

Unveiling the Middle Ground: Intermediate-Level Linguistic Differences and Their Influence on L2 Writing Proficiency

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Abstract—This study examines whether and how adult L2 learners' awareness of intermediate-level language difference (ILLD) affects their writing competence. Quantitative data were collected from 75 English-major university students using an explanatory sequential design, through questionnaires and IELTS Writing Task 2 tests. Correlation and error analyses revealed that understanding distinctions like the use of cohesive devices and substitution of words was linked to higher writing quality. Focus group interviews show that participants recognized the importance of these differences but often struggled to apply them in writing. Error analysis identified common issues, such as the lack of conjunctions and repetitive expressions. 3 of the 8 linguistic differences, including hypotactic versus hypotactic, impersonal versus personal and substitutive versus repetitive, had moderate correlations with writing competence, leading to frequent errors despite learners' theoretical knowledge. Less prominent differences, like indirect versus direct expression, showed weaker correlations and fewer errors. The study contributes both quantitative and qualitative evidence to a field previously dominated by surface-level analyses of CLI. Findings emphasize the need for guided practice in teaching ILLD. Targeted pedagogical interventions can enhance second language writing instruction, improving learners' accuracy, fluency, and overall communicative competence.

Index Terms—intermediate-level linguistic differences, cross-linguistic influence, second language writing, bilingualism, contrastive linguistics

I. INTRODUCTION

Acquiring a second language (L2) involves much more than merely mastering vocabulary and grammar; it requires a nuanced understanding of subtle linguistic features that shape effective communication. Traditionally, language structures are analyzed at two levels: surface features, such as lexical and syntactic elements, and deep-level influences, including socio-cultural and pragmatic factors. However, an intermediate level exists between these extremes that encompasses preferred syntactic, lexical, and discourse arrangements deeply embedded in cultural and cognitive frameworks (Liu, 1991; Ellis, 1992). These intermediate-level linguistic differences (ILLD) can lead to persistent, yet often unnoticed, errors in L2 writing, thereby undermining coherence and fluency (Keyan & Chuangen, 2022; Li & Zhang, 2022).

Although cross-linguistic influence (CLI) is widely recognized in bilingual language development (Unsworth, 2023), most studies have predominantly focused on surface-level characteristics (e.g., word choice and sentence structure) or on deep-level factors (e.g., cultural and pragmatic differences). Consequently, the role of intermediate-level differences in L2 writing remains underexplored. While qualitative research has provided insights into learners' use of cohesive devices and structural patterns (Fei, 2023; Hu et al., 2021; Liang, 2021; Yang, 2023), there is limited quantitative evidence linking learners' awareness of these intermediate features to their actual writing performance.

The contrast between Chinese and English at intermediate level offers a particularly relevant case for examining these issues. For example, English, as a hypotactic language, favors explicit logical connectors and complex syntactic structures, whereas Chinese, being paratactic, relies more on contextual cues for meaning. Moreover, Chinese writing

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often emphasizes repetition over substitution, direct rather than indirect expression, and personal over impersonal constructions, which can lead to stylistic and structural mismatches in L2 English writing. Previous research has shown that raising cross-linguistic awareness can enhance L2 reading and writing (McManus, 2019) and that targeted instructional approaches can improve L2 proficiency (Irsara, 2022; Lucas & Yiakoumetti, 2019). Nonetheless, little is known about how mastery of these intermediate linguistic features translates into improved writing performance.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how Chinese learners' awareness of intermediate-level linguistic differences affects their writing competence. Specifically, the study aims to (1) identify which intermediate-level differences most strongly correlate with writing quality; (2) examine how these differences manifest as errors in learners' compositions; and (3) explore learners' perceptions and challenges in applying these linguistic distinctions in writing. By systematically analyzing both theoretical knowledge and practical writing performance, this study seeks to highlight potential instructional targets for enhancing L2 writing pedagogy.

This research broadens CLI studies by incorporating the intermediate level, addressing a key gap in understanding how mid-tier linguistic contrasts shape L2 writing proficiency. It also provides empirical evidence that explicit instruction in these features is essential for bridging the gap between linguistic awareness and effective writing.

II. INTERMEDIATE-LEVEL LANGUAGE DIFFERENCE

A. Theoretical Framework, Conceptual Definition, and Example Analysis

Unlike surface features (such as vocabulary and grammar) or deep-level elements (such as thought patterns and cultural values), intermediate-level linguistic differences focus on the patterned ways of expression and structural preferences that lie between the two extremes (Liu, 1991). As shown in Table 1, the intermediate level serves as an “expression system” that converts abstract thought into concrete linguistic forms through specific rules and patterns. As Lian (2010) points out in his comparative study of Chinese and English, intermediate-level differences are manifested in the fixed patterns, structural preferences, and cohesive devices that language users employ when expressing their ideas.

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTION OF COMPARISON LEVELS

Level	Description
Surface level	the formal structure layer, which includes basic and syntactic means of expression.
Intermediate level	system of expression, the patterned means of expression when thought is transformed into language.
Deep level	thought patterns, the foundational structure layer, which is the philosophical mechanism of language.

Source: M. Liu (1991)

Building upon these levels, Figure 1 provides an example illustrating how cultural values influence expression at the intermediate stage. Chinese classical philosophy, grounded in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, often prioritizes intuitive and contextual understanding of content (Lian, 2010). This orientation manifests in paratactic connections—where sentences rely on context rather than explicit conjunctions—resulting in greater ambiguity and more reliance on inference by the reader. In contrast, languages that favor hypotactic connections explicitly mark logical or causal relationships through structured linking words. Such contrasts highlight why learners from paratactic traditions may experience challenges when adopting the more syntactically explicit patterns often found in English.

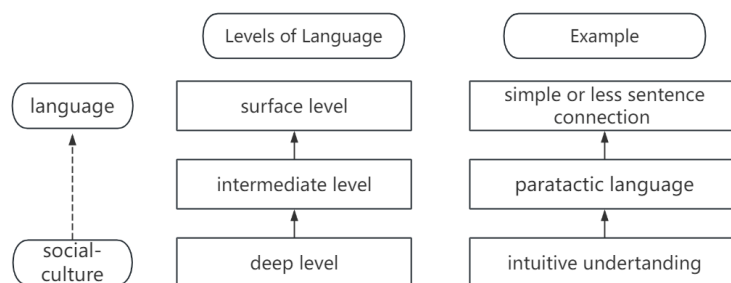


Figure 1. Example of Language Levels

In this study, the term “intermediate-level linguistic differences” refers to those characteristics that are not entirely grammatical in nature nor solely attributable to deep cultural factors but are instead found in sentence organization, the use of connectors, voice selection, and strategies for substitution versus repetition. For example, English tends to employ explicit logical connectors and complex subordinate clauses, whereas Chinese relies more on contextual cues and coordinate structures (Lian, 2010; Liu, 1991).

According to Lian (2010), a number of key differences between Chinese and English at the intermediate level can be summarized as Table 2:

TABLE 2
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CHINESE AT INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

English	Chinese
Hypotactic	Paratactic
Complex	Simplex
Impersonal	Personal
Passive voice	Active voice
Static	Dynamic
Abstract	Concrete
Indirect	Direct
Substitutive	Repetitive

Table 2 depicts how both languages show systematic differences in speech styles. This study takes these differences as a framework, and checks how learners' awareness of these differences is related to their writing competence.

B. Cross-Cultural Comparisons and Impact on L2 Writing

From cross-linguistic studies, it appears that the reflection of these intrinsic differences is not only about the structural aspects but also the cognition styles, aesthetic values, and cultural beliefs that were formed through the differences (Lian, 2010). While the English language usually leans towards logical power and orderliness in all relevant features, the Chinese language is more inclined towards the in-depth comprehension and the abstract meaning. These cultural and cognitive disparities among Chinese participants operate at the intermediate level as fixed expressions which are interconnected to their writing strategies.

During the process of writing in L2, learners frequently and automatically imitate the structure of their native language. For example, studies by Fei (2023) report that the Chinese students are likely to skip the logical connectives when writing English because they are influenced by the fact that their native speech mostly relies on comprehension-bearing objects. Consequently, past research also declared that an indecorous or wrong employment of connecting words is a typical problem given for these students (Hu et al., 2021). Similar problems are observed not only on learners at early stage but also on more advanced learners. Another often observed problem at intermediate level is the underuse of passive voice, which affects the objectivity as well as the formal writing tone that may lower the quality of the paper (Peng, 2023).

Problems at intermediate level not only disintegrate the articles but also relegate them to less academic or formal writing level. In comparison to other means, boosting the knowledge on differences between the L1 and L2 is very necessary to be implemented when improving the writing quality in L2.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Current Research on Cross-Linguistic Influence and Cross-Linguistic Awareness

Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) refers to the phenomenon in which learners, in the process of acquiring an L2, experience positive or negative transfer due to the differences between their native language and the target language (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). A large body of research indicates that CLI is particularly evident in the early stages of language acquisition and gradually diminishes as learners become more proficient (Wood, 2017; Van Dijk et al., 2022). Meanwhile, cross-linguistic awareness—namely, learners' understanding of the differences between their native language and the target language—is considered an important factor in reducing negative transfer and promoting L2 acquisition (McManus, 2021; Lucas & Yiakoumetti, 2019).

Existing studies tend to focus on comparisons of surface features such as vocabulary choice, grammatical structures, and phonological systems (Liu, 1991), or on deep-level cultural and cognitive differences, exploring how social pragmatics and thought patterns in different cultural contexts affect language use (e.g., House & Kádár, 2022). However, there is still a dearth of both theoretical discussion and empirical analysis regarding the intermediate-level linguistic differences—that is, the preferred or fixed patterns of expression—which Lian (2010) argues play a crucial role in maintaining textual coherence, logical flow, and the accurate transmission of information.

Empirical studies have found that Chinese learners often experience a decline in writing quality when composing in English because they tend to neglect the necessary logical connectors, favor simple coordinate sentences over complex structures, and underuse the passive voice (Fei, 2023; Hu et al., 2021; Dai, 2024). These studies indicate that while CLI is a widespread phenomenon overall, its specific manifestations at the intermediate level and the subsequent impact on writing strategies have not been systematically or quantitatively validated. In addition, some studies employing contrastive analysis (CA) have revealed systematic differences in expression patterns between the native and target languages, suggesting that enhancing learners' cross-linguistic awareness may help predict and correct writing errors (Saini, 2016; Wardhaugh, 1970).

B. Research Gaps on Intermediate-Level Linguistic Differences and Pedagogical Implications

Although significant progress has been made in investigating cross-linguistic influence, systematic studies focusing specifically on intermediate-level linguistic differences remain noticeably insufficient. First, most existing literature

tends to analyze surface features or deep structures, while insufficient attention is paid to the expression patterns, sentence structure preferences, and cohesive devices that lie between the two. Second, the empirical studies on the impact of intermediate-level linguistic differences on writing are rather fragmented; they primarily rely on qualitative analyses and case studies, lacking large-scale quantitative validation (Fei, 2023; Peng, 2023). In terms of teaching practice, although some studies suggest that cultivating cross-linguistic awareness can help reduce negative transfer, there is still no mature system for translating the theory of intermediate-level linguistic differences into concrete pedagogical strategies.

IV. METHOD

An explanatory sequential design was adopted so that quantitative data could first be collected and analyzed, followed by qualitative data that provides further insight into the quantitative findings. Figure 2 illustrates the overall research process.

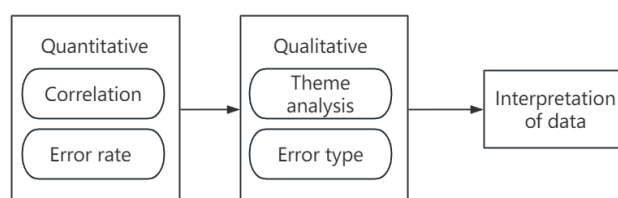


Figure 2. Explanatory Design of the Study

Seventy-five undergraduate students in their fourth semester majoring in English at a Chinese university participated in this study. All participants were native Chinese speakers who had passed the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) with scores ranging from 435 to 592. Importantly, none had taken any IELTS examinations or received IELTS writing training. Consequently, they were entirely unfamiliar with the IELTS test format and had never encountered the specific writing prompt used in this study.

Data were collected using three main instruments. First, a questionnaire of 16 questions was developed based on Lian's eight linguistic differences to measure the students' awareness of these differences. This instrument was reviewed by experts and pilot-tested to ensure its reliability and validity. An IELTS writing Task 2 exam item (from authentic test) was used as a testing instrument. Two instructors, who have arrived at the same results independently, marked the writing applying the regular IELTS criteria, and conducted categorization of errors according to the eight differences; as a result, these scores were used in the quantitative phase.

Finally, focus group interviews were conducted in the last phase of the research with a sample of participants selected based on their questionnaire and writing results and their primary analysis has been presented in this chapter. Those interviews target at those barriers that learners encounter in their attempts to make sense of previously learned, intermediate-level differences influence on their writing and to provide personal insights into their writing practices. All of the interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically in order to extract the most information out of the data.

Regarding the data processing, Spearman's rank-order correlation is used to see the relation closer to the writing performances of the second language learners and their awareness of intermediate-level linguistic differences. As another step towards the goal, regression analysis was conducted in this study to find out whether the learners' awareness of intermediate-level language differences would help them with their English writing test results. The qualitative data obtained from the four focus group discussions were coded and thematically analyzed, and these findings were integrated with the quantitative data collected to then produce an overall understanding of the impact of linguistic differences on L2 writing at the intermediate level.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and all data were anonymized to protect participant confidentiality. Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. It is also acknowledged that this study has several limitations, including the relatively small and homogeneous sample and the potential constraints of the measurement instruments used.

V. RESULTS

A. Correlation

A preliminary analysis examined participants' writing scores across five components: Task Achievement (TA), Cohesion and Coherence (CC), Lexical Resources (LR), Grammatical Accuracy (GA), and an overall Writing Competence (WC) derived from the average of the first four. As shown in Table 3, the mean scores ranged from 5.447 to 5.667, indicating relatively consistent performance across the components, with GA displaying the highest variability (SD = 0.828) and WC the lowest (SD = 0.661). Normality tests (Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk) revealed that

TA, CC, LR, and GA significantly deviated from normality ($p < 0.05$), whereas WC approached normality ($p = 0.037$). Consequently, Spearman's rank-order correlation was deemed appropriate for the subsequent analyses.

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE WRITING TEST RESULTS

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. d
TA	75	4.0	7.5	5.667	.759
CC	75	4.0	7.0	5.527	.682
LR	75	4.0	7.0	5.447	.774
GA	75	4.0	7.0	5.493	.828
WC	75	4.375	7.0	5.533	.661

In addition, a separate questionnaire was administered to assess participants' awareness of eight key linguistic features based on Lian's framework, with two items dedicated to each feature (F1–F8). Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics for each factor. The mean scores for these factors ranged from 7.09 to 8.76, suggesting that although learners generally recognized these differences, the depth of their understanding varied. The questionnaire demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.839$).

TABLE 4
DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF EACH FACTOR

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
F1 (hypotactic vs. paratactic)	75	5	10	7.69	1.294
F2 (complex vs. simplex)	75	6	10	8.48	1.178
F3 (impersonal vs. personal)	75	4	10	7.69	1.740
F4 (passive vs. active)	75	5	10	8.31	1.115
F5 (static vs. dynamic)	75	3	10	7.09	1.780
F6 (abstract vs. concrete)	75	6	10	8.76	.998
F7 (indirect vs. direct)	75	3	10	8.41	1.253
F8 (substitutive vs. repetitive)	75	5	10	8.25	1.015

Two hypotheses guided the correlation analysis: (H1) a significant positive relationship exists between the overall questionnaire score (QUE) and writing performance, and (H0) no significant positive relationship exists between the two. As indicated in Table 5, the total questionnaire score significantly correlated with WC ($r = 0.343$, $p = 0.001$), CC ($r = 0.309$, $p = 0.004$), LR ($r = 0.425$, $p < 0.001$), and GA ($r = 0.302$, $p = 0.004$), while the correlation with TA ($r = 0.164$, $p = 0.08$) was not statistically significant.

TABLE 5
CORRELATION BETWEEN QUESTIONNAIRE AND WRITING TEST RESULTS

		WC	TA	CC	LR	GA
QUE	R	.331**	0.154	.306**	.356**	.285**
	Sig.	0.002	0.094	0.004	0.001	0.007
	N	75	75	75	75	75

To further explore the predictive power of the questionnaire scores on writing performance, a linear regression analysis was conducted. The results, as shown in Table 6, indicated a significant positive relationship, with the questionnaire score exhibiting a coefficient of 0.019 (95% CI: 0.001 to 0.038, $t = -2.025$, $p = 0.047$). Although the model's R^2 value was 0.053—indicating that the questionnaire scores explained only 5.3% of the variance in writing performance—this relationship is statistically significant, suggesting that learners' cross-linguistic awareness does have a measurable impact on their writing competence. The collinearity diagnostics ($VIF = 1$, Tolerance = 1) and the Durbin–Watson statistic of 1.333 further confirmed the absence of multicollinearity and autocorrelation, supporting the validity of the model.

TABLE 6
LINEAR REGRESSION ANALYSIS

	Coefficient	95% CI	VIF	Collinearity Diagnostics Tolerance
Constant	3.972** -5.15	2.461 ~ 5.484	-	-
Questionnaire Score	0.019* -2.025	0.001 ~ 0.038	1	1
Sample size	75			
R ²	0.053			
Adjusted R ²	0.04			
F	F(1,73)=4.101,p=0.047			
Notes: Dependent Variable = WR				
D-W Value = 1.333				
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ Values in parentheses are t-values				

Further factor-by-factor analysis (see Table 7) revealed that factors F1, F3, F4, and F8 consistently demonstrated small-to-moderate positive correlations with most writing measures, suggesting that these intermediate-level differences substantially influence learners' performance. In contrast, factors F2 and F6 showed selective correlations—primarily with lexical resources and grammatical accuracy—while F5 and F7 did not exhibit significant relationships with the writing scores.

TABLE 7
CORRELATION BETWEEN WRITING TEST AND EACH FACTOR

		WC	TA	CC	LR	GA
F1	R	.310**	0.13	.230*	.379**	.303**
	Sig.	0.003	0.133	0.024	0	0.004
	N	75	75	75	75	75
F2	R	0.173	0.035	0.141	.264*	.213*
	Sig.	0.069	0.382	0.114	0.011	0.033
	N	75	75	75	75	75
F3	R	.372**	0.127	.305**	.454**	.366**
	Sig.	0.001	0.14	0.004	0	0.001
	N	75	75	75	75	75
F4	R	.242*	0.083	.252*	.251*	.248*
	Sig.	0.018	0.24	0.014	0.015	0.016
	N	75	75	75	75	75
F5	R	0.028	0.027	-0.018	0.106	0.006
	Sig.	0.405	0.41	0.437	0.183	0.481
	N	75	75	75	75	75
F6	R	0.128	0.064	0.036	.206*	0.103
	Sig.	0.137	0.293	0.38	0.038	0.189
	N	75	75	75	75	75
F7	R	0.108	0.012	0.032	0.174	0.139
	Sig.	0.179	0.46	0.391	0.068	0.116
	N	75	75	75	75	75
F8	R	.302**	.199*	.287**	.334**	.240*
	Sig.	0.004	0.044	0.006	0.002	0.019
	N	75	75	75	75	75

Overall, these findings highlight that certain intermediate-level distinctions—particularly those concerning hypotactic versus paratactic structures (F1), impersonal versus personal usage (F3), passive versus active constructions (F4), and substitutive versus repetitive strategies (F8)—are significantly and positively correlated with writing performance. This suggests that these factors play a particularly salient role in enhancing learners' overall writing competence. In contrast, factors such as complex versus simplex (F2) and abstract versus concrete (F6) showed more selective correlations, primarily with lexical resources and grammatical accuracy, while static versus dynamic (F5) and indirect versus direct (F7) did not display significant relationships with the writing measures. These results indicate that, at this stage of language development, F1, F3, F4, and F8 are especially influential for improving writing performance, whereas the remaining factors may have a more limited or context-dependent effect.

B. Frequency of Errors

A T-unit-level error analysis was conducted on the compositions of all 75 participants, focusing on the eight identified linguistic factors. As shown in Table 8, the error frequencies and corresponding error rates for each factor were calculated. Specifically, Factor 2 (complex vs. simplex) and Factor 1 (hypotactic vs. paratactic) exhibited the highest error rates at 43.35% and 37.91%, respectively, followed by Factor 3 (impersonal vs. personal) with an error rate of 17.43%. In contrast, Factor 8 (substitutive vs. repetitive) displayed a moderate error rate of 15.86%, while the error rates for Factors 4 (passive vs. active), 5 (static vs. dynamic), 6 (abstract vs. concrete), and 7 (indirect vs. direct) were all below 3%.

TABLE 8
FREQUENCY OF ERRORS

Error Type	Frequency	T-unit	Error Rate (%)
F1	459	1211	37.91%
F2	525	1211	43.35%
F3	211	1211	17.43%
F4	31	1211	2.56%
F5	24	1211	1.98%
F6	23	1211	1.90%
F7	17	1211	1.40%
F8	192	1211	15.86%

These findings indicate a pronounced need for targeted instructional interventions for the factors associated with the highest error rates—namely, F2 and F1—as these issues appear to exert the most substantial impact on learners' overall

writing competence. Conversely, the relatively low error rates for F4, F5, F6, and F7 suggest that the difficulties associated with these factors are comparatively minor for this group. Overall, the error distribution underscores the importance of prioritizing those linguistic features that are most problematic in order to effectively enhance writing performance.

C. Types of Errors

The current part investigates the learners' errors that are based on the differences between Chinese and English proposed by Lian (2010). The study indicates that the differences in structure and cognitive thinking styles lead to typical mistakes often made by EFL students in their writings. To put it in general, they are divided into two types of error: the first one has to do with a sentence structure and cohesion, these are the style and revolts of an author's rendering.

a) *Errors Related to Sentence Structure and Cohesion:*

One of the most important differences between English and Chinese writing is the hypotactic (the inside sentence consists of the more important or higher rank) compared with the paratactic structure (sentence that consists of the equal words). Unlike English that normally builds its logical connections between clauses with linking words, Chinese implies such expressions. Thus, they are left out of the mandatory conjunctions by the learners or replaced by too many simple connectors. For instance, the author could have used the transitions "despite" and "in contrast" for linking the ideas of the distraction caused by digital devices and the focused environment exclusively offered by printed media, which would avoid the breaking of the ideas flow. Additionally, at times, students may overuse "and" to connect those ideas that need to be described by either a causal (e.g., correlation between increased use of electronic devices and decreased critical thinking) or an explainable relationship. Substituting out such connectors for "which causes" or "resulting in" types will help clarify implication from one idea to another, thus enhancing readability and coherence.

This second set of problems involves components of constructing complex versus simple sentences. Academic writing in English normally prefers complex sentences by referring to subordinate clauses to clearly set out the relations between ideas, while Chinese is often used to write in style consisting of a series of short sentences that coordinate with each other to suggest the implied relationship between ideas. This seriously strikes three prominent problems. In the first place, the wording of some texts lack the necessary linking words and thereby, disjointed pieces of work are produced. Biological teachers might require students to summarize data and other material to create coherent paragraphs that contain simple subject-verb agreement sentences. Thirdly, the repetition of ideas and descriptions that play similar roles (i.e., referring to "printed books" repeatedly in the essay) not only create choppy sentences but more so disrupts the full flow of the essay. To fix these quibbles, teachers encourage students to utilize different conjunctions and give them a strategy to merge further points to form a unit complex sentence, which comes with clarity and flow.

b) *Errors Related to Stylistic and Rhetorical Expression:*

Another set of errors stems from differences in subject selection, voice, and descriptive style. In Chinese, even in contexts that require objective expression, it is common to use personal subjects; however, formal English writing typically favors non-personal or abstract subjects to maintain objectivity. This difference results in learners overusing pronouns such as "we" in English compositions, making the statements appear overly subjective and informal. For example, "We access information quickly on the internet" can be more formally expressed as "Information is readily accessible on the internet." Additionally, sudden shifts in the subject within a sentence (for instance, switching abruptly from "this method" to "we") can disrupt cohesion, and using vague subjects (such as "we," "people," or "you") may obscure the identity of the agent, thereby reducing clarity. Using more precise or impersonal subjects, or appropriately adopting the passive voice, can effectively improve clarity and formality.

Another recurring issue is voice selection. In Chinese writing, the active voice is often used—even when the subject is ambiguous—whereas formal English writing typically requires the passive voice to emphasize the action or its outcome rather than the doer. For example, in the sentence "If we reduce our consumption of printed books, then we are actually reducing our burden on the environment," converting to the passive voice (e.g., "If consumption of printed books is reduced, the burden on the environment is lessened") can better highlight the action itself and align with English academic conventions.

Additional errors emerge from differences in dynamic versus static expression and abstract versus concrete language usage. Chinese learners tend to prefer dynamic, action-oriented verbs and adjectives; although such expressions are vivid, they may not suit the formal tone required in academic writing. For instance, the sentence "If we watch computers and electronic devices for a long time, it can cause a decline in our eyesight" foregrounds the verb "watch," giving the sentence an immediate yet informal feel. In contrast, a more static or nominalized expression, such as "Prolonged use of computers and electronic devices can lead to a decline in eyesight," better aligns with the requirements of formal writing. Thus, in English writing of scientists and researchers, especially in academia, detailed and concrete descriptions are usually avoided in favor of generalized and abstract expressions. Terms like "writing on paper" or "searching for books" may become a description that is way too detailed, on the other hand, including the generalizations (for instance, "pay attention to the traditional methods") could be clear enough to grasp the main idea.

In this case, mistakes are detected as indirect or direct meaning. Some learners can be too honest in their manner when they talk about casual social crimes—for example, they would say "poor families", "poverty jumbled up in those areas" or "forever poor"—which comes from the Chinese philosophy of being direct and straight to the point and can

offend the hearers in a more polite surround in formal contexts English. More euphemistic or indirect expressions, for example, "families of limited financial resources" could be used as an expression instead of extended "low-income families" and "under-resourced communities" would be ones to refer to the people who need help.

At last, the prominent one is a copious application of redundancy in language. Often, they recast the same noun (an instance is "books" or "printed books") all the way through the lines or they tend to rely on one single sentence pattern (like "for + group" construction) when giving examples for various demographic groups, for example, "for children, for elders, for us...". Such recurrences do not only make the text dull and monotonic but also compromise syntax variety and rhetorical power. By applying synonyms, pronouns, the ellipsis, and various sentence structures, such persistence can be successfully minimized, which probably can improve not only readability but also the effectiveness of persuasion.

D. Interview

Group interviews were held to understand the participants' perception on specific contrastive issues between English-Chinese and their manifestations in writing, as well as the factors that caused the errors. To carry out this research, as analysis data is processed, factors were grouped into four groups based on respective correlation of writing performance with related error rates. Table 9 describes the results for the criteria through which we defined working categories.

TABLE 9
CATEGORIZATION OF FACTORS

Categories	Factors	Correlation	Error rate
C1	F1/ F3/ F8	high	high
C2	F5/ F6/ F7	low	low
C3	F2	low	high
C4	F4	high	low

For Category 1 (C1), Dictionary in the first category, headed by items F1, F3, and F8, has given many students only a general understanding of these concepts. Thus, they didn't use the same technical vocabulary and saw it as a communication gap of "English having more connecting words". Even though they knew the importance of cohesive devices, they never could keep the rules no matter how hard they tried. One such case was that each time many students consumed "we" the result became too formal, but they faced so many issues in avoiding it and using impersonal constructions. The overall finding of the students was that having a deeper insight into these discrepancies may lead to better writing; at the same time, they mentioned that more ways and methods of bridging the gap between theory and management should be employed, and the use of examples, practice in the form of guided instruction, and feedback should be prioritized.

The last type of category (C2) includes (F5, F6, F7: the members of these families were novices). By the assumption, the difference between static versus dynamic language (F5) was the least uncovered matter, abstract versus concrete expression (F6) more, and last but not least indirect versus direct phrasing (F7), the subjective level of most learners being described as quite low. The try-out focused on aspects that were not treated in our lectures on the constructor classes; the students seem to come with a belief that they don't need to work on those aspects yet, because they are for the advanced level. Since students put more effort into the immediate questions, i.e., grammar or vocabulary, they tend generally to overlook the subtler distinctions unless they perceive their results or overall value in their proficiency.

The question rises now whether the topic is complex or simple. That is, the Category 3 (C3) will involve solely the complex and the simple ones. As students became aware that the academic writing in English often employs greater level of complexity of the sentence structure than the development of Chinese, they were not certain which of these differences are the sure-vise type of the sentence structure in Chinese as well as in English. Among those who did admit that they had problems deriving subordinate clauses, conjunctions usage, and punctuation usage; that is the main reason why they used simple sentences totally, as they hemmed forever around where the sentence is complex. Perhaps, the insecurity that comes from being afraid of miswriting actually is what governs the reliance on simpler sentences. All of the participants, including teachers, agreed that only an instruction in the use of the complex structures that are mentioned above will not be sufficient to attain self-sufficiency, but that constant practice and concrete support should be just as matched in the classrooms.

Finally, Category 4 (C4) pertains to F4 (passive vs. active). Student opinions regarding F4 varied: some participants clearly understood that English academic writing frequently employs the passive voice to maintain objectivity, while Chinese writing tends to highlight the agent through active constructions. Others were less clear about the preferred usage in each language; however, they generally made fewer errors when attempting to use the passive voice in English. Overall, learners perceived the use of the passive voice as more "straightforward" compared to other grammatical features, despite acknowledging occasional lapses in its correct application. As a result, instructors might consider focusing on advanced nuances—such as determining when and why to use the passive voice—rather than emphasizing the basic formation rules.

E. Findings

After analyzing both quantitative data (questionnaires and writing tests) and qualitative data (interviews and error analysis), a comprehensive summary of the findings for each linguistic factor (F1–F8) was developed. Table 10 summarizes key metrics for each factor: the average questionnaire score (Que), the correlation coefficient (Cor) with writing performance, the error rate observed in the T-unit analysis, the level of understanding as indicated in the interviews, the frequency with which learners attempted to apply the linguistic differences, and the perceived influence of each factor on writing quality.

TABLE 10
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

	Que	Cor	Error rate	interview understanding	Awareness to apply	Influence on writing
F1	7.69	.310**	37.91%	recognized	seldom	moderate
F2	8.48	0.173	43.35%	good	sometimes	moderate
F3	7.69	.372**	17.43%	recognized	seldom	significant
F4	8.31	.242*	2.56%	mixed	seldom	minimal
F5	7.09	0.028	1.98%	minimal	seldom	low
F6	8.76	0.128	1.90%	limited	seldom	low
F7	8.41	0.108	1.40%	limited, wrong	seldom	low
F8	8.25	.302**	15.86%	recognized	sometimes	moderate

The findings can be discussed under three thematic areas:

a) Types of Differences Most Strongly Correlated with Writing Quality

Quantitative analyses indicate that certain features show stronger positive correlation with writing quality especially those features that are related to morphological complexity, cohesive devices, and the effective management of sentence structures. In our data, factors F1, F3, and F8 not only yielded higher correlation coefficients, but also demonstrated relatively high error rates. This suggests that, for intermediate-level learners, a solid grasp of explicit morphological rules and the effective use of cohesive structures is pivotal in enhancing clarity, coherence, and overall textual sophistication.

b) Manifestations of These Correlations in Learner Errors

Error analysis reveals that the factors most strongly correlated with writing quality also lead to more problems in writing. For instance, the underuse or misuse of cohesive devices results in abrupt transitions and a reliance on simple conjunctions such as “and,” which disrupts the logical flow of ideas. These frequent errors indicate that the very features that, when properly executed, elevate writing quality are the ones learners most commonly struggle to apply consistently, likely due to a lack of procedural fluency and sufficient practice in real writing contexts.

c) Students’ Perceptions and Challenges

Qualitative interviews further show a consistent tension between learners’ theoretical awareness of these linguistic differences and their practical application in writing. Participants generally recognized that incorporating appropriate cohesive devices or employing accurate morphological markers would improve the clarity and academic tone of their texts. However, many expressed reluctance to move beyond “safe” or familiar sentence constructions for fear of making mistakes. Several students noted the absence of targeted practice and constructive, example-based feedback on these intermediate-level features, which hampers their ability to internalize and automatically apply more advanced writing strategies. Consequently, even when learners can articulate the importance of correct verb forms or varied conjunctions, they often struggle to integrate these strategies consistently into their writing. These insights underscore the need for deliberate instructional interventions—such as systematic scaffolding, iterative feedback, and guided revision activities—that can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical writing proficiency.

In summary, the integrated findings reveal that among the various intermediate-level linguistic differences, F1, F3, and F8 appear to have the most substantial influence on writing quality, both in terms of their strong correlations and high error rates. At the same time, while other factors (such as F2, F4, F5, F6, and F7) also play a role, their impact is either more limited or context-dependent. These observations highlight the importance of prioritizing instructional interventions that focus on the most problematic areas, thereby enhancing learners’ ability to produce coherent, precise, and academically sound written texts.

VI. DISCUSSION

This study explored how Chinese adult English learners’ awareness of intermediate-level linguistic differences between English and Chinese affects their L2 writing competence. Employing an explanatory sequential design, we integrated quantitative data from questionnaires and writing tests with qualitative insights from interviews and error analyses to develop a comprehensive picture of the interplay between cross-linguistic awareness and writing performance.

Our results indicate that approximately 60% of the intermediate-level linguistic factors examined are significantly correlated with learners’ writing performance. Factor 1 (hypotactic vs. paratactic structures), Factor 3 (impersonal vs. personal expression), and Factor 8 (substitutive vs. repetitive usage) not only show strong positive correlations with

overall writing scores but also emerge as frequent error hotspots in learners' compositions. These findings align with earlier studies (e.g., Fei, 2023; Hu et al., 2021; Liang, 2021) that have demonstrated the impact of cross-linguistic influence (CLI) on second language competence. In contrast, Factors 5 (static vs. dynamic), 6 (abstract vs. concrete), and 7 (indirect vs. direct) exhibited both low correlations and low error rates, suggesting that these subtler differences are less salient in learners' writing practices. Additionally, while Factor 2 (complex vs. simple structures) shows a high error rate, its overall correlation with writing performance is low, indicating that although learners acknowledge the importance of complex sentence constructions, they struggle to apply them effectively.

Our findings partially support Wood's (2017) meta-analysis, which reported that 81% of studies found a significant influence of L1 on L2 development, while 19% considered it negligible. Similar to the work of Van Dijk, Dijkstra et al. (2022), who observed small to moderate CLI effects in early bilingual children, our study demonstrates that adult learners also experience CLI effects of a small to moderate magnitude at the intermediate level. However, unlike Wood's (2017) suggestion of a declining L1 influence with increased proficiency, our results indicate that adult learners continue to experience consistent CLI effects, particularly in the intermediate linguistic domain. Moreover, while previous research (e.g., Leonet et al., 2020; Lucas & Yiakoumetti, 2019) has shown that heightened cross-linguistic awareness can enhance L2 reading and writing, our study reveals that such awareness alone is insufficient for significantly improving writing competence. The persistence of high error rates in factors that are strongly correlated with writing performance underscores the gap between learners' theoretical knowledge and its practical application.

These findings have clear pedagogical implications. Rather than solely raising learners' awareness of linguistic differences, effective teaching interventions must also focus on bridging the gap between theory and practice. Instruction should include explicit teaching of intermediate-level differences, for example, directly instructing students on the use of precise conjunctions to manage complex sentence structures (addressing F1) and on the adoption of impersonal subjects to achieve the desired academic tone (addressing F3). In addition, targeted practice is essential; structured exercises that allow learners to practice constructing complex sentences (F2) and using cohesive devices appropriately (F1 and F8) are necessary to build procedural fluency. Constructive, personalized feedback is also crucial in helping learners identify and correct errors associated with the high-correlation factors. Finally, guided revision activities that focus on the integration of intermediate-level linguistic features into students' writing can provide the iterative practice needed to internalize these advanced strategies. Such comprehensive interventions are likely to lead to improvements in clarity, cohesion, and overall academic writing competence.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study provides empirical evidence that awareness of intermediate-level linguistic differences (ILLD) between English and Chinese plays a significant role in shaping the writing competence of Chinese adult EFL learners. Although our quantitative analyses revealed that certain linguistic contrasts—particularly hypotactic versus paratactic structures (F1), impersonal versus personal expression (F3), and substitutive versus repetitive usage (F8)—positively correlate with improved writing performance, the high frequency of errors associated with these factors demonstrates that theoretical awareness alone is insufficient for mastery. The persistent gap between understanding and practical application underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that extend beyond mere awareness-raising.

By integrating both quantitative correlations and qualitative error analyses, this study highlights the critical importance of explicitly addressing intermediate-level differences in L2 writing instruction. Our findings suggest that educators should incorporate direct instruction on these nuanced contrasts into the curriculum, accompanied by targeted practice exercises and personalized, constructive feedback. Such comprehensive instructional interventions can help learners internalize and apply the necessary linguistic features more consistently, thereby mitigating negative transfer from the L1 and fostering more coherent, precise, and academically appropriate writing.

Although these insights are drawn from a specific cohort of Chinese adult learners, they hold broader implications for L2 writing pedagogy across diverse learner populations and language pairs. Future research should expand its scope by including learners of varied proficiency levels and from different linguistic backgrounds, and by exploring additional language skills such as speaking and listening. Moreover, longitudinal studies are recommended to track the evolution of learners' understanding of intermediate-level differences over time and to examine whether sustained instructional interventions yield similar improvements across various communicative domains.

In conclusion, this study underscores the centrality of intermediate-level linguistic differences in L2 writing development. By designing and implementing instruction that specifically addresses these subtle yet impactful contrasts, educators can more effectively support learners' progression toward accurate, cohesive, and contextually appropriate written output. Ultimately, bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application is essential for enhancing overall second language writing competence.

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