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A Process Oriented Reconstruction of Language Interference in Multilingual Learners

Mukmin[1*]
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malan [1]
mukminnayya@gmail.com

Ribut Wahyu Eriyanti[2*]
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang[2]
eriyanti@umm.ac.id

Hartono[3]
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang
hartono@umm.ac.id

Hari Sunaryo[4]
Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang
harisunaryo@umm.ac.id

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Corresponding author:
Umar, STIT Buntet Pesantren Cirebon, Indonesia

Abstract

Some researches only focused on identifying linguistic errors as products of interference, limited attention to the underlying cognitive and linguistic mechanisms through which interference emerges. This study investigates the process of language interference in multilingual learners' English production. A qualitative case study design was employed, involving 13 students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Luwuk who actively use multiple languages in their daily communication. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations during English learning activities. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework to identify the process of interference. The findings reveal that language interference occurs through three interconnected processes. First, learners engage in layered language knowledge activation, dominant languages function as mediating systems before English production. Second, cross-linguistic transfer operates as a strategy for constructing meaning, leading to deviations across lexical, grammatical, and phonological levels. Third, repeated patterns of transfer contribute to error fossilization, where certain forms become stabilized and resistant to correction. These processes demonstrate that interference is dynamic, integrated, and influenced by both cognitive and social factors. This study contributes to the reconceptualization of language interference by proposing a process-oriented. The findings offer important implications for language teaching, particularly in multilingual classrooms, by highlighting the need to address the underlying processes of language use rather than focusing solely on error correction.

Keywords: Language interference; Multilingual learners; Cross-linguistic transfer; Fossilization.

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Introduction

The increasing prominence of English as a global lingua franca has significantly transformed the linguistic landscape of education, particularly in multilingual contexts where learners routinely navigate multiple language systems. In many parts of the world, including Indonesia, English is acquired not as a second language in isolation, but as an additional language layered upon existing linguistic repertoires that often include a national language and one or more local languages. This multilingual condition creates a dynamic and complex environment for language learning, in which learners continuously engage in processes of selection, negotiation, and adaptation across languages. Rather than operating within clearly bounded linguistic systems, multilingual learners develop fluid and interconnected linguistic competencies that reflect their diverse language experiences. Consequently, understanding how these learners process and produce English requires analytical frameworks that account for the interaction among multiple linguistic systems rather than treating languages as separate and autonomous entities.

Within this complex multilingual setting, language interference remains one of the most persistent and widely observed phenomena affecting learners' English production. Interference refers to the influence of previously acquired languages on the use of a target language, often resulting in deviations from target language norms. These deviations can manifest across multiple linguistic levels, including phonology, syntax, and lexis, and may affect both spoken and written communication. In multilingual learners, interference is not limited to the influence single source language but may involve the interaction of multiple linguistic systems simultaneously. This condition often leads to more intricate patterns of deviation, where learners draw on overlapping linguistic resources in ways that are not always predictable. As a result, interference can disrupt fluency, obscure intended meanings, and hinder effective communication, making it a critical issue in language education.

Despite its significance, language interference has traditionally been examined through a predominantly product-oriented lens, with a strong emphasis on error identification and classification. However, more recent research has begun to question this approach, arguing that cross-linguistic influence should not be viewed merely as observable error outcomes but as part of a broader, dynamic cognitive system shaping multilingual competence (Chen, 2022) . A substantial body of earlier work focused on cataloguing learner errors, yet contemporary studies emphasize that such errors reflect ongoing interactions between multiple linguistic systems rather than static products (Group, 2016). This shift highlights that interference emerges through dynamic, realtime processing shaped by cognitive, social, and contextual factors, which are often overlooked in product-oriented analyses (Ortega, 2019). Consequently, focusing solely on observable errors obscures the evolving mechanisms through which interference develops during actual language use.

In addition to their product-oriented focus, many earlier studies were conducted in relatively homogeneous linguistic contexts. Recent research, however, emphasizes that multilingual learners operate within complex linguistic repertoires where multiple languages are simultaneously activated and interact dynamically(Hammarberg, 2018);(Deng et al., 2025). In multilingual environments, learners draw on diverse linguistic resources, and factors such as language dominance, typological similarity, and proficiency interact to shape cross-linguistic influence in unpredictable ways (Zohra Athmani & Boukhedimi, 2021). This complexity challenges traditional bilingual-based

models and calls for more flexible frameworks that account for variability and context sensitivity in multilingual settings (Ngọc, 2024).

Another critical limitation of earlier research lies in the tendency to conceptualize language interference as a linear and sequential process. Recent studies increasingly reject this assumption, proposing instead that language processing operates as a dynamic and interconnected system in which multiple processes occur simultaneously rather than in fixed stages (Naderi, 2025). Empirical evidence also shows that crosslinguistic influence can occur at multiple levels (phonological, syntactic, and lexical) simultaneously, even in early stages of acquisition, reflecting parallel rather than sequential processing (Wolfsthurn et al., 2021). Furthermore, multilingual learners often experience overlapping cognitive and affective processes such as activation, transfer, and error production which function as part of an integrated system rather than discrete steps (Qazi & Hayat, 2025).

Therefore, linear models are increasingly seen as insufficient for capturing the complexity of real-world multilingual language use. The limitations outlined above point to a significant gap in the literature: the lack of process-oriented and context-sensitive models that can account for the dynamic, integrated, and contextually grounded nature of language interference. A process-oriented perspective shifts the analytical focus from what errors are produced to how and why they are produced. This perspective emphasizes the importance of examining the cognitive and linguistic mechanisms that underlie language production, including the activation of prior knowledge, the selection of linguistic features, and the interaction among multiple language systems. By adopting such an approach, researchers can gain deeper insights into the processes that give rise to interference, rather than merely describing its outcomes.

Moreover, a context-sensitive approach is essential for capturing the specific characteristics of multilingual learning environments. In contexts such as Indonesian higher education, where students often possess rich and diverse linguistic repertoires, interference cannot be fully understood without considering the sociolinguistic and educational contexts in which language use occurs. Factors such as language exposure, instructional practices, and patterns of language use in daily life may all influence how learners draw on their linguistic resources during English production. Therefore, models of interference must be grounded in empirical data that reflect the realities of these contexts, rather than relying solely on abstract theoretical assumptions.

In response to these gaps, this study aims to reconceptualize the process of language interference in multilingual English learners by developing a theory that is both empirically grounded and theoretically informed. Rather than adopting existing multi-stage models uncritically, this study seeks to examine how interference actually unfolds in a real multilingual learning context and to identify the core processes that characterize this phenomenon. Through qualitative analysis of learners' language production, the study investigates the extent to which the traditionally proposed stages of interference operate as distinct and sequential processes, or whether they are better understood as integrated and overlapping components of a more streamlined process.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to both theoretical and pedagogical domains. Theoretically, it seeks to advance current understandings of language interference by offering a perspective that emphasizes process, integration, and contextual relevance. Pedagogically, a deeper understanding of the processes underlying interference may inform more effective instructional strategies, enabling educators to address not only the symptoms of interference but also its underlying causes. In multilingual classrooms, such insights are particularly valuable, as they can support the

development of teaching approaches that leverage learners' linguistic resources while minimizing negative transfer.

In sum, as multilingualism continues to shape language learning worldwide, there is an increasing need for research that captures the complexity of linguistic interaction in real-world contexts. By adopting a process-oriented and context-sensitive perspective, this study seeks to address existing gaps in the literature and to provide a more holistic account of language interference in multilingual English learning.

Research Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of language interference among multilingual learners in the context of English language learning. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study aims to explore complex, context-bound phenomena that cannot be reduced to numerical data or isolated variables. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for investigating processes, meanings, and experiences within natural settings (Creswel, 2013). Specifically, a case study design is used to allow an intensive and holistic examination of a bounded system within its real-life context. Case studies are considered appropriate when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Robert K Yin, 2018). Therefore, this study does not aim to produce statistical generalizations but rather to generate a rich, contextualized, and analytical understanding of language interference as it occurs in authentic learning situations.

The participants of this study are undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program who have multilingual backgrounds, meaning they actively use more than one language in addition to English, such as local languages (e.g., Banggai, Balantak, and Saluan) and Indonesian as the national language. Participants were selected using purposive sampling based on their relevance to the research objectives, particularly their ability to use multiple languages in daily communication. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to select information-rich cases that can provide deep insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2002). The selected students are also active learners engaged in English-medium academic activities, allowing the researcher to observe language interference in authentic and formal contexts. This approach aligns with qualitative research principles that emphasize depth and relevance of data rather than statistical representativeness (Creswell, 2014).

This study was conducted in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Muhammadiyah Luwuk, located in Luwuk, Banggai Regency, Central Sulawesi. The site was selected due to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the students and the use of English as the academic language in classroom activities. Conducting research in a natural setting is a key characteristic of qualitative inquiry, as it allows researchers to study phenomena in their real-world context. This context enables the researcher to capture authentic language use and observe how interference emerges in real communicative situations. Furthermore, selecting a contextually relevant research site is essential for ensuring that the findings are meaningful and grounded in actual practice.

Research Instruments

The data in this study are qualitative and were collected from two main sources: interview transcripts and classroom observations during English learning activities. Interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and strategies in producing English, particularly in situations where interference occurs. Interviews are

widely used in qualitative research to access participants' perspectives and internal processes. Classroom observations, on the other hand, were conducted to capture actual language use in interaction, including students' participation in discussions and their responses to tasks. Observation allows researchers to document naturally occurring behavior in context. The research instruments include a semi-structured interview guide and observation tools (observation checklist and field notes). The semi-structured format ensures flexibility while maintaining focus, and observation tools support systematic data recording. The use of multiple data collection methods also enables triangulation, which enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Nancy et al., 2014).

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study follows thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis begins with data familiarization, in which the researcher repeatedly reviews interview transcripts and observation notes to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. This is followed by generating initial codes by identifying relevant data segments related to language interference. The next step involves organizing these codes into broader categories through the process of searching for themes. The identified themes are then reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency with the dataset. In the subsequent stage, themes are defined and clearly named to represent specific aspects of the phenomenon. Finally, the results are presented in a structured narrative supported by empirical data. Thematic analysis is chosen for its flexibility and its ability to provide a detailed and nuanced account of complex qualitative data.

Results and Discussion

This section presents research findings regarding the processes by which source language interference arises and operates in the practice of English communication among multilingual learners. The data indicate that language interference does not emerge suddenly at the stage of error production, but rather stems from the way learners activate, manage, and utilise their entire linguistic repertoire when faced with the demands of using English. This process occurs in both spoken and written activities, and is influenced by time pressure, the communicative situation, and the level of automation of the language used in daily life. Based on in-depth interview data, language interference among multilingual learners in Banggai Regency can be understood as a series of interrelated empirical processes, beginning with the activation of layered linguistic knowledge, continuing through linguistic transfer, and culminating in the fossilisation of errors

a. Layered Language Knowledge Activation

Preliminary findings indicate that when multilingual learners use English, their thought processes do not begin with the English language system itself. English, in fact, emerges as the final form of a layered cognitive process, with the conceptualisation of utterances first occurring in the more dominant and automated language. This language activation occurs spontaneously, often unconsciously to the learner, and serves as a cognitive foundation when they face English language tasks.

Some participants explained that before speaking or writing in English, they first access the meaning in their local language or Indonesian, then translate it internally into English. One participant remarked:

1) *"Er… personally, Ma'am, I do. Er… I'll put it in Indonesian firstLuwuk dialect and then back into English again."*

This layered activation process is reflected in the participant's statement in data (1). The participant explained that when wishing to convey an idea in English, the initial meaning often emerges first in the local language used in Luwuk. However, as this local language is considered less standard, the participant first converts it into Indonesian before translating it into English. This statement indicates that learners do not access English directly, but rather through a mediating stage involving another language that is already active within their cognitive system. Thus, language production in multilingual learners involves a step-by-step cognitive process, in which prior language knowledge functions as a conceptual bridge in constructing meaning in the target language.

This layered process is also confirmed by classroom observation data. During oral presentation activities, the researcher noted that some students appeared to pause briefly before speaking, accompanied by silent lip movements or soft mumbling in a non-English language. On several occasions, students were seen jotting down brief notes in Indonesian or a regional language before restating them in English. These observational findings suggest that the speech planning process does not occur directly in English, but rather through another language that is more cognitively established.

Interview data (2) further revealed that language activation is layered, beginning with the regional language, continuing to Indonesian, and only then to English. This process indicates a multi-stage cognitive shift involving more than one language system before the learner achieves English language production. A similar point was made by another participant:

2) *"For me, when learning English, whether I'm writing or doing anything else, I usually translate it into my mother tongue first… in my mind, I translate it into my mother tongue first for example, standard Indonesian into Luwuk and only then do I understand the meaning of the English."*

This finding is reinforced by observations of writing tasks in the classroom. The researcher noted that some students drafted their initial work in Indonesian, then gradually transferred it into English. In several pages of the assignments, traces of deletions or additions of words were visible, indicating a process of gradual translation rather than direct writing in English. This confirms that English functions primarilyas a medium of final expression, not as the main language of thought.

Furthermore, data (3) shows that language activation does not always proceed linearly, but can jump between language systems. Participants described this condition as an unstable process:

3) *"…..before I use English, I translate it first into Banggai or Indonesian".*

This statement aligns with findings from observations during group discussions. In some spontaneous interactions, students were seen switching between the source language and Indonesian whilst discussing, before eventually attempting to express themselves in English. This rapid switching between languages reflects that several language systems are active simultaneously and compete for cognitive control, particularly in situations demanding a quick response.

Layered language activation also appeared to be stronger in situations of spontaneous communication or when encountering tasks that were difficult to solve.

Data (4) illustrates that the regional language often emerged more dominantly in such conditions:

4) *"If I'm fifty-fifty… if something's difficult, I switch to the previous language first."*

This statement indicates that the activation of language knowledge in multilingual learners does not always proceed linearly from one language to another, but can occur flexibly depending on the level of linguistic difficulty encountered. In certain situations, learners may directly access English; however, when faced with limitations in vocabulary or specific structures, their cognitive system will activate the previous language as a strategy for solving linguistic problems. Thus, the language mastered earlier functions as a conceptual reference point in the process of English language production. This phenomenon confirms that the activation of language knowledge in multilingual learners is dynamic and adaptive; cross-linguistic switching is used as a mechanism to maintain the fluency of communication whilst overcoming limitations in the target language.

This finding aligns with the results of observations when students were asked to answer questions directly without preparation. The researcher noted that in such situations, students tended to speak immediately without long pauses; however, the utterances produced often contained structures or word choices reflecting their regional language. Errors were only realized after the utterance had been produced, marked by expressions of hesitation, a small smile, or reflective comments from the students after finishing speaking.

Thus, the triangulation of interview and observation data indicates that layered language activation constitutes the initial cognitive foundation in the process of English language use among multilingual learners. This activation not only influences how learners plan their utterances but also determines the direction of errors and subsequent processes in English language production. Consequently, language interference is rooted in the conceptualization stage, long before errors become apparent in the resulting utterances.

Theoretically, these findings support the concept of language knowledge activation proposed by Selinker (2013), who states that linguistic systems stored in memory become active when learners encounter the target language. However, the results of this study extend this concept within a multilingual context. Whereas the original language transfer model assumed a linear relationship between the first and second languages, in a multilingual context, activation is parallel and simultaneous. Learners do not merely activate the first language, but also the second language or regional languages that share structural or functional similarities with English. Thus, interference in the early stages is not solely due to the dominance of the first language, but rather the result of interactions among the learner's entire linguistic repertoire.

These findings are also consistent with those of Biglari & Struys (2021), who demonstrated that the influence of the first language on the second language depends on the degree of typological similarity between the two. In this study, learners tended to activate languages that were structurally or phonologically closer to English when encountering difficulties. However, unlike that study, which focused on receptive skills, this study shows that layered activation is more evident in spoken production, which demands rapid processing. Thus, this study does not contradict previous findings but extends them to the productive domain and multilingual contexts.

b. Linguistic Transfer as an Effort to Build Connectivity

At the stage of linguistic transfer, multilingual learners tend to transfer linguistic elements from their source language into their use of English. This transfer does not occur at just one linguistic level, but encompasses lexical, grammatical, phonological and

structural aspects, triggered by the perceived similarities between language systems and deeply ingrained linguistic habits.

At the lexical and pronominal levels, learners show a tendency to carry over referential forms from their local language into their English-language thought processes. This is reflected in the use of local pronouns such as torang and dorang, which cognitively substitute for the concepts of 'we' and 'they' in English. One participant stated that these referential forms arise spontaneously in the initial thought process before being converted into English, as shown in data

5) *"For example, 'we' becomes 'torang' first; we think of it that way. If it's 'they', we definitely think of it as 'dorang'." Classroom observations reinforce this finding; students often pause briefly before speaking, as if translating from local pronoun forms into English.*

Furthermore, linguistic transfer is also influenced by the perception of structural similarities between languages. Some learners identified similarities in patterns between English and Indonesian, which were then used as a basis for constructing sentence structures. This perception was explicitly stated by a participant, as shown in data (6), who mentioned that "I have seen English and Indonesian structures that are the same". However, these perceived similarities are often partial. When structures become more complex, there is a reversal of word order, particularly in constructions involving more than two words, as expressed in statement (7): "if there are more than two, their positions are swapped".

In grammatical terms, linguistic transfer manifests as a conflict between language systems. Learners attempt to apply English grammatical rules within an Indonesian or regional language framework, particularly regarding tense usage and active-passive structures. One participant remarked, "In English, there's the past tense; well, usually there's a passive form that becomes active, and that also has an impact" (8). This illustrates that changes in verb forms in English often become intertwined with the understanding of passive and active constructions in Indonesian. Observational findings indicate that, in practice, students frequently use verb forms that do not align with the temporal context, even though they declaratively understand the concept of the past tense.

Transfer also occurs at the phonological and phonetic levels. Learners carry articulation patterns from their first language into their pronunciation of English, particularly regarding the /r/ sound. One participant highlighted the difference in the character of this sound, noting that the /r/ sound in the local language is pronounced more strongly than in English. Furthermore, phonetic adaptation is evident in the pronunciation of English words adapted to the Indonesian phonological system, such as 'serve' being pronounced as 'seref' or 'baseref'. Classroom observations indicate that this pattern does not occur in just one individual, but has become a socially accepted collective practice in interactions among students.

Interestingly, linguistic transfer is also influenced by perceptions of equivalence within the local grammatical system. Learners associate the concept of the definite article 'the' in English with specific markers in the Banggai language, such as 'do buku' to refer to a specific object. Furthermore, participants noted that " , and in the Banggai language there are also verb changes, for example 'makaan', 'kaan', and 'lapamo kaan'. "It has already eaten, before eating and will eat " (9). The existence of a verb-change system in the Banggai language that marks time, such as makaan, kaan, and lapamo kaan, encourages learners to assume a direct equivalence with the English tense system. This

assumption appears helpful in the early stages of comprehension, but simultaneously has the potential to lead to over-generalisation in the use of English language structures.

Linguistic transfer demonstrates that interference is not merely a linguistic error, but rather the result of a rational cognitive process within a multilingual context. Learners utilize existing linguistic resources to bridge the gap with the target language. However, when the perception of similarity is not balanced by an awareness of systemic differences, this transfer develops into a source of recurring errors in English language production.

These findings support the linguistic feature identification and linguistic feature transfer stages in Selinker's (2013) theory. Learners first identify similarities or differences in linguistic features, then transfer those features deemed relevant. However, this study demonstrates that in a multilingual context, the feature identification process does not merely compare two languages but involves more than one language system simultaneously. This indicates that transfer in multilingual learning is multidirectional and more complex than the classical B1–B2 model.

Compared to the study by Syafutri & Saputra (2021), which classified interference into phonological, grammatical, syntactic, and lexical categories, this study provides an explanation of the process by which such classifications are formed. The classifications identified by previous research represent the final manifestation of a gradual process of feature identification and transfer. Thus, this study addresses the shortcomings of previous research, which had not explained the cognitive mechanisms underlying the emergence of these types of interference.

Similarly, the findings of Muliyana et al., (2021) regarding spelling errors, articles, and plural forms in students' writing indicate the transfer of morphological structures from the source language. However, that study did not examine why such transfer occurs or how the process develops. This study demonstrates that partial structural transfer emerges as an adaptive strategy when learners encounter discrepancies in grammatical systems. In other words, interference at the transfer stage is not merely a result of a lack of competence, but also stems from the learner's systematic efforts to establish cross-linguistic connections.

c. Fossilisation of Errors

This section explains how errors in the use of English begin to appear clearly in the real-life communication of multilingual learners. The research findings indicate that errors do not merely emerge as the final outcome of the speaking process, but become a crucial moment marking the transition from internal thought processes to the utterances actually spoken. Errors occur when the internal system used by learners to produce English is no longer able to resist the influence of the source language, which is more mastered and used more automatically, thus leading to the fossilisation of errors.

The fossilisation of errors describes a situation in which the English language errors made by multilingual learners are no longer temporary, but become entrenched and continue to recur despite the learner having received sufficient exposure to instruction, correction and language experience. In this context, fossilisation is understood not merely as a pedagogical failure, but as the result of a complex interplay between phonological and cognitive factors, early learning habits, and social reinforcement within a multilingual environment.

One of the most prominent forms of fossilisation is found in persistent phonological errors, particularly regarding English sounds that share phonetic similarities but have significant phonological differences. Errors in distinguishing between 'thought' and 'through' serve as a representative example of this phenomenon. One participant stated that the two words "are often mixed up because their pronunciation is almost the same,

which is confusing" (10). Phonologically, these two words have different sound structures; however, for learners, the similarity of the initial sounds and long vowels leads to a simplification of sound perception. The results of the observation indicate that this error does not occur in just one context, but recurs in spontaneous speech, even after the lecturer has provided correction.

A similar error also occurs with the word pair 'know' and 'now', which are phonetically distinguished only by an initial sound that is not clearly realised in rapid speech. One participant admitted that they often confused the use of these two words: "When I speak, Ma'am, I mix up 'know' and 'now'" (11). This error is not merely phonetic in nature but impacts the meaning of the utterance, and is therefore categorised as a sound similarity that triggers a meaning error. Classroom observations show that although learners sometimes realise this error after the utterance is complete, they still struggle to correct it spontaneously, indicating that a process of fossilisation has already taken place.

The learners' awareness of their errors is also a key factor in fossilisation. Some learners stated that the errors they made were "sometimes noticed, sometimes not" (12). This phenomenon indicates the presence of a transition error, namely a condition where learners possess knowledge of the correct form but fail to apply it consistently in language production. From the observations, this situation most frequently arises when learners are under communicative pressure, such as during oral presentations or group discussions, where the primary focus shifts from formal accuracy to the conveyance of meaning. Fossilisation is also clearly evident in English sounds that have no direct equivalent in the learner's first language or regional dialect. Interdental sounds such as /θ/ are often substituted with other, more familiar sounds, and this error is acknowledged as being "extremely difficult to correct" (13). These errors are categorised as persistent phonological errors, as they relate not only to pronunciation but also to the internalised sound system. Observations show that although learners are able to imitate correct pronunciation, the sound reverts to an error when used in a full sentence.

In addition to consonants, fossilisation also occurs at the vowel level, as seen in the pronunciation of 'student' as 'stadent'. This error indicates vowel substitution, where English vowels are replaced by vowels that are more dominant in the phonological system of Indonesian or regional languages. In classroom observations, this form of pronunciation appears consistently across various contexts and is unaffected by direct correction, indicating that the pattern has become part of the learners' articulatory habits.

Articulation difficulties were also evident with the /r/ sound, which some participants considered "difficult" to pronounce according to English standards. This difficulty relates to differences in the manner of articulating the /r/ sound in English and the learners' source language. Observations indicate that learners tend to retain a stronger or rolled /r/ sound, which is phonetically understandable but phonologically has the potential to impair speech clarity.

The influence of the source language's phonology is also evident in the pronunciation of the word 'may be', which is realised as 'mai ai'. This error demonstrates how learners split a single English lexical unit into two syllables based on the phonological patterns of their first language. Observations show that this error frequently occurs in fast and informal speech, indicating that this form has become part of the learner's mental representation. In addition to phonological errors, fossilization also occurs at the grammatical level, particularly as a result of early overgeneralisation during the learning process. The statement "I am forget", which continues to be used despite

being known to be incorrect, reflects how an initial focus on the "I am" pattern forms a habit that is difficult to break.

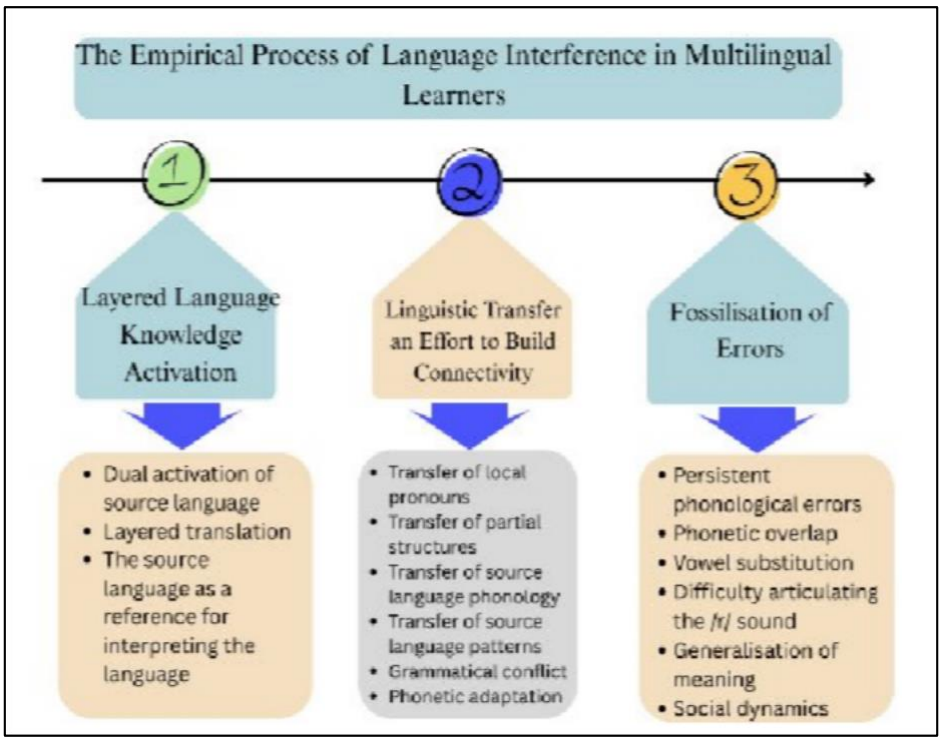
"I am forget… is often wrong and hard to get rid of because of the focus on 'I am' from the start" (14)

Social environmental factors also reinforce the fossilization of errors. One participant noted that certain errors "are heard from many people" (15), indicating the presence of social reinforcement. In classroom observations, non-standard language forms are often accepted without correction in interactions between students, thereby legitimizing these errors socially and making them increasingly difficult to correct fossilization is also evident in the form of semantic generalisation, such as the use of the word 'hanger' to refer to all types of hangers, regardless of the context of use. These errors indicate that learners not only transfer linguistic forms but also over-extend meanings based on limited experience. Observations show that the use of these terms does not create communication barriers in the local context, so learners are not motivated to self-correct.

Overall, fossilized errors suggest that English language errors in multilingual learners result from a long-term process involving the interaction between the source language's phonological system, the learner's cognitive strategies, early learning habits, and the social dynamics within the learning environment. Fossilizations cannot be understood merely as an individual failure, but as a systemic phenomenon that needs to be addressed through a pedagogical approach that is more context-aware, reflective, and sustainable.

To clarify the interrelationships between these processes, this series of findings is presented visually, illustrating the empirical flow of language interference as experienced by learners.

Figure 1: The Process of Language Interference in English among Multilingual Learners



A sequence of processes that demonstrates that language interference in multilingual learners does not occur in isolation, but rather forms an interconnected and continuous sequence. This process begins with the activation of layered language knowledge, whereby learners rely on their dominant language as a basis for thought before using English. This activation is then followed by an attempt at linguistic transfer, namely the search for equivalence of form and meaning across languages as a strategy for establishing connections. Under certain conditions, limited control over this process gives rise to errors as markers of the transition from mental processes to actual speech production. Furthermore, errors that are repeatedly made in various communicative contexts have the potential to persist and form relatively stable patterns in everyday language use.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that language interference in multilingual learners' English production is not a static phenomenon limited to observable errors, but rather a dynamic and interconnected process rooted in learners' cognitive and linguistic systems. By adopting a process-oriented perspective, the findings reveal that interference emerges through a sequence of interrelated stages that reflect how learners activate, negotiate, and stabilize linguistic knowledge during communication.

The study identifies three major processes underlying language interference. First, interference begins with layered language knowledge activation, in which learners rely on their dominant languages, such as local languages and Indonesian, as mediating systems before producing English. This stage highlights that language production does not occur directly in the target language but is shaped by prior linguistic experiences. Second, cross-linguistic transfer operates as a meaning-construction strategy, where learners utilize perceived similarities between languages to formulate expressions in English. While this strategy facilitates communication, it also leads to structural, lexical, and phonological deviations when differences between language systems are not fully recognized. Third, repeated patterns of transfer result in error fossilization, where certain forms become stabilized and resistant to correction due to cognitive habituation and social reinforcement within the learning environment.

These findings contribute to the reconceptualization of language interference by challenging traditional linear models that separate cognitive processes into discrete stages. Instead, the study shows that interference is better understood as an integrated and non-linear process in which multiple linguistic systems interact simultaneously. This reconceptualization provides a more context-sensitive framework for understanding multilingual language production, particularly in educational settings where learners continuously navigate between languages.

Pedagogically, the study suggests that addressing language interference requires more than correcting surface-level errors. Educators need to consider the underlying cognitive processes that shape learners' language use and design instructional strategies that enhance learners' awareness of cross-linguistic differences while leveraging their existing linguistic resources. By doing so, language teaching can move toward a more inclusive and process-oriented approach that supports multilingual learners in developing greater control over their language production.

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