

The Role of English as a Second Language in the Acquisition of Indonesian as a Third Language

A. Qodir Sanusi¹, Indra Darmawan²

¹STAI Wasilatul Falah Rangkasbitung, Indonesia

²Universitas Latansa Mashiro Rangkasbitung, Indonesia
qodirabdulbantani@gmail.com

Abstract

Cross-linguistic influence in third language (L3) acquisition is closely related to both first language (L1) and second language (L2) acquisition. This study investigates the role of English as an L2 in the acquisition of Indonesian as an L3, with particular attention to two aspects: (1) the role of English in articulation and (2) the role of English as a vocabulary provider. Employing a qualitative research design, the data were collected through face-to-face conversations and picture-based sentence production tasks involving three BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) students from Thailand and Madagascar. The findings indicate that English performs two principal functions. First, it supports learners in mastering sounds that are absent from their L1, while at the same time influencing their Indonesian pronunciation patterns. Second, English functions as a bridge language or supplier language when learners do not yet possess specific lexical items in Indonesian, as evidenced by both adapted and unadapted lexical transfers. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of multilingual acquisition processes and offer practical implications for BIPA instruction.

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INTRODUCTION

Psycholinguistics, as a branch of linguistics, includes several subfields, one of which is language acquisition. In language acquisition studies, two major phases are generally recognized: first language acquisition (FLA) and second language acquisition (SLA). As research on FLA and SLA continues to develop, hypotheses proposed in earlier studies are continually tested for validity, thereby allowing for the emergence of new hypotheses that may either complement or replace existing theoretical assumptions (Ghazali, 2013).

Language acquisition involves two interrelated processes: competence and performance. Every individual possesses linguistic competence, which is realized through linguistic performance. In comparing L1 and L2 acquisition, only a limited number of L2 learners attain a higher level of proficiency in their L2 than in their L1 (Ghazali, 2013). This condition suggests that children who successfully acquire their L1 generally demonstrate stronger linguistic competence in their first language than in their second language. SLA occurs among individuals who have already acquired an L1 and is influenced by cognitive conditions, environmental factors, and psychological processes specific to each learner. These factors make language acquisition a complex field of inquiry that remains worthy of continued investigation.

Beyond SLA, recent decades have seen the development of third language acquisition (TLA) studies, which examine how previously acquired languages, namely L1 and L2, influence the acquisition of a third language. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as cross-linguistic influence and makes TLA potentially more

complex than SLA (Cenoz, 2001). TLA is experienced by multilingual individuals who acquire a new language after having already developed competence in at least two other languages.

In TLA, learners tend to borrow words, phrases, and sentences from languages that are typologically closer to the target language. Kellerman, as cited in Cenoz (2001), refers to this phenomenon as psychotypology. Learners' proficiency across multiple languages, rather than only in the target language, significantly affects the acquisition process and adds complexity to the study of multilingual competence. Lexical transfer constitutes a particularly significant area within TLA research because it provides observable evidence of how L3 acquisition takes place. De Angelis (2007) identifies three types of lexical transfer in TLA: adapted transfer, unadapted transfer, and semantic transfer.

Lexical transfer is especially important in the study of cross-linguistic influence because it provides visible evidence of the mechanisms involved in L3 acquisition. De Angelis (2007) classifies lexical transfer into three forms: unadapted transfer, which involves borrowing a complete lexical form from L1 or L2 without integration into L3; adapted transfer, in which lexical items are modified or combined with L3 elements; and semantic transfer, in which words are used with meanings that do not correspond to their intended sense. Examples of such phenomena include code-mixing forms such as *meng-cut* as an adapted form and *cutting* as an unadapted form in Indonesian-English bilingual contexts.

The study of cross-linguistic influence in TLA also requires attention to language distance, which refers to the typological proximity among L1, L2, and L3. Kellerman, as cited in Cenoz (2001), conceptualizes this as psychotypology. For example, an English L1 speaker with Japanese as an L2 may be more likely to transfer from English when acquiring Indonesian because English is perceived as typologically closer to Indonesian. The concept of L3 acquisition therefore requires careful definition. Hammarberg (2001) proposes that L2 may include multiple languages acquired after L1, using the notation B2n to refer to multiple second languages, while L3 refers specifically to the language currently being acquired, even when the learner has previously acquired several other languages.

Learners of Indonesian as an L3 are commonly found among foreign nationals learning Indonesian or residing in Indonesia, particularly in BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) programs. These learners often use their L1 or L2 knowledge to understand Indonesian. English frequently functions as a bridging language because of its perceived typological proximity to Indonesian in terms of word formation and sentence structure. Given the limited amount of research on cross-linguistic influence in Indonesian L3 acquisition, this study positions Indonesian as the target language or L3 and examines the role of English as an L2. Accordingly, this article focuses on two main objectives: (1) to examine the role of English in articulation during the acquisition of Indonesian as an L3, and (2) to analyze the role of English as a vocabulary provider in the acquisition of Indonesian as an L3.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Data were collected through four techniques implemented simultaneously, namely face-to-face conversation, recording, note-taking, and tapping techniques, as proposed by Mahsun (2007). The research subjects consisted of three BIPA students who met the criterion of having acquired more than two languages, thereby positioning them as learners of Indonesian as a third language (L3). The selection of subjects also considered the similarity of their Indonesian language learning period, which began in September 2014.

The first subject, S-1, was Rusfii Madiyoh from Thailand, aged 23 years. Her first language (L1) was Pattani Malay, while her second languages consisted of Thai, which she had acquired from the age of three to the present, and English, which she learned between the ages of 18 and 22. Indonesian was her third language (L3), which she had been learning since September 2014. Her primary language used at home was Malay. The second subject, S-2, was Rakotoharimalala Patricia from Madagascar, aged 19 years. Her first language was Malagasy, which she had used from birth to the present. Her second languages were French, acquired from the age of four to the present, and English, learned during middle school through high school. Indonesian was her third language, which she had been learning since September 2014. Among the languages she had acquired, French was the language in which she was most proficient. The third subject, S-3, was Nandrian Rakotoarizaka from Madagascar, aged 17 years. His first language was Malagasy, which he had used from birth to the present. His second languages were French, acquired from the age of four to the present, and English, learned during middle school through high school. Indonesian was his third language, which he had been learning since September 2014. His most proficient languages were Malagasy and French.

The data in this study were obtained from two main sources. The first source consisted of conversations between the researcher and the subjects on light and informal topics. During these conversations, the subjects were allowed to use their first or second language when they were unable to express their ideas in Indonesian. The second source consisted of sentence production tasks based on 100 images selected according to their relevance to BIPA curriculum keywords. These tasks were designed to elicit at least 100 sentences from each subject.

The data were analyzed using the comparative, equating, and differentiating technique, known as HBSB, proposed by Mahsun (2007). This technique was applied to identify and compare lexical items and pronunciations that deviated from standard Indonesian. The results of the HBSB analysis were then examined further to identify patterns of lexical transfer and to explain the roles of the first language and second language in the acquisition of Indonesian as a third language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Role of English in Articulation in the Acquisition of Indonesian as an L3

The findings demonstrate that English contributes to the development of articulation skills, particularly in relation to sounds that are absent from the learners' L1. This phenomenon is especially evident in S-2 and S-3, whose L1 is Malagasy. Based on the Malagasy phonological system, certain sounds are absent. English, as the subjects' L22, provided them with prior exposure to and mastery of several sounds that later supported their Indonesian pronunciation.

Evidence from S-2 is presented below:

Utterance	Pronunciation	Feature
"Saya course"	[kɔrs]	Recognition of /c/ as [k]
"Kesulitan ... vocabulary"	[kɛsulitan] [vokabulari]	Mastery of [ə] and [v]
"Box letter"	[bɔxlɛtɛr]	Recognition of [x]
"Mosque"	[moske]	Recognition of [q]
"Walking"	[wɔkin]	Recognition of [w]

These examples indicate that English contributes to the acquisition of Indonesian sounds that are not present in the learners' L1. At the same time, English also influences the learners' Indonesian pronunciation. For example, S-2 pronounced *kertas* with an English-like [r], characterized by a minimal alveolar trill, and pronounced *berdoa* with an atypical stress pattern. Additional examples include S-3 pronouncing *mencoba* as [mencoba] rather than the standard [məncoba], and S-2 pronouncing *membeli* as [membəli] instead of [membeli]. These findings are consistent with Lantika and Cholsy (2023), who documented phonological interference from L1 French in the Indonesian pronunciation of BIPA learners.

The role of psychotypology is clearly reflected in these findings. For S-2 and S-3, English was perceived as typologically closer to Indonesian than either French (L21) or Malagasy (L1). This perception facilitated transfer from English into Indonesian. This phenomenon is in line with Kellerman's concept of psychotypology, as discussed by Cenoz (2001). In contrast, S-1's L1, Pattani Malay, is typologically closer to Indonesian, resulting in a lower degree of English influence on his articulation. This finding is also consistent with Fadhilasari, Yulianto, and Suhartono (2023).

2. The Role of English as a Vocabulary Provider in the Acquisition of Indonesian as an L3

English (L22) functioned as a vocabulary provider for all subjects when Indonesian lexical items were not readily available. The data demonstrate two types of lexical transfer: unadapted lexical transfer and adapted lexical transfer.

Unadapted Lexical Transfer

Unadapted transfer refers to the use of complete English lexical items without morphological integration into Indonesian. The following examples illustrate this type of transfer:

Example	Target Indonesian	Speaker
"Saya harus care"	<i>peduli</i>	S-1
"Saya sulit remember"	<i>mengingat</i>	S-2
"After Maroko mengajar"	<i>setelah</i>	S-2
"Nanti announcement lewat online"	<i>pengumuman</i>	S-1
"Roof ini berbentuk limas"	<i>atap</i>	S-3
"Merapikan tie"	<i>dasi</i>	S-3
"Letter itu kiriman"	<i>surat</i>	S-1
"Orang sedang meeting"	<i>rapat</i>	S-1, S-2

“Belajar driving”	<i>mengemudi</i>	S-2
“Makan honey”	<i>madu</i>	S-3
“Mereka jumping”	<i>melompat</i>	S-3

Adapted Lexical Transfer

Adapted transfer occurs when English lexical items are combined with Indonesian morphological elements, such as affixes. The following examples show this pattern:

Example	Formation	Meaning	Speaker
“skill-nya kurang”	<i>skill + -nya</i>	<i>kemampuannya</i>	S-1
“vocabulary-nya kurang”	<i>vocabulary + -nya</i>	<i>kosakatanya</i>	S-3
“saya meng-cutting kertas”	<i>me- + cutting</i>	<i>memotong</i>	S-2
“anaknya di-massage”	<i>di- + massage</i>	<i>dipijat</i>	S-3

These findings support Kholiq and Luthfiyati (2020), who identified similar patterns of English-to-Indonesian lexical transfer in BIPA contexts. Unlike S-1, whose L1, Pattani Malay, occasionally served as a primary vocabulary provider for certain items because of its function as a bridge language with strong typological proximity to Indonesian, English remained the dominant supplier language for all subjects, particularly for concepts involving formal or academic vocabulary.

3. Factors Influencing the Role of English as the Dominant Vocabulary Provider

Several factors explain the dominance of English as a vocabulary provider. First, the L2 status factor proposed by Hammarberg (2001) suggests that L3 learners may consciously avoid transferring from their L1 because they are concerned about excessive interference, while perceiving the L2 as a more neutral alternative. Second, psychotypology encourages learners to perceive English as typologically closer to Indonesian than their other previously acquired languages. Third, the subjects’ proficiency levels in English facilitated lexical access when they experienced gaps in Indonesian production. Fourth, the learning environment also contributed to the role of English, since BIPA programs commonly use English as a medium of instruction, thereby reinforcing its function as a linguistic bridge (Kholiq et al., 2024).

4. Comparison with Previous Research

The findings of this study are consistent with international research on TLA. Williams and Hammarberg (1998) documented a similar pattern of L2 dominance in L3 production among Swedish learners of German with English as an L2. Similarly, Bardel and Falk (2010) identified the L2 status factor as a strong predictor of the source language for transfer in TLA across various language combinations. In the Indonesian context, Fadhilasari, Yulianto, and Suhartono (2023) found that among 10 BIPA students from Thailand, India, and the Philippines, English consistently functioned as the primary supplier language. This supports the cross-linguistic generalizability of the patterns identified in the present study.

Nevertheless, an important nuance emerged from the data. For S-1, a Thai learner with Pattani Malay as L1, the L1 occasionally superseded English when typological proximity strongly favored Malay-Indonesian transfer. This suggests that although English generally dominates as a supplier language, a highly close L1-L3 typological relationship may sometimes override the L2 status factor. This finding warrants further investigation.

5. Implications

These findings have important pedagogical implications for BIPA instruction. First, instructors should recognize English as a natural cognitive resource for learners. English can therefore be used strategically to facilitate positive transfer while also addressing potential negative transfer, particularly in pronunciation. Second, explicit vocabulary instruction should anticipate English-based transfer patterns by providing Indonesian equivalents for high-frequency English lexical items that learners commonly substitute. Third, pronunciation instruction should address the specific English-influenced articulatory patterns documented in this study.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, several conclusions can be drawn.

First, English plays an important role in articulation. It supports learners in mastering sounds that are absent from the L1 of Indonesian L3 learners, while also influencing their Indonesian pronunciation patterns. Learners with Malagasy as their L1 acquired previously unfamiliar sounds, such as [x], [q], and [w], through English. However, they also demonstrated English-influenced pronunciation of standard Indonesian words, such as [mencoba] for the standard form [məncoba].

Second, English functions as a vocabulary provider. It serves as a bridge language when Indonesian L3 learners do not yet possess the relevant target vocabulary. This is shown through unadapted transfer, such as *care*, *remember*, *roof*, and *meeting*, as well as adapted transfer, such as *meng-cutting*, *di-massage*, and *skill-nya*. The dominance of English as a supplier language is influenced by the L2 status factor, psychotypology, proficiency level, and the learning environment.

Third, this study has several limitations. These include the small number of subjects, consisting of only three learners; the relatively short period of Indonesian learning, which was approximately six months at the time of data collection; and the specific L1 backgrounds represented in the study, namely Pattani Malay and Malagasy. Future research should examine learners from more diverse L1 backgrounds, investigate the longitudinal development of the role of English as learners' Indonesian proficiency increases, and compare the role of English in naturalistic and instructed contexts of Indonesian L3 acquisition.

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