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Mother Tongue Interference in English Use at an Islamic Boarding School

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ABSTRACT

Mother tongue interference is a common phenomenon in foreign language acquisition, especially in bilingual and multilingual learning environments. In Indonesian Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), students are encouraged to use foreign languages such as English and Arabic in daily communication; however, intensive contact between languages often results in interference from students' first language when they use English. This study aims to investigate the forms of mother tongue interference in English usage among eleventh-grade students at an Islamic boarding school and to identify the dominant types of interference that occur. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, with data collected through written questionnaires and documentation of students' daily English utterances. The data were analyzed by classifying and describing interference based on linguistic levels, including lexical, morphological, syntactic, phonological, and pragmatic aspects. The findings show that mother tongue interference appears in various forms, with lexical and syntactic interference being the most dominant. Students frequently insert particles, vocabulary, and sentence structures from their first language into English utterances, indicating a strong influence of the mother tongue system. This condition suggests that students' English proficiency remains at the interlanguage stage. These findings inform contextual teaching.

Keywords: mother tongue interference; interlanguage; English as a foreign language; Islamic boarding school

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INTRODUCTION

English as a foreign language plays an important role in the Indonesian educational system, including in Islamic boarding schools. In pesantren-based education, English is not only taught as a compulsory subject but is also used as a medium of daily communication through language discipline programs. These programs are intended to enhance students' communicative competence and to familiarize them with the practical use of foreign languages in everyday contexts.

Despite these efforts, the use of English in Islamic boarding schools is often influenced by students' mother tongue. As residential educational institutions, pesantren commonly implement specific language policies that encourage the use of foreign languages in daily interaction. However, in practice, students frequently transfer elements of their first language when using English, resulting in language interference. The bilingual or multilingual environment of Islamic boarding schools contributes to this phenomenon. Students are accustomed to using more than one language in daily communication, which can facilitate language acquisition but also increase the potential for mother tongue interference. The first language, acquired from an early age, tends to remain dominant and often serves as a reference system when students produce utterances in English.

Previous studies have indicated that mother tongue interference occurs in various linguistic aspects, including phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Research in English as a foreign language learning contexts shows that the dominance of the mother tongue, habitual language use, and intensive language contact are major factors contributing to interference. In Islamic boarding schools, this condition becomes more complex due to the simultaneous use of multiple foreign languages, such as Arabic and English, particularly in informal communication.

Recent studies have further confirmed the persistence of mother tongue interference in EFL contexts. Panjaitan and Seinsiani (2025) found that Indonesian EFL learners frequently experience grammatical and phonological interference in spoken English due to strong reliance on their first language system. Similarly, Hasircioğlu and Öztürk (2024) reported that lexical and syntactic interference remain dominant in EFL students' language production, indicating that mother tongue influence continues even at higher levels of English learning.

Although numerous studies have examined mother tongue interference in English language learning, research that specifically focuses on senior high school students in Islamic boarding school settings remains limited. Moreover, many previous studies emphasize error analysis without sufficiently considering learners' linguistic backgrounds and social environments. Therefore, further research is needed to provide an empirical description of the forms and tendencies of mother tongue interference in English use within pesantren contexts.

Based on this background, this study aims to examine mother tongue interference in the use of English among eleventh-grade students at an Islamic boarding school. The findings are expected to contribute to applied linguistics research and to provide insights for educators in designing more effective and contextual English teaching strategies



METHODS OF RESEARCH

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach. This approach was chosen because the study aims to describe and understand the phenomenon of mother tongue interference in English language use in depth based on data obtained from respondents, without conducting specific treatments or experiments.

The research was conducted at the Daarul Uluum Islamic Boarding School, which implements a foreign language program, specifically Arabic and English, in the daily activities of its students. The research was conducted during the current semester of the 2025/2026 academic year.

The research subjects were 11th grade Islamic Senior High School (MA) students who actively participated in learning activities and the habit of using English in the Islamic boarding school environment. The research subjects were selected using purposive sampling, considering that 11th grade students had received continuous English language learning and were representative enough to observe the phenomenon of mother tongue interference.

The data collection technique in this study used a written questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to explore information about the use of English by santri and the tendency for mother tongue interference to occur in linguistic aspects. In addition, the questionnaire was also used to obtain data on the factors that influence the occurrence of mother tongue interference. Before use, the questionnaire was adjusted to the level of understanding of the students so that the questions were easy to understand and answer honestly.

Data analysis was carried out by grouping and describing the data obtained from the questionnaire. Respondents' answers were analyzed to identify forms of mother tongue interference and the linguistic aspects that were most dominant in experiencing interference. Furthermore, the data were analyzed descriptively and qualitatively by linking the research findings with relevant language interference theories.

This study was conducted in one stage of data collection without using an action cycle, because the study was descriptive and did not aim to make direct improvements to learning. The results of the data analysis were then presented in the form of a systematic narrative description to answer the research objectives.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the questionnaire data and documentation of students' daily English utterances, this study found that **mother tongue interference frequently occurs in the English use of eleventh-grade students** at the Islamic boarding school. The interference appears in several linguistic aspects, including **lexical, morphological, syntactic, phonological, and pragmatic interference**.

The analysis table presented in the manuscript shows that the most dominant interference types are **lexical interference and syntactic interference**. Students often insert particles from their mother tongue such as “**ya**,” “**mah**,” “**dong**,” “**atuh**,” “**yee**,” and “**emang**” into English sentences. This indicates that students still rely heavily on their first language system when communicating in English.

The findings can be summarized as follows:

a. **Lexical Interference**

Lexical interference is the most frequent type. Students insert mother tongue particles into English utterances, such as:



- *"don't do it ya"*
- *"please help me dong"*
- *"you are mah very fomo"*
- *"not already atuh"*

These particles are culturally and pragmatically meaningful in Indonesian or local languages but do not exist in English grammar.

b. Morphological Interference

Morphological interference occurs in the form of incorrect grammatical constructions influenced by Indonesian structure, for example:

- *"you mah have eating"*

This indicates confusion in forming English tense patterns and shows that students transfer Indonesian grammar patterns into English.

c. Syntactic Interference

Syntactic interference is reflected in English sentence structures that follow the mother tongue word order, such as:

- *"that atuh take in"*
- *"take in atuh"*

These sentences are ungrammatical in English and show that students still depend on L1 syntactic patterns.

d. Phonological Interference

Phonological interference is observed through the addition of vowel sounds or local intonation patterns, such as:

- *"sorry yee"*

This shows that English pronunciation is still influenced by the phonological habits of the mother tongue.

e. Pragmatic Interference

Pragmatic interference occurs when students transfer pragmatic markers into English, such as:

- *"what sih"*
- *"why emang"*

These expressions function as pragmatic emphasis in the mother tongue but are not naturally used in English.

Overall, the results confirm that the students' English production is still strongly affected by their mother tongue, especially in informal communication contexts within the boarding school environment.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that mother tongue interference remains a dominant phenomenon in the English communication of Islamic boarding school students. This condition is closely related to the students' bilingual/multilingual environment, where Indonesian or local languages are still used as the primary system of thinking and interaction, while English is practiced as a foreign language in daily routines



1) Lexical interference

Lexical interference is the most dominant form of interference in this research data. Based on the Analysis Table, this interference is characterized by the appearance of vocabulary and particles from the native language in English speech.

In the data “not already atuh”, the particle atuh functions as an intensifier in the regional language, but has no lexical or pragmatic equivalent in English. The presence of this particle causes lexical deviation and indicates the direct transfer of elements from the native language into the target language. In addition, the use of the phrase not already indicates an inappropriate choice of vocabulary to express the meaning of an unfinished activity. In the English language system, this meaning should be represented by the form not yet or the present perfect structure.

The data “don’t do it ya” and “please help me dong” show a similar phenomenon, namely the insertion of the particles ya and dong, which function as markers of attitude and softeners of speech in the mother tongue. Although the semantic meaning of the utterance can still be understood, the use of these particles shows that the students transfer the pragmatic function of their mother tongue directly into English without adjusting to the target language system.

These findings indicate that lexical interference is not only related to vocabulary limitations, but also to the dominance of the pragmatic system of the mother tongue in English speech production.

2) Morphological Interference

Morphological interference is evident in word formation and the use of English grammatical forms influenced by the morphological system of the native language. This can be observed in the utterances “you mah have eating” and “you are mah very fomo”.

In the data “you mah have eating,” the insertion of the particle mah shows the transfer of regional language elements that have no morphological function in English. In addition, the use of the verb form have eating reflects inaccuracy in the formation of the present perfect tense. This phenomenon indicates that the students apply the morphological system of their native language, which does not recognize changes in verb forms based on time, to English.

Meanwhile, in the data “you are mah very fomo,” morphological interference is also seen in the use of slang vocabulary that is not adapted to word classes in English. This shows that the morphological flexibility of the mother tongue influences the way santri form word structures in English.

Thus, morphological interference in this study reflects limitations in mastery of the English morphological system and the strong influence of the mother tongue in the word formation process.

3) Syntactic Interference

Syntactic interference is characterized by the use of English sentence structures that still follow the syntactic patterns of the native language. This phenomenon can be seen in the data “that atuh take in,” “take in atuh,” and “what sih.”

In the utterance “take in atuh”, the word order shows the imperative pattern of the native language, which is commonly accompanied by an emphatic particle. In English, this kind of structure is unknown, so the sentence becomes ungrammatical. The same thing is found in the utterance “that atuh take in”, which does not have a subject and clear word order according to English rules.

The utterance “what sih” shows both syntactic and pragmatic interference. Structurally, this utterance is incomplete because it lacks a predicate, while pragmatically, the word sih functions as an expressive marker in the native language that cannot be directly transferred to English.

This syntactic interference shows that santri are still very dependent on the word order patterns of their native language when forming English sentences.



4) Phonological Interference

Phonological interference is evident in the use of sound elements and intonation from the mother tongue in English speech, as seen in the data “sorry yee” and “why emang.” The addition of the vowel yee and the use of the word emang indicate that the phonological system of the mother tongue still influences English speech production.

This phenomenon generally occurs unconsciously and is closely related to the phonological habits of speakers in their first language. Phonological interference reinforces the finding that santri's command of English is not yet completely detached from the sound system of their mother tongue.

Synthesis of Discussion

Overall, the data in the Analysis Table shows that interference from the mother tongue in the use of English by 11th grade students covers lexical, morphological, syntactic, and phonological aspects, with lexical and syntactic interference being the most dominant forms. These findings indicate that the students' use of English is still at the interlanguage stage, where the target language system has not been fully internalized and is still heavily influenced by the first language.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of analyzing the speech data of 11th grade students at Islamic Senior High School in the Daarul Uluum Islamic Boarding School, it can be concluded that interference from the mother tongue in the use of English is still quite intense. This interference appears at several linguistic levels, namely lexical, morphological, and syntactic. The data in the analysis table shows that elements of the mother tongue are not only present in the form of additional vocabulary such as mah, atuh, or dong, but also influence the word formation patterns and sentence structure of the English used by the students.

Lexical interference is evident through the use of particles characteristic of the mother tongue that are inserted directly into English speech. Meanwhile, morphological interference is seen in the use of verb forms and phrases that follow the patterns of the mother tongue, such as in the utterances “you mah have eating” or “that atuh take in.” Syntactic interference is reflected in sentence structures that do not conform to the rules of English but are in line with the structure of the mother tongue that has become ingrained in the students' language habits.

This interference phenomenon occurs due to the dominance of the mother tongue in the daily lives of students and their suboptimal mastery of English grammar as a foreign language. The bilingual or even multilingual environment of Islamic boarding schools further strengthens language contact, making the transfer of elements from the mother tongue to English difficult to avoid. Thus, interference cannot always be viewed as a mistake, but rather as part of the process of developing students' language competence.

Therefore, the results of this study are expected to serve as material for reflection for English educators in Islamic boarding schools to design more contextual learning strategies. An approach that not only emphasizes structural accuracy but also understands the linguistic background of students is believed to help minimize interference and improve English language skills more effectively.

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