# LEARNING STRATEGY AND INTERLANGUAGE ERRORS: A Case Study of SMPN 5 Padang Panjang Students

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**Abstract**

This study describes learning strategies in relation to interlanguage er- rors. Interlanguage errors are believed as the result of cognitive mechanism or learning strategy used by second language learners. This study specifically describes learning strategies employed by SMPN 5 Padang Panjang students which result in interlanguage errors. The data are sentences containing errors taken from students' compositions. The result indicates that there are three major types of learning strategy used by the learners, including: overgeneralization, first language transfer, and simplification. Of these, the dominant learning strategy is overgeneralization which implies that the students have relied their linguistic knowledge on the target language (English) rather than on that of their first language. English teachers should have positive attitude on interlanguage errors since errors are an inevitable process in foreign language learning. They must also provide appropriate training for the students so that they are aware the differences between English and Indonesian. Such understanding could help them minimize errors and hence they will be able to develop their interlanguage system.

***Keywords**: interlanguage errors, learning strategy*

## A. INTRODUCTION

Learning a foreign language, however, is not easy especially for those who learn the language in a foreign setting for example in Indonesia. Indonesian learners of English will have lots of problems such as not having enough exposure for the language input and not enough source people to practice with.

While learning a foreign language, learners commonly build up a system for themselves which is different in some ways from the system of their first language or mother tongue and foreign language or the target language (TL)-the language that the learners are learning. The system which the language learners build up for themselves has been given various names or terms, such as idiosyncratic dialect and approximative system. The most widely used terminology is the one coined by Selinker (1977), interlanguage. He calls that interlanguage is used to emphasize the structurally intermediate status of the learners' language system between his mother tongue and the target language.

From this we can see that the most noticeable feature of interlanguage is the existence of errors which are commonly known as interlanguage errors. A further study of interlanguage errors could help us, teachers, to better understand the learners' problems and try to provide timely help to learners so that they can achieve competence in the language they are learning. Selinker's description of the interlanguage system has a cognitive (psychological) emphasis and a focus on the strategies that learners employ when learning a second language. It is assumed that interlanguage is the result of the learners' attempts to produce the target language norms. That is to say, learner errors (interlanguage errors) are the product of the cognitive process in second language learning or learning strategy.

The observable phenomenon indicates that the English produced by students of SMPN 5 Padang Panjang also contains a great number of interlanguage errors, covering various linguistic items as well as grammatical elements. Most of the sentences the writer collected contained interlanguage errors. Such a phenomenon give rise to a question as what kinds of cognitive processes or learning strategy used by the learners which results in interlanguage errors. This investigation concerns the pedagogical implication in foreign language teaching. In addition, this investigation would give an important contribution to the better understanding of the process of foreign language learning.

## B. RELATED LITERATURES

### 1. Interlanguage

The term interlanguage (IL) was first introduced by Selinker (1977) to refer to the language of second or foreign language learner. He notices the fact that the learner's language system in neither that of his native language (NL) nor that of the target language (TL); it contains elements from both. If we can imagine a continuum between the NL system and the TL system, we can say that at any given time the learner speaks an interlanguage.

Selinker (1977:1997) hypothesizes that IL is a natural language; it is systematic through its development. It reflects the learner's attempts at constructing a linguistic system that progressively approaches the TL system.And as a language system, IL has three specific features different from other natural languages, namely has proposed three important characteristics of interlanguage: systematicity, permeability, and fossilization (Adjemian:1976).

Systematicity follows from the hypothesis that IL is a natural language that

cannot be a random collection of entities. It is assumed to be systematic from the start; like any natural language system, it seems to obey universal linguistic constrains. Thus, we can learn something about learners' language system in speech or writing by making a series of descriptions of the learner's IL.

Permeability, according to Yip (1995:12), is 'the susceptibility of IL to infiltration by NL and TL rules or forms'. As Adjemian (1976:21) states that 'IL systems are dynamic in character-the systems are thought to be by their nature incomplete and in the state of flux'. The structures of the IL can be invaded or infiltrated by the NL and the TL. Especially when the learner is placed in a situation that cannot be avoided the learners may use linguistic rules from the NL and in other situation, they may distort or overgeneralize rules from TL in order to produce the intended meaning. Both of these processes reflect the basic permeability of IL.

Fossilization, according to Selinker (1988: 92), is 'the persistence of plateaus of non-target like competence in the IL'. When its permeability is lost, the features of an IL become subject to fossilization. Normally, we expect a learner to progress further along the learning continuum, so that his competence moves closer to the TL system and contains fewer errors. Some errors, however, will probably never disappear entirely. Such errors are often described as already fossilized, meaning that they have become permanent features of the learner's speech.

## 2. Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Interlanguage is one of the central concerns of second language acquisition (SLA) studies. SLA means 'the ways in which any learner, child or adult learns a second or foreign language; the learning may take place in a tutored or untutored environment and in a second or foreign language setting' (Nunan, 1991: 1).

In language pedagogy, basically SLA has two major goals: description and explanation. Description is to identify how learners acquire an L2 (Ellis, 2000: 4). The second goal (explanation) is 'to identify the external and internal factor that account for why learners acquire an L2 in the way they do' (Ellis, 2000: 4). In sum, the goals of SLA are to describe how L2 acquisition proceeds and to explain this process and why some of learners seem to be better at it than others (Ellis, 2004).

Within cognitive perspective, IL is considered as a separate linguistic system. It is prominently characterized by the existence of errors, known as interlanguage error or learner error. Within cognitive view, interlanguage errors are evidence about the nature

of the processes or strategies used by the learner at a certain stage in the course of IL development.

This strategy, at a certain point enables learners express their thought with a minimal stock of linguistic means. At another point this results in fossilization of structures which are acquired in a early stage of natural SLA. SLA has more room for cognitive factors to influence and direct the course of its development. It is clear that learning relies on previous knowledge and that over instruction may guide the learner to attend to the salient properties and distinction I the input. Likewise, repeated exposure to the same structure increases the likelihood of its recognition.

### 3. Cognitive Process of Second Language Acquisition

Within cognitive view, interlanguage errors are the product of the cognitive process in second language learning. Selinker (1977; 1997), Ommagio (1986), and Ellis (2004) share a common understanding about such cognitive processes. It was Selinker (1977) who first conceptualized the five cognitive processes/strategies of second language learning. He describes the five processes in terms of:

- language transfer, refers to interference from native language,
- transfer-of-training, errors due to the nature of the language learning materials or approaches,
- strategies of second language learning, errors due to the learner's own approach,
- strategies of second language communication errors due to the way in which the learner communicates with native speakers in natural language-use settings,
- Overgeneralization of TL rules errors due to the way in which the learner restructures and reorganizes linguistic material.

## C. RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, the researcher wants to know interlanguage errors in language strategy. The researcher started from the problems that the students got and after the research ended the researcher hopes that the problems can be solved. For those reasons, the researcher applied quantitative approach since it has purpose to describe interlanguage errors in language learning.

The population of this research is the seventh grade students of SMPN 5 Padang Panjang . There are 11 classes for the seven grade students of the school.

Each class contains more or less 30 students. So the total numbers of the whole students are 313 students. The populations are homogeneous. Each class contains male and female students. The ability of the students is random.

The samples of this research are the seventh grade 1 and the seventh grade 2 of SMPN 5 Padang Panjang. The number of students of each class is 31 students. So, the total number of the students in both classes is 62 students. The researcher purposely took these classes because the researcher has been teaching in these classes besides the English writing skill problem is found here. In determining the sample, the researcher employed cluster random sampling technique to the total population. The use of cluster random sampling is due to the fact that the number of population is large enough, in accordance with Arikunto's statement (2006: 133) that samples can be used if the number of the population is too large to be observed wholly. The technique was used because the subjects of the study were homogeneous and were grouped into two classes. The researcher just took two classes without any special characteristics.

Data collecting techniques, which are used, are test and questionnaire. The test is used to know the students' composition after being given treatment, whether they have better achievement or vice versa. Before the questionnaire is used, it must be tried out to know the validity and the reliability of the instrument. The questionnaire being tried out by the researcher consists of 55 items.

The set of writing test only consisted of one item test. It is used to collect data related to the students' improvements after the treatment is given. The test being given to the students must be valid and reliable. The tried out of the writing test was given to 10 students of SMPN 5 Padang Panjang. The purpose of holding writing test was to know whether the writing test was readable or not. The data are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistic because the researcher wants to give the interpretation of the data and takes a conclusion

## D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 1. Types of Learning Strategy used by the students

Based on Selinkers' taxonomy (1977), the analysis indicates that there were three major learning strategies used by the students, namely: the strategy of first language transfer, overgeneralization and oversimplification. With regards to first language transfer, there are three levels of learning strategy, namely: first language transfer at the level of word, phrase, and sentence.

### a. First Language Transfer

The data show a number first language transfer at word level, namely: the misuse of lexicon or special expression. The students got difficulty to find English equivalents for certain Indonesian words or phrases. They tried to solve the problem by employing word for word translation. It seems that the problem arises due to the gaps in the two languages, the first language (Indonesian) and the target language (English). They turned into the easiest way to bridge the gaps by finding special expression from their first language, that is, the literal translation. To cope with such situation, the students actually can use an explanation or annotation rather than a translation to express such ideas. The following are the examples:

(1) He lives at **Perum Wisma Indah*.

(2) My sister likes **lapek bugih*.

(3) My brother studies in *UNP *jurusan Bahasa Indonesia.

The data also indicates that the students used first language transfer at the level of phrases. They attempted to cope with the problem in expressing their ideas in English by using literal translation or word-for-word translation. Such strategy has brought about a certain result, that is, interlanguage errors as seen in the examples below:

(1) Harimau is **seldom animal* in the earth.

(2) He is **an religion Islamic*.

(3) She **girl beuatiful*.

The students also used Indonesian structure when expressing themselves in English. It is important to point out that there are similarities as well as differences between Indonesian and English structures. On one hand, when similarities exist, the result would be correct and this is called positive transfer as in a sentence “I went to Padang with my mother” (*saya pergi ke Padang dengan ibu saya*). And on the other hand, when differences occur between the two languages the result would be errors or often called negative transfer, as seen in the following examples:

(1) I went holiday to *beach Gondoriah*.

(2) Deny arrived *time 10.00*

(3) She has *personality patient and honest.*

### b. Overgeneralization

The data indicates that overgeneralization is a fundamental learning strategy employed by students. They have activated their linguistic knowledge of the target

language previously learned or acquired (Selinker, 1977 and Corder, 1978). Such strategy is sometimes quite helpful but in other cases it is misleading or inapplicable due to superficial similarities. There are five types of the learning strategy of overgeneralization employed by the students, namely overgeneralization in using article, overgeneralization in using be, overgeneralization in using pronoun, overgeneralization in using verb form, and overgeneralization in using words with similar meaning.

There are two ways to use a noun group to refer to someone or something: the specific and the general way. Using the specific way means we can refer to someone or something, knowing that the person we are speaking to understand which person or thing we are talking about. The is the commonest specific determiner; it is also called the definite article. The second is the general way. It is used when we are talking about people or things in general or indefinite way, without identifying them. A and an are the commonest general determiners; they are also called the indefinite article (Sinclair, 1991). The usage of article is much more complicated. This is the case that might make the students fail to use them. The followings are the examples:

(1) My house is *a big and clean*.

(2) She is *a beautiful*.

(3) I and my family visited *a Jam Gadang*.

The students frequently have difficulties in using “be”. Usually a sentence always needs verb, if there is no full verb it can be given link- ing verb. To “be” also functions as the linking verb. The students are still confused in using to “be”. It is students’ errors that are influenced by target language because they illustrate their attempt to build hypothesis about English from the limited experiences of it in the classroom. They add an unnecessary to “be” to the verb and noun as in the following sentences:

(1) *I am go* to Bukittinggi on holiday.

(2) *She is like* strawberry fruit

(3) *He is go* to school by motorcycle.

In English, there are five different types of pronoun based on its function: subjective, objective, adjective, possessive, and reflexive. Thus, for example for pronoun he, English has *he, him, his, his, himself*. They are actually not quite problematic in form but the usage is rather difficult for students. They sometimes still have difficulties in using them and as a re- sult they have committed errors on pronoun

as in the following sentences:

(1) *He eyes* is small and shinning.

(2) *She nick* name is Jessica

(3) I am very happy *with his*

The students overgeneralized the use of verb form which results in interlanguage errors. *Have and has* are words that have similarity and meaning but have difference function in application. *Have* is used for *subject I, You, We, and They*, while *Has* is used for *subject he, she, and it*. The examples are in the following sentences:

(1) She *have* many friends.

(2) Anggita *have* a tall and lean body

(3) He *have* lunch in the restaurant

The students extend certain meanings beyond their vocabulary master. To cope with this problem, they have tried to use their knowledge to extend their ideas and make errors. In English, there are words that are different in form but similar in meaning. The students have misused some words with similar meaning in their sentences such as in the following examples:

(1) I always give Angelina **eat* every morning and evening.

(2) Situation in the beach very **noisy*.

### c. Oversimplification

The learning strategy of oversimplification can be defined as the strategy of reducing structure to a common denominator as parts of the features. It also can be compared to the strategy of a child's acquisition of its native language; the learners use language that resembles that of very young children. There are two types of learning strategy of oversimplification em- ployed by the students, namely oversimplifica- tion by omitting "be" and oversimplification by omitting's as possessive marker.

A sentence usually needs verb, if there is no full verb it can be given linking verb. To be also have function as the linking verb. The students use the learning strategy of oversimplification by omitting "be" as in the following examples:

(1) Her home___beside my home.

(2) My house___pretty big.

In this case, the students forget or do not understand to give to be in the sentence. Errors made because of the confusion of using to be, so the students omitted "be".

In the sentence, -'s has a function as a sign of the owner of something, in this

case, the students use the learning strategy of oversimplification by omitting -‘s as possessive marker. They do not understand or forget to give -‘s in the sentences. Errors made by the confusion of using -‘s as possessive marker, so the students omitted -‘s in their sentences as in the following examples:

(1) Frida body is small.

(2) Munik house is big …

## 2. The Frequency of Each Type of Learning Strategy

The analysis shows that the highest percentage of errors is the learning strategy of overgeneralization (43.53%). This type includes five different types. First, overgeneralization in using article (2.52%); second, overgeneralization in using Be(10.73%); third, overgeneralization in using pronoun (12.3%); forth, overgeneralization in using verb form (15.77%); and fifth, overgeneralization in using noun with similar meaning (2.21%).

The next most significant proportion number of interlanguage errors is the learning strategy of first language transfer (41.01%). This includes first language transfer at vocabulary level (2.21%), first language transfer at phrase level (11.67%), and first language transfer at sentence level (27.13%).

Finally the number of interlanguage errors which have the lowest percentage is the learning strategy of oversimplification (15.46%). This type includes oversimplification by omitting Be (13.88%) and oversimplification by omitting {S} as possessive marker (1.58%).

**Frequency of Each Type of Learning Strategy**

| Type of Learning Strategy | Freq | % | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Overgeneralization | | | |
| Article | 8 | 2.52% | 43.53% |
| Be | 34 | 10.73% | |
| Pronoun | 39 | 12.30% | |
| Verb form | 50 | 15.77% | |
| Noun with similar meaning | 7 | 2.21% | |
| First Language Transfer | | | |
| Word level | 7 | 2.21% | 41.01% |
| Phrase level | 37 | 11.67% | |
| Sentence level | 86 | 27.13% | |
| Oversimplification | | | |
| Omitting Be | 44 | 13.88% | 15.46% |
| Omitting S as possessive marker | 5 | 1.58% | |
| Total | 317 | 100% | 100% |

From the analysis, it was found that the dominant learning strategy used by the students is the learning strategy of overgeneralization (43.53%). It is greater than the learning strategy of first language transfer used by the students (41.01%). From this we know that the students have the tendency to activate their linguistic knowledge of the target language (English) previously learned or acquired rather than find recourse to the structure of their mother tongue. It occurs because they have already got a considerable knowledge of the target language. In other words, we can say that they attempted to build up hypothesis about the target language (English) from the limited knowledge or experiences of it in the classroom.

This study indicates that there are three types of learning strategies used by the students which result in interlanguage errors. Such errors indicate that the students are in learning process since foreign language learning is a creative construction process. With this view, interlanguage errors should be considered as an inevitable and positive

part of that process. Teachers should have optimistic attitudes towards interlanguage errors. They should be seen as reflections of learners' stage of interlanguage development. Errors must exist in second language learning process.

When learners produce correct utterances, they may tell us (teachers) little about what is going on in their mind; what kind of cognitive mechanism the learners use in learning. Therefore, errors hold vital clues about the process of second language learning. In this case, we may say that their interlanguage knowledge is faulty and the result is errors. Errors are indispensable to the learners themselves, because we can regard the making of errors as the learners' desire to learn. It is the way the learners test their hypotheses about the nature of the target language. That is why the making of errors (as part learning process) is employed not only by those who learn a second language but also by children who acquire their mother tongue. Teachers, therefore, should have positive attitude towards interlanguage errors. They can use interlanguage errors wisely and positively as to go deep into the learners' mind to investigate their learning process. Thus, teachers can be certain with the techniques to help them eliminate the errors in order to develop their interlanguage system.

The research finding is in agreement with Taylor (1975) who conducted a study to investigate how overgeneralization and first language transfer are used in second language learning, and the relationship between the errors due to these two learning strategies. His study was on adult native Spanish speakers. Taylor hypothesizes that, in the early stages of language learning the learner depends more frequently on his native language and makes a greater proportion of transfer errors than the learner in advanced stages. As the learner's knowledge about the target language increases, he will depend less frequently on native language and the proportion of transfer errors decreases while the proportion of overgeneralization increases.

Taylor (1975: 83) hypothesizes that elementary subjects rely more heavily on their native language and make a greater proportion of transfer errors than intermediate sub- jects, while "intermediate subjects rely more heavily on an overgeneralization strategy than do elementary subjects, and the relative proportion of transfer errors is decreased." It is appropriate with the findings of the study since the subjects of this study which are high school students are already in intermediate level.Taylor concludes, "that is, as learner's proficiency increases he will rely less frequently on his native language and on the transfer strategy, and more frequently on what he already

knows about the target language and on the overgeneralization strategy" (Taylor, 1975: 84). Thus, the findings lend only limited supported to Taylor's hypothesis.

Taylor (1975) says that direct translation is more efficient than an oral method because it is difficult to compare the errors made by different speakers: some might make fewer er- rors avoiding some specific structures they are not sure of and others might be more "impulsi- ve." However, he admits that the translation method perhaps "'loads' a study in favour of transfer and interference" (1975: 76). More- over, direct translation may encourage the use of monitor. This methodological problem might have affected the results of the present study with Indonesian learners as well as Taylor's with Spanish learners.

From the observation, it may be predicted that the proportion of transfer errors continues to decrease and that of overgeneralization continues to increase with progressive levels of proficiency, and that overgeneralization will be the dominant strategy for more advanced Indonesian learners of English. Evidence in favour of this prediction would give greater support to Taylor's hypothesis.

One explanation for first language transfer error may have to do with the tendency of the subject or the students to use word forward translation from native language Indonesian to target language (English). This has resulted in interlanguage errors. This strategy is sometimes efficient especially when the structure of both languages Indonesian and English are similar, however when the structure of both languages are different, this first language transfer strategy result in interlanguage error.

The results of this study show that the students have been most confronted with the interference of the target language while there are some errors due to native interference too difficult to overcome. It is very difficult for the language learner to avoid errors because interlanguage errors are inevitable process in foreign language learning. The learning strategy used by students due to their inability to produce the same pattern of the target language.

With this view, interlanguage errors should be considered as an inevitable and positive part of that process. Teachers should have optimistic attitudes towards interlanguage errors. They should be seen as reflections of learners' stage of interlanguage development. Errors must exist in second language learning process. Teachers, therefore, can use interlanguage errors wisely and positively as to go deep into the learners' mind to investigate their learning process. Thus, teachers can be

certain with the techniques to help them eliminate the er- rors in order to develop their interlanguage system.

When learners produce correct utterances, they may tell us (teachers) little about what is going on in their mind; what kind of cognitive mechanism the learners use in learning. Therefore, errors hold vital clues about the process of second language learning. In this case, we may say that their interlanguage knowledge is faulty and the result is errors. Errors are indispensable to the learners themselves, because we can regard the making of errors as the learners' desire to learn. It is the way the learners test their hypotheses about the nature of the target language. That is why the making of errors (as part learning process) is employed not only by those who learn a second language but also by children who acquire their mother tongue. Teachers, therefore, should have positive attitude towards interlanguage errors. They can use interlanguage errors wisely and positively as to go deep into the learners' mind to investigate their learning process. Thus, teachers can be certain with the techniques to help them eliminate the errors in order to develop their interlanguage system.

## E. CONCLUSION

This study indicates that there are three types of learning strategies used by the students which result in interlanguage errors. Such learning strategies indicate that the students are very creative in learning process since foreign language learning is a creative construction process though their learning strategies used result in errors. Thus, we have to be positive in attitude towards interlanguage errors since they are inevitable part of that process. Teachers should have optimistic attitudes towards interlanguage errors. They should be seen as reflections of learners' stage of interlanguage development. Errors must exist in second language learning process.

The present study found that 43.53% of the subjects' errors were attributable to overgeneralization, 41.01% were attributable to first language transfer, and 15.46% were attributable to oversimplification. Analysis of the data indicates that learning strategy of overgeneralization is the most dominant learning strategy used by the subjects resulting in interlanguage errors.

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