

## **INTERFERENCE IN LEARNING ENGLISH: GRAMMATICAL ERRORS IN ENGLISH ESSAY WRITING AMONG RURAL MALAY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA**

*Marlyna Maros, Tan Kim Hua & Khazriyati Salehuddin  
School of Language Studies and Linguistics  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi*

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to present an analysis of interference effect, a factor that plays an important role in inhibiting the acquisition of English among young Malay learners in Malaysian schools. The data substantiating the discussion throughout this article came from an empirical study of errors in essays written by Form One students in six schools in Malaysia. The findings of the study show that despite having gone through six years of learning English in school environment, the learners are still having difficulty in using correct English grammar in their writings. The three most frequent errors are: 1) the use of articles, 2) subject-verb agreement, and 3) copula 'be'.

*Keywords: Interference, acquisition, grammatical errors*

### **Abstrak**

Makalah ini memaparkan analisis kesan gangguan bahasa pertama ke atas penguasaan bahasa kedua, suatu faktor penting yang menghalang penguasaan bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua dalam kalangan pelajar-pelajar Melayu. Perbincangan makalah ini disokong oleh data empirikal dalam bentuk kesalahan tatabahasa yang diperolehi daripada penulisan esei ringkas oleh pelajar-pelajar Tingkatan Satu di enam buah sekolah di Malaysia. Analisis mendapati bahawa, walaupun telah mempelajari bahasa Inggeris selama 6 tahun, pelajar-pelajar tersebut masih mengalami kesukaran dalam penguasaan tatabahasa Inggeris dalam penulisan mereka. Kesalahan tatabahasa yang kerap dilakukan adalah daripada aspek penggunaan artikel, *subject-verb agreement*, dan copula 'be'.

*Kata kunci: gangguan bahasa pertama, penguasaan bahasa Inggeris, kesalahan nahu*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The strong version of Contrastive Analysis (CA) claims that the differences between first language (L1) and second language (L2) structures will result in negative transfer due to the transfer of old habits into new ones. However, this version of CA is only predictive in nature and is not always true. Errors made by learners give us better insights into the process of language learning. Due to this, errors are now regarded as a very important tool for diagnostic purposes in language teaching, at least in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

### **BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

This article analyses the influence of the Malay language on learning English in a number of selected rural schools. Studies carried out done by Nooreiny et al. (2003) and Shaari (1987) among others, found that despite going through the same curriculum, the level of English

proficiency in rural schools is much lower than the level in the urban schools. Shaari (1987), in particular, found that the major difficulty faced by many of the students is learning the English grammar.

This difficulty may also be attributed to the environment in which language acquisition occurs. In the case of Malay students, most of them tend to use the Malay language when interacting with their family members and friends in their home environment as well as in school. They also use their mother tongue to converse with their non-Malay peers who are fluent in the Malay language too. Hence, they hardly use English outside the language classroom, resulting in weak performances in their writing, reading, speaking and listening skills. The problem is most obvious when it comes to examinations. It is always difficult to find students writing their essays with very few grammatical errors; specifically in the use of tenses and word order. When the problem is obvious, teachers or educators need to understand both the linguistic and nonlinguistic causes of the errors. Within the second language acquisition perspective, two ways of looking at these problems are through contrastive and error analyses. These two ways formed the bases for analysis in this study.

This article presents one of the many contributions of contrastive and error analyses in understanding the phenomena of second language acquisition, especially in the acquisition of a global language, i.e. English, in an EFL context. The factors that set this article apart from others discussing related matters are the subjects, schools, and area selected.

## **METHOD**

The subjects for this research were Form One<sup>1</sup> students from 6 rural schools in three different states of Malaysia, namely Pahang, Selangor and Melaka. Two schools were selected to represent each state with 20 students representing each school. The students were selected from the intermediate proficiency group to facilitate the collection of analyzable essays of a certain level. The rationale for choosing Form One is because at this stage, the students would have been taught substantial grammatical items to write short essays, which is pertinent as the source of data for this research. Intermediate proficiency means the score of B and above in their Year Six National Examination.

At the initial stage of data collection, permission was sought from the class teachers involved to allow half an hour of the class' time for free writing activity. The students were given the liberty of selecting the topics but these have been found to evolve around "My best friend" and "My family".

Data were analysed following Norrish's (1992) approach to conducting Error Analysis. This includes sample collection, identifying errors, describing errors, explaining and evaluating errors. Contrastive analysis was used as part of the procedure to explain the occurrences of errors.

## INTERFERENCE IN LEARNING ENGLISH: THE ERRORS

It should be stated here that even though in principle, there were 120 essays, only half of them were analyzable - the other half were simply incomprehensible, hence could not be included in any categories of errors. This has been anticipated as given the area of study, and the social as well as academic backgrounds of the students, most students in the rural areas may have only attained the English language at the intermediate level of proficiency (Hazita 2006).

The length of the essays ranged from 56 to 385 words. Based on the kinds of errors observed, determiner, subject-verb agreement, and copula “be” are the three most problematic grammatical categories among the learners.

The following sections discuss these three most frequent types of errors in the data.

### I. DETERMINER

Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) describe ‘determiner’ as a special class of words that limits (or determines) the nouns that follow them. These words could be in the form of articles (the, a(n)), demonstratives (this, that, these, those), possessive determiners (my, your, his, her, its, our, their) and quantifiers (one, two, ten million). Structurally, a determiner precedes an adjective if there are adjectives in the noun phrase. In cases where no adjectives are present, they are positioned directly in front of a noun. Where the sentence “I put my books on the huge table.” is concerned, two determiners can be detected. The first is ‘my’, a possessive determiner that precedes the noun ‘books’ while the second is ‘the’, a definite article that precedes the adjective ‘huge’. In both cases, both ‘my books’ and ‘the huge table’ are noun phrases.

Determiners of the English language are often restricted with respect to the number and or countability of the head nouns with which they can co-occur. These agreement features are important information about determiners and nouns that are unique to a language like the English language (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999, 83).

Similar to determiners in English, determiners in the Malay language also form part of a noun phrase. Coined as ‘kata penentu’ (words that determine) in the Malay grammar (Abdullah Hassan 1993, 54), the Malay equivalent to the English determiner, however, is often illustrated as, and only limited to, the words ‘itu’ (that) and ‘ini’ (this). These words, on the other hand, are described by the Kamus Dewan (Fourth Edition) as ‘kata penunjuk’ (words that point).

Nik Safiah Karim (1995, 14-5), on the other hand, classifies both ‘itu’ and ‘ini’ as demonstrative determiners and definite articles. She illustrates the use of ‘itu’ as definite article in *Pelukis itu rakyat Australia* (The artist is an Australian citizen). She also shows in her paper that the Malay sentence can also be translated as ‘That artist is an Australian

citizen’ – only that the one with the word that has both deictic and numeral connotations; and that the example she chooses is not in relation to the above Malay sentence.

In comparing the Malay grammar to that of the English, Nik Safiah Karim (1995, 9-15) demonstrates the use of the English determiners (shown in italics) as shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Malay determiners and their English equivalents

Malay Structure	English Structure
Pekerja <i>itu</i> telah tiba. (Noun + <i>Det: Dem</i> <sup>2</sup> )	<i>The</i> worker has arrived. ( <i>Det: Art</i> + Noun)
Pelanggan <i>saya</i> Puan Chong (Noun + <i>Det: Pos</i> <sup>3</sup> )	<i>My</i> client is Mrs Chong. ( <i>Det: Pos</i> + Noun)
Sepupu <i>dia</i> pekerja kilang. (Noun + <i>Det: Pos</i> )	<i>His</i> cousin is a factory worker. ( <i>Det: Pos</i> + Noun)
Teman <i>saya</i> sangat rajin. (Noun + <i>Det: Pos</i> )	<i>My</i> friend is very industrious. ( <i>Det: Pos</i> + Noun)
Ibu <i>itu</i> (Noun + <i>Det: dem</i> )	<i>That</i> mother ( <i>Det: dem</i> + Noun)
Seluar biru <i>ini</i> (Noun + Adj + <i>Det: dem</i> )	<i>This</i> blue trousers ( <i>Det: dem</i> + Adj + Noun)
Seluar biru <i>abang ini</i> (Noun+ Adj + <i>Det: Pos</i> + <i>Det:Dem</i> )	<i>This</i> elder brother’s blue trousers ( <i>Det:dem</i> + <i>Det: Pos</i> + Adj + Noun)
Pegawai kanan <i>itu</i> (Noun + Adj + <i>Det: Dem</i> )	<i>That</i> senior officer ( <i>Det: Dem</i> + Adj + Noun)

Despite the difference in the terms used, both Malay linguists agree that structurally, the words ‘itu’ and ‘ini’ have to be the final element in any Malay noun phrases. Should there be modifiers after the head noun, the modifiers come between the head noun (on the left) and the kata penentu (on the right). Abdullah Hassan (1993, 54) stresses that there must not be any other word after the kata penentu in the Malay noun phrase. Abdullah Hassan’s description is true to a certain extent because he does not regard numerals as determiner.

In the following subsections instances of the incorrect usage of English determiners, particularly the omission and the wrong form of English determiners are illustrated.

**a. Omission of Determiner**

In the Malay grammar, the name of specific places or location like ‘park’, ‘canteen’, ‘school’, ‘sea’ need not be collocated with determiners, unless those places or locations have been specified earlier, or expressed deictically. Unlike the Malay language, the mentioning of those

places or location in the English language, requires a determiner, in any cases. If the expressions are not expressed deictically, it will then be expressed either with a definite article, or an indefinite article. Thus, where this research is concerned, the students failed to insert the article ‘the’ and produced sentences shown in Table 2.

Table 2 The absence of ‘the’ for specific places or locations

Erroneous form	Correct form
* 1. Sometimes I bring it to __ park to play. <i>Malay: Kadang-kadang, saya membawanya ke taman untuk bermain.</i>	Sometimes I bring it to the park to play.
* 2. He works as a meter reader at __ Jerantut Water Department. <i>Malay: Dia bekerja sebagai seorang pembaca meter di Jabatan Air Jerantut.</i>	He works as a meter reader at the Jerantut Water Department.

Malay grammar also does not require one to have any form of determiner in front of instruments like komputer, piano, internet. English grammar, however, requires the instruments mentioned above (computer, piano, internet) to be preceded by determiners and if neither a possessive determiner nor a demonstrative determiner is used, the use of either a definite article or an indefinite article is necessary. Thus, the ungrammatical sentences in Table 3 could be the result of interference of the Malay language structure on English:-

Table 3 The absence of ‘the’ for instruments

Erroneous form	Correct form
* 3. Sometimes I do my revision from __ internet. <i>Malay: Kadang-kadang saya mengulangkaji menerusi internet.</i>	Sometimes I do my revision using <u>the</u> internet.
* 4. She plays __ piano while I sing. <i>Malay: Dia bermain piano sementara saya menyanyi.</i>	She plays <u>the</u> piano while I sing.

### **b. Wrong form of determiner**

Some determiners of the English language have to agree with the noun that comes after it – a property that does not apply to the Malay language. Thus, ‘\*this balls’ would be ungrammatical and the correct version would be ‘these balls’. The example in Table 4 shows that the choice of determiner could be to the interference of the students’ mother tongue.

Table 4 This + singular N and error

Erroneous form	Correct form
* 5. All <u>this</u> countries lost their property. <i>Malay: Kesemua negeri tersebut kehilangan harta mereka.</i>	All <u>these</u> countries lost their property.

Where possessive determiners are concerned, the forms of the Malay possessive determiners are similar to that of the noun in question. In mentioning “my ball”, a person would express it in Malay as ‘bola saya’, with ‘saya’ in the similar form as the nominative case for ‘I’. The forms of the Malay possessive determiners also remain the same when a proper name is used. For example, for ‘Ali’s ball’, the grammatical Malay form would be ‘bola Ali’, with no inflections of any forms are required. Possessive determiners in the form of common nouns would also remain the way a common noun would look like and these common nouns also come after the head noun. In contrast, the forms of English possessive determiners are dissimilar to that of the noun in question. ‘My ball’, for example, would take a genitive form as it is a genitive case, while ‘Ali’ would have to be inflected to ‘Ali’s’ to show that Ali is the possessor of the ball. Common nouns also have to be inflected to ‘teacher’s ball’ to show that the ball belongs to the ‘teacher’ and all of them come before the head noun.

Table 5 Possessive determiner errors

Erroneous form	Correct form
* 6. During <u>I</u> leisure hours, I collect stamps. <i>Malay: Pada masa lapang saya, saya mengumpul setem.</i>	During <u>my</u> leisure hours, I collect stamps.
* 7. My mother_ name is Zaleha binti Yusuff. <i>Malay: Nama ibu saya ialah Zaleha binti Yusuff.</i>	My mother_’s name is Zaleha binti Yusuff.
* 8. <u>She’s</u> hobby is drawing. <i>Malay: Hobinya melukis.</i>	<u>Her</u> hobby is drawing

The above sub-sections clearly show that the use of Contrastive Analysis might just be the best tool to teach English determiners to Malaysians despite being an unpopular approach. This is because the above data show that the ESL learners are going through a diverging phenomenon of language learning, where a linguistic item in the students’ mother tongue (or first language) can be expressed in different ways in the English language. It is hoped that the above data could help teachers to plan their English lessons and approach their teaching of English determiners in the manner that is most appropriate to their students.

## II. SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT (SVA)

English grammar requires the subject and verb to agree in number: both must be singular, or both must be plural. Problems occur in the present tense because one must add an -s or -es at the end of the verb when the subjects or the entity performing the action is a singular third person: he, she, it, or words for which these pronouns could substitute. Other forms, do not take inflection.

Table 6 Agreement with numbers

Person	Singular	Plural
1 <sup>st</sup>	I like ice cream.	We like ice cream.
2 <sup>nd</sup>	You like ice cream.	You like ice cream.
3 <sup>rd</sup>	He /She/ It / The cat/ Fariz/ My mother likes ice cream.	They like ice cream.

The rule tells learners to use the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular inflection (-s) if the subject is a:

Singular proper name (Adam, Amelia, UKM)

Singular common noun (river, university, professor)

Mass noun (fruit, water, cereal)

Third person singular pronoun (he/she/it)

Elsewhere, no inflection is used in the present tense:

Table 7 Agreement and (non)inflections

3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular inflection	No inflection
Bob walk <u>s</u> to school.	The students walk to school.
The bus stop <u>s</u> here.	Those buses stop elsewhere.
This water taste <u>s</u> funny.	(I, You) like fried rice.
My mother like <u>s</u> fried rice.	(We, You, They) like fried rice.

### a. Agreement in Malay

In Malay grammar, there is no such thing as a subject-verb agreement rule that requires inflections based on the number of the subject. The four basic sentence structures in Malay below (adapted from Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2004, 322)) show that the number or status of the subject does not affect the verb structures in the predicates and predicate sentences in Malay are constructed on either one of the four basic structures:

Table 8 Basic structure in Malay sentences

Structure	Subject	Predicate
1	NP <i>Saya/Ali/Dia/Mereka/Emak saya</i> (I/AlI/He/She/They/My father)	NP <i>Guru</i> (teacher)
2	NP <i>Saya/Ali/Dia/Mereka/Emak saya</i> (I/AlI/He/She/They/My mother)	VP <i>Makan nasi.</i> (eat/eats rice)
3	NP <i>Saya/Ali/Dia/Mereka/Emak saya</i> (I/AlI/He/She/They/My mother)	AP <i>Sangat rajin</i> (very hardworking)
4	NP <i>Rumah saya/Ali/Dia/Mereka/Emak saya</i> (My/AlI's/His/Her/Their/My mother's house)	PP <i>Di Kampung Baru</i> (at Kampung Baru)

Based on the above table, the suffixes that accompany the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun in English sentences is not of a concern in Malay sentences. Therefore for the first table (Table 6) that outlines the rule of English present tense third person singular suffix, -s or -es, the equivalent translation of the sentences in Malay would be shown in Table 9 below:

Table 9 English Structures with Malay equivalents

Person	Singular	Plural
1 <sup>st</sup>	I like ice cream. Malay: <i>Saya suka aiskrim.</i>	We like ice cream. Malay: <i>Kami suka aiskrim.</i>
2 <sup>nd</sup>	You like ice cream. Malay: <i>Awak suka aiskrim.</i>	You like ice cream Malay: <i>Kamu semua suka aiskrim.</i>
3 <sup>rd</sup>	He/She/It/The boy/Fariz/My mother likes ice cream. Malay: <i>Dia/Benda itu/Budak lelaki itu/ Fariz/Emak saya suka aiskrim.</i>	They like ice cream. Malay: <i>Mereka suka aiskrim.</i>

### b. Omission of the third person singular -s

The rule of a third person singular inflection in English causes confusion among Malay learners of English whose first language (L1) does not inflect a verb based on the status of the subject. Thus the third person singular marker in English is often omitted by the learners as shown in the sentences in Table 10:



Table 10 Omission of third person singular inflection in English by Malay learners

Erroneous form	Correct form
* 8. She <u>work</u> at Istana Hinggap as an operator. <i>Malay: Dia bekerja di Istana Hinggap sebagai operator.</i>	She <u>works</u> at Istana Hinggap as an operator.
* 9. My father <u>like</u> eat ‘Mee Hailam’ <i>Malay: Ayah saya suka makan mee hailam.</i>	My father <u>likes</u> ‘Mee Hailam’.
* 10. My mother <u>like</u> to eat chicken rice. <i>Malay: Emak saya suka makan nasi ayam.</i>	My mother <u>likes</u> chicken rice.
* 11. My uncle also <u>give</u> stamp with me .. <i>Malay: Pakcik saya beri setem pada saya ..</i>	My uncle <u>gives</u> stamps to me ..
* 12. He <u>work</u> as a meter reader at the Jerantut Water Department. <i>Malay: Dia bekerja sebagai pembaca meter di Jabatan Air Jerantut.</i>	He <u>works</u> as a meter reader at the Jerantut Water Department.
* 13. She <u>stay</u> at home. <i>Malay: Dia tinggal di rumah.</i>	She <u>stays</u> at home.
* 14. She <u>clean</u> the house, <u>washing</u> the clothes and <u>sweep</u> the floor. <i>Malay: Dia bersih rumah, basuh kain dan sapu lantai.</i>	She <u>cleans</u> the house, <u>washes</u> the clothes and <u>sweeps</u> the floor.
* 15. My rabbit <u>like</u> to eat “kangkung” and carrot. <i>Malay: Arnab saya suka makan kangkung dan lobak.</i>	My rabbit <u>likes</u> to eat “kangkung” and carrot.
* 16. She <u>go</u> to the restaurant at Batu Pahat. <i>Malay: Dia pergi ke restoran di Batu Pahat.</i>	She <u>goes</u> to the restaurant at Batu Pahat.
* 17. The restaurant <u>cook</u> seafood. <i>Malay: Restoran itu masak makanan laut.</i>	The restaurant <u>cooks</u> seafood.
* 18. The game <u>consist</u> of two teams. <i>Malay: Permainan itu mengandungi dua pasukan.</i>	The game <u>consists</u> of two teams.
* 19. Belang always <u>play</u> with his toys. <i>Malay: Belang selalu bermain dengan mainannya.</i>	Belang always <u>plays</u> with his toys.

As there is a difference in the SVA rule in English and Malay, where verbs in Malay do not need to agree with the number or status of the subject, the omission of –s in sentences 1-12 above may be due to the interference from the learners’ first language. The equivalence of the verbs in Malay in some of the sentences is underlined in the translated version below. The verbs are all in their base form.

\*She work at Istana Hinggap as an operator.  
(Dia bekerja di Istana Hinggap sebagai telefonis.)

\*My father like to eat “Mee Hailam”.  
(Ayah saya suka makan “Mee Hailam”.)

\*She stay at home.  
(Dia tinggal di rumah.)

\*She go to the restaurant at Batu Pahat.  
(Dia pergi ke restoran di Batu Pahat.)

\*Belang always play with his toys.  
(Belang selalu main dengan permainannya.)

### c. Wrong form of Subject-Verb Agreement

However, there were also cases where the third person singular inflection is used in verbs that occur with other subjects, especially with the first person pronoun I. This occurrence may also be due to the divergent principle of 1 → many; where one form in the mother tongue has many equivalence in the target language learned. For instance, in the case of Malay learners learning the SVA rule in English, learners may have difficulty choosing the right SVA form for their sentences, thus producing sentences shown in Table 11 below.

Table 11 Wrong form of Agreement by Malay learners

Erroneous form	Correct form
* 20. I <u>lives</u> in Kuala Lumpur. <i>Malay: Saya <u>tinggal</u> di Kuala Lumpur.</i>	I <u>live</u> in Kuala Lumpur.
* 21. I <u>lives</u> with my parents. <i>Malay: Saya <u>tinggal</u> dengan ibu bapa saya.</i>	I <u>live</u> with my parents.
* 22. I <u>has</u> pets <i>Malay: Saya <u>ada</u> haiwan peliharaan.</i>	I <u>have</u> pets.
* 23. He <u>working</u> in Kuala Lumpur. <i>Malay: Dia <u>bekerja</u> di Kuala Lumpur.</i>	He <u>works</u> in Kuala Lumpur.

The examples in Table 11 involved the use of ‘I’, the first person singular as a subject of the verb. The verb that follows was wrongly produced because of the confusion of the form to choose in the target language when SVA does not exist in the learners’ mother tongue.

### III. COPULA ‘BE’

The word ‘copula’ originates from the Latin noun for a ‘link or tie’ that connects two different things. In linguistics, a copula is a word that is used to link the subject of a sentence with a predicate (a subject complement or an adverbial). Though it might not itself express any action or condition, it serves to equate (or associate) the subject with the predicate.

The copula ‘be’ is among the English copula verbs that is most problematic to a Malay learner of English because of its multiplicity of forms and its non-existence in the Malay language.

The closest words in Malay which describe the relationship between the subject and the predicate are *ialah* and *adalah*. They are commonly referred to as *kata pemerik* (Nik Safiah, 1995). But they are also not the equivalents of the copula ‘be’ although many second language learners of Malay tend to use them as equivalents and therefore commit errors when they write sentences in Malay. This confusion appears to have been caused by the generalization of the manner in which copula ‘be’ in English and *kata pemerik* in Malay (*ialah* and *adalah*) are used. According to Nik Safiah, *ialah* and *adalah* are only used in two types of sentence structures.

In Malay, *ialah* is used in equative sentences when both subjects and predicate have the same meaning. In English, copula ‘be’ is also used to show equivalence. Quoting from Nik Safiah (1995, 212), *ialah* in Malay is similar in function to be in English as illustrated in Table 12.

TABLE 12: The equivalence of *ialah* with *be*

Malay Structure	English Structure
<i>Protein utama yang terdapat dalam gandum ialah gluten.</i> (NP+NP)	The main protein found in wheat <u>is</u> gluten.

In Malay, *adalah* is used when the predicates describe or qualify the subjects as in the sentences patterns NP+AP and NP+PP as in Table 13 below:

TABLE 13: The use of *adalah*

Malay Structure	English Structure
<i>Taklimat tentang projek perladangan itu adalah terlalu pendek.</i> (NP+AP)	The briefing on the estate project <u>is</u> too brief.
<i>Arahan yang baru diterima itu adalah daripada jurutera tempatan.</i> (NP+PP)	The newly received directive <u>is</u> from the local engineer.

However, other than the situations stated above, the copula ‘be’ is not essential in Malay. Perhaps this explains why many Malay learners of English tend to omit the copula ‘be’ when writing in English as illustrated in sentences in Table 14 below:

**a. Omission of copula ‘be’**

The omission of the copula ‘be’ is one of the most common errors committed by many Malay learners when writing in English. From the data, it is discernible that many learners tend to leave out altogether the copula ‘be’ in their writing as exemplified in Table 14.

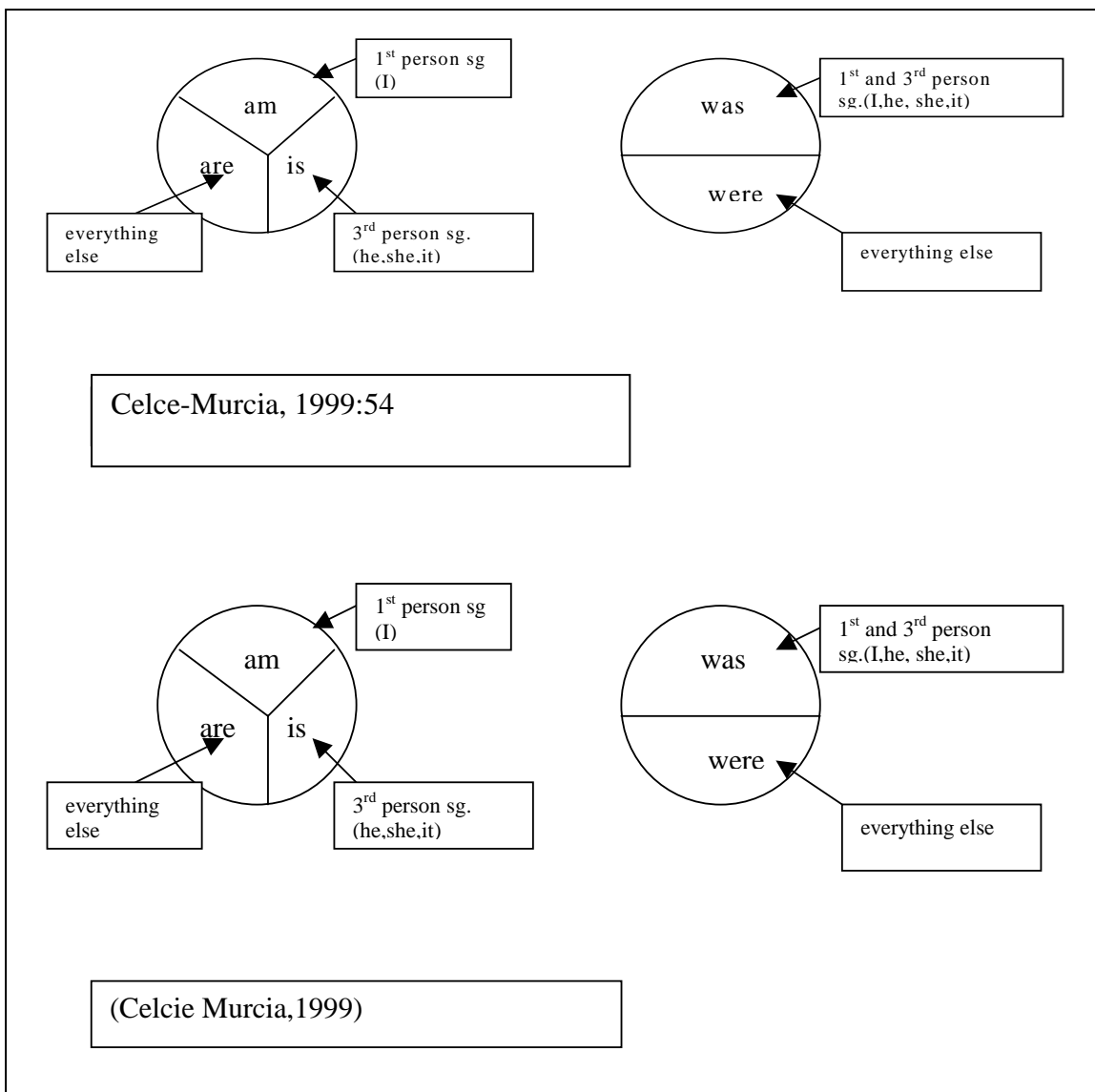
TABLE 14: Omission of copula ‘be’

Erroneous form	Correct form
* 24. My mother's name __ Maznah binti Hj Dahlan <i>Malay: Nama ibu saya Maznah binti Hj Dahlan.</i>	My mother's name is Maznah binti Hj Dahlan
* 25. My cat's name __ Koko. <i>Malay: Nama kucing saya Koko.</i>	My cat's name is Koko.
* 26. Aidil Adha __ a great day for me. <i>Malay: Aidil Adha adalah hari mulia bagi saya.</i>	Aidil Adha <u>is</u> a great day for me.
* 27. Reading story books ___ also my favourite hobby. <i>Malay: Hobi kegemaran saya membaca buku cerita.</i>	Reading story books <u>is</u> also my favourite hobby.
* 28. My mother's hobbies ____ cooking and reading. <i>Malay: Hobi emak saya memasak dan membaca buku.</i>	My mother's hobbies <u>are</u> cooking and reading.
* 29. I ____ born on 13 November 1990. <i>Malay: Saya dilahirkan pada 13 November 1990.</i>	I <u>was</u> born on 13 November 1990.

It is not surprising that this phenomenon happens because the presence of the copula ‘be’ is most of the time not essential in a Malay sentence (Nik Safiah 1995).

**b. Wrong form of copula ‘be’**

Another reason for the occurring errors is the fact that the copula ‘be’ has more distinct forms with respect to person, number, and tense than any other verb in English. The verb ‘be’ has three distinct present tense and two past tense forms as illustrated in Figure 1 below:



The existence of the varied forms of the copula 'be' in English which have multiple parallel forms in Malay could have attributed to the errors in Table 14 below:

- i. use present tense form of 'be' for the past tense form and vice versa:

TABLE 14: Errors in the use of tense

Erroneous form	Correct form
* 30. Princess Isabella <u>are</u> kind and gentle. Malay: <i>Princess Isabella adalah lemah lembut dan baik hati.</i>	<i>Princess Isabella <u>was</u> kind and gentle.</i>
* 31. In a kingdom, there <u>is</u> a very beautiful princess. Malay: <i>Di negara itu terdapat seorang puteri cantik.</i>	<i>In a kingdom, there <u>was</u> a very beautiful princess.</i>
* 32. It's <u>is</u> time to blow the candles and cut the cake. Malay: <i>Tiba masanya meniup lilin dan memotong kek.</i>	<i>It <u>was</u> time to blow out the candles and cut the cake.</i>
* 33. I <u>am</u> so lucky because my family and I were save and nothing happen to us. Malay: <i>Saya berasa sungguh bertuah sebab ahli keluarga saya terselamat dan tidak ada perkara buruk berlaku pada kita.</i>	<i>I <u>was</u> so lucky because my family and I were safe and nothing happened to us.</i>

ii. use the plural form for the singular form (Table 15) and vice versa:

TABLE 15: Errors in the use of plural and singular form

Wrong form	Correct form
* 34. My mother hobbies <u>is</u> cooking, read and anything. Malay: <i>Hobi emak saya ialah memasak, membaca buku dan lain-lain.</i>	<i>My mother's hobbies <u>are</u> cooking, reading and others.</i>
* 35. My family and I <u>was</u> very sad, and poor the driver family. Malay: <i>Saya dan keluarga saya bersedih. Kita turut bersimpati pada keluarga drebar itu.</i>	<i>My family and I <u>were</u> very sad, and took pity over the driver's family.</i>

The forms of copula 'be' in Malay and English are a case of divergent phenomena where one form in Malay appears in many forms in English. Given the complexity of the forms that the copula 'be' can appear in English, learners sometimes tend to use the incorrect forms in place of the correct ones.

### CONCLUSION

Where this study is concerned, out of 826 occurrences of determiners found in the students' essays, a total of 175 (21%) were incorrectly used. On the other hand, out of 427 instances of usage of SVA, 214 (46.83%) were erroneous, while out of the total of 305 usage of copula 'be', 94 (30.8%) were wrongly produced. This study also shows that omission and wrong forms used are the two most common types of errors in all three grammatical categories.

Although not all errors are due to mother tongue interference, a large number of errors identified in the use of determiners, subject verb agreement, and copula 'be' reflected the interference of the Malay grammar. Thus, the problems of acquiring EFL in rural areas in Malaysia can still be largely due to mother tongue interference. Therefore remedial measures should be taken to implement approaches that could best assist students in these problematic areas. This study has identified a number of errors that seem to be attributable to the interference of L1. It is imperative then to implement measures to minimize the chances of occurrence of these errors by looking into the development of teaching materials and that of teaching practices within and outside the classrooms.

### References

- Abdullah Hassan. 1993. *Tatabahasa pedagogi Bahasa Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications and Distributors Sdn. Bhd.
- Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D. 1999. *The grammar book - an ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- Kamus Dewan*. 2005. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Hazita Azman. 2006. English Literacy Education in Rural Malaysia. In Shanta Nair-Venugopal et al. (eds.). *Writing the past into the present*, pg 272-280. Bangi: Penerbit UKM.
- Nik Safiah Karim. 1995. *Malay grammar for academics & professionals*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Nik Safiah Karim. et.al. 2004. *Tatabahasa Dewan*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Nooreiny Maarof. et.al. 2003. Keupayaan penguasaan kemahiran Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan pelajar Melayu dalam arus globalisasi. Dlm. Prosiding Seminar Kebangsaan Arus Perdana 11, hlm, 226-266. Bangi: UKM.
- Norrish, J. 1992. *Language learners and their errors*. London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Shaari Awaluddin. 1987. *The use of tenses in the written English of the Secondary Three students in Malaysia*. Singapore: SEAMEO Regional Language Center.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Malaysian education system is divided into three levels: primary (Years 1-6), secondary (Forms 1-5), and tertiary (College – PhD). At Form One level, most students are about 13 years of age, and have been in school for almost 7 years.

<sup>2</sup> Demonstrative Determiner

<sup>3</sup> Possessive Determiner