

The Study of L1 Interference on English Compositions Made by Eighth Graders

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Abstract

This study is aimed to find out the kinds of lexical and grammatical errors caused by L1 interference or negative transfer of the mother tongue in writing compositions made by eighth grade students of SMP Negeri 13 Malang and the frequency of occurrence of errors. The focus of this study was identifying, describing, and classifying grammatical and lexical errors in students writing. Therefore, descriptive qualitative was considered appropriate for the design of the study. The subjects were 39 eighth grade students in 8A Class in the second semester of 2008-2009 academic years. The instrument used to collect the data was the students' writing tasks. The result shows that there 586 errors resulting from L1 interference were found from 78 compositions. Some categories of errors in Kwary and Sugiri could not be applied to the data, such as, if clause, embedded question, comparison, conjunction, and word class. No sentences containing those categories of errors were found in the data. However, the researcher developed another category of errors that are not mentioned in the classification scheme by Kwary and Sugiri, that is, clause without subject that makes up 2.56% of all errors.

Keywords: L1 Interference, compositions

L1 interference with regard to the terms 'cross-linguistics and language transfer' refers to the influence of the native language structures on students' performance and development in the target language (Hashim, 1999). In other words, L1 interference is the learners' trying to apply rules and forms in their native language (L1) into the target language (FL). The learners' instincts to look for similarities between their mother tongue and the target language and their attempt to draw some comparisons with what they know already are natural (Nicholls, 2003). This is also supported by Brown (2003) that learners have assumption that the target language operates like their native language.

The reliance on similarities between the

native language and the target language can be both a help and a hindrance. The similarities between L1 and FL can lead to positive transfer, which will ease the learners to learn the target language. On the other hand, when the items or structures in both languages are different, negative transfer occurs. This leads the learners to commit errors. Errors which result from negative transfer are known as L1 interference. As no one likes to commit error, L1 interference is actually an unwanted deviation to a language learner (Anastasia, 1989).

Therefore, when a foreign language teacher listens to the learners' speaking in the target language or observes their effort to write in the language, the teacher will soon notice pronunciation, spelling, grammar,

and vocabulary errors which result from L1 interference that tend to recur in every learners. This is in line with Wilkins' statement that, when looking at the speech and writing of the foreign language learner, there is little reason to doubt that we will find many errors which can be traced back to the mother tongue (Wilkins, 1975, p. 190).

Considering the fact that L1 interference influences the language which is produced by the learners when they use a foreign language, it has become a very important area of study in language teaching (Nicholls, 2003). Therefore, the researcher is interested to conduct a study which is related to the issue of L1 interference. It seeks to find out the errors that result from L1 interference in the junior high school students' compositions. The subjects of this study are students of SMP Negeri 13 Malang. This school was chosen since the researcher noticed a lot of errors that reflect L1 interference feature in her students' compositions during her teaching practice in this school. Therefore, it is a good chance to conduct a study in this school and also provide solutions to the problems that are faced by the students.

Related to the background of the study, the aims of the study are to identify the kinds of grammatical and lexical errors caused by first language interference that appear in the writing of the students in 8A Class at SMP Negeri 13 Malang and to identify the frequency of occurrence of the kinds of errors caused by first language interference.

The data and information obtained from this study are expected to be useful for the English teachers, in order to help them identify the areas where students encounter problems in writing and to determine the most appropriate technique and teaching materials to use in overcoming students' writing problems. In addition, the findings of the study will help the students to recognize their problems in the process of learning English and the areas they need to improve.

Method

This is a descriptive study. The researcher tries to identify, classify and describe the grammatical and lexical errors that result from L1 interference made by eighth graders of SMPN 13 Malang in writing compositions. The subjects of this study are the second year students of SMP Negeri 13 Malang in 8A class. This class consists of 42 students, that is, 23 boys and 19 girls. The instrument used to collect the data was the students' writing tasks. The errors found were analyzed through these procedures.

Identifying Errors

In this study identification of errors refers to the identification of any deviation in the students' writings that seem to result from L1 interference. Thus, the deviations found in term of grammar and vocabulary use are listed. After the identification, the errors found were counted although there was more than one error in one sentence.

Categorizing the Errors

In order to categorize the errors, the error classification scheme developed by Kwary and Sugiri (2004) was adapted in this study. The scheme was chosen because it formulates Indonesian categorization of errors resulting from L1 interference that may fit in the data of this study as well. The classification scheme consist of 17 types of errors as follows: noun form, concord, gerund, article, spelling, sentence without verb, word class, preposition, tense, passive form, conjunction, comparisons, aspect, if clause, embedded question, and cross-reference. The researcher also added two more categories related to lexical errors, such as, literal word translation and word order (Bennui, 2008). The errors are, then, described in terms of surface strategy taxonomy that classifies errors into omission, addition, misformation, and misordering.

Tabulating the Errors

In this part, the data from the students'

writings' were presented quantitatively in order to figure out the frequency of occurrence of errors in the students' compositions. The analysis on the students' writings' was focused on grammatical and lexical errors resulting from L1 interference. In order to determine the frequency of occurrence of each error type, the researcher applied a simple percentage as follows.

$$X = \frac{N}{Nt} \times 100\%$$

N: the number of respondent error

Nt: the total number of respondents' error, in each type of error

X: percentage of the number of the respondents' errors in particular types of error

Summarizing and Interpreting

In this study, the selecting data from the findings are described qualitatively. They are described in terms of their form, frequency of occurrence, and percentage of occurrence. The researcher also provided some explanation on why the errors can be considered to result from L1 interference. She, then formulated the reconstructed version of the sentences containing errors based on the appropriate English grammar rules and predicted intended meaning of the writers based on the context.

Results and Discussion

From 78 compositions analyzed, 586 errors resulting from L1 interference were found. Those errors can be classified into grammatical and lexical errors. The grammatical errors can be further categorized into; subject-verb agreement, article, sentence without verb, noun form, pronoun, preposition, word order, tense, gerund, and passive form. The lexical errors consist of errors on literal translation, spelling, and word choice. These findings are illustrated in Table 1.

Some categories proposed by Kwary and Sugiri (2004) are not found from the data, that is, if clause, embedded question, comparison,

Table 1. Types and number of errors in students' constructed sentences

No.	Types of Errors	Frequency	Percent-age
1	Subject-verb agreement	85	14.50%
2	Article	71	12.12%
3	Sentence/ clause without verb	71	12.12%
4	Noun form	67	11.43%
5	Pronoun	47	8.02%
6	Preposition	44	7.51%
7	Literal translation	44	7.51%
8	Spelling	43	7.34%
9	Word order	40	6.82%
10	Word choice	36	6.14%
11	Clause without subject	15	2.56%
12	Tense	14	2.39%
13	Gerund	5	0.85%
14	Passive	4	0.68%
Total		586	100%

conjunction, and word class. No sentences containing those categories were found in the students' compositions.

From the data, however, the researcher finds one more category that is not listed in the previous studies, that is, clause without subject. From the data analysis result it is found that subject-verb agreement comes as the most frequently occurring type of errors in grammatical level, that is, 14.50%. English grammar requires the subject and verb to agree in number: both must be singular, or both must be plural. Problems occur in the present tense because the students must add an -s or -es at the end of the verb when the subject is a third person singular. This concept can be considered the most difficult to master since some previous studies which are conducted by Darus (2009) and Maros (2007) also show that the students made a lot of errors in this area.

The second types of errors with highest frequency of occurrence are errors on the use of article and on subject or clause without verb.

They make up 11.72% of all errors. Students tend to omit the definite or indefinite article that should be attached to nouns because Indonesian words does not have article (Gusrizal, 2000, p. 9). In Bahasa Indonesia, take for example, the word “mobil” means the car or a car. This difference seems to make difficult for the students to apply this concept which result in errors. In addition, the students have tendency to omit verb in a sentence or clause due to in Bahasa Indonesia, the sentence using adjective as a subject complement can stand without any corresponding verb because the adjective itself may serve as the predicate (Gusrizal, 2000). Thus, the omission article and verb in a nominal sentence can be considered a transfer of the native language rules.

Another grammatical error that seems to result from L1 interference is errors on noun form. In Indonesian grammar, countable nouns do not need any plural marker ‘-s’ to indicate that the noun is more than one or plural. When Indonesian say “a car”, they simply say “mobil”, and for “two cars” they just say “dua mobil”.

Still another grammatical error that might be considered a negative transfer of the mother tongue is error on the use of pronoun. In this case, the students are confused to choose the appropriate pronoun to use whether they have to use subject pronoun, object pronoun, or possessive pronoun since the Indonesian language concept of pronoun is much less complicated.

Errors on the use of preposition can also be considered as L1 transfer. From the data, it comes with 6.74% of all problems made by the students. Because the meanings of some prepositions are the same in Bahasa Indonesia, students might use any preposition that have the same meaning to express their idea. In fact, the use of preposition in English is different, for example, the preposition “di” in Indonesian is comparable with English preposition “in”, “on”, and “at”. Those three prepositions in English have different functions, depending on the place that follow the preposition. Thus the students get confused to choose the appropriate

preposition to use.

Error on word order is also considered the type of errors that result from L1 interference. It happens because the Indonesian and English languages have different system of noun phrase word order. In Indonesian a noun phrase is followed by a modifier; on the other hand, in English, they are formed by “modifier + noun” (Guzrizal, 2000). Thus, Indonesian may say “chair red” when they mean “red chair”

Error in the use of tenses may also be considered a negative transfer of native language. This error makes up to 2.39% of all errors types. It is not surprising that the students commit errors in this area since in Indonesia no similar concept can be found. In English, there is indication of time with the use of verbs in present, past, future and continuous tense. Indonesian verbs do not indicate time. The moods and tenses are indicated by the addition of auxiliary verbs and particles. English verbs change according to aspect of time. The differences between the verb system of L1 and English tense make it difficult for students to catch the English notion of tenses (Darus, 2009).

Error in the use of passive form makes up to 0.68% from the data found. This type of errors is frequently found in the students’ compositions since they fail to change the base form verb into past participle. It may happen because the Indonesian and English languages have different system of forming passive form. In Indonesian, passive form is formed by prefix + base form of verb; on the contrary, in English, it formed by “auxiliary + V3. Thus, the students tend to use the base form of verb when they write.

In the lexical area, literal translation is the type of error with the highest frequency of occurrence. It is not surprising that the students commit a lot of errors related to this issue since they have limited vocabularies. Therefore, they rely on their previous knowledge to express something in the target language.

Error in diction or word choice is also frequently found in the students’ composition.

This error amounted to 6.14%. The errors in this type might be caused by direct translation of Indonesian words into English without considering the context of use.

Spelling errors are also found from the data. This happens because some words in Indonesian have almost the same spelling with English. Cook (in Kwary 2004) states that one of the biggest problems in foreign language learning is spelling error since in English alphabet; one syllable does not represent one sound.

From all the errors made by the students it can be concluded that they are influenced by their native language in the process of learning English, which were evidently illustrated in their writing. It is supported by Brown (1994, p. 224) that in the early stages of learning a foreign language, before the system of the target language is familiar, the native language is the only previous linguistics system upon which the learner can draw.

Conclusions

The study revealed that there were 586 grammatical and lexical errors resulting from L1 interference. The kinds of errors which are committed by the students in the grammatical level are errors in the use of subject-verb agreement, article, sentence/clause without verb, noun form, pronoun, preposition, word order, clause without subject, tense, gerund and passive form. The lexical errors consist of errors on literal translation, spelling, and word choice.

586 errors were found from 78 compositions. The kinds of grammatical errors that appear in the students' writings are subject-verb agreement (14.50%), article (12.12%), sentence or clause without verb (12.12%), noun form (11.43%), pronoun (8.02%), preposition (7.51%), word order (6.82%), clause without subject (2.56%), tense (2.39%), gerund (0.85%), and passive form (0.68%). Errors in the lexical area consist of errors on literal translation (7.51%), spelling (7.34%), and word choice (6.14%).

From the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the students were influenced by their L1 in their process of learning English and the errors they make reflect the L1 interference.

The results of this study are expected to give practical contribution to teachers and students in English language teaching and learning. Therefore, both the teachers and the students can minimize their errors resulting from L1 interference.

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