

How does my mother tongue affect my writing?

STEP

UNIT C

1

1

'You live a new life for every new language you speak.'

Czech proverb

A

Reflection

What problems might your mother tongue cause when you try to write in English?

- Select the appropriate term for each sentence.
 1. Sentences in my mother tongue are generally **shorter than** / **the same length as** / **longer than** in English.
 2. The grammar is **similar to** / **different from** that of English.
 3. The vocabulary comes from a source **similar to** / **different from** English.
 4. The word order is **the same as** / **different from** that of English.
 5. In my mother tongue, the way a word is said is **the same as** / **different from** the way it is written.

B

Contextualization

Look at these sentences. In each, there is a mistake caused by MOTHER-TONGUE INFLUENCE.

- Identify each mistake and decide which of these mistakes you are likely to make.
 1. Many students have the idea that sentences in English should be extremely long, but that is not always true, and many sentences written by non-native speakers seem to go on for a very long time, but that can make it very difficult to follow exactly what is going on.

Overly long sentence, with too many clauses – should be divided up into two sentences.
 2. The articles are particular problem for many students because an articles do not always exist in your the mother tongue.
 3. In many Romance languages (e.g., Spanish and Italian), it is meritorious to use Latin-based words as the norm.
 4. The use of collocations is well related to a language's culture.
 5. Spelling can be hard becoss inglish wurds are often ritten diffrently to how they sownd.
 6. I learn the past simple already in high school.
 7. Word order be can seen as a problem big for many students.

c Analysis

What problems can be caused by mother-tongue influence?

Some of the mistakes you make in English may be caused by the influence of your mother tongue. Additional problems which may be caused include:

- **AVOIDANCE**, where you deliberately do not use particular grammar/language because you are worried you will use it incorrectly.
- **FOSSILIZATION**, where you have been making mistakes for such a long time that they now seem natural to you, and you cannot identify the mistake.

To counteract these problems, you need to understand the characteristics of your own language and to analyze both its similarities to and differences from English. However, it is also important to emphasize that the influence of your mother tongue is only one of many factors which impacts on your learning of English. The purpose of this step is to raise awareness of some of the other major factors, focusing on three areas where mother-tongue influence can often be seen: **grammar**, **language** and **style**.

Positive transfer

Although the focus of this step is on some of the problems caused by **MOTHER-TONGUE INFLUENCE** (resulting in **NEGATIVE TRANSFER**), it is important to note that **POSITIVE TRANSFER** also exists – i.e., that it may be easier for you to learn certain aspects of English because of similarities to the grammar or language of your mother tongue.

What grammatical differences may be seen?

No two grammar systems are exactly alike. Since the grammar of your mother tongue has such a big influence on the way you speak, it can be difficult to forget about it when using English. This is particularly evident in students' use of **verbs** and **ARTICLES**, and **WORD ORDER** choices.

Verbs

I learn the past simple already in high school. The way in which different languages express time varies considerably. English may use one tense, whereas another language may use a completely different tense (see **Step 41**).

Articles

The articles are particular problem for many students because an articles do not always exist in your the mother tongue. Many languages have no article system (see **Step 44**) but use other methods to express 'definiteness'. As articles are so common in English they may be involved in the mistakes you see most frequently.

Word order

Word order be can seen as a problem big for many students. English, like around 75% of the world's languages, has a basic Subject–Verb–Object order. However, many languages, including Japanese, Korean and Turkish, are Subject–Object–Verb. In other languages (such as Russian), word order is less important because they use **INFLECTION** to show 'who is doing what to whom'. **MOTHER-TONGUE INFLUENCE** means students sometimes write English sentences following the word order of their mother tongue, as in the example above. Such students may also use 'postpositions' rather than **PREPOSITIONS** (e.g., *I am going school to* instead of *I am going to school*) or to place **AUXILIARY VERBS** after **MAIN VERBS** (e.g., *I going am* instead of *I am going*).

What language differences may be seen?

Vocabulary

In many Romance languages (e.g., Spanish and Italian), it is meritorious to use Latin-based words as the norm. English has borrowed many words from Romance languages, especially French. Speakers of Romance languages such as Spanish or Italian may want to use the English word that is related to a word in their own language – but the Romance-derived word may be considered overly formal in English. The example here – ‘meritorious’ – sounds too formal, even in academic writing (‘better’ or ‘good practice’ would be more suitable).

Spelling

Spelling can be hard because English words are often written differently to how they sound. In English, the sound and the spelling do not always match. This contrasts with many other languages, which are ‘written exactly as they sound’. This causes serious problems with regard to knowing how to spell certain words. It is, therefore, important to check a good dictionary and/or to make use of computer spellcheckers.

‘Ghoti’

This is how you can spell *fish*, according to George Bernard Shaw – using the *gh* from *enough*, the *o* from *women* and the *ti* from *motion*.

Collocations

The use of collocations is well related to a language’s culture. All languages use particular **COLLOCATIONS** (words which frequently appear together with other words). Using collocations can be difficult, as they are hard to predict. In this example, the phrase *well related* would not be used; the normal collocation is *strongly related*. This is one reason why it is important to try to think in English, rather than translate directly from your mother tongue.

What stylistic differences may be seen?

As previous steps have outlined, English academic writing has a particular style, which may be different to the academic writing style in your country.

Sentence length

Many students have the idea that sentences in English should be extremely long, but that is not always true, and many sentences written by non-native speakers seem to go on for a very long time, but that can make it very difficult to follow exactly what is going on. In many cultures, long sentences are seen as evidence of good academic writing. British academic style, however, tends to prefer a simpler, more direct style in which long sentences are avoided. One particular problem which some students have, as in this example, is the overuse of *and* and *but*.

Idea development

There are some who believe that different cultures have different ideas about the way in which a piece of writing should develop. It is important to consider the way in which ideas are presented in your mother tongue, and compare that with English (see **Step 17**).

Concept of knowledge

As outlined in **Step 3**, some cultures tend to view ‘knowledge’ in different ways from others.

D Activation

Look through the following passage and identify the mistakes which have been made.

In addition to an influence of your mother tongue, one popular theory about second language acquisition is the 'natural order hypothesis'. This theory states that when learning any language (whether your first or second language) there is a order specific in which grammar is learnt. It is argued that there is a high relationship between *~ing*, plural *~s* and the verb *to be*. A vivid understanding of this grammar comes before, for example, irregular past forms. This theory has been developed initially by Stephen Krashen.

Problem area	Example from the text	Problem area	Example from the text
Verbs		Vocabulary	
Articles		Spelling	
Word order		Collocations	

E Personalization

Analyze your own language according to the criteria listed below.

Area	Academic English	My language	Pos/Neg transfer
Verbs	12 x forms (3 x tenses, 4 x aspects); active/passive voice		
Articles	Frequently used, definite and indefinite		
Word order	Subject–Verb–Object the norm		
Choice of vocabulary	Words from different sources, especially native Anglo-Saxon; French; Latin		
Spelling	Spelling and sound do not necessarily match		
Sentence length	Shorter, more concise sentences generally preferred		

For any cases of negative transfer which you have identified, try to find some examples in a recent piece of your writing and identify how you can solve the problem.

F Extension

- Step 3 looks at **plagiarism**, a subject which highlights some of the problems which come from differences in academic cultures.
- Step 38 looks specifically at **collocations**, which are typically highly language-specific.
- Unit I helps you with aspects of grammar, which students often find difficult.
- Appendix 1, Step 11, Document 4 is a photocopyable table for analyzing mother-tongue influence.
- Unit J focuses predominantly on **proofreading**. Good knowledge of this skill can help edit out some of those mistakes which are caused by mother-tongue influence.