INTERFERENCE IN LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE: AN ANALYSIS OF SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION IN THE WRITTEN WORK OF YEAR 3 ESL LEARNERS IN WANGSA MAJU PRIMARY SCHOOL, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

One of the most significant and interesting aspects of human development is language acquisition. Since English is a universal language, it is an essential language of interaction and education. Therefore, we have to take this language of education for professional competence seriously. The aim of the study is to explore the analysis of cultural interference, an aspect that significantly hinders the learning and acquisition of English among young Malay learners. It aims to identify the students' errors in sentence construction, particularly on the occurrence of mistakes in subject-verb-agreement' (SVA), determiners, and the copula 'be'. The data of this study came from an exploratory study of errors in the written essays by Year 3 students in Wangsa Maju Primary School, Malaysia. The findings of the study showed that the students were struggling and having difficulty in using accurate English grammar in their academic writing. The results revealed that the most frequent errors were the incorrect usage of the copula 'be' and the absence of determiners. The interference of mother tongue played a vital cause towards inhibiting the production of error free English language sentences. Lack of understanding of how the English language grammar function also accounted to this. All these could be seen as interlingual errors whereby the native language of the participants influenced their writing patterns.

Keywords: cultural interference, language acquisition, grammatical errors, contrastive analysis, writing

INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) brings about dealing with errors through contrastive analysis. The discussion that comes from that analysis leads to error analysis. Lado (1957) believed that learners rely extensively on their native language in learning a second language.

"Individuals tend to *transfer* the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture ─both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives." (Lado, 1957, as cited in Gass, 2013).

Lado's work to produce NL [Native Language]-based materials necessitates to perform a contrastive analysis of the NL and the TL. Contrastive analysis is a way of comparing languages in order to determine potential errors. The purpose is to isolate what is required and is not required to be learned in L2 learning. A structure-by-structure comparison is made in the aspects of phonology, morphology, syntax and culture to analyze the similarities and differences between the L1 and L2. This will result in an assessment of recurring difficulties, and will help teachers to optimally allocate time and effort in teaching the learners.

Despite its claims, Maros et al. (2007) asserted that CA [Contrastive Analysis] is only predictive in nature and is not always correct and regarded as an important tool for diagnostic purposes in language teaching. Therefore, it is important to study actual texts produced by L2 learners.

This study analyses the influence of the Malay language on learning English in Year 3 pupils in SK Wangsa Maju Seksyen 2, Malaysia. These analyses answered the research questions which include the categories of grammatical errors made by the pupils and the causes of the most dominant grammatical error found in their tasks. The English teacher discovered that the students often experience difficulty in the transition from Year 3 to Year 4 English language syllabus. The level of English language syllabus is significantly higher in the sense that there are more sentence construction tasks in the Year 4 syllabus. The difficulties encountered were consistently reflected in the Year 4 students' examination marks. Pupils were unable to construct sentences with minimal grammatical errors. ESL teachers or educators need to examine this matter to reduce this problem to the minimum by understanding both the linguistic and non-linguistic reasons of the errors. Based on the second language acquisition perspective, two methods of examining these issues were (1) contrastive analysis and (2) error analysis. These two methods were the basis for analysis in this study.

The study aimed to identify the students' errors in sentence construction, particularly on the occurrence of mistakes in subject-verb-agreement' (SVA), determiners, and the copula 'be'. Analyzing the learner's production of target language text to identify the relationship between English sentence constructions and native language sentence constructions will clarify the nature of the problems. Two theoretical frameworks were used for reference and focus throughout the study: 1. Through Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado's Linguistics Across Cultures, 1957) we can predict possible sources of errors made by Malay ESL learners, and by analyzing these errors; teachers could gain some insights into future types of remedial instruction. 2. Error Analysis by Stephen Corder (1967) draws on the formal distinctions between the learners' first and second languages to predict errors learners make. Unlike contrastive analysis (a comparison made with NL), error analysis is a comparison made with both NL and TL that enables insight into the current state of knowledge of learners. Corder (1967) highlights the issue of systematic errors in language learning, a systematic process that learners go through in the attempt of producing TL. These errors are not incidental imitation errors, nor mere slips of the tongue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Various studies highlight the problems leading to this study. There are several related themes which are connected to the issues related to written work in the area of ESL learners.

The English Language Syllabus

The English as a Second Language (ESL) syllabus is designed to help learners who already have native knowledge of their mother tongue, to learn effectively another language in comprehensible stages. The Ministry of Education in Malaysia provides a three-part detailed English language syllabus for every level of studies beginning from the elementary grades up till the secondary grades. For the entire syllabus, one of the key objectives is to ensure that learners use correct and appropriate rules of grammar in speech and writing.

However, this study focuses on the transition of Year 3 to Year 4 ESL learning based on the government syllabus in the areas of writing. Although grammatical studies begin explicitly in Year 3 (it is taught implicitly in Year 1 and 2), learners are expected to attempt written tasks in the form of short paragraph writing in Year 4, utilising greater grammatical knowledge than in previous years. When learners enter Year 4, they are considered to be at Level 2. According to the government curriculum, learners are expected to be able to write sentences to form a paragraph through the guidance of teachers and eventually becoming independent writers (Ministry of Education Malaysia, n.d.). Also, as written in the Year 3 learning standards for writing, although the objective is to enable learners to create simple texts, there is no specification as to how much a learner is expected to know how to write by the end of Year 3. Learners' written tasks are focused on writing simple descriptive sentences (Curriculum Education Division , 2012).

Common English Grammatical Issues: Subject Verb Agreement

Subject and verb agree in number for English grammar, where both must be either singular or plural. In the present tense, one must add '-s' or '-es' at the end of the verb when the subjects performing the action is a singular third person: he, she, it, or any substitution word for pronouns. Inflection does not take place for other forms.

Table 1

Agreement with numbers in subject-verb

Person	Singular	Plural
1st	I play basketball.	We play basketball.
2nd	You play basketball.	You play basketball.
3rd	He/She/It/John/My brother play**s** basketball.	They play basketball.

Bahiyah and Wijayasuria (2018) found that Malay learners face difficulties in the subject-verb agreement because the Malay language does not differentiate between people; hence it is not necessary for verbs to agree with the subject. In contrast, this is the rule for English. This creates confusion among students. This analysis is supported by Surina and Kamarulzaman (2009) when they claim that the majority of the

students in Malaysia have issues with English subject-verb agreement.

The copula 'be'

The origin word for 'copula' is from Latin noun meaning 'link or tie' which connects two different things. Linguistically, a copula is a word that is used to link the subject of a sentence with a predicate. (a subject complement or an adverbial). According to the hierarchy of difficulties cited in Brown (2014), the copula 'be' is an absent category is categorised at Level 2 (under differentiation) becomes a problem among Malay learners of English, as the Malay language does not have the copula (Marlyna, Tan & Khazriyati, 2007).

A third domain that has been identified as one of the most problematic grammatical areas besides subject-verb agreement and the copula 'be' in English is the correct use of determiners (Khazriyati, Tan & Marlyna, 2006; Marlyna et al., 2007).

Determiners

Determiners are a special class of words that limits (or determines) the scope of nouns that follow them. Structurally, a determiner precedes an adjective if there are adjectives in the noun phrase. If no adjectives are present, a determiner is positioned directly before the noun (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 19).

Figure 1

Examples of determiners are a, the; this, that, these, those; my, your, her, our, their, its; many, one, some, much
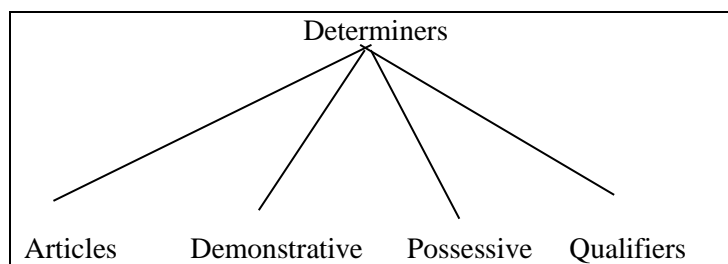
Meanwhile, in Malay, Karim et al. (2008) identified two types of determiners (*kata penentu*): demonstratives (*kata penentu belakang*, e.g. *itu* and *ini*) and quantifiers (*kata penentu hadapan/kata bilangan*, e.g. *segala*, *beberapa*, *dua*, *para* and *sedikit*). This study restricts its focus on the usage of the article.

In comparing Malay grammar to that of English grammar, Karim (1995, p. 9) demonstrates the use of the English determiners as follows:

Pekerja itu telah tiba (Noun + Det: Dem1)
The worker has arrived. (Det: Art + Noun)
Seluar biru ini (Noun + Adj + Det: dem)
These blue trousers (Det: dem + Adj + Noun)
Seluar biru abang ini (Noun + Adj + Det: Pos + Det: Dem)

This elder brother's blue trousers (Det: dem + Det: Pos + Adj + Noun)

Those structures agree that *itu* and *ini* has to be the final element in any Malay noun phrases. Should there be modifiers after the head noun, the modifiers come between the head noun (on the left) and the *kata penentu* (on the right). Hassan (1993,p. 54) stressed that there must not be any other word after the *kata penentu* in the Malay noun phrase. Khazriyati et al. (2006) observed 826 uses of determiners in the students' writing, a total of 175 (21%) errors were detected. Although not all errors are due to mother tongue interference, a large number of errors that occurred in the use of determiners does indicate interference of Malay grammar.

Empirical studies

A number of researchers have done empirical research in this area of study, drawing various methods, theories and frameworks. Jamian, Sankaran and Noranisah (2006) conducted an investigation on the common errors by engineering students at UiTM Penang Malaysia. The aim of the study was to identify and classify the most frequent errors made by the students and to gain an understanding on the causes that triggered the errors. The study also intended to formulate some pedagogical implications of the results for teachers. The significance of this study is to introduce an effective language use among language learners which may hinder more crucial issues related to the importance of understanding the functions of grammar . The study was guided by three hypotheses: 1) Error Analysis 2) Global Analysis 3) Local Analysis. The errors were analysed according to Corder (1981) who aimed at identifying, describing and explaining the errorsin writing. It does not simply classify errors into different parts of grammatical aspects but also explore why a particular error is made. The findings of the study showed that 64.89% of students scored C and lower in their English paper, where 70% of the total scores were focused on the reading skill. However, the poor reading ability is the contributor to their low proficiency.

Subsequently, another study conducted by Sim Wee and Jusoff (2009) focused specifically on the problems with subject-verb agreement (SVA) in writing. The similarity of the context of this study is that they were examining the grammatical problems that occur in the students' writing. They intended to contribute the appropriate treatments that could be implemented in the form of focused teachings. The participants used for this study were 39 second-year students from a public university in Malaysia, who were selected from two different faculties. The method used in this study was based on a qualitative approach which focused on the problems of SVA that the learners faced in writing. The findings of the study show that the subjects made the most number of errors in the omission of verb-forms in the area of the third person singular verb (-s/-es/-ies). However, these occurrences were made when the participants tried to make the verb agree with either the singular or plural subject by dropping the '-s' inflection from the third person singular verb or making the verb plural by adding the '–s' inflection. The subjects were usually over-generalised and, therefore, either omitted the 'be' verb or used it wrongly.

Al-Khaza'leh (2021) investigated the possible writing errors by third and fourth year students of English in the Department of English, Shaqra University. The findings of the study show that students made errors in all their tasks, either in paragraphs or short sentences. Some of these errors were associated with punctuations, subject-verb agreement, capitalisation, singular-plurals but not limited to that.

Pasaribu (2021) explored the error analysis in students' academic writing. This study investigated the writing errors of 26 students in the Department of English at the University of HKBP Nommensen Medan. The findings of the study show that around 252 errors were found. The most dominant error category found in their writings was omission, which occurred 92 (36.51%) then followed by addition 64

(25.40%), misinformation 56 (22.22%), and disordering 40 (15.87%).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study was employed in this study in order to suit the nature of the problem addressed, which was to explore in depth the frequency of second language learners in making errors when constructing sentences in English. Firstly, this study predicted possible sources of errors made by Malay ESL learners by using Contrastive Analysis (CA) in Lado's analysis of linguistics across cultures (1957). By analysing these errors, teachers could gain insights into future types of remedial instruction.

Secondly, Corder's (1976) Error Analysis framework was adopted in order to discuss the errors made by participants using the following five steps: collecting data, identifying errors, describing errors, explaining errors, and finally evaluating errors. The main reason for choosing this framework was because this framework did not simply classify errors into different parts of grammatical aspects but also explore why a particular error was made. Further explanation on how the first native language actually interfered with the writing skills of ESL learners was provided after each error was identified. The significance of understanding why an error was made emphasized the importance of conducting this study as educators would be able to use these reasons to revise the methods of teaching in order to improve the English Proficiency level of ESL learners in Malaysia.

In the current study, 20 Year 3 pupils from a local primary school in Wangsa Maju were the participants. These participants were intermediate ESL learners, whose first language is Bahasa Malaysia. The participants were selected by their English language teachers based on their past experiences teaching them. The participants were chosen using the purposive sampling method which was chosen as it was the most cost and time effective method in choosing the participants.

The method could be explained as follows. With the assistance of English language teachers in the school where the research was carried out, the most suitable classroom (in terms of first language) was identified. In addition, the school board's approval was granted for requesting the school to choose the participants required in this research.

The instrument used in this study was a test paper which included sentence construction questions. The students were to answer four questions in the test. The students were required to construct grammatical sentences in their written task. The test was done during English lessons after the end of year examination. The time allocated for the test was about 30 minutes. Participants did not receive any kind of help from the teacher and were not allowed to refer to books, related materials or the Internet. This was to ensure the written work was solely produced by the participants themselves, using their own writing skills and grammatical knowledge. This was to ensure the validity of the materials gathered.

The 20 papers were all marked and grammatical errors were noted and tabulated in a table. The errors were also categorised and labelled based on their types (including the frequency with which it occurred) with its correction. The Error Analysis framework by Corder (1976) was subsequently adopted to discuss the errors made by the participants. The types of grammatical error were (1) incorrect usage of "be" verb, (2) omission of the copula "be", (3) incorrect usage of determiners, (4) omission of determiners, (5) replacement of 'be' verb with the determiner 'a', and (6) unawareness of the subject-verb agreement (SVA) form in sentence construction. For instance, "Those is remote Control", "This a rice cooker", "Those is a two remote controls", "Robert a information...". All sentences constructed by students were tabulated. Later, the frequency of the errors made was also annotated for each type of errors. Lastly,

categorization of errors, depending on whether it was intralingual or interlingual, was made for different types of errors. Further explanation on how first language actually interfered with the writing skills of ESL learners was provided after each error was identified.

FINDINGS

The 20 papers were all marked and grammatical errors were noted and tabulated. The errors were also categorised and labelled based on the types of grammatical errors that took place (including the frequency with which it occurred) with its correction.

Table 2

Findings from Written Work

Types of Grammatical Errors	Examples of incorrect sentences	Examples of correct sentences	Frequency of errors (Sample number)	Nature of Errors (Interlingual or Intralingual)
Incorrect usage of 'be' verb	"Those is remote Control"	Those are remote controls	5 times -Samples 1, 5, 7, 9, 11	Interlingual (misinformation)
	"Laptop and computer is technology"	Laptop and computer are technology	9 times -Samples 3,4,5,6,8, -10, 14, 18, 20	Interlingual (misinformation)
Omission of copula 'be'	"This a rice cooker"	This is a rice cooker	-2 times -Samples 17, 19	Interlingual (omission)
	"Laptop is computer the technology"	Laptop and computer are the technology	-2 times -Samples 1,11	Intralingual (omission)
	"Laptop and computer a technology"	Laptop and computer are a technology	-3 times -Samples 12, 13,16	Intralingual (omission)
Incorrect usage of determiners	"Those a remote Controls"	Those are remote controls	-6 times -Samples 2,4,6,12,1 7,18	Interlingual (misinformation)
	"Those is a two remote controls"	Those are two remote controls	-2 times -Samples 5, 9	Interlingual (misinformation)
Omission of determiners	"This is rice cooker"	This is a rice cooker	-10 times -Samples 1,3,4,7,11, 12,13,15,1 6,18	Interlingual (omission)

Replacement of 'be' verb with determiner 'a'	"Those a remote Controls"	Those are remote controls	-6 times -Samples 2,4,6,12,1 7,18	Intralingual (substitution)
	"Laptop and computer a technology"	Laptop and computer are technology	-3 times -Samples 12 ,13 ,16	Interlingual (substitution)
the subject -verb agreement (SVA) form in sentence construction	"Robert a information..."	Robert finds/seeks information	-6 times -Samples 4,12,14,15 ,17,18	Intralingual (misordering)
	"Robert is information.."	Robert finds/seeks information	-7 times -Samples 1,2,5,6,10, 11,20	Intralingual (misordering)

The data in the table above explains the types of grammatical errors made by the participants in their written tasks. Five different errors were made in terms of incorrect usage of grammatical items of copula 'be', determiners, and subject-verb-agreement sentence construction rule. Out of the 20 text samples analysed, 14 pieces of evidence pointed out an incorrect usage of the copula "be", for example, "Those is remote Control", "Laptop and computer is technology". Seven errors were identified as omission of the copula 'be' in sentence constructions. Eight errors were identified as incorrect usage of determiners. Determiners were not used in ten written texts. Within the same sample question, 'are' was replaced six times with 'a' in the sentence. All these could be qualified as interlingual errors, whereby the native language of the participants influenced their writing patterns. Finally, there were frequent errors in the construction of sentences in terms of subject-verb-agreement that could be due to intralingual factors.

The two most significant errors were the incorrect usage of copula 'be' (the highest error identified) and the exclusion of determiners (second highest error identified). The copula 'be' was used incorrectly without taking into account the number of objects in a sentence. For example, 'Those are remote controls' was written as 'Those is remote controls' and 'Laptop and computer are technology' were mostly written as 'Laptop and computer is technology'. The copula 'be' functions as a verb that links the subject and its predicative complement in a sentence.

The copula 'be' could precede a noun, an adjective, a numeral, a pronoun, an infinitive, or a gerund. However, in the sample writings analysed, unawareness of this could be due to interference of the mother tongue as the 'be' verb was not varied for singular or plural subject (is/are) in Malay; it was only expressed in one word 'sedang' which indicated the action was taking place. According to Marlyna et al., (2007), the copula 'be' is a common area which Malay ESL learners experienced difficulties when learning and applying it. There is a word in Malay that ties the subject and predicate in the same way as copula 'be' does, which is 'ialah' or 'adalah'. They are used merely to tie the subject and predicate together taking into account if the number of subject and predicate involved. In addition, the fact that it is not essential in Malay itself when tying a subject and predicate together often causes its misuse. This explanation could also be used to understand the replacement of '*are*' with '*a*' in Question 3 ('*Laptop and computers a technology*' instead of '*laptop and computers are technology*'). Apart from copula 'be' not being a necessity in Malay (Marlyna, Tan & Khazriyati, 2007), this error could be caused by the simplicity that exists in the structure of Malay. '*Laptop and computers a technology*' can be translated into Malay as '*Komputer riba dan komputer adalah sejenis teknologi*' / '*Komputer riba dan komputer*

sejenis teknologi', which could both mean *'Laptop and computers are a technology'*. Participants probably had chosen to write such in an attempt to directly translate from the simpler form of the Malay language structure.

The omission of determiners, on the other hand, could be seen in the same sentence such as *'This is rice cooker'* whereby the correct sentence should be *'This is a rice cooker'*. This significance could be attributed to the Malay language structure where determiners do not necessarily play a part in referring how many objects are involved in the predicate of a sentence. Doubling the name of the object is enough to express that there is more than one object involved. For example, *'rice cooker'* is *'pemanas nasi'*. Referring to the single picture of the rice cooker in the worksheet given direct translation to the Malay language in describing the picture could either be *'Ini ialah pemanas nasi'* or *'Ini pemanas nasi'*. Determiners do not play a role unless one is in a situation calling for specification of how many objects are present. If a picture of two rice cookers is given, it can be described in Malay without placing a specific determiner. Instead of *'Ini ialah dua pemanas nasi' (These are two rice cookers),* the sentence can also be written as *'Ini ialah pemanas-pemanas nasi' (These are rice cookers).* According to Khazriyati et al., (2006: 25), 'the Malay numerals are regarded as determiners since they like quantifying determiners, quantify the nouns'.

In terms of intralingual errors, there is no precise explanation for the reasons of these errors as being attributable to the existing native language (Malay) of the participants interfering with the learning and production of the target language (English). Gass (2013) explains the nature of intralingual error as being caused by the language that is being learned: *'are'* was replaced with *'a'* in *'Those a remote control'.* In Question 4 in the writing worksheet, keywords given ('Robert' and 'information'), did not produce the expected answers such as 'Robert finds information…' or 'Robert seeks information…' (which are both grammatically correct and follows the SVA rule). Instead, grammatically incorrect sentences such as 'Robert is information' (Sample 2), 'Robert a information' (Sample 12), 'Robert computer information' (Sample 16), 'Robert a information' (Sample 18) and 'Robert the information' (Sample 9) were produced, to name a few. This could be due to a process in which a learner learns to make sense of how to connect a subject and object correctly in a sentence. Evidence in studies done by Dulay & Burt (1977) and Rosansky (1976) showed that children acquire an understanding of articles before they learn about the copula 'be' in second language learning of the English language. This is a common process in children learning any languages.

DISCUSSIONS

The results of the data gathered from the participants through their written work showed that it is common for pupils to make errors when writing in English. Often the error committed has a rational explanation. The interference of the mother tongue plays a vital role in hindering or preventing the production of error free English language sentences. Lack of understanding of how the English language grammar functions may also account for this phenomenon.

Some interlingual errors cannot just be attributed to the grammatical structure of the learners' native language. Based on the analysis, morpheme order structure could be one of the reasons as to why some grammatical items tend to be used more frequently than others. However, there could be other reasons such as participants simply did not understand the meaning of the words given to them as cues when constructing sentences. The participants also were not familiar with the electrical appliances visualised in the worksheet, hence lacking related vocabulary to describe the pictures.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, not only does a learner's understanding of the target language's grammatical structure plays an important role in aiding their English writing performance, but also the grammatical function of their mother tongue could also play a significant role in affecting the learning conditions of a new language. A greater emphasis should be placed on explaining the English grammatical rules explicitly or in a manner best for a learner to understand rather than to have him or her memorize the grammatical structures at the earlier stage of study. On a positive note, upon discovery of learners' errors due to direct grammar translation, shifting the focus in language classrooms by showing comparisons of grammatical structures in English and Malay. This would enable the learners to notice how sentences are constructed differently in the two languages (Malay and English languages) even when the aim is to convey the same idea which could provide better understanding and awareness of the English language structure. The number of participants in the study is relatively small. As such, future researchers should add more participants for more reliable and accurate results.

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