# A Comparative Study of Errors in ESL Learners' Writing: **A Cross-linguistic Analysis**

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#### Abstract

The study aims to examine the effectiveness of traditional methods for developing English as a Second Language (L2) writing. None of the studies has focused on L2 writing errors comparing the effectiveness of English language teaching methods in the classrooms. However, the current study investigates the efficacy of Grammar translation (GT) and communicative language teaching (CLT) methods in minimizing first language (L1) transfer errors in (L2) writing for 12th grade students in senior secondary public schools. The study included 180 participants randomly. The participants were divided into four groups: two experimental groups were exposed to GT and CLT methods, and two control groups were treated based on their regular curriculum in Hindi and English medium schools for three weeks. The data was extracted from participants over pre and post-test and analyzed quantitatively. The results of this study indicate students made more L1 transfer errors in Hindi Medium Schools in comparison to the English medium in L2 writing. Furthermore, students made a lesser mean of errors for the post-test rather than the pre-test. Moreover, the GT method performed better in Hindi and English medium classrooms than the CLT method in terms of minimizing L1 transfer errors after attending their pre-designed classes. The importance of the GT method for teaching and learning English in India is explored considering current literature on English teaching methods.

**Keywords:** Hindi and English medium schools; L1 transfer errors; Grammar translation method; Communicative language teaching; L2 writing

#### 1. Introduction

Several methods, such as grammar translation (GT) and communicative language teaching (CLT), have been employed to enhance English (L2) writing proficiency in a non-native classroom. However, previous studies have found that L2 learners made numerous errors as a result of the effect of first language (L1) on second language (L2) English compositions (Pondra, 2015; Farooqi, 2015; Fakhar, 2013; Lalitha, 2001; Ahmad, 1996). These studies also indicated that L1 influences L2 to affect the meaning. In this context, hardly any study has focused on the effectiveness of GT and CLT methods in minimizing L1 transfer errors in the writing of L2. Therefore, the current study intends to improve writing by reducing errors by employing GT and CLT methods in a classroom. Teachers can use the current study findings to identify strategies to teach and learn L2 writing. This study has set out an objective to examine the L1 transfer errors which 12th grade English students have committed. This study is also accountable for L2 writing development to eradicate L1 transfer errors by adopting applicable teaching and learning methods. Furthermore, the current study looks at the impact of GT and CLT on L2 learners' ability to eliminate L1 transfer errors in L2 writing.

# 1.1. Grammar Translation (GT) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) Methods

However, India's most vigorous GT tradition is still alive (Lee & Spolsky, 2020; Sharma, 2020). GT is the method of L2 instruction that is primarily structural-based and teacher-centered, and priority is given to accuracy (to develop the structural knowledge of an L2 by comparing the structures of L1 and L2) over fluency (Piantaggini, 2020; Benati, 2018; Larsen-Freeman, 2013; 2000; Savignon, 2007; Griffiths, 2001). Additionally, it emphasizes the 'linguistic competence' ability of learners. Noam Chomsky (1993; 1965; 1957) states that 'linguistic competence' is the structural knowledge of the speaker-hearer's language (Rivers, 1973).

CLT is the method of L2 instruction that is primarily meaning-based, learner-centered and focuses on accuracy and fluency (to develop the comprehension and production of messages in L2) (Kumar & Choudhury, 2020; Celce-Murcia, 2008;

Richards, 2006; Savignon, 2007; 1987). Also, it focuses on learners' 'communicative competence' ability.

According to Dell Hymes (1972; 1967), the 'competence' that Chomsky emphasizes is called 'linguistic competence,' a narrower feature of broader meaning. Dell Hymes states that 'communicative competence' encompasses 'linguistic competence' and covers other variables such as language acquisition and learning socio-cultural aspects. In addition, he emphasizes another significant characteristic of language, the applied and communicative capability of language, which is not discussed adequately in the domain of language learning. Furthermore, he highlights the importance of stressing communicative proficiency rather than language structure in teaching and learning. Furthermore, Canale and Swain (1980) recommend that, in the sense of L2 learning, 'communicative competence' is minimally composed of grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. Currently, teachers primarily utilize the teaching method of CLT extensively in many countries, including India, and emphasize the use of English as a medium of communication in L2 classrooms (Christ and Makarani, 2009; Nunan, 1991).

# 1.2. Language Transfer in a Contact Situation

The most critical component of L2 learning research has been the importance of linguistic information transfer from a first language (L1) to a target language (L2) (Ellis, 2006; 1994; Papadopoulou and Clahsen, 2003; Schwartz, 1998; Schwartz and Sprouse, 1996; Selinker & Gass, 1992; Ringbom, 1990; 1987; Odlin, 1989). Currently, most teachers and researchers agree that learners utilize their knowledge of L1 un/intentionally when they try to learn an L2 (Schmitt, 2002). These phrases have been used to describe the same phenomenon: language transfer, linguistic interference, L1 influence, and cross-linguistic influence (Odlin, 2003; 1989). This claims that not any term frequently employed by researchers is agreeable. For instance, Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) discussed interlingual interference, Cook (2000) and Chen (1999) used the term language transfer and cross-linguistic interferences, and Schmitt (2002) preferred the L1 effect. All phenomena, however, belong to the same concept: the impact of first-language (L1) experiences on second-language (L2) learning.

Odlin (1989) developed a conceptual framework of 'language transfer' and said, "Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired." According to Selinker and Gass (1992), the term transfer encompasses various acts that interact with input from the L2 and universal language features. Prior studies on transfer have not distinguished between negative and positive transfer. According to Gass and Selinker (2001), these two concepts are unlike learning processes: positive and negative transfer. This effect may either cause an error due to negative transfer or a force that aids in acquiring an L2 due to positive transfer. L2 learners, according to Bardovi-Harlig & Sprouse (2018), rely on structures from their L1 to construct L2 utterances, which can be either weather help or a hindrance. The hindrance (negative transfer) leads to an error because of L1 in using L2 (Odlin, 1989). The negative transfer shows up in a variety of linguistic domains. Languages can vary distinctly in several independent ways. The previous linguistic information in learning a second language is determined by the link that may be formed between the L1 and L2 in the learner's language. The inclusion of linguistic features identical to L1 encourage learners to learn L2 (positive transfer).

In contrast, the influencing consequence is called negative transfer if the L1 and L2 features are dissimilar around any related parameter of a given L2 function. Therefore, applied linguists tend to concentrate on negative rather than positive transfer, as it is commonly considered that only negative transfer causes learning difficulties. The degree of divergence between the L1 and the L2 has been demonstrated to impact learning an L2's structure in several previous studies. (e.g., Tolentino & Tokowicz, 2014; 2011, Morett & MacWhinney, 2013).

# 1.3. Studies on L2 Writing Errors in Indian English

Many small-scale studies have been conducted in India to study the errors made by English learners. Ahmad (1996) observes that L2 learners have commonly experienced phonology, morphology, syntactic and orthographic difficulties. Mainly, errors in learners' writing related to word order, prepositions, and articles because of L1 transfer. Corroborating evidence appears from previous research, which accounts for the errors in English writing with articles and prepositions, and the cause of those errors was mainly due to L1 transfer (Farooqi, 2015). According to the results, the first most frequent specific error categories are the addition of unnecessary and omitted articles where they were

necessary (Farooqi, 2015). The omission, addition, and incorrect usage of prepositions are the most common second-type errors (Farooqi, 2015). Fakhar (2013) investigates the incidence of prepositional errors in secondary school English writing. The outcome of this study indicates that learning English prepositions yields low degrees of achievement. The wider language structural difference between second and first languages was cited as the reason for this. Pondra (2016) also identifies the tense, lexical, preposition, article, spelling, concord, and conjunction in the learners use to struggle in learning an L2 that is influenced by intra and interlingual errors. He reports that errors related to prepositions and articles are the primary source of interlingual errors. Lalitha (2001), who investigates L1 influence and issues in learning grammar, specifically in articles and prepositions, observes the morphology of L2 to be a challenge because of the structural differences between L2 target and L1 source languages. It can be observed from the findings of previous studies that the L1 negatively affects the learning of an L2 in the classroom context.

Based on the data from previous studies on L2 writing errors, it can be inferred that L1 transfer has a significant detrimental impact on the protracted process of learning an L2. The findings also reveal that L1 becomes the rationale for errors in their knowledge of L2. Therefore, this research aims to shed light on the errors related to definite articles, prepositions, and word order in learners' L2 writing and how the errors are motivated by the interference of the L1 source language.

# 1.4. Aims of this Study

The current study primarily aims to identify the L1 transfer errors in definite articles, prepositions, and word order in L2 writing and to compare the effectiveness of GT and CLT in reducing L1 transfer errors in L2 writing. In this context, we hypothesize that GT and CLT may affect the learning of L2 grammar in writing differently. Therefore, to investigate this hypothesis, the present study has analyzed L2 writing errors and compared the occurrences of errors in pre and post-test teaching utilizing GT and CLT methods.

To achieve the objectives, the current study aimed to answer the following research questions:

- A. Do the learners of L2 commit L1 transfer errors in writing, particularly in article, preposition, and word order?
- B. Is there any significant difference between L1 transfer errors before and after the intervention of grammar-translation and communicative language teaching methods in L2 writing?

# 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants and Sampling

The participants for this study were chosen using a random sampling procedure. The study was performed in UP Board (Uttar Pradesh Board of High School and Intermediate Education) and CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education) institutions. Therefore, we employed random sampling, which ensures that each sample has an equal chance of being chosen. A sample drawn at random is expected to be representative of the entire population. Randomization was achieved by assigning even odd numbers to each student randomly.

The Control group (CG) consisted of all students given odd numbers, while the experimental groups (GT and CLT groups) consisted of all students given even numbers.

A total of 180 students from the 12th class participated in the study. They were learners of English, studying science, commerce, and art & humanities disciplines at the senior secondary levels. The 12<sup>th</sup> class students were selected for this study because they had learned and understood English for more than ten years. All participants were willing to participate in the study by signing an informed consent form. One hundred eighty selected students consisted of males (N=89) and females (N=91) who were 16 to 19 years old at the time of data collection. Participants stated that they had studied English as a subject since they were in elementary school. All participants were native speakers of Hindi and functionally bilingual; they had lived in the same language region (Sitapur, Uttar Pradesh, India). The students who participated in the study belonged to a semi-urban background.

# 2.2. Classroom Infrastructure and Teaching Procedure

This experimental research design was carried out in U.P Board and CBSE Schools in India. The GT and CLT method was used for students in UP board school; similarly, GT and CLT method was used for students in CBSE School. The classrooms were large and

simple, with a green chalkboard. All the students were seated comfortably on benches close to the teacher. The implementation of GT and CLT with writing strategy instruction lasted three weeks.

EG and CG students contacted the same teachers for 40-50 minutes each day (excluding Sunday). We assigned an instructor to teach the pre-designed classes. They were assigned to teach L2, which included grammatical topics such as definite articles, prepositions, and word order because these aspects of grammar are entirely in contrast to their L1. The instructor used the regular and routine syllabus for teaching an L2 for the control group. The EG teachers consciously delivered the lectures through grammar-translation and communicative language teaching methods to maintain the classroom's intended environment.

# 2.3. Data Collection Procedure & Analysis

A questionnaire was given to all groups at the beginning of the term to collect context information about them, including gender, age, and years of English study. Then, write an essay on the topic 'Introducing India to the Foreigners' (Hamid, 2007) within a time limit of 45 min on a sheet before intervention. After completing the task, the students were given a chance to read the sentences carefully and correct the mistakes they had made in their writing. Following the lesson, participants were instructed to 'write about a movie which you have watched recently', and the same procedure was applied, which was utilized for pre-intervention.

This study utilizes Corder's (1974) method of EA, which consists of three stages: a collection of data (recognition of errors), describing the errors (accounting for the errors), and then explaining the errors of learners (description of errors). Later, adopted Dulay et al. (1982) taxonomy of general language production errors; the study also looked into three different errors: omissions, additions, and misformation. A checklist was employed to record the committed errors and their frequency in the sentences. Two professional English Language teachers examined all of the sentences. Errors were coded using a series of three symbols: A (article), P (preposition), and WO (word order).

# 2.4. Procedure of Analysis

For repeated measures, ANOVAs, the frequency of errors for each student was measured and arranged through variables. Only significant effects ( $\alpha$  =.05) were identified and reported for interpreting the findings in a series of repeated ANOVAs using within-subject

variables of methods (GT & CLT), groups (Experimental & Control), and tests (pre & post).

#### 2.5. Ethical Considerations

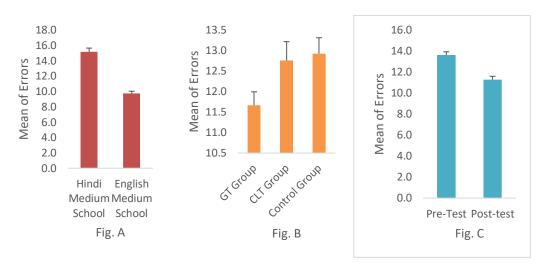
An ethical approval form was completed before the study was carried out and submitted to the National Institute of Technology Raipur, Chhattisgarh. Before the beginning of the project, permission from the institute was obtained. Furthermore, before the study, approval was gained from the participants. The participants were told that their identities would not be revealed.

#### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Statistical Analysis of Errors

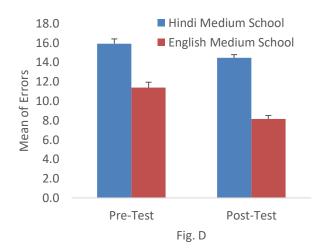
A three-way ANOVA on the frequency of errors of 2 schools (Hindi and English medium schools) × 2 groups (control and experimental) × 2 tests (pre and post) showed the main effect of school, F (1, 29) = 85.950, P=.001,  $\eta^2 p$  = .748, revealing higher mean of L1 transfer errors committed by the learners in Hindi medium school than English medium school in L2 writing (Fig. A). Further, the main effect of group, F (1, 29) = 3.799, P=.035,  $\eta^2 p$  = .213, revealed the result that the total mean of L1 transfer errors was higher for the control group than the experimental group in L2 writing (Fig. B). In addition, an analysis showed a significant main effect of tests, F (1, 29) = 65.394, P=.001,  $\eta^2 p$  = .693, revealing the total mean of the L1 transfer errors was higher for pre-test than post-test in L2 writing (Fig. C).

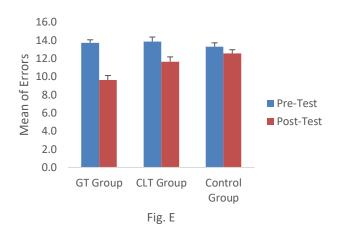
Figure: (A) Mean of errors for Hindi and English medium schools; (B) mean of errors for groups (C) mean of errors for tests (pre and post).



The interactional effect between schools × tests was significant, F (1, 29) = 11.225, P=.002,  $\eta^2 p$  = .279, suggesting the learners have reduced their L1 transfer errors in L2 writing post-treatment of GT and CLT (Fig. D). Further, the interaction between the group × test was significant, F (1, 29) = 20.875, P=.001,  $\eta^2 p$  = .599, showing the lesser mean of errors for the GT group post-treatment than CLT and control group (Fig. E).

Figure: (D) the mean of errors for tests (pre and post) in Hindi and English medium schools; (E) the mean of errors in tests (pre and post) for GT, CLT and Control groups.





The interaction between schools  $\times$  groups  $\times$  tests, F (1, 29) = 3.615, P=.040,  $\eta^2 p$  = .205, signifying the mean of L1 transfer errors in GT group were minimized rapidly post-treatment in English medium school than Hindi medium school. In English medium school, the learners in the GT group have reduced M=5.433 of errors which are higher than post treatment of CLT M=3.367, and control group M=-0.900 which is comparatively higher than GT, CLT of Hindi medium school (Fig. E).

The remaining interactional effect between schools × the group was significant, F (1, 29) = 1.606, P=.219,  $\eta^2 p$  = .103) was insignificant.

# 3.2. Analysis of L1 Transfer Errors in Definite Article

Learning definite English articles is sometimes regarded as the most challenging structural aspect for L2 learners. This is because the definite article 'the' depends on situational reference. Related to this, the L2 learners of English through GT and CLT have committed common errors in using definite articles. The position of the error in the example is indicated with an asterisk\*:

- 1. GT as Experimental Group (Omission of the definite article): \*You can see a lovely fountain before \*Taj Mahal. (You can see a lovely fountain before **the** Taj Mahal.)
- 2. CLT as Experimental Group (Omission of the definite article): Ganga is \*longest river. (Ganga is **the** longest river.)
- 3. Control Group (Omission of the definite article): India is \*only one country where most foreigners visit. (India is **the** only country where most foreigners visit.)

The errors related to omission were found in the definite article with a particular thing or person (example 1), ordinals number (example 2), and superlative degree (example 3).

# 3.3. Analysis L1 Transfer Errors in Prepositions

A preposition is a grammatical aspect that occurs with high frequency and is considered a more complex phenomenon. There are different prepositions, and they are all polysemous. A single preposition can denote various relationships, while many prepositions can denote the same relationship. These examples below indicate that learners of English had a wrong choice of prepositions, which are indicated with an asterisk\*:

- 4. GT as Experimental Group (Misuse of Preposition 'in'): The foreigner's flight comes to Lucknow airport \*in late night. (The foreigner's flight comes to Lucknow airport late at night.)
- 5. CLT as Experimental Group (Addition of Preposition 'on'): All Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and Christians enjoy \*on Deepawali Eid and Christmas together. (All Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians enjoy Deepawali Eid and Christmas together.)
- 6. Control Group (Omission of Preposition 'at'): Then we reach Allahabad from Lucknow \*7 o'clock in the morning. (Then we reach Allahabad from Lucknow at 7 a.m.)

L2 learners through GT and CLT in writing have committed errors in prepositions related to time. For example, learners were found to misuse the preposition 'on' in writing (examples 5). Further, most errors were found wherein L2 learners used the wrong preposition 'in' for the 'night' (example 4). Additionally, most L2 learners had omitted the preposition 'at' for a specific time (example 6).

#### 3.4. Analysis of L1 Transfer Errors in Word-Order

Generally, L2 learners face difficulties in word order if it is contrary to L1. Given examples indicate that learners of English had made errors in word order. Erroneous examples are given below, indicated with an asterisk\*:

7. GT as Experimental Group: India mother tongue hindi is\*. (India's mother tongue is Hindi)

- 8. CLT as Experimental Group: India is so beautiful plas becose, India in\* tree, India in temples, India in seas. (*India is so beautiful place because, in India, there are trees, temples, and seas*)
- 9. Control Group: India land is agricultural use\*. (India's land is used for agriculture)
- L2 learners, through GT and CLT methods in writing, have committed common errors in word order. For example, example 14 indicates that L2 learners had used the auxiliary verb 'is' incorrectly because of its wrong order. Example 8 also indicates that L2 learners had used 'verb' at the end of the sentence. Additionally, L2 learners made errors in misordering the sentence's preposition (examples 7 & 8).

#### 4. Discussion

The focus of the current study was to compare the effectiveness of grammar-translation and communicative language teaching in minimizing L1 transfer errors, particularly for the definite article, prepositions, and word order in the classroom of L2 learning. We found that the learners of L2 in GT and CLT groups committed L1 transfer errors related to definite articles, prepositions, and word order (RQ A). The GT group performed better for post-test than the CLT group's post-test in L2 writing errors (RQ B). This study also includes the findings about GT and CLT that the quality of writing after employing GT and CLT methods improved significantly in terms of fewer committed errors than those written before the intervention of methods. Additionally, we found that the learners of English through the GT method improved writing speedily by decreasing errors in Hindi and English medium schools compared to the CLT. Additionally, the GT method performed better in English medium classrooms in comparison to CLT and Hindi medium schools. According to Schenck, 2017; Long and Robinson, 1988; Griffiths & Parr, 2001; Celce-Murcia, 1991 and Hendrickson, 1978 GT method conceptualized language learning as a process of habit formation and overemphasized grammar accuracy. Additionally, this method uses the L1 for teaching the target language, which is more effective due to language transfer in comprehending the rules of the target language (Salmona, 2014; Horst et al., 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2000; Carson, 1992).

# 4.1. L1 Transfer Error in Definite Article

This finding is compatible with the findings of Lay & Yavuz (2020), Terzioğlu & Bostanci (2020), Basher (2019), Atmaca (2016), Chrabaszcz & Jiang (2014), and Crompton (2011), which exhibited that the errors related to definite article occur more frequently in Turkish, Arabic and Russian due to L1 transfer. Murphy (1985) defines that the article 'the' is used before a particular person and thing, river, holy book, historical building, superlative degree, and ordinal number. In this direction, L2 learners have omitted the definite article 'the' (examples 1 to 3), which appears to be the outcome of the L1 transfer in L2 writing.

The L1 transfer, due to the absence of the definite article in Hindi, is predictable because such type of definite article is not present in Hindi (Kachru, 2006). Thus, using the definite article is much more complicated for English learners who have acquired Hindi as their first language (L1).

# 4.2. L1 Transfer Errors in Prepositions

The learners are facing difficulties in using the correct prepositions because Hindi does not have the feature of a preposition. Given examples above indicate that learners of English have committed errors related to omission and wrong choice of prepositions. These findings are consistent with those of prior studies (Kazazoğlu, 2020; Eng et al., 2020; Gayo & Widodo, 2018; Kusumawardhani, 2018; Abushihab, 2014; Catalán, 1996), which reveal that prepositional errors are the most frequently found in Turkish, Arabic, Chinese and Indonesian L2 learners due to L1 transfer. Hindi follows the postposition, which varies in terms of sentence functions. L2 learners have incorrectly used the prepositions 'in' and 'on' for time, particularly for 'night' and 'occasion/event' (examples 4 & 5). In Hindi, the postposition 'H' [me] (in) and 'Tr' [par] (on) are used for multiple contexts. The L2 learners had transferred the function of 'H' [me] (in) and 'Tr' [par] (on) negatively for the night and occasion/event. So, the cause of the error was attributable to the negative L1 transfer. In addition, most L2 learners have omitted the preposition 'at' for a specific (clock time) time (example 6). Hindi does not have this preposition for a specific point in time. This indicates that the error has occurred due to the L1 transfer (Kachru, 2006).

#### 4.3. L1 Transfer Errors in Word Order

Hindi and English do not follow the same word order structure. Hindi follows SOV (subject-object-verb) while English follows SVO (subject-verb-object) (Kachru, 2006).

Related to this, L2 learners used the auxiliary verb 'is' incorrectly (Example 7) because Hindi is a final language, in which the 'auxiliary verb' is always used at the end of the sentence. Here, Hindi learners of English transfer the feature from L1 to L2 negatively. Additionally, L2 learners have incorrectly placed prepositions in the sentences following the postposition of Hindi (noun followed by postpositions) (examples 7). L2 learners have placed prepositions after the noun but must be used before the noun. Most L2 learners have employed the 'verb' at the end of the sentence in the same sequence as their L1 learners (see example 9). According to English word order, the 'verb' must be used between subject and object.

The results section also indicates that L2 learners have improved writing skills after the intervention of GT and CLT, wherein the GT method has improved the writing of L2 learners in terms of minimizing L1 transfer errors rather than CLT.

#### 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to compare the effectiveness of the grammar-translation method and communicative language teaching approach in improving L2 writing to reduce L1 transfer errors. Applying the theoretical framework of linguistic and communicative competency, the results of this study show that grammatical translation is more successful than communicative language teaching in boosting learners' writing and reducing L1 transfer errors in L2 writing in Hindi and English medium schools. Specifically, the grammar-translation method improved the L2 writing in English medium classroom than CLT. Most policymakers and teachers consider grammar translation a productive language teaching and learning method, but most theorists reject it as an inefficient, even destructive, method of teaching an L2. The results of this experimental study maintain this view supporting the argument that if grammar-translation is to be used in the classroom, it should preferably be based on a principled theoretical framework. Participants in this study endorsed grammar translation, expressing optimistic attitudes toward it reflected in their writing results.

While the current study adds literature on teaching methods that affect teaching and learning outcomes in terms of writing, it experiences numerous limitations. First, this study does not employ a questionnaire to measure the learners' perception and attitude towards the classroom language teaching approach to distinguish the effects of grammar-translation

and communicative approach. Second, this study has covered the limited grammatical aspects of L2 teaching and learning. Third, the duration of the experiment of learning through GT and CLT was limited. However, it is anticipated that if learners participate in L2 learning through GT and CLT for a more extended period and put more effort into teaching and learning material and sessions, their writing skills in other grammatical aspects will be improved. Due to these constraints, extrapolating the current research results to a broader population is challenging. Thus, the future direction of the current study could also address some of these shortcomings by using more quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and analysis, referring to in-depth interviews with students and teachers.

This study provides trustworthiness in using the grammar-translation method to empower the learners' learning of writing skills. Regarding the practical classroom, this experimental study confirms how grammar-translation can serve as a valuable practice to enhance learners' writing skills. Considering the findings from this current study, we hope that a more diverse set of language learning strategies employing the grammar-translation method in language learning classrooms and beyond teachers can provide a more complex range of language learning achieving their utmost potential.

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