

## Mother Tongue Interference in English Language Writing at Derge Secondary School: The Case of Grade 9 Students

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Abstract	Article Information
<p>The purpose of this study was to find out if there are any patterns of mother tongue interference in Derge Senior Secondary School grade 9 students' written English. It explored EFL learners' writing difficulties by analyzing the nature and distribution of their writing errors. To this effect, the researcher examined students' questionnaire, teachers' interview and English writing samples of 30 grade 9 students and then categorized the errors according to spelling, grammar, word order types of errors and coordination of ideas. The data indicated that items such as spelling errors, grammar errors and word order were caused by negative interference of the L1 in students' TL writing. The kind of transfer that dominated was spelling, structure, preposition, doubling of subjects, plural formation and synonyms. Most of the grammatical errors committed by the students were L1 interference in acquiring grammatical elements of L2 (English). Based on the findings, it was recommended that teachers should be aware of the effect of negative transfer of grammar to MT and know how to reduce this problem and implement more effective teaching and learning.</p> <p>Copyright©2015 STAR Journal, Wollega University. All Rights Reserved.</p>	<p><b>Article History:</b> <b>Received</b> : 05-10-2015 <b>Revised</b> : 16-12-2015 <b>Accepted</b> : 20-12-2015</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Contrastive Analysis Mother Tongue Interference Foreign language</p> <p><b>*Corresponding Author:</b> <b>Tamiru Olana</b></p> <p><b>E-mail:</b> <a href="mailto:olana.tamiru@yahoo.com">olana.tamiru@yahoo.com</a></p>

### INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language is a growing need in this age of globalization. It helps communicate with people around the world. However, since people express themselves best in their mother tongue, they face challenges in learning a foreign language (Soares, 2008). It is commonly believed that the first language (L1) has an effect on the foreign language. Native speakers of English, for example, can tell whether someone is French, or Arab after few words of English. The influence of the native language is clearly shown in both written and spoken language (Ridha, 2012). The purpose of this research is to determine the level of interference of English learners' mother tongue with the learning of writing in English language.

Learning English as a foreign language is not an easy process because of transfer of learners' native language to a second language. Clearly, it may take time to master a language where students need to organize their knowledge into coherent structure. English language learners of Derge Secondary School are not making the exception of this phenomenon. When students learn a second language, they tend to relate their mother tongue with the target language in the way that features of L1 are perceived in the foreign language production (Abergo, 2013).

A number of studies assert that a lack of grammatical accuracy in writing may impede progress (Hassan, 2013). Accordingly, it is important to help learners reduce their errors by diagnosing their causes. In this paper, the

researcher gathered the errors according to the levels of grammar: word order, morphology of words, classes, phrases and clauses. The question is whether these errors occur because of divergences between L1 and L2 or because of their convergences. Thus, the notion of transfer is very controversial, having different meanings to different people.

Although transfer is no longer viewed as the only cause of errors at the structural level, L1 is still a complex, and significant systematic resource for the achievements and synthesis of meaning (Hassan, 2013). It is worth noting that cultural interference can be an obstacle to comprehension. The main aim of this paper is, thus, to determine if there are any patterns of native language interference in Derge Secondary School students' writing.

During foreign language learning process, learners face many difficulties. These difficulties are strongly related to native language interference. Many times, students count on the use of their mother tongue while they try to improve their skills using the new language, and for that reason most of them always have mother tongue interference while trying to master the four macro skills: writing, reading, speaking and listening (Abergo, 2013). Derge Secondary School students are not an exception as they face lots of problems with the skill of writing. Since these students have an access to use Afan Oromo and English alternately, the chance of mother tongue interference occurring in their writings of English is likely high.

There are some international studies conducted on the interferences of mother tongue in the English writings of foreign students. Some of these include (Hassan, 2013) who conducted a research entitled, "The Effects of Arabic on English Writing of Petra University Students." The other is Ridha (2012) who conducted a research entitled, "The Effects of EFL Learners' Mother Tongue on their Writings in English: An Error Analysis Study", on Iraqi students. However, to the knowledge of the current researcher, none of the local researchers have conducted research on a similar title in the Ethiopian context in general and on the interference of mother tongue on writings in English language at Derge secondary School in particular. To fill this gap, a thorough study in this area has been pivotal. Therefore, the focus of the study was on the effect of mother tongue interference when students write in English language.

### **Mother Tongue Interference Errors**

Mother tongue interference errors are those caused by the influence of learners' mother tongue on their production of the target language. According to behaviorist learning theory, old habits get in the way of learning new habits. Therefore, the notion of interference has a central place in behaviorist theory (Soares, 2008). This theory predicts that transfer will take place from the first to the foreign language. Where the first language and foreign language share a meaning but express it in different ways (similar stimuli, different response), an error is likely to arise in the FL because the learners will transfer the realization device from their first language into the foreign.

Extensive research has been carried out in the area of native language influence on the target language, including interference. However, there has not been agreement on a definition of the term interference. One explanation for this might be the large number of competing terms used in the discussions. Such terms include contrastive analysis, which was the first method used when studying interference; error analysis, which was developed when linguists began to question the validity of contrastive analysis; and positive and negative transfer, with the latter denoting more or less the same phenomena as interference. Finally, interlanguage is a term used when second language learners' produce results which are neither fully native-language-like nor target-language-like.

### **The Concept of Errors and Mistakes**

An error is "a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker that reflects the competence of the learner", while mistake refers to "a performance error that is either random guess or a slip in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly". The former "cannot be self-corrected" whereas the latter "can be self-corrected if the deviation is pointed out to the speaker"(Gass, 2008).

### **Transfer of Errors**

Transfer of errors may occur because of learners' lack of the necessary information in the second language or the attention capacity to activate the appropriate second language routine. Transfer is of two kinds: positive and negative (Kavaliauskiene, 2009). When it results in something correct because the rules of the first and the second language overlap, we call it a positive transfer. By contrast, when transfer results in something incorrect, this

is referred to as negative transfer, also known as interference (Skoog, 2006). It is true that the 'mother tongue' facilitates acquisition. Vividly speaking when a second language learner is under pressure, the learner will 'borrow' or substitute words from the mother tongue (Khan, 2014).

The primary focus of this study is to analyze the students' errors that are attributed to first language interference. Interlingual errors may occur at different levels such as transfer of phonology, morphological, grammatical and lexical –semantic elements of the native language into the target language.

Intralingual errors are errors which result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than language transfer. "Intralingual errors occur as a result of learners' attempt to build up concepts and hypotheses about the target language from their limited experience with it". These errors are common in the speech of second language learners and they are often analyzed to see what sorts of strategies are being used by the learners. Intralingual errors include: overgeneralization, simplification, communication-based and induced errors (Keshavarz, 2003).

Analyzing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching (Hassan, 2013). He further contends that errors can be regarded as devices learners use in order to learn. Gass (2008) defines errors as 'red flags' that provide evidence of the learner's knowledge of the foreign language.

### **Contrastive Analysis**

During the 1940s and 1950s, most errors were ascribed to interference and consequently a major part of applied linguistics research was devoted to comparing the mother tongue and the target language in order to predict or explain the errors made by learners with particular linguistic backgrounds. This approach was the first to elucidate the problems of interference and was referred to as contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis influenced the field of applied linguistics and second language learning for over two decades (Skoog, 2006). Comparing the mother tongue and the target language was considered useful for teachers, who could predict learner errors beforehand, and thus prevent them. However, contrastive analysis was also criticized by those who considered it impossible to predict when the errors would be made.

As students learn to communicate in the L2, they will begin to notice more features of written L2 that they can decode and understand. This process can be facilitated by teachers who encourage students to notice the similarities and differences between written forms of the two languages, and explicitly teach the differences (such as new letters and sounds) so that students do not become frustrated (UNESCO, 2008).

### **Mother Tongue Influence in EFL Writing**

English writing for EFL students is one of the most difficult language skills. What is commonly believed is that the first language has an effect on the foreign language since students do not know enough about how to generate or create ideas for writing. Many professors are aware of the existence of writing English errors, which is

an important factor to take into consideration in the foreign language instruction. For EFL learners it is even more complicated to write in a foreign language, and it takes considerable time and effort to become a skillful writer. Consequently, to achieve an effective writing is considered to be a problem that demands a complex process (Abrego, 2013).

Clearly, English writing is significant and of great importance in learners' academic courses and it has become a center of attention. It is essential to develop in a proper manner the skill needed for writing about our daily routine, taking notes, writing essays, answering written questions, writing compositions, making experimental reports, and the like. Taking the study on the matter, something that takes the attention of researchers is that learners' mother tongue affects what they write because some of their L1 characteristics are shown up in their writing compositions (Mounya, 2010). Other macro skills writing are the option that gives learners the opportunity to analyze and transmit carefully their ideas and thoughts in a better way because they have something in front of them to self-evaluate errors and improve their English writing.

Chomsky's work is helpful in understanding the assumptions and association of first language in the acquisition of a second language and how the use and practice of the mother tongue affects the learning of the target language. It is considered that transfer induces to a negative change in all linguistic levels including phonetics/phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax, and discourse. In addition, one of the negative connections between L1 and L2 is that students translate every single word into English.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The design for this research is descriptive survey. The use of this design is pertinent because an in-depth description and interpretation of the existing practices of mother tongue interference in students' writing of English language in the sample school would be required. The participants of the study were grade 9 English teachers and students of Derge Secondary School. The total number of grade 9 students in the school at the time of the research was 720. There were about 60 students in each section. Although there were 12 sections of grade 9 in the school, the researcher selected only three sections to make the study more economical, time efficient, valid and effective. These sections of students were selected purposely because they were on the opposite shift of the teaching schedule of the researcher. So, the participants were sections I, K and M students in the academic year 2014/15.

### Sampling Techniques

To select the research participants, the researcher used systematic random sampling technique. The total number of students in section I, K and M is 180. Out of each section, about 10 students were systematically selected from active, medium and slow learners to analyze their document. The selection was based on their first semester English exam result. About 30 students were randomly selected for questionnaire from each section. There were 7 English language teachers in the school including one of the researchers (in both grade 9 and 10). The researcher selected only 3 teachers for interview who teach grade 9 on the opposite shift.

### Rationale for Choosing Grade 9

Grade 9 was selected because it is the time when students start to learn most of the subjects in English. Up to grade 8, with the exception of both English and Amharic subjects, the students learn all subjects in their mother tongue, that is, Afan Oromo. Therefore, doing this ensured that the sample group is suitable for the study and the impact of mother tongue on English language writing could be seen the best amongst these students of grade 9.

### Instruments of Data Collection

The instruments of data collection utilized in this research were questionnaire and interview. The analysis of students' writings from notebook, workbooks and assignment were also the main focus of this study.

### Students' Questionnaire

In constructing questionnaire, according to Nunan (1992), careful attention needs to be given to the wording of the questions and secondly the researcher should not reveal his own attitude by presenting leading questions. Finally, questions should not be complex and confusing nor should they ask more than one thing at a time. Having accepted this truth, the researcher prepared questionnaire items which include both closed and open ended types. The questionnaire was translated into the students' mother tongue (Afan Oromo) by a teacher who has an M.A. degree in Afan Oromo, to avoid language difficulties. Then, it was administered to the 90 students who were randomly selected from grade 9. The students were provided with orientation before responding to the items.

### Teachers' Interview

To make the data more reliable and valid, interview was made with teachers. The interview was to find teachers' viewpoints regarding mother tongue interference in English language writing. It was tape recorded and supplemented with written notes. In planning and conducting the interview, the researcher followed the procedures provided by Nunan (1992) which reads as: preparing the interview schedule and piloting the interview. First, the interview questions were piloted with a small sample of subjects but for the major one, the teachers of the 3 sections were selected.

### Document Analysis

The other instrument utilized in this research was document analysis of 30 students from the three sections. The analyses of students' paragraph writing and assignment were the main focus of the study. The researcher read and analyzed the written exercises, workbooks and assignment given by the concerned teacher focusing on errors interfered from mother tongue of the samples. The sample exercise books, workbooks and assignments were expected to show the types of mistakes committed by the sample learners possibly due to mother-tongue interference. Finally, results of the errors made were tabulated and presented.

To get additional data, the researchers made the participants (students in the 3 sections) to write a descriptive essay on certain topics. The essay ranged from one and a half to two single spaced pages in length. The students were debriefed about the purpose of their writings after they completed it. Then, 30 paragraph writings (10 students from each section) were collected and analyzed to check various inter-lingual errors.

**Method of Data Analysis**

The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis for the open-ended and closed-ended types of questionnaire respectively. The quantitative data were analyzed via frequency and percentage as they are the most widely used descriptive statistics to yield valuable quantitative results. The data gathered using the above techniques were analyzed and integrated using the following procedures.

The data were arranged according to their order of importance. The organized students' responses were tabulated. The data from interview were kept and based on their items and were described qualitatively. As a first step in the analysis of the students' paragraph writings, the researcher marked the types of errors as grammatical, mechanical, word order and lexis related and the like.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This section deals with presentation, analysis and discussion of the data which were collected from teachers and students selected for the study. The other method of data collection used in the study was interview. The three teachers were interviewed to cross-check some of the data given by the students. Five questions were discussed with the interviewees and the results were reported in this section. Document analysis of written exercises was also made to critically see the errors made by the samples in their daily writing activities.

**Responses Related to Whether or not Mother Tongue Negatively or Positively Influences Students' Writing in English**

Table below holds questions that are meant to know whether or not mother tongue negatively or positively influences students' writing in English. Accordingly, Item 1 presents whether students think that their knowledge of MT has a negative impact on their writing in English. Similarly, Item 2 in the table below required the respondents to explain whether mother tongue negatively or positively influences their writing in English.

In Table 1, Item 1 above, majority of the respondents, i.e., 78 (86.6%) reported that students' knowledge of their mother tongue has an impact on their writings of paragraphs in English language. Whereas, 12 (13.4%) of the respondents argued that their knowledge of mother tongue has no effect on their writing in English. From this data, we can generalize that the students' knowledge of mother tongue has a great impact on their writing in English. Teacher 'B' noted that when his students want to express their ideas in writing, they try to write the words as teachers pronounce. For example, he added, to write the word 'knife' they write 'nayf' to write the word write they spell as 'rayit'. We saw this kind of error several times, this is because, in Afan Oromo, students write the words as they pronounce. They also make errors when they write sentences. That is to say, 'Abebe killed a lion' (svo) they say 'Abebe lion killed'(sov) again this is because of their mother tongue influence'.

**Table 1:** Table showing whether or not knowledge of mother tongue negatively or positively influences students' writing in English

No	Items	Respondents	
	Do you think that your knowledge of MT has an impact on your writing of paragraphs in English?	No.	%
1	A. Yes	78	86.6
	B. No	12	13.4
<b>Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>100</b>
	If your answer for question above is 'yes' how does it affect?	No.	%
2	A. Positively	15	16.6
	B. Negatively	20	22.2
	C. Both positively and negatively	55	61.2
<b>Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1, Item 2 above indicates that 55 (61.2%) of the students answered that their knowledge of MT affects their writings of paragraphs both positively and negatively and 20 (22.2%) of them responded that it affects negatively. Fifteen (16.6%) of the students responded that their knowledge of mother tongue affects their writings positively. So, the data suggests that knowledge of students' mother tongue affects their writings of paragraph in English language both positively and negatively. This idea is also indicated in the works of Soares (in the review

of literature in this paper) who suggests that transfer is of two kinds: positive and negative (Soares, 2008).

**Types of Errors Students Commit due to Mother Tongue Error Transfer**

Table 2, Item 3 below requires the students to mention the type of errors they commit due to MT influence. Specifically, it focuses on whether mother tongue interference results in grammatical, mechanical, semantic or word order errors.

**Table 2:** Types of errors students commit

No	Item	Respondents	
	What type of errors do you make because of your mother tongue interference?	No	%
3	A. Grammatical	41	45.6
	B. Mechanical	27	30
	C. Semantic/lexical	12	13.3
	D. Word order	10	11.1
<b>Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2, Item 3 above indicates that majority of the respondents, 41 (45.6%), reported that they frequently commit grammatical errors. Others, 27 (30%) of them reported that they are in the mechanical error category as it includes a problematic aspects of the target language which is spelling. In the third place, 12(13.3%) of the students mentioned that they are in the semantic/ lexical errors category and finally about 10 (11.1%) of the students said that word order errors is the type of errors made by the students.

Moreover, Teacher 'A' explained that students usually make spelling, vocabulary and grammar errors in writing. He extended that they mix Afan Oromo with English

language when they interact in classrooms. Teacher 'B' reiterated that most of the time his students make spelling errors because of their mother tongue interference. Similarly, Ridha (2012) who investigated the effect of EFL learners' mother tongue on Arab students writing in English comes with the same conclusion that grammatical error is the most frequent type of error, followed by mechanical errors.

Item 4 in Table 3 below was meant to explain the first step students take when their teacher tells them to write in English. This is because it is commonly believed that students do not know enough about how to generate or create ideas to write in the target language.

**Table 3:** Table showing how students start their writing in English language

No	Item	Respondents	
		No	%
4	When your teacher tells you to write on different topics/ things what do you do first?		
	A. I start writing in my mother tongue and then translate in to English	62	68.8
	B. I start thinking in English and write in English	28	31.2
<b>Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>100</b>

The data indicated that 62 (68.8%) of the students first write in their mother tongues and then translate it into English. Twenty eight students, i.e., (31.2%), claimed that they start thinking in English and write in English. Teacher interviewees had similar responses on this issue. They responded that negative transfer highly influences the students writing skills. They added, mother tongue transfer highly affects the writings of their students, especially in spelling. In words, the students use their mother tongue sounds rather than English. They fail to write English or spell the words correctly.

Thus, we can conclude that the respondents' first language has an effect on their foreign language writing and the majority of the students first write in their mother tongue and then translate it into English when they are told to do so. Similarly, Soares (2008) points out that when writing English as foreign language, it seems to be usual that most of the time students use their first language in order to try to reach an effective communication in the second one. From the written documents of the students, the researchers realized that most of the students commit errors which can be caused as a result of the interference of their mother tongue. These errors include spellings, grammar and word order as indicated below:

**Spelling Errors:** Both Amharic and Afan Oromo speaking students make spelling errors because the words in these languages are written the ways they are pronounced. All sounds of the word must be written but not in English language. For example,

- To write the word 'throw' they wrote 'sruw', 'srow' etc...
- To write the word 'especially' they wrote 'ispecially'
- To write the word 'father' they wrote 'fazer'
- To write the word 'again' they wrote 'agen'
- To write the word 'season' they wrote 'sezen'
- To write the word 'see' they wrote 'sie'

**Grammar Errors:** As Khan (2014) writes, the grammar of second language poses great amount of problems for many reasons: L1 interference, over generalization and undefined reasons. But learners make mistakes especially due to the reason that the habit of L1 is so strong that cannot be changed easily. From the analysis of the

students' documents, it was found out that students made mistakes due to the interference of their mother tongue grammatical structure. For instance, 'I go to church yesterday'. These kinds of mistakes happen because there is no irregular past forms of the verbs in their mother tongue.

**Word Order Errors:** it was also identified that most of the students misplace the words in their writings. To make a sentence in English, the order should be subject +verb + object. But in the structure of the L1 of the sample students, the order is subject + object + verb. So some times the students use the order of their own language. For example, the students write by saying, "my hobby is football watching and playing" to say, "my hobby is watching and playing football."

**Ways to Overcome Students' Negative L1 Error Transfer**

Table 4 Item 5 requires students to tell how they try to correct errors that occur as a result of their mother tongue interference. Similarly, Item 6 in Table 4 was meant to let students explain what they expect from their teachers to improve the errors committed because of the interference of mother tongue.

Responses to Item 5, Table 4 above indicate that majority, 66 (73.3%), of the student respondents said that to correct their errors they make as a result of mother tongue interference; they have to practice writing in English consistently. Others, 14 (15.5%) of the students, reported that they need to study the structure of their mother tongue and that of English. Only 10, (11.2%) of the respondents, revealed that they need correction by their teachers. Thus, it could be generalized that almost all the students need to practice writing in English in order to minimize the influence of mother tongue when they write in English. This issue of writing practice is also supported by Abrego (2013). He argues that teachers should have to give students more activities and encourage them to write sentences and essays consistently in order to optimize writing in a foreign language.

**Table 4:** Table showing what students expect from EFL teachers to overcome MT interference in their writing

No	Item	Respondents	
		No	%
	What do you do to correct your errors as a result of your mother tongue interference in English language?		
5	A. I need correction by my teacher	10	11.2
	B. I need to study the structure of my mother tongue and that of English	14	15.5
	C. I need to practice writing in English	66	73.3
<b>Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>100</b>
	What do you expect from your teachers to improve the interference of your mother tongue in your writings of paragraph in English language?		
6	A. To tell you the correct way/ form of writing English	30	33.3
	B. To explain the structural difference between your mother tongue and that of English language	20	22.2
	C. To explain the place of your errors and how to correct it.	36	40
	D. I need nothing.	4	4.5
<b>Total</b>		<b>90</b>	<b>100</b>

In Table 4 Item 6, 36 (40%) of the respondents reported that they expect from their teachers to explain the place of their errors and how to correct those errors. Thirty (33.3%) of the respondents said that teachers should tell them the correct ways of writing in English. Moreover, 20 (22.2%) of the students reported that they need their teachers to explain the structural difference between their mother tongue and English. Four (4.5%) of the students responded that they need nothing from their teachers. From these data we can infer that the students almost equally need the help of their teachers to correct their errors and tell the correct way/form of writing in English. This opinion is also depicted in the works of scholars such as Abrego (2013), and Skoog (2006). They pointed out that it is visible that for all teachers, error correction is essential at any level of study.

In addition, Teacher 'A' says that the problem of transfer could be overcome when students are taught by well trained teachers and where there is an adequate English lab; when they begin learning (at primary schools level) that they can develop their English writing skills. Teacher 'B' forwarded almost the same idea to the question. She said that to overcome problems of transfer, the students should study English from the very beginning. A great attention should be given to writing and make students practice.

Teacher 'B' recommends that there should be small classes for English. Students should also be taught English writing well at elementary level. Moreover, a great attention should be given to writing and teachers should help their students to practice writing starting from elementary level. Clever teachers should teach at elementary level because most teachers jump the writing exercises. They hate teaching the writing part.

Teacher 'C' also expressed that practicing daily the students can create correct and meaningful writing. It helps students develop ability and make their interest to do more without any difficulties. Availability of teaching learning materials, like students' textbooks, is crucial for the teaching and learning of English. Teachers should motivate their students not to be worried about errors.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study attempted to identify, describe, categorize, and diagnose the mother tongue interference in English

paragraph writing at Derge Secondary School. The researcher tried to describe, analyze, and explain the errors made by the students in their written work in the light of some theories of language acquisition and language transfer. The results of the study show that the impact of native language is more negative than positive. Most of the learners rely on their mother tongue in expressing their ideas. Although the document analysis showed that the participants' essays included different types of errors, the grammatical errors and the mechanical errors were the most serious and frequent ones. Based on the data collected from students' questionnaire, teachers' interview and analysis of students' writing, the following conclusions were drawn:

- Items such as spelling errors, grammar errors, and word order are caused by the negative interference by the L1 in the paragraph writing of English language.
- The kind of transfer that dominates the influence is the negative one because mother tongue can mainly be found in the following aspects: spelling, structure, preposition, doubling of subjects, plural formation, synonyms, one word- different uses and similar looking words.

To sum up, most of the grammatical errors committed by Derge Secondary School students clearly appear to be due to mother tongue interference of L1 in acquiring grammatical elements of writing in English.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

- Giving students more activities on writing exercises starting from the lower grades helps optimize the writing of the foreign languages and encourage students to write continuously.
- To incite students to speak and write in English at home and with their friends in order to reduce the number of mistakes due to negative L1 transfer, teachers also need to try to teach more effectively the rules and conventions of writing.
- Teachers should correct the errors not only on the blackboard but individually to show their students where their errors lie.

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- Teachers are advised to discuss with students on causes of negative transfer and try to minimize the existing problem and encourage students to speak and write in English and support them when they write and check whether they are on the right track.

### Conflict of Interest

Conflict of interest none declared.

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