

THE INFLUENCE OF FIRST LANGUAGE (MALAY LANGUAGE) ON ENGLISH WRITING AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: AN ANALYSIS OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TRANSFER

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Abstract: First language (L1) interruption is a serious difficulty for Malay students writing in English as a second language (L2). This study looks at the positive and negative transfer of language structures from Bahasa Melayu to English among undergraduates at a private institution in Ipoh. The study, which used qualitative methods such as document analysis of student essays and semi-structured interviews, discovered that positive transfer promotes certain aspects of writing while negative transfer leads to common errors, particularly in tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and direct translation. These findings emphasise the need for tailored teaching strategies and the use of supportive technologies to improve L2 writing skills.

Keywords: First language, interference, writing skills, transfer

INTRODUCTION

English is essential in Malaysia's educational system, influencing both academic success and employment opportunities. According to Asmah (1992), English proficiency plays a pivotal role in academic and professional domains, particularly in urban and higher education contexts. Despite Malaysia's bilingual education policy, many pupils continue to struggle with mastering English writing due to interference from their first language (L1), Malay Language. Research by Karim and Nassaji (2013) and Bukhari and Abdul Aziz (2020) highlights that students frequently transfer linguistic structures from their L1, resulting in common English writing errors. This L1 effect is especially evident in writing, where the grammatical structures and vocabulary of the Malay Language often differ significantly from those of English. These disparities contribute to consistent errors in tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and sentence structure (Tafida & Okunade, 2016; Tati et al., 2021). The process of language transfer, wherein learners apply knowledge from their L1 to learning L2, can lead to either facilitation or interference. Odlin (1989) and Lado (1957) both explain that transfer can be positive when L1 and L2 structures align, but negative when differences lead to errors.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. To examine the patterns of positive transfer from the Malay Language to English in undergraduate student writing.
2. To identify patterns of negative transfer and their impact on writing accuracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Influence of First Language (L1) on Second Language (L2) Writing

Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and Selinker's (1983) Interlanguage Theory explain how learners' L1 influences L2 learning. Karim and Nassaji (2013) affirm that Malay-speaking ESL learners face challenges stemming from structural mismatches between Malay and English, particularly in verb tense and agreement. Odlin (1989) supports the idea that L1 structures can significantly influence L2 output, especially in writing. Asmah (1992) emphasised the deep-rooted use of Malay grammar in shaping English syntax among Malaysian students. Studies by Ellis (2008) and Gass & Selinker (2001) further confirm that first language background is one of the most influential factors in L2 acquisition.

Patterns of Positive and Negative Language Transfer

Positive transfer occurs when similarities between L1 and L2 structures aid the learning process. Mahmoud (2000) states that familiar sentence structures in L1 can facilitate fluency in L2. This is especially helpful in narrative or descriptive writing. However, negative transfer emerges when L1 habits lead to inappropriate L2 usage. Tati et al. (2021), Tafida & Okunade (2016), and Bukhari et al. (2020) all observed that tense confusion, omission of auxiliary verbs, and direct translations are the most persistent problems among Malay learners of English.

Strategies to Reduce Negative Transfer

Studies show that metacognitive strategies, including use of grammar-checking tools and feedback mechanisms, help reduce L1 interference (Montaño-González, 2017; Bukhari et al., 2020). Exposure to English through reading and structured feedback is also effective in fostering L2 competence (Sweller et al., 1998). Furthermore, constructive feedback and awareness-raising activities that draw attention to differences between L1 and L2 grammar can help students become more autonomous in self-editing and self-correction (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

METHODS

This qualitative study was conducted among ten undergraduate Malay students at a private university in Ipoh. Participants, selected through purposive sampling, represented a range of English proficiency levels and were actively enrolled in English writing courses. Each was asked to produce a 200-word restaurant review, which served as the basis for document analysis. This was followed by semi-structured interviews to gain further insights into their experiences with language transfer. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, to identify patterns related to positive and negative transfer. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, thick description for transferability, and peer debriefing to ensure confirmability and dependability.

FINDINGS

This section integrates both findings and discussion, aligned directly with the two research objectives. Thematic analysis generated three major themes and three subthemes based on the participants' writing samples and interview responses. Each theme is supported by verbatim excerpts and validated by prior studies.

Theme 1: Positive transfer

Students frequently demonstrated sentence structures in English that aligned closely with Malay syntax, especially when describing sensory experiences. For instance, "The pancakes were fluffy and tasty" directly

reflects the Malay “Pankek itu gebu dan sedap.” This mirroring suggests that shared structures facilitated expression and clarity, as supported by Mahmoud (2000).

Table 1

| Student | Positive transfer | Bahasa Melayu |
|---------|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 3. | The pancakes were fluffy and tasty. | Pankek itu gebu dan sedap. |

"Fluffy and tasty" is a direct and effective translation of the Malay phrase "gebu dan sedap." It naturally reflects the quality of the pancakes in English.

Table 2

| Student | Positive transfer | Bahasa Melayu |
|---------|---|--|
| 4. | The restaurant had a modern and clean design. | Restoran itu mempunyai reka bentuk moden dan bersih. |

"Modern and clean" accurately translates from Malay "moden dan bersih." It fits nicely in English and effectively describes the restaurant's design.

The analysis of positive transfer in restaurant reviews shows that students effectively use familiar Malay language and structures in their English writing. Phrases like "very nice," "delicious and flavorful," and "friendly and helpful" show how first language knowledge may be effectively applied to improve second language skills. This positive transfer demonstrates the student's capacity to use language commonalities between Malay and English, resulting in clear and idiomatic statements. This successful use of positive transfer leads to more fluid and fluent English writing, demonstrating the positive impact of L1 knowledge on L2 acquisition.

Theme 2: Negative transfer

1: Tense Misuse

“Last year I go to Warung Makan Sedap.” (Student 4)

This example shows confusion with tense. Malay uses time indicators without modifying verb forms. Hence, learners often apply present-tense verbs in past contexts, leading to grammatically incorrect expressions.

2: Subject-Verb Agreement Errors

“The staff looks so rush.” (Student 6)

Malay verbs remain unchanged regardless of subject number or person. This lack of agreement is carried over into English, resulting in common subject-verb agreement mistakes.

3: Direct Translation Issues

“The place was really beautiful.” (Student 2)

Students often translate phrases word-for-word from Malay to English. These translations, while technically correct, frequently miss idiomatic or natural phrasing in English, causing awkward expressions.

Theme 3: Interview-Based Findings on Coping Strategies

The interviews revealed a range of strategies students used to handle L1 interference in writing. Students reported thinking in Malay before writing in English, a factor contributing to structural errors. For example, Student 1 shared: “I think in Malay first, then I translate, but sometimes it comes out wrong.” Student 2 noted vocabulary limitations: “When I don’t know the English word, I just write the Malay meaning using English words.” Others cited tools like Grammarly or QuillBot and frequent reading as ways to enhance English input. Student 3 explained, “I write, and then I check my grammar using the app. I learn what to fix from there.” These insights indicate conscious efforts to mitigate interference through exposure, peer support, and feedback-driven revision.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings affirm that L1 interference significantly shapes the English writing performance of Malay undergraduates. Positive transfer proves beneficial in instances where both languages share syntactic similarities, making sentence construction easier. However, negative transfer poses notable challenges, especially in areas like tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and lexical choices. These align with Karim and Nassaji (2013), who emphasized the enduring impact of L1 grammar on ESL learners' writing accuracy.

The presence of direct translation errors reflects cognitive processing habits where students default to Malay sentence structure, reaffirming Selinker’s (1983) interlanguage concept. Furthermore, the interview responses provided richer context for understanding how learners perceive and attempt to overcome these challenges. Frequent references to thinking in Malay and using support tools suggest an active, though not always accurate, engagement with English writing tasks.

These results highlight the necessity for ESL pedagogy to focus more deeply on contrastive grammar instruction, increased exposure to English input, and consistent, immediate feedback. The integration of technological tools appears promising and should be strategically included in classroom practice. Overall, the interplay of L1 transfer and learner strategies must be carefully considered in designing effective writing instruction for bilingual learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be proposed to help students overcome L1 interference and improve their English writing:

Targeted Instruction on Key Problem Areas: Educators should focus more on teaching the specific areas where Bahasa Melayu and English differ, such as tense usage and subject-verb agreement. This can be done through contrastive grammar exercises that explicitly highlight the differences between the two languages.

Increased Use of Technology: Institutions should integrate AI-based tools like Grammarly and QuillBot into writing curriculums. These tools provide immediate feedback on grammar and style, allowing students to learn and correct errors related to L1 interference autonomously.

Workshops and Practice Sessions: Organizing workshops that emphasize practical writing skills and error correction can be highly beneficial. These sessions should include practice exercises that mimic real-life writing tasks, allowing students to apply what they learn in context.

Peer Review Programs: Implementing structured peer review sessions where students critique each other's writing can foster collaborative learning and encourage students to recognize and correct errors related to L1 interference.

Promote Reading and Authentic Language Exposure: Encouraging students to read English novels, newspapers, and journals can help them develop a stronger sense of correct syntax and vocabulary usage, reducing their reliance on L1 translation.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that L1 interference is a significant factor affecting the English writing proficiency of undergraduate Malay students, manifesting through both positive and negative transfer. While positive transfer can facilitate certain aspects of writing, negative transfer, particularly in tense usage, subject-verb agreement, and direct translations, presents challenges that must be addressed through strategic educational interventions. Recommendations include targeted grammar instruction, integration of technology for feedback, and fostering collaborative and authentic language learning experiences. Future research should consider expanding the sample size and examining the long-term impact of various instructional strategies on minimizing L1 interference.

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