AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON INTERFERENCE ERRORS FROM MALAY LANGUAGE TRASNFER TO MANDARIN LEXICON LEARNING

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Abstract

Language transfer is one of the main factors affecting foreign language learner from learning a target language well. In Malaysia, the number of non-Chinese students learning Mandarin is increasing. However, differences in their language and cultures could impose more difficulties to the non-Chinese students when learning the language. The present study explored the interference errors from Malay language to Mandarin learning of non-Chinese students in terms of lexicon. To this end, learner corpus containing collection of the students' compositions,

dialogues and examination scripts was compiled and analyzed in the study. Four types of lexicon interference errors were focused on, namely (1) improper usage of words (2) word orders error (3) improper usage of collocation and (4) improper usage of culture images. The findings reveal the highest interference error occurs in improper usages of words followed by word order errors, improper usages of collocation and improper usages of culture images. The finding calls for a more effective teaching to be incorporated to raise the students' awareness on the negative transfer of their native language into Mandarin lexicon learning.

1. Introduction

Language transfer is a psychological term defined as that the language applied by learners depends on the previous knowledge of one language to another target language. Language transfer can be divided into two which are positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer refers to the previous knowledge from the native language obtained by language learner, and so forth to help the learner learn well in the target language. In contrary, negative transfer refers to the previous knowledge from the native language which interferes the learner's ability to learn a new target language (Wardbaugn, 1970; Odlin, 1989; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Aleeva, 2012).

Positive transfer results in correct utterances and its influence is more difficult to be recognized or identified as compared to negative transfer. In this regard, focusing on negative transfer is more relevant to pedagogical goals of identifying problematic areas in foreign language learning. Hence, doing research on the negative transfer of a native language is very important for a second or foreign language learner, as well as to find out methods to minimize or eliminate the interference of errors making.

In recent years, China economy has improved dramatically, thus the number of non-Chinese students who choose to study Mandarin has increased in Malaysia. However, differences between language and cultures may lead to some difficulties for the non-Chinese students to learn Mandarin, especially the interference of their mother tongue (Cheun, 2006, as cited in Tan, et al, 2016), as well as limited opportunities to use the target language on a daily basis (Jeon, 2005). They have voiced up their fear as they are unable to communicate effectively in the language they learned (Tan, et al, 2016, cited in Chua, et al, 2018), one of which is in terms of

lexicon. As we know, lexicon is a basic tool of communication. Without a rich knowledge of lexicon, it is difficult for us to perform day-to-day communication or exchange general information from a native language to a target language (Nation, 2001). In sum, the lack of lexicon knowledge is one of the main factors that induce the occurrences of interference of their mother tongue.

Taking into account the importance of lexicon as a component of a target language use, the present study therefore intends to explore the interference errors made by non-Chinese students into their Mandarin learning specifically from the perspective of lexicon. As suggested by Win (2018), it is responsibility to teachers for take the initiatives to become helper to lessen the students' learning fear. Therefore, the research questions addressed in the study are as follows.

Research Question 1: What kinds of interference errors do the non-Chinese students encounter?

Research Question 2: How do the transfers interfere in their Mandarin learning?

Research Question 3: What solutions can be proposed?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Transfer

The term 'transfer' has been defined by various scholars. According to Odlin (1989), transfer is "*the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously acquired*" (1989:27). Meanwhile, Marian and Kaushanskaya (2007) explain transfer as the "*use of semantic or syntactic structures from the other language without active switching to that language*" (2007:369). As mentioned by Wardhaugh (1970), transfer is a tool used to account for or explain the errors which actually occur. He further argues that transfer is the basis for predicting which patterns in second language will be learnt more readily and which will prove more troublesome. In connection with this, it is important to note that all of the scholars share a same opinion, in which they agree with the fact that the native language background of a learner may influence his second or foreign language proficiency, and it can possibly help to predict what areas might be particularly challenging for the learner.

2.2 Definition of Interference

Numerous studies have addressed the meaning of 'interference' of a native language on target language learning. As proposed by Lott (1983), interference is the errors that can be traced

back to the first language, while the learners use the second language (1983:257). Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) view interference as the "*automatic transfer*", due to the results of the old habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language (1982:256). Furthermore, Ellis (2000) defines interference as "*the influence of transfer that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2*" (2000:51). Ellis further explains that learners often construct their own interim rules with the use of their L1 knowledge in their L2 learning, but only when they believe it will help them in the learning task or when they have become sufficiently proficient in the L2 for the transfer to be possible. To sum up, interference means the errors made by someone who is gradually approximates his/her target language built on his/her stages of mother tongue knowledge.

2.3 Previous Studies of Interference Errors

In recent year, several studies proposed by scholars (Odlin, 1989; Pavlenko & Jarvis, 2002; Aleeva, 2012; Atetwe, 2013) provided a significant picture to the topic of negative transfer in term of interference errors in the field of second or foreign language. Odlin's (1989) study classified the effects of cross-linguistic similarities and differences by positive transfer, negative transfer and differing lengths of acquisition. He further divided negative transfer into four types which include underproduction, overproduction, production errors and misinterpretation. Moreover, the study conducted by Pavlenko and Jarvis (2002) focused on the analysis of bidirectional Russian-English transfer. A total of 9 types of interference errors were identified in the study including framing transfer, semantic extension, lexical borrowing, transfer related to the use of tense and aspect inflections with verbs, transfer related to the use of nominal case inflections with nouns and pronouns, loan translations, sub categorization transfer, transfer related to article use and word order transfer.

Furthermore, the findings of Aleeva's (2012) study coded the interference errors into 13 categories and the most common categories are semantic extension, commas after an introductory phrase, lexical borrowings and null subject errors. Atetwe's (2013) study also showed that the use of mother tongue negatively influenced the performance of English in Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). Based on the literature reviewed, the present study aims at investigating how the negative transfers affect learners' language learning, particularly in their lexicon production thus provide an awareness to the learners with regard to the negative transfer which they have from their native language (Malay language) in learning target language (Mandarin).

3. Methodology

The primary data used in the present study is the learner corpus compiled from a total of N=191 non-Chinese students who learn Mandarin as a third language course at a public university in Malaysia. Out of the N=191 students, 76 are at Level One, 56 are at Level Two, and 59 are at Level Three of their Mandarin course. Among the students, n=35 are males and n=156 are females. Their ages range from 21 to 23 years old. There were n=162 (84.4%) Malays and n=29 (15.2%) Indians who participated in the study. Overall, none of the students have had any experience or background knowledge of Mandarin prior to taking part in the study.

The scope of this study is based on the three Mandarin textbooks written by the lecturers of University Malaysia Kelantan (Lee, et.al, 2012; Lee, et.al, 2013; Lee, et.al, 2014). The corpus collected in this research is taken from the mistakes of non-Chinese students who attended Mandarin course at the University. The learner corpus in specific has been developed upon compiling the students' examination scripts, written homework, dialogues between teachers and the students, and dialogues among the students themselves. The contents of the corpus also include the tests and written assignments accomplished by the students. The task includes the practice of sentences, reorganization of words and phrases, translation of sentences, dialogues, writing tasks and other exercises.

The learner corpus was examined and analyzed for the types of interference errors (improper usage of words, word order errors, improper usage of collocation and improper usage of culture images) in the perspective of lexicon committed by the non-Chinese students.

4. Results and Discussions

In the early stage of the Mandarin language learning, many non-Chinese students think that the meaning of each Malay word could match the meaning of a Mandarin word correspondingly. They perceive that every Mandarin word is equal to a Malay word in the concept of meaning, inner meaning, its usage and structure. And they mechanically match the Malay language in Mandarin in the scope of the semantics and structure of the language thus results in interference errors.

As explained, the analysis of types of interference errors in the perspective of lexicon was focused on four sub-categories specifically improper usage of words, word orders error,

improper usage of collocation; and improper usage of culture images. The overall results of the types of interference errors made in the learner corpus are summarized in Table 1 below:

Table 1: *Types of Interference Errors in the Perspective of Lexicon*

No.	Types of lexical errors	Amount	Percentages
1.	Improper usages of words	652	35.5%
2.	Word order errors	561	30.6%
3.	Improper usages of collocation	438	23.9%
4.	Improper usages of culture images	185	10.0%
	Total	**1,836**	**100%**

(n=191)

Table 1 indicates that improper usages of words are the most common types of interference errors from Malay language to Mandarin. Errors in this category constitute 35.5% of all interference errors, with the errors amount of 652. The second most common type of interference errors from Malay language found in my data overall are word order error, which account for 30.6% of all errors, with the errors amount of 561. Next is followed by improper usages of collocation, 438 errors are found from the data collection which account for 23.9%. The least common type of interference errors found in my data are improper usages of culture images, which account for 10% with overall 185 errors.

The following sections present and discuss in detail the individual types of interference errors found in the learner corpus.

4.1 Improper usage of words

Due to the historical background, differences in cultural traditions and customs, there are different degrees of discourse and meaning of Malay language and Mandarin in concrete use. Both languages have a word of polysemy, the expression of multiple words. Or Malay can use only one word to express the multiple meaning of a Mandarin word, or a Mandarin word can express the multiple meaning of Malay word, these phenomena are very common. During the study and use of Mandarin, many Non-Chinese incorrectly understand of the concept of meaning of particular word. They often limit the Malay and Mandarin word in a single corresponding meaning, so committed a lot of serious expression errors. Some obvious example would be viewed in Table 2.

Table 2: *Examples of interference error made by Improper usage of words*

Malay	Mandarin	Examples of Improper usage of words
1. Lagi	再　还　又 zài　hái　yòu	我 **再** 想买衣服 。（正 确 答 案：还） wǒ **zài** xiǎng mǎi yīfú.　　(Zhèngquè dá'àn：**Hái**) {Saya **lagi** ingin beli baju.　(jawapan betul: **juga**) } [*I want to buy clothes **again**.　(Correct answer: **also**)*]
2. Tidak	没 有　不 méiyǒu　bù	我 们 还 **不** 吃 饱。（正 确 答 案：没 有） wǒmen hái **bù** chī bǎo.　(zhèngquè dá'àn: **Méiyǒu**) {Kita masih **tidak** makan kenyang. 　　　　　　　(jawapan betul: **belum**) } [*We **do not** eat enough.　(Correct answer: **have not**)*]
3. Boleh	可以　能　会 kěyǐ　néng　huì	我 **会** 看一看你的书 吗？（正 确 答 案：可以） Wǒ **huì** kànyīkàn nǐ de shū ma? (Zhèngquè dá'àn:**Kěyǐ**) {**Bolehkah** saya membaca buku awak? 　　　　　　　(jawapan betul: **bolehkah**} [**Can** I have a look at your book? (Correct answer: **can**)]

Table 2 presents the occurrence of improper usage of words because of the misunderstanding of Malay simple word used in expressing the multiple words in Mandarin. Example 1 shows that the Malay word of 'lagi', can become the multiple words of 再(zài), 还 (hái) and 又(yòu) in Mandarin which have different meanings. 再(zài) is used to indicate the repetition of an action that will take place in the future; 还(hái) is used in both interrogative and declarative sentences to express repetition which is not yet realized, but will be realized in the future; whereas 又(yòu) is used to indicate the repetition of an action that has already taken place. When used in a negative sentence, 又(yòu) is used to indicate the repetition of the non-occurrence of an action. Therefore, the sentence of '*我**再**想买衣服 (wǒ **zài** xiǎng mǎi yīfú)'* {Saya **lagi** ingin beli baju} [*I want to buy clothes **again***] is incorrect, and the correct answer used

in this sentence is 还(hái), '我还想买衣服 *(wǒ **hái** xiăng măi yīfú)* {Saya **juga** ingin beli baju} [*I **also** want to buy clothes*]'.

Furthermore, Example 2 shows that the word 'tidak' in Malay, can become the multiple words of 没有(méiyǒu) or 不(bù) in Mandarin. 没有(méiyǒu) or 不(bù) also bring a different meaning in Mandarin. 不 (bù) is generally used to negate an action that you *do not want to do* or *do not intend to do* (in the future). So expressing things like "I don't want to go" or "I'm not going" would be uses of 不 (bù). On the contrary, 没 (méi) and 没有 (méiyǒu) can both be used to negate actions that occurred in the past, or to say that something has not happened yet. Thus, the sentence of '我们还不吃饱 *(wǒmen hái **bù** chī băo)*{Kita masih **tidak** makan kenyang}[*We **do not** eat enough*]' is incorrect, and the correct answer which used in this sentence is '没有 (méiyǒu)', '我们还没有吃饱 *(wǒmen hái **méiyǒu** chī băo)* {Kita masih **belum** makan kenyang}[*We **have not** eat enough*]'.

Example 3 shows that the word 'boleh' in Malay, can become the multiple words of 可以 (kěyǐ), 能(néng) and 会(huì) in Mandarin. These three multiple words in Mandarin also bring a different meaning in Mandarin. 会（huì）is the most common use for "can" or "able to", specifically for learned knowledge. Use it for actions you know how to do because you acquired the skill as a result of study, not necessarily because you were born with an innate ability; 能 (néng) normally is used to indicate physical ability to do something or complete a task. Considering the present circumstances, 能 (néng) indicates whether you are "capable" of completing the action based on the situation; whereas 可以 (kěyǐ) can also mean "be allowed to" or "may do". In this case it is often interchangeable with 能 (néng), but not with 会(huì). In view of this, the sentence of '我会看一看你的书吗？ *(Wǒ **huì** kànyīkàn nǐ de shū ma?)* {**Bolehkah** saya membaca buku awak?} [**Can** I have a look at your book?]' is incorrect, and the correct answer which used in this sentence is '可以 (kěyǐ)', '我可以看一看你的书吗？ *(Wǒ **kěyǐ** kànyīkàn nǐ de shū ma?)* {**Bolehkah** saya membaca buku awak?}[**Can** I have a look at your book?]'.

Therefore, if the non-Chinese incorrectly understand of the multiple meaning of particular word during their learning in Mandarin, they would be more easily to make a lot of improper usage of word errors.

4.2 Word order errors

The difference of Malay and Mandarin also appears in word order. The most common errors which the non-Chinese students made mainly are the noun phrase:

Table 3: *Examples of words order errors*

Mandarin		Malay	
Word order	**word mearning**	**word order**	**word order error**
1. 鸡饭	鸡(ayam) 饭(nasi)	nasi ayam	饭(nasi) 鸡(ayam)
jīfàn	jī fàn		fàn jī
	[chicken rice]		[rice] [chicken]
2. 衣店	衣(baju) 店(kedai)	kedai baju	店(kedai) 衣(baju)
yīdiàn	yī diàn		diàn yī
	[clothes shop]		[shop] [clothes]
3. 奶 茶	奶 (susu) 茶(teh)	teh susu	茶(teh) 奶 (susu)
nǎichá	nǎi chá		chá nǎi
	[milk tea]		[tea] [milk]
4. 蓝 色	蓝(biru) 色(warna)	warna biru	色(warna) 蓝(biru)
lánsè	lán sè		sè lán
	[blue color]		[color] [blue]

Both in Mandarin and Malay, the noun phrases are usually composed by modifiers and central words. However, in Mandarin, the modifiers are always before the central words, such as: 鸡饭 *jīfàn* (chicken rice), 衣店 *yīdiàn* (clothes shop), 奶茶 *nǎichá* (milk tea) etc. But in Malay, the words order is exactly opposite. Specifically, the central words are always before the modifiers. In all exercises, non-Chinese students are not aware of the word sequence and directly translate Malay noun phrases into Mandarin word by word. Many word order errors happen in this way.

4.3 Improper usage of Collocation

The meaning of a particular word differs in the different contexts. Without understanding the habit of words and its usage in a fixed combination, Malay collocation rules often affect students during their learning of Mandarin. The following are some of the topical errors:

(1) Malay : teh susu yang kurang manis (meaning: less sweet milk tea)

Direct Mandarin translation : 少甜的奶茶 *shǎo tián de nǎichá*   (milk tea) (less) (sweet)

The correct meaning of Malay word for "teh susu yang kurang manis" in Mandarin translation should be *'少**糖**的奶茶 shǎo **táng** de nǎichá (less **sugar** milk tea)'*. But if the non-Chinese students directly from the Malay phrase *'teh susu yang kurang manis'*, it will become *'少**甜**的奶茶 shǎo **tián** de nǎichá (less **sweet** milk tea)'*.

(2) Malay : saya kena pergi (meaning: I have to go)

Direct Mandarin translation : 我得去 *Wǒ děi qù* (I) (get) (go)

The correct meaning of Malay word for "saya kena pergi" in Mandarin translation should be *'我得去**了** Wǒ děi qù l**e** (I have to go)'*. But if the non-Chinese students directly translate from the Malay, it will become *'我得去 Wǒ děi qù (I have to go)'*. However, the learners always ignore the particular word of '**了** **le**' which has particular meaning in Mandarin context. But in Malay context, in such a situation, there are no such particles there.

(3) Malay : saya ada banyak duit (meaning: I have a lot of money)

Direct Mandarin translation : 我有多钱 *Wǒ yǒu duō qián*   (I) (have) (more) (money)

The correct translation of Malay word of "saya ada bayak duit" in Mandarin translation should be *'我有**很**多钱 Wǒ yǒu **hěn**duō qián (I have a lot of money)'*. But if the non-Chinese students directly translate from the Malay, it will become *'我有多钱 Wǒ yǒu duō qián (I have a lot of money)'*, ignoring the presence of '**很** **hen (very)**' presence. That is because in such a

situation in Malay context, '很 **hen (very)**' does not exist. But in this context in Mandarin, if '很 **hen (very)**' is ignored, the whole sentence becomes incomplete.

Therefore, if the non-Chinese students do not pay attention to the usage and fixed structure of Mandarin phrases and sentences, they easily transfer the usage of their mother tone into Mandarin. Then it is easy to cause problems of improper use of collocation.

4.4 Improper Use of Culture Images

Different countries have their own different culture images. Culture images means the culture symbols that crystallize the wisdom of those country's history, people and culture. Owing to the different culture traditions and living conditions in countries differences, this may gradually generate its unique cultures images. So people in different countries will use different culture images to present one thing. Moreover, Chinese and Malay people have obviously different thought patterns. For example, Chinese people prefer to say something in a euphemistic way, while Western people prefer saying something directly. So when Chinese and Malay people express one meaning, they may use different images as the following examples show.

(1) Malay   : sila makan (please eat)

Direct Mandarin translation   : 请吃 *Qǐng chī* (please) (eat)

The Malay word of "sila makan" usually used by Chinese people in Mandarin is '*请**用餐** qǐng **yòng cān** (please have a meal)*'. But if the non-Chinese students directly translate from the Malay, it will become '*请**吃** Qǐng **chī** (please eat)*'. Although the context of '*请吃 Qǐng chī*' is not wrong, However, if follow the Chinese culture images in inviting other people to have meal, the frequency of context use normally is '*请**用餐** qǐng **yòng (cān)**'* instead of '*请**吃** Qǐng **chī**'.

(2) Malay   : sila beri tunjuk ajar (please give advice)

Direct Mandarin translation   : 请给指教 *Qǐng gěi zhǐjiào*

The correct meaning of Malay word "sila beri tunjuk ajar" in Mandarin translation should be '*请**多多**指教 qǐng **duōduō** zhǐjiào (please more advice)*'. But if the non-Chinese students directly translate from the Malay, it will become '*请**给**指教 Qǐng **gěi** zhǐjiào (please give advice)*', ignoring the presence of '多多 *duōduō* (**more**)', and replace of the word of '给 *gěi*

(give)'. That is because in such a situation in Malay context, '多多 *duōduō* **(more)**' does not exist. But if follow the Chinese culture images in this context, '*请*多多*指教* *qǐng* *duōduō* *zhǐjiào*' is a complete sentence.

(3) Malay   : jom, kita pergi minum. (let's go, we go to drink)
Direct Mandarin translation : 走吧，我们去喝 *Zǒu ba, wǒmen qù hē*

The correct meaning of Malay word "jom, kita pergi minum" in Mandarin translation should be '*走吧，我们去喝*点儿东西*Zǒu ba, wǒmen qù hē* *diǎn'r dōngxi* (let's go, we go to drink something a little bit)'. But if the non-Chinese students directly translate from the Malay, it will become '*走吧，我们去喝* *Zǒu ba, wǒmen qù hē* (let's go, we go to drink)', ignoring the presence of object '东西 *dōngxi* **(something)**', and also '点儿 *diǎn'r* **(a little bit)**'. That is because in such a situation in Malay context, '东西 *dōngxi* **(something)**' and '点儿 *diǎn'r* **(a little bit)**' does not exist. But if follow the Chinese culture images in this context, the sentence will become complete if say '*走吧，我们去喝*点儿东西*Zǒu ba, wǒmen qù hē* *diǎn'r dōngxi*'.

Hence, it's necessary for non-Chinese students to know the differences between Chinese and Malay images. When they know some more culture images, although they cannot speak Mandarin proficiently, at least they may avoid the occurrence of improper use through the different culture images.

5. Conclusion

From the above analysis of the negative transfer of mother tongue, we can clearly see that the Malay language interference on the Mandarin lexicon learning often occurred in the learner corpus. This is because the non-Chinese students do not understand the rules of the Mandarin and the differences between their mother tongue and the target language. This result suggests that teachers should consider both the cultural background as well as language knowledge of the two languages (mother tongue and target language) as part of the target language teaching process. In doing so, they could distinguish between the semantic system, the discourse structure, the communicative principle, the thinking mode and the values both in the mother tongue culture and the target language culture. As they are equipped with such a thorough teaching preparation,

it is hoped that the students would be able to recognize the intrinsic nature of bilingualism thus help them more in avoiding the interference errors made from their mother tongue.

In short, it is not an easy task to overcome the shortcomings of the interference errors caused by the mother tongue during the Mandarin lexicon learning. Teachers should use proactive measures in guiding learners to master the correct direction of learning, so that they understand the influence of Malay language in the expression of Mandarin. They have to make effective efforts to curb the occurrence of interference, transforming its influence into an effective role.

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