THE INHIBITING GRAMMATICAL RULES OF
INDONESIAN IN THE ACQUISITION OF TENSES
AND TO BE

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Abstract: This article aims to examine briefly the implication of contrastive analysis hypothesis for the Indonesian learners in learning English. By contrastive analysis is meant the analysis of the similarities and differences between L1 (Indonesian) and L2 (English) in particular the inhibiting grammatical rules of Indonesian in the acquisition of tenses and to be. This value stems from the fact that based on the observation, the Indonesian students tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their first language (Indonesian) into the target language (English) when they speak and write in English. By knowing the difference and similarities between L1 and L2, the trouble spots in TL could be anticipated, errors might be prevented and at least held to be minimum, in this way the formation of bad habit could be avoided.

Keywords: L1 = first language, L2 = second language, TL = target language

BACKGROUND

It has been believed for many years that the learner's first language (L1) influences the second language acquisition. One of the clear examples of the first language interference in second language acquisition is foreign accents. When a Japanese speaks English, his English sounds Japanese. In English classes where the students come from different countries, there is a variety of English such as Indonesian English, Chinese English, Japanese

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English etc. In Indonesia, the students’ variety of English is influenced by their first languages such as Javanese, Ambonese, Sundanese, and Balinese when they speak English.

Based on my experience as both a learner and teacher of English and on observation on the students of the Faculty of Letters, Soegijapranata Catholic University, properties of the first language, not only accent but also grammar, has great influence in the acquisition of the target language. When they speak English, they tend to transfer the forms and meanings of their first language (Indonesian) into the target language (English).

In this article, I would like to emphasize my writing on the problems of the Indonesian learners in learning English, especially its grammar. If we contrast between the Indonesian and English grammar, we will find several differences. Here, I would like to limit the topic on to be and tenses which Indonesian language does not have.

LANGUAGE TRANSFER

In a language learning process, there is a belief that the properties of the L1 (first language) are thought to exercise an influence on the course of the L2 (second language). Learners transfer sounds, structures, and usage from one language to the other. There are two widely accepted kinds of transfer, namely positive and negative transfer. The similar properties in both languages will result in positive transfer while the differences cause negative transfer, generally known as interference: the L1 habits causes errors in the L2 such as the omission of to be when they speak and write in English due to the fact that Indonesian does not have any to be while English does. The features of the English language that are similar to features of the Indonesian language will present little difficulty, while features of the English language that are different from those of the Indonesian will require some amount of attention on the teacher’s part.

According to behaviorist learning theory, old habits get in the way of learning new habits. The negative transfer from the first to the second language occurs when there is what (Ellis 1991) calls proactive inhibition, namely the way in which previous learning prevents or inhibit the learning of a new habit. Lado (1957, in Gass and Selinker 1983.) further points out the tendency of the L1 learner to transfer the meaning and the forms of his/her first language to the foreign language as follows:
Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings and the distribution of forms and meanings of the native language and culture to foreign language and culture both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture and respectively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives.

The concept of negative and positive transfers is based on the conviction that linguistic differences could be used to predict learning difficulties: Where two languages are similar positive transfer would occur, where they were different, the negative transfer or interference, would result (Larsen Freeman, 1991:53).

In the application of these concepts to teaching, Brian Tomlinson (1990) introduced “Good Friend Passages”. In National Workshops and on inservice training in Indonesia, he drew up a list of about 400 good friends, defined as words in English similar in forms and meanings to equivalent words in Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian Language). Examples of high frequency and/or wide coverage are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Indonesian</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Indonesian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>photo</td>
<td>foto</td>
<td>president</td>
<td>presiden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>class</td>
<td>kelas</td>
<td>taxi</td>
<td>taksi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bus</td>
<td>bis</td>
<td>police</td>
<td>polisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>hotel</td>
<td>radio</td>
<td>radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>book</td>
<td>buku</td>
<td>television</td>
<td>televisi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gown</td>
<td>gaun</td>
<td>cassette</td>
<td>kaset</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Those words are classified into such categories as travel, sports, entertainment, education, and made use of the lists to devise stories that at least fifty percent of the content are “good friends”. The idea, of course, is that the students have been familiar with “Good Friends” and they help to make the rest of the text accessible. Tomlinson further says, “This has meant that the students have been able to understand quite long semi-authentic texts from an early stage and thus gain vital exposure to comprehensible language in use as well as an early sense of achievement and an affinity with English”
THE TROUBLE SPOTS IN LEARNING ENGLISH: TO BE AND TENSES

In attempting to anticipate the trouble spots and to prevent learners’ errors in the target language, I would like to see the differences between Indonesian and English. In this article, I will limit the discussion on grammar, particularly tenses and to be. My starting point is a contrastive analysis between two languages. Whilst English language has “to be”, the Indonesian language do not. The idea of contrastive analysis hypothesis for language teaching was strongly made by Robert Lado (1957:vii cited in Brown 2000) in the preface of his book entitled Linguistics Across Culture “The plan of the book rests on the assumption that we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty by comparing systematically the language and the culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the students” In the first chapter of his book Lado continues “In the comparison between the native and foreign language lies the key to ease or difficulty in foreign language learning ... Those elements that are similar to the [learner’s] native language will be simple for him and those elements that are different will be difficult” (pp.1-2)

TO BE

In English, to be is used in the following patterns

1. Noun <---------To Be <---------Noun Phrase

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>London</th>
<th>is</th>
<th>a big city</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>kota besar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The building</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>a church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gedung itu</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>sebuah gereja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My brother</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>a doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kakak saya</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>seorang dokter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Noun <------->To Be<------>Adjective

The building  is  big
Gedung itu  0  besar
The test  is  difficult
Tess itu  0  sulit
The students  are  happy
Para siswa  0  bahagia

3. Noun <------->To Be <------>Prepositional Group

The bank  is  on the first floor
Bank itu  0  di lantai tiga
Oxford  is  in England
Oxford  0  di Inggris
The dogs  are  outside
Anjing itu  0  diluar

Based on the absence of to be in Indonesian sentences, the Indonesian students who learn English are assumed to forget the use of to be in English. In order to strengthen the hypothesis, let us have a detailed look at the example of the Indonesian student’s rewritten writing test.

Dear Michell,
The situation in Bandungan very quite and the weather very cold. Robert’s sister name Tika. We are swimming in the Rawa Penin swimming pool. After then, we are going eating. Then John is reading in the garden’s villa. Tika and me going shopping.

Johnny have got two friends in Bandungan, Jihan and Yoan. We are going to Jihan’s house. We are happy. Jihan makes cakes for ours. That cake very excellent. Then we go home soon.
Write your news with your friends soon.

Yours,
Anna
P.S. I am going to your house next month
From the above text, we can see that the learner forgot to put to be in the following sentences.

- The situation in Bandungan very quite and the weather very cold. Robert’s sister name Tika.
- Tika and me going shopping.
- That cake very excellent.

To be sure, the learner still committed errors which could be traced to the interference of the Indonesian sentence patterns. The learners tend to transfer the Indonesian sentence pattern into English by putting lexis due to lack of knowledge of English grammar. The Indonesian learner above, therefore, does not use to be in English.

TENSES

The knowledge of conjugation indicating tenses in English is very crucial for English language learners. However, the Indonesian learners find it very difficult learning tenses in English due to the fact that Indonesian language does not have the conjugation system. The tenses are indicated by the adverbs of time but not by conjugation. I assume that the existence of adverbs of time in sentences will help learners to interpret tenses, but they might fail to choose the correct verbs, while their absence will lead to errors.

Present Tense

1. a. Saya pergii ke sekolah setiap hari (Indonesian)
   b. I go to school everyday (Learner’s translation)
   c. I go to school (The expected sentence)
2. a. Dia pergii ke sekolah setiap hari (Indonesian)
   b. She go to school everyday (Learner’s translation)
   c. She goes to school (The expected sentence)

The error the students will possibly make is the verb choice (go or goes) and pronoun choice (she or he) because Indonesian does not have any rules indicating subjectverb agreement. As shown in the examples, pergii is used for all pronouns. In English, the pronouns of the third person (she and he) refer to the female and male gender while in Indonesian, dia (she and he) is neutral.
Past Tense

1. a. Saya pergi ke sekolah kemaren (Indonesian)
   b. I go to school yesterday (Learner’s translation)
   c. I went to school yesterday (The expected sentence)

2. Saya menulis surat dua hari yang lalu (Indonesian)
   b. I write a letter two days ago (Learner’s translation)
   c. I wrote a letter two days ago (The expected sentence)

The error the students will possibly make is the past form of the verb go and write because there is no conjugation in Indonesian and the past tense is indicated by adverbs of time. The learner will not have a problem with the pronoun because the past form of the verbs will agree with all subjects.

Future

1. a. Dia akan pergi ke sekolah (Indonesian)
   b. she will/shall go to school (Learner’s translation)
   c. she will go to school (The expected sentence)

2. a. Kami akan menyanyi bersama (Indonesian)
   b. We will/shall sing together (Learner’s translation)
   c. We will sing together (The expected sentence)

There is a similarity between Indonesian and English. Will and Shall are indicated by akan. The learners might have a problem with “will and shall” and they might use them interchangeably.

PRESENT PERFECT

Based on my experience, students find it difficult understanding Present Perfect, and Past Tense because there is a different concept between Past Tense and Present Perfect in Indonesian. The students will use yesterday or two days ago in the present perfect form. In Indonesian, it is a correct sentence to say I have seen the movies yesterday as a translation of Saya sudah melihat bioskop kemaren. The other problem is that the students will have difficulty choosing the right verb (go, went, gone) as indicated below

a. Dia sudah nonton film itu (Indonesian)
   b. she already see film (Learner’s translation)
   c. she has seen the film (The expected sentence)
By knowing the difference and similarities between the first and the second language, the trouble spots in the target language could be anticipated, errors might be prevented and at least held to be minimum, in this way the formation of bad habit could be avoided.

CONCLUSION

I believe that there is interference from the first language to the target language. From the positive aspect, interference can be recast as a learner strategy. The learner’s L1 may facilitate the developmental process of learning L2 by helping him to progress more rapidly along the universal route when the L1 is similar to the L2. Brian Tomlinson has applied this concept to the technique of teaching vocabulary called Good Fiends.

When learners experience difficulty in communicating an idea, he will resort to the first language to make up his/her insufficiency due to his/her lack of the necessary target language resource.

Based on my observation, the L1 usually interferes the beginners when they have insufficiency of the target language resources to surmount. The teachers’ duty is to give more opportunities to the exposure to the target language in order to gain necessary target language resources in order to eliminate the first language interference.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


