
EFL LEARNERS' LANGUAGE TRANSFER IN WRITING SHORT ENGLISH ESSAYS: A STUDY AT ENGLISH DEPARTEMENT OF UNP PADANG

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Abstract

Cross-linguistic influence within multilingual users commonly happens when communication occurs. While using a foreign language, for instance, learners often transfer the first language to the foreign language. The study at the English department UNP Padang shows how students transfer the Indonesian language in writing their short English essays. Linguistic and non-linguistic differences of the two languages are the factors discussed to see how the first language transfer emerged in their writing. Through the analysis of 30 pieces of students' short essay, it is found that students' language transfer is seen in factors of linguistics, such as the structure of topic-prominent transfer and literal translation, pragmatic (concentration progression on cohesion and coherence) and culture (indirectness and implicitness).

Keywords: *crosslinguistic influence, bi/multilingualism, language transfer*

1. INTRODUCTION

In bi/multilingual communities, it is common if language transfer occurs while using one of languages. It can be seen from some dimensions of discourse. In linguistic dimension, the transfer of linguistic features may not be avoided since the system of those languages are different, especially when dissimilarity of two languages is high. In cognitive perspective, in addition, lack of constructing creativity may lead to language transfer. The cultural factor, such as one's cultural mode of thinking reflects his/her rhetorical patterns based on his/her language culture. Thus, language transfer may be seen from the interrelation between first and second language demonstrated by interference of the dominant language.

English as used by the bi/multilingual people is commonly influenced by many factors, one of them is the first language (L1). It may be either in form of positive and negative transfer (see Lekova, 2010: 320). The more similar the first language with the second or foreign language, the less transfer will emerge, and it results positive transfer. This transfer fortunately leads people to understand and catch the meaning of the interaction occurred. On the other hand, the greater the difference of those two languages, the more language transfer will occur in using one of those languages. Then, the misuse of rules happens in the implementation of using the language, which arises negative transfer. As a result, transfer was considered responsible for error occurrences in cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies (Kasper, 1996).

The existence of the second, and/or foreign language influences the interaction among people very much. It is a challenge for the speakers using that language to learn its culture. Schuman (1978) in Steinberg (2001) states that the level of one's conformation to learn the new culture shows his/her maturity in using the language. When the users of the new language have great chance to be in the new community, they may have more opportunity to contact with its native speakers, and simultaneously, they use the language and its culture. On the contrary, they will be interfered by their own language whenever

they just stay in their first language culture, or could not adapt themselves to the new culture while using the new language.

For EFL writers, the transfer of their native language into English influences the proper use of cohesion and coherence in writing. It is believed that linguistic, pragmatic, cognitive, and cultural interference from native language are the main reasons of miscommunication in EFL writing. Regarding cohesion deficiency and improper coherence, it is necessary to examine one of the linguistic differences believed by many scholars as topic-prominent and English subject-prominent language in the scope of discourse (Jespersen, 1992: 53).

There are many aspects that the students should be able to notice while applying discourse competence, namely, thematic organization, cohesive and coherence, logical ordering, style and register, theoretical effectiveness and the co-operative principle. However, improving students' competence to use appropriate English in the classroom by considering grammatical competence and discourse competence is not an easy work. From the product of students' writing in the process of writing class, it indicates that students ability to use the appropriate language by involving all components of discourse competence has not been achieved yet. Even worse, it also happens on students at English department of undergraduate programs, State University of Padang, especially in written production.

Two studies in relation to language transfer conducted at English department UNP Padang by Syarif at al (2013 and Syarif (2014) show that the problematic linguistic elements and discourse competence in the English language use are the causes of interference. One is the intertwined problems in which more cases of linguistic elements found in a single sentence or writing, make the interference more complicated. Another example is the problems that appear on students' writing is lack of ability in elaborating the ideas and relating it in a logical description. The findings show that the learners transferred their native language (Indonesian) in using English writtenly.

Reflected from the phenomena at English Department UNP Padang, in which students have the problems using English, both on linguistic features and discourse in writing, the paper will discuss how language transfer performed in students' short English essay. The focus is on linguistic (cognitive and pragmatic) and cultural transfer that is related to the cohesion and coherence. This will be based on the theoretical review concerning the focus of the study on language transfer.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW

In language socialization, the ways someone enter the new culture is a very important element to consider (Duff in Hornberger, et al., 2010: 428). As the basis of using the language through the interactional process, learning the norms of the language is an example that should be put into a serious consideration. Nevertheless, negative attitude toward the language learned (L2) or its speakers in classroom setting, affects comprehension and concentration in having language activities; even it can damage the function of memory. Brown (2007) claims that this negative attitude usually arises from cultural knowledge of the language got from unexpected programs of television, film, and from printed media. It turns to decrease motivation to learn and use the language.

Due to different cultural patterns, Rusdi (2000) confirmed the interpersonal relationship of Indonesian and Australian people from some studies. Firstly, Kingsbury's finding on his study (1997) is about the different approach of western journalists, particularly Australian and Indonesian that often leads to miscommunication. Australian journalists tend to be frank and confrontational, while the Indonesian aims to avoid open confrontation. Nusyirwan's study (1986) is showing the difference from three cultural

themes that is sociability in the classroom setting (individualism v.s. collectivism) community (maintaining good relationship v.s. ignore), and steady state (relaxed, active, argue with the lecturer v.s. quiet, listen, never argue). The distinction may create the interpersonal conflict or language transfer.

Language transfer is also known as interlanguage, linguistic interference, or crosslinguistic influence. It refers to speakers or writers applying knowledge from one language to another language. According to Selinker (1972: 201) “interlanguage refers to the separateness of a second language learners’ system, a system that has a structurally intermediate status between the native and target languages. Similarly, Nemser (1971: 9) focusses on the same general phenomenon in second language learning but stressed the successive approximation to the target language with his approximative system. Corder (1971: 151) uses the term idiosyncratic dialect to connote the idea that the learner’s language is unique to a particular individual, that the rules of the learners’ language are peculiar to the language of that individual alone. While each of these designations emphasizes on a particular idea, they share the notion that second language learners form their own language system.

In a topic prominent language, a writer emphasizes the topic of the sentence and organizes its syntax by placing the grammatical unit of adverbial as basic sentence structure at the beginning, but with the main clause, subject and predicate, going behind (Shen, 1988: 87). He stated that topic-prominent structure is found to be employed by many Chinese EFL writers, accounting for nearly 50% of the total structures used. Affected by the topic-prominent nature of the Chinese language, the Chinese EFL advanced learners get used to this feature and are therefore fossilized when they write in the target language. That is by repetitively transferring the topic-prominent structure and placing the adverbial phrases or clauses at the very beginning of a sentence. What should be noticed is that this linguistic feature is, in fact, an indication of structural cohesion in the concentration progression pattern. This occurs in many discourses, even in Chinese EFL genre-based English abstracts with sentences starting with, *In order to*, *In this paper*, *With the development of*, *According to*, *Because of*, *Based on*, *When*, and so on.

Another linguistic difference concerning cohesion is the diverse understanding of repetition both in form and function. Linguistically, English and Chinese are two different languages in terms of repetition. English is a language of form demanding many different forms for one single idea in a given passage. So, repetition on both form and function is not common in the English language, except for rhetorical emphasis and power (Fowler & Ramsey, 1992: 63). Meanwhile, Chinese is a language of meaning with fewer forms and repetition. They are used for emphasis and power as well as a linguistic form, strategy, or pattern for cohesion and coherence. Therefore, repetition for cohesion and coherence is widely accepted in a Chinese context for more purposes than simply emphasis or power.

Hinkle (2001: 121) points out that Chinese students tend to resort to rhetorical devices like repetition to reveal the tension of the writer. Regarding cohesion of their writing, repetitive strategy is used in many of Chinese College English Text essays (Liu & Qi, 2010: 3). The topic sentence, for instance, is normally followed by the introductory phrase in the next sentence, such as *it can...*, *it can...*, *for...*, *for...*. It is found that Chinese EFL writers repeat the subject or the object of the sentences again and again. In contrast, this repetition is rarely found as the cohesive strategy in an English mini-essay (Lian, 1993: 23). Then, Instead of saying *the spacecraft* many times, native English speakers tend to use its synonyms such as *the space-shuttle*, or *spaceship*.

Unawareness of pragmatic difference in writing turns to cohesion and coherence deficiency. In this case, Liu & Qi (2010: 3) believe that pragmatically, Chinese EFL technical genre-based writers have been attempting to *translate* the idea prepared in their

mind rather than creating the abstract in their production, for the text translated in English is presented totally in Chinese ways: concentration progression pattern and topic-prominent structure for both cohesion and coherence, simple lexical repetition for cohesion, empty and indirect background for coherence, and over generalization of overt links. They believed that English native speakers are well-trained in textual cohesion and coherence, and also would not transfer those five items mentioned above in the production process.

Cognitive factor is considered as the most important reason when related to the socio-interactive approach, for it shows that writing is an enmeshed network of concept, socially-situated events and behavior (Swales, 2001). Related to this factor, Liu & Qi (2010: 3) state that English writing is process-oriented, writers are audience-oriented and tend to be in a dynamic state of social interaction, a writer has a set of cognitive schema or a network of text principles of audience, unity, cohesion, and coherence demanded for text quality. However, Chinese writing tends to be product-oriented and writer-oriented with few ideas of audience and their expectations. In this case, the audience can easily find that the Chinese writer tends to produce incomprehensible copy due to less consideration of clear social context and audiences, having no knowledge of comparable differences in syntax and text, and therefore has a poor understanding of their expectations of required forms. All of these have a distinct influence on the target language either in reading or writing and on their choices of cohesive and coherence strategies due to the mother culture and language. Besides, repetition is commonly used by EFL writers in their writing is a good illustration of the great impact of different language and culture on the target language writing process.

Socio-cognitive influence of the L1 in the production of abstracts in the target, which is regarded as the “binding power” even though the power of L1 influence is far from absolute (Cook, 1988: 156). The binding in terms of contact settings, cognitive capacities to notice and to categorize is more associated with the cognitive inhibition of the mother language. Cook views the EFL learning as the attainment of a new perspective but not as an escape from the conceptual world, and therefore binding power, of the native language. In this case, socio-cognitive influence in using cohesion and coherence is related to overgeneralization of L2 in term of syntax and text, topic-prominent structure or concentration progression pattern, and choices of repetitive strategies

Related to textual problems, Asian culture has indirectness, implicitness, low illocutionary clarity, and loose logic but not in Western culture (Jia, 1997: 23). The way L1 writers arrange sentences to build coherence in L2 English is confusing for readers of native English. It does not fulfill native readers expectations, and causes misunderstanding and miscommunication for native English has the culture of directness, linear development, high illocutionary, clarity, and tight logic judgment, which is very different from Asian culture (Liu & Qi, 2010: 4).

To sum up, cohesive and coherence problems occur in EFL writing due to the influence of the native language. The main reasons of these problems are related to four major factors: linguistic, pragmatic, cognitive, and cultural factors. The interference of linguistic factor of L1 is related to topic-prominent language and repetition both in form and function. Pragmatic factor includes concentration progression pattern and topic-prominent structure for both cohesion and coherence, simple lexical repetition for cohesion, empty and indirect background for coherence, and over generalization of overt links. Cognitive factor consists of socio-interactive influence and socio-cognitive influence. Cultural factor deals with indirectness, implicitness, low illocutionary clarity, and loose logic.

3. METHOD

The method used is discourse analysis of documents, that is the product of the English short essay of students of English department UNP Padang. It is to discover the systematic features of scientists' discourse, a variety of data of writings (Litosseliti at el. (2010: 124-126). It also determines how certain language forms used in different context in multidisciplinary nature (see Heigham, at al. (2009: 242-247). How far the linguistic and non-linguistic factors contributed to the phenomenon of language transfer in using English on students' essay writing in Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP) is seen from the four perspectives: linguistic (cognitive, pragmatic) and cultural factors from the coherence and cohesion of discourse.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Basically, the transfer of L1 into the English use is faced in students' writing resulted from the effect of lack competence on English rules and cultural internalization. Linguistically, such lack competence showed as the one of top sources of the the transfer in their writings. The following discussion is based on the transferred elements, namely, linguistic (pragmatic, cognitive) and cultural factor.

There was deviation of language of English language rules appeared as shown in the following data:

1. *Nowadays, the progress of technology expend quickly than **ourthink**.*
2. *...or **what everything** we feel.*

The deviation of the two data is analysed only on the word order. The case in datum 1 is on the pronoun *our*, which should be followed by the noun instead of verb *think*. Besides, *than* that functions as the subordinator to connect clauses, the construction after *than* should be a clause, such as ... *the progress of technology expend quickly than **how we think*** with the SV pattern. There are two possible factors faced in this case, first is the lack knowledge on the types of pronoun (subjective, possessive); second is lexical translation. As a result of direct translation of *dugaan kita* in bahasa Indonesia is transferred into *our think* in English (see Liu and Qi (2010). As it is claimed by Shishah (2002: 16) that translation is favored by some L2 writers, and this strategy that is used more by less skilled writers. In datum 2, the use of *what* and *everything* is redundant because they have the same function, that is as the object of the clause *we feel*. In English embedded clause, subordinating conjunction *what* as the replacement of object of the clause automatically substitutes it in initial position, that is ... ***what** we feel*, or it may be directly with the object itself, ... *anything we need*. Here, overgeneral use of subordinating conjunction may be the cause. Indeed, students' competence on linguistic features is really demanded in practising their English in order to avoid grammatical transfer. The deviation is as the result of transferring the Indonesian rules into the English use, as well as literal translating the Indonesian ideas into English.

The lack of students' vocabulary reflected on students' English writing affects the cohesion and coherence of students' writing in English. This is represented in their repeated words/ expressions in their writing. Here is one of them:

3. ***Communication** is very important to help people to share experience and make unknowable information to be clear. One of **communication** that important role in our live is English language. English is one foreign language that needs to be learned.*

Finding hard to get the appropriate word for substituting the word *communication* in the second sentence is the cause of repeating it. Their limited English words also tends to do language transfer. Liu & Qi's (2010: 3) findings about Chinese students' writing are similar to this. There commonly appeared repetitive strategy in many of Chinese CET (College English Text) essays for cohesion. That is in contrast to native speaker writers, in

which repetition is rarely found as the cohesive strategy in an English mini-essay (Lian, 1993: 23). They tend to use synonym or reference.

The tendency to use the same words to express the similar ideas built the products of the writing as inappropriate discourse. The lack of vocabulary leads learners to use the words they have known by ignoring the appropriate context when words are used. As a result, their discourse competence is also affected. Besides, it also leads the learners to transfer the Indonesian vocabularies into English as an impact of their lack vocabulary mastery. It is in line with the idea proposed by Troike (2006) in which two different structure and style of languages can influence the understanding when the language user cannot differ them well. The translation process and the environment which cannot build an effective communication in using English results a worse learners' achievement in acquiring English. They are the factors that cause language transfer when the students directly do translation in their writing (Arifin, 2011). To be considered, Chens (2006) conclusion of his research finding is that understanding linguistic differences between students' L1 and English may help the learners reduce language transfer.

Most of the writers use topic-prominent language by placing the topic rather than the subject at the beginning. Using the concentration progression pattern in writing shows that the pattern of Bahasa Indonesia has already been transferred into English writing. It can be seen in the following data.

4. *As we know that the ability in English of students in Senior High School is lower. The student in SMA has low ability in speaking English.*
5. ***Because of English seems difficult in students, they become lazy to study about it.***

To topicalize the sentence with adverbial phrases or clauses is seemingly the style of Asian writers since the concept of their thinking is not directly to the point (see Shen, 1988 and Rusdi, 2000). Eventhough it is believed that writers have their own styles in writing, the transfer made by the writers in those two sentences affect the meaning of the text since the choice of phrases does not show the appropriateness. Then, this transfer breaks the understanding. This feature is fossilized when they write in the target language by repetitively transferring the topic-prominent structure and placing the adverbial phrases or clauses at the very beginning of a sentence (Liu and Qi, 2010: 3).

In relation to this case, Hinkel (2002: 23) compared the writings of non-native English speakers (NNS) (Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Arabic) to those of native English speakers (NS). One of the major results of the study is that the L2 texts were syntactically and lexically simpler than the L1 texts. This condition indicates that lack of cohesive devices and coherent writing in non-native English speakers.

Moreover, in using English, the topic talked tends to begin with unimportant thing; it is identified from the product of their writing that mostly used redundant parts of the sentences. It can be seen in the following datum.

6. ***They see that, although there are many advantages of using facebook there are also disadvantages of using it.***

The sentence can be actually reduced to become *There are many advantages and disadvantages of using facebook*. The bold typed introductory part of the sentence should be omitted since it is not useful. This shows that the indirect way of expressing thing as the rhetorical pattern in the Indonesian social communication has already been transferred into the English writing (see Jia, 1997: 23). The way how cultural internalization interferes the use of English can be identified from students point of view that they mostly thought what to write in the Indonesian language before they formulated an English sentence.

Hence, this way of thinking should not be used when someone uses the second language (Lekova: 1990) since both of the languages have different language structures and style.

Furthermore, cultural factor plays great role on transferring the L1 in the use of cohesive devices and coherence markers in English writing. Findings of the current study highlight that most of the writers are lack of reading authentic English texts and journals about English teaching. Most of them are not used to reading articles or journal as reading is not their habit. They read only if their lecturers ask them to do so even though they admitted that lack of reading limits their vocabularies. It is widely known that reading is not a part of Indonesian culture.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The transfer of the Indonesian language into English faced on students' writing short essays is pictured out in various linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Students' low competence in the English cognitive and pragmatic knowledge affects them to use their native ways in writing an English essay. The problems in using lexical devices are on the use of unvaried and incorrect reiteration and collocation. As the result, their cohesive and coherent devices tends to form the inappropriate English text. The way the students explore their ideas in writing English essays tends to be indirect and inductive. To begin the talk with unimportant things in writing is their style and custom. Consequently, the sentences are often hard to understand. This is as the reflection of their habit in expressing things in the Indonesian culture. Because of that, the possibility to transfer the Indonesian rules into the English use is reasonable. Then, the proses of cultural internalization occurs.

In order to reduce language transfer, especially in writing, in English language learning, language awareness should be considered to be emphasized by strengthening the activities more on practice beginning from the basic to the more complex patterns. Furthermore, strengthening the cross cultural knowledge in the instruction is needed to be put into account in the subject of *Cross Cultural Understanding*.

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