

AN ANALYSIS OF SLIPS OF THE TONGUE AMONG MALAY ESL LEARNERS IN UNIVERSITI ISLAM SELANGOR

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ABSTRACT

Slips of the tongue (SOT) are unintentional speech errors that indicate linguistic challenges faced by second language learners. The aim of this study was to analyse the occurrence of slips of the tongue (SOT) among Malay ESL learners in Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS) which focuses on the frequency, types, and factors that influence the occurrence. A mixed method approach was used, including interviews, observation, and frequency count. The result revealed that 9 of the 17 participants committed SOT with the highest error of addition. Anticipation, reversal, and substitution were fewer common forms. These errors were largely caused by anxiousness, shyness, and overconfidence, which interfere with language and cognitive functions. This study highlighted that there is a need for targeted strategies to reduce slips of the tongue occurrences and improve oral competency among Malay ESL learners benefits for educators and language practitioners.

Keywords: Slips of the tongue (SOT); speech errors; ESL learners;

1. INTRODUCTION

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the process of learning a non-native language, either in formal settings like classrooms or informal settings where the language is spoken. A key challenge in SLA is building vocabulary and linguistic skills (Surmanov & Azimova, 2020), as well as overcoming pronunciation difficulties, especially with unfamiliar sounds (Gilakjani & Ahamdi, 2011). Speech errors, or slips of the tongue (SOT), occur when what is said differs from what is intended, influenced by factors like nervousness, low self-confidence or rapid speech.

Sigmund Freud (1915), slips of the tongue are regular speaking errors that occur as small mistakes. According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is an utterance that you accidentally say when you intended to say something else. These errors are unexpected, yet can be systematically into eight categories: anticipation, perseveration, shift, reversal, blend, substitution, addition and deletion.

SOTs are common in language production and can occur at various levels (phonetic, syntactic, etc.). Factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence contribute to these errors. Educators can help reduce these errors by fostering a supportive environment that boosts learners' confidence.

This study explored the occurrence of SOTs among Malay ESL learners, focusing on the types and contributing factors. The study's objectives were to investigate the frequency and types of SOTs, and identify factors influencing their occurrence. Research questions include: 1) To what extent do Malay ESL learners commit SOTs?, 2) What types of SOTs occur?, and 3) What are the factors that influence SOTs?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to help ESL learners improve their language skills and communication. It also offers insights for educators to refine teaching methods. The study focused on tertiary-level students at Universiti Islam Selangor, specifically those enrolled in the Diploma in English Language Studies (DELS) and Bachelor of English (Hons) with Corporate Communication (BECC) programs.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods, to explore slips of the tongue (SOT) occurrences among Malay ESL learners. Interviews and observations provided in-depth data on the patterns and causes of SOTs, offering insights for improving ESL teaching and understanding language acquisition.

2.1 Research Design

The study integrated both qualitative (interviews and observations) and quantitative (frequency count) methods. Interviews allowed for flexible questioning and deeper exploration, while field notes captured non-verbal cues. Frequency count helped determine the extent of SOT occurrences. Triangulation of data enhanced validity and reliability, providing a comprehensive understanding of the issue.

2.2 Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select 17 ESL students (11 BECC and 6 DELS) from Universiti Islam Selangor, who were intermediate to high-level English learners. Participants were chosen based on their relevance to the study and their consent.

2.3 Research Instruments

The study used interviews (prepared and unprepared speeches) and observations to gather data on SOT occurrences. Interviews were recorded, and field notes were taken during the observations to identify factors contributing to SOTs. Frequency count was used to analyze the occurrence of slips.

Prepared speech refers to spoken language that is planned, structured, and rehearsed before delivery. In research interviews, this typically involves participants who are informed in advance about the questions or topics, allowing them to organize their thoughts and choose their words carefully. As a result, their speech tends to be more fluent and coherent, with fewer language errors or slips of the tongue (SOTs). Prepared speech offers insights into a speaker's language abilities under ideal or controlled conditions, which is useful when comparing language performance across different contexts or speakers.

Unprepared speech, on the other hand, is spontaneous and unrehearsed. Participants are prompted to respond without prior notice, often in a conversational or impromptu setting. This type of speech reflects natural, real-time language processing, where speakers may struggle with finding the right word, sentence structure, or pronunciation. As such, unprepared speech tends to produce more slips of the tongue, making it a valuable source of data when examining the cognitive and linguistic factors that affect real-time communication. Comparing prepared and unprepared speeches allows researchers to assess how planning and spontaneity influence the frequency and nature of SOTs.

2.4 Research Procedure

Before the interview sessions began, all participants were asked to sign consent forms. This was to ensure they agreed to take part willingly and understood how the data would be used. The interviews were held in a quiet room to avoid noise or interruptions, helping participants focus better during the session. Each interview lasted between 5 to 20 minutes, depending on how much the participant shared. Once the interview was over, participants were given small gifts or tokens of appreciation as a thank-you for their time and cooperation.

After conducting the interviews, the recordings were carefully transcribed — meaning every word spoken was written down. Then, the data was coded, which means the researcher organized and labeled different parts of the conversation to find patterns. The main goal was to spot and count the number of slips of the tongue (SOTs) that occurred. This analysis helped the researcher understand how often these slips happened and what types were most common during the interviews.

2.5 Data Analysis Method

This study adopted a mixed method design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a deeper understanding of the issue, as recommended by Creswell (2014). Text analysis was used to identify and categorise slips of the tongue (SOT) from interview data, which were coded based on Fromkin's (1973) eight SOT types. A frequency count was then conducted to determine how often each type occurred and which participants made them. In addition, field notes were analysed for non-verbal cues that might explain the occurrence of slips. This approach aligns with the qualitative focus on understanding patterns in human behaviour, as highlighted by Merriam and Tisdell (2015).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Frequency of Slips of the Tongue

The first research question explored the extent to which Malay ESL learners committed slips of the tongue (SOTs). The results show that most participants made at least one slip, with a total of 24 SOT occurrences recorded. As shown in the data, participant R3 had the highest frequency, contributing 40% of the total slips, followed by R2, R8, R11, R13, and R17 with 30% collectively. Others, like R1, R5, R9, and R12, recorded only one slip, while R15 made two. Several participants (R6, R7, R10, R14, and R16) did not commit any SOTs. These differences may be influenced by factors such as nervousness or varying levels of language proficiency, as learners with stronger English skills tend to make fewer errors (Fromkin, 1973).

Table 1: Frequency of Slips of the Tongue

Respondent	Frequency	Percentage (%)
R1	1	10
R2	3	30
R3	4	40
R4	0	0
R5	1	10
R6	0	0
R7	0	0
R8	3	30
R9	1	10

Respondent	Frequency	Percentage (%)
R10	0	0
R11	3	30
R12	1	10
R13	3	30
R14	0	0
R15	2	20
R16	0	0
R17	3	30
Total	24	100%

3.2 Types of Slips of the Tongue

The second research question focused on identifying the types of slips of the tongue (SOTs) in participants' speech during interviews. Out of the eight types identified by Fromkin (1973), five were observed: **addition**, **deletion**, **anticipation**, **reversal**, and **substitution**. As shown in Table 4.2, **addition** was the most frequent, followed by **deletion**, while the other three appeared less often. To illustrate these findings, examples of each SOT type are provided in Table 2.

As shown in Table 3, addition and deletion were the most frequent types of slips of the tongue (SOTs) made by participants. Many added unnecessary sounds or words, such as R2 saying "everythings" instead of "everything," reflecting an overgeneralisation of plural forms. This is similar to findings by Matiini (2016), who observed students saying "peoples" instead of "people," likely influenced by differences in Malay and English grammar—Malay uses repetition (e.g., *buku-buku*) to indicate plurals rather than adding an 's'. R8 also added redundant words, such as "more better," which distorted the intended meaning. Deletion errors, like R9 saying "semester reak" instead of "break," occurred when participants left out key sounds, often due to rushing or nervousness. Less frequent were anticipation errors (e.g., "family friendly"), reversals (e.g., "accodomate" for "accommodate"), and substitutions (e.g., "quite place" for "quiet place"), all of which suggest momentary confusion in pronunciation or word choice. Perseveration and misderivation errors were not found in this study, possibly because they occur less often in casual or semi-structured speech among ESL learners.

Table 2: Types of Slips of the Tongue

Respondent/ Type	R 1	R 2	R 3	R 4	R 5	R 6	R 7	R 8	R 9	R1 0	R1 1	R1 2	R1 3	R1 4	R1 5	R1 6	R1 7
Anticipation	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Perseveration	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shift/ Misderivation	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Reversal	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Blend	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Substitution	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Addition	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	2	0	1	0	2
Deletion	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Total	1	3	4	0	1	0	0	3	1	0	2	1	3	0	2	0	3

Table 3: Example of Types of Slips of the Tongue

Respondent	Examples	Types
R1	'...one specident specialist student like is like I used to take care of'	Blend
R2	'...from TikTok that he use a timer...' 'I keep it simple and moderate umm to accodomate ...' 'he use a timer for everythings that he...'	Deletion Reversal Addition
R3	'...because I have sibling they works...' '...housewife so many thing that she...' '...school and my fathers still work...'	Deletion Deletion Addition
R5	'I am a family friendly person'	Anticipation
R8	'I set a goals like what I want...' '...and if I cannonot achieve today...' '...keep like more better and <i>then other of that</i> aaa I keep productive is to keep I always...' '...get together with my friends and umm like my classmate '	Addition Addition Addition Deletion
R9	'During the semester reak ...'	Deletion
R11	'...and my matrics number...' '...keep productive as a students so first...'	Addition Addition
R12	'I think the last one as a students make sure...'	Addition
R13	'I was very young my parents divorce so...' '...and the follow the two youngers sisters...' 'in my opinion everyone deserve to be happy...'	Addition Addition Deletion
R15	'For mysif ...' '...Nervous actually it mixeds feelings ...' '...he must be tired because he follow my instructions'	Deletion Addition Deletion
R17	'...and quite place where...' 'I am a single students so I have no problems with...' 'They are good students also they helps me a lot a lot of things...'	Substitution Addition Addition

3.3 Factors Influencing Slips of the Tongue

The findings show clear differences in how participants responded during prepared and unprepared speeches. In the prepared sessions, most participants appeared confident and spoke fluently, likely because they received the questions three days earlier and had time to prepare. In contrast, during the unprepared speech, many were nervous and hesitant, struggling to organize their thoughts on the spot. Some spoke too quickly or unclearly, leading to more slips of the tongue. Similar studies in Siregar (2023) and Detrianto (2017) found that these factors often lead participants to experience social pressure, which may impact their language performance. Overall, errors were more common in unprepared speech due to anxiety and lack of preparation, while prepared speech had fewer mistakes. Some factors that contribute to the occurrence of slips of the tongue are lack of confidence, nervousness, shyness, lack of vocabulary, and limited exposure to speaking the language (Wahyuningshi & Afandi, 2020). These errors were also influenced by the participants' native language, Malay, which differs from English in sound, grammar, and sentence structure.

Table 4: Factors that Influence the Occurrences of Slips of the Tongue

Respondent	Interview Sessions	
	Prepared Speech	Unprepared Speech
R1	Ready	Nervous
R2	Speak fast	Hesitate
R3	Ready, Shy	Nervous
R4	Ready, Confident	Able to answer confidently
R5	Calm	Nervous
R6	Nervous, Shy	Nervous
R7	Calm, Ready	Able to answer confidently
R8	Speak fast, Nervous	Hesitate
R9	Nervous	Nervous, Shy
R10	Ready	Able to answer confidently
R11	Ready, Speak fast	Able to answer confidently
R12	Speak fast, Not speak clearly	Hesitate
R13	Nervous	Speak fast
R14	Ready	Able to answer confidently
R15	Nervous, Shy	Hesitate
R16	Ready	Able to answer confidently
R17	Nervous, Shy	Nervous, Not ready

4. CONCLUSION

This study examined slips of the tongue (SOT) among Malay ESL learners at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS). Most participants made SOTs during unprepared speeches in interviews, influenced by factors like nervousness, hesitation, and rapid speech. A few participants did not commit any SOTs, likely due to their calm and confident behavior. The most common SOTs were addition (e.g., “and my fathers still work...”) and deletion (e.g., “everyone deserve to be happy...”), often due to L1 transfer. Less frequent errors, such as anticipation and reversal, were linked to nervousness and speaking quickly. These findings highlight the impact of external factors like anxiety on language performance, suggesting the need for strategies to reduce pressure and improve speech fluency for ESL learners.

The study's limitations include a small sample size, which restricts the depth of findings. Other challenges were scheduling interviews due to participants' busy schedules, reluctance to be video recorded, and technical issues with audio quality, including background noise and unclear voices.

Future research should increase the sample size for better generalizability and use video recordings to improve data accuracy. Analyzing non-verbal cues and participant behavior could provide deeper insights. These improvements would help expand on the current study's findings and contribute to a broader understanding of SOTs in ESL learners.

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