From L1 Transfer to Syntactic Mastery: Exploring Sentence Structure Difficulties Among ESL Learners in Writing Through the Lens of Interlanguage Development

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ABSTRACT

Sentence structure difficulties remain one of the biggest challenges encountered by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in academic writing, often limiting their ability to produce grammatically accurate, syntactically complex, and coherent texts. While previous studies have extensively documented grammatical and syntactic errors, existing research has largely examined these issues in isolation, with limited attention given to the underlying developmental processes that connect first-language (L1) transfer, interlanguage development, and syntactic mastery. Consequently, there is a lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework that explains how these constructs interact throughout the development of ESL writing proficiency. This conceptual paper aims to develop an integrated framework that explains the relationship between L1 transfer, interlanguage development, and syntactic mastery in ESL writing through the lens of Selinker's Interlanguage Theory. The study adopts a narrative review methodology based on literature retrieved from the Scopus database. Relevant publications were identified using systematic keyword searches, screened according to predetermined inclusion criteria, and synthesised through an integrative thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, theoretical perspectives, and conceptual relationships. The review reveals that L1 transfer serves as the initial linguistic resource from which learners construct their interlanguage, while interlanguage development functions as the principal mechanism through which learners progressively restructure transferred linguistic knowledge into increasingly target-like sentence structures. The synthesis further indicates that syntactic mastery is reflected in improvements in grammatical accuracy, sentence variety, syntactic complexity, clause integration, cohesion, and rhetorical appropriateness. Based on these findings, the study proposes a conceptual framework in which interlanguage development mediates the relationship between L1 transfer and syntactic mastery in ESL writing. The proposed framework contributes to second language acquisition and ESL writing literature by providing a theoretically grounded explanation of sentence structure development and offers practical guidance for language educators, curriculum developers, and researchers seeking to design instructional interventions that facilitate learners' progression towards syntactic mastery.

Keyword: ESL Writing, Interlanguage Development, L1 Transfer, Sentence Structure Difficulties, Syntactic Mastery

INTRODUCTION

The ability to construct grammatically accurate and syntactically correct sentences is a fundamental component of successful second language (L2) writing. In English as a Second Language (ESL) contexts, writing proficiency extends beyond vocabulary and grammatical knowledge to include the ability to organise ideas through coherent and varied sentence structures. Academic writing, in particular, requires learners to demonstrate syntactic complexity, sentence variety, and grammatical accuracy to communicate

meaning effectively. Despite increased attention to communicative competence in ESL education, sentence structure remains one of the most persistent challenges faced by ESL learners. Learners frequently produce awkward, fragmented, or overly simplified sentences that limit the clarity and effectiveness of their written communication (Kim, 2012). These difficulties often stem from the interaction between learners' first language (L1) knowledge and their developing English linguistic system, making sentence construction a critical area of inquiry in second language writing research. Understanding how learners progress from L1-influenced sentence production towards syntactic mastery is therefore essential for advancing both theory and pedagogical practice.

Existing literature has consistently documented that sentence structure difficulties are among the most biggest challenges encountered by ESL writers across different educational settings. Research has shown that learners often demonstrate limited sentence variety, reliance on simple sentence constructions, difficulties in combining clauses, and problems producing complex syntactic structures required in academic writing (Charpentier-Jiménez, 2020; Shah et al., 2026). In addition, grammatical inaccuracies involving inflectional morphemes, subject-verb agreement, tense consistency, and clause integration frequently accompany these syntactic limitations (Matiso, 2023; Niez et al., 2025). Such difficulties are closely associated with the developmental nature of learners' interlanguage, in which linguistic knowledge evolves gradually as learners negotiate between the grammatical systems of their L1 and the target language (Selinker, 1972). From an interlanguage perspective, many non-target-like sentence structures are not merely errors but developmental features reflecting learners' current stage of language acquisition. L1 transfer further shapes this developmental process, often resulting in syntactic patterns that mirror the learners' native language, particularly when structural differences exist between the two languages (Ceylan, 2019). Although explicit syntax instruction has been found to facilitate the development of more complex sentence structures (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024), learners may continue to experience interlanguage fossilisation, whereby persistent sentence structure errors become resistant to further improvement.

Despite substantial empirical evidence documenting sentence structure errors in ESL writing, existing studies have predominantly adopted descriptive or intervention-based approaches that focus on identifying error types, measuring syntactic complexity, or evaluating instructional effectiveness. Comparatively fewer studies have attempted to synthesise these findings within a comprehensive theoretical framework that explains how L1 transfer influences learners' progression towards syntactic mastery through the developmental processes of interlanguage. Consequently, the relationships among L1 transfer, interlanguage development, and sentence structure difficulties remain conceptually fragmented. This limitation restricts the development of coherent theoretical explanations capable of informing both future empirical investigations and instructional practices. To address this gap, the present conceptual paper proposes an integrated conceptual framework that positions L1 transfer as the antecedent influencing learners' interlanguage development, which subsequently shapes sentence structure difficulties and ultimately affects learners' attainment of syntactic mastery in ESL writing. By integrating these constructs into a unified model, this paper seeks to provide a clearer theoretical explanation of the mechanisms underlying sentence structure development among ESL learners.

The significance of this conceptual paper is both theoretical and pedagogical. Theoretically, it contributes to second language acquisition (SLA) scholarship by extending Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory to explain sentence structure development within ESL writing. Rather than viewing syntactic errors solely as deficiencies, the proposed framework conceptualises them as developmental manifestations of learners' evolving interlanguage systems influenced by cross-linguistic transfer. This perspective provides a more nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between L1 influence and syntactic development. Pedagogically, the framework offers implications for curriculum designers, language educators, and teacher educators by highlighting the importance of recognising developmental sentence patterns, addressing L1-induced syntactic transfer, and implementing explicit syntax instruction that facilitates progression towards syntactic mastery. Such insights may inform the design of instructional interventions that support learners in producing increasingly accurate, varied, and sophisticated sentence structures in academic writing.

This conceptual paper is grounded primarily in Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory, which posits that

second language learners develop a dynamic and evolving linguistic system characterised by developmental stages, language transfer, overgeneralisation, and fossilisation. The theory provides a robust lens for understanding how sentence structure difficulties emerge as natural developmental phenomena rather than isolated grammatical failures. Drawing upon this theoretical foundation and contemporary literature on syntactic development in ESL writing, the paper develops a conceptual framework linking L1 transfer, interlanguage development, sentence structure difficulties, and syntactic mastery. The remainder of this paper is organised into four sections. Following this introduction, the paper reviews relevant literature concerning sentence structure difficulties, L1 transfer, and interlanguage development. The subsequent section presents the proposed conceptual framework and theoretical propositions, followed by a discussion of its implications for ESL writing research and pedagogy. The paper concludes by outlining future research directions and highlighting the framework's potential contribution to advancing theory and practice in second language writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The proposed framework treats L1 transfer as a multidimensional influence rather than a uniformly beneficial or harmful predictor. Positive transfer refers to the facilitation of English sentence construction when familiar L1 patterns are compatible with target-language requirements; negative transfer refers to non-target-like forms associated with cross-linguistic differences. Structural transfer concerns grammatical form, including constituent order, agreement, articles and clause organisation. Conceptual transfer concerns how previously acquired ways of organising events, information and discourse may influence the meanings and relationships encoded in English writing. These dimensions can overlap and should not be assumed to be directly observable from a single error.

Cross-linguistic influence may also be conscious, such as deliberate translation or comparison of grammatical rules, or relatively automatic, when established L1 routines shape production without deliberate attention. Consequently, the framework does not assume that all learners with the same L1 will exhibit identical transfer patterns. Linguistic distance, English proficiency, target-language exposure and individual learning histories may change both the form and strength of transfer. A future empirical comparison should therefore specify learners' L1 backgrounds and examine language-pair-specific contrasts rather than treating L1 transfer as a single undifferentiated score (Odlin, 1989; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008).

L1 Transfer

L1 transfer refers to the influence of learners previously acquired linguistic knowledge on their comprehension and production of a second language. In ESL writing, this influence is particularly evident when learners rely on familiar word-order patterns, grammatical categories, clause structures, and rhetorical conventions from their first language while constructing English sentences. Transfer may be facilitative when the L1 and English share comparable syntactic features, but it becomes a source of difficulty when the two languages differ substantially in constituent order, tense and aspect marking, article systems, subject–verb agreement, subordination, and the use of inflectional morphology. Consequently, ESL learners may produce sentences that are grammatically interpretable yet structurally awkward or non-target-like because their English output reflects an underlying L1-based organisational pattern.

Research involving Malaysian secondary-school learners, for example, has identified persistent weaknesses in morphology and syntax, indicating that learners may possess sufficient vocabulary to express basic meanings while lacking control over the grammatical relationships required for well-formed English sentences (Jalaluddin et al., 2008). Similar problems include omission or misuse of verb inflections, plural markers, determiners, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, and agreement features, all of which can disrupt sentence completeness and clarity (Matiso, 2023). L1 influence may also contribute to inappropriate word order, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, direct translation, limited clause combination, and the overuse of structures that are acceptable in the learners' native language but marked in English. Petroj (2016) argues that the structural properties of learners' native languages shape how they process and acquire English, suggesting that transfer should not be treated merely as interference but as a cognitive strategy through

which learners interpret unfamiliar L2 forms.

Nevertheless, when learners depend excessively on direct translation or have insufficient exposure to English syntactic patterns, L1-based constructions may become recurrent and increasingly resistant to correction. These effects are visible not only among beginners but also among more proficient writers whose sentences may remain grammatically questionable, stylistically awkward, or insufficiently idiomatic despite conveying the intended meaning (Kim, 2012). Therefore, L1 transfer functions as an important antecedent of sentence-structure difficulty: it supplies learners with an initial linguistic framework for producing English, but it can also constrain their movement towards target-like syntactic organisation when cross-linguistic differences are not recognised, explicitly addressed, or restructured through sustained language use.

Interlanguage Development

Interlanguage development provides a broader theoretical explanation for why sentence-structure errors in ESL writing are systematic, variable, and persistent rather than random. Selinker (1972) conceptualised interlanguage as an autonomous and evolving linguistic system constructed by learners as they move between their first language and the target language. This system contains elements of both languages but is not identical to either; instead, it reflects learners' current hypotheses about how English operates. From this perspective, sentence fragments, simplified clause structures, incorrect agreement, unconventional word order, and overgeneralised grammatical rules are evidence of an emerging internal system rather than merely signs of failure. Learners may, for instance, omit third-person singular verb endings because the feature has not yet been incorporated into their interlanguage grammar, or they may overgeneralise regular past-tense rules to irregular verbs after discovering that English commonly marks past time morphologically. Interlanguage development is therefore incremental and stage-like: learners initially depend on short, formulaic, or minimally elaborated sentences before gradually developing coordination, subordination, phrasal elaboration, and greater clause integration.

Bardovi-Harlig (2014) emphasises that documenting interlanguage requires attention to developmental sequences and changes in learner production over time because the emergence of new forms does not necessarily lead to the immediate elimination of earlier ones. As a result, accurate and inaccurate forms may coexist within the same learner's writing, and performance may vary according to task complexity, topic familiarity, time pressure, linguistic context, and degree of attention to form. Such variability explains why an ESL learner may produce a correct structure in a controlled exercise but fail to use it accurately in extended academic writing. Interlanguage is also shaped by L1 transfer, overgeneralisation, instructional input, communication strategies, exposure to English, corrective feedback, and opportunities for meaningful production (Corder, 1975; Selinker, 1972). When learners receive insufficient input or when non-target-like forms continue to communicate meaning successfully, some structures may stabilise or fossilise, producing persistent errors even after years of instruction. Foster-Cohen (2017) similarly highlights the importance of understanding interlanguage as a cognitive and developmental system whose representations may remain incomplete or reorganise unevenly. Thus, interlanguage development mediates the relationship between L1 transfer and English sentence production: L1 knowledge contributes to the learner's provisional grammatical system, while subsequent input, instruction, noticing, practice, and feedback determine whether that system develops towards greater complexity and accuracy or stabilises around non-target-like patterns.

Syntactic Mastery in ESL Writing

Syntactic mastery in ESL writing may be understood as the learner's developing capacity to produce sentences that are accurate, varied, coherent, structurally appropriate, and sufficiently sophisticated for a given communicative or academic purpose. It does not simply mean producing long or complex sentences; rather, mastery involves selecting and controlling a repertoire of simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex constructions while maintaining grammaticality and clarity. ESL learners frequently struggle to achieve this balance. Some rely heavily on short and simple sentences because these forms reduce processing demands and the risk of grammatical error, but excessive dependence on them may lead to repetitive, disconnected, or underdeveloped writing (Alsalami, 2022). Others attempt more elaborate

constructions without sufficient control of clause boundaries, subordination, punctuation, agreement, or cohesive relationships, resulting in sentence fragments, fused sentences, misplaced modifiers, faulty coordination, and ambiguous meanings. Sentence variety is another important dimension of mastery because effective writing requires learners to manipulate sentence openings, clause types, phrase structures, and patterns of information distribution.

Charpentier-Jiménez (2020) found that quantifying sentence variety can reveal limitations that are not captured by general accuracy measures, particularly when learners repeatedly use a narrow range of structures. Academic writing places additional demands on learners because it requires them to express logical relations such as cause, contrast, condition, concession, and evaluation through controlled syntactic resources. Recent research on Arab EFL academic writing similarly indicates that syntactic complexity develops through the gradual coordination and integration of clauses and phrases, although greater complexity does not automatically guarantee accuracy or textual effectiveness (Shah et al., 2026). Syntactic mastery should therefore be conceptualised multidimensionally through complexity, accuracy, variety, appropriateness, and cohesion. From an interlanguage perspective, persistent difficulty in any of these dimensions signals that parts of the learner's syntactic system remain transitional, underdeveloped, or fossilised. At the same time, such difficulties are not immutable. Explicit instruction, focused practice, corrective feedback, sentence-combining activities, model-text analysis, and repeated opportunities to revise writing can draw learners' attention to gaps between their current interlanguage and target-language usage. Accordingly, syntactic mastery represents the developmental outcome towards which learners progress as they restructure L1-influenced patterns, expand their interlanguage grammar, and acquire increasingly effective ways of combining linguistic forms to communicate complex meanings in written English.

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual paper employed a narrative literature review methodology to examine how first-language (L1) transfer and interlanguage development shape sentence-structure difficulties and syntactic mastery among learners of English as a second language (ESL). A narrative review was considered appropriate because the purpose of the study was not to estimate the statistical effect of a specific intervention, but to critically interpret, integrate, and synthesise theoretical arguments and empirical findings drawn from second-language acquisition, interlanguage, cross-linguistic influence, syntactic development, and ESL writing research. Narrative reviews are particularly useful for examining broad, theoretically complex, and conceptually diverse bodies of literature, as they allow researchers to identify recurring patterns, reconcile different perspectives, clarify relationships among constructs, and develop new conceptual explanations (Ferrari, 2015; Green et al., 2006; Sukhera, 2022). Nevertheless, because narrative reviews may be affected by subjectivity in the selection and interpretation of sources, the present study incorporated transparent search, screening, and synthesis procedures adapted from systematic review practices to strengthen methodological rigour and reduce selection bias (Ferrari, 2015). The review was guided by the following central question: What sentence-structure challenges do ESL learners encounter in writing, and how does interlanguage development influence these difficulties? Attention was given to three interconnected constructs: L1 transfer as an antecedent of non-target-like sentence production, interlanguage development as the mechanism through which learners' syntactic systems evolve, and syntactic mastery as the intended developmental outcome. The narrative synthesis ultimately informed the development of a conceptual framework explaining how L1 transfer influences syntactic mastery through learners' developing interlanguage systems.

Data were collected exclusively from the Scopus database, which was selected because it is a multidisciplinary abstract and citation database covering peer-reviewed literature across the social sciences, arts and humanities, and other research fields relevant to language education and applied linguistics. Scopus also provides document-search functions and filters that enable researchers to refine results according to publication year, document type, subject area, language, and source type. Because the concepts do not necessarily appear together in every relevant publication, additional searches were conducted using combinations of two or three construct groups. Alternative spellings, including fossilisation/fossilization, and related terms such as language transfer, grammatical errors, sentence complexity, clause integration,

academic writing, and second-language learners were also employed to improve retrieval. The search was limited primarily to English-language journal articles, review articles, books, and book chapters that directly addressed L1 influence, interlanguage processes, sentence construction, syntactic development, or ESL/EFL writing. Foundational theoretical publications were retained regardless of publication date when they were essential to defining the principal concepts or establishing the theoretical basis of the proposed framework.

Key Steps in Conducting the Narrative Review

The narrative review was conducted through six interrelated steps. First, the review question and conceptual boundaries were defined by identifying L1 transfer, interlanguage development, sentence-structure difficulties, and syntactic mastery as the central constructs. This step ensured that the review remained aligned with the purpose of developing a theoretically grounded conceptual framework rather than merely describing common grammatical errors. Second, relevant literature was identified through Scopus using combinations of keywords, synonyms, phrase searching, truncation where appropriate, and Boolean operators such as AND and OR. Searches were conducted within article titles, abstracts, and author keywords, and the results were refined by publication period, language, document type, and relevant subject areas. The complete search strings, date of searching, filters applied, and number of records retrieved should be recorded to establish an auditable search process. Third, the retrieved records were screened for relevance. Titles and abstracts were initially examined to remove publications that did not focus on second-language learning, writing, sentence structure, syntactic development, L1 transfer, or interlanguage. The full texts of potentially relevant publications were then assessed. Studies were included when they: (a) involved ESL, EFL, or other L2 English learners; (b) addressed written sentence production, grammar, syntax, syntactic complexity, accuracy, or sentence variety; (c) examined L1 transfer, cross-linguistic influence, interlanguage development, developmental errors, or fossilisation; and (d) offered theoretical or empirical evidence relevant to the proposed relationships. Publications were excluded when they focused exclusively on first-language writing, speech production without implications for writing, literary analysis, machine translation, computational syntax, or topics unrelated to learner language development. Duplicate records and publications for which insufficient relevant information was available were also removed.

Fourth, information was extracted and organised thematically using a review matrix containing the author, publication year, research context, learner population, research design, theoretical perspective, sentence-structure challenge, principal findings, and relevance to the proposed conceptual framework. The identified difficulties were grouped into recurring categories such as word-order transfer, sentence fragments, run-on sentences, subject–verb disagreement, inaccurate tense and inflectional morphology, limited sentence variety, dependence on simple sentences, problems with coordination and subordination, weak clause integration, awkward constructions, and insufficient cohesion. Evidence concerning interlanguage was further categorised according to L1 transfer, developmental sequences, overgeneralisation, variability, stabilisation, fossilisation, instructional input, feedback, and opportunities for language use. Fifth, the selected literature was critically analysed and narratively synthesised. Rather than summarising each publication separately, the review compared areas of convergence, contradiction, and theoretical tension across studies. Greater interpretive weight was assigned to studies with clear methodological procedures, direct relevance to ESL writing, and strong theoretical or empirical support. Foundational works were used to establish theoretical concepts, whereas recent studies were used to demonstrate contemporary patterns and pedagogical concerns. This process is consistent with the principle that a rigorous narrative review should move beyond description towards critical integration and explanation (Ferrari, 2015; Green et al., 2006). Finally, the synthesised findings were used to construct the proposed conceptual framework. L1 transfer was positioned as a principal antecedent influencing learners' sentence production, interlanguage development was conceptualised as the evolving explanatory mechanism through which transferred and newly acquired linguistic knowledge is reorganised, and syntactic mastery was treated as the developmental outcome reflected in increasing accuracy, complexity, variety, cohesion, and appropriateness. The resulting framework therefore emerged from a theory-informed synthesis of the selected Scopus-indexed literature rather than from statistical aggregation. As a narrative review, the study does not claim exhaustive coverage of every publication or permit meta-analytic generalisation; instead, it offers an interpretive and theoretically coherent account of the processes connecting L1 transfer, interlanguage development, sentence-structure

difficulties, and syntactic mastery in ESL writing.

Data Collection and Review Strategy

The data collection process was conducted through the Scopus database, selected because it is one of the largest multidisciplinary bibliographic databases containing high-quality, peer-reviewed publications in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, education, and language teaching. Scopus was chosen to ensure that the review was based on credible and internationally recognised scholarly sources while providing comprehensive coverage of empirical and theoretical studies related to ESL writing, sentence structure, and interlanguage development. The literature search was performed using a structured keyword strategy that combined the principal concepts of the present study with Boolean operators (AND, OR) to maximise both the breadth and precision of the search. The search string employed was:

("sentence structure" OR "syntax" OR "grammatical structure" OR "sentence formation") AND ("difficulties" OR "challenges" OR "issues" OR "problems") AND ("ESL" OR "English as a second language" OR "second language" OR "language learning") AND ("writing" OR "composition" OR "text production" OR "written expression")

The search was applied to the Title, Abstract, and Keywords (TITLE-ABS-KEY) fields in Scopus to retrieve studies that explicitly addressed sentence structure difficulties in ESL writing. To improve the relevance and quality of the retrieved literature, several filtering criteria were applied. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles, review papers, and book chapters published in English, while conference papers, editorials, notes, and non-peer-reviewed publications were excluded. Additional refinement was undertaken by restricting the search to subject areas closely related to Applied Linguistics, Language Education, Education, Social Sciences, and Arts and Humanities. Following the initial retrieval, duplicate records were removed before the titles and abstracts were screened to determine their relevance to the objectives of the study. Full-text screening was subsequently conducted to ensure that each selected publication provided theoretical or empirical evidence concerning sentence structure, syntactic development, L1 transfer, interlanguage, or ESL writing. Foundational studies, including seminal theoretical works, were retained regardless of publication year because of their significance in explaining interlanguage development and second language acquisition, whereas contemporary studies were prioritised to capture recent developments in ESL writing research.

After the literature had been identified and screened, the selected studies were analysed using an integrative thematic analysis approach. Unlike descriptive reviews that merely summarise previous findings, integrative thematic analysis enables researchers to synthesise evidence from diverse methodological traditions and theoretical perspectives to generate a comprehensive conceptual understanding of a phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The approach was particularly appropriate for this conceptual paper because the retrieved studies consisted of qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, conceptual, and review-based research addressing different aspects of ESL sentence structure and second language acquisition. The analysis began with repeated reading of the selected studies to achieve familiarity with their objectives, theoretical foundations, methodologies, and principal findings. Relevant information was then extracted systematically and organised into a literature matrix comprising the author(s), publication year, research context, participant characteristics, research design, theoretical framework, key findings, and implications for the present study.

The extracted evidence was subsequently coded inductively and comparatively to identify recurring patterns across the literature. Similar concepts and findings were grouped into broader conceptual categories that reflected common issues associated with ESL sentence construction. Through iterative comparison and constant refinement, these categories were synthesised into several overarching themes, including (i) L1 transfer and cross-linguistic influence, (ii) interlanguage development and developmental errors, (iii) grammatical and syntactic difficulties, (iv) sentence complexity and syntactic variety, (v) fossilisation and persistent sentence structure errors, and (vi) pedagogical strategies supporting syntactic development. Rather than treating these themes as isolated issues, the integrative thematic analysis examined the conceptual

relationships among them to explain how learners progress from L1-influenced sentence production towards increasingly sophisticated syntactic competence. Emphasis was placed on identifying how interlanguage functions as the developmental mechanism linking L1 transfer to learners' evolving sentence structures and eventual syntactic mastery.

Finally, the synthesised themes were interpreted through the lens of Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory to construct the proposed conceptual framework. Instead of aggregating statistical findings, the review integrated theoretical arguments and empirical evidence to explain the dynamic processes through which L1 transfer influences learners' interlanguage development and subsequently affects sentence structure difficulties in ESL writing. This interpretive synthesis enabled the development of a coherent conceptual model that extends existing literature by illustrating the interconnected relationships among L1 transfer, interlanguage development, sentence structure difficulties, and syntactic mastery. Consequently, the integrative thematic analysis served not only as a method of organising previous research but also as the principal analytical strategy for generating the conceptual propositions advanced in this paper.

Key Findings from the Narrative Review

The narrative review identified eight interrelated findings concerning the sentence-structure difficulties experienced by ESL learners and the role of interlanguage development in shaping those difficulties. The findings indicate that learners' problems extend beyond isolated grammatical mistakes and reflect a developing linguistic system influenced by first-language knowledge, incomplete acquisition of English grammar, limited control of complex structures, and the possible stabilisation of non-target-like forms. Table 1 summarises the principal findings derived from the reviewed literature.

Table 1 Key Findings on Sentence-Structure Difficulties and Interlanguage Development in ESL Writing

No.	Key finding	Description of the finding	Influence of interlanguage development	Supporting literature
1	**L1-induced syntactic transfer**	Learners frequently transfer word order, clause patterns, grammatical categories, and sentence-construction conventions from their first language into English. Such transfer can produce sentences that communicate the intended meaning but do not conform to conventional English syntax. The effects are especially noticeable when the L1 and English differ in constituent order, subject use, tense marking, article systems, agreement, or clause organisation.	L1 knowledge provides an initial linguistic resource for constructing the learner's interlanguage. When transferred patterns are incompatible with English, they become provisional interlanguage rules and may produce recurrent non-target-like constructions.	Ceylan (2019); Jalaluddin et al. (2008); Selinker (1972)
2	**Persistent grammatical and morphological errors**	ESL learners commonly experience difficulties with subject–verb agreement, tense consistency, auxiliary verbs, articles, prepositions, pluralisation, pronouns, and inflectional endings. Errors involving verb and noun inflections may reduce	These errors demonstrate that some English grammatical features have not been fully incorporated into learners' interlanguage systems. Learners may omit unfamiliar forms, apply an incomplete rule, or overgeneralise a familiar	Matiso (2023); Niez et al. (2025); Selinker (1972)

		grammatical accuracy and interfere with the clarity of sentence-level meaning.	rule to inappropriate contexts.	
3	**Reliance on short and simple sentences**	Some learners depend heavily on basic subject–verb–object constructions and produce sentences that are short, minimally elaborated, or disconnected. Although such structures may be accurate, excessive reliance on them restricts idea development, rhetorical effectiveness, and the expression of complex relationships.	Simple sentences frequently characterise earlier or less developed interlanguage stages. Learners may deliberately avoid complex forms that exceed their current linguistic resources or that they perceive as likely to generate errors.	Alsalami (2022); Bardovi-Harlig (2014)
4	**Limited sentence variety**	Learners often use a restricted range of sentence types, sentence openings, clause patterns, and sentence-combining strategies. Repeated use of similar structures can make written texts monotonous and may prevent learners from adapting sentence form to different communicative functions.	Limited variety reflects a constrained interlanguage repertoire. Learners repeatedly select structures that have already become established in their developing linguistic system, while less familiar structures remain unavailable, unstable, or avoided.	Charpentier-Jiménez (2020)
5	**Difficulty constructing complex sentences**	Learners encounter problems coordinating and subordinating clauses, selecting appropriate conjunctions, forming relative and adverbial clauses, and maintaining grammatical control across longer sentences. Attempts to increase complexity may result in fragments, run-on sentences, faulty coordination, or unclear clause relationships.	Complex sentence construction develops gradually as the interlanguage system expands. Learners may recognise individual grammatical forms but remain unable to integrate them consistently into extended written production. Accuracy and complexity may therefore develop at different rates.	Bardovi-Harlig (2014); Ramzan and Alahmadi (2024)
6	**Awkward and non-target-like constructions**	Even relatively proficient ESL learners may produce sentences that are grammatically comprehensible but unnatural, stylistically inappropriate, or inconsistent with conventional English usage. These constructions may involve unusual collocations, misplaced modifiers, unconventional information order, or literal translation from the L1.	Awkwardness arises when the learner's interlanguage rules approximate but do not fully correspond to target-language patterns. It may also indicate that learners possess declarative grammatical knowledge but lack automatised control of form–meaning relationships in authentic writing.	Ceylan (2019); Kim (2012)
7	**Weak clause integration and**	ESL learners may struggle to express relationships among	Cohesion problems reflect an interlanguage system in	Charpentier-Jiménez

	textual cohesion	ideas through reference, conjunction, subordination, and logical sequencing. Sentences may be individually understandable but insufficiently connected, producing writing that appears fragmented or lacks progression.	which sentence-level forms and discourse-level functions have not yet been fully integrated. Learners may know connectors but use them mechanically, inaccurately, or without understanding their rhetorical functions.	(2020); Matiso (2023)
8	**Interlanguage stabilisation and the value of explicit instruction**	Certain sentence-structure problems may persist despite prolonged language learning, particularly when the forms do not prevent communication or when learners receive insufficient corrective feedback. Nevertheless, focused syntax instruction, sentence-combining practice, model analysis, feedback, and revision can support the production of more accurate and complex sentences.	Frequently used non-target-like forms may stabilise or fossilise within the interlanguage system. Explicit instruction can draw attention to gaps between learners' current production and English conventions, encouraging restructuring and progression beyond an interlanguage plateau.	Ramzan and Alahmadi (2024); Selinker (1972)

Note. L1 = first language; ESL = English as a second language.

The first major finding is that L1 transfer constitutes an important starting point in ESL sentence development. Learners do not approach English writing without prior linguistic knowledge; instead, they draw upon the grammatical patterns and sentence-formation principles acquired through their first language. This reliance may facilitate English learning when both languages share similar structures. However, when the grammatical systems differ, learners may transfer L1 word order, omit compulsory English elements, or construct clauses according to native-language conventions. Studies of second-language writing have similarly indicated that learners' writing development is influenced by their previous language knowledge and writing experiences (Ceylan, 2019). Consequently, L1 transfer should not be understood only as negative interference. It is also a cognitive strategy through which learners formulate initial hypotheses about English structure. Within the proposed framework, L1 transfer therefore functions as an antecedent that supplies linguistic material for learners' developing interlanguage, while cross-linguistic differences increase the likelihood of non-target-like sentence formation.

The second finding concerns the persistence of grammatical and morphological difficulties. Errors involving tense, agreement, auxiliary verbs, articles, plural markers, prepositions, and inflectional morphemes frequently occur because English requires learners to encode grammatical information in ways that may not be present or expressed similarly in their first language. Niez et al. (2025), for example, identified persistent difficulties in learners' use of inflectional affixes across nouns, adjectives, and verbs, illustrating that sentence accuracy depends on the successful integration of both morphological and syntactic knowledge. Matiso (2023) likewise found that ESL learners experience recurring grammatical difficulties that require a pedagogically comprehensive response. From an interlanguage perspective, these patterns are not entirely random. They indicate that learners have formed provisional rules, such as omitting an inflection, applying a form inconsistently, or extending a grammatical rule beyond its appropriate context. Such errors may consequently reveal the organisation and developmental status of the learner's internal linguistic system.

A third major pattern is learners' dependence on simple structures and a restricted range of sentence forms. Short and simple sentences may allow learners to communicate meanings while reducing the cognitive demands associated with grammatical planning, lexical selection, and clause integration. However, persistent reliance on basic structures may constrain the expression of complex ideas and produce texts

characterised by repetition and weak rhetorical development. Alsalami (2022) documented challenges associated with short-sentence writing among first-year EFL undergraduates, while Charpentier-Jiménez (2020) examined sentence types, sentence combining, and sentence patterns as important dimensions of sentence variety. The latter study demonstrates that syntactic performance cannot be adequately evaluated solely by counting grammatical errors; researchers must also consider the range and functional use of structures available to learners. In interlanguage terms, a limited repertoire indicates that certain sentence patterns have become relatively stable, whereas more advanced forms remain emergent, inconsistently controlled, or strategically avoided.

The review further shows that complex sentence construction represents a major developmental challenge. Academic writing requires learners to establish relationships of cause, contrast, condition, concession, sequence, and evaluation through coordination and subordination. Learners may understand these relationships conceptually but lack sufficient grammatical resources to express them accurately. Difficulties can therefore emerge in clause boundary identification, conjunction selection, relative-clause formation, modifier placement, and the integration of dependent and independent clauses. When learners attempt syntactically ambitious sentences before attaining adequate control, their writing may contain fragments, run-on sentences, faulty coordination, or unclear reference. Conversely, learners who prioritise accuracy may avoid complex structures and remain dependent on simpler patterns. This finding suggests that syntactic development is not linear: complexity, accuracy, fluency, and variety may progress at different rates. The coexistence of accurate simple sentences and inaccurate complex sentences can therefore represent an expected transitional feature of interlanguage development rather than contradictory evidence of proficiency.

Another significant finding is that sentence-structure difficulties affect not only grammatical correctness but also naturalness, cohesion, and rhetorical effectiveness. Some ESL sentences may be technically comprehensible yet sound awkward because of literal translation, unusual information sequencing, inappropriate collocations, or the application of partially acquired grammatical rules. Problems may also extend beyond individual sentences when learners lack the resources needed to connect propositions and maintain logical progression. Consequently, a learner may produce several grammatically acceptable sentences that do not form a coherent passage. These findings demonstrate that syntactic mastery should not be defined merely as error-free sentence production. It should encompass grammatical accuracy, structural variety, clause integration, cohesion, appropriateness, and the ability to select constructions that serve particular rhetorical purposes. Sentence variety research supports this broader position by showing the importance of examining sentence types, patterns, and combining practices rather than relying on a single measure of correctness.

The final integrative finding is that interlanguage development explains both progression and persistence in ESL sentence construction. Learners' errors represent a developing, rule-governed linguistic system shaped by L1 transfer, target-language input, instruction, overgeneralisation, communication strategies, feedback, and opportunities for written practice. As learners progress, their sentence production may become more accurate, varied, and complex; however, earlier forms do not necessarily disappear immediately. Competing forms may coexist, causing learners to produce a structure accurately in one context and inaccurately in another. When non-target-like forms continue to communicate meaning and receive little corrective attention, they may stabilise and become resistant to change. Nevertheless, the reviewed literature suggests that development is not predetermined. Explicit syntax instruction, guided sentence combining, focused corrective feedback, exposure to model texts, and iterative revision can help learners notice discrepancies and restructure their interlanguage. The movement from L1 transfer to syntactic mastery should therefore be conceptualised as a gradual and recursive process rather than a direct or linear transition.

Overall, the narrative review demonstrates that sentence-structure difficulties among ESL learners emerge through the interaction of cross-linguistic influence, developmental limitations, cognitive demands, instructional conditions, and opportunities for meaningful language use. L1 transfer shapes the initial forms available to learners, while interlanguage development determines how those forms are retained, modified, replaced, or stabilised over time. Syntactic mastery represents the developmental outcome of this

restructuring process and is reflected not only in fewer errors but also in greater sentence variety, controlled complexity, cohesion, and rhetorical appropriateness. These findings support the proposed conceptual relationship in which L1 transfer influences ESL sentence production through the mediating mechanism of interlanguage development. They also indicate that sentence-structure difficulties should be interpreted as diagnostic evidence of learners' current developmental systems and as potential points for pedagogical intervention rather than simply as deficiencies to be counted and corrected.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded primarily in Interlanguage Theory, which explains how second-language learners construct an evolving linguistic system that is influenced by, but not identical to, either their first language or the target language (Selinker, 1972). Interlanguage is understood as a dynamic, systematic, and transitional form of linguistic knowledge that develops as learners test hypotheses, internalise new grammatical patterns, and restructure previously acquired language knowledge. Within this perspective, sentence-structure difficulties are not regarded merely as random errors or evidence of insufficient learning; rather, they are manifestations of learners' current developmental systems. The framework also draws on the concept of language transfer, which proposes that learners use knowledge from their first language when processing and producing the second language (Odlin, 1989). Such transfer may facilitate learning when L1 and English structures are similar, but it may also result in non-target-like word order, omitted grammatical elements, inappropriate clause patterns, and literal translations when the two languages differ. In the context of this study, Interlanguage Theory offers an appropriate explanatory lens because it accommodates both the influence of L1 transfer and the gradual, non-linear development of English syntax. It also explains why learners may produce a structure accurately in one context but inaccurately in another, why earlier and later forms can coexist, and why some errors may stabilise despite continued exposure and instruction (Bardovi-Harlig, 2014; Han, 2004).

Applied to ESL writing, the framework conceptualises L1 transfer as the principal antecedent, interlanguage development as the central explanatory mechanism, and syntactic mastery as the developmental outcome. Learners initially rely on familiar linguistic resources from their first language to construct English sentences, particularly when their knowledge of English grammar is incomplete. These transferred patterns enter the learners' interlanguage and interact with target-language input, instructional feedback, overgeneralisation, communication strategies, and opportunities for written practice. The interlanguage system is therefore continually reorganised as learners move from simple, formulaic, or L1-influenced constructions towards more varied and complex English sentence patterns. However, this progression is not automatic or uniform. Learners may avoid complex structures, overuse familiar sentence patterns, or retain inaccurate rules when they have limited exposure to appropriate models or when their errors do not prevent communication. The proposed conceptual framework accordingly assumes that L1 transfer affects learners' sentence construction indirectly through interlanguage development, which can either support restructuring or contribute to stabilisation and fossilisation. Syntactic mastery is conceptualised not as native-like perfection, but as increasing control over grammatical accuracy, sentence variety, clause integration, structural complexity, cohesion, and rhetorical appropriateness. This multidimensional understanding is consistent with second-language writing research showing that syntactic development involves changes in both complexity and accuracy and that these dimensions may progress at different rates (Bulté & Housen, 2012; Norris & Ortega, 2009). The framework therefore proposes a developmental pathway in which L1 transfer shapes the initial interlanguage system, interlanguage processes determine how sentence patterns are modified or retained and sustained restructuring leads progressively towards syntactic mastery.

Theoretically, the framework integrates interlanguage, cross-linguistic influence, syntactic development, and second-language writing scholarship into a unified explanation of sentence-structure difficulty. It extends traditional error-based approaches by treating learners' written errors as diagnostic evidence of an evolving linguistic system rather than as isolated deficiencies. This interpretation is supported by Corder's (1967) view that learner errors reveal the rules and hypotheses underlying second-language development. The framework also offers practical implications for ESL teaching. Teachers can use recurring sentence patterns to identify learners' developmental needs, distinguish L1-induced errors from broader developmental errors,

and design targeted interventions involving explicit grammar instruction, contrastive analysis, sentence-combining activities, model-text analysis, focused corrective feedback, and guided revision. Instruction should not merely correct surface errors but should help learners notice differences between their existing interlanguage rules and conventional English structures, thereby encouraging cognitive restructuring. The framework may also assist curriculum designers in sequencing sentence-level instruction from controlled forms towards increasingly complex and rhetorically purposeful structures. In conclusion, the proposed framework explains the movement from L1 transfer to syntactic mastery as a gradual, recursive, and context-sensitive process mediated by interlanguage development. It provides a theoretically coherent basis for understanding why sentence-structure difficulties persist, how they change over time, and how pedagogical intervention may facilitate learners' progression towards more accurate, varied, cohesive, and effective ESL writing.

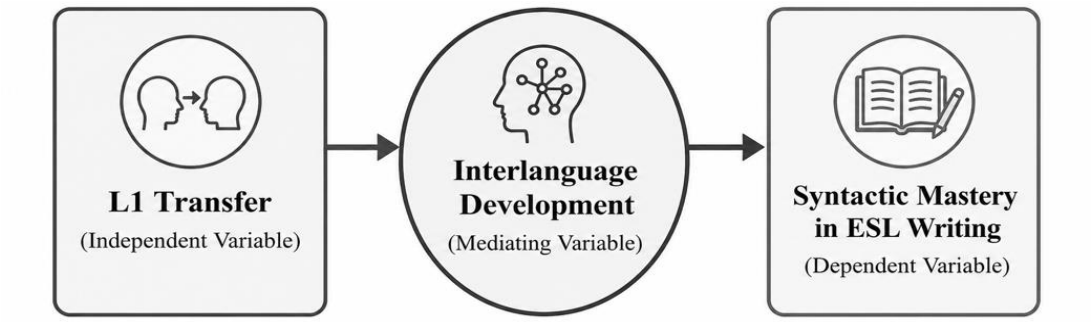

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Construct Definitions and Boundaries of the Proposed Model

L1 transfer (antecedent) denotes the influence of prior-language linguistic and conceptual representations on English written production. Interlanguage development (mediating process) denotes change over time in learners' evolving, internally organised English grammatical system, including restructuring, increased consistency and possible stabilisation. Syntactic mastery (outcome) denotes context-appropriate control of grammatical accuracy, sentence variety, clause integration, syntactic complexity and cohesion; it does not require native-like perfection. Sentence-structure difficulties are observable manifestations of the developing system and indicators for analysis, not an additional causal construct in the central mediation model.

Instruction and context form the conditions under which the developmental pathway may unfold. Explicit grammar instruction, corrective feedback, genre-based writing pedagogy, opportunities for English exposure and sustained writing practice can provide input and support noticing or restructuring. Motivation and educational context may shape engagement with these opportunities. The present framework therefore acknowledges these factors as contextual influences and potential future covariates or moderators, without claiming that their individual effects have been established by this narrative review. Any moderation hypothesis requires a separately specified mechanism and appropriate empirical evidence.

Proposition Development

Proposition Development: L1 Transfer and Syntactic Mastery in ESL Writing

L1 transfer has long been recognised as one of the most influential factors in second language acquisition because learners naturally rely on their existing linguistic knowledge when learning and producing a new language. According to Interlanguage Theory, learners do not begin second language learning with an empty linguistic system; instead, they actively utilise their first-language knowledge to formulate hypotheses about the target language (Selinker, 1972). From this perspective, L1 transfer represents a cognitive resource that enables learners to interpret unfamiliar linguistic forms, organise ideas, and construct meaningful sentences during the early stages of language development. Odlin (1989) similarly argues that language transfer is an inevitable consequence of language learning because similarities and differences between the first and second languages shape learners' acquisition processes. Although previous studies have frequently

associated L1 transfer with grammatical interference and non-target-like sentence patterns, contemporary second language acquisition research recognises that transfer may also facilitate learning when learners successfully map comparable grammatical structures and syntactic principles from their native language onto English. Such positive transfer provides learners with an initial structural foundation from which increasingly sophisticated sentence construction can emerge as their linguistic knowledge expands (Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). Consequently, L1 transfer should not be viewed solely as a source of syntactic errors but also as an important cognitive mechanism that contributes to the gradual development of English sentence production.

Within the proposed conceptual framework, the relationship between L1 transfer and syntactic mastery is explained through the developmental processes of interlanguage. Learners initially construct English sentences using linguistic patterns influenced by their first language; however, these patterns are progressively reorganised as learners receive instructional input, corrective feedback, communicative experience, and opportunities for meaningful writing. As interlanguage develops, learners gradually modify or replace L1-based structures with increasingly target-like syntactic patterns, resulting in improvements in grammatical accuracy, sentence complexity, sentence variety, clause integration, and textual cohesion. Therefore, L1 transfer provides the initial linguistic knowledge that supports learners' progression towards syntactic mastery rather than functioning exclusively as an obstacle to learning. This interpretation is consistent with developmental perspectives that view learner language as a dynamic and evolving system in which prior linguistic knowledge facilitates subsequent language restructuring (Bardovi-Harlig, 2014; Selinker, 1972). Accordingly, this conceptual paper proposes that the influence of L1 transfer on syntactic mastery may be facilitative or constraining depending on structural compatibility, because learners' existing linguistic knowledge serves as the foundation upon which more advanced English sentence structures are gradually constructed and refined through interlanguage development.

Proposition 1 (P1): The relationship between L1 transfer and syntactic mastery varies with the compatibility of transferred features: facilitative transfer is expected to support target-like syntactic performance, whereas non-facilitative transfer is expected to be associated with greater sentence-structure difficulty.

Proposition Development: L1 Transfer and Interlanguage Development

Interlanguage development is a dynamic process through which second language learners gradually construct an evolving linguistic system that reflects both their first language (L1) and the target language. According to Selinker (1972), learners do not acquire the target language by simply replacing their native language with a new linguistic system; instead, they develop an intermediate grammar that continuously changes as they receive linguistic input, test hypotheses, and refine their language knowledge. Within this developmental process, L1 transfer serves as one of the principal psycholinguistic processes influencing the formation of interlanguage. Learners naturally draw upon previously acquired linguistic knowledge to interpret unfamiliar grammatical structures, organise sentence patterns, and formulate meaning in the second language. Consequently, the grammatical rules, syntactic structures, and discourse conventions of the first language become important cognitive resources during the initial stages of second language acquisition. Although transferred structures may not always correspond to target-language norms, they provide learners with an essential linguistic foundation from which their interlanguage begins to develop. Odlin (1989) similarly argues that language transfer is an inevitable outcome of second language learning because learners rely on prior linguistic experience when processing and producing the target language. Therefore, L1 transfer should be viewed not merely as a source of interference but as a developmental mechanism that contributes to the construction of learners' evolving interlanguage systems.

From an interlanguage perspective, learners continuously restructure their linguistic knowledge as they receive instructional input, corrective feedback, communicative experience, and increased exposure to authentic language use. The influence of L1 transfer gradually interacts with these learning experiences, enabling learners to modify, reorganise, or replace initial language hypotheses with more target-like grammatical representations. Bardovi-Harlig (2014) explains that interlanguage development is characterised by systematic progression rather than random error production, with learner language

reflecting successive stages of linguistic growth. Similarly, Corder (1967) contends that learner errors provide valuable evidence of the underlying developmental processes through which interlanguage evolves. Rather than indicating failure, these errors reveal how learners actively construct and refine their internal language systems. As learners become increasingly aware of differences between their native language and English, transferred linguistic patterns are progressively adjusted, resulting in greater grammatical control and more sophisticated sentence production. Consequently, L1 transfer functions as a significant catalyst for interlanguage development by providing the initial linguistic framework upon which subsequent language restructuring occurs. This conceptualisation is consistent with the developmental assumptions of Interlanguage Theory, which recognises prior linguistic knowledge as an indispensable component of second language learning.

Proposition 2 (P2): L1 transfer shapes learners' initial interlanguage representations, with the direction and consequences of that influence depending on the linguistic features transferred and their compatibility with English.

Proposition Development: Interlanguage Development and Syntactic Mastery in ESL Writing

Interlanguage development constitutes the central mechanism through which second language learners progressively acquire greater control over the grammatical and syntactic features of the target language. According to Selinker (1972), interlanguage is a dynamic and systematic linguistic system that evolves as learners continuously construct, test, and revise hypotheses about the second language through exposure, interaction, instruction, and communicative practice. Rather than developing in a linear manner, learners' interlanguage undergoes continuous restructuring as previously acquired linguistic rules are modified or replaced with more target-like forms. This developmental process is particularly evident in ESL writing, where learners gradually move from producing simple, fragmented, or L1-influenced sentence structures to constructing increasingly accurate, varied, and syntactically sophisticated written texts. As learners receive corrective feedback and engage in meaningful writing activities, their interlanguage expands to include more complex grammatical structures, improved clause integration, greater sentence variety, and more appropriate use of cohesion. Bardovi-Harlig (2014) argues that interlanguage development should be understood as a gradual progression characterised by developmental sequences and systematic linguistic change rather than the elimination of isolated grammatical errors. Consequently, improvements in learners' interlanguage represent important indicators of syntactic growth and increasing writing proficiency.

The relationship between interlanguage development and syntactic mastery is further supported by research demonstrating that learners' syntactic competence develops through continuous refinement of their internal linguistic systems. As interlanguage matures, learners become increasingly capable of producing grammatically accurate and rhetorically effective sentences by integrating complex syntactic structures such as coordination, subordination, relative clauses, and phrasal elaboration. Contemporary research has shown that the development of sentence complexity is accompanied by improvements in grammatical accuracy and cohesion, although these dimensions may progress at different rates depending on learners' proficiency, instructional experiences, and opportunities for language use (Bulté & Housen, 2012; Norris & Ortega, 2009). Similarly, explicit syntax instruction has been found to facilitate learners' movement beyond developmental plateaus by enabling them to construct more sophisticated and target-like sentence structures (Ramzan & Alahmadi, 2024). From the perspective of Interlanguage Theory, syntactic mastery is therefore not an endpoint achieved through memorising grammatical rules but the developmental outcome of an evolving interlanguage system that becomes progressively more accurate, complex, coherent, and communicatively effective. Accordingly, as learners' interlanguage develops, their ability to produce well-formed, varied, and contextually appropriate sentence structures also improves, leading to higher levels of syntactic mastery in ESL writing.

Proposition 3 (P3): Greater interlanguage restructuring towards target-language conventions over time is expected to predict improvements in grammatical accuracy, syntactic variety, clause integration and context-appropriate complexity.

Proposition Development: The Mediating Role of Interlanguage Development between L1 Transfer and Syntactic Mastery in ESL Writing

Interlanguage Theory posits that learners do not transfer knowledge from their first language (L1) directly into successful second-language performance; rather, transferred linguistic knowledge is processed through an evolving interlanguage system that gradually approximates the target language (Selinker, 1972). Consequently, the influence of L1 transfer on syntactic mastery is neither immediate nor linear. Instead, learners initially rely on L1 grammatical knowledge to formulate hypotheses about English sentence construction, and these hypotheses become incorporated into their developing interlanguage. As learners receive instructional input, corrective feedback, communicative experience, and increased exposure to authentic English, their interlanguage is progressively reorganised through continuous modification of existing linguistic rules. This developmental process enables learners to replace or restructure L1-based sentence patterns with increasingly target-like syntactic structures. Bardovi-Harlig (2014) explains that interlanguage development is characterised by systematic linguistic restructuring rather than random error correction, while Odlin (1989) emphasises that language transfer constitutes an important source of learner hypotheses during second-language acquisition. Accordingly, L1 transfer provides the initial linguistic foundation upon which learners construct their interlanguage, whereas interlanguage development determines how transferred linguistic knowledge is refined into more accurate and appropriate English sentence structures.

The mediating role of interlanguage development therefore provides the theoretical mechanism that explains how L1 transfer contributes to syntactic mastery in ESL writing. Learners who effectively develop their interlanguage are better able to modify transferred linguistic patterns, internalise English grammatical rules, and integrate increasingly complex sentence structures into their writing. As the interlanguage system becomes more sophisticated, learners demonstrate greater grammatical accuracy, sentence variety, clause integration, syntactic complexity, and textual cohesion, all of which contribute to syntactic mastery. Conversely, when interlanguage development is limited or stabilises prematurely, L1-influenced sentence patterns may persist and result in fossilised grammatical and syntactic errors that hinder writing development (Han, 2004). This explanation is consistent with Corder's (1967) argument that learner errors provide evidence of an evolving linguistic system rather than mere deficiencies in learning. Therefore, interlanguage development functions as the central developmental pathway through which learners transform prior linguistic knowledge into progressively more target-like English sentence production. The proposed mediation relationship extends Interlanguage Theory by explaining not only the direct influence of L1 transfer on learner language but also the developmental process through which transferred knowledge is restructured to achieve syntactic mastery in ESL writing.

Proposition 4 (P4): Interlanguage development is proposed to mediate the relationship between feature-specific L1 transfer and subsequent syntactic mastery; the direction and magnitude of the indirect relationship are expected to depend on the nature of the transferred features.

Operationalisation and Directions for Empirical Validation

The propositions are theoretical expectations derived from the narrative synthesis, not tested findings. A future study could operationalise L1 transfer by first specifying contrastive linguistic features for each L1–English pairing and coding writing patterns plausibly linked to those contrasts. Positive and negative transfer should be coded separately, with triangulation through learner explanations, translation or comparison tasks, and independent coding to avoid attributing every error to L1 influence. Conscious transfer could be explored through stimulated recall or learner reports, whereas automatic influence would require convergent behavioural evidence rather than self-report alone.

Interlanguage development requires repeated observations rather than a single writing sample. Researchers could collect comparable writing tasks at multiple points, trace changes in recurring error patterns and the emergence, variability or stabilisation of particular structures, and assess whether revisions persist in new tasks. Syntactic mastery could be represented through grammatical accuracy (for example, error-free clauses

or errors per 100 words), syntactic complexity (for example, mean length of T-unit, clauses per T-unit and phrasal elaboration), sentence-type variety, clause integration, and appropriately defined cohesion measures. Indicators should be selected and validated for the learners' proficiency and writing genre; greater complexity alone must not be interpreted as mastery.

A longitudinal design following learners across a semester or longer would be more suitable for testing the proposed developmental mechanism than a single cross-sectional comparison. To evaluate P1–P3, researchers could compare specified language-pair transfer patterns with later changes in interlanguage indicators and syntactic outcomes while controlling for baseline writing ability. To examine P4, a temporally ordered mediation analysis could estimate whether earlier transfer-related patterns predict later syntactic outcomes through intermediate developmental changes. Such analysis would require adequate sample size, reliable measurement, clear temporal ordering and careful consideration of confounding; statistical mediation alone would not establish causality. Qualitative longitudinal error analysis could complement these estimates by documenting the actual restructuring of learner rules.

Future studies should record learners' L1 backgrounds, English proficiency, exposure, motivation, instructional conditions, feedback and writing genre. These variables may be treated as controls or, where theory and sample size justify it, explored as moderators of a clearly specified path. Comparative research across language backgrounds and instructional settings would help determine when transfer facilitates learning, when it impedes development, and which educational supports are associated with movement beyond persistent sentence-structure difficulties.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper advances the understanding of sentence structure difficulties among ESL learners by proposing an integrated framework that explains how L1 transfer contributes to syntactic mastery through the mediating role of interlanguage development. The review highlights that learners' sentence-level challenges including grammatical inaccuracies, limited sentence variety, difficulties in constructing complex sentences, and persistent L1-influenced syntactic patterns are not isolated errors but developmental features of an evolving interlanguage system. The proposed framework extends the application of Interlanguage Theory by positioning L1 transfer as the foundational linguistic resource, interlanguage development as the central explanatory mechanism, and syntactic mastery in ESL writing as the developmental outcome. Theoretically, the study contributes to second language acquisition and ESL writing literature by integrating previously fragmented constructs into a coherent conceptual model that provides a stronger explanation of learners' syntactic development. Practically, the framework offers valuable insights for language educators, curriculum developers, and teacher educators by emphasising the importance of recognising learners' developmental stages, designing instruction that addresses L1-related influences, and implementing explicit syntax instruction, focused feedback, and meaningful writing practice to facilitate syntactic growth. Nevertheless, this study is limited by its conceptual nature and reliance on previously published literature rather than empirical evidence, which prevents direct validation of the proposed relationships. In addition, the review was confined primarily to literature retrieved from the Scopus database and therefore may not represent all relevant studies published in other databases or languages. Future research should empirically test the proposed framework using quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches across diverse ESL and EFL contexts, examine the mediating role of interlanguage development using advanced statistical techniques such as structural equation modelling, investigate potential moderating variables such as language proficiency, instructional approaches, or learners' linguistic backgrounds, and evaluate the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions designed to strengthen syntactic mastery through interlanguage development.

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