

Mother Tongue Interference in the Writing of English as a Second Language (ESL) Malay Learners

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify the errors in writing committed by Malay ESL learners which can be attributed to mother tongue interference. Twenty pre-degree quantity surveyor students from Universiti Teknologi MARA Perak campus participated in the study. They were instructed to write between 200- to 300-word essays on a given topic in English and in Malay. Their compositions were analyzed using the algorithm for conducting error analysis (EA) proposed by James (1998) which are practiced by current EA practitioners. Since the main focus of the study is mother tongue interference, only errors related to L1 interference were addressed. The paper presents and discusses the descriptive analysis of the results in relation to three major types of interference which are 'transfer of rules', 'redundancy reduction' and 'overgeneralization'.

Keywords: Mother Tongue Interference, Transfer Of Rules, Redundancy Reduction And Overgeneralization.

1.0 Introduction

One of the major obstacles in acquiring the second language is mother tongue or L1 interference especially in productive skills of speaking and writing. Mother tongue interference affects L2 learning as 'language' is considered as a set of new habits while 'learning' is considered as the establishment of habits (Jie, 2008).

1.1 Background of the Study and Problem Statement

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) is one of the institutions of higher learning in Malaysia which uses English as its medium of instruction. UiTM students are homogeneous in terms of

their first language (Malay) and educational background. The majority of the students are Malays and all of them had undergone 11 years of formal education where English is taught as a compulsory subject. However, for many of these students the length of exposure to English is not reflected in their proficiency level. A review of research conducted to examine English language learning in Malaysian schools reveals that one of the major obstacles in learning English is the strong influence of the national language or Bahasa Malaysia (Jalaludin, Mat Awal & Abu Bakar, 2008; Maros, Tan & Salehuddin, 2007; Stapa & Abdul Majid, 2006).

1.2 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyse errors in writing committed by pre-degree UiTM students to identify the sources which contribute to the errors. It is hoped the information gathered will provide some insight into the difficulty faced by Malay students in learning English.

1.3 Research Questions

The study addresses the following research question;

RQ: What are the errors committed by the students in writing in relation to three types of L1 interference which are 'transfer of rules', 'redundancy reduction' and 'overgeneralization'?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is significant since it has been established that error analysis (EA) provides teachers with tools for better understanding of the learners' problems in learning the second language. EA allows researchers to collect data on actual problems and not hypothetical ones (Fauziati, 2014). Identifying the areas of difficulty is important for English Language practitioners to develop teaching materials which pay attention to these critical areas.

2.0 Literature review

2.1 Errors versus Mistakes

Before analyzing learner errors, it is important to distinguish between 'errors' and 'mistakes'. Errors are caused by learners' inadequate knowledge of the target language while mistakes are slips of the pen or tongue. L2 learners can self-correct their mistakes but they cannot self-correct the errors they make (Mourtaga, 2004). Mistakes are not a result of deficiency in competence (Yuksel, 2007), instead they can be considered as lapses which may result from memory failure and physical and mental fatigue.

2.2 Interlingual versus Intralingual Errors

There are two types of errors normally committed by L2 learners which are interlingual and intralingual errors. Interlingual errors are caused by L1 interference while intralingual errors are caused by the difficulty of acquiring the language being learned (Hourani, 2008). Interlingual errors have been classified into various distinct categories by different scholars. However, this study has adapted three out of seven general categories proposed by (Hanafi, 2014) which the learner errors are classified into. The categories are 'transfer of rules', 'redundancy reduction' and 'overgeneralization'.

2.3 Transfer of Rule

This type of errors occurs when the writers apply knowledge of their native language to the second language situation when they do not have the native-level command of a language,

such as when translating into a second language. The ESL/EFL writers have the tendency to use their mother tongue experience to structure the information in the target language.

2.4 Redundancy Reduction

This type of errors is committed by ESL/EFL learners when they remove necessary or add unnecessary items in a sentence due to ignorance. They simplify or modify the L2 sentence structure because they have not fully acquired the language yet. This type of errors is usually committed by beginner level writers. For example, they produce phrases such as "... I happy to study at the Universiti Islam Antarabangsa" instead of "...I am happy to study at Universiti Islam Antarabangsa". The word 'am' is eliminated and the word 'the' is added.

2.5 Overgeneralization

Overgeneralization happens when the learners apply the rules of L2 without taking into consideration the exceptions to the general rules. Lee (1990) classifies overgeneralization errors into four categories namely grammatical, discourse, phonologically-induced and lexical errors.

2.6 Related Research on Learner Error

Research on L1 interference in writing among L2 learners of English has been conducted by researchers such as Abushibab (2014), Chan (2004), Ghabool, Mariadas and Kashef (2012), Mojica (2010), Thep-Ackrapong (2005), Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013), Wee, Sim and Jusoff (2010) to name a few. Abushibab (2014) analyzed errors made by Turkish learners while Chan (2004) investigated errors made by Hong Kong Chinese learners. Ghabool et al. (2012) and Wee et al. (2010) studied interference of Malay among Malaysian secondary school students and tertiary level students respectively. Thep-Ackrapong (2005) and Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) conducted their studies among Thai learners. Although the focus of these studies vary, they concluded that L1 interference is one of the problems faced by the learners which consequently contributed to their errors in writing.

2.7 The Algorithm for Conducting Error Analysis

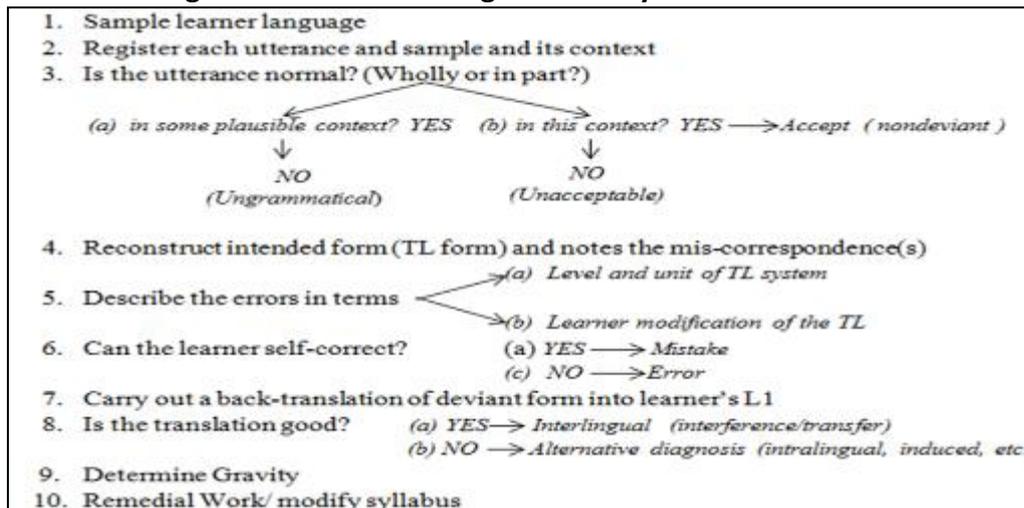


Figure 1: The Algorithm for Conducting Error Analysis

James (1998) develops the algorithm for conducting EA as depicted in figure 1. The set of procedures is still utilized for current EA practices.

3.0 Research Methodology

3.1 Writing Samples

Writing samples for the study were collected from 20 pre-degree quantity surveyor students from Universiti Teknologi MARA who were enrolled in a Proficiency Level ESL class at the time of data collection.

3.2 Error Analysis Procedure

The study has adapted the procedure in conducting error analysis proposed by James (1998). Firstly, the participants in the study were asked to write between 200-300-word narrative essays in both their L1 (Malay) and the target language or L2 (English). The title given for the English version was, "The most embarrassing moment of my life" while the Malay version was "Saat-saat yang paling memalukan dalam hidup saya". The data was then analyzed and the errors were described and discussed. Since the focus of this study is on interlingual errors (L1 transfer or interference), only this type of errors were addressed.

4.0 Findings and discussions

Based on the analysis of the writing samples, it was found that the highest number of errors committed by the students come from 'redundancy reduction' category followed by 'transfer of rules' and 'overgeneralization'.

4.1 Description of Redundancy Reduction Errors

Table 1 shows examples of redundancy reduction errors which were extracted from the students' writing samples.

Table 1:

Example of Redundancy Reduction Errors

The excerpts	The correct form
1) <i>When I in form 5...</i>	<i>When I was in form 5...</i>
2) <i>I very excited to take the photo...</i>	<i>I was very excited to take the photo...</i>
3) <i>I went to jog at park.</i>	<i>I went to jog at the park.</i>
4) <i>I still standing on the stairs...</i>	<i>I was still standing on the stairs...</i>
5) <i>Maybe because we so tired...</i>	<i>Maybe because we were so tired...</i>
6) <i>The coach who also my class teacher...</i>	<i>The coach who was also my class teacher...</i>
7) <i>Last year I involved in Arabic language programme at my school.</i>	<i>Last year I was involved in the Arabic language programme at my school.</i>
8) <i>So we decided to call the person who in charge the programme.</i>	<i>So we decided to call the person who was in charge of the programme.</i>
9) <i>I felt more better after that.</i>	<i>I felt better after that.</i>
10) <i>Doctor told my mother I was fainted.</i>	<i>The doctor told my mother that I had fainted.</i>
11) <i>I was wake up late that day.</i>	<i>I woke up late that day</i>

In Malay language, 'be' verbs do not exist. Therefore, many students see 'be' verbs as unnecessary, and due to this reason they have the tendency to drop 'be' verbs from their sentences. The errors are exemplified in excerpts 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. The translated version of excerpt 1 was worded as: "*Bila saya di tingkatan 5...*". When the sentence is translated directly to English it becomes "*When I in form 5...*". Similarly, the second excerpt, "*I very excited to take the photo...*", is a translated version from Malay: "*Saya sangat teruja untuk mengambil gambar...*". Excerpts 3 and 10 show another redundancy reduction errors involving the use of 'article'. 'Article' is another part of speech which does not exist in Malay. Thus, like 'be' verbs they are often dropped from a sentence. In excerpt 3 and 10, the article '**the**' was missing. In contrast, an unnecessary 'be' verb was inserted in excerpt 11. Instead of "I woke up", the student wrote "I **was** wake up".

In excerpt 9, a comparative adverb '**more**' was unnecessarily inserted before the superlative '**better**'. The direct translation of the sentence in Malay was: "*Saya merasa lebih baik selepas itu*". The word '**more**' was added probably because the writer had directly translated "*lebih baik*" to "*more better*". Similarly, in excerpt 10, "*I was fainted*" is a direct translation of "*Saya telah pingsan*".

4.2 Description of Transfer of Rule Errors

Table 2 highlights examples of "transfer of rules" errors. Malay students often have problems with the use of prepositions in their writing as in excerpts 11 and 14. The number of prepositions in Malay are much less compared to the English language which has more than one hundred prepositions. Malay prepositions are limited to around 15 words such as '**pada**' which has a general meaning of '**at**'; '**dari**' and '**daripada**' which means '**from**'; '**ke**' and '**kepada**' which can be translated into '**to**'; '**dalam**' and '**di dalam**' which carry the general meaning of '**in**' or '**inside**'; '**dengan**' which can be translated into '**with**'; '**oleh**' which has the general meaning of '**by**'; '**atas**' and '**di atas**' which can be translated into '**on**' or '**above**'. Malay language uses the same preposition '**pada**' for time of the day as in '**pada waktu pagi**', '**pada waktu malam**', '**pada waktu petang**' and for days of the week such as '**pada hari Isnin**'

and for months of the year such as '*pada bulan April*'. Therefore, Malay students tend to use the preposition '*at*' for all the situations above because they transfer the Malay language rules into English. Another rule that tend to influence their writing in English is the rule related to adjectives. English adjectives normally come before nouns such as 'blue (adj.) shirt (noun)' and 'tall (adj.) building (noun)'. However, in Malay the nouns precede the adjectives such as 'baju (noun) biru (adj.)' and 'bangunan (noun) tinggi (adj.)'. Due to this reason, Malay students tend to transfer this rule when they write in English as exemplified by excerpts 13. They use the phrase 'student university' instead of 'university student'. Another finding is the transfer of Malay language rule related to plural nouns. In Malay language, the adjective '*ramai*', will be used to show plural such as in '*ramai pelajar*' (*many students*) while the noun form, in this case '*pelajar*' does not change. Thus, Malay students tend to drop the 's' in the noun after adjectives as shown by excerpt 15.

Table 2:

Examples of Transfer of Rule Errors

The excerpts	The correct form
11) At the evening...	In the evening...
12) The incident was happen...	The incident happened ...
13) As a student university I was busy...	As a university student ...
14) At the second day, I had to attend ...	On the second day, I had to attend ...
15) All student have to join the tuition class.	All students have to join the tuition class.

4.3 Description of Overgeneralization Errors

Table 3 shows examples related to overgeneralization errors. This type of errors is frequently committed by beginner level ESL learners. The rule of conversion from present tense to past tense for regular verbs by adding 'd', 'ed' and 'ied' are often overgeneralized to irregular verbs as well, as shown in excerpts 16 and 17. In excerpt 16 the verb 'take' had been wrongly converted to 'taked' and in excerpt 17, the verb 'think' was converted to 'thinked'. Another rule that is often confusing to beginner level learners is the rule related to subject-verb agreement. The rule that singular subject should carry a singular verb (base form of the verb + 's') is often overgeneralized to include the singular subject 'I' and 'you' as shown in excerpt 18. Finally, the English language rule of transforming a singular countable noun to plural by adding 's', 'es' and 'ies' is often generalized to uncountable noun such as in excerpt 19. In excerpt 19, the student had added 'ies' to the uncountable noun 'jewelry'.

Table 3:

Examples of Overgeneralization Errors

The excerpts	The correct form
16) I taked many photos of the trees.	I took many photos of the trees.
17) They thinked that my body was trapped.	They thought that my body was trapped.
18) I has many embarrassing moments	I have many embarrassing moments
19) I thought I lost many of my jewelries	I thought I lost some of my jewelry

5.0 Conclusion

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that interference errors under redundancy reduction category were probably committed due to the non-existent of a certain rule or concept in the participants' L1. Due to the absence of 'be' verb and 'article' in Malay, the students have the tendency to drop necessary 'be' verbs or articles and add unnecessary ones in their writing. Under the category of transfer of rules, it was found that the learners had difficulty in choosing appropriate propositions to use because there are only about 15 propositions in Malay whereas there are more than hundreds of prepositions in English. The students also committed errors related to the use of adjective because in Malay, an adjective usually comes before a noun whereas in English it is the other way round. Finally, it was found that the rules that are frequently overgeneralized include the rules related to conversion of verbs from present to past tense and singular to plural nouns.

5.1 Recommendation

In light of these findings it is recommended that ESL educators spend more of their class time focusing on the error prone areas.

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