

THE INFLUENCE OF URDU (L1) SYNTAX ON THE ENGLISH (L2) SYNTAX IN WRITING ENGLISH, AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL IN LAHORE

*1Mareya Amin, 2 Tooba Ahmed

*1MS English Linguistics, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus
2 Lecturer in English, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus

Abstract:

This paper examines the role of the Urdu (L1) syntax on English (L2) syntax in writing among university-level students in Lahore, with the aim of determining the effect of positive and negative transfer. The research, based on semi-structured interviews of university students, finds the role of L1 interference and support in writing. The results indicate that Urdu influences the syntactic structure, adverb position, prepositions, and use of articles, which are mostly unconscious and result in the emergence of grammatical errors and unnatural expressions. Simultaneously, L1 facilitates the generation of ideas, planning of sentences, and formation of simple syntactic forms in writing L2. The paper sheds light on the enduring effects of L1 on advanced L2 learners and the significance of increasing syntactic awareness in multilingual settings.

Keywords: Syntax, Cross-linguistic influence, Positive and Negative Transfer

1. Introduction

Language is a valuable instrument of social adaptation, allowing the individual to communicate with the environment (R. Ferreira et al., 2024). In the globalized world, the importance of English language proficiency cannot be denied. According to Anorboyeva and Botirova (2023), L1 is sometimes known as the native language, the mother tongue or the primary language. First Language acquisition (L1) significantly differs from learning a second language (L2). Infants acquire their mother tongue as their first language, while children and adults learn additional languages usually in a formal setting. The process of acquiring a first language begins in the early years, with children quickly recognizing sounds, words, and simple sentences. However, when learning an L2, they have already acquired L1 (Gonca, 2016, as cited in Hashim et al., 2024). This difference leads to an important phenomenon: the influence of L1 on L2.

Urdu is the national language of Pakistan and it also serves as a lingua franca, while English an official language and is also widely used in academic and non-academic settings (Qayyum et al., 2023). Moreover, writing is widely considered as the most challenging among the four language skills, as it requires the writer to draft ideas, logically organize the thoughts, use correct grammar, and produce syntactically accurate sentences. Writing is not a random process; it requires proper knowledge and application of the grammatical rules and structures (Casal & Lee, 2019). Various factors influence the academic writing skills of EFL/ESL learners, but the most dominant one is the influence of L1 (Mahmood et al., 2020, as cited in Hashim et al., 2024). Thus, the influence of one's first language (L1) on second language (L2) usually plays a central role in second-language (L2) writing, especially in multilingual settings.

There is a strong relationship between syntax instruction and the development of complex sentences in ESL writing (Ramzan et al., 2024). According to Carnie (2021), Syntax refers to the set of rules governing how words combine to form phrases, clauses, and sentences. In written language, syntax helps the writers to achieve clarity and coherence: features that are central to academic discourse. Burton-Roberts (2021), avers that Far beyond the basics of grammar, syntax determines the structure and coherence of sentences, forming the foundation for expressing intricate ideas. In the ESL context, syntax holds importance beyond linguistic accuracy; it serves as the medium through which learners can express their thoughts precisely and engage in advanced discourse.

However, there are certain differences between the syntactic structures of different languages. According to Qayyum (2023), Urdu language usually follows a Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) order, uses postpositions, and allows relatively free word order, English; on the other hand, follows a fixed Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) order and uses prepositions. These differences result in predictable areas of difficulty for Urdu-speaking learners of English, who may unintentionally transfer some of the Urdu structures into their English writing. One common source of difficulty is the negative transfer of the syntactic patterns, which often leads to ungrammatical constructions (Li, M, 2025).

However, when students' writing is influenced by L1 structures, the results can be both helpful and problematic. Language transfer, also commonly called cross-linguistic influence (CLI), refers to the process in second (or additional) language acquisition in which linguistic features from a learner's prior language(s) affect their perception, production, or understanding of the target language (L2) (Erkir et al., 2025). According to Sabbah (2018) Transfer can be of two types, specifically positive transfer and negative transfer. The process of using rules from L1, which usually facilitates or has a positive influence on learning L2 is called the **positive transfer**. This transfer mainly occurs because of similarities between L1 and L2. In comparison, **negative transfer** is the transfer of rules from L1 which has harmful impact on the learning and use of L2. This is majorly due to differences between L1 and L2. According to Hussain (2019), second language learners (L2) mostly do not have the same degree of ease with language learning as L1.

This research tends to investigate how Urdu syntax (L1) influences English syntax (L2) in English writing among university students, identifying both negative and positive transfer patterns.

1.1. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the influence of Urdu (L1) syntax on the English (L2) syntax in English writing.
2. To study the positive and negative transfer from Urdu (L1) to English (L2) in English writing.
3. To examine the effect of students' L1(Urdu) on L2(English) writing.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How does the Urdu (L1) syntax influence the English (L2) syntax in English Writing?
2. How does positive and negative transfer occur from Urdu (L1) to English (L2) in English writing?
3. How does the students' L1(Urdu) affect their L2(English) writing?

2. Literature Review

Research on first language (L1) influence in second language (L2) writing has evolved considerably over the past few decades, highlighting the phonological, lexical, and morphological features of a learner's native language which impact their second language acquisition. Previous research emphasized that Urdu, being the dominant L1 for most Pakistani learners, often interferes with the English structures, creating several challenges (Masood et al., 2020). Their study investigated how Urdu (L1) influences English (L2) usage in Pakistan, revealing four major types of errors; articles, prepositions, subject-verb agreement, and direct lexical transfers from Urdu into English. Their study concluded that certain structural differences between Urdu and English create persistent difficulties for English learners.

In the same year, Singh and Maniam (2020) studied and identified L1 interference from Bahasa Melayu to English among Malaysian secondary school students. The findings of this qualitative research are parallel those of Masood et al. (2020), revealing negative syntactic transfer as students often translate structures from their L1 into English

(L2). Spolsky's good learners' model was used in the study to demonstrate that translation from L1 to L2 lead to several grammatical errors such as incorrect use of articles, pronouns, verb forms, and tenses. With further advancement, more attention was given to written discourse and the deeper structural effects of Urdu on English composition. Yasir et al. (2023) explored the interference of Urdu in English writing at multiple linguistic levels—lexical, morphological, phonological, and orthographic. Code-switching and spellings errors were also explored. Consistent with these studies, Qayyum et al. (2023) focused on **coordinating conjunctions**, comparing Urdu *aur* with English *and*, exploring the difficulties faced by the Urdu (L1) speakers when transferring its structures to English (L2).

A recent study by Hashim et al. (2024) showed the persistence of L1 interference in the context of higher education. This research, conducted at Thal University Bhakkar, demonstrated that Urdu affects learners' academic English writing: the dissimilar syntactic structures of Urdu and English being the primary cause of these errors. The researcher concluded that L1 functions as a "double-edged weapon," providing support in comprehension but misleading the learners in writing.

Another study on Urdu Case Clitics as Postpositions in Comparison with English Prepositions (Hashmi, 2024) analyzed how Urdu markers such as *ko* function differently from that of English prepositions. This structural difference often contributes to syntactic transfer errors, where Urdu learners overgeneralize or mishandle the prepositional rules in English. More recently, Li (2025) investigated syntactic priming between English and Chinese, showing that the exposure to specific sentence structures in one language often influences production in another. This study involved English-Chinese bilinguals and illustrated the cognitive basis of syntactic transfer.

Despite extensive research on the influence of the first language on second language learning, most studies have focused individual grammatical, lexical and phonological aspects. Limited attention has been given to the complex syntactic features in this regard. Additionally, the challenges faced by advanced or university level English learners in Pakistan are not fully explored. Most importantly, previous research has concentrated mainly on error analysis thus ignoring positive transfer where L1 syntax supports correct L2 structures. Thus, leaving a partial picture of how Urdu actually shapes English writing. This study seeks to fill these gaps by providing more focused and in depth analysis.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This paper has selected **qualitative approach** to research, where **semi-structured interviews** was the main data collection instrument. This approach was adopted since it will enable the participants to show their perceptions, experiences and language practices freely. Semi-structured interviews also offer the opportunity to dig deeper where needed, which is necessary in the comprehension of the complexity of language influence and transfer.

3.2. Participants

In this study, there were seven (7) participants. The sample included MS English students enrolled in the first semester at a public sector university in Lahore. These respondents were chosen as they have advanced exposure to the English language as a second language, and they are involved in writing academic English regularly, making them relevant to the study. All participants provided verbal consent before being interviewed. No details that might help define the identity of the participants were gathered, which guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity.

3.3.Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data based on a pre-designed series of open-ended questions, which were consistent with the aim of the research. The audio recording of the interviews was done using a mobile phone audio recorder, and this allowed the accurate recording of the responses of the participants to be transcribed and analyzed later. The collection of data went on until it became saturated. This research paper reached the saturation point following the seventh (7th) interview, since further interviews were not yielding new information on matters concerning the L1 syntactic transfer.

3.4.Interview Questions

- Q.1. Can you tell me which language you mostly speak at home and in daily communication?
- Q.2. How would you describe the main differences between Urdu and English Syntax?
- Q.3. Explain in detail how your Urdu language habits influence English as a whole?
- Q.4. Explain or think of instances when your L1 influences your L2 specifically in writing?
- Q.5. How does your L1 help in L2 writing? Can you think of an example?
- Q.6. Can you think of any instance when your L1 made it harder for you to write correct English sentences?
- Q.7. Do you feel that your L1 has an impact on your L2? If yes, can you think of specific examples why this happen?

4. Analysis

a. Cognitive Translation Dependency

In several interviews, respondents said that they think in Urdu and later translate it into English. The effect of this process can be literal translations, unnatural phrases, and structural mistakes. This demonstrates that Urdu is the cognitive base of sentence construction and syntactic transfer is inevitable.

My mind unconsciously processes it first in Urdu. Then I translate it into English... This process happens automatically. (Student ,1)

Whenever I try to write... I firstly organize my ideas in Urdu and then convert those sentences into English. (Student, 7)

Some of the Participants mentioned that L1 influence is subconscious and automatic. Even advanced learners are affected by L1 interference when Urdu is their major L1.

Urdu lies in my subconscious mind... it interferes automatically. (Student, 6)

b. Direct Urdu to English translation

The participants continually cited inability to maintain the fixed SVO order of English because of the Urdu SOV order. Such interference causes the incorrect arrangement of verbs, phrases, and the strange structure of the sentence. One of the most powerful negative impacts of the Urdu language on English writing seems to be word order transfer.

The reason is the difference in syntactic structures of both languages. (Student, 7)

My mind follows Urdu word order automatically. (Student, 6)

I sometimes write incorrect sentences... I might say 'This book I'm reading' instead of 'I'm reading this book'. (Student, 1)

c. Difficulty in placement of verbs, prepositions, and adverbs/ Omission or misuse of Articles

Participants noted that they experienced repeated problems with articles and prepositions two aspects in which Urdu and English are vastly different. Owing to the fact that these elements do not have any direct counterparts in the Urdu language, learners are likely to leave them out, dis-locate, or overuse in English. Such an observation validates that there is strong negative syntactic transfer because of non-existence of grammatical parallels.

Urdu lack articles, so sometimes we omit articles in English too. (Student, 3)
For example, when we translate the sentence Bacha Khel raha hai into English; due to our Urdu habits, we simply say Child is playing, instead of saying The child is playing. (Student 3)
I face difficulties with adverbial and prepositional phrases... I sometimes place them incorrectly. (Student, 2)
The other difference is of prepositions and postposition that is; English uses prepositions and Urdu uses postpositions. For Examples; In English we say The book is on the table while in Urdu it is like; Kitab maiz per hai. (Student, 5)

The Urdu interference on complex English structures discerns the fact that syntactic transfer increases with the level of sentence complexity.

It is harder for me to write complex sentences due to the influence of Urdu. (Student, 4)

It is harder when I try to convert complex Urdu sentences into English. (Student, 4)

d. Structural Support

Although negative transfer is predominant, respondents also accept positive transfer. Urdu assists in generating ideas, sketching the contents and occasionally in constructing simple tenses, or in building continuous constructions. L1 is used as a conceptual support system although it distorts syntax at times.

Continuous sentences... can be easily translated. (Student, 3)

Urdu helps me express ideas clearly... gives me confidence to start writing. (Student, 4)

Urdu helps because I think the sentence in Urdu first and then adjust it to fit English grammar. (Student, 1)

e. Reduced influence at advanced (tertiary) levels

Students said that as they move to higher levels of proficiency, they become more aware of their Urdu-based errors. With more practice and reading, they improve and make fewer Urdu-influenced mistakes in English writing.

Looking back to when I first started learning English, I used to make mistakes while translating Urdu sentences into English due to differences in sentence structure. However, now it feels like my L1 is not affecting my L2 at this stage. (Student, 1)

f. L1 affects speaking more often than writing.

Students shared that when they speak English, Urdu comes into their mind automatically because speaking is fast and has no time to think. In writing, they get more time to correct mistakes, so Urdu influence becomes less.

My L1 influences my speaking habit more than the writing ones. (Student, 2)

5. Findings

The qualitative data interpretation was conducted in accordance with the six-step thematic model created by Braun and Clarke (2006), which guaranteed the methodological rigor of the study and then correspondence between the research purpose and the qualitative data analysis. This was done by first coding the transcribed interview data, where certain segments of the data were coded. These codes were then grouped in terms of the meaning they had to constitute the overall themes.

Codes	Themes	Insights from the interviews
Regular communication in Urdu	Dominance of L1	Urdu is main vehicle of communication among participants, which forms a powerful cognitive foundation that manipulates English processing.

Urdu mental processing before English writing	Cognitive Translation Dependency	Students mentally build sentences in Urdu and then into English that influence their syntactic patterns.
Direct Urdu to English translation	Negative Transfer	Students use literal translation and thus commit syntactic mistakes and form unnatural English phrases.
Difficulty in placement of verbs, prepositions, and adverbs	Syntactic Placement Challenges	Urdu learners of English face difficulty in the placement of Verbs, Adverbs and Prepositions.
Omission or misuse of Articles	Cross-Linguistic Influence (Absence Effect)	Since Urdu lacks articles, learners tend to omit or incorrectly use English articles, thus reflecting negative syntactic transfer.
L1 helps in ideas generation and sentence planning.	Positive Transfer	Urdu(L1) eases the cognitive load by supporting conceptual planning and idea formation before writing in English.
L1 forms the foundation for basic tense structures.	Structural Support	For some learners, Urdu serves as a scaffold/bridge in forming simple English sentences such as the simple continuous tense.
L1 affects speaking more often than writing.	Skill-Specific Influence	Some participants report that L1 influence is more noticeable in spoken English, due to spontaneous use and less monitoring.
Reduced influence at advanced (tertiary) levels	Developmental Shift	Higher proficiency lessens the L1 interference, indicating that the influence can diminish with increased exposure to L2.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed at discussing the effects of Urdu (L1) syntax on English (L2) syntax in English writing of university level students in Lahore. The study employed a qualitative design, using semi-structured interviews to explore the transfer (positive and negative) of Urdu to English writing and how the habitual first language use by students influences their production of the second language. The results reveal that the objective of the study has been met to a great extent. The participants mentioned Urdu syntax as a factor influencing the structure of English sentences, especially the word order, adverb placement, and the use of articles. Negative transfer was also found in the direct translation of Urdu sentences into English by students, causing syntactic mistakes. Positive transfer was found when Urdu gave a conceptual or structural scaffolding, e.g., planning thoughts or constructing simple sentences. The research also found L1 influence to be mostly unconscious because learners always use Urdu to think before they write in English.

This study adds to the body of knowledge in second language acquisition by demonstrating the presence of L1 influence in the writing of L2 at the university level in Pakistan. It supports the significance of developing awareness of the cross-linguistic differences in learners and implementing specific teaching strategies to reduce the syntactic interference. In general, the research proves that L1 syntax has a great influence on the writing in L2, even in the case of advanced learners, and also proves that the L1 syntax may be used as a supportive means of organizing the ideas and creating a sentence. Such lessons not only support the current theories on language transfer but also provide a practical implication in teaching English language to students in multilingual settings.

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