INTERFERENCE IN LEARNING ENGLISH: OMISSION OF COPULA BE IN ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN SELANGOR INTERNATIONAL ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

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Abstract

Acquiring English grammar is often treated as a 'meticulous' process for ESL learners. Direct translation in their second language is the result from language transfer from their first language. Some ESL learners found it difficult to grab even the most basic English grammar after spending years in school. Applying Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis together with the Error Analysis Hypothesis as a method of explaining why some features of a Target Language were more difficult to acquire than others, this study aims to identify the students' errors in essay writing in regards to the omission of the copula be; and to analyze the learner's production of data to see the relationship between omission of the copula be in English essay writing and their native language grammar. The results showed that learners produced sentences that seem to have interference from their L1. They directly translated English sentences according to the syntactic structure in their L1. This agrees with Selinker (1979) and Dulay et al (1982) that when learners fail to understand the syntactic structure of L2, they resort to L1 in order to produce sentences in L2.

Keywords: language interference, Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, Error Analysis Hypothesis

1.1   Introduction

Language learning is actually a process of trial and error, in which a learner forms a hypothesis; do mistakes to prove it, and make corrections to adjust it. In acquiring the second language, learners might encounter several difficulties. One of them is in regard to the acquisition of grammar in the target language. The strong version of Contrastive Analysis states that the differences between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) structures will cause the negative transfer. However, this statement is predictive in nature and it is not necessarily true. The learners' deviations from the target language norms should not be regarded as undesirable errors or mistakes. Nevertheless, they are inevitable and a necessary part of the learning process. The Error Analysis (EA)

study, therefore, is to examine a learner's errors in a longitudinal way in order to state the individual learner's errors. Through Contrastive Analysis (CA), we can predict possible sources of errors made by Malay ESL learners, and by analyzing these errors; teachers and lecturers can gain some insights into future course design or types of remedial instruction.

In regard to the issue of second language acquisition in Malaysia, there have been studies that focus on structural differences between Malay and English language. It has been shown that the structural differences between the two languages interfere the learning process of English grammar and hence the acquisition of English as a second language. One of the studies available is a research done by Marlyna, Khazriyati & Tan Kim Hua (2005) where they observed the occurrence of mistakes in 'subject-verb agreement' (SVA) and copula 'be'.

Some of the problematic grammatical categories are affixes, adverbs, adjectives, plural forms, copula, and subject-verb agreement. It is apparent that the attributing factor is the different grammatical structures between Malay and English (Nor Hashimah, Norsimah & Kesumawati, 2008). In this study, English and Malay structures will be compared to ascertain whether structural differences between the two languages lead to poor command in English language.

Apart from morphology, the other main constraint of English acquisition among Malaysian students is the differences of syntactical structures between the Malay and English language (Nor Hasimah et al., 2008). Syntax is one of the main areas of linguistics in which sentence structures and patterns are analyzed. Although Malay and English share the same basic structure, that is 'subject-verb-object' (SVO), there are numerous other differences between the two languages such as the usage of copula 'be', subject-verb agreement, articles, determiner and relative pronouns. Therefore, in this study, the focus will be on the structural and the syntactical differences that lead to the omission of the copula be.

1.2 Literature Review

1.2.1 Copula in English

The word 'copula' originates from Latin which means a 'link or tie' that connects two different things in linguistics; a copula is a word that is used to link the subject of a sentence with a predicate (a subject complement or an adverbial). Though it might not itself express any action or condition, in the English grammatical system, the form of copula 'be' is crucial in a sentence to connect the subject of a sentence with a predicate. There are three forms of copula 'be' for present tense namely 'am', 'is' for the third person singular subjects and 'are' for plural ones as well as 'you'. As for the past tense form 'was' is used for singular subjects (I, he, she, it) while 'were' is for plural subjects (you, we, they) including 'you' in the form of second person singular (Nor Hashimah, Norsimah, Kesumawati, 2008).

1.2.2 The Copula in Malay Language

According to Nik Safiah et.al (1997), there are two forms of copula in Malay language; *ialah* and *adalah*, which is similar in use to the English copula. They are commonly referred as *kata pemeri* (Nik Safiah, 1995). The usage of the copulas *adalah* and *ialah* are interchangeable (Sneddon 1996: 237). However there still exist some differences regarding their co-occurrence constraints and types of copula functions. First, *adalah* tends to link verbal predicates while *ialah* tends to link nominal predicates:

(1) Semua keterangan saya **adalah** benar.

    'All of my opinions are correct.'

(2) Kereta merah itu **ialah** kereta saya.

    'That red car is my car.'

In Malay language, such a nominal or verbal contrast in the co-occurrence constraints is similar to that of the negator pair *bukan* / *tidak*. This suggests a likely distinction between *ialah* and *adalah* in their affinity with either nouns or verbs. Though both copulas have the same meaning, they are used differently. Besides that, *adalah* has a unique sense of 'in fact' when it appears sentence-initially, which for its function of introducing new information can be considered a predicational type copula (Akmajian 1979, cited in Dikken 2005):

(3) **Adalah** dipercayai dadah itu dibawa masuk dari negara jiran.

    'In fact, it is believed that the drug was smuggled from neighboring

    countries.'

As for *ialah*, it is the only copula allowed to go with a cleft sentence, which is typical of a specificational copular use (ibid.):

(4) Yang tinggal di Taman Bahagia **ialah** Lee dan Asmah.

(5) *Yang tinggal di Taman Bahagia **adalah** Lee dan Asmah.

    'The ones who live in Taman Bahagia are Lee and Asmah.'

This functional difference between *adalah* and *ialah* can be explained in etymology. *Adalah* is composed of the existential *ada* and the particle -*lah* while *ialah* is composed of the pronoun *ia* and -*lah* (Yap 2007:19). The existential *ada*, for its function to introduce new information, echoes the predicational use of *adalah*, and the pronoun *ia*, for its presupposed antecedent, attunes with the specificational use of *ialah* to clarify given information (Wei-Hsien He, 2011).

In addition, the copulas *ialah* and *adalah* in Malay are similar to the English copula on one condition. It is where the use of *ialah* is to show equivalence. *Ialah* is used in equative sentences when both subjects and predicate have the same meaning (Marlyna, Tan Kim Hua, Khazriyati, 2007):

(6) Protein utama yang terdapat dalam gandum **ialah** gluten.

'The main protein found in wheat is gluten.'

As for the use of *adalah*, it is used when the predicates describe or qualify the subjects as in the sentences patterns NP+AP and NP+PP:

(7) Taklimat tentang projek perladangan itu **adalah** terlalu pendek.

'The briefing on the estate project is too brief.'

However, other than the situations stated above, the copula 'be' is most of the time not essential in Malay (Nik Safiah, 1995). Many second language learners of Malay tend to use them as equivalents and therefore commit errors when they write sentences in Malay. This confusion appears to have been caused by the generalization of the manner in which copula 'be' in English and *kata pemeri* in Malay are used (Marlyna, Tan Kim Hua, Khazriyati, 2007).

1.2.3 Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis

Contrastive Analysis (CA) is originally developed by Charles C. Fries (1945) and expanded and clarified by Robert Lado (1957), systematically compares the similarities and differences between native languages and the target languages systems and predicts the difficulties that learners might encounter when learning a new language. The strong version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis stated that learning difficulty was the result of interference from old habits in the learning of new habits. This also suggests that the greater the differences between the two languages are, the greater the difficulty and more errors will be made.

CA is a popular method of analyzing the structure of any two languages with a view to estimate the differential aspects of their systems, regardless of their level of development. CA emphasizes the influence of the mother tongue in learning a second language at phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. An examination of the differences between the first and the second language helps to predict the possible errors that could be made by L2 learners.

Learning a second language is facilitated whenever there are similarities between that language and the native tongue. Nickle (1971) states that interference may occur when there are marked contrasts between the mother tongue and second language.

On the other hand, Error Analysis (EA) is the other part of second language pedagogy. EA was established in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and colleagues. EA was an alternative to CA, an approach influenced by behaviorism through which applied linguists sought to use the differences between the learners' native and target languages to predict errors. EA indicated that CA was unable to predict a great majority of errors (Corder, 1967). EA is closely related to the study of error treatment in language learning and teaching. Today, the study of errors is important in teaching methodology (Corder, 1967). According to Weireesh (1991), EA was an important aid in learning process. The making of errors was used as a device to identify and explain difficulties faced by learners. Candling (2001) added that errors made by second language learners are

potentially important for the understanding of the processes of SLA (as cited in Darus & Subramaniam, 2009).

1.2.4 Language Interference

Research on native language interference on target language has been conducted extensively. According to Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982), interference is an automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language onto the surface of the target language, while Lott (1983) defines interference as 'errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue'.

However, Ellis's (1997) definition on interference is a bit different where he refers this as 'transfer' – 'the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2. He also adds that transfer is governed by learners' perceptions about what is transferable and by their stage of development in L2 learning. Skiba (1997) regards interference as the transfer of elements of one language into the learning of another. Elements may include phonological, grammatical, lexical, and orthographical. In learning a target language, (Selinker, 1971, Seligar, 1988 and Ellis, 1997) state that learners construct their own interim rules with the use of their L1 knowledge, but only when they believe it will help them in the learning task or when they have become sufficiently proficient in the L2 for transfer to be possible.

An important distinction between errors and mistakes has been made by Ellis (1997) where he says that errors reflect gaps in the learner's knowledge. These occur because the learner does not know what is correct. On the other hand, mistakes occur because the learner is unable to perform what he or she knows in a particular instance, and this reflects occasional lapses in performance.

Norrish (1983) classifies causes of error into three types that are carelessness, first language interference, and translation. He argues that carelessness is often closely related to lack of motivation. Many teachers will admit that it is not always the student's fault if he loses interest, perhaps the materials and/or style of presentation do not suit him. Norrish also states that learning a language; whether it is a mother tongue or a foreign language is a matter of habit formation. When someone tries to learn new habits the old ones will interfere the new ones and this cause of error is called first language interference. Translation happens when a student translates his first language sentence or idiomatic expression into the target language word by word and this is probably the most common cause of error.

Gass and Selinker (1994), state that a mistake can be self-corrected, but an error cannot. Errors are systematic; they are likely to occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learner. Thus, the learner would not be able to locate them but the teacher or researcher.

According to Beardsmore (1982), many of the difficulties a second language learner has with the phonology, vocabulary and grammar of L2 have to do with the interference of habits from L1; and this actually support Dulay's view

on interference. The formal elements of L1 are used within the context of L2, thus resulting in errors in L2, as the structures of the two languages are different.

1.3   Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study are:
1) to identify the students' errors in essay writing in regards to the omission of the copula be.
2) to analyze the learner's production of data to see the relationship between omission of the copula be in English essay writing and their native language grammar.

1.4   Research Questions

The following research questions are addressed in this study.
1) To what extent do the students tend to omit the copula be in their essay writing task?
2) To what extent does the omission of copula be in the students' essays are due to the interference of their native language grammar?

1.5   Theoretical framework

This study will apply the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis together with the Error Analysis Hypothesis as a method of explaining why some features of a Target Language were more difficult to acquire than others. The theoretical foundations for what became known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis were formulated in Lado's Linguistics Across Cultures (1957). In this book, Lado claimed that "those elements which are similar to the learner's native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult". While this was not a novel suggestion, Lado was the first to provide a comprehensive theoretical treatment and to suggest a systematic set of technical procedures for the contrastive study of languages. This involved describing the languages (using structuralist linguistics), comparing them and predicting learning difficulties.

Error analysis in SLA was established in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and colleagues. Error analysis was an alternative to contrastive analysis, an approach influenced by behaviorism through which applied linguists sought to use the formal distinctions between the learners' first and second languages to predict errors. Error analysis showed that contrastive analysis was unable to predict a great majority of errors, although its more valuable aspects have been incorporated into the study of language transfer. A key finding of error analysis has been that many learner errors are produced by learners making faulty inferences about the rules of the new language.

1.6   Significance of the study

The results of this study could be useful to teachers and lecturers to identify the errors made by students in English essay writing specifically the copula be omission in acquiring their second language (English), so that they can develop a method to overcome this problem in their teaching. It is also hoped that the findings of this study would offer English Language teachers better

insights on effective teaching strategies in helping their students to master English grammar.

1.7   Scope of the study

This study focused on ten undergraduates from Selangor International Islamic University College SIIUC who enrolled in English Preparatory I course whose first language is Malay. This course is compulsory for students in SIIUC in order for them to graduate. The participants are in semester one of their study, ranging from various programmes. The students were selected from the intermediate proficiency group to facilitate the collection of analyzable essays of a certain level. The rationale for choosing semester one students is because at this stage, the students would have been acquired substantial grammatical items to write essays, which is pertinent as the source of data for this research. Intermediate proficiency means the score of B to C in their Form Five National Examination (SPM).

Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other undergraduates at other levels or areas because the participants are selected from SIIUC in Bandar Seri Putra, Selangor. The findings may not be applied to undergraduates from other educational background or areas, for examples, primary schools or to ESL undergraduates in rural areas.

1.8   Research Instruments

Instruments that have been used in this research are in the form of instruction for the essay writing and the tool used in analyzing the essays. In collecting the data from the participants, the first instrument is the instruction given by the researchers in which they were asked to write essays. The second instrument used in this research was based on Norrish's approach of Error Analysis (Norrish, 1992). It was used to identify the errors made by the students particularly in the criterion of the omission of the copula be.

1.9   Research Procedures

The participants were asked to write an essay in one hour according to the topic given by the researchers. The length of the essay ranged from 200 to 300 words. They were not allowed to bring dictionary or other language aid tool as this will affect the data. They were also placed according to the examination sitting arrangement; they cannot communicate to each other, and they cannot ask the researchers for help. The essays were then collected according to time given regardless they finish the essay or not.

2.0   Result and Discussion

In answering the two research questions proposed in this study, we have identified some of the sentences in regard to the omission of the copula based on the essay of the participants. In this section the researchers will analyze those sentences along with the explanation on causes of errors done.

Research questions:

1) To what extent do the students tend to omit the copula be in their essay writing task?
2) To what extent does the omission of copula be in the students' essays are due to the interference of their native language grammar?

The following are the sentences made by the learners that have been identified by the researchers lacking in a way that they omit the use of copula be. Since this study is focusing on the omission of copula be, the other errors made by the participants such as word order, the omission of article, and so on will not be corrected and will not be emphasized in this research.

The first part of the data analysis will focus on the omission of verb to be which are am, is, are, and was.

- My family is the local family that same as the other family.
  (My family is the local family that **is** same as the other family)
- He also a good motivaters…
  (He **is** also a good motivaters…)
- My other sister that sixth in siblings, is a…
  (My other sister that **is** sixth in siblings, is a…)
- First my brother, second my sister, and me the youngers.
  (First **is** my brother, second **is** my sister, and me **is** the youngers)
- The effect of the accident, her right hand…
  (The effect of the accident **was**, her right hand…)
- My secondary school at Sekolah Menengah Agama Ihsan….
  (My secondary school **was** at Sekolah Menengah Agama Ihsan….)
- His age looks old but my father's look still young.
  (His age looks old but my father's look **is** still young)
- So nice and cute.
  (*It* **is** so nice and cute)
- He also very close to me.
  (He **is** also very close to me)
- I hope my family always with me…
  (I hope my family **is** always with me…)
- Her school at Sekolah Menengah…
  (Her school **is** at Sekolah Menengah…)
- Their __ fourteen and thirteen years old.
  (*They* **are** fourteen and thirteen years old)
- When I happy and sad, they always be there.
  (When I **am** happy and sad, they always be there)
- That why I love my family.
  (That **is** why I love my family)
- …no metter when we sad, we need to make…
  (…no metter when we **are** sad, we need to make…)
- So sad.
  (*It* **is** so sad)
- He not marriage again.
  He **is** not marriage again (*yet*).
- …and last my younger brother, his name is…
  (…and last **is** my younger brother, his name is…)

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- My hope, I will change my family life…
  (My hope **is**, I will change my family life…)

In these sentences, the copula be is missing because the translation of these sentences in Malay are grammatically correct. This might due to the direct translation of their mother tongue or transfer of the L1 grammar. According to the Malay language, the occasion of *ialah* or *adalah* is essential in some cases. Therefore, these sentences give the evidence that the learners tend to transfer their knowledge in L1 grammar into the second language sentences.

The second part of the data analysis will focus on the omission of auxiliary verb which are is, am, are + -ing.

- …now I continue my studies at Kolej…
  (…now I **am** continu*ing* my studies at Kolej…)
- …she studying at Kolej…
  (…she **is** studying at Kolej…)
- He studying at IKIP Collage at Kuantan.
  (He **is** studying at IKIP Collage at Kuantan)
- He school at Sekolah Menengah…
  (He **is** school*ing* at Sekolah Menengah…)
- Their also studying at the same primary school…
  (*They* **are** also studying at the same primary school…)
- She still studies at Sekolah Menengah…
  (She **is** still stud*ying* at Sekolah Menengah…)
- My father __ only hoped to me.
  (My father **is** only hop<u>ing</u> *on* me)
- She study in SMKA Limauan…
  (She **is** study*ing* in SMKA Limauan…)
- Study at SK Pekan Bongawan.
  (*He* **is** study*ing* at SK Pekan Bongawan)
- Only me continiue in KUIS.
  (I **am** the only one continu*ing* in KUIS)

For these sentences, learners tend to omit the copula be which is also called the auxiliary 'be' due to the absence of it in the learners L1. The verbs in Malay could only have inflections such as *me…kan, me…i* and so on. While English have the tenses as well as the auxiliary verb that comes with the root verb with –ing. As for the meaning wise, the translation of these sentences in Malay will have the word *sedang* in replace of the omission of the copula be which means in progress where in English, we have the tenses that show progressive with the form of the 'be' verbs + root verb + -ing.

2.1   Conclusion

The major concern of this paper has been with the omission of copula be as the result of interference of L1 on L2 and what its effects are on the syntactic structure of a written task of a second language learner. The learners have produced sentences that seem to have interference from their L1. They directly translated the English sentences according to the syntactic structure in their L1. This is somewhat agree with Selinker (1979), Dulay et al (1982), Blum-Kulka & Levenston (1983), Faerch & Kasper (1983), Bialystok (1990), and Dordick (1996)

that when learners fail to understand the syntactic structure of L2, they resort to L1 for help in order to produce sentences in L2.

The researchers in this study have covered only a few limited aspects; only those concerning the omission of copula be and the extent on the interference of their native language grammar. Thus, the results will only be generalized on those particular aspects and not on those aspects such as the word order or the omission of article. Also, time restraint in this study limits the researcher to cover those aspects and as the result, only these aspects that were concerned by the researcher in order to complete this study.

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