Language Acquisition (LA): Linguistic Errors in the Speech of a Four-Year-Old Batakese Child

Try Mahendra Siregar ✉, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Indonesia

✉ *trymahendrasiregar@usk.ac.id*

Abstract: The phenomenon of bi/multilingualism often presents challenges for language users, particularly in transferring between languages. These challenges are typically influenced by rule-governed complexities, cultural factors, and first language (L1) interference. In recent years, studies in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have increasingly focused on learner errors, as they provide valuable insights into the difficulties encountered in acquiring a second language (L2). This research aims to investigate the language errors produced by a four-year-old Batakese child acquiring Bahasa Indonesia as an L2. Employing a qualitative approach, data were collected through naturalistic observation of the child's speech. The data were then analyzed using three techniques: vanishing, inserting, and replacing linguistic elements between L1 and L2. The findings reveal four types of language errors: phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactical. These errors highlight the influence of both interlingual (L1 transfer) and intralingual (developmental) factors in the child's early bilingual development.

Keywords: Language error, Bilingualism, Batakese Child, Language Acquisition.

INTRODUCTION

A phenomenon about language is always interesting to discuss because language is an inseparable part of human life. Language is essentially a means of communication among members of a society (Sirbu, 2015). In everyday life, humans connect with one another through spoken and written forms of language. In Indonesia, a country rich in ethnic and linguistic diversity, there are many local languages spoken in daily conversations. Although the exact number of local languages remains uncertain, estimates suggest that Indonesia is home to between 500 and 700 languages, with some sources claiming even more up to around 1,000 languages (Abdullah, Yunita, & Maria, 2014; Musgrave, 2014; Lewis, Simons, & Fennig, 2016). This remarkable diversity makes most Indonesians inherently bilingual or multilingual.

Bilingualism is often described as the ability to use two languages fluently, while multilingualism involves the use of more than two languages, often interchangeably, depending on social or situational needs (Cohn & Ravindranath, 2014; Grosjean, 2010). In practice, however, navigating between multiple language systems is not always seamless. Language users, especially young learners, may experience interference between languages, particularly due to structural differences or cultural factors embedded in each language system (Yip & Matthews, 2007).

In recent years, studies in second language acquisition (SLA) have placed significant emphasis on the analysis of learner errors. Errors are seen as a window into the language learning process, as they provide insight into the challenges and strategies involved in acquiring a new language (Khansir, 2012). Whether in adults or children, language errors occur both consciously and unconsciously and are influenced by cognitive, linguistic, and social factors. According to Keshavarz (2011), there are three important assumptions about language errors: (1) errors are inevitable, as one cannot acquire a language without making mistakes; (2) errors are significant in that they reflect stages of development; and (3) not all errors are due to the learner's first language—meaning that language transfer is just one of several possible causes.

Errors may appear across various linguistic levels, including phonology, morphology, lexicon, and syntax. By analyzing these error types and their linguistic aspects, this study aims to examine the language errors produced by a four-year-old child. The child is of Batakese descent and uses Batak as his mother tongue. Therefore, instances of language transfer and structural interference are likely to occur between the two language systems: Batakese (L1) and Bahasa Indonesia (L2).

The objective of this research is:
"How the language error produced by four years old batakese child in his conversation with interlocutors?"

A. Theoretical Review
1. Error Analysis

Error analysis is a type of linguistics analysis that focuses on the errors learners make (Khansir: 2012). The error analysis is a new approach that based on theories of first and second language acquisition and possible similarities between them (Keshavarz: 2011). Thus, the error analysis may be carried out in order to 1) find out how well someone knows a language, 2) find out how a person learns a language, and

3) to obtain information on common difficulties in language learning.

2. Causes of Error

There are mainly two major sources of errors in second language learning. The first source is interference from native language while the second source can be attributed to intralingual and developmental factors (Hanna: 1986). The native language of every learner is an extremely significant factors in the acquisition of the language (Brown: 1994). Errors due to the influence of the native language are called interlingual errors (Hanna: 1986). Selinker (in Keshavarz: 2011) put forward five processes as being central to second language learning (interlingually): 1) language transfer, 2) overgeneralization, 3) transfer of training, 4) second language learning strategies, and 5) second language communication strategies.

Meanwhile, the intralingual and developmental errors are due to the difficulty of the second/target language. Intra lingual and developmental factors include the following (Hanna: 1986): *Simplification, overgeneralization, hypercorrections, faulty teaching, fossilization, avoidance, inadequate learning, and false concepts hypothesis.*

3. Types of Errors

Dulay, as cited in Kuntjara (2013), categorizes language errors into five major types: omission, addition, misformation, misordering, and blends. Each type reflects a unique way in which learners deviate from the expected norms of the target language during the acquisition process.

a. Omission refers to the absence of one or more required elements in a sentence. These missing items are often grammatical markers or content words that are essential for syntactic and semantic completeness. For instance, learners might omit subjects, auxiliary verbs, or plural markers, resulting in fragmented or incomplete sentences such as *"He going school"* instead of *"He is going to school."*

b. Addition occurs when learners include elements that are not required in a sentence. These unnecessary insertions may stem from overgeneralization of language rules, such as adding -*ed* to an already irregular verb (*"comed"* instead of *"came"*), or repeating elements (*"the my book"*), which are not standard in the target language structure.

c. Misformation involves the use of an incorrect form of a morpheme or structure. In this type of error, the learner selects the wrong form of a word or grammatical structure, such as saying *"goed"* instead of *"went,"* or using *"she cans"* instead of *"she can."* This reflects confusion between rule applications or the misuse of morphological forms.

d. Misordering refers to the incorrect arrangement of sentence components. The words are all present and correctly formed, but their order disrupts the natural syntax of the target language. An example would be *"He to the store went,"* which mirrors the structure of some learners' first language but does not conform to the rules of English (which requires *"He went to the store"*).

e. Blend is a less common but important error type where the learner combines two linguistic structures or forms into one incorrect form, often due to indecision or confusion between choices. For example, a learner might produce *"a dog brown"* by blending the noun phrase structures *"a brown dog"* and *"the dog is brown."* These errors demonstrate how learners grapple with competing language forms and reflect the transitional nature of their interlanguage development.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach. Qualitative research typically involves the intensive study of multiple variables over an extended period to capture the richness of context and the personal perspectives of the subject. It relies on the collection and analysis of non-numerical data such as observations, interviews, documentation, and other discursive sources of information (Gay & Peter, 2000).

The data in this study were obtained through observations of language errors made by a four-year-old child during second language acquisition. The child is of Batakese descent and currently attends lower kindergarten (PAUD), where they have begun participating in formal classroom activities. At this stage, it is expected that the child will use their second language (L2), Bahasa Indonesia, more frequently in daily communication compared to the earlier, pre-school phase.

The researcher observed the child's utterances during conversations with various interlocutors. During these observations, the researcher recorded the interactions, took field notes, and analyzed the contextual use of language. To analyze the data, three techniques were applied: (1) vanishing, the omission of elements from L1 or L2; (2) inserting, the addition of elements from one language into another; and (3) replacing, the substitution of L1 elements for L2 elements or vice versa.

To minimize researcher bias, the study employed several strategies. First, observations were conducted over multiple sessions to ensure consistency and reliability in the data. Second, the researcher used triangulation by comparing data from field notes, audio recordings, and contextual analysis. Third, reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the process to critically reflect on the researcher's own assumptions and interpretations. These measures aimed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the language errors identified in the speech of a four-year-old Batakese child during the process of acquiring Bahasa Indonesia as a second language (L2).

4. **Findings**

The errors were categorized into four major linguistic components: phonological, morphological, lexical, and syntactical. Each category reflects a different aspect of how the child navigates between their first language (L1), Batakese, and L2, Bahasa Indonesia. The classification of errors is based on observational data and analyzed within the framework of interlingual and

intralingual influences. Detailed examples are provided below for each type of error.

a. Phonological Error

Phonological error is labeled pronunciation error. It occurs when a child says one sound instead of another.

Table. 1
The Phonological Errors

No.	Phoneme	Data
1	*k* substitute with *t*	*kakak tatak*
2	*s* substitute with *c*	*sepeda cepeda*
3	*r* substitute with *y*	*rambut yambut*
4	*l* substitute with *y*	*lama yama*
5	*e substitute* with *i*	*pergi pigi*
6	*g* substitute with *d*	*goyang doyang*
7	*[e] sound*	*belum b[e]lum, (sounded more like [e] in ekor)*

Phonological errors numbered (1) to (6) are primarily attributed to the underdevelopment of the child's speech organs. At the age of four, a child's articulatory system is still in the process of maturing, which can affect their ability to produce certain sounds accurately. As a result, the child often substitutes more difficult sounds with those that are easier to articulate. For instance, sounds such as /k/, /s/, and /r/ may be replaced with simpler or more familiar sounds like /t/, /c/, or /y/, reflecting the natural progression of phonological development.

In contrast, the phonological error identified as number (7) reflects the influence of the child's first language, Batakese. The pronunciation of the vowel [e] in Batakese tends to be heavier or more open compared to the relatively lighter [e] sound in standard Bahasa Indonesia. This transfer effect indicates that the child is applying familiar L1 sound patterns to L2 vocabulary, which is a common phenomenon in early bilingual language acquisition. Such patterns reveal not only the child's developing awareness of linguistic differences but also the strong impact of their linguistic environment on speech production.

b. Morphological Error

Morphology means the structure of words, how words are formed to fit together. The word error in morphological is referring to the process of word structures with error in it. The data found for morphological errors are in both affixes process, those are prefix and suffix; as follows:

Table 2.
Morphological Error

No.	Process	Indonesian to Batakese (Vice versa)

1	Prefix	_terambil tarambil_ such in: Olo, tarambilnya.
		Membuat mambuat such in: _Mambuat_ apa kau?
2	Suffix	_Mama Mamak_ such in_: Masak kue _mamak_

The errors in prefix usage are the result of language contact between the child's first language (L1), Batakese, and second language (L2), Bahasa Indonesia, an interlingual influence. In Batakese, the prefixes _tar-_ and _ma-_ function similarly to _ter-_ and _me-_ in Bahasa Indonesia. This structural similarity appears to have led the child to overgeneralize L1 rules when attempting to use L2 forms. For instance, in the utterance "_olo, terambilnya_," the child substituted the Bahasa Indonesia prefix _ter-_ with the Batakese equivalent _tar-_, demonstrating how L1 patterns are imposed on L2 usage. This transfer reflects the child's still-developing ability to distinguish between the morphological rules of both languages.

Another morphological error can be seen in the use of suffixes, particularly where phonological development plays a role. The child added the consonant _k_ at the end of the word _mama_, producing _mamak_. While the core meaning of the word remains unchanged, the addition alters the standard form and is therefore considered an error. This type of error stems from intralingual factors—specifically, an internal variation within the child's first language. It indicates that the child may be influenced by familiar forms in L1, possibly hearing _mamak_ more frequently in daily conversations, and is attempting to align new language inputs with known phonological patterns. This highlights how both interlingual and intralingual processes shape the early stages of morphological development.

c. **Lexical Error**

In daily communication, some Batakese lexical items are naturally carried over and adapted into the child's use of Bahasa Indonesia, especially in informal or home settings where code-mixing is common. This blending of languages often leads to lexical errors as the child navigates between two linguistic systems without full awareness of where one language ends and the other begins. These errors occur when the child uses Batakese words in place of their appropriate Bahasa Indonesia equivalents, typically without realizing the switch. Such instances reflect both the strong influence of the home language environment and the child's still-emerging ability to differentiate between vocabulary from L1 and L2. The lexical errors identified in the data are as follows:

Table 3.
Lexical Errors

No	Lexical Error	Meaning	Error Sentences	Purposed Sentence

1	Ecek-ecek	pretend	"Kok nangis? Ecek-ecek?"	"Kenapa kamu menangis? Pura-pura?"
2	Oto	fool	"oto-an, nangis"	"Bodoh, nangis"
3	Modom	sleep	"Iki mau modomloh"	"R (Child's name) mau tidur"
4	Olo	yes	"Olo, terambilnya"	"Iya, ter-ambilnya"

The lexical errors observed in the Batakese child's spoken language are primarily the result of unconscious language processing. At this early stage of development, the child absorbs and reproduces the language he hears most frequently in his daily interactions, without yet having the metalinguistic awareness to distinguish which words belong to which language. This natural mixing occurs because the child is still building his internal language system and tends to rely on familiar vocabulary, regardless of its linguistic origin. As such, words from Batakese are often inserted into Bahasa Indonesia sentences, leading to what may be perceived as lexical errors. This phenomenon is a normal part of bilingual language acquisition, particularly when both languages are used interchangeably in the child's environment. Over time, as the child matures and gains greater exposure to formal language use, his ability to consciously select and separate vocabulary from each language will improve, reducing the frequency of such errors.

d. **Syntactical Error**

The syntactical errors identified in the child's speech fall into three main categories: misformation, omission, and misordering. These types of errors reflect challenges in constructing grammatically correct sentences in the target language, Bahasa Indonesia. Some of these errors are influenced by the structural patterns of the child's first language (L1), Batakese, indicating interlingual interference. Others arise from the child's limited grasp of the rules and structures within Bahasa Indonesia itself, demonstrating intralingual developmental errors. Each error type provides insight into how the child is actively experimenting with and gradually internalizing the syntactic systems of both languages. The following examples illustrate how these syntactical processes manifest in the child's utterances.

1) **Misformation**

The child demonstrated **misformation** in the use of linking words or conjunctions, which reflects an **intralingual** error, stemming from an incomplete understanding of the grammatical rules within Bahasa Indonesia. One example of this can be seen in the utterance:

"Kakak pilih ini sama merah?"

In this sentence, the child incorrectly used the conjunction *sama* (which typically means *with* or *together with*) instead of the appropriate alternative *atau* (meaning *or*) to express a choice. This indicates that the child has not yet fully acquired the rules governing the use of conjunctions in question structures.

The intended meaning behind the sentence was to ask, *"Which one do you prefer? This one (while pointing to a green hat) or the red one?"* However, due to limited exposure to formal structures and developmental language competence, the child relied on a more familiar or frequently heard form (*sama*) in place of the grammatically correct one (*atau*). This misformation highlights a common stage in language acquisition where children apply familiar words in unfamiliar contexts due to gaps in their syntactic knowledge.

2) Omission

Another syntactical error observed in the child's speech is omission, where one or more elements of a sentence are left out during construction. This typically results from the child's tendency to simplify speech structures, favoring shorter and more manageable forms over more complex, grammatically complete ones. This process, often referred to as simplification, is a common feature in early language development and reflects the child's attempt to communicate effectively with limited linguistic resources.

For example, in the utterance

"Ambil semangka dari kulkas" ("Take the watermelon from the fridge"),

The child omits the subject *aku* ("I"), which is necessary to form a grammatically correct sentence in Bahasa Indonesia. According to the standard sentence structure in Bahasa Indonesia; S-P-O-K(C) (Subject, Predicate, Object, and Complement), the correct form should be

"Aku mengambil semangka dari kulkas" ("I took the watermelon from the fridge").

The omission of the subject simplifies the sentence, but it also deviates from standard syntax. In another instance, the child omits question words when trying to ask something, as seen in the example:

"Kakak udah makan? Iki mau makan ni."

While the communicative intent is clear, the construction lacks the interrogative structure required in Bahasa Indonesia. A more complete version of the question would be:

"Apakah kakak sudah makan? Aku mau makan ini sekarang" ("Have you eaten? I am going to eat this now").

The absence of question words such as *apa*, *siapa*, *mengapa*, *bagaimana*, *kapan*, and *di mana*, commonly referred to as the 5W+1H—illustrates the child's limited grasp of question formation rules. These omissions are examples of intralingual errors, which arise not from interference between languages, but from the complexity of the target language's rules that the child has not yet mastered. They highlight the developmental nature of language learning, where children often prioritize meaning and simplicity over grammatical accuracy.

3) Misordering

Beside of misformation and omission, the child also made error in words order. The child put few words incorrectly in his target language. The L2 or Bahasa Indonesia rules were substituted with Batakese language rules which commonly put Predicate or Verb before the subject. For example:

Mau pergi	*aku*	*sama mamak ke pasar*	*Bahasa Indonesia with Batak rules*
P	S	K (C)	
Giot kehe	*au*	*rap umak tu pasar*	*Batak*
P	S	K (C)	

It can be clearly seen that the child was following the batak rules instead of Bahasa Indonesia S P O K (C). If we can revise it, the sentence will be:

Aku	*akan pergi*	*bersama ibu ke pasar*	*Bahasa Indonesia*
S	P	K (C)	
I	*Will go*	*To market with mom*	English
S	P	C	

This instance of misordering clearly illustrates the effect of interlingual transfer, where the syntactic structure of the child's first language (L1), Batakese, is unconsciously applied to their second language (L2), Bahasa Indonesia. Rather than constructing sentences according to the normative S–P–O–K (Subject–Predicate–Object–Complement) pattern of Bahasa Indonesia, the child relies on the more familiar Predicate–Subject–Complement structure typical of Batakese. This reliance reflects an early developmental stage in bilingual language acquisition, where the child has not yet fully internalized the syntactic boundaries between the two languages.

Such blending of language systems is a natural phenomenon in bilingual learners, particularly when both languages are used interchangeably in the home or community environment. At this stage, the child is not intentionally mixing languages, but rather drawing on the linguistic resources most accessible and frequently reinforced. Over time,

as the child gains more exposure to formal education, increased interaction in Bahasa Indonesia, and greater cognitive maturity, the distinctions between L1 and L2 structures are expected to become more defined. This gradual refinement marks the shift from cross-linguistic influence toward greater syntactic accuracy and linguistic autonomy in each language system.The findings from this study illustrate how early bilingual language development is shaped by both cognitive limitations and cross-linguistic influence. The language errors made by the four-year-old Batakese child reflect the intricate interaction between first language (L1) Batakese and second language (L2) Bahasa Indonesia. The observed errors across the four linguistic components-phonology, morphology, lexical, and syntax-highlight both interlingual and intralingual processes, supporting existing theories in second language acquisition (Khansir, 2012; Keshavarz, 2011).

The phonological errors, for instance, can be largely attributed to the natural development of articulatory organs, a phenomenon consistent with child language acquisition stages (Yip & Matthews, 2007). However, the influence of the L1 phonetic system-particularly the distinctive [e] sound in Batakese-further complicates pronunciation in L2. This transfer aligns with Grosjean's (2010) claim that bilinguals often activate both linguistic systems simultaneously, leading to overlapping features in early speech. Morphological errors, such as the overuse of Batakese prefixes and suffixes in place of their Bahasa Indonesia equivalents, reveal the child's effort to systematize language through analogical reasoning. These substitutions exemplify the interlanguage concept, where learners build a transitional grammar influenced by both L1 and L2 (Touchie, 1986).

Lexical errors, meanwhile, appear to stem from language dominance and exposure patterns. The child unconsciously draws from a familiar linguistic pool-largely shaped by the Batakese-speaking home environment-leading to frequent code-mixing. As noted by Sirbu (2015), language functions as a primary medium of socialization, and thus the child's lexical choices reflect the language norms of his immediate environment. Syntactical errors further illustrate the child's developmental trajectory. Misformation, omission, and misordering reveal the complexity of acquiring syntactic rules in a second language. The influence of L1 structures, particularly in word order, confirms the role of interlingual transfer in shaping early sentence construction (Cohn & Ravindranath, 2014).

CONCLUSION

These findings highlight the natural stages of bilingual development, where the child is still negotiating between the two language systems as part of their language acquisition journey. The errors observed whether phonological, morphological, lexical, or syntactical demonstrate the dynamic interaction between the child's first language (Batakese) and second language (Bahasa Indonesia). This has important implications for early childhood education and bilingual language instruction. Understanding the nature of such errors can help parents, teachers, and language practitioners support young bilingual learners more effectively by creating learning environments that are sensitive to language transfer and developmental readiness. For future research, it is recommended that similar studies be conducted with larger samples across different age groups and language backgrounds to explore whether similar patterns of errors appear in other bilingual contexts. In addition, longitudinal studies would be beneficial to trace the development of bilingual children's language systems over time and to examine how specific errors evolve or are self-corrected through exposure, instruction, and maturation. Researchers may also consider integrating sociocultural variables such as home language use, caregiver language attitudes, and media exposure to provide a more comprehensive understanding of bilingual language acquisition in local Indonesian contexts.

REFERENCES

Abdullah, S. Ibrahim, Yunita & Maria C. (2014). *Distribution of Daily Use Local Language in Indonesia*. The Second International Conference on Education and Language (2nd ICEL).

Brown, H. Douglas. (1994). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. Prentice Hall.

Cohn, Abigail C. & Maya R. (2014). *Local Languages in Indonesia: Language Maintenance or Language Shift?* Linguistik Indonesia, 32(2). https://doi.org/10.26499/li.v32i2.22

Grosjean, François. (2010). *Bilingual: Life and Reality*. Harvard University Press.

Khansir, Ali Akbar. (2012). *Error Analysis and Second Language Acquisition*. Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2(5). https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.5.1027-1032

Keshavarz, M. Hossein. (2011). *Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis* (New Edition). Rahnama Press.

Lewis, M. Paul, Simons, Gary F., & Fennig, Charles D. (2016). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* (19th ed.). SIL International.

Limengka, Kuntjara. (2013). *Language, Linguistics, Communication and Media: Types of Grammatical Errors in the Essay Written*, 1(1).

L.R. Gay & Peter Airasian. (2000). *Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Application* (6th ed.). New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Musgrave, Simon. (2014). *Language Documentation and the Study of Indonesian Languages*. Wacana, 15(1), 15–40.

Sirbu, Anca. (2015). *The Significance of Language as a Tool of Communication*. Mircea cel Batran: Naval Academy Press, 18(2).

Touchie, Hanna Y. (1986). *Second Language Learning Errors and Their Types, Causes, and Treatment*. JALT Journal, 8(1).

Yip, Virginia & Matthews, Stephen. (2007). *The Bilingual Child: Early Development and Language Contact*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620744