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# Investigating the Impact of Interlanguage on Adult EFL Learners in Indonesia: Strengths and Weaknesses

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## Abstract

The study of second language acquisition (SLA) concerns not only the way to learn a second language (L2), but also the unique language system created by language learners (interlanguage). This qualitative study analyzed EFL learners' interlanguage by focusing on their strengths and weaknesses in speaking English, especially on phonological, grammatical and pragmatic competence in speaking English. The language data were obtained from a recorded conversation between two non-native English speakers from Indonesia. The data were analysed by referring to contrastive analysis, error analysis and the socio-cultural perspective in SLA. The results indicated that although both learners had a strong L1 accent, the learners did not face any difficulty in constructing English sentences in the right sentence order (SVO). In addition, when facing difficulties in speaking English, the learners were seen to ask and provide support to each other, as well as to talk to themselves (private speech). In terms of weaknesses, the study found that the learners often mispronounced the letter "t" in English as the sound of "t" in Indonesian, made grammatical errors in subject and verb agreement, and applied Indonesia's pragmatic concepts when speaking English. The study suggests that it is necessary to have a positive view on learners' interlanguage as it can be used as a tool to learn a second language.

**Keywords:** Contrastive analysis, error analysis, interlanguage, second language acquisition, socio-cultural perspective in SLA.

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## 1. Introduction

Understanding the theory of second language acquisition (SLA) is essential for English language teachers (ELT), especially for those who teach English as a foreign language (EFL) or second language (ESL). The study of SLA concerns not only on how people learn a second language (L2), but also on why language learners produce non-native language features in practicing their L2 (Gass & Selinker, 2001). The mixture of learners' first and second language emerges an independent and unique language system which

is known as interlanguage (Gass & Selinker, 2008). It is important to pay attention on students' interlanguage as it can provide information on what aspects that should be improved in learners' second language. This information can be retrieved by conducting contrastive analysis and error analysis. Contrastive analysis allows language educators to see what difficulties that might arise because of the contrasts between learners' first language and second language (Ellis, 1994). Meanwhile, error analysis can give a clear picture of common errors that language learners often produce in performing their L2 (Corder, 1967). The results of these analyses will allow language educators to help language learners improve their second language.

This qualitative study aims at analyse EFL learners' interlanguage by focusing on their strengths and weaknesses in speaking English, especially on phonological, grammatical, and pragmatic competence in speaking English. The language data were obtained from a recorded conversation between two non-native English speakers from Indonesia. The data were analysed by referring to contrastive analysis, error analysis and the socio-cultural perspective in SLA. It was expected that the study could contribute to raise EFL teachers' awareness in conducting contrastive and error analysis to support EFL learners' learning process.

## 2. Literature Review

This section presents some concepts in SLA which were used as the basis to analysis the language data. In the following sub-sections, the concepts discussed are contrastive analysis, error analysis and socio-cultural perspective in SLA.

### 2.1. Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis

In learning a second language, it is common for language learners to produce a non-native version of the second language or what is known as interlanguage. Interlanguage is a mixture of learners' second language with some features of their first language (Selinker, 1972; Ortega, 2009; Odlin, 1989). The emergence of interlanguage is due to learners' first language interference that triggers learners to apply the rules of their first language when communicating in another language (Norrish, 1983; Richards, 1971). Learners' interlanguage can be identified with the presents of formulaic language that is used incorrectly (Wray, 2000). Interlanguage can also be seen from the incorrect formation of interrogative and negative sentences (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). The frequency of these errors will be reduced gradually through practices and exposures to

the second language. However, in some cases, learners might experience fossilization, or a condition when interlanguage becomes permanent errors, for example strong accent of L1 when speaking in L2 (Yule, 2006). To investigate learners' interlanguage, language educators can conduct contrastive analysis and error analysis.

Contrastive analysis is a technique to find the similarities and differences between two languages (Ellis, 1994). The similarities between L1 and L2 are considered beneficial to help learners in learning a second language while the differences between the two languages can cause difficulties to understand the L2 (Lado, 1957). Language educators can conduct contrastive analysis to predict what challenges that their students face in learning their second language, and by using this information, teachers can select appropriate materials for their classroom (Ibid). In contrastive analysis, errors are seen as the result of L1 interference, however, there are also errors that cannot be predicted through contrastive analysis (Corder, 1967). This limitation raises an awareness of the importance to conduct error analysis to accompany the contrastive analysis.

While contrastive analysis starts by comparing two languages, error analysis tries to find the language errors produced by learners (Corder, 1967). This analysis is conducted by collecting, observing, and analysing the sample of learners' language (Brown, 1987). The results of this analysis can help language educators to see more clearly what to improve and emphasize in their English lessons (Corder, 1981). Some factors that contribute to these errors are first language interference, habit of translating L1 to L2 literally, overgeneralization (applying the incorrect linguistic rules), such as plural (childs, foots) and past form (eated, knowed), and the ignorance or misunderstanding of the language rules (Norrish, 1983; Richards, 1971). Despite this fact, errors cannot be avoided in language learning process because they serve as tools to learn a second language (Weireesh, 1991). By learning from these errors, language learners will be able to improve their understanding of L2. Besides language errors, another element that is also important to support the process of learning a second language is social interaction.

## 2.2. Socio-cultural perspective in language learning

The socio-cultural theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978) does not specifically focus on language acquisition; however, the theory can also be implemented for the process of acquiring a language. In socio-cultural perspective, social interaction is one of the contributing factors to the successful of language acquisition (Ellis, 2000). Some important concepts in this perspective are zone of proximal development (ZPD), scaffolding and

private speech. Further explanations about these terms can be seen in the following paragraphs.

ZPD relates to a condition where learners can develop and learn more effectively because of sufficient supports given in the forms of collaboration with more knowledgeable others (MKO) (Vygotsky, 1978; McLeod, 2018; Berk & Winsler, 1995). These people can be teachers, parents, or classmates (Ibid). Children who are taught in their ZPDs are given lessons which are not too hard and not too easy to follow (Crain, 2010). In ZPD, the support is necessary to complete a task, and in the classroom the support can be given through scaffolding the lesson.

Scaffolding was first suggested by Bruner (Ninio & Bruner, 1978) to extend the concept proposed by Vygotsky (1978). Scaffolding is implemented by modelling and simplifying ask, and collaborating with MKO in solving the task (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003). As supports can be given by peers, this concept is included in this literature reviews considering the possibility of peer feedback given by interlocutors. Besides getting help from peers, learners can also gain some supports by talking to themselves or what is known as private speech.

When learners face difficulties in completing a task, maybe because of its complexity or because of learners' unfamiliarity with the task, they often talk to themselves in order to find solutions in solving the problems. This phenomenon is recognized as self-regulation behaviour or private speech (Vygotsky, 1986). Private speech is proven to improve the process of language acquisition in children (Bivens and Berk, 1990). Even though the participants of this study are adult, this concept is thought to be necessary since there might be a possibility when speakers talk to themselves in order to figure out something when speaking English.

## 3. Research Method

The language data were obtained from a recorded conversation between two non-native English speakers from Indonesia. In this study, the participants were given aliases as participant E and participant M in order to shield their identity. The participants were willing to be recorded when speaking English. The thirty minutes of their recorded conversation were transcribed. Then, the data were analysed by referring to contrastive analysis, error analysis and the socio-cultural perspective in SLA. The participants' information can be seen in Table 3.1.

Both participants were from Indonesia. Participant E is a Javanese student who studied Accounting and Finance at the University of Leeds. She has learned TOEFL

TABLE 1: The participants' information

| Aliases | Age | Origin | Major | English Proficiency Level |
|---------|-----|--------|-------|---------------------------|
| Participant E | 26 | Indonesia | Accounting and Finance | Band 7 in IELTS |
| Participant M | 29 | Indonesia | International Construction Management and Engineering | C1 |

and IELTS, and her IELTS score is in band 7. Even though she considers English as a language that is not really difficult to learn, she believes that the most difficult thing in learning English is to understand the grammar rules. Meanwhile, participant M is from the East Nusa Tenggara. She studied International Construction Management and Engineering at the University of Leeds. She has learned English in various institutions, and her English proficiency level is C1. She considers English as a language that is not easy to learn because of the systematic rules that are different from those of Indonesia, especially those related to academic style in writing and speaking.

# 4. Result and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results of the study. The findings are presented in two sub-sections. Section 4.1 discusses the strengths of the participants' English competence while section 4.2 discusses the participants' weaknesses.

## 4.1. The Strengths

Overall, since both speakers have attained band 7 on IELTS, it proves that they have achieved a good level of English proficiency. The pronunciation of both speakers can be categorised as clear enough even though participant E has strong Javanese accent, and participant M has strong East Nusa Tenggara accent when speaking English. The interference of the participants' mother tongue and a major difference between their mother tongue's accent and English' accent are probably the reasons of this phenomenon. The contrastive analysis indicates that English and Indonesia share similar sentence order (subject – predicate – object), and this becomes an advantage for the two non-native speakers in speaking English.

The language data reveal that both speakers did not face any difficulty in constructing sentences using the correct sentence order (subject-predicate-object). For instance, in line 58 of the conversation, "he's not riding the bike" consists of a subject (he), a verb (is riding), and an object (the bike). Another example can be seen in line 62, "she's not

wearing shoes" that also consists of a subject (she), a verb (is not wearing), and an object (shoes). Besides clear pronunciation and the correct use of sentence order, both speakers also show good communication strategy in which they use fillers to explain and express their feelings. This can be seen in line 19 "...I don't know, I'm not sure mm...with the black jacket..." and in line 29 "In Butchers we have mm...", and in line 16 and 22 when participant M says "Yeah".

Furthermore, when facing difficulties in speaking English, learners were seen to ask and provide supports to each other, as well as talk to themselves (private speech). Even though both speakers sometime use incorrect English grammar, they enjoyed speaking English, and tried their best in finding the right words to describe something in English, and this can be seen in line 62 "oh she's not wearing shoes...in my picture", and in line 64 "hahaha she just go with bare foot". In line 6, participant E says, "this is City Pharmacy, right?" and participant M replies by saying "Yes, City Pharmacy". This dialogue indicates that participant M tried to provide feedback to help participant E in expressing her thought in English. Similar example can also be seen in line 18, "like a vas?", and in line 30 "with apron?". Besides asking for assistance while communicating in English, the participants also talked to themselves, and this can be seen in line 19 "...I don't know, I'm not sure", in line 22 "what is this colour...brown?", and in line 29 "mmm, what is it..? Pies?". These examples are categorised as the display of private speech which is not aimed to get a reply from the interlocutor but to the speaker herself.

## 4.2. The Weaknesses

The language data indicate that some features of non-native English or learners' inter-language can still be seen in both speakers' performance. In this section, some examples of learners' weaknesses in terms of phonology, grammar and pragmatic competence are discussed. Following this, the display of scaffolding and private speech between participant E and M is also presented.

### 4.2.1. Phonology

Phonology is the study of sounds produced by human's speech system (Clark et al., 2007). From the data, it can be identified that both participants often mispronounced the letter "t" in English as the sound of "t" in Indonesia. An example of this can be seen in line 29 when participant E pronounced "they" in "they consist of seven pies...". In this utterance, the sound of "t" in "they" is not the phoneme"ð" in English, but it becomes

"d" in Indonesian phoneme. Moreover, in line 86 when participant M says, "I think it's a books", the sound of "t" in "thinks" is also the sound of "t" in Indonesia. The "t" in "think" is not the phoneme "θ" in that "think" is not pronounced as "θɪŋk", instead, participant M pronounced "t" in "think" as "t" in Indonesia which is not aspirated. Thus, based on these examples, it is concluded that both speakers' first language has influenced the way they pronounce "t" in English.

### 4.2.2. Grammar

In the sample of language data, both participants were seen to use incorrect grammatical form of English. In line 22, participant M did not add "is" after the present participle verb "wearing" in "the woman wearing pink shoes". Participant E also did similar error in line 29, "someone wearing grey apron", and in line 5 "the girl just bringing a bag". In line 36, error related to subject and verb agreement is also seen, such as in "there's small pies and a big pies". The examples above indicate that the common grammatical error made by the participants relates to subject and verb agreement.

### 4.2.3. Pragmatics

Pragmatics tries to the real meaning behind an utterance (Yule, 2000). In regards to interlanguage, language learners fail to understand the pragmatic concepts of the second language (Ellis, 2008). In line 8 of the conversation, it can be seen that speaker E tries to be polite by adding "ya?" at the end of "I will tell it first, ya?". The use of "ya" at the end of a request is common in Indonesia as a form of politeness in speaking, but "ya" at the end of a request in English is uncommon. In English, it is more common to say "do you mind if...?" or "May I...?" instead of "...ya?". The participants could say, "do you mind if I explain it first?" or "It's my turn to explain it first, right?".

## 5. Conclusion

The study of second language acquisition is a reminder for language educators that learning another language requires effort and takes time. It is a long process for language learners to reach a stage when interlanguage is rarely seen in their second language. In regards to the errors made by participants in this study, it implicated that teachers could use the language errors to support learners' learning process so that teachers can help them overcome the errors. Therefore, teachers are suggested to have

positive view on language errors in that they are not the evidences of failures, instead, these errors are the results of natural cognitive process, the evidences that students are learning, and they can be used as tools to learn a second language (Ancker, 2000; Coder, 1967; Weireesh, 1991).

In addition, English teachers are suggested to reflect on their teaching practices by referring to the results of contrastive analysis and error analysis. Being able to see the challenges that students are dealing with in learning English can help English teachers select appropriate teaching materials that can support learners' language competence. Thus, by understanding learners' strengths and weaknesses in speaking English, English teachers can help learners improve their English proficiency.

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