First Language Influence on Second Language Performance: A Study of Common English Grammatical Errors among Rural Secondary School Students

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ABSTRACT

As a second language in Malaysia, English is taught to all from the pre-school level until the fifth form of the secondary school. Even though the teaching and learning of English is carried out for several years, many students still fail to acquire the language successfully at the end of their schooling, which in turn jeopardizes their chances of future employment. After being exposed to the language for eleven years, students, particularly those from the rural areas, are found to be linguistically incompetent and unable to communicate successfully in the target language. The question now is why has this issue arisen. This paper attempts to share some insights into the issue of incompetency in English among rural secondary school students in Kulai, Johor. It reports an analysis of common errors made by three hundred second language learners in the acquisition of Subject-Verb Agreement, Tenses and Relative Pronouns. Using a combination of Norrish's approach to conducting Error analysis and Contrastive Analysis, initial analysis of the common errors revealed syntactical intra-lingual interference from the first language. This paper will present a comparative linguistic analysis of the syntactical structures of the two languages in our attempt to explain and offer insights into learners' difficulties in acquiring the target language.

INTRODUCTION

Malaysian government accorded English a second language status as stated in Article 152. Its significance, both nationally and globally, has seen the language made compulsory in the curriculum of primary and secondary levels of schooling in Malaysia. As a result, Malaysian children are introduced to the language as early as four or five years old. They would then continue to learn English until they reach secondary five (17 years old). However, the 2006 UPSR results recently revealed that 70% students are weak in the target language (Utusan Malaysia, 16th November 2006). Alas, after 11 continuous years of learning English the result is less than satisfactory.

In an effort to make the subject more interesting, a literature component has recently been added to the teaching of English language. In addition, various language activities are held on both district and national levels to promote the use of English, for example choral speaking, drama, debate and essay writing competitions. Despite the introduction of various language activities and improvisation in teaching methodologies, the level of proficiency of the students, especially those in the rural areas, has yet to improve. The failure to master English has even been considered to be one of the reasons behind the high level of unemployment among university graduates. This has prompted the

education authority to take drastic measures in an attempt to rectify this problem. One of them is by replacing the medium of instruction from Bahasa Melayu to English in the teaching of science and mathematics. The question remains whether the change in policy will somehow help to improve the quality of English among students in both primary and secondary levels.

This paper attempts to share some insights into the issue of incompetency in English among rural secondary school students in Kulai Johor by analyzing common errors committed by 300 second language learners in the acquisition of English Subject-Verb Agreement, Tenses and Relative pronouns. Using a combination of Norrish's approach to conducting Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis, initial analysis of the common errors revealed syntactical interlingual interference from the first language. This paper will present a comparative analysis of the syntactical structures of the two languages in our attempt to explain and offer insights into learners' difficulties in acquiring the Target Language.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

There are a number of studies focusing on the achievement of English among Malaysian students. Studies by Hamidah, Melor and Nor Zaini (2002), Noreiny Maarof et.al (2003) and Hazita Azman (2004) illustrate that students' incompetency in English can be attributed to several non-linguistic factors such as learner's attitude, geographical location and ethnic group. Also, there have been studies that analyze the structural differences between the Malay and English language. The studies revealed that differences between the two language structures interfere in the learning of English grammar, which consequently will hinder the acquisition of English as a second language. Marlyna, Khazriyati and Tan Kim Hua (2005) have observed the mistakes in 'subject-verb agreement' (SVA) and 'be' copula forms. In subject-verb agreement, problems occurred when the verb has to be inflected in the present tense to agree with the subject. The findings of the research show that 46.83% are mistakes on subject-verb agreement. The writers contend that mistakes are committed in the subject-verb agreement form because of its non-existence in the Malay language.

There have been numerous other studies on the problems faced in the teaching and learning of English in schools which offer solutions to the problem but the standard of English continues to deteriorate. Global challenges and pressures from examination seem to make students losing their focus. Thus this paper aims to identify and offer explanation in relation to the students' incompetency to acquire English by specifically focusing on the syntactical aspects of the English language.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BAHASA MELAYU (MALAY LANGUAGE) AND ENGLISH

A practical approach in dealing with the problem of students' inability to acquire English is to first look at the cause. This paper will begin by looking at the historical background of English and the Malay language.

Asmah (1985) says that we need to look at the people or speakers of the Malay language if we are to know the historical background of the language (Malay). There are various opinions as to the origin of the Malays.

The most prominent account is one that contends the Malays come from Central Asia. This is based on the artifacts found in caves in Perak. In addition there is also evidence of similarities in vocabularies from cognates that have similarities in Malay, Iban, Semambuk, Paittan languages. These similarities show that the Malays travel through sea and land and decided to reside in Peninsula Malaysia while other ethnic groups continue their journey to other places.

In terms of classification, Malay is under the umbrella of Austronesian languages. Austronesian languages are divided into four groups and they are Indonesian, Malanesian, Austronesian and Polynesian with Indonesian language forming the biggest group. Its speakers cover a wide area from Farmosa in the north to Philippines islands and Maluku in the east, Timor Timor in the south and Madagascar in the west. Malay language is grouped in this category. The Indonesia family group has the most number of languages with Malay as the most prolific in terms of development. Malay is accorded national language status in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, the Malay language is the language of instruction in education even at tertiary level and this has directly become the catalyst to the development of the Malay language.

English, on the other hand, is classified in the Germanic language from the Indo-European group. The early history of Germanic languages is based on the reconstruction of Proto-Germanic which has evolved into German, English, Dutch, Afrikaan, Yiddish and Scandinavian languages. English was influenced by two waves, first by Germanic language of the Scandinavian descent which occupied various parts of Britain in the 8th and 9th centuries. This was later followed by the Normans in the 11th century.

The Germanic people occupied native speakers of Celt in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland. The language of the invaders helped form what is later known as Old English. English was also heavily influenced by Norse, language of the Vikings in the east.

The brief historical background clearly shows that the two languages, English and Malay, are not connected and do not come from the same cognate. Therefore, there are a lot of structural differences that have been identified, especially from morphological aspect. These structural differences have formed the main constraints in the inability of

Malaysian students to acquire English. This paper will prove the claim based on the findings of a research conducted.

SOCIAL SURROUNDING AND THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH

The present study was conducted in three secondary schools in Johor comprising 315 students as the respondents. All the students are in Form Two and thus they have had seven good years of learning English. The schools involved were Sekolah Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra (STARP), Sekolah Menengah Senai (Senai) and Sekolah Sultan Alauddin (SSA), which are considered as an urban school, sub-urban school and rural school respectively. The gender and race distribution of the respondents are shown in the tables below:

Table 1: Gender

	Senai	STARP	SSA
Male	53.5	39.1	51.9
Female	46.5	60.9	48.1

The table above illustrates that there are more male students compared to females in Senai and SSA while female students form the overwhelming majority in STARP. Meanwhile, an interesting pattern emerged in terms of race distribution in all three schools. In Senai, the total number of Malay and Chinese students is almost the same, that is 41.4% and 43.4% respectively and Indians make up the remaining 14.1%. In STARP, 60.9% are Malay, 30.0% are Chinese and only 9.1% Indians whereas in SSA, all of the students are Malays. This is due to the fact that, SSA is situated in a FELDA settlement area where the majority of its settlers are Malays. Below is the table on race composition of the respondents:

Table 2: Race composition

	Senai	STARP	SSA
Malay	41.4	60.9	100.0
Chinese	43.4	30.0	0
Indian	14.1	9.1	0
Others	1.0	0	0

With regard to family income, majority of the respondents come from families with an income of less than RM1000.00 a month. Data showed that 83% of the students in SSA are categorized in the low-income families [1]. This is followed by Senai with 63.3% and STARP 52.8%. The following UPSR results demonstrate their level of mastery in English. Based on their 2004 UPSR results, 66% students from Senai, 50% students from STARP and 70% students from SSA are considered weak in English. Less than 25% attended tuition classes because of the unavailability of such services or their parents cannot afford to send them to one. A combination of factors such as poverty, unavailability of tuition services, social environment, interest and attitude contributes to the students' inability to acquire the target language [2]. To further ascertain the level of the students' weaknesses in English, two sets of Cloze Test were given to the 315 respondents to complete. The aim of the test is to determine if syntactical differences

between Malay and English do indeed contribute to the students' inability to successfully acquire English.

SYNTACTICAL STRUCTURES OF MALAY AND ENGLISH

One of the main constraints of English acquisition among Malaysian students is the differences of syntactical structures between the Malay and English language. Syntax is one of the main areas of linguistics in which sentence structures and patterns are analyzed. Although Malay and English share the same basic structure, that is 'subject-verb-object' (SVO), there are numerous other differences between the two languages such as the usage of copula 'be', subject-verb agreement, articles, determiner and relative pronouns.

Copula 'be'

In the English grammatical system, the form of copula 'be' is crucial in a sentence to connect the subject of a sentence with a predicate. There are three forms of copula 'be' for the present tense namely 'am', 'is' for the third person singular subjects and 'are' for plural ones as well as 'you'. As for the past tense form 'was' is used for singular subjects (I, he, she, it) while 'were' is for plural subjects (you, we, they) including 'you' in the form of second person singular. This phenomenon, which does not exist in the Malay language and the complexity of the grammatical rules leads to the students' failure to acquire the target language. There are two items in the cloze test which have been used to assess the respondents' understanding on the usage of 'be' copula; question 2 in cloze 1 and question 7 in cloze 2. The first question is testing on the present tense while the second one is on the past tense form.

C1 2. Some _____ (2) huge, like the giraffe or the whale ……….
    A. is
    B. are
    C. was
    D. were

C2 7.   One night, when his parents _____ (7) out, he took the opportunity to play with the fire-crackers.
    A. are
    B. were
    C. is
    D. was

Cloze, Qs No	Salah (S)/ Betul (B)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
1,2 (copula 'be')	S	65.0	56.9	80.0
	B	35.0	43.1	20.0
2, 7 (copula 'be')	S	63.0	50.0	54.3
	B	37.0	50.0	45.7

The findings show that the percentage of respondents who have given the right answer for question 2 cloze 1 is very low, that is between 20% to 43% for all three schools. As for question 7 in cloze 2 the percentage for students getting the right answer is also considerably low, between 37% to 50%. The overall percentage indicates that more than half of the students in all three schools have failed to understand the usage of English 'be' copula and therefore unable to use the form correctly. The students' failure to understand and acquire this grammatical form is due to the fact that there is no such form in the Malay language. According to Nik Safiah et.al (1997), there are two forms of copula in Malay language, that is *ialah* and *adalah*, which is similar in use to the English copula. However, the form *ialah* and *adalah* is predetermined and not essential in Malay. The multiplicity of English copula which vary according to the subject and tenses have greatly contributed to the students' failure in acquiring this grammatical rule. In a research conducted by Marlyna, Khazriyati and Tan Kim Hua (2005) it has been shown that students committed 30.8% mistakes out of 305 forms of copula 'be'. The findings prove that copula 'be' is an important grammatical form and should be given serious attention.

Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA)

Rosniah Mustafa and Norizah Md. Noor (2003) have listed several types of common grammatical errors of English among Malaysian students and subject-verb agreement is one of those. Very often, students use the wrong form of verb in a sentence which does not agree with the subject as well as the tense such as in *Naim and Zaireen *cycles* to school everyday and *The child *wash* his father's car.

Two items are included in the cloze to test students' understanding on the form of subject-verb agreement. Below are examples of questions taken from the cloze tests:

C1 5.   Different species _____ (5) different habits and eat different kinds of food.

    A   adopt
    B   adopted
    C   adopts
    D   is adopting

C2 4.   ….that no one was _____ (4) to play with fire-crackers.
    A   allow
    B   allowed
    C   allows
    D   allowing

Cloze, Qs No	Salah (S)/ Betul (B)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
1,5 (SVA)	S	72.0	75.2	79.6
	B	28.0	24.8	20.4
2, 4 (SVA)	S	50.0	44.5	40.0
	B	50.0	55.5	60.0

Interestingly, the findings show that the percentage of students obtaining the correct answer in cloze 1 is slightly different than that in cloze 2. While the percentage of correct answer is relatively low in question 5 cloze 1 for all schools, between 20% to 28% only, the percentage is rather high in question 4 cloze test 2, between 50% to 60% students have answered correctly. The difference of achievement for this grammatical form could be attributed to the indicator 'was' provided in question 4 cloze 2, which might have helped students to choose the correct answer 'allowed'. Although there is an indicator in the first question indicating that the structure is the simple present tense form, students have failed to give the correct answer. The failure of acquiring subject-verb agreement form among most students is rather predictable. The absence of this structure in Malay language has significantly deterred the students from acquiring it.

Determiner

This section discusses errors committed in the use of determiner and possessive pronoun.

Articles (*'a', 'an'* and *'the'*)

In the grammatical system of English language, indefinite and definite articles *a, an, the* are two of the different types of determiner that are used to premodify a head noun in a noun phrase. A research carried out by Khazriyati, Tan Kim Hua and Marlyna (2006) revealed several common errors in the use of English determiners. Among them are the failure to place the article 'the' before a particular place or location such as garden and department, musical instrument and computer, academic subjects such as science and a name of a country that functions as an adjective in a noun phrase. The complexity of the rules in the usage and placement of English determiners does contribute to confusion in application among leaners of this target language. The cloze questions testing students' understanding of determiners are as follows:

C1 7. You can also find animals such as _____ (7) whale and the dolphin
    A   the
    B   a
    C   an
    D   -

C2 3. …….the police issued _____ (3) warning that no one ……..
    A   the
    B   an
    C   a
    D   -

Cloze, Qs No	Wrong (W)/ Correct (C)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
1,7	S	48	44	49
	B	52	56	51

Cloze, Qs No	Wrong (W)/ Correct (C)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
2,3	S	69	60	62
	B	31	40	38

The findings revealed a high percentage of correct answer for question 7 cloze 1 ie 51% to 56%, as compared to only 31% to 40% for question 3 cloze 2. The difference may be due to the nature of the subject or the head noun that follows. The subject that determines the use of determiner 'a' is an abstract noun ie 'warning' as opposed to a concrete noun. Students may have learnt that 'a' is normally used for concrete countable nouns such as 'a cat' and 'a flower' as well as the failure to realize that when a noun is introduced for the first time in a text ie the presentation of new information, then the suitable determiner for it is the indefinite article 'a'.   The error comitted in the use of 'the' for question 7 cloze 1 could have been a failure to recognize 'the whale and the dolphin' as belonging to two specifically different species of animal.

Possesive Determiner

The following examples are on possesive determiner.

C1. 4. _____ (4) way of life is very different too.
    A   They
    B   Them
    C   Their
    D   Theirs

C2. 6.   Even though (6) _____ parents forbade him, he decided to play with fire-
crackers.
    A   her
    B   his
    C   him
    D   he

(D)

Cloze, Qs No	Salah (S)/ Betul (B)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
1, 4 (possessive determiner)	S	61.0	51.9	54.4
	B	39.0	48.1	45.6
2,6	S	37	33.6	40
	B	63	66.4	60

Both questions test students' understanding of possessive adjective, a type of determiner indicating possession such as *my, your, his, its,* dan *their.* The choice of possessive adjective given for both questions are shown above. Analysis of data demonstrates a difference in percentages for all three schools. The percentages of students giving the correct answer for question 6 cloze 2 ie 60-66% is higher than the percentages for question 4 cloze 1 ie 39-48%. Prominent disparity in the number of incorrect answers may be a result of direct translation from first language for C1 Q4 while for C2 6 high percentage of accuracy might have been due to the common usage of possessive determiner 'his' in writing and reading texts. Both questions are as follows:

    C1 4. _Thei_r way of life is very different too.
    C2 6   Even though _hi_s parents forbade him, he decided to play with fire-
        crackers.

The highest incorrect answer for Q4 cloze 2 is 'th_ey w_ay of life' which translates into 'mereka' or 'cara kehidupan mereka'. Bahasa Melayu does not have parallel item for the English possessive determiner. First, second and third person pronoun such as *saya, aku, anda, awak, ia, dia* dan *mereka*, apart from being used as a noun phrase to refer to specific person, they can also be used as premodifier, with the head of a noun phrase, to indicate possession, for example *buku saya, rumah dia* dan *kehidupan mereka.* Due to this difference in structures, students may have resorted to direct translation in the search for the correct asnwer.

Marlyna Maros and Tan Kim Hua focused their research on the errors in the use of English determiner committed in 873 sentences taken from 51 essay samples. 175 mistakes or 21% have been identified from 826 usage of *determiner* in the samples,. Their findings revealed that most of the mistakes in the use of *determiner* is due to the

differences in structure of both languages. Structural differences are clearly creating problems for the students when result of analysis not only highlighted students' failure to place any determiner before a noun, as well as their inability to use a suitable determiner for singular and plural nouns such as '*this balls*' for '*these balls*'.

English Determiner' must be followed by a noun or an adjective, if there is an adjective in a noun phrase. For example::

> I left *my* new umbrella at *the* bus stop.

There are two *determiners* in this sentence ie *my* and *the*, in which *my* is a *possessive* determiner preceding the adjective *new umbrella*, whereas *the* is the article which has to come before the noun *bus stop*. Their analysis revealed errors in students' writing with regard to the use of *possessive determiner* such as *my* and   *the*.

Relative Pronoun

In English, relative pronouns are used as conjunctions to connect one clause to another. Relative pronouns refer to nouns that have been mentioned earlier in the clause or sentence. There are 5 types of relative pronouns in English language : **that, which, who, whom,** and **whose.**

Who, Whose dan Whom – are used to refer to people
Which – is used to refer to things, place or idea
That – can be used to refer to people or things

This different variation of relative pronouns do not exist in bahasa Melayu. Relative sentence in bahasa Melayu is marked by the word 'yang', which can refer to both animate and inanimate nouns. The absence of parallel structure certainly pose a problem for the students which makes it difficult for them to correctly match a relative pronoun that corresponds with specific noun. Therefore, the different usage and application of each and every relative pronoun needs memorisation and a clear understanding of their functions. Based on the high percentage of incorrect answer, this aspect of the English syntax may be one which students have yet to master, as demonstrated by the examples below:

C1.8.   You can also find animals such as _____ (7) whale and the dolphin _____ (8) live in the water, swimming _____ (9) just like fish, yet they do not belong to the fish family.

> A   what
> B   who
> C   whose
> D   which

C2.9.　He was such in great pain (9) _____ he could not even sleep properly.
　　　A　this
　　　B　whose
　　　C　that
　　　D　who

Cloze, Qs No	Salah (S)/ Betul (B)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
1,8	S	79	83	85
	B	22	17	15

Cloze, Qs No	Salah (S)/ Betul (B)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
2,9	S	36	33	61
	B	64	67	39

Both questions were used to test students' understanding of *relative pronouns*. The percentage of answers differ for both questions in all three schools. The number of those who answered incorrectly are higher in the three schools for question 8 cloze 1, ie 79-85%, whereas for question 9 cloze 2 the percentages of those giving the correct answer are higher in two schools ie 67% for STARP and 64% for Senai except for SSA, ie 61%. There are two possibilities for the disparity. First, the use of 'that' is more common in sentences and its function in C2 9 marked a clear cause and effect structure between the two clauses. The second possibility is the absence of relative pronoun in the first language which created difficulty in processing and understanding the appropriate usage of pronoun that correctly corresponds to the specific noun used in the sentence in question 8 cloze 1.

CONCLUSION

A thorough examination of syntactical differences between the Malay language and English has been shown to be one of the major factors in students' inability to successfully master the English language; to successfully understand and apply their existing knowledge of English grammatical structure, as reflected in the results of the cloze tests conducted. Various efforts, on both national and individual levels, have been poured into the strategies to improve students' ability or command of English language. However this usually focuses on pedagogy or the teaching of the target language. Perhaps it is timely now to suggest that English teachers should be exposed to linguistic knowledge to better equip them in teaching the language. Because as was previously explained, comparative analysis of the two languages ie BM dan BI may be one of the ways in understanding and solving this persistent problem of inadequacy in target language application, despite having learnt for 11 years. In addition, attention should also be given to conducive and comfortable learning environment to make learning English more fun and exciting, which in turn makes learning more meaningful. All these factors beg the attention of all parties involved in the effort or drive to improve students' acquisition of the English language.

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[1]Even though Malaysia has fixed income of RM500.00 as the demarcation line for hardcore poor, RM1000.00 is still considered poor for families with a few school-going children.

[2] Macro level factors will not be discussed in this paper. Please refer to full report of research project SK001/2006 English as a Second Language: Problems and Solutions.