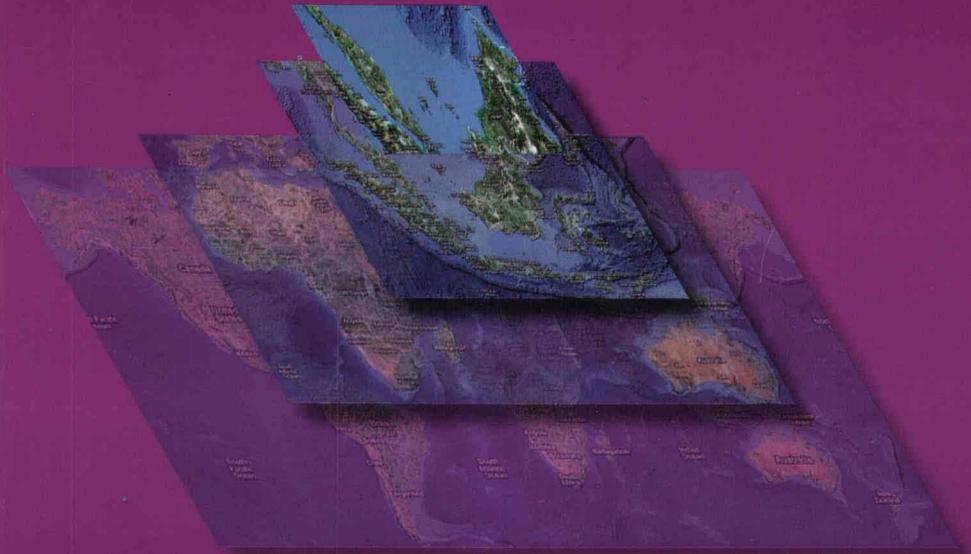


# **EXAMINING CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA: Critical Knowledge From Research**



Volume 2    Jilid 2

RESEARCH KNOWLEDGE & INTELLECT APPLICATION SERIES  
SIRI ILMU PENYELIDIKAN & APLIKASI INTELEK

UfoRIA



UiTM

**EXAMINING CONTEMPORARY  
MALAYSIA:  
Critical Knowledge From Research**

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Critical Knowledge From Research**

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# Foreword

This UfoRIA Research Knowledge and Intellect Application series has been evaluated and edited by a panel of expert and professional reviewers from within and outside the UiTM system. Most of the articles/papers in this special series has been presented at the 'Kontemporari' seminar series both at the state and national levels. A few articles/papers have even been presented and shared at regional and international seminar and conferences.

The articles/papers selected for this second volume discusses contemporary and also critical issues that need to be carefully examined and further researched by the academic community in Malaysia. This cycle of research effort and knowledge dissemination is a never-ending journey as we strive to make knowledge and learning more that just academic culture.

It is hoped that this Research Knowledge and Intellect Application series would continue the knowledge acculturation initiative that was started in 2002 when UfoRIA was born. This is the second out of two books, one in Malay and this particular volume in English, edited and published by the Unit for Research and Intellect Application (UfoRIA) with the support of the Campus Director of UiTM Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia.

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# Interlingual errors in writing: a limited case study at a Malaysian university

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## ABSTRACT

Although there are some similarities in the syntactic structures of Malay and English, there are a lot more differences than there are similarities between the two languages. Therefore, it is expected that first language interference would be one of the sources of errors in the writings of Malay students who are learning English as a second language. In this study students' writings are analysed to see if there are any patterns which can be generalized as typical Malay students' errors. The major concern of this paper is to determine whether there are observable features of interference of L1 (Malay) on L2 (English) particularly in the syntactic structure of the students' writing samples. This paper aims to discuss the following problems: 1.) the instances where the syntactic structure in L1 is used in L2, causing an error. 2.) the instances where the absence of a similar syntactic structure of L2 in L1, creates a difficulty for a learner in L2. 3.) the instances where a word is chosen based on its meaning in L1 but is out of context in a particular L2 sentence, causing an error. 4.) the instances where a sentence in L1 is directly translated into L2, causing an error.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Malay or Bahasa Melayu is the official language in Malaysia. It is also the medium of instruction in public schools as well as government agencies. English language on the other hand is the second language albeit only politically. In reality it functions as a second language only in certain parts of the society. Although it is used widely in business sectors especially the service industries, Malaysians in general and Malays in particular can go about their daily routine successfully without having to utter a single word of English. Due to this

reason Malay students lack the intrinsic motivation in learning English or any other languages for the matter. Despite having learnt the language for at least eleven years by the time they leave secondary school, a large number of Malay school leavers are still not proficient in English.

In addition to the above situation, Malay students in UiTM face problems in learning English primarily because they lack exposure to the language. There is no incidental (inductive) learning and even if they have learnt the grammar rules deductively in school they may not be able to apply what they have learnt in their writing or speaking due to this reason. It has been noted generally that these students revert to the rules of their mother tongue whenever there is a gap in their knowledge of English.

Although there are some similarities in the syntactic structures of Malay and English, there are a lot more differences than there are similarities between the two languages. Thus, it is expected that first language interference would be one of the sources of errors in the writings of Malay students who are learning English as a second language. The extent of the interference however, is not yet fully understood and it is the objective of this study to investigate the instances of the interference in the writings of a group of Malay students who are learning English as a second language.

This case study is conducted because it is felt that by understanding the common errors done by the students the lecturers would be more able to correct and explain the errors to them. The areas that may cause confusion can also be highlighted earlier so that the students would be more aware of these and can consciously avoid making such errors. If the students' errors are caused by L1 (Malay) interference there should be some patterns in the errors done by UiTM students since the majority of them are Malays. In this study students' writings are analysed to see if there are any patterns which can be generalized as typical Malay students' errors. The major concern of this paper is to determine whether there are observable features of interference of L1 (Malay) on L2 (English) particularly in the syntactic structures. This paper aims to discuss the following problems: 1.) the instances where the syntactic structure in L1 is used in L2, causing an error. 2.) the instances where the absence of a similar syntactic structure of L2 in L1, creates a difficulty for a learner in L2. 3.) the instances where a word is chosen based on its meaning in L1 but is out of

context in a particular L2 sentence, causing an error. 4.) the instances where a sentence in L1 is directly translated into L2, causing an error.

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive research has been done in the area of first language (L1) interference on the target language (L2) dated back to the 1980's. Dulay (et.al.1982) define 'interference' as 'automatic transfer', due to habit, the structure of L1 onto the structure of L2. Another definition is by Lott (1983:256) who considers 'interference' as 'errors' in the use of L2 which can be traced back to L1.

Ellis (2000) like Dulay also refers to 'interference' as 'transfer' which he argues is controlled by learners' perception of what can be transferred and by their stage of development in their L2 learning. He adds that learners construct their own rules with the use of L1 knowledge. However, he stresses that this will only happen once the learners reach a certain level of proficiency and when they feel that it will help them in their L2 learning activities.

According to Chomsky as cited in Freeman (1994) in order for L2 learners to function in a new language they need both grammatical and communicative competence. Grammatical competence includes knowledge of syntax (sequence), phonology (pronouncing and understanding words) and semantics (deriving meaning from what other people say). However, communicative competence is the ability to actually apply the rules into performance in terms of speech or writing. Theoretically the learners, over a period of time would steadily accumulate knowledge of L2 and organize this knowledge into structures that are coherent so that effective communication in L2 can take place (Rutherford, 1987). In reality the learners often appear to accumulate the rules of L2 but fail or have difficulty in constructing coherent structures. When writing or speaking, L2 learners tend to rely on their L1 structure to produce a response.

In order to analyze learner language it is important to make a distinction between errors and mistakes. Brown (2000) distinguishes between 'errors' and 'mistakes'. He explains that 'errors' are the deviations from the adult grammar of the native speaker which reflect the competence of the learners. 'Errors'

cannot be self-corrected. 'Mistakes' however, refers to performance errors or slips in performance due to the inability of the learners to practise what they know. Mistakes can be self-corrected when the speaker realizes it or once they are pointed out to him.

When analyzing the errors made by second language learners it is also necessary to understand how the learner cognitively relates to his or her existing linguistic system and the process of second language acquisition (Brown, 2000). In the early stages of learning a second language the learner relies heavily on his or her first language. The first language or the native language is the only linguistic system which the learner can draw on. This process is referred to as interlingual transfer or as interference of one's native language to another language learned (Brown, 2000). However, once learners have begun to acquire parts of the new system in the language learned, and as they progress in the second language, intralingual transfer exists (Brown, 2000). Their previous experience and their existing knowledge begin to include structures within the target language itself.

Recent studies on first language interference were conducted by Bhela (1999), Bada (2001) and Williams (2001). Bada and Williams focused on interference on speech production of English sounds by native speakers of Japanese and Spanish respectively. They discovered that transfer occurs more frequently in phonological utterances than in other domain and a speaker who has attained absolute command of the L2 syntax and semantics may still fail in attaining the same skill in phonology. However, it is felt that as long as pronunciation problems do not interfere with intelligibility it should not cause a great concern.

On the other hand the case study conducted by Bhela (1999) focused on interference of L1 on syntactic structures of the second language. His study was conducted on native speakers of four languages namely Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian and Italian who were learning English as a second language. He concluded that the learners attempted to use invented or borrowed items which are more or less similar to the rules of L2 structure as far as their knowledge of L2 allows.

This case study, similar to Bhela (1999) would look at interference of L1 on syntactic structure of L2. The participants are Malay (L1) students who are learning English (L2) as a second language.

### **3.0 SCOPE OF STUDY**

The scope of this paper is limited to the analysis of writing samples of 30 UiTM students who are learning English as a second language, with a focus only on syntactic structures. The results of the analysis are used to make generalization only on specific instances of L1 interference normally found in Malay students' writing.

### **4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study was not an experimental intervention. It was designed to uncover the complexity of language use in a particular sample of language learners' writing. Therefore, it had an explicit descriptive purpose.

#### **4.1 Participants**

30 participants were involved in this study. All of them were second semester students from the Diploma of Estate Management. At the time the study was conducted they were doing level two proficiency English which was a remedial course. They had all gone through level one English when they were in semester one with various degree of achievement.

All 30 participants had sat for their SPM examination in 2003 and their achievement for Malay and English subjects in SPM was noted. This was to see whether their proficiency levels in both languages had any influence in the kind of 'interlingual' errors that they made in their writing. Table 1 provides in more detail the breakdown of the students' performance in their SPM examination.

**Table 1: The participants' results for English and Malay subjects in SPM**

GRADE	FREQUENCY	
	ENGLISH	MALAY
A2 – A1	4	24
C3 – C4	3	5
C5 – C6	13	1
P7 – P8	10	0
TOTAL	30	30

## 4.2 Tasks

The 30 participants were asked to write a short essay of about 150 words in English based on a given topic. They were given one hour to complete the task. After a 15-minute break the participants were asked to write on the same topic but in Malay. They were given the same time limit.

5 out of the 30 participants were chosen for a more detailed study. They were chosen based on their performance in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examination for English and Malay subjects. Their grades for both subjects are illustrated in Table 2. All five participants achieved the same letter grades for both subjects. Each of them was asked to write two short essays on a given topics in both English and Malay.

**Table 2 :The SPM examination results of the five selected students**

CANDIDATE	ENGLISH	MALAY
CANDIDATE A	A2	A1
CANDIDATE B	A1	A1
CANDIDATE C	A2	A2
CANDIDATE D	A2	A2
CANDIDATE E	C5	C5

### 4.3 Analysis Procedure

The analysis of the written texts was done with the help of Malay language experts while the English texts were analyzed by the researchers themselves. Since the focus of this study is only on L1 interference (interlingual) errors, all the errors made by the students were firstly classified into 2 categories; 'interlingual' and 'intralingual'. The interlingual errors were then further analyzed to look for instances where L1 syntactic structures were used in L2 and where the absence of a similar L2 structure in L1 resulted in an error in L2. In addition, the writing samples were also examined for instances where a word is chosen based on its meaning in L1 but is out of context in a particular L2 sentence, causing an error. Finally an analysis was done on the instances where a sentence in L1 is directly translated into L2, causing an error.

### 5.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

It can be observed from the analysis of the participants' writings that all of them made both interlingual and intralingual errors in their writings. Since the focus of this study is only on interlingual errors, this type of errors were further divided into four major categories:

1. Using L1 rules in L2 writing
2. Absence of similar L2 structure in L1 causing difficulty in learning L2
3. Wrong choice of words due to L1 interference
4. Direct translation from L1 into L2

Table 3 shows the number of interlingual errors made by the participants in this study. It can be seen that the majority of the subjects made Type 2 errors. From the 30 participants' writing samples 351 Type 2 errors were found, while the second highest was Type 1 errors which was found 111 times. This was followed by 46 Type 4 errors and the least errors found were the Type 3 errors which were made 26 times.

**Table 3: Frequency of interlingual errors**

Type of errors	Frequency
Type 1 errors – (Using L1 rules in L2 writing)	111
Type 2 errors – (Absence of structure in L1)	351
Type 3 errors – (Wrong choice of words)	26
Type 4 errors - (Direct translation)	46

To illustrate the type of errors made in more detail we decided to select only five out of the 30 students. The selection as mentioned earlier was based on the participants' SPM grades for English and Malay subjects. The five selected participants scored the same letter grades for both English and Malay subjects. (As shown in Table 2). The five participants are referred to as Candidate A, B, C, D and E in this study.

### 5.1 Type 1 Errors

**Table 4: Type 1 errors**

CANDIDATE	Frequency
CANDIDATE A	0
CANDIDATE B	1
CANDIDATE C	3
CANDIDATE D	0
CANDIDATE E	4

Type 1 error is made when an L1 rule is used in L2 structure probably due to a gap in the learner's knowledge. Writing samples of the five candidates revealed that candidate B, C and E made this type of error 1, 3 and 4 times respectively. The following is an example of Type 1 error.

“That incident **was happen** on Thursday...”

Initially when we came across this type of error we assumed that it was an intralingual error. The assumption was that the student had problems in active

and passive voice formation. However, upon further investigation it was revealed that this type of error is made because the student is using Malay (L1) syntactic rules in his English (L2) sentence structure. In Malay there is no conjugation of verbs. Instead, words such as ‘telah’ or ‘sudah’ are used to indicate the past. ‘Be’ verbs are absent in Malay, so naturally Malay students often have problems understanding their usage. When the Malay version of the essay was examined it was found that the student used the word ‘was’ as ‘telah’ which in Malay is used to show the past. In Malay the student wrote:

“Kejadian itu **telah berlaku** pada hari Khamis...”

This type of error was repeated throughout the essay and the pattern is very clear and consistent. He further wrote:

“...the ticket **was finish** to sell.”

The Malay version reads as follows:

“ tiket **telah habis** dijual.”

Obviously the student has not mastered the rules of Past Tense in English and reverted to the Malay rule whenever he has to use it in his writing. Since there is no direct substitute of ‘telah’ in English he solved his problem by ‘borrowing’ the ‘be verb’ ‘was’ and used it as ‘telah’. He failed to conjugate the verbs ‘happen’ and ‘finish’ and this resulted in errors.

## 5.2 Type 2 Errors

*Table 5: Type 2 Errors*

	Tenses	Article	Subject-verb agreement
CANDIDATE A	7	0	2
CANDIDATE B	6	1	0
CANDIDATE C	7	2	0
CANDIDATE D	3	1	2
CANDIDATE E	16	1	1

The absence of certain syntactic features of L2 in L1 causes difficulties to Malay students because they cannot refer to L1 as guidelines. As illustrated in Table 5, Candidate E made the most errors in his writing samples. He made 1 error in article, 1 error in subject-verb agreement and the most errors were in tenses which totaled 16 times. As a whole, candidate E made relatively more errors compared to the others. Candidates A, B, C, and D are relatively more proficient in both languages as they obtained better grades for both Malay and English subjects in SPM thus as expected, did not make a lot of interlingual errors such as in articles. Candidate A made 7 errors in tenses, and 2 in subject-verb agreement. Candidate B made 6 errors in tenses and 1 in articles. There were not many subject-verb agreement errors found in the writing samples because they wrote the essay in the past tense. It would be interesting to see whether the participants would make more errors in subject-verb agreement if they are required to write in present tense. As we examined further, most of these students made these errors because in L1 which is Malay, there are no specific rules on subject-verb agreement, articles, and tenses as in English language. For instance in English there is a grammar component on articles which are 'a', 'an', and 'the'. The rules in using these articles are specific such as words which begin with the vowels sounds 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o', 'u' will begin with the article 'an'. However in Malay articles do not exist. Students obviously face problems in these areas as illustrated in the examples below.

**Examples of Type 2 errors in tenses, article and subject-verb agreement:**

“It **happen** six years ago”, “ I was rather **surprise**”

“ On **the** Sunday evening...” , “ ...if he had **a** free time.”

“These **incident** happened...” , “ It **teach** us to be independent.” , “One of the **benefit**...”

### 5.3 Type 3 Errors

*Table 6: Type 3 errors*

CANDIDATE	Frequency
CANDIDATE A	1
CANDIDATE B	0
CANDIDATE C	2
CANDIDATE D	0
CANDIDATE E	2

Type 3 error is an error made because a word is chosen based on its meaning in L1 but is out of context in the L2 sentence. In theory as one's vocabulary increases he would be less likely to make Type 3 error. The following is an example of Type 3 error which was found in one of the samples.

“...working part-time can **avoid** a student from wasting time doing useless activity.”

The word ‘avoid’ was chosen because of its meaning in Malay which is ‘mengelakkan’ but in the above sentence it is out of context. The word he should be using instead is ‘prevent’. In Malay the student wrote:

“...bekerja separuh masa boleh **mengelakkan** seseorang pelajar dari membuang masa membuat aktiviti yang tidak berfaedah.”

Another example of Type 3 error is as follows:

“... we already have money that we **find** on our own.”

The word ‘find’ was chosen because in Malay it means ‘cari’. The word he was looking for is ‘earn’ which in Malay the meaning is also ‘cari’. In Malay he wrote:

“... kita sudah mempunyai duit yang **dicari** sendiri.”

## 5.4 Type 4 Errors

*Table 7: Type 4 errors*

CANDIDATE	Frequency
CANDIDATE A	1
CANDIDATE B	1
CANDIDATE C	1
CANDIDATE D	1
CANDIDATE E	1

Type 4 error is made when a sentence in L1 is directly translated to a sentence in L2.

Each of the five candidates were found to make this type of error in their writing samples. Some of the errors are illustrated below:

*Malay Version* : “ Saya **malu dengan** ibu dan bapa saya.”

English Translation: “ **I shame with** my parents.”

*Malay Version* : “ Sekarang **beliau di rumah sakit**, saya rasa sangat sedih.”

English Translation: “ Now **he at hospital**, I felt very sad.”

*Malay Version* : “ Saya tidak tahu **apa nama penyakit** yang dia ada.”

English Translation: “I did not know **what the name of the sickness** that he had.”

*Malay Version* : “ **Di sana** saya berjumpa dengan rakan-rakan saya.”

English Translation: “**At there** I met with my friends.”

## 6.0 CONCLUSION

Based on the findings it can be concluded that:

- 1) The instances where the syntactic structure in L1 is used in L2 are more prominent among beginners. It occurred more frequently among students who are less proficient in a second language. These students tend to rely heavily on their L1 syntactic rules due to the gaps in their L2 knowledge. Although our students are not beginners considering the fact that they have gone through twelve years of formal English language lessons in school, this problem is still prominent among them. It is our conclusion that some of the rules have been wrongly understood and these rules have been fossilized making it almost impossible for the students to ‘unlearn’ them.
- 2) The instances where the absence of a similar syntactic structure of L2 in L1 creates a difficulty for a learner in L2 are found more frequently among less proficient students because they tend to revert to L1 for guidance. In the absence of similar features in L1 they resorted to inventing their own rules to solve their syntactic structure problems in L2.
- 3) The instances where a word is chosen based on its meaning in L1 but is out of context in a particular L2 sentence are rampant even among more proficient students due to their limited vocabulary. They have learnt the meaning of words in isolation thus they lack understanding of how to use them in context.
- 4) The instances where a sentence in L1 is directly translated into L2 are found in abundance among the participants who have a lower proficiency level. They construct a sentence in L1 first and literally translated it into L2.

Our study concurred the findings of Bhela (1999) who also discovered that the learners attempted to use ‘invented’ or ‘borrowed’ items which are more or less similar to the rules of L2 structures whenever there is a gap in their knowledge and whenever there are no similar structures of L2 in L1. From our observation, L1 interference is prominent among the students although theoretically as they

progress in their L2 learning they should accumulate syntactic knowledge of L2. After twelve years of formal L2 lessons they should be able to function independently on their L2 syntactic knowledge without relying on L1 rules. In the case of this group of students the majority of them does not seem to progress and their knowledge of L2 seems to be stagnant at beginners' level.

## 6.1 Significance of the study

This study is an eye opener and should be useful especially to language educators at tertiary level. As language educators we need to consider L1 interference seriously to understand our learners' difficulties in grasping the rules of grammar in their L2 learning. We often equate our students' L2 abilities with their age and the length of time they have gone through formal L2 education. In reality due to the prominence of L1 in their everyday lives the instances of interference are frequent and difficult to avoid. This study has proven that L1 interference seems to hamper a learner's progress in L2 learning in the absence of a similar syntactic feature of L2 in L1. However, in the case of transferable features of L1 and L2, would transfer help speed up learning process? English and Malay have some similarities in their syntactic structures and there are some transferable and semi-transferable features that exist between the two languages. Thus, further research can be conducted in the same area to ascertain whether transfer is totally undesirable or in some cases welcomed.

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