

Analysis of Japanese Learners' Mother Tongue Interferences in Speaking English Language

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Abstract—the use of the mother tongue can influence the production of spoken English, which covers the phonological, grammatical, and lexical aspects. This study aims to find out the interferences of the mother tongue with the result of a second language, which in this case is English. The method used in this study is qualitative descriptive, and the data is collected by observing and recording the data in the field. The data is students' utterances in English whose mother tongue is Japanese. The results show that the three aspects, which consist of the phonological aspect, grammatical aspect, and lexical aspect in the mother tongue, interfere with the speaking ability, which, in this case, speaking English ability.

Index Terms—mother tongue, second language, language interference, Japanese learner

I. INTRODUCTION

English, one of the most widely spoken languages, serves as a lingua franca in various domains, including business, science, academia, and international communication (see Ethnologue, 2023; United Nations, 2023). As a result, non-native English speakers strive to attain proficiency in spoken English to excel in diverse social and professional contexts by acquiring the language in various ways, such as formal and informal situations (Krashen, 2009). In learning a new language, it has been widely recognized that students heavily rely on their mother tongue (Gass & Selinker, 2008). This phenomenon could not be separated from its process because people are already used to the sounds of their mother tongue and how they pronounce the words. Moreover, language acquisition and communication are complex processes involving various linguistic influences (Krashen, 1981). In the context of second language acquisition, learners often encounter challenges when transitioning from their native language to the target language.

English is the most used language in the world (See Table 1), and this condition influences information and science available on the internet, technologies that run in English, tourism, commercial, etc. Crystal (2003, p. 29) stated that English is a global language because of its geographical, historical, and social-cultural position. Meanwhile, achieving fluency and naturalness in spoken English can be a challenging process, primarily due to the phenomenon of mother-tongue interference.

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TABLE 1
TOP 20 MOST SPOKEN LANGUAGES, 2023

No	Spoken Languages	Number
1	English	1.5 B
2	Mandarin Chinese	1.1 B
3	Hindi	609.5 M
4	Spanish	559.1 M
5	French	309.8 M
6	Standard Arabic	274.0 M
7	Bengali	272.8 M
8	Portuguese	263.6 M
9	Russian	255.0 M
10	Urdu	231.7 M
11	Indonesian	199.1 M
12	Standard German	133.2 M
13	Japanese	123.4 M
14	Nigerian Pidgin	120.7 M
15	Egyptian Spoken Arabic	102.4 M
16	Marathi	99.2 M
17	Telugu	96.0 M
18	Turkish	90.0 M
19	Tamil	86.6 M
20	Yue Chinese	86.6 M

Source: Ethnologue (2023)

Mother tongue interference refers to the transfer of linguistic patterns, structures, and pronunciation from the native language into the second language, in this case, English (see Obilade, 1984). Such interference can manifest at various linguistic levels, such as phonetics, phonology, syntax, vocabulary, and pragmatics, leading to miscommunication and misunderstandings. These interferences not only impact the accuracy of spoken English but also influence the speaker's confidence and communicative effectiveness (see de Bruin et al., 2023; Nazarenko, 2013; Vavilova et al., 2015; Wolfsturn et al., 2021). According to Selinker (1972), mother tongue interference refers to the influence of a person's native language (mother tongue) on their acquisition and use of a second language (target language). Mother tongue interference, also known as cross-linguistic influence, refers to the influence that a person's first language (L1) may have on their second language (L2) when learning or using it (Cummins, 1979). This influence can occur at various linguistic levels, such as phonological, grammatical, lexical, and pragmatic.

Mother tongue interference is a common phenomenon that impacts second language learners in encountering challenges when transitioning from their mother tongue to the target language (see Marita & Jufrizal, 2021; Adnyani et al., 2021; Carrió-Pastor & Vallés, 2015; Cerban, 2013; Gimenez, 2015; Ino et al., 2023; Sarfraz et al., 2016). In this case, Japanese learner also encounters the same situation when they study a new language. Moreover, as a prominent economic and technological powerhouse, Japan recognizes the importance of English proficiency for its citizens to participate in the global arena actively. However, English and Japanese belong to vastly different language families with distinct linguistic structures, posing challenges for Japanese students learning English (see Adnyani et al., 2021; Noviyenty & Putri, 2021; Peaci, 2016).

In connection with the above, this research aims to comprehensively analyze mother tongue interference in spoken English for Japanese, exploring its different forms, the factors contributing to its occurrence, and its implications for language learners and educators. By delving into the intricacies of this phenomenon, the researcher hopes to shed light on the challenges of non-native English speakers and propose effective strategies to minimize the impact of mother tongue interference on spoken English fluency. Thus, this research analyzes how Japanese learners' mother tongue interferes with the spoken English language.

II. RESEARCH FOCUS

- A. **Error analysis perspective:** This research will adopt an error analysis perspective by analyzing the errors made by Japanese students in their spoken English. The focus will be on identifying the recurring errors and understanding their underlying causes, whether they are attributable to mother tongue (Japanese) transfer, overgeneralization, or other factors.
- B. **Sociolinguistic perspective:** The research will also consider the sociolinguistic aspect of language learning. Factors such as language contact, exposure to English in different settings, and attitudes towards the English language may influence the extent of mother tongue interference. By considering these sociolinguistic factors, the research aims to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the phenomenon.
- C. **Pedagogical perspective:** This research aims to offer practical implications for English language teaching in Japan. By examining the areas of mother tongue interference, the study will contribute to developing targeted pedagogical approaches and instructional materials that address the specific linguistic challenges Japanese learners of English face.

III. CONCEPT AND THEORY

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the influence of the Japanese language on the spoken English language production of Japanese learners. The research aims to identify the specific areas where mother tongue interference occurs and analyze the types of errors that arise due to this interference. Additionally, the study seeks to explore the linguistic factors contributing to these errors and propose effective pedagogical strategies to address and minimize such interference.

Mother tongue effects could be negative and positive in acquiring the target language. Grammatical, lexical, and phonological errors in the target language may be negatively impacted by L1 effects on L2/FL learning (Kecskes, 2008), but L1 habits also help people acquire all of their foreign language habits in beneficial ways (Hakuta, 1993) interference of first language divides into three types; phonological, grammatical and lexical interference (Weinreich, 2011).

A. Phonological Aspect

Phonology examines how speech sounds are arranged into a system or the sound system of a particular language. In addition to explaining pronunciations, phonology also seeks to account for what is essential in pronunciations, what facilitates communication, and what distinguishes one utterance from another (Kreidler, 2004). Moreover, Phonology describes the system and patterns of sounds that occur in a language. Phonology deals with the phonemes and sequences of phonemes (Nurhayati, 2018). It means each language has its own phonology and its own particular sound systems, either in English or Japanese (see Saito, 2013; Yi et al., 2023).

	/a/	/i/	/u/	/e/	/o/	/ja/	/ju/	/jo/
∅	あ ア [a]	い イ [i]	う ウ [u]	え エ [e]	お オ [o]	や ヤ [ja]	ゆ ユ [ju]	よ ヨ [jo]
/k/	か カ [ka]	き キ [k'i]	く ク [ku]	け ケ [ke]	こ コ [ko]	きゃ キヤ [k'a]	きゅ キュ [k'ju]	きょ キョ [k'jo]
/g/°	が ガ [ga]	ぎ ギ [g'i]	ぐ グ [gu]	げ ゲ [ge]	ご コ [go]	ぎゃ ギヤ [g'a]	ぎゅ ギュ [g'ju]	ぎょ ギョ [g'jo]
/s/	さ サ [sa]	し シ [ci]	す ス [si]	せ セ [se]	そ ソ [so]	しゃ シヤ [ca]	しゅ シュ [ci]	しょ ショ [co]
/z/¹	ざ ザ [za]	じ ジ [zi]	ず ズ [zi]	ぜ ゼ [ze]	ぞ ソ [zo]	じゃ ジャ [za]	じゅ ジュ [zi]	じょ ジョ [zo]
/t/²	た タ [ta]	ち チ [ci]	つ ツ [tsi]	て テ [te]	と ト [to]	ちゃ チャ [tca]	ちゅ チュ [tci]	ちょ チョ [tco]
/d/¹²	だ ダ [da]	ぢ チ [zi]	づ ツ [zi]	で デ [de]	ど ト [do]	ぢゃ チャ [za]	ぢゅ チュ [zi]	ぢょ チョ [zo]
/n/²	な ナ [na]	に ニ [ni]	ぬ ヌ [nu]	ね ネ [ne]	の ノ [no]	にゃ ニヤ [na]	にゅ ニュ [ni]	にょ ニョ [no]
/h/	は ハ [ha]	ひ ヒ [ci]	ふ フ [fu]	へ ヘ [he]	ほ ホ [ho]	ひゃ ヒヤ [ca]	ひゅ ヒュ [ci]	ひょ ヒョ [co]
/b/³	ば バ [ba]	び ビ [bi]	ぶ ブ [bu]	べ ベ [be]	ぼ ボ [bo]	びゃ ビヤ [b'a]	びゅ ビュ [bi]	びょ ビョ [bo]
/p/	ぱ パ [pa]	ぴ ピ [pi]	ぷ プ [pu]	ぺ ペ [pe]	ぽ ポ [po]	ぴゃ ピヤ [p'a]	ぴゅ ピュ [pi]	ぴょ ピョ [po]
/m/	ま マ [ma]	み ミ [mi]	む ム [mu]	め メ [me]	も モ [mo]	みゃ ミヤ [m'a]	みゅ ミュ [mi]	みょ ミョ [mo]
/r/⁴	ら ラ [ra]	り リ [ri]	る ル [ru]	れ レ [re]	ろ ロ [ro]	りゃ リヤ [r'a]	りゅ リュ [ri]	りょ リョ [ro]
/w/	わ ワ [wa]	ゐ ヰ [i]		ゑ エ [e]	を ヲ [o]			

°g can become ŋ in the middle of words or γ in fast speech

¹z and ²z may be affricates dz and dz̥

²t, d and n are laminal denti-alveolar

³b can become θ in fast speech

⁴r can also be ʀ

[w]	At the end of utterances
[m]	Before [b, p, m]
[n]	Before [d, t, ts, n] (apical before [r, l])
[ŋ]	Before [t̥, d̥, n]
[ɹ]	Before [k, g, ŋ]
[ɰ]	Before vowels, [j, u], [r, l], [ɸ, s, ç, z, ç, h]

Figure 1. Japanese Phonology Chart
Source: WaniKani Community (2021)

	monophthongs				diphthongs		Phonemic Chart voiced unvoiced
	i:	ɪ	ʊ	u:	ɪə	eɪ	
VOWELS	sheep	ship	good	shoot	here	wait	
	e	ə	ɜ:	ɔ:	ʊə	ɔɪ	əʊ
	bed	teacher	bird	door	tourist	boy	show
CONSONANTS	æ	ʌ	ɑ:	ɒ	eə	aɪ	aʊ
	cat	up	far	on	hair	my	cow
	p	b	t	d	tʃ	dʒ	k
pea	boat	tea	dog	cheese	June	car	go
f	v	θ	ð	s	z	ʃ	ʒ
fly	video	think	this	see	zoo	shall	television
m	n	ŋ	h	l	r	w	j
man	now	sing	hat	love	red	wet	yes

The 44 phonemes of Received Pronunciation based on the popular Adrian Underhill layout. adapted by EnglishClub.com

Figure 2. English Phonology Chart
Source: <https://www.englishclub.com/pronunciation/phonemic-chart.php>

B. Grammatical Aspect

Grammatical interference is a natural phenomenon that occurs when the elements of the first language are included in the use of the second language step by step in the grammar of the second language, such as word order, pronoun, subject-verb agreement, conjunction, singular-plural agreement, tense, and so on (Martanti, 2011; see also Aka, 2020; Kurata, 2014; Muroya, 2022; Sakamoto & Furukawa, 2022). This phenomenon could be found in Japanese learners learning English because the Japanese structure and English differ. Japanese sentences generally have an S-O-V structure, and it is also the basic transitive sentence structure (Subject-Object-Verb), which differs from English grammar (see Lianna et al., 2020).

C. Lexical Aspect

According to Weinreich (2011), lexical interference is the situation when one vocabulary interferes with another. Furthermore, acquiring a foreign language has a variety of effects on our own language. It could pertain to multilingual phonology and lexicon (Pavlenko, 2000). In conclusion, lexical interference occurs while learning a new language (Cf. Akhavan et al., 2023; Aldaberdiyzy, 2013; Ivanova & Hernandez, 2021; Sari & Gaho, 2020).

IV. METHODS

This research was conducted in Bali-Bali English. Bali-Bali English is a language course institution located in Jimbaran, South Kuta, Badung, Bali, Indonesia (<https://balibali-english.com/>). The study employed a qualitative-descriptive. Qualitative research was applied to explore and provide deeper insights into real-world problems (see Tenny et al., 2022). Instead of collecting numerical data points or intervening or introducing treatments just like in quantitative research, qualitative research helps generate hypotheses as well as further investigate and understand quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Krug & Schlüter, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).

The data was collected using observation by using a tape recorder, especially the Japanese utterances during English production in a classroom at Bali-Bali English. The analytical data was obtained from Japanese learners with different levels, namely beginner low, beginner medium, beginner high, and intermediate low. The data collection process took one month and two weeks.

The data was first analyzed using error analysis theory (Corder, 1982) and contrastive analysis theory (Lado, 1957). Identifying and categorizing errors in the spoken English of Japanese students will be a crucial step, and a comparison between Japanese and English will be conducted to reveal areas of potential interference and highlight the contrasting linguistic structures. This will involve a systematic analysis of the linguistic features that are prone to mother-tongue interference. The steps of error analysis specified by Corder (1982) are as follows: collection of data, identification errors, quantification errors, and explanation of errors.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Phonological Aspects

The following data is collected based on the actual condition of Japanese learners' utterances while speaking English from any level through observation in the classroom. It can be found that most Japanese students have difficulties pronouncing some sounds in English, as revealed in Table 2. It is based on the student's level of English, which was assessed by the teacher when they entered the school.

TABLE 2
PHONOLOGICAL ERROR DONE BY JAPANESE LEARNER DURING SPEAKING ENGLISH

Level	Sounds in L2	Sounds interfere by L1	Example in words
IM, IL, BH, BL, BM	R = /r/	/l/	Very /veri/ → /veli/ Rice /rais/ → /lais/
IL, BH, BL, BM	Th = /ð/ /θ/	/t/ /dθ/	Think / θɪŋk/ → / tɪŋk/ Through /θru/ → /dθru/ This / ðis/ → /θdis/
IL, BH, BL, BM	V = /v/	/b/	Favorite /fei.vər.ət/ → /fei.bər.ət/ Curvy /kɜ:(r)vi/ → /kɜ:(r)bi/

Note: IM (Intermediate Medium), IL (Intermediate Low), BH (Beginner High), BM (Beginner Medium), BL (Beginner Low).

Based on the table above, some Japanese learners still need to correct their pronouncing some words in English. This situation is happening because Japanese and English phonology sounds are different. The phonetic sounds that mostly interfere with the Japanese mother tongue are /l/ and /r/ because in Japanese, the sound /l/ is strongly used, and the sound /r/ is soft, almost like /l/ sounds. The phenomenon of /l/ and /r/ sound interference happens for students already in Intermediate Medium to Beginner. Then the following sounds are / to /b/. This case does not occur much as /l/ sounds, but this sound is a common mistake pronounced by some Japanese because the /s/ sound is powerful and familiar in the Japanese language. Meanwhile, there are no /v/ sounds in Japanese. The last one is the /th/ sound. Japanese students sometimes find it difficult to pronounce /th/ because this sound is unfamiliar. As a result, they usually use /t/, which sounds familiar to them, to substitute them. Moreover, some Japanese students also are difficult to differentiate between the /ð/ and /θ/ sounds in English (see Aka, 2020; Kobayashi, 2023; Kubota, 2017; Kurata, 2014; Muroya, 2022; Naderpour, 2022; Saito, 2013; Sakamoto & Furukawa, 2022; Yi et al., 2023).

B. Grammatical Aspects

Grammatical interference refers to the phenomenon where speakers tend to use their mother tongue (L1) structure when they produce the target language (L2), which happens naturally. The following data is grammatical interference done by Japanese learners.

Data 1:

L2: I English study
CL: I study English

As seen in Data 1 above, it shows grammatical interferences. The grammatical errors occurred because the mother tongue's structure interfered with the speaker. In this case, the Japanese mother tongue structure is S-O-V. The speaker uses her L1 structure in producing L2, which shows grammatical interference. The correct grammar is "I study English" (see CL = Correct language).

Data 2

L2: I ate toastto and banana and pineapple and drink orange juice and coffee.
CL: I ate toast, banana, and pineapple and drank orange juice and coffee.

The sentence L2 above shows redundancy "and" in spoken English, which is grammatically incorrect. The redundancy "and" in the sentence above is due to the influence of L1 structures because "and" means "to" in Japanese. They usually put the conjunction "to" between each word and come after every noun except the last one, which is used in connecting multiple items. If compared with the use of conjunctions in English, it is certainly different (see Sutasoma et al., 2022), for example in Japanese:

Japanese language	: コーヒーと チーズケーキを おねがいします
	(Kōhī to chīzukēki o onegai shimasu)
Meaning	: Coffee and cheesecake please

Data 3

L2: I have two pen
CL: I have two pens

Data 3 shows the error grammar in processing nouns from singular to plural. This phenomenon is a common grammar mistake because there is no pluralization form in Japanese; meanwhile, in English, there is a pluralization (adding *s/es*). In Japanese, the way of processing nouns to the singular is by adding suffixes next to the word, such as the suffixes *-tachi*, *ora*, and *-domo*, which indicate a plurality of [+human] nouns (Martin, 1975), for example in Japanese:

Japanese language	: 男の子は	男の子たちは
	(otonoko)	(otonoko-tachi)
Meaning	: boy	boys

Data 4

L2: Mr. Jul yesterday night how did you do?
CL: What did you do yesterday night Mr. Jul?

Data 4 above shows grammatical mistakes in producing questions in English. The structure of the speaker's utterances was influenced by the question structure of her mother tongue. Usually, in the Japanese language, the structure for making questions is (noun or noun phrase) + *か* + (question word) + (verb) + *か*. So, from the structure, it is seen that the speaker follows the mother tongue structure in making interrogative sentences in English. This phenomenon is considered as grammatical interference.

C. Lexical Aspects

Lexical interference tends to the use of L2 vocabulary, which L1 still influences; this phenomenon usually happens when a person uses L1 elements while speaking in L2. Some of the phenomena exist for Japanese students while producing English.

Data 5

L2: I ate **etto** Hawaiian **pancakekio** and *to malasadas* like a donuts
 CL: I ate Hawaiian pancakes and *malasadas* like donuts

Data 5 above found that the speaker follows the structure of his mother tongue. The speaker uses the word “**pancakekio**”, which actually has the same meaning as pancakes in English, but the way of pronouncing it is similar to his mother tongue because the word “**pancakekio**” is an absorption language from English that is recognized in Japanese with their own language style.

Then, in this sentence also, it can be recognized that the speaker uses the filler word “etto”, which is a Japanese filler word that only helps the speaker to recall their idea in English instead of using English filler words such as “umm, hmm” which has no meaning at all in this sentence. Fillers serve a communication function, having a place in the speakers’ vocabulary. Fillers are not the main message; they just help to have meaning in sentences (Clark & Tree, 2002). Besides that, this phenomenon shows language interference when the speaker uses Japanese words to express themselves.

Data 6

L2: He is beautiful **to** smart
 CL: She is beautiful and smart

Data 6 found that the speaker uses the word “to” as a conjunction, which is in the Japanese language. The word “to” is a conjunction that has the meaning of “and” (cf. Sutasoma et al., 2022). The L2 shows the wrong conjunction because the borrowing system from the mother tongue so that the target language indicates lexical interferences.

Data 7

L2: I like drink *kohi*
 CL: I like drink coffee

Data 7 above shows that the speaker uses the term “*kohi*”, which is originally a word from Japanese that means coffee. *Kohi* is the absorption word from Dutch, namely *koffie*. This phenomenon happens because the Japanese already familiar with the word “*kohi*”, which refers to “coffee”. In this case, they used to pronounce the word *kohi*. So, it indicates lexical interference. Similar to the data 8 below.

Data 8

L2: I love dancesu
 CL: I love dance

The word “dancesu” is also the Japanese word “**ダンス**” (*dansu*), which means “dance”. As mentioned in the previous data, this word is also an absorption word from England, and the L2 indicates lexical interferences.

VI. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the phenomenon of mother tongue interference is a prevalent issue that affects language learners as they strive to acquire a new language (see Aziz et al., 2019; Kaushanskaya et al., 2011; Madriñan, 2014; Popa, 2016; Wang, 2014; Wong & Dras, 2009). This interference is particularly evident in Japanese learners of English, as they grapple with various challenges, such as transitioning from their mother tongue to the target language. These challenges encompass difficulties in structuring sentences correctly, selecting appropriate words in the target language, and accurately pronouncing English words. Notably, mispronunciations often occur due to the influence of Japanese phonetic sounds. However, as students’ English proficiency increases over time, the impact of mother tongue interference gradually diminishes. It underscores the dynamic nature of language acquisition and the potential for learners to overcome initial obstacles with dedicated effort and continued language development. Therefore, further research is needed to explore the dynamic of mother tongue interference in the Japanese language or another language to reveal other phenomena in languages.

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