Mother Tongue Interference on Speaking Skills among Sabahan Students

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ABSTRACT

Speakers of second languages may struggle communicating due to interference from the mother tongue. This is especially true among Sabahan students, since Sabah, Malaysia is multilingual. This study seeks to identify the interference of the mother tongue among Sabahan students at Universiti Teknologi MARA, as well as the strategies they employ to reduce the interference. Five respondents were selected via purposive sampling, and data collected from interview sessions was audiotaped and transcribed, and then analysed using content analysis methodology. The study finds that mother tongue interference reduces fluency due to errors in language transfers, and carries phonological effects that hinders pronunciation. Despite this, the efficacy of communication remains stable. The findings suggest ways that Sabahan learners of English can be supported by educators and the education system.

Keywords: second language learning, mother tongue interference, pronunciation, phonology

INTRODUCTION

Interference pertains to imposing the rules of the mother tongue onto another language (Subandowo, 2017; Noviyenty & Putri, 2021). The first language can be useful resource in learning a second language; however, it may also hinder learning since learners may confuse the rules between different languages and limit possible development, for instance if the learner becomes overly reliant on the first language in order to function in the second (Zarei et al., 2022) or when a learner is unable to produce certain sounds since they do not exist in the first language (Siahaan et al.,2022).

Malaysia is a multicultural, multilingual country. Certain states in Malaysia can be more diverse than others. Sabah, a state physically located in north Borneo, is home to 52 indigenous and sub-ethnic groups, including Dusun, Kadazan, Bajau, Rungus, and Murut, and migrant communities such as Bugis, Javanese, Suluk, and Chinese (Wong, 2012; Fong, 2022). Furthermore, Malaysian citizens are expected to master Malay, the national language, as well as English, which is widely used and is part of the mandatory syllabus in the Malaysian education system (Azar & Tanggaraju, 2020). This linguistic background poses a challenge for Sabahan students learning English as interference from their mother tongue may affect their progress. Moreover, Bakar et al. (2021) add that the reduced exposure and likelihood of using English in rural areas compared to bigger cities pose further challenge to students from rural areas, which describe a large portion of Sabahan students. In the tertiary setting, this issue may be compounded by the delivery of subject matters in English. Since the language of delivery in primary and secondary education in Malaysia is Malay, except in English and other language classes, tertiary level Sabahan students not only have to contend with the shift in the delivery language but also the increased cognitive load.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

One of the theories put forth by Stephen Krashen (1982) is the Monitor Hypothesis. This hypothesis posits that as a learner learns a language, they develop an internal system that will monitor their output, especially in terms of grammar. In this way, a learner attempts to integrate linguistic rules they have learned into their language production, monitoring for errors. As learners work to solidify their schematic understanding of the L2, in this case English,

interference from their L1, such as the various Sabahan languages, may cause the learners to overcorrect or transpose the rules of the other languages onto English (Krashen, 1982; Alwan & Obeid, 2025). In practice, the most common linguistic interference often falls into one of four categories (Khvalyboha & Khvalyboha, 2024), namely:

- Phonetic: Learners face pronunciation issues and have difficulty pronouncing words in the target language due to similarities or the sound being absent in the mother tongue
- Grammatical: Learners apply the rules of one language onto another
- Lexical: Learners mistakenly believe words from other languages have equivalent meanings in the target language
- Semantic: Happens when the meaning of a word in one language does not align directly in the target language, leading learners to misuse the word.

In effect, interference may bring both positive and negative impacts to language learning (Nishanti, 2020). Patrick et al. (2013) detail two types of interference - proactive and retroactive interference. Proactive interference allows learners to draw upon their existing linguistic knowledge and apply it to the language they are learning, thereby bridging their learning gap. For instance, certain indigenous languages in Nigeria feature consonant and vowel sounds comparable to English, such as the short vowels /i/, /u/, and /e/ as well as the voiced bilabial plosive /b/, voiceless alveolar plosive /t/, and /d/, making it easier for the speakers to learn English (Patrick et al., 2013). In contrast, Yoruba features sounds that are similar to, but different from, English's short voiceless bilabial plosive /p/, voiceless and voiced labiodentals fricative /f/ and /v/, and long vowels /i:/, /u:/, /o:/. When trying to produce English words featuring those sounds, a native Yoruba speaker may struggle due to interference from Yoruba. Such instances of interference, where a learner is dragged down by their knowledge of the first language, is called retroactive interference (Patrick et al., 2013).

Within the literature, there is a dearth of studies that focus on Sabahan students and their experiences navigating multilingualism within academic and non-academic settings. There is much that needs to be done to bridge this gap, considering the variety of linguistic backgrounds of the students. As a first step, this study seeks to identify the types of interference interferences of the mother tongue on students' speaking skills among Sabahan students in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sabah.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fong (2022) quotes Datuk Seri Hajiji Noor, the Chief Minister of Sabah, stating that Sabah comprises more than 30 ethnic groups and 217 sub-ethnic groups using more than 50 languages with no less than 90 dialects. Some of the languages spoken in Sabah include Dusun, Kadazan, Bajau, Murut, Lun, Bruneian, Rungus, Bisaya, Iranun, Bawang, Sungai, Suluk, and Sama (Wong, 2012). Of these languages, Dusun is considered the largest with 17.8% speakers (Adnan & Hamdan, 2013, as cited in Dani et al., 2019). However, Malay is widely spoken in these communities as it is the lingua franca in Malaysia and is the language of instruction in the national education system.

The dialect of Malay spoken in Sabah is quite distinct, especially from the dialects in the peninsular, and is known as "Melayu di Sabah" (lit. Malay in Sabah), "Cakap Sabah" (lit. Sabah-speak), "Bahasa Sabah" (lit. Sabah

language) or simply "the language of Sabah" (Wong, 2012). When Sabahan speakers use English, many of them can easily be identified from their accent due to their distinct pronunciation. In line with that, Zarei et al. (2022), in a study on 25 English as a Second Language (ESL) students from a private university in Malaysia, documented how pronunciation mistakes made by learner when switching between codes are caused by differences in the mother tongue and the second language's sound and writing systems. Furthermore, the study, which utilised semi-structured interviews, highlighted that learners' proficiency is reduced when they translate from the mother tongue as they speak instead of thinking in the second language (Zarei et al., 2022). This study suggests that interference may play a role in a second language student's ability to speak fluently.

Similarly, Siahaan et al. (2022) ran a study on junior high school students in Timor Tengah Regency to see how mother tongue, namely Meto and Indonesian, interference affect students' ability to speak English. 10 students were purposefully sampled from a pool of 25, and they were observed having a conversation in pairs in front of the class. The study found that although students are relatively proficient in the target language, the interference can be noticed in aspects of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and fluency. It should be noted that the study is run in a classroom setting among learners of comparable skill ability; whether the findings can be generalised to most language learners in general would require deeper investigation.

In a somewhat reversed situation, Ganuza and Hedman (2019) studied whether Somali students in Sweden who received mother tongue instruction (MTI) may display effects of interference in the acquisition of their second language. The cross-sectional, longitudinal, and cross-linguistic data analyses study of 120 students found that MTI positively impacts second language acquisition, even if the exposure time is as limited as one hour per week. This study suggests that interference may not always automatically hinder language learners' progress, as multilingualism provides linguistic resources across all the languages in a speaker's repertoire (Amin, 2017).

In short, interference may assist a learner in learning a second language, or it may hinder them. Thus, this study will examine instances of interference among Sabahan students who may come from a diverse linguistic background when they speak and their strategies to overcome them.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study uses interview as the main data collection method. Five (5) Universiti Teknologi MARA Sabah students of Sabahan origin and whose mother tongue is one of the Sabahan languages (in this study, this term is used to refer to the languages spoken Sabah, Malaysia). These students were purposefully selected for online interviews via Google Meet. The sample size is deemed adequate as the qualitative method yields rich data that may be representative despite its relatively small size (Dworkin, 2012). Furthermore, Karania (2017) suggests that data saturation may be reached even in cases where the sample size is smaller than ten.

Participation was entirely voluntary; after responding to an advertisement for the research, possible respondents were vetted to determine their eligibility, before being invited to participate in the interview. Their eligibility is determined by inclusion criteria such as status as a student, multilingualism that includes a Sabahan language, and conversationality in English to ensure that they are able to fully express themselves during the interview. Of the five participants, two spoke Kadazan as their first language, while the rest used Malay, Momogun Rungus, and Murut.

The interview, adapted from Kambala (2021), consisted of 12 questions, 11 of which were open-ended. The final question requires the participants to pronounce a set of 12 English words that included short vowel sounds, long vowel sounds, and a diphthong sound so that it can be determined whether there is mother tongue interference in their speech. Following the interviews, the audio recording was initially transcribed using otter.ai before being refined manually by the researchers to ensure accuracy. The final transcription is then analysed based on codes, both of predefined categories based on the research questions and themes emerging from the data. Applying the

codes to the data allows the researchers to identify patterns in the respondents' speech and hence formulate conclusions about interference in their speech.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study finds that Sabahan learners of English display instances in interference while interacting. Interference can influence the learner's fluency as well as pronunciation.

Interference and Fluency

English and the Sabahan languages have different sets of sounds, phonetic patterns, and linguistic rules, all of which may cause strain to learners when they communicate. All the respondents displayed pauses and hesitancy when

communicating, with multiple interjections of filler words like "um" and "umm" peppering their spontaneous responses. By themselves the fillers do not signify interference, but they are used to buy time as the respondents search for the vocabulary and apply grammatical rules appropriate to the situation. In fact, Respondent 4 commented that, "Erm… So for me, it's not it's not really because sometimes it follows the word to be convert and it follows the suitability of the current accent in speech," highlighting that they needed time to convert words from their native language into the target language.

Besides delays due to translation processing, some respondents also exhibited interference influence due to differences in the prosody between their languages. The Momongun Rungus speaker, for instance, mistakes the interviewer's attempt to confirm as a request for clarification, leading the conversation to be incoherent. In this case, the interviewer's utterance, "What is it? Momogus Rungus?" was interpreted as "What is Momogun Rungus?", suggesting that differences in the inflection between the two languages may interfere with a learner's understanding. Furthermore, their attempt to answer the misinterpreted question clearly demonstrated their struggle in finding the vocabulary. Besides trailing off without fully answering the question, the respondent attempted to salvage the situation by "concluding" their statement using the Malay discourse marker -lah, which is often used pragmatically to soften utterances, e.g. from a command into a request (Jaafar, 1999). In this case, the respondent seems to ask the interviewer to let the issue go as they were not able to discuss the relatively complex topic.

Speakers' fluency is also hindered by interference from differences in the grammar structure between their languages. When the Murut speaker uttered "when they talk to a person that* from another country", they fell back into the grammatical pattern of their mother tongue. Similarly, the Momogun Rungus speaker struggled with the subject-verb agreement of English when they uttered, "For me what's, what's make* it difficult?" since there is no direct equivalence in their language.

Phonological Interference

Table 1 shows the words listed in Question 12 of the interview as well as the respondents' pronunciation of the words. These words are chosen to represent the sounds of short vowels, long vowels, and diphthong as these sounds are common in English but can be rare in other languages. Where the table is highlighted indicates errors in the respondents' pronunciation.

Table 1 Pronunciation of the word list of Question 12

Word List Item		Respondents				
Word	IPA pronunciation	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5
Short vowel sounds						
slab	/slæb/	/slæp/	/slæb/	/slæb/	/slep/	/sleb/
kids	/kɪdz/	/kɪdz/	/kɪdz/	/kɪdz/	/kɪdz/	/kɪdz/
plastic	/ˈplæstɪk/	/ˈplæstɪk/	/ˈplastɪk/	/ˈplæstɪk/	/ˈplæstɪk/	/ˈplæstɪk/
bag	/bæg/	/beg/	/bag/	/beg/	/beg/	/bæg/
Long vowel sounds						
bake	/beɪk/	/beɪk/	/beɪk/	/beɪk/	/beɪk/	/beɪk/
alien	/ˈeɪliən/	/ˈeliən/	/ˈeliən/	/ˈeɪliən/	/ˈeliən/	/ˈeliən/
snake	/sneɪk/	/sneɪk/	/sneɪk/	/sneɪk/	/snek/	/snek/
fatal	/ˈfeɪtl/	/fatl/	/fetl/	/ˈfeɪtl/	/ˈftal/	/ˈftal/
Diphthong sounds						
town	/taʊn/	/θaʊn/	/taʊn/	/taʊn/	/taʊn/	/taʊn/
light	/laɪt/	/laɪt/	/laɪt/	/laɪt/	/laɪt/	/laɪt/
play	/pleɪ/	/pleɪ/	/pleɪ/	/peleɪ/	/pleɪ/	/pleɪ/
deer	/dɪr/	/dɪr/	/dɪr/	/dɪr/	/dɪr/	/dɪr/

Table 1 shows instances of interference among the respondents. A few of the listed words exist either as formal loanwords or commonly accepted slang words in the speakers' mother tongues such as "plastik", "beg", and "alien". The pronunciation of plastik and plastic are very similar between the languages, and it can be seen that only R2 displayed irregularity in their pronunciation. In contrast, the word "beg" is usually pronounced with the higher /ɛ/ in Sabahan languages, and clear interference can be seen in the respondents' pronunciation of the word. Similarly, "alien" utilises the shorter /e/ sound in most Sabahan languages, and most respondents seem to be influenced by this habit. In this sense, retroactive interference hinders the respondents' ability to pronounce these words correctly (Patrick et al., 2013).

In contrast, all respondents pronounced "kids", "light", "deer", and "bake" correctly. "Kids" and "light" are high frequency words so it is not surprising for all the respondents to pronounce them correctly. In contrast, although "deer" is a low frequency word, it is commonly used in nursery rhymes and during beginner lessons of English in Malaysia. As such it is unsurprising that the respondents are familiar with the word and could pronounce it accurately. The correct pronunciation of the relatively low frequency "bake" is more surprising, especially since the long vowel sound /eɪ/ is relatively uncommon in Sabahan languages. One possible cause for its familiarity may be from the rise in popularity of media contents surrounding baking such as The Great British Bake Off or baking contents on social media like TikTok and Instagram. Indeed, the respondents indicated in the interview that increasing their exposure to English-language media is one of their strategies to reduce interference.

Besides the vowels, there are also a few instances of mispronunciation of consonants. For example, R1 produces /slæp/ for /slæb/ and /θaʊn/ for /taʊn/. This may be an instance of overcorrection or overcompensation, where the

respondent attempts to avoid making errors but the attempts cause them to commit errors elsewhere. In this case, it is possible that the respondent focussed on ensuring the vowels are pronounced correctly but relaxed their focused on the consonants, since English consonants are similar to those of Sabahan languages.

Apart from the targetted words, interference in the respondents' pronunciation can also be detected as they answered other questions during the interview. The most common occurrence happened among consonant clusters that might be foreign to Sabahan language, such as the word "constantly" being pronounced as /ˈkɒnstəntli/ and "difficult" as /ˈdɪfɪkult/ instead of /ˈdɪfɪkəlt/. The latter may also be a case of interference due to differences in the ortographic systems of the languages, since the letter "u" many Sabahan languages corresponds to the sound of /u/ rather than /ə/. Another possible explanation is the interference of the stress patterns of the different languages, with English being stress-timed, and thus may contain stressed and unstressed syllables, whereas many Sabahan languages are syllable-timed, and thus lacks the reduction of the /u/ into /ə/ in certain syllables.

It can be seen during the interviews the respondents were aware of the gaps in their English proficiency, and were taking active steps in monitoring their output, as per Krashen's (1982) Monitor Hypohtesis. Besides instances of proactive and retroactive interference discussed above (Patrick et al., 2013), there were also noticeable attempts by the respondents to correct, or at least improve, utterances that contained errors. In such cases, repetition as a form of self-correction is one of the more salient strategies (Rieger, 2003). When R3 stuttered, "Um.. I do think... Umm… Yeah, I do think because like, some- sometimes when I when I tried to speak in English, I often think about the phrases in Malay first," and when R4 said, "For me whats, whats make it difficult?", it was clear that the respondents noticed the grammatical issues in their utterances and attempted to self-correct, though to varying degrees of success. In short, Krashen's (1982) Monitor Hypothesis can be observed taking place among the language learners, and educators may utilise this gap to inform their practice.

CONCLUSION

Despite instances of interference occurring when the respondents communicate, the interviews show that their communicative ability is not severely hampered. Although the respondents may display slightly reduced fluency due to a longer processing time, they make up for it using strategies such as using filler words and code mixing. Where the respondents occasionally mispronounce words, the words are largely still recognisable. Instances where the communication broke down completely are quite rare and are caused by factors such as a lack of vocabulary rather than interference.

It should be noted that there is a lack of consistency in the pattern of interference. Although the sample size is adequate, it should be noted that the sample is of speakers of Sabahan languages, of which there are at least 50 (Fong, 2022). Besides the fact that only four of those languages were represented, the representation of one speaker per language means that a generalisation cannot be drawn from the available data. Further complicating the situation is the status and actual usage of Malay language within these communities; future research should consider isolating instances of interference from the Sabahan languages versus Malay. Indeed, most, if not all of the respondents are multilinguals instead of true bilinguals, and that criterion should be factored into future research. Doing this will allow teachers to target linguistic features to emphasise in order to reduce interference among learners.

The findings suggest a few possibilities pedagogically. First, a deeper study on the extend of interference from Sabahan languages should be carried out in order to identify exactly how learners of different mother tongues are affected. For instance, each Sabahan language may pose different potential of interference, whether phonetically, grammatically, lexically, or semantically, from their unique structure, and only by reducing that gap in the literature can more appropriate methods targetting specific issues be identified (Khvalyboha & Khvalyboha, 2024). This will allow educators to move away from a one-size-fit-all method. Furthermore, such research should take into account the unique preferences and temperament of the current generation of learners. In general, Malaysian students receive a lot of media content in English, either through films, TV series, or social media, as

mentioned by the respondents themselves, and this aspect should be properly capitalised within formal language lessons to support learners' journey and help them reduce instances of interference.

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