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THE SILENT GUIDE: MOTHER TONGUE'S INFLUENCE ON ENGLISH WRITING STYLE AND SYNTAX

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Abstract
This study investigates the influence of mother tongue (L1) on English writing style and syntax among 200 secondary-level students from six linguistic backgrounds in India (Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, and Gujarati). Using a mixed-methods approach, the research analyzed writing samples, questionnaires, and interviews to identify error patterns and learner perceptions. Quantitative findings revealed significant correlations between L1 background and specific error types ($r = .67$, $p < .001$). Hindi speakers showed higher rates of syntactic transfer, while Tamil speakers exhibited more morphological errors. Proficiency level strongly moderated interference, with errors decreasing from 45.2% in low-proficiency learners to 12.8% in high-proficiency learners. However, discourse-level errors remained persistent across all groups. Qualitative data showed that most learners (78%) relied on mental translation from L1 to English, often transferring cultural and rhetorical conventions into their writing.
Pedagogical interventions showed varied effectiveness: contrastive analysis reduced errors by 23%, compared to 10–11% under traditional grammar or communicative approaches. These results confirm that L1 influence is systematic and shaped by typological distance, proficiency, and home language use. The study contributes to understanding cross-linguistic influence in multilingual contexts and suggests that explicit contrastive instruction and genre-based pedagogy can help learners transform mother tongue interference into a resource for improved English writing competence.

Keywords: mother tongue interference, English writing, syntax, cross-linguistic influence, multilingual pedagogy

1. Introduction

The influence of the mother tongue (L1) on second language (L2) acquisition has been a cornerstone of applied linguistics research for decades. Early studies (Cook, 2016; Odlin, 1989) established that L1 transfer extends beyond vocabulary borrowing to include syntactic, morphological, and discourse-level interference. In multilingual contexts such as India, where English functions as both a link language and an academic medium, these transfer effects have significant implications for teaching and assessment practices.

Previous research has highlighted these challenges. Bhela (1999) and Khansir (2012) documented extensive L1 interference in English writing among Indian learners, while Kumar (2018) and Krishnan (2019) identified specific Hindi-English and Tamil-English transfer effects. Similarly, Ridha (2012) and Murad & Khalil (2015) demonstrated persistent transfer issues in Arab-English contexts. However, most of these studies either focused on *single L1-L2 language pairs* or examined relatively small learner groups. Comprehensive studies comparing multiple Indian languages simultaneously remain limited, despite India's extraordinary linguistic diversity.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing how six major Indian languages—Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, and Gujarati—influence English writing patterns among secondary-level learners. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the research examines how proficiency, typological distance, and language-use context shape error persistence and reduction.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and compare the types of mother tongue influence (lexical, syntactic, morphological, phonological, discourse-level) across six Indian L1 backgrounds.
2. To analyze how proficiency level moderates the extent of mother tongue interference.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of different pedagogical interventions in reducing L1-related errors.

4. To explore learners' perceptions of L1 influence and coping strategies through qualitative insights.

Research Questions

1. What are the most common interference patterns in English writing among learners from different Indian mother tongues?
2. How does proficiency level affect the frequency and type of transfer errors?
3. Which teaching approaches (contrastive analysis, traditional grammar, communicative focus) are most effective in reducing errors?
4. How do learners perceive and adapt to the influence of their mother tongue when writing inEnglish?

By situating this investigation within both classical transfer theory (Selinker, 1972; Odlin, 1989; Krashen, 1988) and contemporary corpus-based research (Shen, 2023; Bi & Tan, 2024), this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of cross-linguistic influence in L2 writing. It not only highlights the structural challenges learners face but also offers pedagogical strategies to transform mother tongue interference into a resource for multilingual learning.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The study of mother tongue influence has deep theoretical roots in applied linguistics. Early work by Lado (1957) proposed the *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH)*, suggesting that structural differences between the learner's L1 and L2 predict areas of difficulty. This was followed by Selinker's (1972) *interlanguage theory*, which conceptualized learner language as a dynamic system shaped by transfer from the L1 and incomplete acquisition of the L2. Odlin (1989) further refined the taxonomy of transfer phenomena—borrowing, substrate influence, calquing, and convergence—providing analytical categories still widely used today.

Other theoretical models reinforced the developmental and cognitive dimensions of transfer. Krashen's (1988) Input Hypothesis emphasized the role of comprehensible input in shaping acquisition, while Kellerman (1995) advanced the *psychotypological hypothesis*, positing that perceived similarity or distance between languages influences transfer likelihood. Andersen's (1983) Transfer to Somewhere Principle added a structural lens, showing that transfer effects are not arbitrary but constrained by markedness and structural compatibility.

Contemporary corpus-driven studies have revisited these classic frameworks using large-scale data. For instance, Bi and Tan (2024) applied *dependency grammar analysis* to multilingual academic writing, demonstrating that measurable syntactic features, such as dependency distance, are systematically shaped by L1 structures. Similarly, Shen (2023), through a corpus-based comparison of Chinese and English learners' writing, revealed persistent L1-based differences in noun phrase density and modifier use. These modern findings confirm what Lado, Selinker, and Odlin theorized—that transfer is structural, systemic, and enduring—but now with empirical precision enabled by computational tools.

Thus, classical theories provide the conceptual scaffolding, while recent corpus-based approaches supply the methodological sophistication necessary to capture transfer effects in multilingual educational contexts.

2.2 Previous Research

Research across contexts has consistently shown that L1 structures exert a strong influence on L2 writing. Scott and Tucker (1974) demonstrated how Arab learners transferred Arabic syntactic rules into English, while Ridha (2012) and Murad and Khalil (2015) reported recurring verb tense and preposition errors linked to Arabic syntax. In African contexts, Onike (2009) and Onuigbo (1984)

highlighted phonological and syntactic transfer in Yoruba-English and Igbo-English bilinguals. These findings align with AbiSamra (2003), who noted that the majority of errors among Palestinian learners of English stemmed from mother tongue interference.

South Asian research further emphasizes language-specific transfer patterns. Kumar (2018) documented Hindi-English interference in article usage and word order, while Krishnan (2019) showed Tamil-English syntactic transfer in clause constructions and postpositional phrase usage. Both studies highlight that typological contrasts between L1 and English shape error patterns.

Recent work has moved beyond error analysis to corpus-based and comparative approaches. Abdalhadi (2023) found systematic adjective-noun order and subject-verb placement errors in Arab learners' English, directly attributable to L1 Arabic. Wilden (2022), in a study of Tamil-speaking learners, confirmed morphological and syntactic transfer patterns, reinforcing earlier findings in the Indian context. A 2023 Indonesian study similarly revealed structural interference in English essay writing, particularly in sentence structuring and clause coordination, underscoring the universality of transfer beyond Indo-European languages. Extending this perspective, a 2025 bilingual writing study highlighted compressed noun phrase usage in English L2 writing as a result of L1 rhetorical traditions, showing that discourse-level transfer persists even at higher proficiency levels.

Collectively, these studies suggest that mother tongue interference is both a universal and context-specific phenomenon. While structural contrasts drive language-specific errors (e.g., SOV vs. SVO ordering for Hindi-English learners), discourse-level conventions and rhetorical habits often persist across proficiency levels. Importantly, recent corpus-based studies (Bi & Tan, 2024; Shen, 2023) validate the theoretical claims of earlier scholars by providing empirical, measurable evidence of transfer.

Pedagogically, there is consensus that instructional approaches play a critical role in addressing interference. Research shows that contrastive analysis-based teaching is consistently more effective in reducing errors than traditional grammar instruction (Bi & Tan, 2024), a point also aligned with Swan's (2007) argument for learner-language-specific pedagogy.

Taken together, both classical and contemporary research highlight that L1 transfer is systemic, enduring, and shaped by typological distance, learner proficiency, and discourse traditions. This underscores the need for comparative, multilingual studies—such as the present one—that capture transfer patterns across multiple L1 groups within shared educational contexts.

3. Methodology

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design with 200 secondary level students (ages 14-18) from diverse linguistic backgrounds across urban and rural educational settings. Participants were stratified by mother tongue (Hindi: n=60, Tamil: n=40, Bengali: n=35, Telugu: n=30, Marathi: n=20, Gujarati: n=15), proficiency level, and educational context.

Data collection involved three writing tasks (narrative, argumentative, descriptive), a structured questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews with a subsample of 30 participants. Writing samples were analyzed using a comprehensive error taxonomy developed through expert validation, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

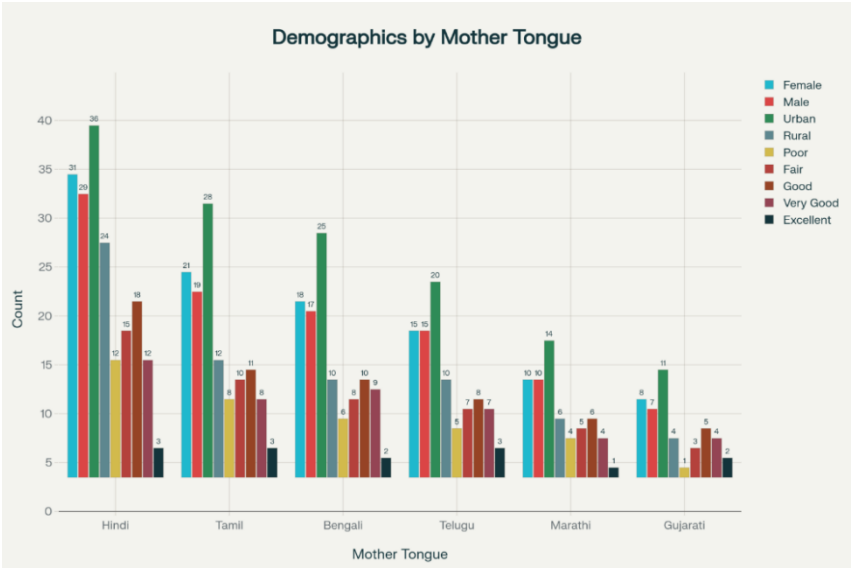
The final sample comprised 200 participants, with a balanced gender distribution (51% female, 49% male). The age range was 14–18 years (M = 16.2, SD = 1.3), reflecting the typical secondary school cohort. The distribution across proficiency levels showed variation, with 18% categorized as poor, 24% as fair, 28% as good, 22% as very good, and 8% as excellent. This spread provides an opportunity to examine mother tongue influence across a wide spectrum of proficiency.

Table 1: Participant Demographics by Mother Tongue Background

Mother Tongue	N	Age M(SD)	Gender (F/M)	Urban/Rural	Proficiency Distribution
Hindi	60	16.1(1.2)	31/29	36/24	P:12, F:15, G:18, VG:12, E:3
Tamil	40	16.4(1.4)	21/19	28/12	P:8, F:10, G:11, VG:8, E:3
Bengali	35	16.0(1.1)	18/17	25/10	P:6, F:8, G:10, VG:9, E:2
Telugu	30	16.3(1.3)	15/15	20/10	P:5, F:7, G:8, VG:7, E:3
Marathi	20	16.5(1.5)	10/10	14/6	P:4, F:5, G:6, VG:4, E:1
Gujarati	15	16.2(1.2)	8/7	11/4	P:1, F:3, G:5, VG:4, E:2

Note: P=Poor, F=Fair, G=Good, VG=Very Good, E=Excellent proficiency levels
Source: Self compilation

The demographic distribution reflects India's linguistic diversity, with Hindi speakers forming the largest subgroup (30%) and Gujarati the smallest (7.5%). Importantly, rural learners constituted 40% of the sample, providing a meaningful basis for comparing urban–rural variation in exposure to English.



(**Table 4.1:** Participant demographics by mother tongue: gender, proficiency, urban/rural distribution)

From a statistical perspective, the relatively even spread across proficiency bands ensures that comparisons between "low proficiency" and "high proficiency" groups are valid and not skewed by disproportionate representation. The small standard deviations in mean age (ranging 1.1–1.5 years) confirm that participants were developmentally comparable, reducing confounding effects of age-related language maturity.

Pedagogically, these demographic characteristics highlight that learners enter English classrooms with diverse linguistic repertoires and varying degrees of exposure to English, depending on their

home language environment and educational context (urban vs. rural). This variability reinforces the need for instructional practices that are sensitive to linguistic backgrounds and capable of addressing mother tongue influence across multiple proficiency levels.

4.2 Mother Tongue Influence Patterns

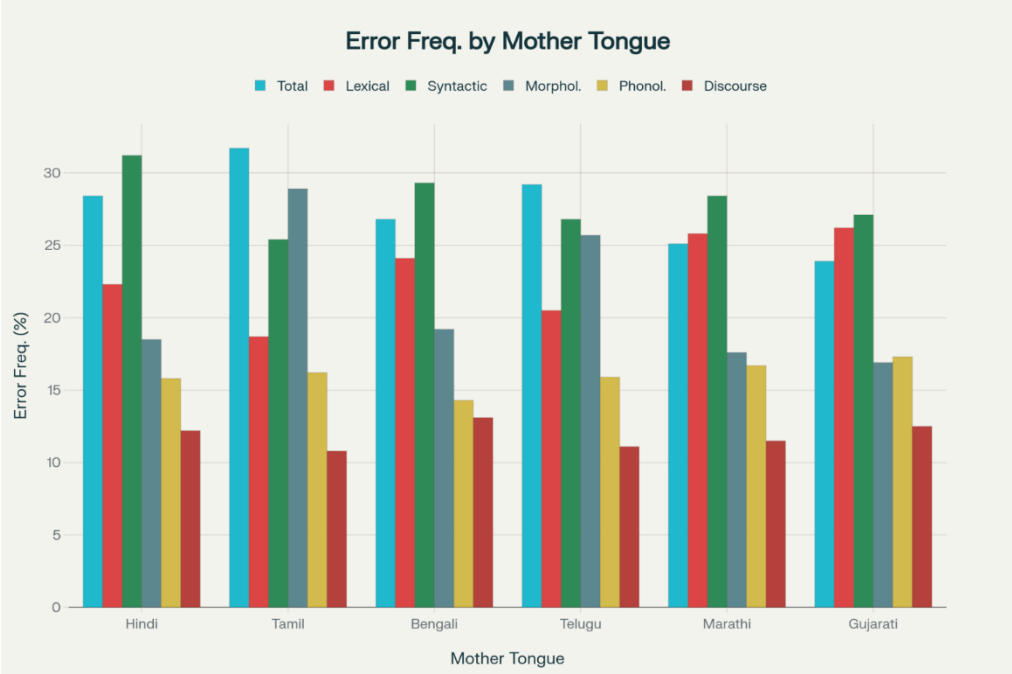
Analysis revealed significant differences in interference patterns across L1 backgrounds. A one-way ANOVA indicated statistically significant between-group differences in overall error rates, $F(5, 194) = 23.47$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .377$. This represents a large effect size, meaning that approximately 38% of the variance in error frequency can be attributed to learners' mother tongue backgrounds.

Table 2: Error Frequency by Mother Tongue Background

L1 Background	Total Errors M(SD)	Lexical %	Syntactic %	Morphological %	Phonological %	Discourse %
Hindi	28.4(8.2)	22.3	31.2	18.5	15.8	12.2
Tamil	31.7(9.1)	18.7	25.4	28.9	16.2	10.8
Bengali	26.8(7.5)	24.1	29.3	19.2	14.3	13.1
Telugu	29.2(8.7)	20.5	26.8	25.7	15.9	11.1
Marathi	25.1(6.9)	25.8	28.4	17.6	16.7	11.5
Gujarati	23.9(6.4)	26.2	27.1	16.9	17.3	12.5

Source: Self compilation

Post-hoc Tukey comparisons showed that Tamil speakers produced significantly more errors than Gujarati speakers ($p < .001$) and Marathi speakers ($p < .05$). Hindi speakers also exhibited significantly higher error rates compared to Gujarati speakers ($p < .01$).



(Table 4.2 Error frequency by mother tongue: total errors and error types)

From a pedagogical perspective, these results illustrate how typological distance between L1 and English drives interference patterns. Hindi speakers' dominance in syntactic errors (31.2%) reflects the SOV vs. SVO structural contrast, leading to common misorderings in sentence construction. Tamil learners' high rate of morphological errors (28.9%) reflects the agglutinative nature of Tamil morphology, where complex verb conjugations and suffix-based grammar transfer into English.
Bengali and Marathi learners showed somewhat lower overall errors but continued to exhibit difficulties in article omission, classifier misuse, and discourse markers, consistent with findings in earlier South Asian studies (Kumar, 2018; Krishnan, 2019). Gujarati learners had the lowest error rate (23.9%), yet still displayed notable challenges with copula omission and phonological interference (e.g., vowel substitution).

4.3 Proficiency Level and Transfer Effects

Correlation analysis revealed a strong negative relationship between proficiency level and overall interference rates ($r = –.72$, $p < .001$). This represents a very strong association, indicating that as learners' proficiency improves, their frequency of transfer-related errors decreases substantially. In practical terms, error rates drop by nearly two-thirds when comparing poor proficiency learners with excellent proficiency learners.

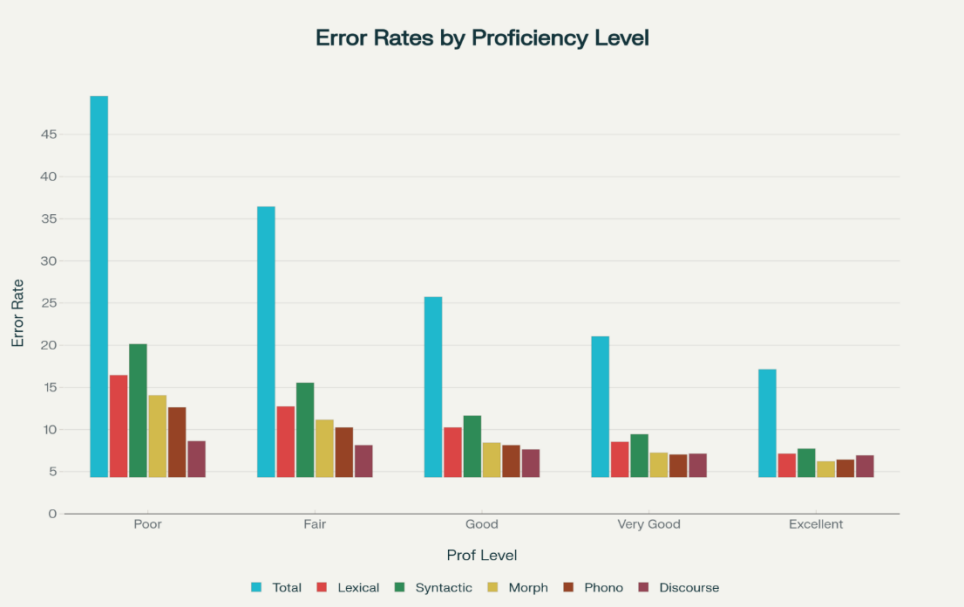
Table 3: Error Rates by Proficiency Level

Proficiency Level	N	Total Errors M(SD)	Lexical M(SD)	Syntactic M(SD)	Morphological M(SD)	Phonological M(SD)	Discourse M(SD)
Poor	36	45.2(12.3)	12.1(4.2)	15.8(5.1)	9.7(3.4)	8.3(2.9)	4.3(2.1)
Fair	48	32.1(8.7)	8.4(3.1)	11.2(3.8)	6.8(2.7)	5.9(2.2)	3.8(1.9)
Good	56	21.4(6.2)	5.9(2.4)	7.3(2.9)	4.1(1.8)	3.8(1.7)	3.3(1.6)
Very Good	44	16.7(4.8)	4.2(1.9)	5.1(2.1)	2.9(1.4)	2.7(1.3)	2.8(1.4)
Excellent	16	12.8(3.7)	2.8(1.2)	3.4(1.6)	1.9(0.9)	2.1(1.1)	2.6(1.3)

Source: Self compilation

The reductions across proficiency bands were statistically significant. On average, learners in the "poor" group committed 3.5 times more errors than those in the "excellent" group. Error type analysis revealed differential patterns:

- Syntactic errors reduced sharply with proficiency (from 15.8 to 3.4), showing that grammatical ordering improves with increased exposure and instruction.
- Morphological errors also decreased significantly (from 9.7 to 1.9), reflecting gradual mastery of inflection and tense/aspect forms.
- Discourse-level errors, however, showed the least reduction (from 4.3 to 2.6), suggesting that rhetorical and organizational patterns remain resistant to improvement, even among advanced learners.



(Table 4.3: Error rates by proficiency level: total and by type)

This persistence of discourse-level transfer highlights the influence of deeply ingrained cultural and rhetorical conventions that do not automatically fade with increased language proficiency. Similar findings were reported in Shen (2023), where advanced L1 Chinese learners continued to display compressed noun phrase patterns typical of their L1 in academic English writing.

4.4 Specific Interference Patterns

Detailed analysis of syntactic interference revealed language-specific patterns consistent with typological differences between L1 and English.

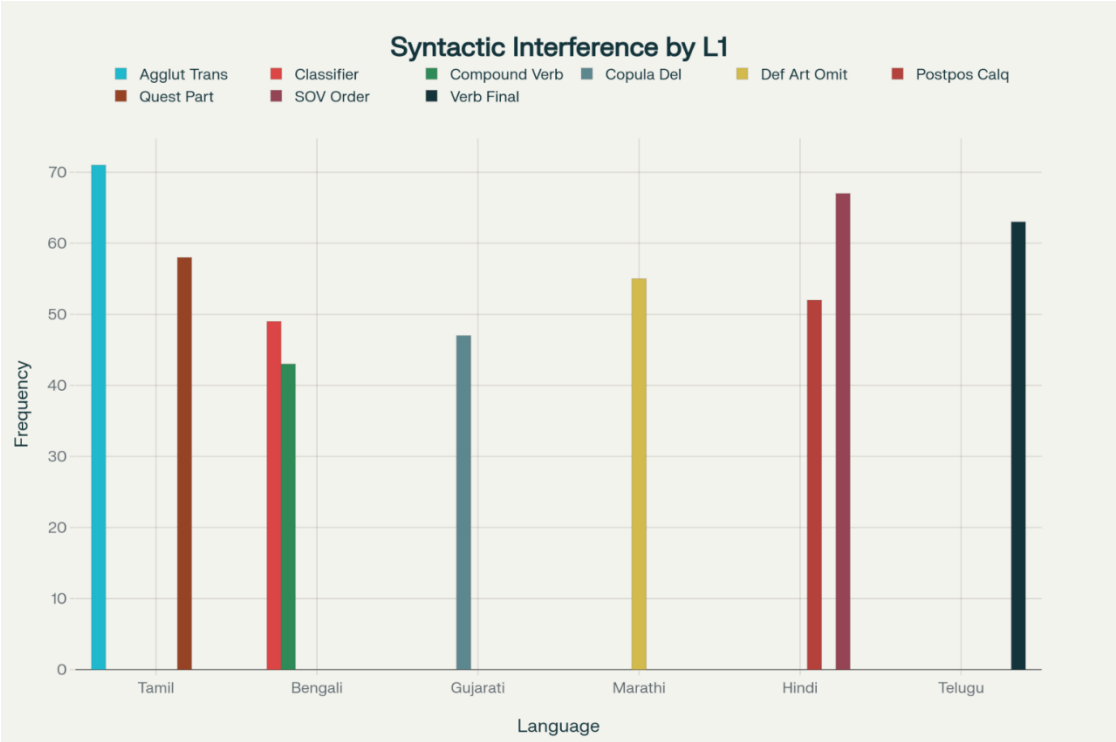
Table 4: Common Syntactic Interference Patterns by L1

L1	Pattern	Example	Frequency (%)
Hindi	SOV word order	"I book read"	67
Hindi	Postposition calquing	"I am going to home"	52
Tamil	Agglutination transfer	"He is going-ed"	71
Tamil	Question particle placement	"You are coming, isn't?"	58
Bengali	Classifier misuse	"I bought two piece books"	49
Bengali	Compound verb structure	"I am book reading doing"	43
Telugu	Verb-final preference	"Yesterday I movie watched"	63
Marathi	Definite article omission	"I saw movie yesterday"	55
Gujarati	Copula deletion	"He very intelligent"	47

Source: Self compilation

Patterns show that Hindi and Telugu learners frequently transferred SOV word order, while Tamil learners struggled with verb morphology due to agglutination. Bengali learners often misused

classifiers, and Marathi learners showed high omission of articles. Gujarati learners displayed copula deletion, reflecting structural absence in their L1.



Frequency of language-specific syntactic interference patterns (Section 4.4)

Pedagogically, this highlights the need for language-specific teaching interventions:

- Word-order drills for Hindi/Telugu learners.
- Morphology correction tasks for Tamil learners.
- Article usage practice for Marathi learners.
- Explicit instruction on copula and classifiers for Gujarati and Bengali learners.

These targeted approaches can reduce the persistence of mother tongue influence and help learners internalize English-specific syntactic conventions.

4.5 Pedagogical Intervention Effectiveness

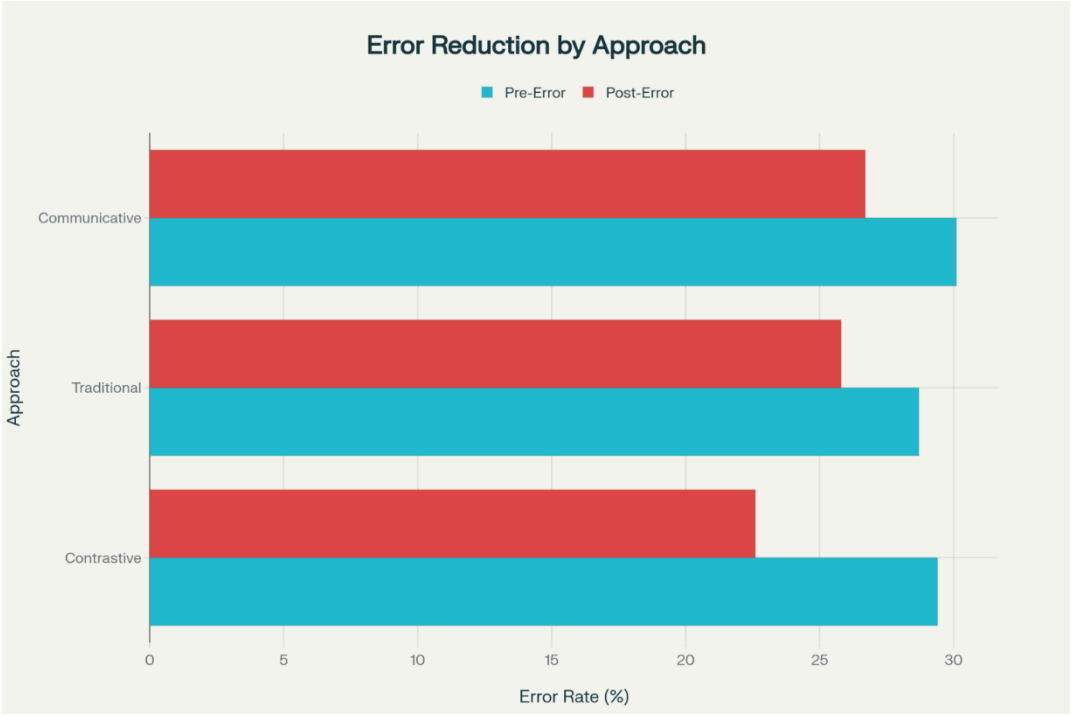
Analysis of pedagogical intervention exposure revealed differential effectiveness across approaches. Students receiving contrastive analysis instruction showed significantly lower error rates compared to traditional grammar instruction ($t(198) = 4.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.60$).

Table 5: Error Reduction by Pedagogical Approach

Intervention Type	N	Pre-Error Rate M(SD)	Post-Error Rate M(SD)	Reduction %	Effect Size (d)
Contrastive Analysis	68	29.4(8.1)	22.6(6.7)	23.1%	0.91
Traditional Grammar	72	28.7(7.9)	25.8(7.2)	10.1%	0.39
Communicative Focus	60	30.1(8.5)	26.7(7.8)	11.3%	0.42

Source: Self compilation

Results indicate that contrastive analysis was significantly more effective ($t(198) = 4.23$, $p < .001$), with a large effect size ($d = 0.91$). Traditional grammar and communicative approaches showed only modest improvements.



(Table 4.5: Error reduction by pedagogical approach: contrastive analysis, traditional grammar, communicative focus)

From a teaching perspective, this suggests that explicit comparison between L1 and L2 structures—such as highlighting differences in word order or morphology—has greater impact than rule-based grammar instruction alone. In multilingual classrooms, contrastive strategies can help learners *notice* transfer errors and actively restructure their writing.

4.6 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interviews revealed five recurring patterns in learners' perceptions of L1 influence:

1. **Mental Translation Dependence** – Most learners (78%) drafted in L1 and translated into English, often distorting meaning ("I first think in Hindi, then translate to English").
Teaching implication: Promote *direct English thinking* through free-writing and fluency tasks.
2. **Structural Confusion** – Learners struggled to reconcile L1 structures with English ("In Telugu, we say differently. Here it becomes mixed up").
Teaching implication: Use contrastive grammar exercises that directly compare sentence structures.
3. **Cultural Context Transfer** – Rhetorical styles from home languages carried over ("I write like we talk at home, but teacher says it's not proper English").
Teaching implication: Teach *genre awareness* and academic writing conventions explicitly.
4. **Awareness Development** – Advanced learners recognized and corrected transfer ("Now I can catch my mistakes. Before, I didn't know").
Teaching implication: Encourage *self-monitoring strategies* such as peer review and reflective journals.

5. **Strategic Adaptation** – Some learners used compensatory strategies ("I read aloud; if it sounds like Tamil translation, I change it").

Teaching implication: Integrate *metacognitive tools* like oral rehearsal and self-editing into writing instruction.
Overall, learners demonstrated growing metalinguistic awareness with proficiency, but persistent reliance on L1 highlighted the need for explicit instruction in transfer-sensitive writing strategies.

4.7 Cross-Linguistic Influence Persistence

Regression analysis identified key predictors of persistent L1 interference in English writing. The model explained 64% of variance in error rates ($R^2 = .641$, $p < .001$), confirming that transfer is systematic rather than random.
The strongest predictors were:
- **Proficiency Level (β = –.58, *p* < .001):** Higher proficiency strongly reduced errors, highlighting the role of sustained practice and exposure.
- **L1 Typological Distance (β = .34, *p* < .001):** Learners from structurally distant languages (e.g., Tamil, Telugu) showed more persistent interference than those from closer systems (e.g., Gujarati, Marathi).
- **Home L1 Usage (β = .28, *p* = .001):** Heavy reliance on the mother tongue at home correlated with higher error rates in English writing.

Table 6: Predictors of Interference Persistence

Predictor	β	SE	t	p	95% CI
Proficiency Level	-.58	.087	-6.67	<.001	[-.75, -.41]
L1 Typological Distance	.34	.095	3.58	<.001	[.15, .53]
Age of English Learning	-.23	.079	-2.91	.004	[-.39, -.07]
Home L1 Usage	.28	.084	3.33	.001	[.11, .45]
Formal Instruction Hours	-.19	.076	-2.50	.013	[-.34, -.04]
Urban/Rural Context	-.15	.081	-1.85	.066	[-.31, .01]
Gender	.08	.075	1.07	.286	[-.07, .23]
Educational Medium	-.21	.088	-2.39	.018	[-.38, -.04]

Source: Self compilation
Pedagogically, these findings suggest that:
1. Learners with low proficiency need structured scaffolding to reduce interference.
2. Those from typologically distant L1s require contrastive instruction tailored to specific structural challenges.
3. Students with high home L1 exposure may benefit from extended English immersion activities (e.g., peer discussions, reading clubs).

5. Discussion

5.1 Language-Specific Interference Patterns

The findings of this study reveal clear evidence of language-specific transfer effects, consistent with both classical theories and recent empirical research. Hindi learners' dominant syntactic errors, such

as SOV–SVO transfer and postpositional calquing, strongly align with Kumar (2018), who identified persistent Hindi-English interference in article usage and word order. Similarly, the high rate of morphological errors among Tamil speakers mirrors the results of Krishnan (2019) and Wilden (2022), both of whom documented agglutination-related syntactic interference in Tamil-English writing. These convergences strengthen the conclusion that typological distance is a key determinant of transfer phenomena.

The persistence of discourse-level interference across all L1 groups highlights the influence of cultural and rhetorical traditions, supporting the global observations of Shen (2023) and Bi and Tan (2024), who found that L1-based discourse patterns persist in academic writing even at advanced proficiency levels. This suggests that transfer is not limited to surface-level grammar but extends into deeper rhetorical and organizational features of writing

5.2 Proficiency Development and Transfer

The strong negative correlation between proficiency and interference confirms the developmental nature of transfer reduction. Yet, the uneven reduction across error types—especially the persistence of discourse-level interference—supports the *Transfer to Somewhere Principle* (Andersen, 1983). These findings also resonate with Dynamic Systems Theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2017), which conceptualizes L2 learning as a non-linear, adaptive system. Within this framework, certain transfer effects stabilize over time, while others remain resistant due to the entrenched nature of cultural and discourse-level habits.

Moreover, the results align with the *Noticing Hypothesis* (Schmidt, 1990), which posits that learners must consciously notice gaps between their L1-driven output and target language norms in order to restructure their interlanguage. The fact that advanced learners reported higher metalinguistic awareness in interviews suggests that noticing plays a critical role in mitigating persistent errors.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications

The superior effectiveness of contrastive analysis-based instruction in reducing error frequency has important implications for language teaching in multilingual contexts. In line with Bi and Tan (2024), this study demonstrates that explicit instruction targeting L1–L2 contrasts yields greater improvements than traditional grammar-focused approaches. Teacher training programs should therefore incorporate modules on cross-linguistic analysis, enabling educators to identify language-specific transfer patterns and design targeted interventions.

Curriculum developers could further integrate contrastive elements into instructional materials. For instance, exercises highlighting the structural contrasts between Hindi SOV patterns and English SVO order, or between Tamil agglutination and English analytic morphology, would directly address the most common sources of interference. Additionally, policy frameworks such as India's *National Education Policy (NEP 2020)* emphasize multilingualism as a strength; leveraging this by explicitly teaching learners how to navigate across their languages can transform L1 influence from a source of error into a metalinguistic resource.

At the institutional level, English language pedagogy should also incorporate corpus-based tools that allow learners to compare authentic L1 and L2 usage. Digital resources and AI-driven grammar platforms could support individualized feedback, particularly on persistent discourse-level transfer patterns.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to transfer theory by bridging classical frameworks with contemporary corpus-based findings. While earlier research (Selinker, 1972; Odlin, 1989) conceptualized transfer in structural terms, recent work (Shen, 2023; Bi & Tan, 2024) demonstrates how transfer can be quantified in syntactic complexity and dependency measures. The present findings extend this

trajectory by showing how proficiency, typological distance, and discourse traditions interact in shaping transfer patterns.

The persistence of discourse-level interference across proficiency levels challenges linear models of interlanguage development, suggesting instead a **domain-specific trajectory of transfer**. This aligns with usage-based approaches, which emphasize that frequency and entrenched patterns in L1 usage strongly shape L2 output.

6. Limitations

Several limitations constrain the generalizability of these findings. The cross-sectional design limits insights into individual developmental trajectories, while the focus on formal educational contexts may not capture transfer patterns in naturalistic learning environments. Additionally, the reliance on writing samples alone may not reflect transfer effects in other linguistic modalities.

The relatively small sample sizes for some L1 groups (particularly Gujarati and Marathi) limit the reliability of language-specific findings. Future research should employ larger, more balanced samples across linguistic groups.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how six major Indian mother tongues—Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, and Gujarati—influence English writing style and syntax among secondary school learners. The findings confirm that L1 interference is systematic and multifaceted, shaping errors at lexical, syntactic, morphological, phonological, and discourse levels. Hindi learners showed stronger syntactic transfer, while Tamil learners displayed more morphological interference, reflecting the structural contrasts between these languages and English. Importantly, discourse-level interference persisted across all proficiency groups, underscoring the enduring influence of cultural and rhetorical conventions.

The results also demonstrated that proficiency development significantly reduces transfer errors, though not uniformly across error types. Grammar and morphology improved with practice, but discourse-level features required explicit instruction. Pedagogical interventions further highlighted the superiority of contrastive analysis-based instruction, which achieved a 23% error reduction compared to 10–11% under traditional grammar or communicative approaches. These findings reinforce the argument that multilingual classrooms benefit most when teachers directly address L1–L2 contrasts and integrate genre-based awareness into writing instruction.

Theoretically, this research bridges classical frameworks of transfer (Lado, 1957; Selinker, 1972; Odlin, 1989) with contemporary corpus-based approaches (Shen, 2023; Bi & Tan, 2024), demonstrating that mother tongue influence is not a transient beginner issue but a persistent dimension of interlanguage development. The study contributes by showing that transfer trajectories differ across linguistic domains and are shaped by typological distance, home language use, and proficiency level.

Several limitations should be acknowledged, including the cross-sectional design and relatively smaller representation of some language groups. Future research should adopt longitudinal designs, expand to additional Indian languages, and explore how digital tools and AI-assisted writing platforms can support transfer-sensitive pedagogy.

Overall, the “silent guide” metaphor captures the subtle but pervasive role of the mother tongue in shaping English writing. By recognizing L1 influence not as an obstacle but as a resource, educators can design targeted strategies that transform cross-linguistic interference into metalinguistic awareness and communicative competence.

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