

# First Language Transfer in Mandarin Compositions

## Written by Learners with English as Mother Tongue

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### Abstract

To help Mandarin learners express their ideas in compositions is one of the toughest jobs for teachers of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) who frequently find that their students' works are rife with inappropriate expressions as well as grammatical errors. Mother tongue transfer, which is an important part of second language acquisition study, has always been used to account for the various problems occurring in second language learners' study process. This study carries out both quantitative and qualitative analyses on the errors in compositions made by Mandarin learners with English as their mother tongue. Four categories of errors are identified, and the cognitive mechanisms that lead to these errors are studied. The results reveal that the compositions made by Mandarin learners are subject to the influence of the learners' mother tongue (i.e., English) both in sentence structure and choice of words. The influence can be categorized into two types. First, learners transfer the English grammars (e.g., lexical, semantic, syntactic rules) to Mandarin compositions. Second, due to the linguistic differences between the two languages, learners have difficulty in mastering some Mandarin grammars, thus making various mistakes.

**Keywords:** first language transfer, written Chinese as a second language, grammatical errors, inappropriate expressions

## 1 Introduction

Language transfer is considered as a significant factor that influences second language (L2) learning based on the assumption that the process of second language acquisition is distinct from first language (L1) learning (Cook, 2000). For one thing, L2 learners begin their learning with L1 already acquired in a competent way. If one has learned one set of materials in a certain context, these acquired materials and the context will affect the learning of another set of materials (Perkins & Salomon, 1994). This is why students with English as mother tongue find that French is much easier to learn than Chinese (Odlin, 1989). Generally speaking, L1 transfer has two sorts of effects: positive transfer and negative transfer, whereas positive transfer plays a facilitating role in second language (L2) acquisition, and negative transfer is an impediment to L2 acquisition (Odlin, 1989). Research indicates that negative transfer happens in grammar, syntax, pragmatics, and semantics (Ionin & Zubizarreta, 2010), and the results of negative transfer manifest themselves in the form of underproduction, overproduction, production errors, and misinterpretation (Odlin, 1989).

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in learning Chinese as a

second language among people outside China. According to a report by Goldberg, Looney, & Lusin, (2015), enrollment in college level Chinese language classes has already made Chinese as one of the most widely taken foreign languages. However, compared with Spanish, French and German, Chinese is still one of the less commonly taught languages (Ke & Li, 2011). This is partly due to the substantial differences between Chinese and English in terms of syntax, semantics, grammar, and pragmatics. These significant differences pose a great difficulty for students with English as mother tongue to acquire Chinese as a second language, and consequently undermine their interest and motivation. In the current research of Chinese as a second language, mother tongue transfer is insufficiently researched. This research attempts to fill the gap.

This research analyzes Chinese compositions written by students whose mother tongue is English. The mistakes in these compositions are studied and the aim is to address the following question: how does the students' mother tongue (i.e., English) influence their study of Chinese? The result of this research will not only provide reference for future studies in L2 acquisition (especially Chinese), but also enlighten Mandarin teachers and help them understand the causes of students' mistakes.

## **2 Literature Review**

As a significant phenomenon in L2 acquisition, language transfer has been studied by many researchers from different angles. According to Odlin (1989), the similarities and distinctions between languages are responsible for different language transfers; similarities produce positive transfer and distinctions lead to negative transfer. Positive transfer can facilitate second language learning by accelerating the development of interlanguage, while negative transfer will hamper second language acquisition. Because the differences in some language forms and regulation systems between two languages may be mistaken as similarities by some L2 learners (Tang, 1997), repetitive mistakes occur in L2 learners' use of second language. Such distinctions and the resulted negative transfer occur in phonetics, lexicon, and grammar (Li, 2016), and also manifest itself in syntax and pragmatics (Ionin & Zubizarreta, 2010), as well as discourse (Schachter & Rutherford, 1979). The errors caused by negative transfer are categorized into four types: underproduction, overproduction, production error, and misinterpretation (Odlin, 1989). Ionin and Zubizarreta (2010) further proved through their study that transfer could be found at internal and external interfaces, and it is possible for L2 learners to recover from negative transfer at the syntax-semantics interface.

Besides the above-mentioned theoretical studies, some empirical research and case studies have been made about first language transfer and the results are mixed. In one study, White (1986) found that native speakers of Spanish (a pro-drop language in which subjects are optional) are more tolerant of sentences without subjects, while native speakers of French (a non-pro-drop language in which subjects are compulsory) invariably make English sentences with subjects. This indicates that the first language setting does have effect on second language acquisition. However, in a

research about “binding” – the relationship between subjects and reflexive pronouns, Cook (1990) found that L2 (i.e., English) learners who speak Japanese, Norwegian, and Roman languages respond to this language phenomenon with similar levels of difficulty and speed. Later, Hayes (2003) collected speech data from 124 L2 adult Russian learners with English as mother tongue and conducted a quantitative analysis. He concludes that mother tongue transfer could happen to learners of all levels, and most mistakes in lexicon and syntax could be attributed to negative transfer. Guo, Liu, and Chen (2014) by analyzing the mistakes in 54 English papers written by ESL students who speak Chinese, also found the negative influence of the students’ mother tongue (i.e. Chinese) on their English study.

From the above-mentioned research, it can be seen that mother tongue transfer has drawn extensive attention from L2 theorists and researchers. However, up till now few studies have been conducted about the effect of English as a mother tongue on the acquisition of Chinese as a second language. This is a great pity as Ellis (1994) claims that no second language acquisition theory could be considered complete without describing the mother tongue transfer.

To study the transfer effect of English on Chinese learning, some knowledge about the differences in syntax, lexicon, discourse structure, and pragmatics between English and Chinese is essential. Many studies have been conducted on these differences. By reviewing the previous studies, Tsao (1982) summarizes the differences between English and Chinese. (1) Chinese is more tolerant of deletion, while in English pronouns must be used to indicate coreferentiality. (2) the Chinese equivalent of English *it* (*ta*) is mainly used to refer to animals, while in English it can be used to refer to all inanimate things. (3) In English, passive construction is used to indicate that object of the verb is used as the topic of the sentence, while in Chinese it is a way to express bad experience (Chu, 1979). (4) English paragraph structure is direct and Chinese paragraph structure is indirect (Kaplan, 1966). In addition to these studies from linguistic perspective, many researchers have studied the differences between English and Chinese from the perspective of translation. In a book about Chinese-English translation (Lv, Yu, Zhang, Li, & Zhang, 1982), some differences between English and Chinese in the use of words and sentence structures are listed. (1) In Chinese, some sentences can go without subjects, but in English subjects are indispensable parts. (2) Possessive pronouns are used more often in English than in Chinese. (3) In Chinese attributes are usually put before the nouns or noun phrases that they modify, while in English attributes may appear before or after the nouns or noun phrases. (4) In Chinese, adverbial modifiers usually appear between subjects and predicates, but in English adverbial modifiers may appear at many different positions. (5) In Chinese narratives are put before attitudes and opinions, while in English the order is reversed. Later, Lu (2010) summarizes the differences between English and Chinese in lexicon and syntax. The differences are listed below: (1) There is no article in Chinese. (2) There is no classifier in English. (3) In English, the order of events and the logic relation are indicated by connectives, while in Chinese they are indicated by sentence orders. (4) In English, inflections are used to indicate the tense and number, but in Chinese time adverbs and affixes are used.

There are also some studies about Chinese compositions. Zou & Yu (2009) studies the compositions written by foreign students in their university and lists some mistakes that the students were prone to make in punctuation, character, vocabulary, and grammar. Bo & Zhang (2017) studies the textual time cohesion in CSL students' compositions and finds the following mistakes: overuse of time cohesion, lack of time cohesion, misuse of time cohesion, misplacement of time cohesion. Although these studies reveal various problems occurring in CSL students' compositions, few studies focus on the mother tongue transfer effect. Therefore, this study is conducted to fill the gap identified.

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

Based on the previous studies, this study intends to answer the following questions. (1) How does the students' mother tongue (i.e., English) influence their study of Chinese? (2) What is the mechanism of the transfer?

#### **3.2 Subjects**

Altogether 104 Chinese compositions are collected from two teachers of Chinese working in a college in the U.S. After close scrutiny, three compositions are excluded. Two of them are excluded because they are not written by students with English as mother tongue. The third composition is excluded due to illegible handwriting. The students who are second generation of immigrants from China were born and grew up in the U.S., and are thus considered English native speakers. Eventually 101 compositions are used in the study, among which 48 are class essays and 53 are application essays for the 9-week intensive summer language program, designed to improve American study-abroad high school and college students' Chinese language skill in China.

The compositions are of varied types including narratives, argumentations, letters, reports, and fictions. The topics are diversified, such as self-introduction, college life, family life, animal protection, environment, technology, history, and social problems in U.S.

#### **3.3 Procedure**

First, a native-speaking teacher of Chinese picked out the grammatical mistakes and inappropriate expressions in the 101 compositions. Later, a Chinese-speaking teacher of English was asked to identify those mistakes that might be related to English way of expression. The mistakes were then categorized and counted to see

their significance. A mistake that appears more than once in one composition is counted as one. Finally, these mistakes were analyzed to reveal the cognitive mechanism behind them.

## 4 Results

The problems found in the compositions can be classified into four categories. “Redundancy” is found in 82 compositions (81.2%); “structural inappropriateness” is found in 80 compositions (79.2%); “misuse of words” is found in 55 compositions (54.5%); “other inappropriate expressions caused by differences between Chinese and English morphology” is found in 34 compositions (33.7%).

Table 1  
*Problems identified in the compositions*

Problems	Occurrence Frequency	Percentage
Redundancy	82	81.2%
Structural inappropriateness	80	79.2%
Misuse of words	55	54.5%
Inappropriate expressions caused by morphological differences	34	33.7%

The following part of this paper will take a close look at each of the problems.

### **Problem 1: Redundancy**

“Redundancy” means the unnecessary use of certain words in sentences. For instance, “*wǒ*” (the pronoun in Mandarin meaning *I*) was found to be overused in 53 compositions. Here is a typical example: *wǒ shàng gāozhōng de shíhou, wǒ gēn wǒ de tóngxúe qùle zhōngguó* (我上高中的时候，我跟我的同学去了中国)。When I was in high school, I went to China with my classmates.). Although there is no severe grammatical error in this sentence, a native speaker of Mandarin will consider it an inappropriate expression as one will say “*wǒ shàng gāozhōng de shíhou, gēn tóngxúe qùle zhōngguó*” (我上高中的时候，跟同学去了中国)。In another word, the second and the third “*wǒ*” are thought of as unnecessary in Mandarin, while they are necessary in English as the sentence is grammatically wrong if they are omitted from its English translation as following: \* When I was in high school, went to China with classmates. “*Wǒ*” is not the only word that tends to be repeated by Mandarin L2 learners. The repetition of other parts of sentences are also noted in this study, such as subjects, predicates, and modifying adjectives. The following sentence may illustrate this point: *jīn’guǎn sānguó yǐhòu yǒu jīncháo hé suǐcháo, dàn zhèxiē cháo dài dōu méiyǒu hàn dài yǒu nàme qiáng dà de guó lì* (尽管三国以后有金朝和隋朝，但这些朝代都没有汉代有那么强大的国力)。Although there were Jin Dynasty and Sui Dynasty after Three Kingdoms, Jin Dynasty and Sui Dynasty didn’t have the strong national power as Han Dynasty had.). Here, the second “*yǒu*” (meaning *have*) is deemed unnecessary by Mandarin L1 speakers but the English equivalent “*had*” fits

well in the English version. Altogether, such kinds of repetitions amount to 47 cases.

Besides unnecessary repetition, the redundancy is also identified in the unnecessary use of some function words, among which connectives are the most salient. Take this sentence for example: wǒ xuǎn lái làisī dàxué yīnwéi lǎoshī dōu hěnhǎo hé xúsheng dōu hěncōngmíng (我选来赖斯大学因为老师都很好和学生都很聪明)。I choose to come to Rice University because the teachers are all good and the students are all smart.). In this sentence, “*hé*” (meaning *and*) is inappropriately used here as it obstructs the flow of discourse. Here is another example, *tā juéde nàr de dòngwù shēntǐ bùhǎo, suǒyǐ tāmen méiyǒu huólì, bù xǐhuan dòng* (他觉得那儿的动物身体不好, 所以它们没有活力, 不喜欢动。He thought that animals there are in bad health, so they lack vitality and don't like to move.). A native speaker will choose to omit the connective “*suǒyǐ*” (meaning *so*), while the English equivalent “*so*” is an indispensable part in the English version. Thirty-one compositions are found to have such unnecessary use of connectives.

Apart from connectives, two particular function words were found overused. One is the modal particle *de* (meaning *of*), which was found in 30 compositions. Some examples are listed in Table 2, and the unnecessary words and their English counterparts are marked in bold.

Table 2

*Examples of "de" being overused*

Wèi shénme zhōngguó rén de kàn fǎ yǔ měiguó rén de fēicháng bù yīyàng?

为什么中国人的看法与美国人的非常不一样?

**Why are Chinese people's ideas different from American people's?**

Tāmen lái wǒ de jiā cānjiā shèngdàn jùhuì.

他们来我的家参加圣诞聚会。

**They come to my home for the Christmas party.**

Qùnián de xiàtiān, wǒ wèi yīgè zūfáng gōngsī gōngzuò.

去年的夏天, 我为一个租房公司工作。

**Last year's summer, I worked for a house rental company.**

Another one is “*shì*” (the Mandarin linking verb meaning *be*), found in 10 cases. The following sentences can illustrate the point.

Table 3

*Examples of "shì" being overused*

Wǒ de kè dōu shì yǒu yìsi.

我的课都是有意思。

**My classes are all interesting.**

Zhēnzhèng de ài shì xiàng yīgè méiguīhuā.

真正的爱是像一个玫瑰花。

**Real love is like a rose.**

To sum up the first problem, we use Figure 1 to show the different types of redundancy and their frequency.

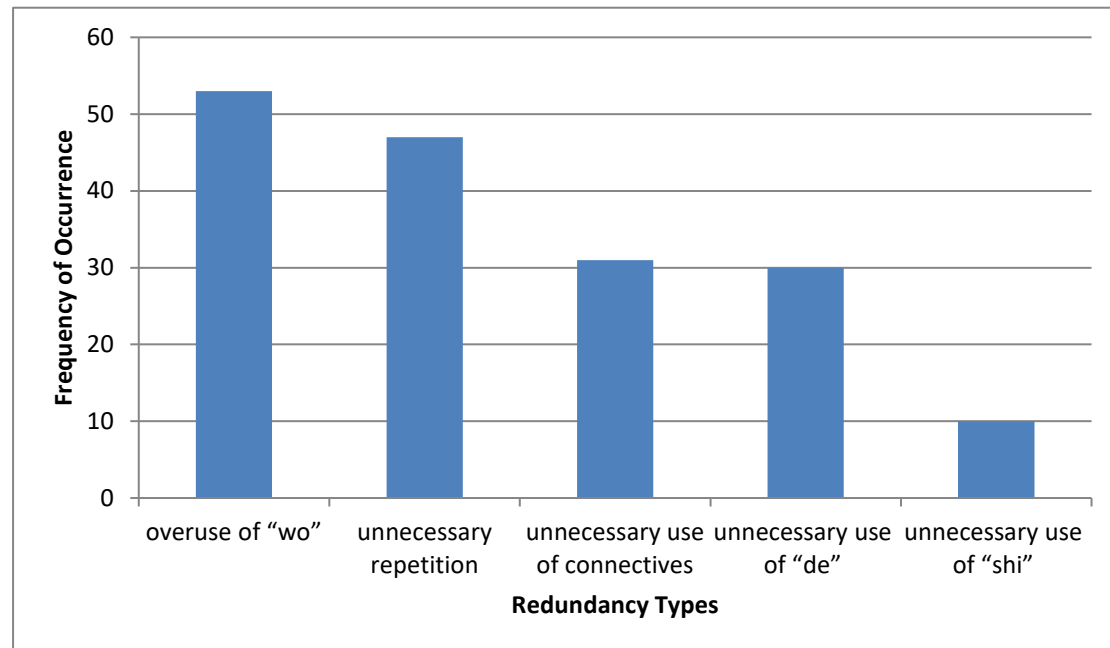


Figure 1. Types of redundancy and their frequency

### Problem 2: Structural inappropriateness

Here, the term “structural inappropriateness” is used instead of “structural error” because the sentences involved do not generate ambiguity and are not grammatically wrong, but a native speaker will immediately identify them as having “foreign tone” due to the inappropriate organization and arrangement of parts in the sentences. Six categories of this problem were noted. The typical examples, the corrected versions, the English counterparts, and their frequency are listed in Table 4.

Table 4

#### *Types of structural inappropriateness and examples*

Problem types	Examples & English translations	Corrections	Frequency
Improper nominalization	CET yào ràng wǒ fāzhǎn wǒde líuli. CET 要让我发展我的流利。 (CET can let me develop my fluency.)	CET kěyǐ ràng wǒde zhōngwén gèng líuli. CET 可以让我的中文更流利。	40
Incorrect positioning of adverbial modifiers	Wǒmen děi kànshū hé xiězuò měizhōu. 我们得看书和写作每周。 (We have to read and write every week.)	Wǒmen měizhōu děi kànshū hé xiězuò. 我们每周得看书和写作。	33
Inappropriate order of propositions	Wǒ rènwéi rúguǒ bùqù Zhōngguó wǒ jiù bùnéng hēnhǎode lǐjiě zhōngguó wénhuà hé fēngsú. Duì wǒ lái shuō, 我认为如果不去中国我就不能很好地了解中国文化和风俗。对我来说,	Wǒ rènwéi xuéhǎo yīgè yǔyán, liǎojiě wénhuà tèbié zhòngyào. Duì wǒ	26

Problem types	Examples & English translations	Corrections	Frequency
(Lyons, 1977)	xuéhǎo yīgè yǔyán, liǎojiě wénhuà tèbié zhòngyào. 我认为如果不去中国我就不能很好地理解中国文化和风俗。对我来说, 学好一个语言, 了解文化特别重要。 (I think if I don't go to China, I can't understand Chinese culture and custom well. To me, knowing about the culture is vital to learning a language.)	lái shuō, rúguǒ bùqù Zhōngguó wǒ jiù bùnéng hěnhǎode liǎjiě Zhōngguó wénhuà hé fēngsú. 我认为学好一个语言, 了解文化特别重要。对我来说, 如果不去中国我就不能很好地理解中国文化和风俗。	
Overuse of attributive adjectives	Wǒ dédàole wǒde dàxué ràng wǒ dào Zhōngguó liúxué de jiǎngxuéjīn. 我得到了我的大学让我到中国留学的奖学金。 (I have got the scholarship granted by my university, which allowed me to study in China.)	Wǒ cóng dàxué dédàole yībǐ jiǎngxuéjīn, kěyǐ ràng wǒ dào Zhōngguó liúxué. 我从大学得到了一笔奖学金, 可以让我到中国留学。	15
Wrong choice of subjects	Wǒ hé wǒde hǎopéngyǒu de xīngōngzuò ràng wǒmen chuān báisède chènshān. 我和我的好朋友的新工作让我们穿白色的衬衫。 (The new job that my friend and I have got requires us to wear white shirts.)	Wǒ hé wǒde hǎopéngyǒu huànle yīfèn xīn'gōngzuò, xūyào chuān báisède chènshān. 我和我的好朋友换了一份新工作, 需要穿白色的衬衫。	11
Unnecessary use of passive voice	之所以那么多有机食物是被出口到美国的..... Zhīsuǒyǐ nàmeduō yǒujī shíwù shì bèi chūkǒu dào Měiguóde..... (The reason that many organic foods are exported to America...)	之所以那么多有机食物出口到美国..... Zhīsuǒyǐ nàmeduō yǒujī shíwù chūkǒu dào Měiguó.....	4

By comparing the Mandarin sentences listed above with their English equivalents, it can be seen that all these six structural problems have their roots in the students' mother tongue. (1) "liúli" (流利) in Mandarin is an adjective, but in English there is a nominal counterpart of it—fluency—which can be put in the object position together with possessives. (2) In Mandarin, adverbial modifiers usually appear between the subjects and predicates (Lv, Yu, Zhang, Li, & Zhang, 1982), so "měizhōu" (每周) can only appear after the subject "wǒmen" (我们). In contrast, its English counterpart "every week" can be put at the end of the sentence. (3) The proposition "rúguǒ bùqù Zhōngguó wǒ jiù bùnéng hěnhǎode liǎjiě Zhōngguó wénhuà hé fēngsú" is the main point of this whole discourse, so in Mandarin it should be put after "wǒ rènwéi xuéhǎo yīgè yǔyán, liǎojiě wénhuà tèbié zhòngyào," which is the background information. On the opposite, since English tends to "start with climax"



(Lu, 2010), the order of the two propositions is reversed in the English version. (4) The attributive part “wǒde dàxué ràng wǒ dào zhōngguó liúxué” is too long for Mandarin since sentences in Mandarin are usually short, while by using past participle and attributive clause, we can make it an attributive part in the English version. (5) When expressing the impact of something on people, especially when people are driven to take some action by this something, in English we usually use the thing as the subject of the sentence and use the word about people as the object. For example, “The new job that my friend and I have got requires us to wear white shirts.” Such structure is unacceptable in Mandarin because in Mandarin usually “human” is the subject and the “thing” is in the explanatory proposition. (6) In Mandarin, passive voice is usually used to express some negative feelings or ideas, so “bèi” is unnecessary in the sentence “\*Zhīsūyǐ nàmeduō yǒujī shíwù shì bèi chūkǒu dào měiguóde...”. Differently, in English passive voice must be used as long as the object of the verb is used as the topic of the sentence (Chu, 1979).

### **Problem 3: Misuse of words**

“Misuse of words” means two kinds of problems. One is that a wrong word is used due to the misunderstanding of a word’s meaning, function, or the context in which it should be used. The other problem is that although the right word is used, the way that it is used is wrong.

For the first problem, it has been noticed that many wrong words are used because they have the same English equivalents with the right words and are close in meaning to the right words. Therefore I term this problem “misuse of synonyms.” This sentence may illustrate the point: tā hěn piàoliang, yě hěn **tián** (她很漂亮, 也很甜). In Mandarin, we usually say a girl is tiánměi (甜美) or kě’ài (可爱), while tián (甜) is used to indicate the taste of food. In contrast, in English, they can be expressed by just one word —“sweet.” Such misuse of synonyms occurred in 29 cases.

Besides the misuse of synonyms, several particular words have drawn my attention as they were mistakenly used by more than one student due to the misunderstanding of these words’ function or the context in which they should be used. I identified five such words. (1) *shì* (是, be) occurred in 15 cases. An example is “\*wǒde míngzì **shì** Gāoshēng” (我的名字是高笙), which is a direct translation of the English version “My name **is** Gaosheng.” *jiào* (叫) would be used instead by the native speaker. (2) *yàoshì* (要是, if) occurred in 15 cases where *rúguǒ* (如果, if) are usually used. An example is “\***yàoshì** wǒ gēn péngyǒu chīfàn, wǒ jiù hěn gāoxìng” (要是我跟朋友吃饭, 我就很高兴). This is caused by the fact that *yàoshì* and *rúguǒ* have the same English counterpart “if,” but in Mandarin they have a subtle difference in usage. (3) *zhēn* (真, really) occurred in 16 cases where *hěn* (很, very) should be used. An example is “\*wǒ zài Zhōngguó néng ràng wǒde zhōngwén **zhēnhǎo**” (我在中国能让我的中文真好). This is caused by the fact that *zhēn* (真) and the adjective it modifies can only be used as predicate in Mandarin (Lu, 2011), while its English counterpart “really” (though similar in meaning) has broader functions and can be used as predicate, attribute, or adverbial modifier. (4) *tā* (它, it) occurred in 9 cases where other words such as *nà* (那, that) should be used. An example is “\*wǒ zhīsūyǐ

xiǎng qù Yúnnán shì yīnwéi duìyú wǒ láishuō tā shì gè xīn dìfang” (我之所以想去云南是因为对于我来说它是个新地方). This is caused by the fact that *tā* in Mandarin is chiefly used to refer to animals (Tsao, 1983) while its English equivalent “it” can be used to refer to all the other inanimate things. (5) *yǒu* (有, have) occurred in 10 cases where other verbs should be used instead. An example is “\*wǒde biǎojiě **yǒu** tāde hūnlǐ zài nàr” (我的表姐**有**她的婚礼在那儿), which is a direct translation of the English expression “My cousin had her wedding there.”

For the second problem, one particular word drew my attention. In 6 cases, *suīrán* (虽然, although) was found being used without its partner *dànshì* (但是, but), as in this sentence “*suīrán wǒ ài wǒde dàxué, wǒ bù xǐhuān yuǎnlí wǒde jiārén*” (虽然我爱我的大学, 我不喜欢远离我的家人). This is because its English equivalent “although” is used alone.

To summarize this part, Table 5 presents the examples and corrected versions.

Table 5

*Words misused and examples*

Words misused	Examples	Corrections	Occurrence frequency
Misuse of synonyms	Tā hěn piàoliang, yě hěn <b>tián</b> . 她很漂亮, 也很 <b>甜</b> . (She is pretty and sweet.)	Tā hěn piàoliang, yě hěn <b>kě'ài</b> . 她很漂亮, 也很 <b>可爱</b> .	29
<i>shì</i> (是, be)	Wǒde míngzì <b>shì</b> Gāoshēng. 我的名字 <b>是</b> 高笙。 (My name is Gaosheng.)	Wǒde míngzì <b>jiào</b> Gāoshēng. 我的名字 <b>叫</b> 高笙。	15
<i>yàoshì</i> (要是, if)	<b>Yàoshì</b> wǒ gēn péngyǒu chīfàn, wǒ jiù hěn gāoxìng. <b>要是</b> 我跟朋友吃饭, 我就很高兴。 (If I have a meal with my friend, I will be very happy.)	<b>Rúguǒ</b> wǒ néng gēn péngyǒu chīfàn, wǒ huì hěn gāoxìng. <b>如果</b> 我能跟朋友吃饭, 我会很高兴。	15
<i>zhēn</i> (真, really)	Wǒ zài Zhōngguó néng ràng wǒde zhōngwén <b>zhēn</b> hǎo. 我在 <b>中国</b> 能让我的中文 <b>真</b> 好。 (Staying in China can make my Chinese really good.)	Wǒ zài Zhōngguó néng ràng wǒde zhōngwén <b>hěn</b> hǎo. 我在 <b>中国</b> 能让我的中文 <b>很</b> 好。	16
<i>tā</i> (它, it)	Wǒ zhīsuǒyǐ xiǎng qù Yúnnán shì yīnwéi duìyú wǒ láishuō <b>tā</b> shì gè xīn dìfang. 我之所以想去云南是因为对于我来说 <b>它</b> 是个新地方。 (The reason that I want to go to Yunnan is that to me, it is a new place.)	Wǒ zhīsuǒyǐ xiǎng qù Yúnnán shì yīnwéi duìyú wǒ láishuō <b>nà</b> shì gè xīn dìfang. 我之所以想去云南是因为对于我来说 <b>那</b> 是个新地方。	9

Words misused	Examples	Corrections	Occurrence frequency
<i>Yǒu</i> (有, have)	Wǒde biāojiě <b>yǒu</b> tāde hūnlǐ zài nàer. 我的表姐 <b>有</b> 她的婚礼在那儿。 (My cousin had her wedding there.)	Wǒde biāojiě zài nàer jǔbàn le tāde hūnlǐ. 我的表姐在那儿举办了她的婚礼。	10
<i>suīrán</i> (虽然, although)	Suīrán wǒ ài wǒde dàxué, wǒ bù xǐhuān yuǎnlí wǒde jiārén. 虽然我爱我的大学, 我不喜欢远离我的家人。 (Although I love my university, I don't like to be away from my family.)	Suīrán wǒ ài wǒde dàxué, <b>dànshì</b> wǒ bù xǐhuān yuǎnlí wǒde jiārén. 虽然我爱我的大学, <b>但是我</b> 不喜欢远离我的家人。	6

#### **Problem 4: Inappropriate expressions caused by morphological differences**

Besides the above-mentioned problems, also noticed were two sorts of inappropriate expressions. One is related to the expression of tense (having occurred in 33 cases). The other is about the use of measure words (found in 14 cases). A close study reveals that they are both caused by the morphological differences between Chinese and English, so I put them into one group. They have led to inappropriate expressions in varied forms which are depicted in Table 6 and Table 7.

Table 6  
*Problems in expressing tense*

Types of error	Examples	Corrections
Unnecessary use of auxiliary words	Wǒde tóngxué bǐ wǒ cōngmíng <b>le</b> . 我的同学比我聪明了。 (My classmate is more intelligent than I.)	Wǒde tóngxué bǐ wǒ cōngmíng . 我的同学比我聪明。
Lack of auxiliary words	Suīrán Qínshǐhuáng tǒngyī zhōngguó, ... 虽然秦始皇统一中国, ... (Although Qinshihuang had united China, ...)	Suīrán Qínshǐhuáng tǒngyī <b>le</b> zhōngguó, ... 虽然秦始皇统一了中国, ...
Incorrect positioning of auxiliary words	Wǒde zhōngwén lǎoshī gěi wǒ nàgè míngzì <b>le</b> . 我的中文老师给我那个名字了。 (My Mandarin teacher gave me that name.)	Wǒde zhōngwén lǎoshī gěi <b>le</b> wǒ nàgè míngzì. 我的中文老师给了我那个名字。
Wrong choice of auxiliary words	Wǒ yǐqián xué <b>le</b> fǎyǔ hé lādīngyǔ. 我以前学了法语和拉丁语。 (I have learned French and Latin.)	Wǒ yǐqián xué <b>guò</b> fǎyǔ hé lādīngyǔ. 我以前学 <b>过</b> 法语和拉丁语。

Table 7  
Problems in using measure words

Types	Examples	Corrections
Unnecessary use of “gè” (个)	Měigècì wómāma hé wǒ qù shāngdiàn... 每个次我妈妈和我去商店... (Each time my Mom and I go to shops...)	Měicì wómāma hé wǒ qù shāngdiàn... 每次我妈妈和我去商店...
Lack of measure words	Wǒ yǒu sān tóngwū. 我有三同屋。 (I have three roommates.)	Wǒ yǒu sān gè tóngwū. 我有三个同屋。
Unnecessary use of “yīgè” (一个)	Wǒ dàduō chūqù zuò zuòyè, yīnwéi wǒ děi yòng yīgè dǎyìnjī. 我大多出去做作业，因为我得用一个打印机。 (I don't usually do my homework at home, because I have to use a printer to do it.)	Wǒ dàduō chūqù zuò zuòyè, yīnwéi wǒ děi yòng dǎyìnjī. 我大多出去做作业，因为我得用打印机。
Wrong choice of measure words	Wǒ zài yīgè hěnhǎo de dàxué dú dàsān. 我在一个很好的大学读大三。 (I'm a junior student in a very good university.)	Wǒ zài yīsuǒ hěnhǎo de dàxué dú dàsān. 我在一所很好的大学读大三。

English is an inflected language, which means that the time of an action is conveyed by varying the form of the verb involved. In contrast, Mandarin “has been known to be a language without much inflectional morphology” (Li, 1999), so the time of an action in Mandarin is shown by the use of time adverbs and affixes (Lu, 2010) such as *le* (了) and *guò* (过). This difference in expressing time poses a great difficulty for Mandarin learners with English as native tongue and it is common that they make mistakes related to the use of affixes as listed in Table 5.

Other factors that lead to problems for Mandarin learners with English as native tongue are that there is no measure word in English and there is no article in Mandarin (Lu, 2010). The errors related to the measure word problem usually manifest themselves in unnecessary use of *gè* (个), lack of measure words, and wrong choice of measure words. The mistakes related to the article issue are usually unnecessary use of *yīgè* (一个), as the article in English “a” (or “an”) is thus translated.

## 5 Conclusion and Discussion

This study focuses on the grammatical errors and inappropriate expressions in Mandarin compositions made by Mandarin learners with English as their mother tongue. The data is collected from class essays and application essays for CET-Kunming Summer Language Program. Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. Some common problems and mistakes that occurred with high frequency are identified and they are categorized into four groups. A comparison between these mistaken expressions and the relevant English expressions reveal the mechanism

leading to these errors: the writers either transferred the English ways of expressing and organizing some ideas to their Mandarin compositions, or made mistakes due to the difficulties in mastering some Mandarin grammars which are essentially different from English. This result provides solid answers to the research questions raised.

Due to the small size of the sample, the result of this study needs to be further proved by a larger corpus, which may reveal more problems caused by mother tongue transfer. However, this study can enlighten the Chinese teachers about the causes behind some errors occurring frequently in students' compositions. Further studies may be conducted on the teaching approaches to solve these problems. Besides, a study is also worth being made about the cultural, philosophical, and psychological factors lying behind these language differences, as it will shed light on the differences between Chinese people and people in western countries concerning mentality, thus enhancing mutual understanding, facilitating language teaching and learning, as well as promoting cultural exchange.

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# 以英语为母语的汉语二语学习者习作中的母语迁移现象

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## 摘要

帮助汉语学习者进行书面表达是汉语教师一项较为艰巨的任务。在日常教学中，教师经常发现学生的习作中会反复出现一些语法错误和不恰当的表达方式。母语迁移是二语习得领域中的一个重要理论，经常用来解释分析二语学习者在学习过程中出现的各种问题。本研究对以英语为母语的汉语二语学习者习作中出现的各种错误进行了定量分析和定性分析，总结出四种类型的错误并对导致这些错误的认知机制进行了探究。结果显示，这些以英语为母语的汉语学习者在汉语写作中对于句式结构和词语的选择都会受到其母语的影响。这些影响分为两种：将英语的一些语法规则，包括词法、语义规则、句法等迁移到汉语的书面表达中；由于英汉两种语言在一些语言学规则方面的差异，导致学习者难以掌握一些汉语独有的语法规则，从而错误频出。

**关键词：**母语迁移，汉语二语写作，语法错误，不恰当表达

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