INDONESIAN INTERFERENCE IN STUDENTS’ WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This research deals with Indonesian grammatical interference in students’ English writing. This research was designed to investigate: (1) the most common Indonesian grammatical interference found in English writing tasks done by students from 3 senior high schools in Sigli; and (2) the factors that caused these senior high school students in Sigli to have Indonesian grammatical interference. The subjects of this research were 86 first graders and three English teachers from three senior high schools; 29 students from SMAN Unggul Sigli, 27 students from SMAN 1 Sigli, and 30 students from MAN 1 Sigli plus 1 English teacher from each school. The data for this research was collected by using document analysis, a questionnaire, and interviews. The document analysis was in the form of students’ English writing papers about the description of their friends related to their appearance and/or their personality. The results from the document analysis showed that incorrect verb tenses, including subject-verb agreements were the most common Indonesian grammatical interference mistakes made by the students in their English writings – they were around 54% of all the interference mistakes found. Based on the results from the questionnaire and the interviews, it was found that most of the interference errors made by the students were caused by the students having too little practice to improve their English. Besides, the teachers did not provide the students with a good English environment which could help make them more familiar with English.

Key words: Interference, Grammar, Writing, First Language.

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INTRODUCTION

Most Indonesians do not use English as a means of communication. In daily speaking, they use Indonesian to interact with their family, friends and others around them. At schools, for example, teachers and students mostly use Indonesian as their language for communication, even in English teaching-learning processes. In this case, Indonesian is more dominant and strongly used by them in all aspects of life. English is categorized as a foreign language in Indonesia. It fits what Richards, et al. (2010: 224) who have stated that a foreign language is via: a language which is taught as a school subject but is not used as a medium of instruction in schools nor as a language of communication within a country (with notable exceptions).

Although English is not used as dominantly as the Indonesian language in Indonesia, it cannot be denied that the need for English is very important parallel with technological developments around the globe. Therefore, English has become a school subject in Indonesia. The fact that English has been categorized as a foreign language in this country makes the English learning process far from a success (Pudiyono, 2012: 230). The role of the first language is one reason that causes this failure. Ellis (1986: 19) mentions that the learner’s first language strongly influences the learning process of a target language. It cannot be denied that foreign language learners already possess habits and knowledge from their first language before they start to learn the new language. This earlier knowledge will be transferred, consciously or not, to the process of using the foreign language. This kind of transfer can either help learners master the target language or hinder it or do both.

Saville (2006: 19) has written that there are two types of transfer which occur in second or foreign language development, positive transfers and negative transfers. Positive transfers refer to when a first language structure or rule is used with the target language and that use is appropriate or correct. Whereas, a negative transfer is defined when a first language structure or rule is used in the target language and that use is inappropriate and considered an error. In other words, this negative transfer only occurs when the structures between the two languages are different and this is commonly known as first language interference.

In fact, from the School-Based Curriculum (KTSP) or 2006 Curriculum, the third grade (year IX) students at Junior High Schools
are expected to have a good capability to write a short essay. They are expected to learn how to write English accurately, smoothly, and acceptably so that at the end of the learning process, they will be able to produce good writing and be able to interact in a daily life context. Thus, when they get into senior high school, their teachers expect that they will already be well prepared to produce Basic English writing.

However, from preliminary observations at SMAN Unggul Sigli on August 2014, it was found that students still had some difficulties in writing. They made errors due to the influence of the grammatical aspects of their first language. For instance, instead of saying ‘I like reading so much or a lot’, one of them said ‘I very like reading’. He assumed that what he wrote could be inferred from the Indonesian grammar viz: *Saya sangat suka membaca*. With this mind-set, the language products the students produced were not grammatically acceptable; therefore, people found it hard to understand their writing due to the grammatical interference irregularities. From these problems and the theories of interference above, this study is really concerned about the grammatical interference of Indonesian in students’ writing in English.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Writing**

Writing is considered as a skill which functions to support the development of oral language. Unlike speaking, writing works as an archive that can save the words and ideas permanently on paper, stone or in a computer file. Related to this, Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams (2003: 356) have said that writing is a skill that can permanently record what has been spoken. As a result, people can read and reread written ideas as often as they like. Writing is also believed to be the last form of communication that people have to learn comprehensively after speaking. Spoken language, for a child, is acquired naturally as a result of being exposed to it, whereas the ability to write has to be consciously learned. It is indeed what Hammill and Bartell (1975: 107) have said, that writing is the highest as well as the last form of communication to be mastered in which people actually transfer their thoughts, feelings, and ideas to paper.

Unlike speaking, writing helps people to consider more carefully the best words to use to transmit a message. Scoot and Ytreberg (1990: 69) state that writing gives people more opportunity to go back and
think about what they have written. Thus, the message should be clearer and the reader should be able to obtain the information exactly as the writer intended.

Undoubtedly, the need for good ability to write is crucial in peoples’ lives since advances in transportation and technology now allow people from nations and cultures throughout the world to interact with each other. Besides, all students at schools need to make notes about the material given by the teacher especially for those who are learning the language. This is in line with Grant (1987: 94) who has said that many learners who learn a language do not properly learn it until they have written it down. Moreover, Harmer (2004: 3) also adds that most exams that are used to test language abilities or other language skills always rely on the students’ proficiency in writing in order to measure their knowledge. Although writing has been considered as an indispensible skill for the language learner, it never seems an easy skill to be learnt. Nunan (1999: 271) and Brown (2004: 218) agree that writing is the most difficult thing to do with a language even in one’s own native language.

Moreover, Heaton (1989: 135) has stated that to produce a good paragraph or essay, a writer is not only required to possess mastery of grammatical and rhetorical devices but also conceptual and judgmental elements. According to him, there are five general skills that should be possessed by a writer to produce good writing. First, knowledge related to the use of the language is considered as the skill that should be mastered by a writer. It includes the ability to write correct and appropriate sentences i.e. to use appropriate collocations. The second skill is the ability to use the conventions peculiar to the written language that are categorized as mechanical skills, e.g. punctuation. After that, the ability to think creatively and to develop thoughts is the other important skill that will help the writer to produce interesting writing. Stylistic skills which are defined as the ability to manipulate sentences and paragraphs and to use language effectively also need to be developed by a good writer. Last but not least, the ability to write and transmit the ideas appropriately in order to meet a particular purpose with a particular audience in mind, together with an ability to select, organize, and order relevant information is also considered as a crucial skill to be honed by a good writer.
**Grammatical Interference**

Considering the definitions of grammar and of interference, in this present study grammatical interference is defined as errors in English grammar which are caused by negative transfer of structures from the L1, i.e. Bahasa Indonesia, to the target language, English. An analysis of errors in students’ writing is considered as a means for improving students’ accuracy in writing. It also allows the teacher to be more informed and aware about the students’ learning processes.

Shahin (2011: 210) explains that error analysis is important to provide the teacher with information about how the learner is learning the language and how much he is learning. Teachers should stop their students from feeling discouraged in learning writing. Thus error analysis should be done in an effective way so that it can have benefits for the students. This can be done by determining which errors that the teacher needs to analyze and which not.

Bates, et.al (1993) in McMartin-Miller (2014: 25) divides errors into three types. In this case, the researchers of error analysis can note these types for consideration in determining the errors that will be analyzed. The first ones are the errors that cause the proficient speaker of a target language to misinterpret the message conveyed. This is called a *global error*. These global errors include incorrect verb tenses, verbs incorrectly formed, incorrect use or formation of modal verbs, incorrect use or formation of conditional sentences, incorrect sentence structure, incorrect word order, incorrect connectors, incorrect use of the passive voice, and unclear messages. The second type are the errors that are less serious than global errors, but still make the sentence structure appear awkward, which include incorrect subject-verb agreements, incorrect or missing articles, problems with the singular or plural of nouns, wrong word choices, wrong word forms and non-idiomatic or not appropriate collocation expressions. These types of errors are categorized as *local errors*. The last error type is those he classifies as *other errors*. These errors are claimed as errors which are also made by native speakers of English such as errors of capitalization, coherence, comma splices, dangling modifiers, fragments, lower case use, errors in punctuation, run-on sentences, spelling errors and more collocation errors.

However, in this research, the writer is only focusing on analyzing five basic grammatical errors which are generally taken from the types of errors classified by Bates et.al (1993) and suggested by Young in Micheal and Bernard (2001: 283). Those errors are considered as errors
that are commonly made by Indonesian learners in producing English writing as a result of L1 interference. They are:

1. incorrect or missing articles, possessive adjectives, and other determiners which are considered as local errors,
2. incorrect verb tenses, including subject-verb agreements which are considered as global errors,
3. incorrect or awkward word orders which are also categorized as global errors,
4. problems with singular or plurals of nouns which are also categorized as global errors, and
5. incorrect use of the passive voice which is also considered as a global error.

RESEARCH METHOD

The design of this research was for descriptive qualitative research in which the researcher describes the Indonesian L1 grammatical interference in the writing of the students in English. The sample for this study was first graders (year 10 students), 29 from SMAN Unggul Sigli, 27 from SMAN 1 Sigli, and 30 from MAN 1 Sigli that became the sample. Besides, the researcher took one English teacher, from each school, who taught these students. In short, there were 86 first graders and 3 English teachers who were taken as the sample.

Analysis of Documents

In this study, document analysis means the students’ written papers which were analyzed in order to get the data about the number and types of Indonesian grammatical interference errors. The sample students were asked to compose a descriptive text of around 90 words about their friends related to their appearance and personality. Then, data about the Indonesian grammatical interference errors was obtained by analyzing the students’ writings and classifying them according to the type of errors that were mentioned before. All grammatical interference errors identified in each document were counted and the value for each of them was counted as one.

Finally, the data was tabulated and analyzed in order to find out the forms of Indonesian grammatical interference that were most commonly found in the English writing done by these senior high school students. This was done by using the formula from Sudijono (2006: 205) as follows:
In which:
P refers to Percentage
F refers to Frequency of each type of Interference error
N refers to Total Number of all Interference errors
100% refers to Constant Value

Analysis of Data from the Questionnaire

The questionnaire had 9 closed questions and 2 open questions about activities that the students usually did to improve their English. The results from the questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed in tables for each question. The analysis was based on the percentage of the students’ responses (Brown, 1997:73). To calculate the frequency of an answer, the researcher used the following formula:

\[ p = \frac{f}{n} \times 100\% \]

In which:
p : answer percentages
f : frequency of answer
n : total of respondents

Analysis of Data from Interview

In conducting the interviews, the researcher used a recorder to record what the respondents said. This was important to avoid losing information during the interviews and it helped the researcher to analyze the responses from the students correctly. The results from the interviews were analyzed based on the information given by the respondents. In this case, the researcher described the answers of the students to the questions in the interview. The percentage of the students who gave the same answers was also provided in the results. This meant that, the researcher used the same formula to calculate the percentages of students who gave the same answers or information during the interviews. The formula is as follow:

\[ P = \frac{F}{n} \times 100\% \]

In which:
P refers to Percentage
F refers to Frequency of Interference error
n refers to Total Number of all Interference errors
100 is the Constant for calculation of %

FINDINGS

The figure above shows that the highest percentage of Indonesian grammatical interference errors was found in category 2, which was incorrect verb tenses: 54% of interference error were incorrect verb tenses. By contrast, the incorrect use of passive voice (category 5) was only 0.8%, the lowest % of grammatical interference found in these writings. The other three categories were 27% for category 1, incorrect possessive articles, 8% for category 3, incorrect word order and 10% for category 4, incorrect singular or plural of nouns.

From the results from the questionnaires and the interviews it was found that most error interference made by the students was caused by the students getting too little practice to improve their English. Simply put, the teachers did not provide the students with sufficient teaching-learning English experiences to make them more familiar with English.
DISCUSSIONS

This discussion first deals with the most common interference errors made by the students. This problem was discussed based on the data from the students’ English writing papers where it was found that the highest category of students’ Indonesian grammatical interference was the second category, i.e. incorrect verb tense, including subject-verb agreement which was 54% of all the errors. The fifth category, incorrect use of passive voice, had the lowest level of errors, 0.8%, in the students’ English writing. However, the kind of text the students were asked to compose did not lead them to create this kind of sentence.

These findings are similar to most previous studies of grammatical interference which found that verb tense was one of the most common type of grammatical interference found in students’ writing. A study conducted in Indonesia by Pudiyono (2012), for example, found that verb tense was the grammatical interference error form which not only occurred in students’ written English but also in their speech as well. A study conducted in Malaysia also showed the same result. For instance, a study by Maros, Hua, and Salehuddin (2007) found that subject-verb agreement was the most common grammatical error found in Malaysian students’ essays. However, another study conducted in Malaysia by Maniam (2010) showed a different result, viz: that the incorrect use of the verb to be was the most common grammatical error made by the students in their writing.

The second problem that needs to be discussed is about the factors that cause the students to make Indonesian grammatical interference errors in their writings. From the data, there are some reasons that cause the students to make these interference errors. It was found that as English is not used for communication between the students and their English teachers during their English classes; this was one of the main reasons why the students often got interference from their L1. This was because the students were quite unfamiliar with English and did not have enough practice using English. Consequently, they were not familiar with English and could not produce English utterances smoothly.

Moreover, lack of effort by the students to use English outside of school hours also became another reason. Most of the students did not use their free time to join any English course or club and they were also not interested in reading English books or listening to English DVDs or
watching English shows on the TV or in the internet. This became a serious problem since skills in writing depend a lot on how often someone reads or listens to English. Moreover the students were not interested in writing down any English words in their daily life as well. Though there were some who liked to listen to English songs and to watch English movies and videos. It can be inferred that the students did not have much practice to improve their ability in English. Pudiyono (2012) who conducted similar research in Purwokerto, Central Java, also found that one reason the students were influenced by their L1 in producing English was their lack of practice which made it difficult for them to internalize English linguistic knowledge that they learned.

The use of dictionaries is another factor that causes interference problems. This is because most students did not know enough words to express their ideas clearly. In fact, a dictionary can help students to find words to use in writing English. On the other hand, one tendency when using a dictionary also leads the students to produce English that includes L1 interferences. This is caused when they directly copy a word into their writing without checking whether the word form suits the English context or not.

Furthermore, the Indonesian grammatical interference was also made by the students due to the habit of the students in thinking through their utterances in Indonesian first. Then, these utterances were written into English. The worst way to transform Indonesian into English is by rewriting it word by word. This can cause the meaning that they want to transmit to be not appropriate or acceptable in an English context. These habits not only happen amongst English learners in Indonesia but amongst students from other places as well. From the findings of Maniam’s study (2010), it was found that Tamil students in Malaysia also tended to think out their sentences in Tamil before they wrote them in English. Worse, they did not think them out as whole sentences but they preferred to think them out one word at a time in Tamil and then translate those words into English.

In fact, L2 learners of English commonly have L1 interference when learning the target language. This is in line with Ellis (1986: 19) who has written that the learner’s L1 strongly influences the learning process for the L2. In addition, Martanti (2011) has also stated that language interference is a natural phenomenon that occurs in bilingual or multilingual countries. However, based on the finding of this study it is hoped that English teachers can minimize the interference by being
more aware about the most common types of Indonesian grammatical interference made by the students and the factors that cause the interference amongst them.

CONCLUSIONS

After doing this research to analyze Indonesian grammatical interference errors made by senior high school students in writing English, the researcher has some conclusions. First, students often make Indonesian grammatical interference errors when they write compositions in English. The most common type of Indonesian grammatical interference was found in the category for incorrect use of verb tense, including subject-verb agreement. The researcher can presume that most students of senior high school made interference errors in this category because they were still confused about the different use of verbs in each tense in the L2 that they do not have in their L1, Indonesian language, and grammar.

Last, the fact that most of the students did not practice speaking English in the classroom with their friends or their teacher contributed to them making errors. Moreover, they did not spend their spare time effectively doing something useful to improve their English outside of school hours. The way the students generated their ideas word for word from their Indonesian language to their English was also a major factor that caused them to make interference errors.

SUGGESTIONS

Here are some suggestion for English teachers concerning with improving the English ability of their students, especially in writing skills. First, teachers should be more aware of grammatical interference made by students in their writings. The most common types of Indonesian grammatical interference found in students’ English writings should also be considered seriously by their English teachers. This will help them to determine the most appropriate ways and methods to apply in the classroom to help the students avoid making grammatical interference errors.

Moreover, it is a good idea for the teachers to create an English environment at school. This can be done by using English when they communicate with their students, at least during English classes. Besides, teachers should also always remind their students about
Indonesian grammatical interference by giving them corrections for the interference errors that they produce in their English writings. Last but not least, conferencing can also play a significant role to show students the Indonesian grammatical interference in their writing papers. By doing this, all students can realize the errors and question the teacher about the issues they have trouble with. At the same time, the teacher can give them feedback about the Indonesian grammatical interference made by them.

REFERENCES


