Crosslinguistic Influence In the Written English Of Malay Undergraduates

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe, analyse and explain the crosslinguistic influence in the written English essays of Malay undergraduates to determine how similarities and differences between English and Malay can influence the acquisition of English and also to look at how the students' own culture influences the written work of these students. The term 'crosslinguistic influence' is commonly known as language transfer which has been defined as 'the influence of the mother tongue on the learner's performance in and/or development of a given target language' (Sharwood Smith, 1994:198). It also includes the influence of any other language known to the learner prior to learning the target language. For a thorough understanding of transfer, it is necessary to make structural comparisons but also to take into account non-structural factors such as the cultural beliefs and values of the writers.

tures that learners were likely to find difficult attempted to study systematic errors in second language production. Later, the study on interlanguage was carried out extensively.

Kaplan's landmark article in 1966 describes the first major study that attempted to examine how a person's way of thinking was influenced by culture and to take the view that the native discourse structures are reflected in the written English of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. According to Kaplan, his subjects showed evidence of styles and structures that were culturally influenced. It appeared that the written English of students whose native languages were Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, French etc. was systematically different from the writings of students who were native speakers of English. The emphasis of the work was on the rhetorical styles with little attention given to reasons for culture-specific writing styles.

Differences in terms of discourse organisation, rhetorical pattern, reader or writer responsibility, use of figurative language, plot development and argumentation have been studied by various writers. In the 1990s, there was a renewed interest in the study of writing across cultures. Contrastive rhetoric is seen as a means of increasing the awareness of the background and culture of the L1 and its effects on the L2 writing produced.

Culture

To understand transfer, we need to have an understanding of not only the structures, but also the non-structural factors such as the cultural beliefs and values of the writers, since the native language influences and interacts with non-structural factors. According to Connor (1996:101) 'a widely accepted definition of culture considers it a set of rules and patterns shared by a given community'. Ward Goodenough (1964:36), a cultural anthropologist and linguist, defined a society's culture as consisting of

> whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner
> acceptable to its members and do so in any role that they accept for anyone
> of themselves. .culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist
> of things, people, behaviour, or emotions. It is rather an organization of
> these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models

for perceiving, relating, and otherwise interpreting them (In Connor, 1996:101).

As stated by Asmah (1987·112) 'language reflects the culture of its speakers, the way of life they lead as well as their physical and social environment'. The discourse produced by ESL learners may appear to be incoherent to someone who is not familiar with the culture of the writer. When the reader is not familiar with the writer's culture, he may not be successful in interpreting the content of the discourse produced. Knowledge which is culturally specific can affect the production of discourse. For example, proverbs and verses of the Koran are common in the writings of the Malays. Hindi expository prose organisation has been found to be sometimes spiral rather than linear reflecting circular patterns of organisation in traditional Hindi culture and religion. Mention may also be made of the extensive use of allusions and historical references in Chinese writing (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Purves, 1988).

Importance of Studies on Crosslinguistic Influence

Studies on crosslinguistic influences are important to language experts and practitioners who can be made aware of the difficulties faced by the L2 learner and the possible problems that he may encounter in learning and using the language. This knowledge can then be used to assist the L2 writer to become familiar not only with the linguistic features of the language, but also with the discourse patterns and the cultural norms of the target language. On the other hand, it has to be recognised that the learner's other languages have a valued role. Transfer from one language to the other can be said to enhance the expressive resources of each language without actually causing a loss in intelligibility. Transfer can also be considered as a process in which the rules of the first language are used as hypotheses in learning a second language and a varying amount of influence of one language over another is to be expected. While there are some types of transfer that can lead to loss of intelligibility and pragmatic failure, others can actually add colour and variety to the language.

Effects of Crosslinguistic Influence

Odlin (1989) gives a classification of the varied effects that cross-linguistic similarities and differences can produce:

I.   Positive transfer
II. Negative transfer
     A. Underproduction
     B. Overproduction
     C. Production errors
     D. Misinterpretation
III. Differing lengths of acquisition

Negative transfer was evident in the written essays of the Malay students in the study. An elaboration of negative transfer is given below:

Underproduction may be said to occur when learners produce very few or no examples of a target language structure. In other words, they avoid using structures which differ considerably from those in the native language.

Overproduction may in some cases be viewed as a consequence of underproduction. When students try and avoid certain structures, they may end up using too many simple structures.

The three main types of production errors likely to arise from similarities and differences in the native and target structures are (1) substitution, (2) calques, and (3) alterations of structures. Substitution occurs when the native language forms are used in the target language, for example when a Malay word is inserted into an English structure. Calques are errors which occur when the native language structure is used in the target language, for example, when a Malay structure is used in speaking or writing in English. This can happen when a person makes a literal translation of the English sentence of idiomatic expressions and/or word-order errors. Substitutions and calques are usually the types of errors writers on bilingualism refer to when they discuss transfer errors.

Misinterpretation is said to occur when the learner on the basis of native language structures, makes an inference that is very different from that made by a native speaker of the target language.

Subjects, Data and Procedure

The subjects in this study consist of a homogeneous group of learners, 33 first year Malay students at the Academy of Islamic Studies at the University of Malaya. They are all females, come from different parts of Malaysia but mainly from the North and the East Coast and their ages range from 21 to 23. Many of them have had their earlier education in Islamic religious schools and their exposure to English and their proficiency can be said to be more or less the same. All of them had first acquired their native tongue and then learned English when they went to school. All of them major in Islamic Studies or Islamic Education and will probably be involved in religious instruction in the future. A questionnaire was given to the students to obtain information relevant to the study such as the educational background and age of the students.

The students were asked to write descriptive essays, one a description of their hometown and another, their experiences as a student at the University of Malaya. This type of essay was used because it is typical of the sort usually given in the examination and also because it is a form familiar to them as it is based on a simple type of organization: introduction, development, conclusion.

Samples of their written work were examined and analysed for crosslinguistic influence in the grammar, lexis and discourse produced. The study also attempts to examine the effects of cultural beliefs and values on the written discourse produced.

Findings

Crosslinguistic Influence in Grammar

The errors examined here are mainly those arising from negative transfer which are underproduction, overproduction and production errors. There are two types of errors that occur regularly in the data due to similarities and differences in the native and target languages.

1   Substitution (use of native language forms in the target language)
2.   Calques (errors that reflect very closely a native language structure)

The grammar of the Malay students reflects mainly influence from the mother tongue in the form of language transfer.

1. Tenses

The essays reveal that the tense often inappropriately used is the present tense which is either overproduced or used for past and future time. This can be explained by the fact that tenses are not present in the Malay language, thus resulting in the present tense being used for past events or the past tense used for present time.

Present tense used for past events
*I'm very tired when I first come to this university.

*Their voices are very loud and make me so fed up.

*At first weeks I find to difficult to make myself friendly with others.

Past tense used for present time
*They always visited their friends and relatives from one house
to another house.

*There were people from another place in Terengganu.

The tense system is difficult for Malay learners to grasp because of its absence in the Malay language. There is no inflection of the verb to indicate past actions and time adverbials are used for denoting time in Malay, for example, the verb *pergi (go)* is used in sentences about a present, past and future time with no change of the verb. The students may make the mistake of thinking that the past tense need not be used because of the presence of past time adverbials, as is the case with Malay. Students are also often unable to distinguish between the perfective and the past tenses because past actions, which are normally expressed using the simple past tense, present perfect and past perfect aspect in English, are indicated in the same way in Malay. Unlike English, the verb in Malay does not undergo inflection to indicate different past actions. Instead, references to past time are indicated by words like *telah* (already), and *lepas* as in *minggu lepas* (last week).

2.   Articles

Articles are often omitted in the data examined. Other studies have been carried out on students' performance in written texts and these indicate that writers/speakers of native languages with articles tend to use them more accurately in the target language than do speakers/writers of native languages which do not have articles (Odlin, 1997:34).

The following are some examples from the written work of the Malay students.

*I am one of the students in this university who studies in
^semester system.

*My village is in front of ^sea.

*My hometown also ^capital city of Trengganu.

3.   Auxiliary verbs

The auxiliary verb is often omitted, overproduced or wrongly used in the data. This may be because no such system exists in the Malay language. Moreover, the three auxiliaries, 'be', 'have' and 'do' can function as main verbs and as subordinate verbs in compound constructions. The words *adalah* and *ialah* are used instead in the Malay language and these can be considered optional.

* I ^always tired because I^ got classes from morning until evening.

*I'm enjoyed become the University of Malaya student.

*I am cannot get any books.

In some cases, students include an auxiliary when it is not required, a result of 'double marking' which has been described as 'a failure to delete certain items which are required in some linguistic constructions but not in others' (James, 1998:107).

4. Nouns

Nouns which should be in the plural form are found in the singular and vice versa. In the Malay language, plurality is indicated by a repetition of the same word or the word does not undergo any changes, so this may pose a problem for the learner.

*For a *haluansiswa* (orientation) weeks I stayed at Fourth College...

*I had a new friends..

*As a freshies.

*...we took some subject...

5. Word categories

They also experience difficulty in distinguishing between an adjective, verb and noun. The students may know which word is needed, but they may not be able to decide on the needed category, resulting, for instance, in adjective morphology errors.

*Life here at UM is very *adventures.*

* .help us to become *independence* students.

*We live in a *harmony* condition.

*My hometown is very *interested* places.

*I'm very *gratitude* to God because I can go to university...

Crosslinguistic Influence in the Lexis used

The following are examples of crosslinguistic influence in the lexis used in the written discourse of the Malay students.

Haluansiswa (orientation) goes (brings)with^ a thousand memories.

*After a week, my friends and me were removed (moved) to
Pantai Puri College.

*There I had many friends and a lot of sweet remembrance (memories).

*But it doesn't happen already (anymore).

*Five years ago my village is shrink (small). .

Individual words have meanings but they do not exist independently in English. Their meanings are defined through sense relations/semantic relations. Not knowing the sense relations gives rise to the selection of inappropriate words which do not collocate with the other words in the sentence. Students may use the less apt of two co-hyponyms, make the an appropriate choice from a set of near-synonyms or use too specific a term in a context not suitable for it. The crosslinguistic influence could also arise due to the fact that a single lexical item in Malay can correspond to more than one lexical item in English. The major problem is that the students tend to resort to their mother tongue for literal translation at word or sentence level. This is due to the fact that they are inclined to think in Malay when they attempt to write essays in English. The result is that transfer from the native language takes place. When they face difficulties in expressing themselves in English, they may first think of what to write in Malay and then try to come up with literal equivalents in English.

An example of a literal word translation is given below.

*If I don't, the senior will *hot* and angry.

The word 'hot' is a literal translation of *panas* (*hati panas* means 'angry' in Malay) which has been used inappropriately. The choice of word is the equivalent for a Malay word at a literal level. The use of such words may be incomprehensible to someone who does not know Malay. The students may have formulated their sentences in Malay and then translated them into English literally.

There are also examples of Malay words and phrases used in English structures.

*We had a *Haluansiswa* (orientation) week...

*Our *pembantu mahasiswa* (orientation assistants) is so angry.

*...we had *orientasi* (orientation) week.

*like *Kenduri Kahwin* (wedding feast)...

* *Budu* (a kind of sweet) and the sweet foods are the popular foods..

*We have many traditional games such as *wau* (kite), *gasing* (top), ...

There is often a switch to the mother tongue when students are not able to come up with an appropriate English word or phrase and do not know what the English equivalent is. Common Malay words used are words for food and traditional games. English equivalents are, perhaps, not known to them or there may be no English equivalents for these words, and usually for these words, the Malay words are normally retained even by people proficient in English.

It has been observed that the students switch to Malay to express their intended meaning and that this may be due to their inability in finding a suitable English equivalent. This also reflects the students' tendency to translate from Malay to the target language. Many of them resort to using the bilingual dictionary and since they think and formulate sentences in Malay and then translate them into English, they may face difficulties in coming up with suitable English equivalents for the meaning that they intend to convey in the target language.

*We have doing anything they ordered because we feeled afraid so much.

*I also must do the assignments.

The above are examples of the use of Malay structures in the literal translation of the Malay sentences. In the Malay language, the qualifying word usually occurs before or after the adjective but in English it occurs before the adjective (we felt so much afraid- *kami rasa takut sangat/sangat takut*). The use of 'also' is affected by the Malay version *'Saya juga mesti membuat tugasan'*

Misordering is often the result of learners relying on word for word translations of native language structures when producing the target language.

Cultural Influence on Discourse

Language, and in particular vocabulary, used can be said to be a reflection of the culture of the speakers. According to Asmah 'man's perception and conception of the realities around him include his view of the world, and this is recorded in his language' (1987:113). For this reason, a study of the cultural values and beliefs of the students is important in the analysis of written or spoken texts. Since language reflects the culture of its speakers and the way of life that they lead, as well as their physical and social environment, the writing produced by ESL learners may be said to reveal particular beliefs and values, which are reflected especially in the choice of lexis in written discourse.

Any attempt to define Malay culture has to recognise Islam as its foundation. As noted earlier, many of the students in this study have studied in religious schools and are from the East Coast or the North. Religion plays a major role in their lives and this is reflected in their written discourse. The descriptions of events and settings may be influenced by Islam since the religion enhances certain beliefs. For instance, there is often mention of mosques in the descriptions of the hometown. They may say, for instance, that they live near the mosque or that the mosque is situated at a particular place for the convenience of the residents. A common belief appears to be that one must be grateful for the good that is bestowed upon oneself. There is mention of God, as when they express their gratitude for being able to enter university. In this culture, God is revered and all that happens is seen to occur as He wills it. This again reflects the influence of Islam. Emphasis appears to be more on the gratitude they feel rather than on their success and achievement in being able to enter university. Islamic influence is also often reflected in the descriptions provided of what the villagers do during certain public holidays. The holidays mentioned are either *Hari Raya*, which is celebrated after a month of fasting, or *Nuzul Koran*, a public holiday in certain places when the al Quran reading competitions are held.

I feel so proud and happy

My house was near the mosque.

* My dreams to further studies in university coming true.

I'm very proud to be . . Universiti Malaya student.

* I'm very gratitude to God because I can go to university

As we know Kota Bharu is known as 'Kota serambi Mekah'
(Little Mecca)

This is because the government ... more Islamic development.

My village has .. such as mosque for Muslims,
post office, clinic. .

* Sometimes when public holiday comes, for example *Nuzul
Quran* (Koran reading competition) public holiday. We always
make foods and drinks and put it at the mosque and we eat it
together after the pray.

In the writing describing hometowns, there is often mention of the good quali-
ties of the people in the writer's hometown. They are all portrayed as being
people of good character, charitable and helpful to one another. This reflects
the inherent values of people in villages who place great emphasis on working
together and helping each other. There is often mention of all races living in
harmony showing that they understand the importance of accepting people of
different races. This reflects the importance of all races living in harmony and
may not be completely understood by people unfamiliar with the history of the
country and the existence of people of different races and religions who live
there.

They love and respect each other.

...and the villagers are very kind, friendly, helpful..

* We live in a harmony condition.

We respect the other races.

* People in these country (state) was a kind people. They

lived with different races and help each other.

It's very peaceful, far away from industrial areas.

Their villagers .   very honest, cooperate with each other
and very kind.

There are also feelings of patriotism displayed in the writing. All appear to be
proud of the place they are from and have a very high opinion of it as they have
been brought up in that particular place

I'm so proud of my hometown.

I am very proud to stay here. Although I live in Kuala
Lumpur, I never forget it.

I love my country (state) because it is a beautiful
country.

It is noticeable that there is a lack of description of the places of interest found
in the hometown. Concentration is given to the people and their qualities and
to the food that is found there. It would be interesting to compare these with
the writing produced by students from the urban areas and with a different
background.

The writers' lack of independence is shown in the discourse of the es-
says. In the descriptions of their experience at the university, many described
how difficult it was to be away from home for the first time and away from
their parents. Even though they are all between 21 and 23 years of age, their
lack of independence is obvious and the descriptions show that they have not
been exposed to the world outside of their hometown. This may be due to the
fact that independence is not generally encouraged from an early age as the
emphasis on an interdependent culture, rather than on individual independence,
is found in the communities that the students come from. The students indi-
cate that they think and behave as a group, when they write about their separa-
tion from the family and the friends who are with them at university, and indi-
cate that they need social relationships and interaction with groups of students
to make them feel at home. Lack of familiarity with the lifestyle and restric-

tions surrounding relationships between men and women are shown in the writings as well.

I wanted to follow my parents back to Kelantan.

*I'm very sad and was crying when I shakes hands with my parents.

The situation at UM was very different during ... secondary school.

.I find to difficult to make myself friendly with others.

*Especially for a boy. Because I come from ... girls school.

*This is first time for me   .far from family

.it's also .. sad .   I must separate .   my family.

...I have lot a friends who always take care of me.

* When I was first time in Universiti Malaya. I was by shock. All are different at my school before.

The writings also suggest that certain kinds of food are associated with the hometowns of the students and that food and hospitality are an important part of the culture. People of each state have certain speciality dishes which they are known for and this is reflected in the written compositions of the students. When students are asked to describe their hometown, a description of the food plays a major part of the essay. The special food found in the place is often described in very favourable terms. The Malay words for the food are used as the English equivalents are not known although they may exist.

Our favourite food is *nasi dagang*. The other foods are *nasi minyak, nasi kerabu* and others.

I like to eat *Tomyam* very much.

The delicious food in my hometown is *laksa.*

*You can see many *keropok* maker in my hometown.

Food in my hometown is very cheap.

We also have the other types of food such as *tempe, kerabu* and others.

*If anybody eat *nasi dagang* they may be want to eat more.

Keropok lekor is quite different from other *keropok.*

If you want to have lunch or dinner or breakfast, my
hometown can give you a lot of food and the famous food
is *nasi kerabu.*

Traditional games and martial arts found in a certain state or place are often
mentioned such as *congkak* (a board game), *wau* (a kite), *silat* (a kind of mar-
tial art), which are all part of the culture of the East Coast. Like the food, the
games are known as the traditional games of a particular state or place and are
not played anywhere else.

*At a free time, some of the villagers have something to do
like congkak, fishing.

such as *wau, gasing, silat.*

Conclusion

It is useful for teachers to consider the problem of transfer and a knowledge of
the native language and culture will make teachers more effective in dealing
with students' writing and the problems that they face. A teacher aware of
Malay-based errors will be able to pinpoint problems that these students are
likely to experience. A knowledge of their cultural beliefs and values will also
sensitize the teacher to the kinds of content produced by the writers. Although
some types of transfer can lead to loss of intelligibility and pragmatic failure,

other types can enhance the writing of the students as well as add charm and colour to the language.

By examining the cultural and crosslinguistic influences, the reader is sensitized to the range of variation that exists amongst students who come from a different background and culture and whose native tongues are different. It will help teachers perceive what may be difficult or easy for students learning the target language.

Teachers and students must realize that there are different assumptions regarding text, writers, audiences and the knowledge writers can have about writing.

> This view emphasizes individual and cultural-societal contributions of writers. It helps celebrate diversity and explains that nonnativeness in writing derives from social and cultural traditions imprinted upon each individual whose writing practices contribute variety to the norm (Connor, 1996:26).

Since English is the most widely learned language in the world today, some implications of multilingualism for the teaching of English may be useful. Further studies need to be carried out on the relationships between culture, writing and second language instruction. Previous writings have stressed features of good writing in written discourse and the use of handbooks on writing. The inclusion of culture as a factor which influences written discourse, with the rules and patterns belonging to different groups and related perceptions of written texts, merits further investigation.

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