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L1 and L2 Writing Differences: From Understanding to Practice

English-language instructors often seek resources, such as instructional materials, digital media, and mentor support, to help capture first-language (L1) and second-language (L2) differences in accessible ways and better support their students. These resources are especially useful for novice instructors who may be learning about such differences and developing their professional practices at the same time.

When it comes to L1 and L2 differences in second-language writing, some researchers are not fully convinced that there is a fundamental difference. However, when comparing L1 and L2 writing, many would agree that macro- and micro-level writing characteristics exist and overlap (Eckstein and Ferris 2018). Identified here are some of the consistent differences between L1 and L2 writing in English. This article identifies differences through a review of existing literature and practical observations from consultants at the Vanderbilt University English Language Center who provide one-to-one writing support for L2 university students at the U.S.-based institution.

The L1 and L2 writing differences are presented in three categories: word-level, sentence-level, and global-level. Frequent tendencies and common errors of L2 writers are featured within the categories. Although the features highlight general trends of L2 writers related to word- and sentence-level tendencies and errors, in reality, these types of errors do not represent all writing differences, despite often receiving the bulk of attention from researchers and practitioners. For this reason, we also include differences in tendencies of language use and composition of L2 writers at the global level.

Being familiar with different L1 and L2 tendencies and errors at the word, sentence, and global levels provides instructors with additional background knowledge of their learners and can help guide instruction. To support the transfer of such information into practice, we also include tips and sample activities for each of the three categories of L1 and L2 writing differences. Finally, while much of the information presented here could be transferred across L1 and L2 learning contexts, the tips and activities that follow have been selected for intermediate to advanced L2 learners in secondary or tertiary academic settings. Our main goal is to provide an accessible resource for English-language instructors who are seeking to better understand L1 and L2 writing differences to improve their teaching practice.

WORD-LEVEL TENDENCIES AND ERRORS: TABLES, TIPS, AND TASKS

The word- and sentence-levels are common focal points for novice instructors when considering L1 and L2 differences and planning instruction, as teacher-preparation courses and related introductory literature often highlight those areas. For this reason,

the L1 and L2 writing differences presented here also feature these levels, beginning with word-level tendencies.

Word-level tendencies and errors of L2 writers are often categorized according to basic parts of speech. Table 1 identifies word choice as a consistent theme across these same categories. Additionally, while Table 2 shows that verbs, nouns, articles, and prepositions continue to be a challenge for L2 writers, particularly in the areas of selection and construction, issues also exist within style and tone. Such issues include students' use of nonacademic language in academic writing contexts. Due to the challenge of style and tone in word choice, instructors might consider using resources that provide L2 students with opportunities to compare their word choices to those of L1 writers or analyze L1 usage.

The tables provide additional details on word-level tendencies (Table 1) and errors (Table 2), including examples, and are followed by word-level tips and sample activities for writing instruction.

Word-level tips and activities for L2 writing instruction

- New vocabulary requires comprehensive instruction to ensure that learning takes place. Help students develop strategies, such as reading context clues and using a learner English dictionary, to further their L2 vocabulary acquisition.
- Define and explain brand-name vocabulary, as it may be unfamiliar to your students (e.g., "Kleenex" = "tissues" and "YouTube" = "video-sharing platform").
- Provide a variety of activities and, if appropriate to your context, include cooperative learning opportunities even when addressing word-level issues.
- Scaffold activities to become less structured as the lesson progresses—for example:
    - Activity 1: Write the correct preposition in the blank.
    - Activity 2: Create sentences using the provided prepositions.
    - Activity 3: Analyze the use of prepositions in an authentic text.
    - Activity 4: Have a dialogue about [a selected topic] using different prepositions.
- Help advanced learners become familiar with academic wordlists or digital tools, such as a corpus, that support language development at the word level.

Category	Word-Level Tendencies of L2 Writers
Verbs	• fewer motion verbs (*enter, leave*) (Crossley and McNamara 2009) • fewer causal verbs (*let, make*) (Crossley and McNamara 2009) • more use of *be* as main verb (especially *be verb + adjective*) (Hinkel 2003b)
Nouns	• more locational nouns (*home, Spain, highway*) to show spatiality (Crossley and McNamara 2009) • more pronouns (first-person *I*) (Crossley and McNamara 2009) • more vague nouns (*people, thing, way*) (Hinkel 2003b)
Adverbs (Hinkel 2003a)	• more manner adverbs to describe how an event occurred (*accurately*, *quickly*, *loudly*) • more amplifiers (*completely*, *undoubtedly*) • more emphatic adverbs to further support a claim (*absolutely*, *definitely*)
Other	• fewer abstract words (*success, freedom, -isms*) (Crossley and McNamara 2009) • fewer words with multiple meanings (*backbone, position, draft*) (Crossley and McNamara 2009) • more use of context-dependent words (*amount, fill*) than high-meaningfulness words (*music, art, movies*) (Crossley and McNamara 2009) • more general words (*do, come, make*) (Crossley and McNamara 2011)

Table 1. Word-level tendencies of L2 writers as compared to those of L1 writers

Activity 1: Stranded!

Language practice: Practicing modal selection

Level: Intermediate

Reference: Table 2. Word-level errors, verbs

Procedure: Place students in small groups. Explain that the groups will be traveling to a desert island where they will need to survive for a number of weeks. To prepare, each group needs to agree on three items to take with them from the following: matches, a solar-powered computer, a toothbrush, a knife, a compass, a sewing kit, antiseptic ointment, a rope, a magnifying glass, and chocolate. A review of the vocabulary may be necessary. Also, demonstrate the expected structure for the group discussion, emphasizing the use of modals:

Student A: We should bring a _____ because _____.

Student B: Actually, we might consider bringing a _____ instead because _____.

Student C: I agree. We must bring a _____, so we can _____.

After each group selects three items through the structure discussions, students pair up with another group and compare and explain their selections. Lastly, each student writes out a dialogue between two or three people, demonstrating their group's item-selection process and highlighting their modal use. Here is a student sample:

Error Category	Description	Example L1 Usage	Example L2 Usage
Verbs (Ferris and Hedgcock 2005)	Tense formation	The bird sang.	The bird singed.
	Passive constructions	The game is played.	The game is play.
	Modal constructions	We should run.	We should running.
	Modal selection (Hinkel 1995)	You should study.	You must study.
	Subject-verb agreement	She flies.	They flies.
	Intransitive vs. transitive	I go with her.	I go her.
Nouns (Ferris and Hedgcock 2005)	Plural forms	men	mans
	Possessive endings	Pablo's	Pablos
	Determiners	I saw that bird.	I saw those bird.
	Countability	lots of information	lots of informations
Articles (Vanderbilt University English Language Center, interviews)	General usage	I want the computer.	I want computer.
Prepositions (Vanderbilt University English Language Center, interviews)	Use with verbs	Think about a topic.	Think in a topic.
	Use with nouns	Are you at home?	Are you in home?
Style and Tone (Hinkel 2015)	Nonacademic (conversational)	Many studies _____.	A lot of studies _____.

Table 2. Word-level errors of L2 writers as compared to usage by L1 writers

Student A: We should bring matches because we will need to start fires for cooking and heat.

Student B: Actually, we might consider bringing a magnifying glass instead because we could run out of matches or they may get wet.

Student C: I agree. We must bring a magnifying glass, so we can have more fires.

If time allows, students can present their dialogues explaining their modal selections.

Activity 2: Hedge It

Language practice: Considering the use of hedging markers

Level: Advanced

Reference: Table 1. Word-level tendencies, adverbs

Procedure: Explain to students that in academic writing, it is important to back up claims and that amplifiers and emphatic adverbs, often used to boost claims, need to be used cautiously. Provide students with language tools (modals, verb choice, and other adverbs) that can soften claims and help to ensure a defensible analysis, a practice called *hedging*.

Give each student a slip of paper stating a different claim that could be softened, such as "Education results in a better life," "Technology undermines human connections," and "It is obvious that smoking should be banned." Students take turns reading their claims to the class (or group) and allow other students to offer suggestions and rationale for softening the claim (hedging it). Here is a student sample:

Student A: Cars are clearly responsible for air pollution. (original claim)

Student B: Cars are likely responsible for air pollution. (different adverb choice)

Student C: Cars may be responsible for air pollution. (modal)

Student D: Cars contribute to air pollution. (verb choice)

This process continues until students work through different ways to soften each of the original claims. An extension activity is to have students analyze an academic article from their discipline, identifying examples of hedging in the text.

Activity 3: Count, Noncount, and Run!

Language practice: Sorting and applying count and noncount nouns

Levels: Intermediate to Advanced

Reference: Table 2. Word-level errors, nouns

Procedure: Label index cards or similar-sized pieces of paper with count nouns, noncount nouns, and nouns that can be both count and noncount, writing one noun on each card. The nouns may be based on a current unit theme and can vary by class level. For example, for an intermediate-level class in an academic setting, the selected nouns may be as follows:

- Count nouns: *solution*, *cause*, *process*, *theory*, and *analysis*
- Noncount nouns: *research*, *homework*, *information*, *vocabulary*, and *equipment*
- Both: *paper*, *religion*, *life*, *time*, and *experience*

Provide small groups with mixed-up sets of the labeled index cards and ask groups to sort the cards by noun type: count, noncount, and both.

After the cards are sorted and checked as a class, give each group a list of determiners—written on the board, in a handout, or on another set of index cards. Examples of determiners are *a*, *each*, *my*, *several*, *less*, *this*, *many*, *few*, *plenty of*, *neither*, and *the*. The groups discuss which type of noun can be used with each determiner provided, and then the groups practice creating sentences joining the determiners with the sorted nouns, such as "Smaller universities may do less research than larger universities." The groups may have

to change the noun form to fit a determiner (e.g., with *several* and *solution*, the plural form of the noun needs to be used). After some practice, the groups can challenge one another. The instructor announces one of the determiners, and a representative from each group hurries to the board to see who can use the selected determiner and one of the sorted nouns appropriately in a sentence. The first representative to complete the task successfully receives a point for their group. The process continues until all of the determiners have been practiced by the students. Here is a sample:

> Instructor: "Each!" (A representative from each group hurries to the board.)
>
> Group A representative writes: The paper discusses each theory.
>
> Group B representative writes: The student is reading each information.
>
> Group C representative writes: The teacher shared each solution.

The instructor asks which group was the first to use *each* and one of the nouns correctly in a sentence. The class reviews the groups' responses on the board, and a point is awarded to the group that used the targeted language correctly first. (In the example above, the sentences by Groups A and C are correct, but Group C received the point for completing the task first.)

If time allows, students practice writing sentences with the provided determiners and sorted noun cards, individually or in small groups, either in preparation for the board-race activity or as a review. An extension is to have students write sentences using the provided determiners but selecting other nouns, either in another round of the activity or at their seats.

SENTENCE-LEVEL TENDENCIES AND ERRORS: TABLES, TIPS, AND TASKS

Research on sentence-level tendencies demonstrates an overall preference among L2 writers for more-simplified grammatical structures but also an inclination toward specific formulaic language functions (see Table 3). Interestingly, similar to the sentence-level tendencies, sentence-level errors often experienced by L2 writers, namely word order and verb tense (see Table 4), may also be based on propensities stemming from L1 rules and patterns as well as previous L2 exposure.

The tables provide additional details on sentence-level tendencies (Table 3) and errors (Table 4), including examples, and are followed by sentence-level tips and sample activities for writing instruction.

Sentence-level tips and activities for L2 writing instruction

- Build on the sentence-level structures that students already know.

Category	Sentence-Level Tendencies of L2 Writers
Clauses (Silva 1993)	• more clauses per sentence • shorter average clause length
Conjunctions (Silva 1993)	• more coordination (*and*, *but*, *of*) • less subordination (*after*, *because*, *even though*)
Syntax (Hinkel 2002)	• less variety and complexity of word organization (*subject + verb + object*) • more simple sentences (*Students read Chomsky*) than complex sentences (*The instructor made students read Chomsky*)
Lexical Bundles (groups of words often found together) (Pérez-Llantada 2014)	• more identification-focused bundles (*an important role in*; *of the most important*; *taken into account*) • more inferential bundles (*due to the fact*; *as a consequence of*; *on the basis of*) and fewer stance bundles for hedging (*it is important to note*; *it is likely/possible that*)

Table 3. Sentence-level tendencies of L2 writers as compared to those of L1 writers

Error Category	Description	Example L1 Usage	Example L2 Usage
Word Order	subject and object placement	I threw the ball.	The ball I threw.
	misplaced modifiers	the large cake	the cake large
Tense	tense agreement	As the principal talked, she looked around.	As the principal talked, she looks around.

Table 4. Sentence-level errors of L2 writers as compared to usage by L1 writers
(Vanderbilt University English Language Center, interviews)

- Use examples of sentence patterns from authentic texts that are of interest to the students.

- Refer to corpora to guide instruction and materials development and to allow students to validate linguistic features and examine language use.

- Limit feedback to specific errors focusing on targeted language skills, such as those being practiced. Note: Students may become overwhelmed when instructors point out all identifiable errors, including errors that the students have not yet received focused instruction on.

Activity 1: Four Corners

Language practice: Using subordinate conjunctions to transition between two ideas in a sentence

Level: Intermediate

Reference: Table 3. Sentence-level tendencies, conjunctions

Procedure: Create four signs labeled in large print with each of the following: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, and *Strongly Disagree*. Post one of the signs in each of the four corners of the room and place several sheets of large sticky easel paper (butcher paper or note paper will also work) and a large dark marker in each corner. On the board (or equivalent), post a list of ten to 12 subordinate conjunctions previously reviewed in class (e.g., *even though*, *since*, *after*, *because*, *so*, *once*, *whenever*, *due to*, *unless*). Ask students to stand in the center of the room while you read a controversial statement that they can connect with, such as, "Cell phone use among children should be illegal." After you read it, students move to the corner of the room that most identifies their position on the statement. For example, those who strongly disagree with the statement will move to the corner labeled *Strongly Disagree*. Give the four self-sorted groups five minutes to come up with arguments defending their position on the statement and to record those ideas on the paper provided. Students should use subordinate conjunctions from the list provided or other subordinate conjunctions they know to structure their arguments (e.g., "Due to possible health risks, cell phone use among children should be illegal").

After five minutes, each group presents its supporting arguments. Upon hearing the groups' arguments, students may decide to move to a different corner if they have been swayed by another group's argument(s). Students who shift their position on an issue may be asked to explain their reason for doing so (ideally, using a subordinate conjunction in the explanation). Continue to read out controversial statements, with the students moving to the corner that best supports their position on the statement. For each statement, students work together to develop their arguments, using subordinate conjunctions.

Note that this activity has been adapted to focus on subordinate conjunctions and that similar adaptations could be made to focus on other practice areas. An extension activity is to require each student to select one of the statements presented and write a response paragraph, based on the arguments shared. Keeping the arguments posted around the room will allow students to easily refer back to the points made during the discussions and

be able to see examples of the subordinate-conjunction structure expected of them.

Activity 2: Verb-Tense Baseball

Language practice: Reviewing verb-tense agreement

Levels: Intermediate to Advanced

Reference: Table 4. Sentence-level errors, tense

Background: Depending on the background of your students, you might begin by explaining the basics of baseball. Videos and handouts that provide an orientation to baseball are available online; a simple explanation based on your own understanding would work, too.

Procedure: Divide the class into two teams. Explain the following rules to the students: One team will be in the field, and the other team will be up to bat. The team that is in the field will consist of the pitcher (to read the questions), the infielders and outfielders (to decide whether the batters' answers are correct), and the scorekeeper. These roles can rotate between innings (rounds). The umpire (teacher) will also help manage the game. The team "at bat" will take turns coming to the batter's box at home plate. (Bases can be made from paper and posted.) At home plate, the batter receives a teacher-prepared question, related to verb tense, from the pitcher. The question could require the batter to provide a grammar rule, rule explanation, or correct verb formation based on a prompt. Examples are level-dependent but might be similar to the following:

- In academic writing, what tense is generally preferred? (1 base)

- What tense is used after the time markers *since* and *for*? (1 base)
  (If correct) Give a sentence using this construction. (Steal another base for a total of 2.)

- Provide the correct verb tense: Research _____ (to show) that healthy eating promotes productivity. (2 bases)
  (If correct) Provide the rule that supports your choice. (Steal a base for a total of 3.)

- Different tenses can occur in the same sentence or paragraph due to a clear shift. Give one reason for such a shift. (3 bases)

If the batter answers the question correctly, he or she moves around the baseball diamond (classroom) according to the number of bases indicated on the pitcher's card. The batter stays on base until being bumped ahead by another batter and making it home (earning a point). If the batter answers the question incorrectly, the team gets an out (three outs and the team returns to the field). If desirable to further extend students' knowledge of baseball, add in cards that indicate aspects of the game, such as a strike or ball (three strikes = an out; four balls = a base). Once a team has three outs, the teams switch places (at bat and in the field). The number of innings (rounds) played can vary, based on teacher and student needs, but each team should have the same number of opportunities at bat. This activity could be adapted to a more localized sport that students are familiar with, especially if the cultural aspect of understanding baseball is not a lesson objective.

An extension activity is to provide students with the game questions to answer on their own before reviewing the questions as a class. Additionally, once students become familiar with the game, each team could create questions for the other team.

GLOBAL-LEVEL TENDENCIES: TABLE, TIPS, AND TASKS

Global-level tendencies describe the style and cohesion of written texts, with features such as genre conformity, organizational styles, and academic styles. These features are often informed by culture and marked by individual approaches, generally precluding such use from being viewed as errors. Despite this, helping L2 writers establish a framework for analyzing and adhering to context-specific, global-level expectations in academic writing is important, as writers are customarily expected to adapt to the global-level features upheld by their

audience. However, a global-level instructional focus may be less familiar to L2 writers due to the more consistent prioritizing of linguistic deficiencies, such as grammar, in traditional writing instruction. We have presented the global-level tendencies due to the relative lack of focus in the literature; also, our analysis found the relationship between tendencies and errors to seem like two sides of the same coin and more challenging to delineate.

Table 5 provides details on global-level tendencies of L2 writers and is followed by related tips and sample activities for this level of writing instruction.

Global-level tips and activities for L2 writing instruction

- Remind students regularly that rhetorical traditions can vary across disciplines and cultures, so it is important to understand what is expected of them in the context they are writing in.

- Review model papers in class to demonstrate the format, citation style, and organizational framework expected of students.

- Help students develop outlining skills to encourage an intentional consideration of audience and genre. Through reverse outline activities, students develop an outline of an existing model text. Such activities provide additional outlining practice while also furthering students' genre-analysis skills.

- Consider focusing on the following global-level writing areas as part of a student-needs analysis: paraphrasing and summarizing; citation rules and conventions; and analyzing, synthesizing, and organizing argumentation and author positioning.

Activity 1: In the News

Language practice: Analyzing and applying discourse organization

Level: Intermediate

Reference: Table 5. Global-level tendencies, rhetorical conventions

Procedure: Cut up several copies of a newspaper headline into separate words. Organize groups of students to work together, putting the words of the headline in the correct order. Then, students share out the headlines they created. The teacher shares the actual headline with students, who then predict what the news story is about and the order in which the information is revealed in the article. Next, students read the actual news article, labeling the type of information that appears in each paragraph as (1) lead paragraph, (2) body of supporting details, and (3) additional information. As a class, discuss the organization of the news article and potential reasons for such a layout.

After this warm-up, provide each group with another headline (or a different headline per group) that is again divided into separate

Category	Global-Level Tendencies of L2 Writers
Logical Cohesion (logical structure of text)	fewer cause–effect relationships (Crossley and McNamara 2009)
Lexical Cohesion (how meanings of words relate to each other in text)	fewer words within abstract hierarchical relationships (*car*, *sedan*) (Crossley and McNamara 2009)
Referential Cohesion (how text and words refer to each other and outside texts)	more provision of new information; less lexical overlap or repetition for cohesiveness (Crossley and McNamara 2009)
Rhetorical Conventions	more prioritizing of linguistic deficiencies (e.g., grammar) than discourse organization and style related to genre (Grav and Cayley 2015)

Table 5. Global-level tendencies of L2 writers as compared to those of L1 writers

words. Each group creates a headline based on the words provided. (It is not necessary to supply the correct headline here.) Then, the groups create news stories based on the headlines they created and the structure discussed from the original article. Finally, the groups share their news stories with the class, highlighting both the content and organization but also the importance of the structure in the story development. (Note that the headline-creation steps are included to help engage the students and make them feel invested in the activity. These steps could be eliminated if time is an issue, as the activity is engaging regardless.)

An extension activity is to ask students to look at other texts they are familiar with—recipes, manuals, brochures, and textbooks—and analyze the discourse organization presented in those texts.

Activity 2: Connect the Thoughts

Language practice: Incorporating cohesive strategies within a text

Levels: Intermediate to Advanced

Reference: Table 5. Global-level tendencies, rhetorical conventions

Procedure: Take a level-appropriate text (generally eight to ten sentences long) and cut it into strips of sentences. The text will ideally have limited cohesion and be on a subject not closely familiar to the students. Instructors may need to alter an existing text, such as part of a research article, news story, previous course paper, or other informational text, by removing cohesive devices like repeated key terms, generic transitions, and dovetailing. Provide sets of the sentence strips, out of order, to student pairs. The pairs attempt to put the sentences in order, building a paragraph, and then share their sentence-ordering strategies with the class as well as describing what made the activity challenging. A lack of cohesion will likely be discussed as a challenge (if not, the teacher can present the notion); the teacher then talks with students about strategies for connecting ideas in a text. After discussing such strategies, pairs set out to incorporate cohesive devices into their ordered sentence strips (now a paragraph) to better connect the ideas and enhance flow. If resources allow, students might add the cohesive devices to their paragraphs by using different-colored sticky notes or other ways to color-code, such as yellow for repeating key terms, green for generic transitions, and blue for dovetailing. Color-coding helps reinforce the idea that using a variety of cohesive devices typically makes for better-crafted writing. In the end, each pair reads the revised (and newly cohesive) paragraph to the class. Highlight the different strategies that the groups successfully employed; for example: "Class, notice how Stefan and Raul used [cohesive strategy] to connect the ideas of *x* and *y*. Stefan and Raul, could you please read that part again?"

An extension activity is to have students analyze a text from their discipline, perhaps even a piece of their own writing or that of a peer, identifying examples of cohesive devices used by the writer(s).

CONCLUSION

This article has provided a compilation of L1 and L2 writing tendencies and errors while also offering tips and activities related to the word-, sentence-, and global-levels of L2 writing instruction. While the word-, sentence-, and global-level features highlighted in this article are helpful for understanding and teaching L2 writers, additional differences may exist in your specific context. Note that the fact that these features may also appear in the writing of L1 writers and proficient L2 writers does not necessarily indicate that these writers are any less holistically proficient. Differences in writing ability and tendencies lie more within the two groups than across or between them. Reasons for these differences include proficiency in the L1 and educational experience with various forms of writing. Following is a final list of tips that can be applied across the three levels:

General tips for L2 writing instruction

- Make instructions and expectations explicit, especially with writing assignments. Providing instructions both in writing and orally aids understanding.
- Present key terms and ideas on the board, a screen, or poster paper so that students can follow more easily and take notes that they can review later.
- If you ask students to write about or respond to a lecture or written content, realize that their listening and reading language skills may impair their ability to write on the topic.
- Consider the extent to which cultural knowledge is necessary to meet task expectations.
- Provide contextualized learning opportunities to make instruction more effective. To do so, practice lesson objectives within the students' own work, teacher writing samples, or other authentic texts.
- If relevant, explain and demonstrate discipline-specific writing expectations, styles, and skills, as such expectations can vary greatly from one discipline to another.
- Help students learn how to examine their own work critically, finding errors and making changes that strengthen their own writing. Providing students with a checklist to review alongside their work can assist with this process (e.g., "Did I include topic sentences?").
- Incorporating a peer-review process can help reinforce learning. Providing a rubric or checklist for peer reviews ensures that students are using the same framework and language to give their feedback.
- Make feedback as meaningful as possible by explaining abbreviations and what you mean by comments such as "awkward" or "unclear."
- Allow time for students to revise their work, based on feedback, to solidify learning. If time allows, discuss revisions individually with students before they begin the revision process.

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