



Understanding Language Interference in Multilingual Contexts for Inclusive English Language Education

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ABSTRACT

Language interference refers to deviations from the rules of the target language due to the influence of a speaker's first or second language. This study aims to identify and analyze the forms of English language interference experienced by multilingual students, providing an empirical foundation for developing inclusive and linguistically responsive English language education that accommodates learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds. Employing a qualitative case study design, the research focuses on students from the English Language Education Program at the University of Muhammadiyah Luwuk, who use multiple languages in their daily lives. Data collection instrument was interview. The findings reveal two primary forms of interference in students' English communication: phonological and syntactic interference. Phonological interference stems from sound similarities students' source language and English, while syntactic interference arises from the influence of first and second language syntax on English sentence construction. These findings underscore the importance of understanding learners' linguistic backgrounds as a basis for fostering more inclusive English language teaching practices in multilingual classrooms.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning in multilingual contexts presents one of the most significant challenges in modern education. When individuals acquire more than one language, the potential for language interference the transfer of structural elements from one language to another becomes highly probable (Weinreich, 2010). Such interference can affect various aspects of second or third language acquisition, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. This study is grounded in the understanding that, within multilingual English language learning environments particularly among students from diverse regional language backgrounds interference is not merely a technical obstacle but also carries important socio-cultural dimensions. Therefore, examining language interference in multilingual classrooms serves not only to rectify linguistic errors but also to support the development of inclusive English language education one that acknowledges and

responds to learners' linguistic diversity.

Indonesia's multilingual context is particularly evident in regions such as Banggai Regency, Central Sulawesi. Students enrolled in the English Language Education Program come from varied ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, including Malay Luwuk, Banggainese, Balantaknese, Saluanese, and Indonesian. Each of these regional languages possesses distinct phonological and syntactic systems that differ from both Indonesian and English.

Preliminary observations indicate frequent instances of phonological and syntactic interference. For example, students may pronounce "double" (/dʌbəl/) as "dobol", or "how" (/haʊ/) as "ha". Similarly, a student pronounced "glass" (/glɑ:s/) as "galas". Syntactic interference is also evident, such as the construction "I book reading" instead of the correct "I'm reading a book". Studies by Ellis, (2015) and Larry & Selinker, (2013) reinforce that interference is a primary source of errors in second language acquisition. In the local context, research by Syafutri & Saputra (2021), further demonstrates that Indonesian students exhibit distinct interference patterns based on their regional languages. However, these studies have not sufficiently explored interference within the framework of inclusive learning.

This issue extends beyond mere linguistic concerns. A lack of understanding regarding the sources of students' errors may lead to homogenized teaching approaches that fail to address the individual needs of multilingual learners. Consequently, disparities in access to effective learning emerge, contradicting the principles of inclusivity in education.

Previous research has extensively examined language interference in both bilingual (Brown, 2000) and general foreign language learning contexts (Troike and, 2006). Most of these studies focus on error identification and interference categorization. However, a significant research gap remains: the complex dynamics of multilingual contexts have seldom been the primary focus. The majority of studies investigate the influence of a single L1 on L2 acquisition, rather than the interaction of multiple L1s with a single L2 (English). Additionally, prior research tends to remain descriptive, documenting student errors without connecting findings to the development of inclusive, linguistically responsive teaching strategies.

This study not only identifies interference types but also maps interference tendencies across regional language groups, offering a more detailed understanding of multilingual dynamics in English language learning. By linking language interference to inclusive education, this research enriches discourse on English language teaching in Indonesia, particularly in regions with strong multilingual backgrounds. Through this novel approach, the study advocates for an English language education system in Indonesia that is adaptive to learners' linguistic and cultural diversity, promoting a fairer and more equitable learning environment. Based on this rationale, the study aims to: Identify and categorize forms of interference in English language learning among multilingual students, and provide empirical support for developing inclusive English language teaching practices. By addressing these objectives, this research seeks to shift the focus of English language education from mere proficiency outcomes to a more holistic and equitable approach that respects learners' linguistic identities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *Nature of Language Interference*

Language interference, also known as linguistic or cross-linguistic interference, refers to the influence of a speaker's native language (L1) on their use of a second language (L2). This phenomenon is common among bilingual and multilingual individuals, especially during the process of second language acquisition. Interference can be both positive when similarities between the two languages facilitate learning and negative when differences lead to errors in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary usage. Interference manifests at various linguistic levels, including phonological, morphological, syntactic, lexical, and semantic domains. For example, phonological interference often results in a foreign accent, while syntactic interference may cause incorrect word order in sentences (Rasulova, 2021). Lexical interference occurs when words from L1 are directly translated into L2, often resulting in unnatural expressions or the creation of non-existent words in the target language. These effects are exacerbated when the structures of the two languages differ significantly.

Psycholinguistic research indicates that interference stems from the mental overlap or competition between linguistic systems in bilingual speakers. This may result in what some researchers describe as a “third system,” where features of both languages merge, leading to hybrid or incorrect language usage. Moreover, the degree of interference is often influenced by the speaker's proficiency, exposure to L2, and even emotional or contextual factors (Hamerska, 2023).

In conclusion, language interference is a natural outcome of bilingualism and language contact, affecting various aspects of speech and comprehension. Understanding its mechanisms is essential for improving second language instruction and minimizing negative transfer effects.

2.2 *Sociolinguistic Perspectives in Multilingual Settings*

Multilingual settings are rich linguistic landscapes shaped by complex social, cultural, and political dynamics. From a sociolinguistic perspective, these environments are not just sites of multiple languages coexisting but are also spaces where power relations, identities, and ideologies intersect. Individuals in multilingual contexts often navigate different linguistic repertoires depending on their social roles, audience, and the situation, a phenomenon known as “language choice,” which reflects deeper societal structures and individual agency (Rzayeva et al., 2020).

One key insight from sociolinguistic research is that multilingualism is not simply additive but transformative. In educational settings, for instance, multilingual students don't just acquire new languages. They also reshape their identities and cultural understandings through language learning. This process is influenced by prevailing language ideologies, which may favor dominant languages over minority ones, thus affecting how students value and use their native tongues in schools and beyond (Relaño Pastor, 2019). These dynamics highlight the importance of inclusive language policies that recognize and promote linguistic diversity as a resource rather than a barrier.

Sociolinguists have also examined how multilingual individuals manage “linguistic non-understanding,” which is not just a communication failure but a reflection of deeper

social and cultural boundaries. By analyzing real-life multilingual interactions, researchers underscore the value of reflexivity acknowledging the researcher's and speaker's positionality in interpreting language use (Goodchild & Weidl, 2025). Multilingual spaces thus become sites of negotiation, where meanings, relationships, and identities are continuously co-constructed. Moreover, studies in urban Europe have shown how immigrant minority languages contribute to shaping multicultural identities and challenge traditional notions of national language norms. The visibility and vitality of these languages in public life—especially in education—are vital to fostering inclusion and equity in increasingly diverse societies (Extra & Yagmur, 2005).

In sum, sociolinguistic perspectives in multilingual settings reveal how language is intricately linked to social justice, identity, and power. Understanding these relationships is crucial for developing more equitable and responsive language practices and policies.

2.3 Inclusive Education and Language Diversity

Inclusive education in the context of language diversity seeks to ensure that all students, regardless of their linguistic background, have equal access to learning opportunities. As societies become increasingly multicultural, schools face the growing responsibility of addressing not only physical or cognitive differences, but also the rich variety of languages students bring into the classroom.

Language is deeply tied to identity and inclusion, and ignoring this diversity can lead to alienation, lower academic achievement, and diminished self-esteem (Li, 2022).

One of the most powerful elements of inclusive language education is its ability to foster social cohesion. When teachers acknowledge and incorporate students' linguistic backgrounds, they promote mutual respect and a sense of belonging in the classroom. Strategies such as differentiated instruction, multilingual materials, and culturally responsive teaching practices are essential to creating such inclusive environments (Aswad & Wirentake, 2023). These methods empower students from diverse linguistic communities to participate fully and confidently, enhancing both academic outcomes and classroom harmony.

The role of educators is central to this transformation. Teachers must be trained not only in language pedagogy but also in how to address the specific needs of linguistically diverse students. Unfortunately, many education systems still operate under monolingual assumptions, where the dominant national language is viewed as the only legitimate medium of instruction. This marginalizes minority and migrant students, often leading to linguistic exclusion and academic disadvantage. Research emphasizes that promoting multilingualism in schools enhances cognitive development and improves second language acquisition for all students (Motschenbacher, 2016).

Successful inclusive language education also requires supportive policies. For example, schools in New Zealand and France are beginning to incorporate immigrant languages into curricula and classroom practices, recognizing that students perform better when their linguistic identities are respected (Smythe, 2020). Similarly, programs that value the use of heritage languages alongside national and foreign languages can help students feel validated, resulting in better academic and social engagement (Žero, 2022).

Ultimately, inclusive education that embraces language diversity is not merely an

educational strategy, it is a social imperative. By integrating multilingualism into inclusive practices, educators can help dismantle systemic inequalities and build classrooms where every student is seen, heard, and supported.

3. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative case study design to explore language interference phenomena among multilingual learners within an inclusive English language education context. The case study approach is chosen for its strength in providing an in-depth understanding of complex linguistic dynamics, particularly in settings where learners bring diverse linguistic backgrounds into the classroom. This design allows the researcher to investigate how multilingual students experience and negotiate language interference both phonological and syntactic within their learning environment, and how these interferences become the empirical data toward inclusive pedagogical practices.

To identify participants who are most relevant to the focus of the study, purposive sampling was employed. Participants were selected based on specific criteria: they are students enrolled in the English Education Program, possess multilingual backgrounds, and come from various ethnic. This sampling method ensures that the study includes individuals who have firsthand experience with multilingual communication challenges and who are capable of articulating the impact of language interference on their English learning processes.

The primary instrument used in this study was the semi-structured interview. This tool was selected for its flexibility and capacity to generate rich, detailed narratives from participants. Interviews were conducted individually and focused on eliciting participants' linguistic experiences, instances of language interference, coping strategies, and their perceptions of inclusivity in English language classrooms. The interview questions were designed to probe how students' source languages influence their English language acquisition and communication.

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, a method suitable for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. The analysis process followed the steps outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which include familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, peer debriefing and member checking were employed. Selected participants were invited to review the preliminary interpretations to confirm that their perspectives were accurately captured. This iterative and reflective approach to data analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of how language interference manifests in multilingual learners and what this means for inclusive English language education practices; incorporate choice, such as reading self-selected texts or participating in literature circles, have been particularly effective (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2020).

Targeted reading strategies are crucial in addressing achievement gaps among students of varying backgrounds. Struggling readers benefit from tailored approaches, and research shows that such interventions can lead to noticeable improvements in literacy skills (Ocampo, 2024). While numerous strategies have proven effective, teachers often face

challenges in their implementation. Limited time, lack of resources, and varying student needs can hinder the adoption of comprehensive reading strategies (Ocampo, 2018). Professional development and ongoing support are critical for teachers to effectively implement these strategies in diverse classrooms.

Literature underscores the importance of teacher-utilized reading strategies in developing proficient readers. As educators continue to explore and adopt various approaches, the imperative remains to tailor strategies to meet the unique needs of their student populations. Ongoing research and professional development are essential for equipping teachers with the skills necessary to foster a love for reading and enhance literacy across all student demographics.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the forms of language interference experienced by multilingual students in their English communication. The analysis focused on phonological and syntactic deviations influenced by the students' first and second languages. Data collected through interviews revealed systematic patterns of interference that varied depending on the participants' linguistic backgrounds. The following table summarizes the key phonological and syntactic interference features identified across different language groups.

Table 1. Forms of Language Interference in Students' English Communication

Students' initials	Student's Language(s)	Phonological Interference	Syntactic Interference
ISD	Banggai, Indonesian Malay Luwuk	/θ/ → /t/ → "tink" (<i>think</i>); omission of final /d/ → "goo" (<i>good</i>)	Omission of auxiliary verbs → "He not come yet"; missing past tense markers → "He go home"
DEM	Balantaknese, Indonesian Malay Luwuk	Monophthongization → "bed" (<i>bad</i>); substitution /z/ → /s/ → "soo" (<i>zoo</i>)	Use of double negatives → "I don't know nothing"; verb tense confusion → "She go yesterday"
MAL	Saluanese, Indonesian, Luwuk malay	Glottal stop insertion → "bu'le" (<i>bullet</i>); vowel insertion → "sekul" (<i>school</i>)	Repetition of subjects → "My sister she go school"; subject drop → "Go to class now"
AND	Saluanese, Indonesian, Luwuk malay	Glottal stop insertion → "bu'le" (<i>bullet</i>); vowel insertion → "sekul" (<i>school</i>)	Repetition of subjects → "My sister she go school"; subject drop → "Go to class now"
FAN	Indonesia Luwuk malay Banggainese	Substitution /z/ → /s/ → creisy (<i>crazy</i>)	
IMN	Luwuk malay Bahasa Indonesi Banggainese	Substitution /z/ → /s/ → five → faip	
IGM	Saluanese, Indonesian, Luwuk malay	Overgeneralization; Ibu → Tiina → <i>mother</i> Ayah → Tuuma → <i>father</i>	

Nenek → neenek → <i>nether</i>		
ISH	Saluanese, Indonesian, Luwuk malay	Omission <i>Longres</i> → <i>Long dress</i>

The table illustrates how students' first and second languages influence their English phonology and syntax. Phonological interference often involved sound substitution, simplification, or insertion, omission, overgeneralization, and reflecting the absence or variation of English phonemes in the students' native languages. For instance, the substitution of /θ/ with /t/ and /v/ with /f/ indicates limited articulatory familiarity with these sounds. Syntactic interference was evident in grammatical structures that mirror local language rules, such as the omission of auxiliary verbs or the use of double negatives. These findings demonstrate that multilingual students draw heavily on their existing linguistic knowledge when producing English, resulting in distinct patterns of cross-linguistic influence. Understanding these patterns is crucial for developing pedagogical strategies that are sensitive to the multilingual realities of learners in similar educational contexts.

The findings of this study reveal two prominent forms of English language interference among multilingual students: phonological and syntactic. These forms of interference, as detailed in the previous section, manifest through predictable phonetic substitutions, omission of grammatical elements, and structural deviations that reflect the influence of the students' source languages. Such patterns are consistent with psycholinguistic research indicating that interference arises from entrenched linguistic habits and cognitive constraints when switching between languages (Knol et al., 2024) (Lina, 2023). The recurrence of errors such as the replacement of /θ/ with /t/ or the omission of auxiliary verbs not only illustrates linguistic transfer but also highlights the need for pedagogical strategies that recognize the complexities of multilingual language acquisition.

From a broader pedagogical perspective, these findings serve as an empirical foundation for advancing inclusive and linguistically responsive English language education. As Sah & Li (2024) argue, limiting classroom interaction to English only policies can marginalize learners who rely on their full linguistic repertoires for meaning-making. In the current study, students often demonstrated English interference patterns linked to their native languages Malay Luwuk, Banggainese, Balantaknese, Saluanese, and Indonesian indicating that their language use is shaped by a dynamic interplay of all the languages they navigate. This aligns with the concept of translanguaging, which encourages learners to fluidly use their linguistic resources to access content, express understanding, and participate fully in classroom discourse.

However, the findings also underscore the risks of selective recognition of language backgrounds. For instance, some students' languages might be more "visible" or socially accepted in academic settings, while others remain underrepresented or ignored, contributing to what Sah and Li describe as linguistic injustice. Thus, acknowledging and incorporating all learners' linguistic resources especially those from Indigenous or minoritized communities is essential for fostering equity and inclusion in English language classrooms.

Teacher practices are central to this transformation. The evidence suggests that students' patterns of interference are not merely individual errors but reflections of deeper

classroom dynamics and policy constraints. Research by Anderson (2024), and Hamdalo., et al (2023) emphasizes the importance of teachers adopting translingual and culturally responsive strategies—those that value students’ home languages as legitimate tools for learning. In this study, the recurrence of specific syntactic structures from local languages in English utterances implies that students are not merely misusing English, but adapting it based on their linguistic habits. This adaptation can be harnessed pedagogically if teachers model flexible, inclusive language use, encourage metalinguistic reflection, and create a classroom environment where language diversity is treated as a resource rather than a deficit.

Moreover, from an assessment and policy standpoint, the persistent reliance on monolingual standards to judge language proficiency can obscure learners' strengths and reinforce deficit-oriented perspectives. Nordmeyer, (2023) and Gorter & Cenoz (2017), argue for the development of asset-based assessment models that appreciate the unique pathways through which multilingual students acquire English. The data from this study can contribute to such a shift by revealing the specific areas where learners need support not to conform to native-speaker norms, but to build communicative competence through targeted, affirming instruction.

Finally, the findings have implications for broader societal and individual factors in language education. Learners' willingness to engage with English and their success in overcoming interference are influenced not only by cognitive challenges, but also by motivation, identity, and the sociocultural status of English and their home languages (Namugenyi, 2024). An inclusive approach to language teaching, therefore, must go beyond correcting errors and instead promote positive identity formation, respect for all languages, and critical awareness of linguistic hierarchies.

In summary, this study’s findings do more than document types of language interference they highlight the necessity of a shift in mindset: from viewing interference as a barrier, to seeing it as a diagnostic tool and pedagogical entry point. Educators and institutions must leverage these insights to design linguistically inclusive curricula that affirm multilingual students’ full repertoires, support their cognitive and emotional engagement, and contribute to a more equitable English language education system.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has identified two major forms of language interference phonological and syntactic among multilingual students studying English. These interference patterns are not random errors but are systematically shaped by the students’ first and second languages, including Malay Luwuk, Banggainese, Balantaknese, Saluanese, and Indonesian. Phonological interference typically involved predictable sound substitutions, while syntactic interference often emerged in the form of omission or misuse of grammatical structures, such as auxiliary verbs or prepositions.

These findings highlight multilingual learners do not operate in isolation from their linguistic backgrounds; instead, they construct meaning using all the languages they know. Interference, therefore, should not be seen purely as a linguistic deficiency but as a reflection of complex language processing and adaptation. The study also underlines the importance of inclusive pedagogical approaches that respond to learners’ diverse

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