

Native Language Interference and its Implications in English Language Teaching in National Schools

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Many of the errors that are made by pupils learning English as a second language or a foreign language stem from native or first language or L1 interference. The phenomenon of native language interference is the result of a psychological process in which the pupil transfers his intuitive knowledge of the system of his own language to the system that obtains in the target language. This transfer results in the pupil's producing sentences, spoken or written, in the target language which are non-grammatical or 'deviant'. Naively, we tend to interpret this phenomenon in terms of the expression that the pupil 'translates literally'.

In a Malay situation, a teacher of English soon discovers that the native language interference is the main cause of the errors that the pupils make. This phenomenon occurs at the three basic levels of language – (i) at the phonological level (or sound system level) where certain English sounds present problems to the Malay speaker because in his system these sounds do not exist or do not occur in environments in which they commonly occur in Malay; (ii) at the syntactic level (or structural level) where sentence structures in English differ from Malay ones, and (iii) at the semantic level (or word meaning level) where word-forms in both languages carry different meanings.

In this article I would like to narrow my considerations of the interference phenomenon only in so far as it affects the syntactic level, which in fact, impinges on the grammar of the two languages, English and Malay. A knowledge of the two grammar systems is, therefore, essential. Many contrastive analyses of English syntax and those of other languages have been done by linguists but a major contrastive study of the English and Malay syntactic pattern has yet to be produced. Whether the non-availability of such a study is to be regretted is debatable. There are those who believe that such knowledge does not help the language teacher at all, while others find such contrastive studies positively helpful. But I personally keep an open mind on this issue. I believe that an understanding of Malay grammar is

essential if we are to understand the difficulties of our pupils.

Recently I undertook a study of the errors made by adult Malay speakers and discovered that the significant errors made by my students, in producing basic English sentences, can be conveniently classified under eight major headings: in the use of verbs; vocabulary; prepositions; the article; agreement – (i) subject-complement (ii) determiner-headword; word order; and, pronouns. Figure 1 illustrates the frequencies with which the errors occurred.

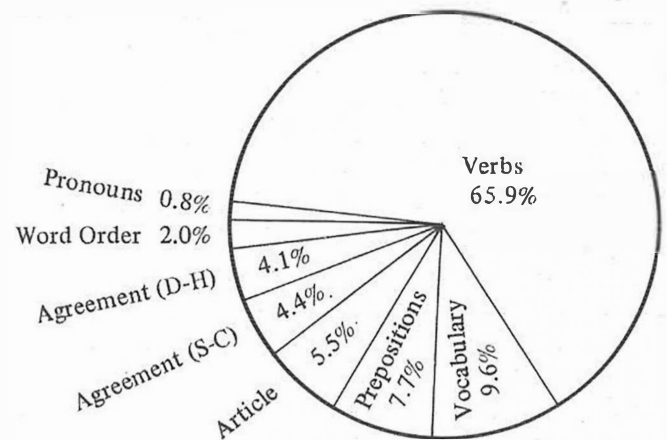


Fig. 1 Proportion of Frequency of Errors to major classification.

Whilst I did not go into very great depth in a contrastive analysis of English and Malay structure I was satisfied that native language interference was the main cause of the pupils' errors. It will be sufficient here just to mention, in very broad terms, the main areas where the English teacher can expect to find the interference phenomenon operating.

(a) In the use of verbs

The relatively simple Malay tense system and the complexity of the English system pose the greatest difficulty for the Malay speaker. To put it simply – where the

Malay speaker can get by with the three basic tenses, simple, past and future, the English system calls for a finer discrimination in the concept of time. I am sure a moment's pause here will indicate the many pedagogical implications that this big difference in the two systems has in language teaching and learning.

(b) Vocabulary

While a case can be made for the similarity of the syntactic structures of two languages, the problems of interferences in vocabulary stem from the fact that there are certain class words in the two languages which have no one-to-one equivalence. For a random example, the English adverb form is often rendered in Malay with a preposition + adjective or, in some cases only, by the adjective. For example,

“He walks quickly” is either
(i) *Dia berjalan dengan chepat.*
or (ii) *Dia berjalan chepat.*

which through interference is rendered as

- (i) He walks with quick or
- (ii) He walks quick.

(c) Prepositions

The Malay speaker faces a complicated problem. Where English has many fine differences in the use of prepositions and adverbials, Malay has more general prepositions or functional words. An example will suffice to illustrate this difficulty.

Look *at* the picture *of* the boy *on* page 8 *of* your book.

Pandangkan gambar budak dimuka surat 8 dalam buku awak.

Apart from these problems, where there are no one-to-one equivalences, the Malay speaker, like many other foreign learners of English will find the English phrasal verbs confusing.

(d) The Article

In the English system the article functions in accordance

with strict rules whereas in Malay the article is wanting. The problems, therefore, are obvious.

(e) Agreement

(i) *Subject – complement:* The stringent English rule on agreement in the structure N be N does not apply to Malay. Where in English one must say:
My two *brothers* are *teachers*.

In Malay, *Kedua abang saya guru.*

(ii) *Determiners – headwords*

In the same way determiners and headwords in English must agree whereas such a rule does not apply in Malay. Often, therefore, we get pupils generating sentences like:

This salesmen want to be successful.
which is a direct interference from the Malay,
Penjual2 ini hendak berjaya.

(f) Word Order

The problem of word order arises from the positioning of class words in syntax. Malay adjectives, used attributively, come after the noun – *rumah besar*, not *besar rumah**, as in the English “a big house”. In sentences one often gets such deviant sentences as:

The young man also hard work.
They catch fish more at night.

(g) Pronouns

The English pronoun system is more complex than the Malay system. There are several forms to indicate the cases in pronouns in English, whereas Malay pronouns do not indicate case in the word form. For example, *dia* (he or she) may stand for he, she, him, her, his.

My somewhat cursory comments on the potential areas of difficulty for the Malay native speaker which arise from language interference have far reaching practical implications in language teaching. In the next part of my discussion which will be continued in the next issue, I would like to consider these important implications.