

Cognitive Processes Featuring Learner Language: A Study of Indonesian Students Learning English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Committing errors by students who are learning a new language is common. And language containing errors produced by second language learners is termed interlanguage. It is believed that a learner's interlanguage is the product of various learning strategies. The main objectives of this study was to describe and explain the typical cognitive processes which feature the learner language under the study. This study was a qualitative research of second language acquisition in classroom context. The framework used in this study was error analysis discussed by James. Data on learner language were elicited through free composition as it was believed to be the best linguistic forms of closely observed language production. Data analysis used was a kind of contrastive activity; the learner language was contrasted with the target language. The collected data were analyzed using interlanguage framework to describe and explain the features of learner language found in the students' written production. The result of this study revealed some cognitive processes which characterized the learner language. This includes strategy of second language communication, language transfer, and strategy of overgeneralization.

1. INTRODUCTION

Committing errors by students who are learning a new language is common. In SLA perspective, such errors are considered as a sign of human fallibility, for example, as a consequence of incomplete knowledge of the target language on the part of the learner, or inadequacy in the teaching learning process. Language errors are inevitable in learning process including learning a second or a foreign language which requires creativity. Language errors are no longer viewed as mere language deviations from the target language but rather as a source for researching of what goes on in the learners' mind.

Language containing errors produced by second language learners is termed interlanguage by Selinker (1997), referring to a particular linguistic stage second language learners go through during the process of mastering the target language. The main idea is that learners create interlanguage system when trying to express their ideas in the target language. It is the linguistic system that characterize the output of language learners at any stage of learning prior to complete acquisition of the target language. Since its first interlanguage conception in 1972 by Selinker, the term interlanguage has undergone reformulations to avoid the comparative fallacy of target language comparisons. This has prompted the alternative term, that is 'learner language', referring, in a strict sense, to the oral or written language produced by second language learners (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

Within the SLA research, linguistic samples of learner language are collected and studied with a particular objective, that is, to gain insights into the learners' developing linguistic knowledge of the second language. It is believed that the learners' speech and writing is considered to provide the clearest evidence of their linguistic knowledge (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). In other words, learner language serves as the primary data for the investigation of second language acquisition and it is thus necessary for SLA researchers to infer learners' second language competence from their productive performance.

The resulting learner language theory that is quite relevant today is summarized by Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005) as follows: (1) a learner's interlanguage primarily comprises implicit linguistic knowledge; (2) a learner's interlanguage knowledge constitutes a system in the same way as a native speaker's grammar is a system. This system accounts for the regularities that are apparent in the learner's use of the L2; (3) a learner's interlanguage is permeable, i.e. the system is open to influence - it is easily penetrated by new linguistic forms from the outside (through input) as well as inside (through internal processing); (4) a learner's interlanguage is transitional. The learner restructures their interlanguage grammar as they revise their hypotheses about the new language. This development involves a series of stages; (5) a learner's interlanguage is variable. At any one stage of development the learner employs different forms for the same grammatical structure; (6) a learner's interlanguage is the product of various learning strategies. One such strategy is L1 transfer but other strategies are intralingual, e.g. overgeneralization or simplification; (7) a learner may supplement their interlanguage by means of communication strategies (e.g. paraphrase or requests for assistance) to compensate for gaps or difficulty in accessing L2 knowledge while performing; (8) a learner's interlanguage may fossilize, i.e. the learner may stop developing and thus fail to achieve a full native-like grammar.

This study focuses solely on characteristic of learner language number 6 mentioned above, that is, a learner's interlanguage is the product of various learning strategies. Selinker's (1997) description of the interlanguage system has a cognitive 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 are the product of the cognitive process in second language learning. He suggests that there are five processes central to second language learning, namely: (1) Overgeneralization. Some of the rules of the interlanguage system may be the result of the overgeneralization of specific rules and features of the target language; (2) Transfer of Training. Some of the components of the interlanguage system may result from transfer of specific elements via which the learner is taught the second language; (3) Strategies of Second Language Learning. Some of the rules in the learner's interlanguage may result from the application of language learning strategies "as a tendency on the part of the learners to reduce the target language to a simpler system; (4) Strategies of Second Language Communication. Interlanguage system rules may also be the result of strategies employed by the learners in their attempt to communicate with native speakers of the target language; (5) Language Transfer. Some of the rules in the interlanguage system may be the result of transfer from the learner's first language.

There have been a number of research on learner language features in home country setting, i.e. Indonesia such as those which have been conducted by Fauziati (2017), Riyanto (2012), and Sutopo (2013). These studies particularly focused on learners' second or foreign language written production. These studies had common findings that interlanguage errors in the learners' written production were at various linguistic levels, e.g. phonology, morphology, and syntax. Fauziati (2010) in particular confirmed that the learners' interlanguage grammars were not fossilized. Despite the enlightening findings, these studies, however, did not particularly investigate any of the interlanguage features commonly occur in learner language. In addition, Long's (1990) study on interlanguage concluded that learners' interlanguages exhibit systematicity which manifests itself in many ways, including the regular suppliance and non-suppliance of both targetlike and nontargetlike features in certain linguistic contexts and in the persistence of the same errors. Thus, interlanguages appear to be rule-governed. Martínez and Cabrera (2002) in their narrative qualitative analysis of the interlanguage of compulsory secondary education students in the canary islands found that overgeneralisation of grammatical rules and principles was very common. That is why the learners' interlanguage errors are

systematic. The present study is meant to extend the previous studies by focusing more on the interlanguage features commonly found in the learner language.

The problem statement addressed in the current study says: What typical cognitive processes which feature the learner language under the study and how is the linguistic realization of the cognitive processes? This study is very significant as it can give us (teachers) vivid pictures of the common phenomenon usually occur in second language learning. In general, it can give insights into several aspects of adult second language learning such as the resources, the process, and the constraints on adult second language learning.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study was a qualitative research of second language acquisition in classroom context. Chaudron (1990) called it classroom second language acquisition while Ellis (2006) instructed second language acquisition. The framework used in this study was error analysis discussed by James (2014). This was carried out on the students' composition to identify and collect data on the learner language, to describe, and explain the data.

The research subjects were were 60 students of grade eleven of Muhammadiyah Senior High School of Surakarta, central Java, Indonesia. All students had studied English for at least five years through formal instruction at schools.

Data on learner language were elicited through free composition as it was believed to be the best linguistic forms of closely observed language production. The learners could use freely any patterns or rules they had learned or acquired for their own communication purposes. The students were required to write free composition in the classroom under direct supervision of the researchers. Then they submitted their work to the researchers. The free composition around 250-300 words.

Data identification was a kind of contrastive activity; the learner language was contrasted with the target language. The learner language included in the data were sentences containing errors either ungrammatical and/or unacceptable. The erroneous sentences collected from the students' composition and these were used as the primary data of this research.

The collected data were analyzed using interlanguage framework to describe and explain the features of learner language found in the students' written production. This includes the typical features of learner language found in the students' written production and the linguistic realization of the interlanguage features in the students' work.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study revealed some cognitive processes which characterized the learner language. This includes strategy of second language communication, strategy of language transfer, and strategy of overgeneralization.

3.1 Strategy of Second Language Communication

When attempting to communicate ideas in written expressions, the students frequently found it difficult because of the gaps in their linguistic repertoire. To anticipate such problem, they found an alternative way of getting the meanings across. They used the strategy of code switching. They code switched from English into Indonesian. The Indonesian lexical items they have utilized are of two different forms: unmodified Indonesian words and modified Indonesian words.

Switch into First Language without Modification: When switching from English into Indonesian, the students used full replacement of Indonesian words (Tarone, 2006). In other

words, they did not make any modification to the words they use such as in the sentences: "Our activities on Sundays are singing, dancing, and doing *karawitan*; We watch *wayang kulit* performance at Sri Wedari Solo; I live in *kampung/desa* Tohudan;

The sentences exemplifies how the students switched from English into Indonesian since they got problem in finding the direct English equivalents of the social cultural-bound words. Therefore, they consciously code switched from English into Indonesian abruptly when their interlanguage vocabulary was not adequate to convey the thought. They utilized their limited knowledge to cope with their limitation capacity in the target language. It can be deduced that the students switched into their native language as cognitive strategy to cope with vocabulary problem. Switches into First Language with Slight Modification: The study also revealed that the students switched from English into Indonesian with a slight modification. In other words, they did not use full replacement of Indonesian words but had slightly modified the forms so that they look like English such as in the examples: "We study English *energically* because we have national examination; She used *acesori* in her neck; The prince look very have *kharismatic*. The resulting words (*energically*, *acesori*, and *kharismatic*) actually do not exist in English. These words are taken from Indonesian words *enejik*, *aksesori*, and *karismatik* and happen to be cognates.

3.2 Strategy of Transfer

This study revealed that some erroneous sentences had the similar characteristics of the students' first language. Such erroneous sentences that can be traced back to their first language were undoubtedly the results of language transfer. It gives us fact that they made use of what they already know about first language to make sense of the second language. In other words they utilized their first language experience as a means of organizing the target language data in the area of vocabulary as well as grammar.

Transfer in Vocabulary: When attempting to express the intended meanings, the students frequently transferred into Indonesian words in their English written production especially when dealing with specific expression. for examples, they wrote "They always prayed to get *peringkat* in class; They prayed to get *beasiswa* for studying abroad; They play *jamuran* in the school yard. It is factual the students had problems to find equivalence in English. Consequently, they cope with the dilemmas by transferring into Indonesian, their first language.

Transfer in Grammar: Grammatical transfer in the students' written production was quite noticeable. This marked the feature of the learner language. The students used the linguistic system, especially the grammar, they knew best from their native language. For example, the wrote "Mommy said, "sweety, let's wake up, *it is already morning* (Indonesian: *sudah pagi*); In the morning I get up to bathe *straight to change clothe* (Indonesian: *langsung ganti baju*); *Until in school* (Indonesian: *sampai di sekolah*) I playing together my friends; Mr. Ridho bagus was just one *couple husband and wife* (Indonesian: *pasangan suami istri*) who lived happily.

The phenomena above can be explained through language transfer theory. The data revealed that the students' mother tongue affected their learning a foreign language. As there are differences between their mother tongue and the target language, the students' mother tongue functioned rather negatively, in a sense that the students produced ill-formed English.

3.3 Strategy of Overgeneralization

This study revealed that overgeneralization was a fundamental learning strategy featuring the learner language. The students activated any linguistic knowledge of the target language previously learned or acquired to help them express their ideas in English.

Lexical Overgeneralization: The students overgeneralized some vocabularies because they did not notice that the words had similarity in meaning but different in application. For example, they wrote " A bike, motor cycle, or a car are means to *carry* (English: transport) you to some places; I always hear (English: listen) Radio Prambos every morning with Gina and Desta.

Such words (carry and transport, hear and listen) are semantically identical but different in forms or they are false friends. The similarity lies in the basic component of meaning. Such condition often brought the students to overgeneralize the use of such words. This can be explained as the result of an activation process in which more than one lexical items (cohorts) present themselves as candidates for the expression of a concept. The students misused of such words because a group of the lexical items within cohorts were often semantically related.

Grammar Overgeneralization: In the area of grammar it is clearly seen that the students also utilized overgeneralization strategy. They used this strategy to cope with the inherent difficulty of the second language. The analysis showed that overgeneralization in the area of affixation, preposition, wordiness, and parallel construction.

The strategy of grammar overgeneralization was in the use of pronoun. When expressing ideas in English, we constantly refer to thing or person we have already mentioned or about to mention. We do this by repeating the noun group, but unless there is a special reason to do so we are likely to use a pronoun instead. In English, there are five different types of pronoun based on its function: subjective, objective, adjective, possessive, and reflexive. These area seems often problematic for the students, resulting in the existence of learner language. The findings showed they overgeneralized the use of pronoun in different cases. For example, they wrote "*Him* liked a thief; *They* mother very confused; All family made a surprise birthday party for father *him*; *Him* father looked happiness; *Her* have a boyfriend".

The second is overgeneralization in using affixation. The data showed that the students frequently had difficulties when dealing with words formed through derivational process. A major type of word formation, in which a certain kind of affix (derivational) is used to form new words. Derivational affixes often change the part of speech of the base form. Such as *read* is a verb whereas *readable* is an adjectives. This was a problem for them. This was obviously seen in their chaotic use of words and whether to choose *skill*, *skilled*, or *skillful*; *punish*, *punished*, or *punishment*; *violate*, *violation*, or *violator*.

The data showed that they did not have difficulty in the form, rather, on which form to be used for a certain construction (the usage). To cope with this problem they activated the highly automatized English affixes they already acquired (overgeneralization strategy).

The third overgeneralization strategy was in using preposition. The data revealed that that preposition frequently emerged as a serious problem. Preposition is one of the linguistic elements which is difficult to acquire especially by the Indonesian learners of English. Compared to Indonesian, English has greater number of preposition. Furthermore, there are no fixed rules as how to use prepositions. Prepositions therefore cannot be acquired easily by the learners. In addition, there is no one to one equivalent of Indonesian and English preposition.

This condition led them to wrongly use the preposition. In choosing preposition, they often merely activated the one already internalized in their mind since their early learning of English (overgeneralization). For example, they got the knowledge that the Indonesian *di* has its English equivalent *in*. They, then, used this ready stock preposition in different cases, resulting in wrong use of preposition such as *in* "in the other hand," "in Monday and in Wednesday," "in another time," etc.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study revealed some underlying cognitive strategies reflected in the students' language, namely: strategy of second language communication, language transfer, overgeneralization. In essence, I could draw a conclusion that the students had been most confronted with problems on vocabulary, especially in finding adequate equivalents for the key words. They certainly got difficulties in translating Indonesian cultural-bound words into English. In addition, they did not notice several words which seemed to be adequate equivalents but turned out to be false friends. And to make things worst, they got inadequate capability in translation skills that they use literal translation when expressing the intended meanings. And to cope with such difficulty, the students used cognitive processes by relying on the linguistic knowledge the already acquired, that is, linguistic knowledge from the learners' native language known as transfer as well as linguistic knowledge from the target language known as overgeneralization.

In other words, the learner language was the product of cognitive process appeared to be much dependent on both native language and the target language. One thing is very clear. Having fewer resources at their disposal in the target language, they relied on the knowledge they already knew, either from their native language or the target language to help them cope with the problem. In one situation, they relied extensively on their native language and in another situation, they relied on the target language grammar but did it wrongly by over generalizing or simplifying the rules. Thus, code switching, language transfer, and overgeneralization were the result of cognitive processes, which manifest themselves in strategies of code switching, transfer, and overgeneralization. These strategies can help learners to cope with the complexity of the TL grammatical system.

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