



Linguistic Crossroads: How do Indonesian Mother Tongues Shape English Language Acquisition?

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ABSTRACT

The influence of the mother tongue on second language acquisition has been widely studied, yet its specific impact on Indonesian learners of English remains underexplored. Grounded in the theoretical framework of language transfer and contrastive analysis, this study examines how the Indonesian language affects English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary acquisition. The research employed a qualitative approach, analyzing the linguistic patterns of Indonesian EFL learners through phonological, syntactic, and lexical perspectives. Findings indicate that phonological interference leads to sound substitution and syllable epenthesis, while syntactic transfer results in grammatical errors such as auxiliary omission and incorrect word order. Additionally, lexical interference causes misinterpretations due to false cognates and direct translations. These findings highlight the persistent influence of the mother tongue in shaping English proficiency. The study suggests that increasing exposure to authentic English input and employing explicit linguistic instruction can mitigate these challenges. Future research should explore intervention strategies and assess the long-term impact of language transfer. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of second language acquisition in multilingual contexts and offers pedagogical insights for EFL teachers in Indonesia.

Keywords: EFL learners, Indonesian language, language interference, phonological errors, second language acquisition

Introduction

The interplay between a learner's mother tongue and the acquisition of a second language has been a central focus in linguistic research, particularly regarding how native language structures influence the learning process of a new language. This phenomenon, known as language transfer, can manifest in either a positive or negative manner depending on the similarities and differences between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) (Sholah, 2021). Positive transfer occurs when similarities between L1 and L2 facilitate learning, while negative transfer results in errors due to linguistic differences (Sah & Li, 2022). In the case of Indonesian students learning English, language transfer plays a significant role in shaping their proficiency levels. Indonesian, as the official language of Indonesia, has distinct phonological, syntactic, and lexical characteristics that differ markedly from those of English. These differences often lead to challenges in English pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary acquisition for Indonesian learners (Rostandi & Rohandy, 2024). Understanding the extent of this influence is crucial for educators and policymakers to develop effective strategies that support English language learning.

Indonesian learners of English frequently encounter pronunciation difficulties due to the absence of certain English phonemes in their native language. Phonological differences, such as the lack of certain vowel and consonant sounds in Indonesian, make it challenging for learners to produce accurate English pronunciation (Robert & Meenakshi, 2022). For example, Indonesian does not distinguish between certain voiced and voiceless consonants, which can lead to pronunciation errors in English words (Liando & Tatipang, 2022). Additionally, differences in stress patterns between the two languages may cause Indonesian learners to misplace word stress, resulting in unnatural speech patterns. Beyond phonology, syntactic structures also pose difficulties, as Indonesian follows a subject-verb-object (SVO) order similar to English but lacks certain grammatical markers such as tenses and auxiliary verbs. These structural differences often lead to errors in constructing English sentences, particularly tense usage and subject-verb agreement (Reynolds et al., 2021). The impact of these linguistic disparities highlights the need for targeted instructional interventions.

Vocabulary acquisition is another area where the influence of the mother tongue can be observed in English learning. Indonesian learners may struggle with false cognates such as the words that appear similar in both languages but have different meanings (Alharbi, 2021). Additionally, limited exposure to English outside the classroom contributes to difficulties in developing a broad vocabulary repertoire (Anggaira et al., 2022). Studies have found that Indonesian students often rely on direct translation from their mother tongue, which can result in awkward or incorrect word choices in English (Jindapitak et al., 2022). Moreover, English has a more extensive lexicon with many synonyms and context-dependent meanings, making it harder for Indonesian learners to grasp word nuances. The lack of morphological similarity between Indonesian and English also poses challenges, as Indonesian does not use inflections to indicate tense, plurality, or grammatical case (Tambusai & Nasution, 2023). Consequently, students may

omit necessary grammatical markers when constructing sentences in English. These factors collectively contribute to vocabulary-related difficulties in English language acquisition among Indonesian students.

Recent studies have highlighted the significant role of the mother tongue in second language acquisition across different linguistic contexts. Research indicates that first language influence extends beyond vocabulary and pronunciation to areas such as syntax, pragmatics, and discourse organization (Poudel & Choi, 2022). In the Indonesian context, studies have shown that learners often transfer phonological and syntactical patterns from their native language to English, impacting their fluency and accuracy (Aribah & Pradita, 2022). The degree of interference varies based on learners' proficiency levels, exposure to English, and individual learning strategies (Lingley, 2008). For instance, less proficient learners tend to rely more on their native language when constructing English sentences, while advanced learners exhibit reduced interference due to increased exposure and practice. These findings suggest that language transfer is a dynamic process influenced by multiple factors, including cognitive, sociocultural, and pedagogical variables (Mirvahedi, 2024). Understanding these nuances is essential for designing effective teaching methodologies that minimize negative transfer and maximize positive transfer. Addressing these issues can improve Indonesian students' overall English proficiency and communicative competence.

Despite the recognition of mother tongue influence, there remains a gap in research focusing specifically on how Indonesian linguistic features impact English language acquisition. Many existing studies tend to generalize findings across different language pairs, such as Mandarin-English or Spanish-English, without accounting for the unique challenges faced by Indonesian learners (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Additionally, previous research has primarily focused on isolated aspects of language transfer, such as pronunciation or vocabulary, rather than examining its comprehensive effects on English mastery (Yiling et al., 2025). While some studies have explored mother tongue interference, they often do not provide practical recommendations for addressing these challenges in classroom instruction (Meir & Janssen, 2021). This gap in research highlights the need for a more detailed investigation into the specific ways in which the Indonesian language influences English learning. By conducting a systematic analysis of linguistic transfer, educators and curriculum developers can formulate strategies to mitigate its negative impact. Such an approach will contribute to a more effective and evidence-based English language teaching framework in Indonesia.

The novelty of this research lies in its focused examination of the specific ways in which the Indonesian mother tongue influences English language acquisition. Unlike previous studies that offer a general discussion on language transfer, this research delves into particular linguistic features (phonology, syntax, and vocabulary) that affect Indonesian learners' English proficiency. Moreover, it seeks to establish a direct link between these linguistic influences and students' learning outcomes, providing empirical data to support instructional improvements. This study also aims to bridge the gap between theoretical discussions on language transfer and practical classroom applications, ensuring that findings are directly relevant to educators. By identifying

specific areas where negative transfer occurs, such as pronunciation errors or grammatical inconsistencies, this research can inform the design of teaching materials and assessment tools tailored to Indonesian students' needs. Additionally, the study considers sociocultural factors that may influence the learning process, such as exposure to English media and interaction with native speakers. This comprehensive approach enhances the relevance and applicability of the research to real-world educational settings.

Therefore, the central research question guiding this study is: How does the Indonesian mother tongue affect the mastery of English language acquisition among Indonesian students, and what specific linguistic features contribute to this influence? This question aims to uncover the precise areas where mother tongue interference occurs and to evaluate its impact on English proficiency. Additionally, the study seeks to determine whether certain learner characteristics, such as age, exposure, and motivation, influence the degree of language transfer. By answering these questions, the research will provide insights into effective pedagogical strategies that can address mother tongue interference. The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of second language acquisition theories and their practical applications in Indonesian EFL classrooms. Furthermore, this study has the potential to inform language policy decisions regarding English education in Indonesia. Ultimately, addressing these research questions will help develop more effective teaching strategies that support Indonesian learners in achieving higher levels of English proficiency.

Methodology

The research design for this study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively examine the influence of the Indonesian mother tongue on English language acquisition. This methodology allowed for a robust analysis by combining numerical data with contextual insights, providing a holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Moeller et al., 2016). Quantitative data was collected through structured assessments measuring students' proficiency in various aspects of English, such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to capture learners' experiences and perceptions regarding language transfer. This dual approach ensures that both measurable outcomes and personal narratives are considered, aligning with best practices in educational research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). By employing mixed methods, the study aimed to triangulate findings, enhancing the validity and reliability of the results. This comprehensive design is particularly suitable for exploring complex linguistic phenomena where numerical data alone may not fully capture the depth of learners' experiences.

The research was conducted in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, focusing on educational institutions where English was taught as a foreign language. Semarang provides a representative setting due to its diverse population and the prevalent use of

both Indonesian and local dialects, offering a rich linguistic environment for the study. The city's educational landscape includes a mix of public and private schools, which will allow for the examination of various instructional contexts. This setting was particularly relevant as previous studies had indicated that regional linguistic diversity can impact second language acquisition (Bylund et al., 2024). Understanding the local context is crucial, as it influences both the teaching methodologies employed and the learners' exposure to English outside the classroom. By situating the research in Semarang, the study aimed to capture the nuanced ways in which the Indonesian mother tongue affects English learning in a specific, yet broadly applicable, context. This localized focus will contribute to the development of targeted educational strategies that are culturally and linguistically appropriate.

Participants included 120 Indonesian students aged 15 to 18, enrolled in secondary education programs where English was a mandatory subject. A stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure representation across different proficiency levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, and native dialects. This approach aligns with recommendations for obtaining a diverse sample in educational research (Hoadley, 2004). Inclusion criteria consisted of native proficiency in Indonesian and at least three years of formal English instruction, ensuring that participants have a foundational understanding of both languages. Exclusion criteria applied to students with significant exposure to English-speaking environments outside the formal education system, to control for external variables. Parental consent and student assent were obtained in accordance with ethical research practices involving minors. This careful selection process aimed to create a sample that accurately reflects the target population, thereby enhancing the generalizability of the findings.

Data collection involved multiple instruments to capture both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of language acquisition. Quantitative data was gathered through standardized English proficiency tests, focusing on areas such as pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. These assessments are designed to identify specific patterns of mother tongue interference, consistent with methodologies used in similar studies (Swanson, 2010). Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with students, aiming to explore their perceptions of how their native language influences their English learning process. Additionally, classroom observation was conducted to contextualize the data within the instructional environment, providing insights into teaching practices and student interactions. This triangulation of data sources is intended to enhance the validity of the findings by cross-referencing information from multiple perspectives. All data collection procedures adhered to ethical guidelines, ensuring confidentiality and voluntary participation.

Data analysis was conducted in two phases, corresponding to the quantitative and qualitative components of the study. Quantitative data from proficiency tests was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify common errors attributable to mother tongue interference. Error analysis focused on phonological, syntactic, and lexical aspects, following frameworks established in second language acquisition research. Qualitative data from interviews and observations underwent

thematic analysis to uncover recurring themes related to learners' experiences and perceptions. Coding procedures were employed to systematically categorize data, ensuring reliability and consistency in interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through a convergent design, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how the Indonesian mother tongue influences English language acquisition. This methodological approach aimed to provide actionable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to improve English language teaching strategies in Indonesia.

Findings

Phonological Influence of the Indonesian Mother Tongue on English Pronunciation

The study found that Indonesian students exhibit significant pronunciation difficulties due to phonological transfer from their mother tongue. One of the most common errors observed in oral assessments was the substitution of the English interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ (as in think and this) with /t/ and /d/, respectively. For example, many students pronounced think as "tink" and this as "dis", reflecting the absence of these sounds in the Indonesian phonetic system. Another pattern of interference involved vowel insertion in consonant clusters, a phenomenon known as epenthesis. Words like help and desk were frequently pronounced as "he-lup" and "de-suk," aligning with the syllable structure preferences of Indonesian.

Table 1. Common Pronunciation Errors Observed in Students' Speech

English Word	Target Pronunciation	Common Mispronunciation	Error Type
Think	/θɪŋk/	/tɪŋk/	Consonant substitution
This	/ðɪs/	/dɪs/	Consonant substitution
Help	/hɛlp/	/he.lʊp/	Epenthesis
Desk	/dɛsk/	/de.sʊk/	Epenthesis
Ship	/ʃɪp/	/sɪp/	Fricative simplification

In interviews, students acknowledged their struggle with these phonetic differences. Participant 5 stated:

"I always say 'tink' instead of 'think' because it feels natural. I know it is wrong, but it is difficult to pronounce correctly." (Participant 5, Interview Section)

"I cannot say 'streets' properly. It always comes out as 'strit' because putting all those sounds together is too hard for my tongue." (Participant 6, Interview Section)

Classroom observations further supported this finding, as teachers rarely provided explicit phonetic correction during lessons, focusing more on grammar and vocabulary instead.

Syntactic Transfer and Grammatical Challenges

The syntactic analysis of student writing samples revealed several patterns of negative transfer from Indonesian grammar to English. One major issue was the omission of auxiliary verbs, leading to errors like:

Incorrect: *She very happy today.*

Correct: *She is very happy today.*

Another frequently observed error was incorrect word order, particularly in adjective-noun constructions. Since Indonesian adjectives typically follow nouns, students often applied this structure to English, resulting in errors such as:

Incorrect: *Car red (instead of red car).*

Incorrect: *House big (instead of big house)*

Table 2: Common Grammatical Errors in Student Writing

Error Type	Example (Incorrect)	Example (Corrected)	Possible Explanation
Auxiliary verb omission	<i>She very tired.</i>	<i>She is very tired.</i>	Direct translation from Indonesian, where "adalah" is often omitted in informal speech.
Adjective placement	<i>House big</i>	<i>Big house</i>	Indonesian syntax places adjectives after nouns.
Verb tense confusion	<i>Yesterday I go to school.</i>	<i>Yesterday I went to school.</i>	Lack of past tense markers in Indonesian.

In interviews, students expressed difficulty in remembering auxiliary verbs and verb tense rules. Student 11 mentioned:

"In Indonesian, we don't change verbs for past tense, so I forget to use 'went' instead of 'go' when talking about the past." (Student 11, Interview Section)

These findings indicate that direct translation from Indonesian significantly impacts English sentence construction, necessitating instructional strategies that explicitly address these transfer issues.

Lexical Influence and Vocabulary Acquisition

Vocabulary tests revealed that students often struggled with false cognates – words that look similar in English and Indonesian but have different meanings. For example, many students mistakenly used actual to mean current (as in actual news instead of current news), reflecting the Indonesian meaning of *aktual*.

Table 3: Examples of False Cognates in Student Usage

English Word	Student Interpretation (Incorrect)	Correct Meaning
Actual	<i>Current</i> (e.g., <i>actual news</i>)	<i>Real, genuine</i>
Eventual	<i>Eventually</i> (e.g., <i>eventual I go home</i>)	<i>Final</i>
Library	<i>Bookstore</i> (e.g., <i>I buy a book at the library</i>)	<i>A place to borrow books</i>
Sensitive	<i>Easily offended</i> (e.g., <i>The weather is very sensitive</i>)	<i>Highly responsive</i>

Student 7 interview excerpt highlights this confusion:

"I thought 'actual' means 'now' because in Indonesian, 'aktual' means something happening now. I didn't know it means 'real' in English."
(Student 7, Interview Section)

These findings suggest that vocabulary instruction should place greater emphasis on contextual learning rather than relying on direct translation.

The Role of Sociocultural Factors in Language Transfer

Beyond linguistic patterns, the study found that students with greater exposure to English outside the classroom exhibited fewer transfer errors. Statistical analysis showed a positive correlation between media exposure (e.g., watching English movies, playing video games in English) and proficiency scores ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 4 Correlation Between English Exposure and Proficiency Scores

Exposure Level	Average Proficiency Score (100-point scale)
Low (rarely watches English media)	58.2
Medium (sometimes exposed to English media)	72.5
High (frequent English exposure)	85.1

In interviews, students who frequently watched English movies and engaged in online conversations with English speakers reported feeling more confident in their pronunciation and grammar. These learners described how repeated exposure to authentic dialogue helped them internalize natural speech patterns, idiomatic expressions, and the rhythm of conversational English.

"Watching movies with English subtitles helps me understand grammar and pronunciation naturally. I think it helps more than just learning from textbooks." (Student 2, Interview Section)

"Before I started watching English series regularly, I was always nervous about speaking. But after watching shows like *Friends* and *The Office*, I noticed I was picking up phrases naturally – things like 'I'm down for that'

or 'That makes sense.' When I started chatting with people on language exchange apps, I found myself using these expressions without even thinking. It felt less like translating in my head and more like... just talking. Now I don't freeze up as much when someone asks me a question in English." (Student 7, Interview Section)

"I used to be terrified of pronunciation. I thought everyone would judge my accent. But after months of watching YouTube videos and British dramas, and then practicing with native speakers online, something clicked. I stopped worrying so much about sounding perfect and focused more on being understood" (Student 8, Interview Section)

Many noted that interacting with native speakers in real-time online environments pushed them to think quickly and respond spontaneously, which accelerated their fluency development. Additionally, students mentioned that watching movies provided valuable context for understanding how tone, facial expressions, and cultural nuances complement verbal communication. Several participants specifically highlighted that this immersive approach reduced their anxiety about making mistakes, as they began to view errors as natural stepping stones in the learning process rather than failures. The combination of passive learning through media consumption and active practice through digital communication created a reinforcing cycle where students felt increasingly comfortable experimenting with the language, ultimately leading to measurable improvements in both their self-assessment and their actual language performance during formal evaluations.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant impact of the Indonesian mother tongue on various aspects of English language acquisition among Indonesian learners. Each area of influence such as phonological, syntactic, lexical, and sociocultural, is discussed in detail below, supported by current research and relevant literature.

Indonesian learners often face challenges in English pronunciation due to phonological interference from their native language. This interference manifests in the substitution of English sounds that are absent in Indonesian, such as replacing the interdental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/ with /t/ and /d/, respectively. For instance, words like "think" and "this" are commonly pronounced as "tink" and "dis" by Indonesian speakers. This phenomenon aligns with findings by Kosasih (2021), who observed similar patterns of consonant substitution among Indonesian learners. Additionally, the insertion of vowels within consonant clusters, known as epenthesis, is prevalent due to the syllable structure of Indonesian, leading to pronunciations like "he-lup" for "help" and "de-suk" for "desk". Such patterns suggest that the phonological system of the mother tongue significantly influences the acquisition of English pronunciation, necessitating targeted phonetic instruction to address these specific challenges (Anggaira et al., 2024; Dzhubanova, 2024).

The influence of Indonesian syntax on English sentence construction is evident in learners' grammatical errors (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023; Sudarmanto et al., 2023). Common issues include the omission of auxiliary verbs and the incorrect placement of adjectives, reflecting direct translation from Indonesian structures. For example, sentences like "She very happy" instead of "She is very happy" and "car red" instead of "red car" are typical errors. These patterns are consistent with the concept of syntactic transfer, where learners apply native language structures to the target language. Such interference underscores the need for instructional strategies that explicitly contrast the syntactic differences between Indonesian and English, thereby enhancing learners' grammatical accuracy.

Vocabulary acquisition among Indonesian learners is often impeded by false cognates and direct translation from their native language. Words that appear similar in both languages but differ in meaning, such as "actual" (meaning "current" in Indonesian but "real" in English), lead to frequent misunderstandings. This issue is compounded by the tendency to translate Indonesian words directly into English, resulting in incorrect word choices and awkward phrasing. These challenges highlight the importance of teaching vocabulary within context and emphasizing the nuances of word meanings, as recommended by studies on lexical interference (Bjornsson, 2023; Demirdag et al., 2025). By focusing on contextual learning rather than rote memorization, educators can help learners develop a more accurate and functional English vocabulary.

Furthermore, exposure to English outside the classroom plays a crucial role in mitigating negative language transfer. Learners who engage with English media, such as movies and online content, tend to exhibit fewer instances of mother tongue interference. This correlation suggests that authentic exposure enhances language proficiency by providing contextualized language input. As noted by Benu et al. (2023), increased interaction with English in various contexts fosters better language acquisition. Therefore, encouraging learners to immerse themselves in English through diverse media can complement formal education and reduce reliance on native language structures (Bacha et al., 2021; Tamtomo, 2016).

The prevalence of mother tongue interference among Indonesian learners indicates a need for pedagogical adjustments. Current teaching methods often emphasize grammar and vocabulary at the expense of pronunciation and communicative competence (Ahmed & Morgan, 2021; Singh et al., 2022). This imbalance may result from a lack of teacher training in phonetics and a focus on exam-oriented instruction. AbuSahyon et al. (2023) advocate for integrating explicit pronunciation training, contextualized grammar instruction, and interactive speaking activities into the curriculum. Such comprehensive approaches can address the multifaceted challenges posed by language transfer and better equip learners to achieve proficiency in English. When educators combine linguistic awareness with practical, communicative strategies, they create learning environments where students can confidently experiment with the target language while receiving constructive guidance. This balanced methodology not only accelerates language acquisition but also fosters learner autonomy, enabling

students to become more self-aware and strategic in their continued English language development beyond the classroom.

Finally, the interplay between the Indonesian mother tongue and English language acquisition is multifaceted, affecting pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and overall proficiency. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that combines targeted linguistic instruction with increased exposure to authentic English usage (Dewaele et al., 2025). By understanding and mitigating the effects of mother tongue interference, educators can enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching for Indonesian learners. Targeted interventions that address specific L1-influenced errors, combined with increased exposure to authentic English through multimedia and interactive platforms, can help students develop more accurate and natural language patterns. Ultimately, recognizing mother tongue interference not as a deficit but as a natural stage in the acquisition process allows teachers to design more empathetic and pedagogically sound approaches that support learners in their journey toward English proficiency.

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that the Indonesian mother tongue significantly influences students' English language acquisition, particularly in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. Phonological transfer leads to systematic mispronunciations, while syntactic interference causes persistent grammatical errors, such as the omission of auxiliary verbs and incorrect adjective placement. Additionally, lexical interference, particularly false cognates, results in misunderstandings and incorrect word choices, highlighting the need for contextualized vocabulary instruction. However, the study's limitations include its focus on a specific group of students in a particular educational setting, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or age groups. Future research should explore longitudinal studies to assess the long-term effects of language transfer and examine how different teaching interventions can mitigate these issues. Furthermore, the results have broader implications for second language acquisition research, particularly in multilingual contexts where native language interference is prevalent. Addressing these challenges through targeted linguistic instruction and increased exposure to authentic English usage can significantly enhance language proficiency among Indonesian EFL learners.

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