



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

Y.E.Budiyana <sup>1</sup>

**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.*


**Key words:** *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

---

<sup>1</sup> Drs. YE Budiyana, MA. is a lecturer of the Faculty of Letters, Soegijapranata Catholic University, Semarang

 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:

English	Indonesian	English	Indonesian
photo	= foto	president	= presiden
class	= kelas	taxi	= taksi
bus	= bis	police	= polisi
hotel	= hotel	radio	= radio
book	= buku	television	= televisi
gown	= gaun	cassette	= kaset

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

#### **I. Noun <----->To Be <----->Noun Phrase**

London	is	a big city
<i>London</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>kota besar</i>
The building	is	a church
<i>Gedung itu</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>sebuah gereja.</i>
My brother	is	a doctor
<i>Kakak saya</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>seorang dokter</i>

2. Noun <----->To Be<----->Adjective

The building	is	big
<i>Gedung itu</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>besar</i>
The test	is	difficult
<i>Tes itu</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>sulit</i>
The students	are	happy
<i>Para siswa</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>bahagia</i>



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

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

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 Pening swimming pool. After then, we are going eating. Then John is reading in the garden's villa. Tika and me going shopping.*

*Johny 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. | <i>Saya</i> | <i>pergi</i> | <i>ke sekolah setiap hari</i> | (Indonesian)       |                         |
|       | b.          | I            | go                            | to school everyday | (Learner's translation) |
|       | c.          | I            | go                            | to school          | (The expected sentence) |
| 2. a. | <i>Dia</i>  | <i>pergi</i> | <i>ke sekolah setiap hari</i> | (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, *pergi* 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

- Brown, H. Douglas. *Teaching by Principles*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Inc., 2001.
- Corder, S.P. *Error Analysis and Interlanguage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, pp. 56-65.
- Coder, S.P. 'The Significant of Learners' Errors' In Richards, J.C. 'Error Analysis. London: Longman, 1981, pp. 56-65.
- Dulay, B., M. Burt and S. Krashen. *Language Two* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Ellis, R. *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Gass, S, and L. Selinker, eds. *Language Transfer in Language Learning*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1983.



- LarsenFreeman, D., and M. Long. *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*, London and New York: Longman, 1991.
- Mclaughin, B. *Theories of Second Language Learning*, London:Edward Arnold, 1987.
- O'Malley, J.M., and A.U. Chamot. *Learning Strategies in Second Language Acquisition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Paul Schachter. "Transformational Grammar and Contrastive Analysis" in Harold B. Allen and Russel N. Campbell (eds), *Teaching English as a Second Language*, Manila: McGraw Hill Inc., 1975.
- Selinker, L. 'Interlanguage' In Richards, J.C. *Error Analysis* London: Longman, 1980.
- Brian, Tomlinson. "Managing change in Indonesian high schools", *ELT Journal* Vol. 44/1, 1990, pp. 25-37.

