Crossing Boundaries
Musings on Language, Literature and Culture

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CHAPTER 5

A Malay-English Cross-linguistic Study of Present Time Forms

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Abstract: This is a comparative study of written present time forms of Malay and English. Central to the discussion on temporal similarities and differences between the two languages is the unmarked form of the former. Written output from respondents who use Malay as their first language and English as a second language (ESL) was collected, and the data analysis provides evidence of the difference in the acquisitional patterns of the English present time forms between the two distinct levels of Malay users of the English language. Lower intermediate users’ output strongly approximates Malay forms while the more proficient group’s interlanguage indicates the usage of more complex linguistic items.

Keywords: cross-linguistic influence, Malay present time forms, English present time forms, acquisition patterns, interlanguage

Introduction

Malay and English come from two different linguistic families. So, according to Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) (James, 1980; Lado, 1957), it is predictable that Malay learners of English will face difficulties in learning linguistic features that do not have parallel or equivalent forms in their native language. The CAH claims that the principal barrier to second language acquisition is the interference of the first language on the second language system, and that a scientific, structural analysis of the two languages in question would yield a taxonomy of linguistic contrasts between them which in turn would enable a linguist to predict the difficulties a learner would encounter (Brown, 2006). The idea is updated in Odlin’s (2003) Cross-Linguistic Influence (CLI) theory to include other aspects of the first language, such as, phonology, syntax, lexis, and semantics that could influence a second language learner’s process in acquiring the target language. This study has conceptually applied the CAH and, to a certain extent, CLI as its framework in comparing English and Malay.

Background

The learning of English has been reported as challenging; and, in particular, a persistent problem that has been observed among Malays who face difficulty in acquiring specific English linguistic forms. Previous studies indicate that acquisitional difficulties may occur in acquiring the English reflexive forms (Arshad 1999), the past time forms (Maskanah 2007, 2008; Maskanah & Arshad 2006; Svalberg & Chucho 1998; Tan 2005), the present time inflections (Tan 2005) and numerous other grammar items (Haja Mohideen1991). This study aims to investigate