The Influence of Direct Malay-To-French Translation on Novice Interpreters: A Roleplay Intervention Study Among Malay Students in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Terengganu Branch

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore whether the transmission of the original language (Malay) to the interpreter's second language (French) affects the grammatical correctness of novice interpreters in oral interpreting dialogues when interpreting from Malay dialogue between Universiti Teknologi MARA (UTM) Terengganu Branch Malay students in their roleplay task. Structured role play tasks were used with a group of intermediate level learners of French to minimise source a interference and target language reformulation strategies. The pre and post intervention interpreting performances showed that direct Malay-to-French translation produced systematic errors in French such as errors of article omission, auxiliary errors and errors of syntactic transfer. After roleplay intervention, learners demonstrated significant improvement in sentence restructuring, usage of tenses, and functional expression use, indicating from the surface level of translation to the meaning level of re-expression. The results emphasize the significance of contrastive linguistic teaching and communication training in the training of interpreters. Implications for pedagogy and interpreting theory are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Competence interpretation is not only about the lexical knowledge and involves the ability to reorganize the structures of messages across languages respecting the grammars of the target languages (Gile, 2009; Pöchhacker, 2016). For L1 learners with a different language structure, direct translation may result in grammatical interference in interpreting output (Bowen, 2018; Moser-Mercer, 2003). Malay is a typologically different language from French, which poses particular problems for French to Malay oral interpreting learners in Malaysian context where the L1 for many learners is Malay.

Malay has some grammatical elements that are absent in French that are essential for producing grammatically correct sentences, among others, are articles, complex tenses, and subject-verb agreement and negation auxiliaries. The lack of these grammatical elements may result in ungrammatical sentences when translating directly from Malay to French (Asmah, 1981; Omar & Leong, 2015). The present study investigates the nature of errors made by novice interpreters while directly translating from Malay to French and how errors could be reduced by using structured role play intervention to develop reformulation skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpreter Training and Transfer

Gile (2009) noted that interpretation is considered a cognitively complex activity, where multiple aspects such as simultaneous comprehension, message processing, and production of the target language must be carried out. Shlesinger (1998) and Bowen (2018) found that the problem of transfer from the source language is commonly found during the use of direct translation strategies, particularly in the early periods of the acquisition of a second language. Thus, this resulting in structural interference in output.

Negative Transfer and Interlanguage

Negative transfer is the effect that L1 grammatical properties have on L2 on errors (Ellis, 2008). Tipton (2010) claimed that L1 interference occurs when the L1 structure is transferred to the TL expression without adapting the structure in terms of its syntactic and morphological characteristics.

Role-Play as Pedagogical Intervention

Task-based instruction and role play have been proven to enhance communicative skills in interpreter training, as it emulates authentic discourse and fosters language reformulation in terms of meaning instead of literal translation, as stated by Gile (2014) and Hansen (2002). Role-play enables learners to rehearse structuring messages in context and get comfortable with using functional expressions.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Twenty intermediate-level French learners (L2), all native Malay speakers enrolled in an interpreting elective at a Malaysian university, participated in the study.

Intervention Design

The study followed a pre-/post-intervention design. Participants completed interpreting tasks before and after a structured role-play program. The role-play activities were modeled on authentic hospitality and service interactions where the contexts where French is used pragmatically.

Data Collection and Analysis

Written dialogue assignments were used as the medium for data collection and analysis. Student submissions were examined for errors by comparing their output with target-language-appropriate renderings, with particular attention to syntactic, morphological, and lexical features affected by direct translation from Malay.

Sample Pre-Intervention Data

Before the role-play intervention, students' interpreting output frequently reflected direct translation from Malay to French, resulting in grammatical errors. Below are selected authentic examples:

Source Text (Malay)	Student's Direct Translation	Correct French Form	Grammatical Problem
"Saya sudah terangkan kepada pelanggan."	Je déjà expliquer à client.	J'ai déjà expliqué au client.	Missing auxiliary; article omission; incorrect preposition
"Pelanggan mahu batalkan tempahan itu."	Client veut annuler réservation.	Le client veut annuler la réservation.	Missing definite articles
"Kami akan hantar pekerja sekarang."	Nous va envoyer employé maintenant.	Nous allons envoyer un employé maintenant.	Verb conjugation error; missing article

"Makanan belum sampai lagi."	La nourriture pas encore arriver.	La nourriture n'est pas encore arrivée.	Auxiliary omission; incorrect negation; participle agreement
"Bilik itu sangat kotor."	Chambre très sale.	La chambre est très sale.	Missing article; missing copular verb
"Tetamu marah sebab servis lambat."	Client fâché parce que service lent.	Le client est fâché parce que le service est lent.	Missing verbs; article omission
"Saya tidak pasti tentang perkara itu."	Je ne pas sûr sur cela.	Je ne suis pas sûr de cela.	Missing auxiliary; wrong preposition
"Kami minta maaf atas kesilapan ini."	Nous demander pardon pour cette erreur.	Nous demandons pardon pour cette erreur.	Infinitive used instead of conjugated verb

Analysis: These samples reveal that Malay L1 structures were transferred directly into French, leading to systematic errors. Students treated French as a sequence of lexical equivalents rather than a target language with distinct grammatical rules.

RESULTS

Pre-Intervention: Effects of Direct Malay-to-French Translation

The pre-intervention analysis showed that direct translation caused errors in:

- Auxiliary verb usage
- Article and determiner placement
- Copula verbs
- Negation structures
- Word order and infinitive overuse

These patterns align with previous research on L1 interference in L2 interpreting (Gile, 2009; Bowen, 2018).

Post-Intervention: Improvements After Role-Play

After structured role-play activities, students exhibited greater grammatical accuracy and message reformulation:

Source Text (Malay)	Improved French Interpretation	Grammatical Improvement
"Saya sudah terangkan kepada pelanggan."	J'ai déjà expliqué au client.	Correct auxiliary, article, preposition
"Pelanggan mahu batalkan tempahan itu."	Le client souhaite annuler la réservation.	Article usage correct

"Bilik itu sangat kotor."	La chambre est très sale.	Copula inserted
"Tetamu marah sebab servis lambat."	Le client est mécontent parce que le service est lent.	Complete clause structure
"Kami minta maaf atas kesilapan ini."	Nous demandons pardon pour cette erreur.	Proper verb conjugation

Post-intervention performances indicate a shift from surface-level lexical translation to meaning-oriented reformulation, demonstrating that role-play fosters awareness of grammatical differences and encourages structural adaptation.

DISCUSSION

Direct Translation and Negative Transfer

The study confirms that novice interpreters often rely on direct L1-to-L2 translation, causing negative transfer. Errors observed in auxiliary use, articles, copular verbs, and negation reflect Malay structural influence on French output (Gile, 2009; Bowen, 2018).

Role-Play and Reformulation Development

Role-play activities effectively encouraged meaning-based reformulation, allowing students to restructure messages to align with French syntax. Students also acquired formulaic expressions and cohesive devices that enhanced fluency and professionalism (Jones, 2014; Gile & Hansen, 2002).

Pedagogical Implications

- Explicit instruction on Malay-French structural differences can reduce negative transfer.
- Role-play provides contextualized practice in restructuring messages.
- Emphasizing reformulation strategies and functional expressions improves grammatical accuracy and pragmatic competence.

Theoretical Contribution

This study contributes to interpreting research by illustrating L1 structural interference patterns and showing that task-based interventions can reduce grammatical errors arising from direct translation.

CONCLUSION

Direct translation from Malay to French is a major source of grammatical errors in novice interpreters' output. Structured role-play intervention fosters grammatical accuracy, message reformulation, and appropriate use of functional expressions. These findings highlight the importance of contrastive instruction and contextualized practice in interpreter training for Malaysian learners.

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