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## **CROSS-LINGUISTIC INFLUENCE IN MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS WRITING: A CASE STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

*Studies on cross-linguistic influence have shed some lights on the general view of the processes involved when learning a second language which is different from the first language. This study aims to identify and describe aspects of cross-linguistic influence in the writings of Malaysian ESL. The subjects in this study were five students from the Kadazandusun ethnic who mostly speak their mother tongue and Malay language in their daily communication. They learned English as a second language from pre-school until form five at secondary school level. They have attended fully-funded government schools that use Malay language as a medium of teaching and learning. Data were collected from given written tasks. Besides that, a set of questionnaire were administered to elicit information on their language dominance and*

*linguistic knowledge. The focus of data analysis was twofold; syntactic level (word order, subject use and present continuous tense) and lexical level (misspelling, borrowing and coinages). The findings of this study to suggest that forms and the meaning in the second language are expressed and formed by the learners' language knowledge and use of the second language as well as by the influence of the first language.*

### **Keywords**

First Language Influence, L1 Transfer, English as a Second Language, Writing

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## **1. Introduction**

The role of English language in second language learning has received important attention from numerous theorist and researchers for decades. It also plays a crucial role on the understanding of second language acquisition. Studies on language transfer and research on cross-linguistic influence have shed lights on the general view of the process involved when learning a new language which is different from the mother tongue. As people learn any languages, certain language skills are developed. Language learners seem to transfer these skills to the target language. According to Kingdom (2006), cross linguistic transfer is a natural feature in multilingual learning and contexts. The study of cross linguistic transfer has contributed to the analysis of the processes and condition in which learners transfer their skills from first language to a target language.

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study is to identify and describe the kind of cross linguistic influence in the writing of five selected Malaysian learners of English as a second language.

### **1.2 Objectives of the Study**

This study is guided by the following objectives;

- To identify the first languages influence the written performance of Malaysian ESL learners at the syntax level.
- To identify the first language influences the written performance of Malaysian ESL learners at the lexical level.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

This case study aims to answer the following research questions;

- How does first language influence the written performance of Malaysian learners of ESL

at the syntax level?

- How does first language influence the written performance of Malaysian learners of ESL at the lexical level?

## **2. Literature Review**

Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) has been a central issue in Second language learning. It's role has been researched extensively in the past few decades (Odlin, 1989; Selinker, 1992; Ellis, 1994; Keller man, 1995). Despite the many arguments on how or how much one's first language affects his/her acquisition of a new language, cross-linguistic influence does have a significant role in language learning. The use of first language (L1) provides students with a sense of security that enables them to learn second language (L2) with ease and in comfort.

The influence of student's L1 all lies in the process through which learners of the second language go through while learning. Some students learn L2 by using the knowledge they already have in their L1. They use structures from their L1 that are similar to the L2 and experiment with the new language. An inter-language, which consists of the learner's existing knowledge of the second language, is thus created. Therefore, by using what they already know, students are able to overcome communication breakdown.

Studies on CLI in the field of syntax where the major concern was to see how word order in L2 might be influenced by the structural differences of the word order in L1 was conducted extensively. Some studies have shown that there has been conflicting evidence relating to the influence of L1 on the L2 word order in production. Some studies reported that L2 acquisition is affected by the SVO (subject-verb-object) ordering in L1 (Zobl, 1982), others suggested that the production of simple declarative sentences in English is not strongly influenced by the structural nature of L1 (Fathman; 1976; Fathman & Loco co, 1989). Furthermore, there was a controversy as to whether an L1 basic word order can be transferred to L2 where such word order is not used at all. Rutherford (1983) found no evidence of such transfer in Japanese learners of English (i.e., Japanese uses SOV order, while English uses SVO). Zobl (1986) supported that finding but suggested that such transfer can occur in case a language makes use of more than one basic word order (e.g., Dutch). Nevertheless, on the notion of syntactic transfer, Ohlin (1989) reviews empirical studies which showed considerable evidence both for positive and negative transfer related to issues such as articles, word-order, relative clauses and negations. Syntactic transfer

has also been studied at the level of tenses. It was found out that English tenses are used erroneously in some cases without any influence from L1, instead, other factors such as social, educational and linguistic may affect several ways (Celaya, 1992). However, her data showed that transfer seems to be favored by the different meaning of tenses in the languages and that learner with low proficiency in the L2 draw from their L1 in the use of present continuous tense.

A number of lexical studies (Atkins, et.al, 1986 & 1988; Arid & Gas's, 1987; Fisher, 1994 in Priyono, 2005: 230) conclude that the main area of difficulty that is potentially to be the main problem experienced by L2 learners is lexical constraints. The lexical constraints in this case are related to Lexical Conceptual Structure; a conceptual structure which refers to the knowledge of lexical item with all its lexical properties which include how to pronounce and how to spell.

Lexical transfer is also an essential cognitive process in the learning of a new language. Students establish equivalence relations between words of their first language and those of the target language and, based on this inter linguistic identification, they transfer lexical items they think are similar in the languages in comparison (DE Angelis & Selinker, 2001). The cross-linguistic similarities between L1 and L2 can also be assumed to play an important role in the storage of lexical items (Ringbom, 1987). Students will use the lexical knowledge which they had stored for the purpose of production or to comprehend. In a study conducted on identifying the patterns of the lexical and syntactic conceptual structure of Indonesian language that influence the learning of English as a second language, it showed that all the sentence units on the students' writing works are very much influenced by Indonesian language system (Triastuti, 2015). The language produced is simply the manifestation of a linear translation in which the input in the L1 is immediately or instantly changed into the output in the L2.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The subjects of this study are five selected ESL learners. They are from the Kadazandusun ethnic in Sabah, who speaks their local dialect and Bahasa Malaysia most of the time in their daily conversation with parents, family members, siblings and friends. They have attended a fully-funded government school from pre-school until secondary school which uses Malay as a medium of instructions, teaching and learning. The subjects have been learning English as a second language in school. Their ages ranging from 18 to 20 years old and their

knowledge of English are only due to formal English language formal instruction in school. The subjects are currently studying Certificate in Tourism and Adventure. The subjects are currently in semester three and have been enrolled in English courses since the first until current semester. The subjects take two hours of English class in a week for 13 weeks along the semester.

### **3.2 Instrument**

The sample data were collected from a written task on a given topic called “My favorites song”. The subjects were allowed to accomplish the written task within 20 minutes. They were asked to write freely without using any dictionary or any other additional source of information such as grammar or reference books. The instructions were given in English. The researcher provided further clarification to the subjects orally to ensure the subjects understand the procedures and topic.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

The focus of this analysis was twofold; at the syntax level, there are three main core issues mainly word order, the use of subject and the use of present continuous tense. At the lexical level Celaya and Torras’ classification (2001) was adapted alongside Ringbom’s (2001) distinction between transfer of form and transfer of meaning. Thus, at the level of lexical transfer of form misspellings, borrowing and coinages were at the core while the use or presence of calques emerges as the main element to analyze with regards to lexical transfer of meaning. Table 1 below summarises a brief description of the elements considered as the basis of analysis in this case study:

**Table1:** *Classification of syntactic and lexical transfer.*

Syntactic transfer	Word order	The SVO property which characterizes the order of constituents in an English clause may be violated due to L1 influence, e.g. <i>*eat the apple I</i>
	Subject use	Use of null subjects in English because of L1 influence, e.g. <i>*go home</i> instead of <i>I go home</i>
	Tense use	Influence from L1 in the use of the English present continuous, e.g. <i>*I eat now</i>
Lexical transfer of form	Misspellings	The conventions for representing phonemes by means of graphemes may be violated because of L1 influence, e.g. <i>*little</i> instead of <i>little</i>
	Borrowing	Insertion of L1 words as complete language shift

	Coinages	Learners adapt L1 words to the English structure, so that they sound or look like English,
Lexical transfer of meaning	Calques	The L2 word is the result of literal translation from the L1

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

The classification of syntactic and lexical transfer as shown in Table 1 was used to identify the syntactic and lexical transfer present in the written task performed by the subjects.

An analysis of the three main issues in syntactic transfers showed that the most common syntactic properties that influenced the learners' interlanguage were the subject. All learners used the subject "*This song...*" repeatedly, more than three times as identified in their written task. Two subjects used the pronoun "*it*" consistently to substitute the subject "*This song...*" in every sentence. The syntactic analysis also revealed that subjects wrote the song title as the subject in the sentences;

*Cry on my shoulder is....*

*Escape the fate is...*

*Little thing is...*

In terms of word order, most of the subject's sentences were correctly constructed following the SVO (Subject Verb Object) pattern of English;

*This song can also make me sing along because...*

*This song reminds me to someone...*

*I enjoyed listening to the song...*

*I listened to the song during my pleasure time*

Regarding the use of the English present continuous tense, three subjects were able to construct (be + gerund) correctly;

*The song is making me relax...*

*The song is very relaxing to listen...*

*The song is very entertaining...*

In addition, a subject was able to construct present continuous tense correctly with errors in

meaning;

*The song is entertaining and suitable for relax at home.*

*Malay: Lagu itu sangat menghiburkan dan sesuai untuk bersantai di rumah.*

*English: The song is entertaining and suitable for relaxing at home.*

There was another instance in which there were both errors in form and meaning;

*I have listening the song*

*Malay: Saya telah mendengar lagu ini...*

*English: I have listened to the song.*

*I have downloading the song*

*Malay: Saya telah mendapatkan lagu itu.*

*English: I have downloaded the song.*

The findings from the study also suggest that syntactic transfer regarding word-order and subject use may not appear in isolation. Instead, they can be seen together as a clause as shown in the following example:

*This song I like it*

*Saya suka lagu ini*

*I like this song*

O (S) V

SVO

SVO

From the example stated above, it is shown that subjects used a word order which does not correspond to the SVO English pattern. The construction of such pattern is influenced by L1 as L1 word order is more flexible.

Meanwhile, the most common pattern of syntactic level was related to subject verb agreements (SVA) as explained by Jordens (1986). The following examples illustrate the agreements errors produced by the subjects in this present study:

*My favorite song is much*

*Malay: Lagu kegemaran saya sangat banyak.*

*English: My favorite's songs are many.*

*The song is...*

*Malay: Lagu itu adalah*

*English: The songs are*

*The lyrics and melody is*

*Malay: Lirik dan melodi itu*

*English: The lyrics and melody are*

*It also gives me*

*Malay: IA juga memberikan saya*

*English: It also gives me*

In response to the second question posed on this paper, an analysis of lexical transfer of form and meaning was carried out following the previously described classification. Table 2 below, shows the classification of types of influence identified along with the number of instances in which they occurred. It also shows the examples from the data to illustrate each case.

**Table 2: Results and examples of lexical transfer**

Lexical transfer of form	Misspellings	1. felling (English = feeling) 2. streng (English = strength) 3. favorite (English = favorite) 4. Beacouse (English = because)
	Borrowing	No borrowed words found in the written task.
	Coinages	1. Difren (English = different) 2. Relex (English = riley) 3. Stres (English) = stress)
Lexical transfer of meaning	Calques	No calques words found in the written task.

In terms of lexical transfer, the subjects' misspellings and coinages were commonly found in the subjects' sentences. No borrowed words and clagues words were found, as learners have strong schemata and knowledge about the written task topic "My favorite's song". According to Ringbom (2001), this kind of transfer of meaning occurs when learners are aware of the existing target word forms.

## **5. Conclusion**

This present study has addressed the cross-linguistic influence in the writing of Malaysian ESL learners in a case study. Since this is a case study, it is worth clarifying that the following comments are not conclusive. After an analysis of the sample data, it was possible to identify instances of syntactic and lexical transfer and also, to suggest various methodological issues that should be considered for further research.

At the syntactic level, it was observed that subjects were used in the subjects' construction



of English sentences which is also seen in sentence construction within the Malay language. Also, the subjects' L1 might have influenced the use of English present continuous tense as it presented errors in form and of meaning. It was also revealed that L1 influence in word order and subject use may exist in the construction of a single sentence. Results from this study also suggested that errors in subject verb agreement might occur as a result of L1 influence. By considering the L1 influence at the lexical level, it seen that there were instances for both transfer of form and transfer of meaning. Borrowed and clagues words do not occur in the subjects' sentence construction.

The results of such study might be useful in making informed decisions with regards to curriculum planning and design and textbook selection. It may be relevant for teachers to minimize negative attitudes towards subjects' insertion of, for instance, misspellings and coinages words which may explain their need to fill a gap of lexical knowledge in L2, and understand their reliance on L1 resources as positive attempts to accomplish their communicative purposes. Finally, classroom activities should be designed to foster and increase learners' own awareness of the linguistic choices they make when communicating in the target language and the significance of these choices.

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