

# L1 Syntactic Interference in ESP Students' Writing Assignments

Tia Marita<sup>1\*</sup> and Jufrizal<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> English Department, FBS Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Sumatra Barat 25131, Indonesia

<sup>2</sup> English Department, FBS Universitas Negeri Padang, Padang, Sumatra Barat 25131, Indonesia

\*Corresponding author. Email: [tiamarita09@yahoo.com](mailto:tiamarita09@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

In second/foreign language learning, learners often have their prior knowledge of their first language interference in producing their L2, whether it is in spoken or written form. As Weinreich points out four types of interference, the interference may occur in any aspect of linguistic, including syntax. Researcher conducted a study related to this issue by analyzing L1 syntactic interference occurs in students' writing assignments. This article focuses on theoretical grounding of some factors that may cause L1 syntactic interference to appears in ESP students' writing assignments. Researcher followed qualitative descriptive methods in this research with documents analysis and questionnaire as the means to collect the data of this study. Documents are in the form of writing assignments from economic students in ESP class at STES Manna Wa Salwa Padang Panjang. The data was analyzed by using several steps such as identifying, classifying, analyzing, and interpreting. From the documents analysis, researcher found out L1 syntactic interference in students' L2 writing occur in all aspects of syntax, such as in phrases, clauses, and sentences. Based on some findings and discussion from the questionnaire, it was found that interlingual and intralingual factor are the main factors which cause interference to happen. Interlingual factor happens due to several system differences of syntax between L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) and L2 (English), while intralingual factor is due to students' habit of their native language and lack of practice in improving their L2. L1 interference occurs a lot in students' writing product and it affects their L2 writing efficiency.

**Keywords:** *Interference, Syntax, Syntactic Interference, Writing*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The need of mastering English language skill has become a prominent aspect to survive in this age of globalization. There are no field of profession which does not required English skill parallel to the technological developments around the world. To fulfill this kind of needs, English has been taught as school subject since the beginner level in Indonesia. However, English has not been used as a mean of communication in daily life for most of times. The use of Bahasa Indonesia is more dominant even in the English learning process. It makes English as second/foreign language learning has been far from success [1], and one of the reasons of its failure is the role of first language interference.

Since written communication has become more demanding in line with the development of communicative technologies in this era, Chen states that in order to take control of this age of globalization, the world would become smaller due to the need of unlimited communication [2]. Consequently, members of global institutions, for their benefits in education and business cooperation have to be able to maintain their

connection with one another. More people have realized the need of good quality English writing for communication purposes in some circumstances. For instances in business purposes, Indonesian economic students need to master the ability of constructing good sentences to communicate with foreign clients through email or other communicative apps. However, writing in English for second/foreign language learners has never been easy. There are many aspects that need to be put together in order to be able to reach English native-speakers level. Although English has been taught in school since the very beginner level of education in Indonesia, English never has a supported environment in Indonesian students' community to be used as dominant language in communication. Therefore, the knowledge of their first language sometimes interferes in their L2 outcomes whether it happens consciously or not. This kind of action is called language interference or linguistic interference.

Linguistic interference has become widespread phenomenon among English as second/foreign language learners. Although English is taught as school subject in Indonesia since beginner level of education, it has not been used as a mean of communication in daily

activities. Learners still hold on to their native language (L1), Bahasa Indonesia, to be used in communication most of time, so they have a tendency to have their L1 interfere while using English in many circumstances. This kind of tendency is called by Arthur as “language interference” or “linguistic interference” [3]. Lekova views this kind of phenomenon as the transference of one language’s element in to another one at various kinds of level especially linguistical elements since linguistic holds a major contribution in producing language in active or passive form [4].

There have been some studies conducted by the previous researchers related to L1 interference found in L2. Bhela conducted a research related to L1 interference [5]. A Spanish, an Italian, a Vietnamese, a Cambodian student as the participants, using provided pictures were asked to write stories. In order to tell the thoughts, they try the L1 syntactic properties to get related to L2 structures. These kinds of things make some unread in extents and have led the space between L1 and L2. The result told that the learners, an invalid written story was written with inappropriate structure. This study showed how L1 interference can cause some errors in students’ writing and affecting their L2 writing efficiency.

Another study of L1 interference was conducted by Camilleri [6]. Camilleri investigated the in Maltese learner English writing’s native transfer. A hundred selected participants whom write essays, caused by L1 interference, were examined to detect errors. It is based on a five-stage investigation, including misidentification, data collection, misdescription, attribution of miscategorise, and reflection on findings. The results showed that students were divided into 13 categories, namely nouns, adverbs, verbs, adjectives, verb forms, prepositions, articles, spelling, harmony, idioms, pronouns, passive pronunciation and the most error-prone word order. The main reasons for the errors found were L1 interference related to direct translation, the difference in grammatical characteristics between L1 and L2, and the transfer of the L1 system in L2 writing. Similar to them in various materials, Jenwitheesuk also studied the L2 writing errors causes in third year college student written works [7]. Their mainly errors were revealed caused by a lack of syntactic knowledge. The four most common mistakes found are determinants, verb agreement and subject, prepositions, tenses, respectively. The limited grammatical and lexical competence caused was explained, that the learner relied on the first language and transferred them into L2 writing. “The persisted errors in writing were resulted from the mother tongue interference, the false hypothesis and the ignorance of the correct sentence

patterns of English structures, together with the lack of knowledge in grammatical rules,” claimed the researcher.

Based on those facts in the field and several results of studies above, researcher is inspired to do further exploration related to L1 interference in students’ writing assignments. Dedicated to the study of language learners’ successive approximation of the target language is an important inquiry link in the study of second language acquisition (SLA). With the students’ English educational background from primary to tertiary level, they are supposed to have good knowledge in conducting English writing texts. Yet, no one can assure such assumption unless a scientific discovery is done to find out the answer. For that purpose, researcher is interested to do further investigation of the kind of linguistic interference that cause errors in students’ writing English task especially for students who learn English for specific purposes. Focus of this research is to find out L1 syntactic interference in students of ESP class writing assignments. Researcher would like to do deeper analysis in L1 syntactic interference found in students of STES MANNA WA SALWA Padang Panjang writing assignments. Syntax is element of linguistic that study about the relation between words, which makes it important aspect in order to define good writing quality in L2. Such investigation is needed in order to get scientific insight into L1 interference phenomena and to answer whether any further pedagogical consideration needs to be taken.

#### *L1 INTERFERENCE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING*

Interference occurs as a distraction from learners’ prior linguistic knowledge in the production of their other language in communication. Second language learners tend to use foreign languages when trying to speak the form, meaning and cultural language of their L1. The result of old habits is interference of the first language, and it must be unlearned before the learning of the new hobbies of second language [8]. Similarly, Beardsmore believes that if learners have difficulty in L2 phonology, vocabulary and grammar, it is due to interference from L1 habits [9]. Linguistic interference could appear in any aspect of linguistic. It can appear in the form of elements, sounds, or structures of one language to another. As no language is identically the same, the language system differences can interfere to one another in the outcomes. Weinreich in Nababan points out four types of linguistic interference, they are; phonological interference, morphological interference, syntactic interference, and lexical interference [10]. Phonological

interference occurs when the phoneme or sound of one language affected by phoneme or sound of another language used by the speakers. Morphological interference occurs when the process of forming morpheme from one language absorbed by affixes of another language. Syntactic interference occurs when constructing sentences in one language absorbing the structure system of another language. And lexical interference occurs when the producing the words in one language got affected by the words from another language.

Learners of English as second/foreign language have some tend to transfer the forms, meaning and culture of them when attempting to speak the language, to the foreign language and culture. Interference must be unlearned before the learning of the new hobbies of second language, and it is the result of old habits of the first language [11]. L1 habits are also transferred and then the errors occur by learning L2 habits [8]. Similarly, Beardsmore believes that if learners have difficulty with English pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, they will interfere with L1 habits [9]. Towell and Hawkins (in Nemati & Taghizade) pointed out that very few English learners can successfully reach the native-speaking level, and most second language learners cannot reach the native-speaking level [8]. Further, Dulay et al. shows that the path of the acquisition of first language is different from second language acquisition, but the errors of L1 and L2 learners are very similar [11].

## 2. METHODS

This study was conducted by using qualitative descriptive method which researcher described the L1 syntactic in the interference students' English writing assignments. The participants of this study are economic students in ESP class at STES Manna Wa Salwa in Padang Panjang. There are about 20 students who get the distribution of questionnaire in the form of Google form. The questionnaire consists of 9 closed questions and 2 open questions about students' L1 interference tendency in their English writing outcomes. The result of questionnaires were analyzed based on the percentage of students' responses <sup>[6]</sup>.

## 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

In order to find some factors that might cause L1 syntactic interference to happen, researcher distributed questionnaire to the participants. From the results of the questionnaire analysis, it was found that there are some factors that cause L1 syntactic interference to appear in students' English writing assignments. The factors are categorized into two major types, interlanguage factors and intralanguage factors.

### *Interlanguage Factors*

Interlanguage factors are some causes of errors that appear due to the native language influences which interfere with target language learning. This happened when students' L1 habitual language use interfere to their other language outcomes, in this case, English language writing. Based on the results of questionnaire, the first cause was infinitive to be the system differences of two languages. Sometimes, students' first language syntactic system interfered to their writing outcomes. From the data, the different of word order between Bahasa Indonesia and English in conducting phrases mostly caused syntactic interference in their writing. In Bahasa, adjective that is used to describe the noun infinitive. Meanwhile in English it is before the noun. It is found that the system structure of placing adjective after noun in Bahasa sometimes interfere in their English writing. For example, when students are supposed to promote the product they would like to sell, instead of writing "spicy cassava chips", they wrote "cassava chips spicy" which they mean to tell "*keripik singkong balado*".

This kind of error occurred due to some significant differences in syntactic structure between their L1 and English. Therefore, their L1 syntactic knowledge interfered in their English writing. This result was in line with the result of the previous study of Lee's [12]. He revealed that Korean learners who studied EFL, also had errors in their English writing outcomes caused by L1 interference. He studied medical students' English writing assignments, both in the formal and informal contexts, and found out that one fourth of errors were resulted from L1 transfer. Since there were also system differences in syntax between Korean and English, it caused learners' prior knowledge of their first language to interfere to their target language outcomes.

Another result showed that their first language habitual action also became the factor that caused interference in their English writing assignments. In some cases, Indonesian language users speak without a complete sentence as long as the interlocutors understand the message it is acceptable. For instance, the existence of predicate "to be" which could mean "adalah" in Bahasa is very rarely used. For example, instead of saying "*Produk ini adalah produk unggulan keluaran terbaru*", they only wrote "*Produk ini produk unggulan keluaran terbaru*". This kind of habit sometimes interfere in their English outcomes which instead of writing "This product is the newest best seller product", they wrote, "This product the newest best product" which syntactically error and incomplete since in English predicate is needed to form a complete sentence.

Their L1 prior knowledge interfered in their writing in target language. The questionnaire result showed that their habitual action of first language used got them confused so they tended to mix it up with their target language outcomes. This case has the same discussions in Chen's previous study of Taiwanese students in the context of students L1 habitual language use [2]. They had error in the misuse of English tenses. Most Taiwanese students had reported that They have difficulty in using English tenses. Because Mandarin is not an inflected language, their prior knowledge and habit of their L1 interfere their English language outcomes and cause some errors.

From other result, it is showed that another interlanguage factor of the L1 syntactic interference is the literal translation that the students made from their L1 into target language. Students confessed that instead of trying to think in English while writing English, they tended to translate what they had in their first language into English word by word. Translating their first language into English literally only lead to errors and inefficiency to their English writing. They claimed they did it because it was easier for them to write in their language first then translate it into English instead of writing while thinking in English. This case was quite similar to a previous study of Khodabande related to literal translation of L1 [13]. He found out that in their headlines of writing assignments, students had grammar and vocabulary errors. Students' tendency caused more errors of using local language, Abuse and omission of prepositions, auxiliaries, articles, lack of subject-verb agreement, and mostly in the lexical choice. The findings of his study were emphasizing the idea of the interference from native language which was surely the immediate noticeable source of error in the form of literal translation.

#### *Intralinguage Factors*

Many strategies used by learners in language acquisition and the mutual interference of target language items had errors. Intralinguage factors as the cause of L1 syntactic interference means that the problem placed not only in the learners' habitual action of their first language use, but also the lack of knowledge of the language's target. They did not know their language's target very well, they may have difficulties in using it. Their limited knowledge of the target language might cause them to use their L1 knowledge instead. Intralinguage factors reflect not only the use of structure of the mother tongue, but also the generalization that based on their limited knowledge of the language's target. Brown states that it has been founded at the early stage of language learning is mainly manifested as interlanguage transfer [14]. But

once learners start to learn certain parts of the new system, more generalizations emerge between their L1 language and the target language.

From the findings, it was found that the intralinguage factors also played role in the L1 syntactic interference in students of economic English writing assignments. The data showed that intralinguage factors might appear due to lack of English practice, and they were not very familiar with English. Students claimed that it was true since elementary school they have learned English but they still had lack of knowledge about it. This was because English is not used as the means of communication mostly in the daily activities. Moreover, English was rarely used between the lecturer and their students during their English classes; This was why students were often disturbed by their L1, since they were not familiar with English, they generalized their knowledge of L1 into the target language and had it mixed it up in their English writing outcomes and could not produce English writing efficiently. Obviously, native language transfer is found to play a role which is at the top causes in students error making.

In line to this case, Kim in his previous study found out that how intralinguage factors also become the causes of L1 interference in English language outcomes. He analyzed students' writing samples to examine L1 interference phenomenon. He classified the errors that he found in the students' writing into intralinguage and interlanguage errors based on the causes of errors. The result of his study showed that most of learners' errors were made due to the lack of knowledge in the target language which leads L1 interference. He pointed out that Koreans believe that English learners often misuse English expressions. It can be happened due to their L1 interference. Thus, it may originate from the learner's error, not only an abnormal form that should be corrected, but also reflects the creative process of seeking the rules of the target language system.

Moreover, students seem to have less interest in improving their English syntax knowledge. Most of them did not join any English course or club for fill their free time and they are not interested in reading English books or listening to English DVDs. can also watch English programs on TV or the Internet. Since writing skills depend largely on how often someone reads or listens to English, this became a serious problem. Since they have limited knowledge of English as target language and did not make any significant effort to improve it increase the tendency of L1 interference. Pudiyo who conducted similar research in Purwokerto, Central Java, also found that student's lack of practice which made it difficult for them to internalize English linguistic knowledge was one reason

that influenced by their L1 in producing English [15]. Pudiyo conducted a similar study in Purwokerto, Central Java. He also found that students' lack of practical ability makes it difficult for them to internalize English linguistic knowledge, which is one of the reasons that influenced by their L1 in producing English. This result suggests that some of the students may have managed to use their L1 knowledge to interfere in producing English expressions in written text instead of having good quality of English in their essay writing.

Another result from the questionnaire also showed that sometimes the use of dictionaries can be another intralingual factor that causes interference problems. This is because most students do not have much knowledge in English words to express their ideas clearly, so they find it by using dictionary or translation devices. Actually, using dictionary is one of the ways to enrich students' vocabularies bank and help students find words for writing English. However, A trend when using dictionaries can also leads cause students to produce English that includes L1 interference. This allows them to copy words directly into their writing without checking whether the form of the words is suitable for the English environment.

In addition to these two mainly factors cause of L1 interference, we can see that other factors, such as testing and teaching materials and techniques, the type of language exposure available to the learner, the transfer of a third or more language known to the learner, should also be evaluated as the cause of the error. L1 interferes with English learning. This kind of study can let the teachers figure out the factors that cause errors so they can be more aware and focus on which place should be solving on and the L2 classroom needs all kinds of attention. Moreover, the teacher can be better able to select materials and developing courses that can facilitate the L2 learning process.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Researcher concluded that Students believe that errors have been made due to intra- and inter-language interference. L1 commonly interference L2 learners of English when learned the other language. Ellis had written that the student's L1 could influences the learning progress for the L2. In addition, that is natural phenomenon when language interference occurs in bilingual or multilingual country. However, it is being wanted that English lecturer can decrease the errors caused by L1 syntactic in student writing assignments based on the finding of this study, by being more aware about the most common factors that cause L1 interference made by the students. Moreover, students have to encourage themselves to improve their

knowledge and skill English so the inefficiency in their writing outcomes can be avoidable. They must improve their writing skills instead of relying on their L1 conversion, there are many ways students are able to do, such as using their social media to aid construct sentences, or use computer programs to help them.

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