

Insights into Mother Tongue Influence in ESL Classrooms: A Comparative Empirical Analysis of Syntactic, Grammatical, and Translational Errors in Secondary School Narrative Essays

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ABSTRACT

Mother tongue (L1) interference remains a central obstacle in second language (L2) acquisition within English as a Second Language (ESL) environments. This empirical qualitative study investigates the influence of Bahasa Melayu (L1) on English (L2) narrative essay writing among secondary school students in Hulu Perak, Malaysia. The main objective was to systematically identify, categorize, and analyze the linguistic errors made by ESL learners due to negative L1 transfer. Using a qualitative case study design, thirty Form Two Malay secondary school students were selected via purposive sampling. Data collection involved textual document analysis of 30 narrative essays written under controlled conditions, complemented by qualitative semi-structured interviews with three selected focal participants to provide additional qualitative evidence regarding students' reported cognitive translation processes. A total of 342 linguistic errors were identified and categorized into three main domains: syntax errors (39.5%), grammatical errors (41.2%), and direct word-for-word translation (19.3%). The findings identified recurring patterns consistent with possible interlingual transfer, particularly in noun–adjective word order, copula omission, tense marking, subject–verb agreement, and literal translation of Malay expressions, driven by fundamental structural dissimilarity between Bahasa Melayu and English syntax (e.g., noun–adjective word order inversion, absence of verb conjugation for tense, omission of copular 'be', and literal translation of Malay idioms). The interview findings further indicated that some learners reported using their L1 as a cognitive resource during drafting, particularly when they were uncertain about English structures or expressions in written L2 output. Recommendations are provided for ESL practitioners to implement contrastive analysis and translanguaging strategies to mitigate negative language transfer in dual-language contexts.

Keywords: Mother tongue interference, language transfer, syntax errors, grammatical errors, direct translation, ESL writing, empirical error analysis, Bahasa Melayu

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In the contemporary globalized era, English serves as the paramount international lingua franca across academic, economic, and technological domains (Dewi, 2015). Within multicultural and multilingual societies such as Malaysia, English holds a prominent status as a compulsory second language (L2) taught across primary, secondary, and tertiary education institutions. Consequently, Malaysian students naturally operate as dual-language or multilingual learners, routinely navigating between their native mother tongue (L1) predominantly Bahasa Melayu among Malay students and the target language, English. Mother tongue refers to the primary language inherited, acquired naturally in early childhood, and continuously reinforced within a learner's home and immediate community environment (Denizer, 2017). While L1 acquisition occurs

spontaneously through immersive social interaction, acquiring an L2 involves formal instruction, systematic cognitive effort, and conscious rule application (Alsamandi, 2010; Denizer, 2017).

Among the four fundamental language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing is universally acknowledged by applied linguists as the most complex and cognitively demanding skill to master (Alsalami, 2022; Iftanti, 2016). Writing is not merely a process of transcribing spoken words; rather, it requires higher-order cognitive processing including idea generation, outline planning, syntactic structuring, lexical selection, drafting, and recursive editing (Langan, 2005). Developing proficient L2 writing skills during early secondary education is critical, as writing serves as the primary medium for academic assessment and future professional communication. However, secondary school ESL learners routinely encounter severe hurdles when attempting to express complex thoughts in written English (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). A significant proportion of these writing difficulties stems from the cognitive reliance on L1 linguistic structures during the L2 drafting process.

Statement of the Problem

A major problem in Malaysian ESL education is the persistent gap between students' receptive knowledge of English and their productive writing ability. Students in rural and semi-rural educational districts, such as Hulu Perak, frequently experience limited exposure to authentic English environments outside formal school hours. Minimal reading habits, coupled with restricted opportunities for real-world English communication, restrict learners' vocabulary acquisition and weaken their intuitive grasp of English grammar (Moses & Mohamad, 2019). When tasked with composing narrative essays, learners heavily depend on Bahasa Melayu as an internal mental bridge to generate ideas and structure sentences.

Extensive empirical research indicates that L2 writers frequently commit systematic errors in syntax, morphology, tense agreement, and lexical choice due to mother tongue interference (Thiagarajah et al., 2022). While dual-language instructional frameworks aim to facilitate learning, the actual mechanism of language transfer in student writing requires rigorous empirical investigation. Teachers frequently report feeling overwhelmed by repetitive structural errors in student essays but often lack detailed empirical data regarding the specific categories and frequencies of negative L1 transfer. Without empirical evidence derived directly from student writing samples, educators cannot effectively tailor diagnostic feedback or design targeted remedial lessons. Therefore, this study provides a comprehensive empirical analysis of syntactic errors, grammatical errors, and direct translation patterns found in secondary school narrative essays.

Research Objectives

To guide this empirical investigation, the following research objectives were formulated:

- 1 To identify and quantify the frequency of linguistic errors committed by Form Two Malay ESL learners in narrative essay writing.
- 2 To categorize errors into specific linguistic domains: syntax errors, grammatical errors, and direct translation instances.
- 3 To analyze qualitative empirical evidence of negative L1 (Bahasa Melayu) transfer in written student samples and triangulate findings with student interview data.

Research Questions

- 1 What are the specific categories and frequencies of linguistic errors occurring in English narrative essays written by Form Two Malay students?
- 2 How do Bahasa Melayu structural and grammatical features manifest as possible negative language transfer in students' L2 writing?
- 3 What cognitive translation strategies do students report utilizing when composing essays in English?

Operational Definitions

- **Mother Tongue (L1):** The native language inherited and predominantly spoken in the learner's domestic and immediate community environment (in this study, Bahasa Melayu).

- **Negative Transfer (Interference):** The cognitive and linguistic process whereby rules, structures, or lexical items from the L1 are inappropriately applied to L2 production, resulting in ungrammatical or non-native written outputs.
- **Syntax Errors:** Errors pertaining to word order, clause structure, phrase arrangement, and the omission or misplacement of essential sentence components.
- **Grammatical Errors:** Violations of grammatical and morphological rules, including tense marking, subject-verb agreement, article usage, and preposition selection.
- **Direct Translation:** Literal, word-for-word rendering of Bahasa Melayu phrases, idioms, and sentence patterns into English without adapting to target-language idiomatic standards.

Significance of the Study

This empirical investigation provides practical benefits for ESL educators, curriculum planners, and textbook authors. By presenting concrete empirical evidence and exact data regarding student errors, the study enables teachers to move beyond generic grammar instruction toward diagnostic, contrastive pedagogy. Understanding the precise areas where Bahasa Melayu interferes with English writing helps educators implement targeted instructional scaffolds that directly address L1-L2 structural differences.

Scope and Limitations

This study focused exclusively on 30 Form Two Malay students enrolled at a national secondary school in Hulu Perak, Perak, Malaysia. The empirical data were restricted to written narrative essays and qualitative semi-structured interviews. Due to the targeted sample size and rural geographic location, the quantitative percentages reported reflect this specific cohort and should be generalized to broader national populations with appropriate contextual consideration.

In addition, the study involved one narrative writing task and interviews with only three focal participants. The error classification was conducted by the researchers without independent inter-rater coding; therefore, inter-rater reliability could not be established. Furthermore, although several error patterns were consistent with possible Bahasa Melayu influence, the study cannot conclusively attribute every identified error to L1 transfer, as developmental factors, English proficiency, instructional experience, and other learning conditions may also contribute to learner errors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The conceptual anchor of this study is grounded in Stephen Krashen's Second Language Acquisition Theory (1981), specifically the Input Hypothesis and the Monitor Hypothesis. Krashen asserts that L2 acquisition occurs when learners receive "comprehensible input" ($i+1$) in a low-anxiety environment. However, Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis posits that conscious learning acts as an editor or "monitor" that inspects and corrects L2 output. In writing tasks, learners use their monitor to apply learned grammatical rules. When L2 knowledge is incomplete or learners experience difficulty during production, they may draw on their L1 as a cognitive resource, potentially resulting in L1-influenced structures, leading to L1 structural transfer (Krashen, 1981).

Complementing Krashen's model, Corder's Error Analysis framework (1967, 1981) provides a basis for identifying and interpreting learner errors as evidence of developing L2 knowledge. Corder emphasized that learner errors can provide insight into the learner's developing linguistic system rather than being viewed simply as failures in language learning. Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory further explains that L2 learners develop an evolving linguistic system that is influenced by, but is not identical to, either the L1 or the target language. From this perspective, learner errors may arise from several processes, including language transfer and developing knowledge of the L2, rather than from L1 influence alone. These perspectives are relevant to the present study because they provide a framework for examining recurring syntax, grammatical, and direct translation errors while recognizing that L1 transfer is one possible source of learner difficulty. In addition, contrastive analysis helps identify structural differences between Bahasa Melayu and English that

may explain patterns such as noun–adjective word order differences, copula omission, tense marking, and literal translation of expressions.

Comparative Structural Typology: Bahasa Melayu vs. English

To understand mother tongue interference empirical data, one must examine the typology of Bahasa Melayu (L1) versus English (L2). Bahasa Melayu is an Austronesian language characterized by an agglutinative morphological structure, whereas English is an Indo-European language relying heavily on inflectional morphology and rigid word order rules.

LINGUISTIC FEATURE	BAHASA MELAYU (L1) STRUCTURE	ENGLISH (L2) STRUCTURE
NOUN PHRASE MODIFIER ORDER	Head Noun + Adjective	Adjective + Head Noun
	Example: ' <i>kereta merah</i> ' (car red)	Example: 'red car'
TEMPORAL/TENSE MARKING	No morphological verb inflection; tense conveyed via temporal adverbs (e.g., ' <i>semalam</i> ' = yesterday)	Mandatory morphological inflection (e.g., walk -> walked; run -> ran)
COPULAR VERB 'BE'	Absent in equative/descriptive clauses	Mandatory copula verb
	Example: ' <i>Dia gembira</i> ' (He happy)	Example: 'He is happy'
SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT	Verbs remain invariant regardless of subject number or person	Verbs inflect based on subject number/person (e.g., He runs vs. They run)

Table 1: Contrastive Typological Comparison between Bahasa Melayu and English

As summarized in Table 1, these fundamental typological differences create structural traps for Malay ESL learners. When students mentally draft narrative ideas in Bahasa Melayu, translating them into English without structural re-ordering may contribute to recurring syntax errors, missing copula verbs, and tense discrepancies (Maniam, 2020; Rahman et al., 2022).

Empirical Studies on Mother Tongue Interference

Numerous empirical investigations across ESL/EFL contexts confirm the pervasiveness of L1 interference. Maniam (2020) conducted an error analysis on secondary students in Selangor, revealing a substantial proportion of syntactic errors associated with L1 Malay sentence construction. Internationally, Atawneh (1994) and Al-Khasawneh (2010) observed similar L1 transfer phenomena among Arabic speakers learning English, particularly regarding prepositions and article omission. In Malaysia, Thiagarajah et al. (2022) emphasized that while students possess ideas, the cognitive workload of translating while maintaining correct L2 grammar results in systematic error patterns.

Research Gap

Although previous literature acknowledges the existence of mother tongue interference, few studies provide detailed empirical corpora of student errors pairing student excerpts with quantitative error breakdowns across syntax, morphology, and direct translation. Furthermore, few studies incorporate qualitative interview triangulation to explain the cognitive mechanics driving these specific written errors. This study bridges this empirical gap.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design integrated with quantitative descriptive error frequency analysis. Case study methodology allows for an in-depth, contextualized examination of language phenomena

within a bounded real-world setting (Merriam, 1998). The qualitative component provided direct textual evidence of student errors and interview transcripts, while descriptive statistics provided frequency distributions of error types.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

Setting: The research was executed at a national secondary school (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan) situated in Gerik, Hulu Perak district, Perak, Malaysia. The school has a total enrollment of 722 students (344 male, 378 female). The demographic composition of the school is over 95% Malay, creating a homogenous linguistic environment where Bahasa Melayu is the dominant mother tongue.

Participants: Non-probability purposive sampling was utilized to select 30 Form Two Malay students (14 male, 16 female; aged 14 years). The inclusion criteria required participants to have completed primary education under the national curriculum and possess intermediate-to-low English proficiency. Additionally, three focal participants (P1, P2, P3) representing high, medium, and low error frequencies were selected for follow-up qualitative interviews.

Data Collection Procedures & Instruments

Data collection was conducted over a four-week period utilizing two primary research instruments:

Controlled Narrative Writing Task (Document Analysis): All 30 participants were required to write a 200–250-word narrative essay titled "An Unforgettable Day with My Family" within a 45-minute classroom period. No dictionaries or external digital aids were permitted, ensuring that written outputs reflected authentic internal language processing.

Semi-Structured Qualitative Interviews: Semi-structured interviews lasting 20-25 minutes were conducted individually with participants P1, P2, and P3 in Bahasa Melayu to eliminate language barriers. Questions focused on their cognitive writing strategies, internal translation habits, and reasons behind specific errors identified in their essays.

Data Analysis Framework

Written essays were systematically analyzed following Corder's (1974) Error Analysis Framework, consisting of four steps: (1) collection of the sample corpus, (2) identification of errors, (3) classification of errors into linguistic categories, and (4) explanation of errors based on possible L1 transfer. Errors were categorized into three primary domains: Syntax Errors, Grammatical Errors, and Direct Translation Errors.

For the purpose of analysis, the identified errors were classified according to the following operational criteria. Syntax errors were defined as errors involving English word order, phrase arrangement, clause structure, or omission of essential syntactic elements. This category included noun–adjective word order inversion, omission of the copular verb *be*, and inappropriate existential or clause structures. Grammatical errors were defined as errors involving grammatical or morphological features, including tense and aspect marking, subject-verb agreement, and article use. Direct translation errors were defined as expressions that appeared to reflect a literal transfer of Bahasa Melayu words, phrases, collocations, or expressions into English, resulting in an inappropriate or non-idiomatic English construction.

Each identified error was assigned to the category that best represented its primary linguistic feature. For example, an expression such as "*restaurant big*" was classified as a syntax error because the primary issue involved noun–adjective word order, while "*family visit*" was classified as a grammatical error because the primary issue involved English past-tense marking. An expression such as "*eat wind*" was classified as a direct translation error because it represented a literal rendering of the Bahasa Melayu expression *makan angin*. Where an error could potentially involve more than one linguistic feature, the feature most directly related to the study's coding categories was used as the basis for classification.

Following classification, the frequency of errors in each major category was calculated and converted into percentages. Selected student excerpts were then examined qualitatively to illustrate the linguistic patterns identified. The interview responses of the three focal participants were used to provide additional contextual evidence regarding their reported use of Bahasa Melayu during the English writing process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Error Distribution

A rigorous textual analysis of the 30 student narrative essays yielded a total of 342 identified linguistic errors across the three analytical categories. Table 2 summarizes the quantitative distribution across the three main linguistic domains.

LINGUISTIC ERROR CATEGORY	SUB-CATEGORY ASPECT	FREQUENCY (N)	PERCENTAGE (%)
1. SYNTAX ERRORS	Word Order Inversion, Missing Copula, Clause Structure	135	39.50%
2. GRAMMATICAL ERRORS	Tense Inconsistency, Subject-Verb Agreement, Articles	141	41.20%
3. DIRECT TRANSLATION	Literal Phrase Rendering, Idiomatic Substitution	66	19.30%
TOTAL	Corpus of Identified Interference Errors	342	100.00%

Table 2: Quantitative Frequency Distribution of L1 Interference Errors (N = 342)

As indicated in Table 2, Grammatical Errors accounted for the highest proportion of errors (41.2%), closely followed by Syntax Errors (39.5%), while Direct Translation comprised 19.3%. Empirical proof for each category is presented below with actual student excerpts.

Qualitative Data Analysis: Empirical Evidence of Errors

Category 1: Syntax Errors (39.5%)

Syntax errors occurred when students mapped Bahasa Melayu sentence structures directly onto English text. Three distinct sub-aspects were identified:

Aspect A: Noun-Adjective Word Order Inversion. In Bahasa Melayu, modifying adjectives follow the noun (Noun + Adjective). In English, adjectives precede the noun. Students consistently replicated Malay head-first structures.

• Student Proof 1A:

"My	father	buy	shirt	blue	for	my	brother."
[Correct L2 Form:	"My	father	bought	a	blue	shirt	for my brother."]
[L1 Source: "Bapa saya beli baju biru..."]							

• Student Proof 1B:

"We	go	to	restaurant	big	near	the	beach."
[Correct L2 Form:	"We	went	to	a	big	restaurant	near the beach."]
[L1 Source: "Kami pergi ke restoran besar..."]							

Aspect B: Omission of Copular Verb 'Be'. Bahasa Melayu lacks an equivalent to the English linking verb 'be' (is/am/are/was/were) when connecting subjects to adjectival or prepositional complements. Consequently, learners systematically omitted copular verbs.

• Student Proof 1C:

"My	mother	very	happy	because	food	delicious."
[Correct L2 Form:	"My	mother	was	very	happy	because the food was delicious."]
[L1 Source: "Emak saya sangat gembira kerana makanan sedap."]						

• Student Proof 1D:

"The	weather	hot	yesterday."
[Correct L2 Form:	"The	weather	was hot yesterday."]
[L1 Source: "Cuaca panas semalam."]			

Aspect C: Faulty Existential and Clause Structures. Bahasa Melayu frequently uses existential markers like 'ada' to indicate possession or existence without formal subject dummy pronouns, leading to faulty clause structures.

• Student Proof 1E:

"At	the	park	have	many	people."
[Correct L2 Form:	"There	were	many	people	at the park."]
[L1 Source: "Di taman ada ramai orang."]					

Category 2: Grammatical Errors (41.2%)

Grammatical errors stemmed from morphological mismatches between the two languages, particularly regarding tense inflections and subject-verb agreement:

Aspect A: Tense and Aspect Marking Discrepancies. Bahasa Melayu verbs do not inflect for past tense; temporal context is indicated solely through time adverbs (e.g., 'semalam', 'dulu'). Consequently, students failed to apply past tense morphology in narrative writing.

• Student Proof 2A:

"Yesterday,	my	family	visit	my	grandmother	at	kampung."
[Correct L2 Form:	"Yesterday,	my	family	visited	my	grandmother	in the village."]
[L1 Source: "Semalam, keluarga saya melawat nenek..."]							

• Student Proof 2B:

"We	play	football	at	the	field	until	sunset."
[Correct L2 Form:	"We	played	football	in	the	field	until sunset."]
[L1 Source: "Kami bermain bola..."]							

Aspect B: Subject-Verb Agreement Errors. Because Malay verbs do not change based on singular or plural subjects, learners struggled with third-person singular inflections.

• Student Proof 2C:

"My	sister	like	to	eat	ice	cream."
[Correct L2 Form:	"My	sister	likes	to	eat	ice cream."]
[L1 Source: "Adik perempuan saya suka makan..."]						

Aspect C: Article Omission and Misuse. Bahasa Melayu uses numerical classifiers (e.g., 'seorang', 'seekor', 'sebuah') rather than definite/indefinite articles ('a', 'an', 'the'). Students either omitted required articles or substituted inappropriate determiners.

• Student Proof 2D:

"Father	park	car	under	tree."
[Correct L2 Form: "Father parked the car under a tree."]				
[L1 Source: "Bapa letak kereta bawah pokok."]				

Category 3: Direct Translation Errors (19.3%)

Direct translation error occurred when learners rendered Malay expressions word-for-word into English, producing idiomatic incongruity:

Aspect A: Literal Rendering of Malay Collocations. Students translated Malay colloquial idioms and fixed expressions directly, creating ungrammatical L2 constructions.

• Student Proof 3A:

"My	heart	very	big	when	win	game."
[Correct L2 Form: "I was very proud/delighted when I won the game."]						
[L1 Source: Direct translation of Malay idiom ' <i>besar hati</i> ' (proud/honored).]						

• Student Proof 3B:

"We	eat	wind	at	Cameron	Highlands."
[Correct L2 Form: "We went sightseeing at Cameron Highlands."]					
[L1 Source: Direct translation of Malay idiom ' <i>makan angin</i> ' (vacation/sightseeing).]					

• Student Proof 3C:

"My	father	give	hand	to	old	man."
[Correct L2 Form: "My father helped the old man."]						
[L1 Source: Direct translation of Malay phrase ' <i>beri tangan</i> ' / ' <i>hulur tangan</i> ' (give a helping hand).]						

Aspect B: Preposition Misallocation. Malay prepositions like 'di' cover multiple English prepositions ('in', 'on', 'at'), leading to preposition substitution errors.

• Student Proof 3D:

"We	arrived	at	night	in	the	hotel."
[Correct L2 Form: "We arrived at night at the hotel."]						
[L1 Source: " <i>Kami sampai malam di hotel.</i> "]						

Triangulation via Qualitative Interview Findings

Qualitative interviews with focal participants P1, P2, and P3 provided supporting evidence that some written errors were associated with reported cognitive translation strategies . When asked how she composed her sentences, Participant P2 stated:

> " <i>Bila saya nak tulis ayat Inggeris, saya fikir ayat Malay dulu dalam kepala. Lepas tu saya tukar perkataan satu-satu pergi Inggeris. Bila tak tahu grammar, saya ikut susunan Malay je.</i> "	
(When I want to write an English sentence, I think the Malay sentence first in my head. Then I change word-by-word to English. When I don't know the grammar, I just follow the Malay order.)	

Participant P3 similarly explained his reason for writing "eat wind":

> *"Saya tahu 'makan' tu 'eat', 'angin' tu 'wind'. Saya ingat boleh terus guna 'eat wind' untuk percutian."*
(I know 'makan' is 'eat', 'angin' is 'wind'. I thought I could directly use 'eat wind' for holiday.)

These qualitative statements provide additional contextual evidence for the role of mental translation and reported reliance on Bahasa Melayu during English writing. However, the interview data do not establish that all identified errors resulted from negative interlingual transfer.

DISCUSSION

The findings are broadly consistent with Corder's Error Analysis framework, Selinker's Interlanguage perspective, and Krashen's Monitor Hypothesis. The recurring syntax and grammatical errors identified in the students' essays suggest that learners may experience difficulty when transferring their developing knowledge of English structures into written production. The relatively high frequencies of syntax errors (39.5%) and grammatical errors (41.2%) indicate that these were prominent areas of difficulty in the present dataset. However, these patterns should not be interpreted as conclusive evidence that Bahasa Melayu was the sole cause of the errors, as developmental factors, limited English proficiency, and differences in learners' exposure to English may also contribute to such difficulties (Maniam, 2020; Thiagarajah et al., 2022). The interview responses further provide supporting evidence that some students consciously relied on Bahasa Melayu structures or expressions when producing English, particularly when they were uncertain about the appropriate English form. Therefore, the findings suggest that L1 may function as a cognitive resource during L2 writing, while also highlighting the need for targeted instruction that helps learners recognize differences between Bahasa Melayu and English structures.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This empirical investigation identified recurring patterns of syntax, grammatical, and direct translation errors in the narrative essays of Form Two Malay ESL learners. Analysis of 342 identified errors showed that grammatical errors accounted for 41.2%, syntax errors for 39.5%, and direct translation errors for 19.3% of the dataset. The selected student excerpts and interview responses provided evidence of recurring language patterns and reported reliance on Bahasa Melayu during English writing. These findings are consistent with possible L1 influence, particularly in areas involving word order, copula use, tense marking, and literal translation. However, the findings do not establish that Bahasa Melayu was the sole cause of the identified errors, as developmental factors and other learning conditions may also contribute to learner difficulties.

Based on these empirical findings, the following pedagogical recommendations are proposed:

- **Explicit Contrastive Instruction:** ESL teachers should incorporate explicit contrastive analysis lessons that highlight specific structural differences between Bahasa Melayu and English (e.g., Adjective-Noun order vs. Noun-Adjective order).
- **Targeted De-Translation Exercises:** Teachers should implement activities that directly address common literal translation traps (such as 'makan angin' -> 'sightseeing') to help learners recognise and avoid inappropriate word-for-word translation.
- **Pedagogical Translanguaging Scaffolding:** Rather than banning L1 entirely, educators should guide learners to use L1 for initial idea brainstorming, followed by structured syntactic transformation activities to build correct L2 forms.

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