use in L2 writing?" an interview was conducted to gather and analyse responses. The interview analysis revealed two prominent themes related to learners' perceptions of L1 use in L2 writing: L1 as a Cognitive Scaffold and Awareness of L1 Interference.

L1 as a cognitive scaffold

Most participants expressed a generally positive attitude toward the use of their first language during the writing process. They viewed L1 as a crucial cognitive tool that supports multiple aspects of their L2 writing. Many described how switching to their native language helped them better understand complex writing tasks, organize their thoughts, and retrieve appropriate vocabulary. One student explained, "Using Chinese helps me clear my mind and plan better before writing in English," highlighting how L1 acts as a mental workspace where ideas can be developed without the immediate pressure of producing grammatically correct English.

Several learners emphasized that L1 use reduced cognitive load during the early stages of writing. By thinking in their native language, they could focus more on content and logical flow without getting overwhelmed by the demands of writing in a less familiar language. For example, another student stated, "When I first read the prompt, I translate it into Chinese to make sure I really understand what is being asked. Then I plan my ideas and outline in Chinese, which makes writing in English easier." This process suggests that L1 functions as a scaffolding mechanism, providing a mental framework that supports effective L2 composition.

Awareness of L1 Interference

Despite acknowledging the benefits, learners also demonstrated a clear awareness of the potential pitfalls of over-reliance on their first language. Many expressed concern that literal translation from Chinese to English sometimes resulted in unnatural, awkward, or incorrect sentences. This finding is particularly problematic in areas such as syntax, idiomatic expressions, and word order, where the structural differences between Chinese and English are significant. One participant candidly remarked, "Sometimes, translating word-for-word from Chinese leads to strange sentences. I know the meaning is clear to me, but it might confuse the reader or sound wrong."

This awareness indicates that learners are not uncritically dependent on L1; instead, they are actively negotiating when and how to use their first language strategically. They recognize that while L1 can aid comprehension and planning, excessive or careless transfer can introduce errors

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and reduce the overall quality of their writing. Some students described a conscious effort to "check" or revise their writing to avoid the pitfalls of direct translation, showing metalinguistic sensitivity and growing bilingual competence.

Discussion

Discussion on Chinese high school students' use L1 at different stages of L2 writing

The study reveals a clear pattern in L1 use across the three main stages of writing, with the pre-writing stage being the most intensive in terms of L1 reliance. During pre-writing, learners predominantly use their first language as a cognitive tool to generate ideas, plan essay structures, and comprehend the task requirements. This heavy reliance is unsurprising given that idea generation and strategic planning require deep cognitive engagement, which learners find more accessible when using their dominant language.

This finding reinforces Wang and Wen's (2002) theoretical framework, which positions L1 as essential in the early phases of L2 writing, particularly for learners with intermediate or lower proficiency who have yet to develop fully automatic L2 processing skills. The findings also support Bruen and Kelly's (2017) argument that L1 functions as a "cognitive scaffold," allowing learners to externalize their thoughts before translating them into the L2. This stage-specific reliance underscores the importance of providing learners with sufficient time and space to harness their L1 strategically during planning, a practice that has been undervalued in some L2 writing pedagogies that emphasize immediate English output.

During the while-writing phase, the study identifies a shift in L1 usage—from broad cognitive planning to specific linguistic support, notably lexical retrieval and sentence translation. Learners appear to use their L1 as a resource to bridge gaps in vocabulary and syntactic knowledge, facilitating smoother composition despite their limited English proficiency. This finding aligns with previous research (Murphy & de Larios, 2010; Tsuji, 2021), showing that L1 serves as a translational tool that reduces the cognitive load associated with retrieving and organizing unfamiliar L2 words and structures. However, the data also reveal that while learners report frequent use of L1 in interviews, quantitative measures suggest a more moderate level of use during writing. This discrepancy indicates that learners' perceptions of "L1 use" may extend beyond overt language switching to include covert mental translation processes, highlighting the complexity of accurately measuring L1 reliance.

In contrast, L1 use in the post-writing stage is minimal, primarily limited to backtracking activities such as reviewing and minor revising. This limited use is consistent with the constraints of Chinese high school education, where students often face strict time limits that preclude extended editing. The finding aligns with Wang and Wen's (2002) observation that cognitive resources are primarily allocated to initial stages of writing and less so to post-writing revision, especially under timed conditions. It also points to a potential area for pedagogical improvement: encouraging learners to engage more fully in post-writing revision could enhance writing quality and reduce errors related to L1 interference.

Another finding drawn from the questionnaire and interview results is that the use of L1 decreases with the improvement of L2 proficiency. The observed decrease in L1 use as learners' L2 proficiency increases is consistent with established research that positions L1 as a compensatory resource during early language development (Zhao& Hassan, 2024; Murphy & de Larios, 2010). This pattern indicates that learners with lower English proficiency tend to rely more heavily on their first language to manage the complex cognitive demands of writing, such as idea

generation, task analysis, and lexical retrieval. As their proficiency improves, learners can process these demands more directly in the target language, resulting in diminished dependence on L1.

This finding aligns with cognitive load theory, which suggests that learners with limited L2 skills experience higher mental effort when composing in English. Utilizing L1 helps reduce this load by facilitating pre-writing planning and lexical access. With growing L2 competence, learners develop greater automaticity and fluency in English, enabling them to conceptualize and organize ideas without reverting to their native language.

Discussion on learners' perceptions of L1 use in L2 writing

Learners in this study generally hold a positive view of L1 transfer, seeing it as an indispensable aid in making sense of the writing task and organizing their thoughts. Their perception reflects an understanding that L1 facilitates comprehension and lowers cognitive barriers, which is crucial for navigating complex writing assignments. This positive attitude corresponds with findings from Qi (1998) and Tsuji (2021), who similarly noted that L1 use can enhance cognitive efficiency and strategic planning in L2 writing.

Nonetheless, learners demonstrate a sophisticated awareness of the potential downsides of L1 use. They acknowledge that direct, literal translation from Chinese to English often leads to unnatural phrasing and grammatical errors, echoing concerns raised in cross-linguistic transfer literature about interference (Odlin, 1989). This awareness indicates that learners are not simply passive users of their L1 but critically monitor its influence on their English output. Such metalinguistic insight suggests that learners are capable of developing strategies to mitigate errors, provided they receive appropriate instruction and feedback.

This view contrasts with earlier studies that sometimes portray L1 use as either wholly detrimental or beneficial. Instead, it highlights the nuanced, dynamic nature of bilingual writing, where L1 can simultaneously serve as a scaffold and a source of error, depending on how and when it is deployed. This complexity aligns with Bruen and Kelly's (2017) conceptualization of L1 as a flexible, strategic resource, and it calls for pedagogical approaches that encourage reflective, controlled L1 use rather than strict prohibition.

Discussion on howL1 functions vary across writing stages

The distinct functions of L1 at different writing stages emphasize its multifaceted role in L2 composition. At the pre-writing stage, L1 acts primarily as a "Cognitive Scaffold," enabling learners to clarify ideas, map out essay structures, and internalize task demands in a familiar linguistic medium. This function is critical for learners with lower English proficiency, as it offloads cognitive effort and helps organize complex thoughts before engaging with the more demanding process of writing in L2. Such use of L1 mirrors Wang and Wen's (2002) emphasis on L1 in planning and idea generation.

During while-writing stage, L1's role shifts to that of a "Translational Tool," assisting learners in retrieving vocabulary and translating sentences into English. This stage-specific function addresses learners' lexical and syntactic gaps, enabling them to produce coherent L2 text despite linguistic limitations. Prior research (Murphy & de Larios, 2010; Tsuji, 2021) supports this finding, illustrating how L1 reduces working memory load and eases lexical access during composition.

In the post-writing stage, L1 use is confined to a "Review Aid," employed sparingly to backtrack and refine drafts. This limited engagement contrasts with pre- and while-writing stages,

reflecting practical constraints such as time pressure and exam-oriented writing tasks typical of Chinese secondary education. The minimal post-writing use highlights a potential weakness in current instructional practices, where revision is underemphasized, possibly limiting learners' opportunities to correct L1-based errors and improve overall text quality.

The findings of this study provide strong empirical support for the complex, stage-dependent role of L1 in L2 writing, reinforcing the theoretical model proposed by Wang and Wen (2002). The study advances this framework by providing nuanced insights into how L1 functions evolve dynamically throughout the writing process and how learners strategically regulate their L1 use according to task demands and proficiency levels.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings challenge rigid prohibitions against L1 use in L2 writing classrooms. Instead, they advocate for instructional approaches that recognize L1 as a legitimate cognitive and linguistic resource, particularly valuable in the pre-writing and while-writing stages. Moreover, scaffolding lexical and syntactic skills through targeted vocabulary and grammar instruction could help reduce excessive reliance on L1 during the composition phase. This approach could free cognitive resources for more sophisticated English output and gradually foster greater L2 independence. Additionally, increasing opportunities for post-writing revision, with guided attention to L1 interference, could enhance learners' ability to self-monitor and improve their writing quality.

Conclusion

This study closely examined how Chinese high school students use their first language (L1) during English writing. The findings reveal that students frequently rely on their L1 in the pre-writing stage to generate ideas, comprehend the writing task, and plan their essays. Additionally, they strategically use L1 during later stages for lexical retrieval, translating thoughts, and ensuring coherence. However, participants also noted that excessive reliance on literal translation during drafting can hinder fluency and naturalness in English writing. These insights have important implications for English teaching in China. Educators and curriculum developers should recognize the constructive role of L1, particularly in brainstorming and planning, while guiding students to minimize direct translation during drafting. Instructional designs that separate idea generation in L1 from composition in L2—such as encouraging students to jot down ideas in Chinese before drafting in English with vocabulary support—may enhance writing fluency and accuracy.

Nevertheless, this study has limitations. The participant sample was primarily drawn from rural schools, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to urban or more diverse contexts. Moreover, reliance on self-reports and interviews may have led to under- or overestimation of actual L1 use. Future research could address these limitations by including more varied samples and employing methods like think-aloud protocols or direct observation to capture real-time L1 use. It would also be valuable to explore instructional interventions that help students transition from L1-based planning to English drafting, and to investigate how L1 use varies across different writing tasks and proficiency levels.

Overall, this study sheds light on the complex yet crucial role of L1 in L2 writing for Chinese learners, offering valuable directions for pedagogical practices aimed at fostering more confident and skilled English writers.

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