

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF FIRST LANGUAGE TRANSFER TO ENGLISH SENTENCES STRUCTURE AMONG SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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### Abstract

This study explores how first language (L1) transfer affects English sentence structure among five first-year students of the English Literature Study Program at Sebelas April University when translating Indonesian texts into English. Using Robert Lado's theory of language transfer, the study identifies common structural errors caused by negative transfer, such as incorrect word order, misuse of articles, verb tense errors, and subject-verb disagreement. The data were collected through a translation task involving five Indonesian sentences and analyzed using a descriptive qualitative method. The findings show that most errors made by the participants reflect direct influence from Indonesian grammatical structures, while only one participant demonstrated evidence of positive transfer. These results indicate that L1 plays a significant role in shaping learners' English sentence construction and highlight the importance of contrastive grammar instruction in second language learning.

**Keywords:** psycholinguistics, first language acquisition, second language acquisition, language transfer

### INTRODUCTION

Psycholinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and the human mind, and the psychological processes involved in language, both in language production and comprehension. It covers how the brain processes language information, how language is acquired, and how language is used in communication. Chaer (2002) explains that etymologically psycholinguistics formed from psychology and linguistics. Therefore, the fields can stand on its own. Furthermore, those fields combine linguistics and psychology, which can be mentioned as "Psychology of Language". Chaer (2002) also adds that psycholinguistics describes the process of psychology followed if people communicate by saying sentences. Fernández, E. M. (2011) states that psycholinguistics is the study of the mental processes and representations that support language acquisition and language use. The discipline lies at the juncture of linguistics and psychology and is further informed by computational linguistics, cognitive science, neuroscience, sociolinguistics, anthropology, and the philosophy of language. Aitchison (2003) adds that psycholinguistics focuses on the mental mechanisms that make it possible for people to use language, particularly in the comprehension, production, and acquisition of language.

In today's globalized world, English has become a very important means of communication, especially in academic and professional matters. Due to that, English is taught as a foreign



language in many countries, including Indonesia, where students start learning English from an early age. However, many learners still struggle to construct grammatically correct and natural-sounding English sentences. One of the key factors contributing to this challenge is the influence of the learner's first language (L1) on second language (L2) usage.

Learning a second language (L2) is not easy, especially if the rules in the language are very different from the first language (L1). Many learners unconsciously carry over patterns from their first language. Sometimes this helps, but often it leads to mistakes, especially if the sentence structure between the two languages is different. In Indonesia, this kind of language transfer is common among students learning English. Septiana (2020) found that Indonesian EFL learners frequently produce grammatical errors due to interference from their first language structure. Errors such as strange word order, overly literal translations, or missing grammatical elements often arise not because they do not know the rules, but because they are still thinking in Indonesian. Linarsih et al. (2020) also reported that Indonesian grammatical patterns often influence students' English sentence construction, particularly in word order and article usage. Despite the extended period of English language learning, students still often make mistakes in constructing sentences when translating from Indonesian to English. These errors are not always caused by students' weak grammar and vocabulary mastery, but are often influenced by structural transfer from the first language (L1) that affects sentence construction in the second language (L2). Darwis (2023) explains that Indonesian learners tend to transfer sentence patterns from Bahasa Indonesia directly into English, resulting in grammatical inaccuracies. This transfer is in the form of direct influence from Indonesian sentence patterns brought into English, such as the use of subject-predicate-object structures that are not in accordance with the rules of the target language (L2) and the wrong choice of auxiliary verbs. Similar findings were also reported by Suryani and Hariyanto (2021), who found that grammatical interference frequently appears in Indonesian students' English writing.

According to Chomsky (1965), first Language Acquisition is a natural process that occurs because humans are biologically endowed with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD), an innate mental mechanism that enables children to acquire language without explicit instruction. In contrast, Second Language Acquisition, according to Saviile-Troike (2006), involves the process by which learners develop a new language system, often with limited exposure to the second language. A related concept is Language Transfer, which, as defined by Odlin (1989), refers to the influence that arises from similarities and differences between the target language and a previously acquired language, which may not have been fully mastered.

This study uses the Theory of Language Transfer by Robert Lado (1957). He said, "Elements that are similar to the mother tongue will be easy for him, and elements that are different will be difficult." The statement shows that in the process of acquiring a second language (L2),

elements that are similar to the first language (L1) will be easier to learn, while elements that are different will cause difficulties. Based on this principle, language transfer is divided into two types:

1. Positive transfer, which is when the structures of L1 and L2 have similarities or similarities, this will make it easier for learners to use L2.
2. Negative transfer, which is when there are differences between L1 and L2 structures, will cause errors in language use, such as in grammar, sentence structure, or meaning.

In his book "Linguistics Across Cultures" Lado explains that the process of acquiring a second language (L2) cannot be separated from the influence of the first language (L1), where learners will unconsciously transfer the structure and language habits from L1 into L2. This transfer can be positive, if the structures of L1 and L2 are similar, or negative, if the differences between the two actually lead to errors in language use. In the context of this study, Lado's theory is used to explain how English Literature students still often make grammatical errors in translating texts from Indonesian into English. These errors are not solely caused by a weak mastery of grammar or vocabulary, but because of the influence of Indonesian as L1, which affects the sentence structure in English as L2. Phenomena such as word order that is not in accordance with the English structure, improper selection of auxiliary words, and omission of certain grammatical elements, can be traced as a form of direct influence from Indonesian sentence patterns.

Lightbown and Spada (2013) further support this perspective by stating that learners often make errors in L2 as a result of transfer from L1. When the structures in both languages are similar, the transfer may lead to correct usage (positive transfer), but when they differ, it can result in errors (negative transfer). This reinforces the idea that the influence of L1 plays a significant role in shaping the success or difficulty of acquiring grammatical accuracy in a second language.

This study focuses on examining how first language transfer affects the sentence structure of students studying in the English Literature Study Program at Sebelas April University. This study aims to identify the transfer phenomena commonly found in students' translations from Indonesian to English, as well as how it affects their ability to construct grammatically correct English sentences. Although several previous studies have discussed grammatical interference among Indonesian EFL learners, most of them focused on general writing errors or classroom performance (Septiana, 2020; Linarsih et al., 2020). This study specifically examines how first language transfer influences English sentence structure through translation tasks among first-year English Literature students using Robert Lado's theory of language transfer (Lado, 1957). Therefore, this study provides a more focused psycholinguistic analysis of structural transfer patterns that appear in students' sentence construction during the early stage of second language acquisition (Odlin, 1989; Lightbown & Spada, 2013). Based on the background above, this study is

guided by the following research question: How does first language (L1) influence English Literature students in translating Indonesian texts into English in terms of sentence structure?

## METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the influence of first language transfer on sentence structure in translation from Indonesian into English. Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data. The final written report has a flexible structure. Those who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation (Creswell, 2007). Also, qualitative research is descriptive (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The data collected take the form of words or pictures rather than numbers. The written results of the research contain quotations from the data to illustrate and substantiate the presentation. The data include interview transcripts, fieldnotes, photographs, videotapes, personal documents, memos, and other official records.

The participants in this study were five first-year students of the English Literature Study Program at Sebelas April University. Although they are still in the early stages of their studies, these students have been introduced to some of the basics of translation and have basic to intermediate level English skills. They were chosen because at this stage, the influence of the first language (L1) in the translation process is still very strong, so it is possible to analyze to what extent the transfer of their first language (L1) can affect the sentence structure of their translation.

Data were collected by asking each participant to translate five Indonesian sentences into English. The sentences were specifically selected because they contained grammatical structures that potentially trigger first language transfer, such as word order, article usage, plural forms, tense, auxiliary verbs, and conditional sentences. The sentences were: (1) *Di atas meja ada sebuah buku dan dua pena*, (2) *Kalau saya kaya, saya akan beli rumah*, (3) *Saya pergi ke pasar kemarin*, (4) *Mereka sedang belajar bahasa Inggris sekarang*, and (5) *Dia memiliki dua kucing putih*. The participants completed the translation task individually without using online tools, AI, or dictionaries so that the translations reflected their natural language processing.

To ensure data validity, this study applied the Source Triangulation technique. Triangulation was conducted by comparing the translations of the five participants of the same two Indonesian sentences. Despite coming from different individuals, consistency in the types of errors that appeared was observed as an indicator of data reliability. Triangulation of sources is checking out

the consistency of different data sources within the same method (Patton, 2002). This technique allowed the researcher to evaluate the congruence and stability of the patterns that emerged in the participants' translations. In addition, the researcher applied Thick Description by presenting the full range of translation results, including variations and errors, in a transparent manner. This comprehensive presentation aims to provide a rich context and help readers make an objective assessment of the validity of the findings. In the context of this psycholinguistic study, Thick Description refers to the researcher's task of both describing and interpreting the students' translation behavior, particularly the structural errors and patterns that arise as a result of cognitive transfer from L1 to L2 (Ponterotto, 2006).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

In this study, the researcher specifically analyzed how first language (L1) transfer appears in the sentence structures produced by university students when translating from Indonesian into English. This analysis focused on identifying forms of structural influence from Indonesian that affect the grammatical construction of sentences in English. These include errors such as inappropriate word order, improper use of auxiliary verbs, as well as omission of important elements that should be present in the correct English sentences structure.

By using Robert Lado's theory of language transfer which distinguishes between positive transfer and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when the structures between L1 and L2 are similar and do not cause interference in the translation process. Meanwhile, negative transfer occurs when the difference in structure between Indonesian (L1) and English (L2) causes errors in the translation. With this approach, the researcher can trace and interpret the types of structural errors as a direct reflection of the influence of the first language, which not only provides a picture of students' learning behavior, but also strengthens the theoretical view that L1 has a major role in shaping second language (L2) production at an early stage.

Table 1. English literature students in translating sentences from Indonesian into English

No	Participants	Sentence 1	Sentence 2	Sentence 3	Sentence 4	Sentence 5
1	P1	There's a book and two pen on the	If I rich, I'll bought a house.	I go to market yesterday.	They studying English	She have two white cats.

		table.			now.	
2	P2	Over the table there are a book and two pens.	If I rich, I will buy house.	I go to market yesterday.	They studying English right now.	She have 2 white cat.
3	P3	There's a book and two pencil on the table.	If I rich. I'll buy a hause.	I went to the market yesterday.	They studying English now.	She haved two white cat.
4	P4	On the table there is a book and 2 pen	If i'm rich, I will buy a house	I go to the market yesterday.	They studying English now.	She has two white cats.
5	P5	On top of a table, there is a book and two pens.	If I were rich, I would buy a house.	I went to the market yesterday.	They are studying English now.	She has two white cats.

The table above presents the results of observations conducted by the researcher on first-year students of the English Literature Study Program at Universitas Sebelas April. The data were collected by asking five participants to translate five Indonesian sentences into English. The sentences were specifically selected because they contained grammatical structures that potentially trigger first language (L1) transfer, such as word order, article usage, plural forms, tenses, auxiliary verbs, and conditional sentences.

## Discussion

The results of this study show the significant role of first language (L1) transfer in shaping the sentence structures produced by English Literature students when translating from Indonesian (L1) into English (L2). The data clearly show that many of the structural errors found in the students' English translations are the result of negative transfer, i.e. when the structural differences between Indonesian and English lead to inappropriate application of L1 rules in L2 production.

### The Influence of Indonesian Syntax on English sentences Structure

In Sentence 1 (*Di atas meja ada buku dan dua pena*), some students produced sentences such as "Over the table there are a book and two pens" or "There's a book and two pens on the table".

These sentences show direct translation from Indonesian, especially in terms of word order and the use of articles and plural markers.

Indonesian syntax tends to have flexible word order and does not use articles such as “a,” “an,” or “the” which are mandatory in English. In addition, the concept of plurals in Indonesian is not characterized by morphological changes (for example, “pen” can mean one or more), but rather depends on context or reduplication. This leads to errors such as:

1. Omission of plural markers: “two pens”, “two pencils”
2. Inconsistent use of articles: “a book and two pens”
3. Unnatural word order: “Over the table...”, which reflects L1

This finding is in line with Lado's (1957) theory which states that when the structures of the first and second languages are very different, then negative transfer is more likely to occur and hinder accurate second language production.

### **Errors in Conditional Sentences and Use of Tenses**

In Sentence 2 (*Kalau saya kaya, saya akan beli rumah*), most students failed to form the second conditional sentence correctly. Common errors include:

1. “If I am rich, I will buy a house.”
2. “If I am rich, I'll buy a house.”

These errors show difficulty in forming hypothetical conditional sentences, which in English must use a special structure: If + past simple, followed by would + base verb. Meanwhile, in Indonesian, the supposition form does not involve changing tenses, so students tend to apply the rules from Indonesian directly.

Only Participant 5 produced a grammatically correct sentence: “If I were rich, I would buy a house.” This suggests the possibility of prior exposure to this structure or a better understanding of English grammar, which can be categorized as positive transfer, when structures in L1 and L2 are similar in meaning though not in form.

### **Errors in Tenses and Auxiliary Verbs**

In Sentence 3 (*Saya pergi ke pasar kemarin*), several participants produced translations such as “I go to market yesterday” and “I go to the market yesterday.” These sentences indicate negative transfer in tense formation and verb usage. Indonesian verbs do not change according to time reference, so learners tend to apply Indonesian grammatical patterns directly into English. This leads to several common errors:

1. Incorrect verb tense: “I go” instead of “I went”

2. Omission of article: “to market” instead of “to the market”
3. Direct transfer of Indonesian sentence structure into English

In Indonesian, past events are usually marked by adverbs such as “*kemarin*” without requiring changes in verb forms. As a result, students frequently retain the base form of the verb even when the sentence clearly refers to past time. This finding supports Lado’s (1957) theory that differences between L1 and L2 structures may lead to grammatical interference in second language production.

Similarly, in Sentence 4 (*Mereka sedang belajar bahasa Inggris sekarang*), most participants produced sentences such as “They studying English now.” This error reflects negative transfer in the use of auxiliary verbs and progressive forms. Several structural problems can be identified:

1. Omission of auxiliary verb: “They studying” instead of “They are studying”
2. Direct translation from Indonesian progressive structure
3. Incomplete present continuous construction

Indonesian does not require auxiliary verbs to express ongoing actions. Progressive meaning is usually understood through context or adverbs such as “*sedang*” and “*sekarang*.” Consequently, learners tend to omit the auxiliary verb “are” when constructing English present continuous sentences. This demonstrates how Indonesian grammatical patterns influence English sentence production among EFL learners.

### **Errors in Subject–Verb Agreement and Adjective Order**

In Sentence 5 (*Dia memiliki dua kucing putih*), several participants produced translations such as “She have two white cats” and “She haved two white cat.” These errors indicate difficulties in subject-verb agreement, verb formation, and plural marking. The errors include:

1. Incorrect subject-verb agreement: “She have” instead of “She has”
2. Incorrect verb form: “haved”
3. Omission of plural marker: “two white cat”

These errors occur because Indonesian grammar does not apply subject–verb agreement or plural inflections in the same way as English. In Indonesian, the verb form remains the same regardless of the subject, and plural meaning is often understood through context rather than grammatical inflection. Therefore, students tend to transfer Indonesian sentence patterns directly into English, resulting in inaccurate sentence structures.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies on first language interference among Indonesian EFL learners. Septiana (2020) found that Indonesian students frequently experience grammatical interference in English writing, particularly in article usage, word order, and verb forms. Similarly, Linarsih et al. (2020) reported that Indonesian grammatical structures

strongly influence students' English sentence construction. The present study supports these findings, as most participants showed structural errors that reflected direct transfer from Indonesian into English. In addition, Darwis (2023) also noted that Indonesian learners tend to transfer Indonesian sentence patterns into English, especially in tense usage and auxiliary verbs. Therefore, the results of this study reinforce the view that first language transfer remains a dominant factor in second language production among Indonesian EFL learners.

These findings show that interlanguage development in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners is strongly influenced by first language structures, especially in the early stages of learning. Most of the grammatical errors found in the students' translations are not random, but systematic and reflect patterns from Indonesian.

From a psycholinguistic perspective, these findings indicate that learners rely heavily on cognitive patterns from their first language when processing and producing second language structures. During translation activities, students tend to access familiar grammatical systems stored in long-term memory before restructuring them into the target language. This process explains why Indonesian sentence patterns frequently appear in the students' English production, particularly when learners have limited mastery of English grammatical rules (Perkins & Zhang, 2022). This implies that:

1. Learning strategies need to explicitly highlight the grammatical differences between L1 and L2.
2. Learners need practice not only in vocabulary, but also in grammatical structures such as article usage, auxiliary verbs, tense formation, and word order.
3. Translation exercises can be a useful tool to uncover L1 interference patterns, so that teachers can deal with them directly.

In addition, the findings reinforce the theoretical view that language transfer is an inevitable aspect of second language acquisition. While positive transfer can support the learning process, negative transfer should be actively addressed through teaching that builds metalinguistic awareness among learners.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that first language (L1) transfer has a significant influence on the English sentence structures produced by students, especially in the early stages of second language (L2) acquisition. Most students showed structural errors in their translations from Indonesian into English, such as incorrect word order, omission or improper use of articles, misuse of auxiliary verbs, incorrect tense formation, and errors in conditional sentences. These errors reflect the

presence of negative transfer, in which the differences between Indonesian and English structures lead learners to apply L1 patterns inappropriately to L2 production.

In the context of psycholinguistics, these findings indicate that second language acquisition is closely related to the cognitive influence of the first language. When students translate or construct English sentences, they tend to rely on familiar grammatical patterns from Indonesian that are stored in their long-term memory. As a result, Indonesian sentence structures frequently appear in their English production. Although some examples of positive transfer were identified, negative transfer was found to be more dominant and systematic in influencing students' interlanguage development.

The findings of this study also suggest that English language teaching should explicitly emphasize the structural differences between Indonesian and English. Learners need more practice not only in vocabulary acquisition but also in grammatical structures such as article usage, verb tenses, auxiliary verbs, subject–verb agreement, and word order. In addition, translation exercises can serve as an effective tool to identify and address patterns of first language interference in second language learning.

However, this study was limited to five participants and a relatively small number of translation tasks. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all Indonesian EFL learners. Future studies are recommended to involve more participants and a wider variety of sentence structures in order to obtain more comprehensive and generalizable findings regarding first language transfer in second language acquisition.

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