

Cross-Linguistic Transfer in Law Students' Writing in a Basic English Course

Komang Agus Ariawan*, Ni Luh Putu Sri Adnyani, I Made Suta Paramarta

Ganesha University of Education, Indonesia

* agus.ariawan@student.undiksha.ac.id (Primary Contact)

ABSTRACT

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This study investigated cross-linguistic transfer in the English writing of first-semester law students enrolled in a Basic English course. It aimed to identify the types of cross-linguistic transfer and examine how Indonesian morphological and syntactic features influenced students' written production. A descriptive qualitative design was employed, using qualitative content analysis to analyze 30 students' written texts. The findings revealed that negative transfer was more prevalent than positive transfer, accounting for 247 (73.51%) and 89 (26.49%) unique instances, respectively. At the morphological level, affixation and derivation emerged as the most dominant feature, whereas clause construction was the most frequent syntactic feature. These findings indicate that structural differences between Indonesian and English substantially influenced students' grammatical accuracy. The study contributes to a better understanding of cross-linguistic transfer in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context and provides pedagogical insights for improving English writing instruction.

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1. INTRODUCTION

English proficiency has become an essential competency in higher education, particularly for supporting academic communication and professional development. For students enrolled in law programs, writing in English is especially important because legal education requires the production and interpretation of various written documents, including legal essays, case analyses, contracts, and academic papers. Furthermore, a considerable proportion of legal literature and international scholarly publications is available exclusively in English, making effective writing skills indispensable for accessing and communicating legal knowledge. Nevertheless, the distinctive characteristics of Legal English, including its formal register, specialized terminology, and complex grammatical structures, continue to present substantial challenges for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Abduqayumova & Madalieva, 2025).

One of the primary factors influencing EFL learners' writing performance is cross-linguistic transfer, which refers to the influence of a learner's first language on the acquisition and use of a second language (Odlin, 1989). Indonesian learners frequently rely on linguistic knowledge acquired from their native language when constructing English sentences, particularly because Indonesian and English differ considerably in their morphological and syntactic systems. These differences include tense marking, subject-verb agreement, and other grammatical features that are obligatory in English but absent or expressed differently in Indonesian (Lado, 1957). Rather than being viewed solely as evidence of linguistic deficiency, such language transfer can be understood as part of the developmental process of second-language acquisition through the formation of an interlanguage, a transitional linguistic system that reflects learners' evolving competence in the target language (Selinker, 1972). This perspective is further supported by Arabski (2006) and Gass et al. (2020), who argue that drawing upon first-language knowledge is a natural cognitive strategy employed during second-language learning.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the influence of learners' first language on English writing performance. Russak & Zaretsky (2021) reported that first-language knowledge significantly shapes grammatical structures and sentence construction in learners' written production. Likewise, Fikri (2023) identified persistent morphological and syntactic interference among Indonesian EFL learners, particularly in the use of tense and subject-verb agreement. Similar findings were presented by Bi and Tan (2024), who concluded that learners' linguistic backgrounds substantially affect the syntactic patterns employed in second-language writing. Although these studies have contributed valuable insights into cross-linguistic transfer, most of them have focused on general EFL contexts involving secondary school students or university students from diverse academic disciplines, with relatively limited attention given to learners studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly those pursuing legal education.

Despite the growing body of research on cross-linguistic transfer, several research gaps remain evident. Previous investigations have primarily concentrated on identifying grammatical errors or classifying language interference without comprehensively examining how Indonesian morphological and syntactic features simultaneously influence English academic writing. Moreover, few studies have integrated Cross-Linguistic Transfer Theory and Interlanguage Theory to explain the interaction between learners' first-language knowledge and the linguistic characteristics of English within an ESP context. Therefore, this study offers a novel perspective by providing an integrated analysis of Indonesian morphological and syntactic influences on the English writing of law students, thereby extending current discussions beyond conventional grammatical error analysis toward a more comprehensive understanding of learners' linguistic development.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify the types of cross-linguistic transfer present in the English written texts of law students, examine how Indonesian morphological features influence their written production, and analyze the impact of Indonesian syntactic structures on their English writing. By focusing specifically on first-semester law students enrolled in a Basic English course, this study is expected to enrich the existing literature on cross-linguistic transfer within the field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Furthermore, the findings are anticipated to provide pedagogical implications for designing more context-sensitive English instruction that addresses the specific linguistic needs of law students and supports the development of more effective academic writing skills.

2. METHOD

2.1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore and interpret the phenomenon of cross-linguistic transfer in law students' English writing, with particular emphasis on morphological and syntactic features. The research was designed to identify and explain language transfer patterns rather than to test hypotheses or quantify relationships statistically. A qualitative design was considered appropriate because it enabled the investigation of students' written production within its natural instructional context, allowing the influence of Indonesian as the first language to be examined authentically through written texts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was further grounded in Cross-Linguistic Transfer Theory (Odlin, 1989), which provided the theoretical foundation for identifying and interpreting instances of language transfer in students' English writing.

2.2. Participants and Data Collection

The participants consisted of 30 first-semester students from the Law Study Program, Faculty of Law, Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha, who were enrolled in the compulsory Basic English course. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: Indonesian as their first language, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, and completion of the required English writing assignments. The primary data comprised students' written assignments collected through document analysis after obtaining permission from the course lecturer. To provide contextual support for the analysis, the writing instructions and assignment guidelines used in the course were also collected as supplementary data.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which facilitates the systematic classification, coding, and interpretation of textual data (Mayring, 2000; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Schreier, 2012). The analytical procedures followed the three-phase framework proposed by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), consisting of preparation, organization, and reporting. Initially, all written texts were read repeatedly to develop a comprehensive understanding of the data. Each transfer instance was then identified and classified as either positive or negative transfer by considering the relationship between the students' English forms and the corresponding linguistic patterns in Indonesian. Negative transfer was identified when an English form was non-target-like and could plausibly be related to an Indonesian linguistic pattern, particularly when differences between the two languages provided a reasonable explanation for the deviation. Positive transfer was identified when a target-like or largely target-like English structure corresponded to a structural similarity between Indonesian and English. Cases for which Indonesian influence could not be reasonably established were not classified as transfer. This classification was followed by morphological and syntactic coding of the identified negative-transfer instances.

Each negative-transfer instance was subsequently coded according to its morphological and syntactic features. When a single instance contained more than one linguistic feature, more than one feature code was assigned. For example, the expression "I

graduate one month ago at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha” was interpreted as negative transfer because the learner used the base verb form to refer to a past event, reflecting a difference between Indonesian, which does not mark past time through verb inflection, and English, which requires tense marking. Similarly, “I happy to learn” was interpreted as negative transfer because the English copula *be* was omitted, a pattern compatible with Indonesian nominal and adjectival constructions. In contrast, “I can work under pressure” was considered an instance of positive transfer because the structure is target-like and reflects a basic structural pattern that can plausibly be supported by similarities between Indonesian and English. For analytical purposes, each error category was represented by a specific code to facilitate data organization and subsequent interpretation. The coding scheme is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The Coding Categories

Code	Category	Example
OM	Omission	She happy
AD	Addition	She is goes
MF	Misformation	He go yesterday
MO	Misordering	What she is doing?

The coded data were then interpreted by drawing upon Cross-Linguistic Transfer Theory (Odlin, 1989), Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972), and the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (Dulay et al., 1982) to explain how Indonesian linguistic structures influenced the students’ English written production.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

The analysis of 30 written texts produced by law students revealed that the students’ first language (Indonesian) remained a dominant influence on their English writing. Based on the qualitative content analysis, two types of cross-linguistic transfer were identified, namely positive transfer and negative transfer. The findings demonstrated that negative transfer occurred more frequently than positive transfer, accounting for 247 unique instances (73.51%), whereas positive transfer comprised only 89 unique instances (26.49%). These findings indicate that the students frequently relied on Indonesian linguistic patterns when composing English texts, resulting in various grammatical and structural deviations.

The 247 negative-transfer instances and 89 positive-transfer instances represent unique transfer instances, with each instance counted once according to its transfer type. These figures differ from the feature-code frequencies reported in the subsequent morphological and syntactic analyses. A single negative-transfer instance could contain more than one linguistic feature and was therefore assigned multiple feature codes when applicable. Consequently, the 247 unique negative-transfer instances generated 291 feature-level coding assignments, consisting of 143 morphological codes and 148 syntactic codes. The feature-code frequencies thus represent occurrences of coded linguistic features within the negative-transfer instances rather than additional unique transfer instances, individual students, or separate errors.

Most negative-transfer instances were reflected in the students' use of word forms and sentence structures. For example, one student wrote, "I can do communication is a good, friendly," illustrating a direct transfer of Indonesian linguistic patterns into English. The sentence was revised as "I have good communication skills and I am friendly," because the original expression did not conform to English grammatical and lexical conventions. Another example appeared in the sentence "I am apply at this position because i have experience and skill good enough about communication," which was corrected to "I am applying for this position because I have sufficient experience and good communication skills." These examples suggest that the students encountered considerable difficulties in selecting appropriate word forms, constructing noun phrases, and organizing grammatically acceptable English sentences.

Table 2. Summary of Findings Based on the Research Questions

Research Question	Main Finding	Supporting Data	Interpretation
RQ1: Types of cross-linguistic transfer	Negative transfer was highly dominant.	Negative transfer: 247 unique instances (73.51%) Positive transfer: 89 unique instances (26.49%)	Students mostly transferred Indonesian linguistic patterns into English, resulting in grammatical and structural errors.
RQ2: Morphological features	Affixation and derivation were the most dominant morphological features, followed by verb inflection and tense marking.	Affixation and derivation: 63 feature codes Verb inflection and tense marking: 32 feature codes Subject-verb agreement: 21 feature codes Plural marking: 19 feature codes Possessive and pronoun marking: 8 feature codes	These findings indicate that differences between Indonesian and English morphological systems influenced the students' use of word formation and verb forms in English writing.
RQ3: Syntactic features	Clause construction and article usage were the most dominant syntactic features.	Clause construction: 71 feature codes Article usage: 25 feature codes Null copula tendency: 18 feature codes Word order: 17 feature codes Flexible word order: 17 feature codes	These findings suggest a strong influence of Indonesian sentence patterns on students' English writing.

Further analysis revealed that the influence of Indonesian extended beyond the morphological level to the syntactic level. Morphological errors were predominantly

associated with affixation and derivation, followed by verb inflection and tense marking, subject-verb agreement, plural marking, and possessive and pronoun marking. At the syntactic level, clause construction emerged as the most frequent feature, followed by article usage, null copula tendency, and word-order deviations. For instance, a student wrote, "I graduate one month ago at Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha," which should be expressed as "I graduated from Universitas Pendidikan Ganesha one month ago." Likewise, the sentence "I happy to learn" was corrected to "I am happy to learn." These findings demonstrate that the structural differences between Indonesian and English continue to exert a substantial influence on the students' ability to produce grammatically accurate English writing.

Based on Table 2, it can be concluded that all three research questions were successfully addressed through the analysis of the students' written texts. The findings indicate that negative transfer was the predominant form of cross-linguistic transfer, suggesting that the students continued to rely heavily on Indonesian linguistic structures when writing in English. This influence was evident not only at the morphological level but also at the syntactic level, as reflected in the high frequency of errors related to affixation and derivation as well as clause construction. Overall, the findings confirm that the linguistic differences between Indonesian and English made a substantial contribution to the occurrence of grammatical deviations in the students' English written production.

3.2. Discussion

The findings demonstrated that negative transfer was considerably more dominant than positive transfer, indicating that Indonesian remained the primary linguistic reference when the students composed texts in English. This result is consistent with Odlin (1989), who explains that language transfer occurs when knowledge of the first language influences the use of a second language, either positively or negatively. In the present study, the predominance of negative transfer suggests that the structural differences between Indonesian and English led students to apply first-language patterns inappropriately when producing English sentences. This finding also supports Lado (1957), who argued that differences between the native language and the target language are likely to become sources of learning difficulties and language interference.

The predominance of negative transfer identified in this study is in line with previous studies on English writing by Indonesian learners. Ramendra et al. (2021) reported that learners frequently transfer Indonesian linguistic patterns into English because they tend to rely on language structures that are already familiar to them. Similarly, Lestari et al. (2023) found that first-language interference remains one of the main factors contributing to grammatical errors in English writing. These findings reinforce the present study by confirming that cross-linguistic transfer continues to influence learners' written production, particularly when the two languages possess substantially different grammatical systems.

At the morphological level, the findings revealed that affixation and derivation constituted the most dominant features of cross-linguistic transfer, followed by verb inflection and tense marking, subject-verb agreement, plural marking, and possessive and pronoun marking. These findings indicate that the students encountered difficulties in applying English morphological rules because the Indonesian language does not employ

grammatical inflections in the same way as English. Consequently, many students transferred Indonesian morphological patterns into English, resulting in various grammatical inaccuracies. This interpretation corresponds with the explanation presented in the findings that morphological differences between the two languages contributed substantially to students' writing errors.

The present findings are supported by Sari et al. (2021), who found that Indonesian learners commonly experience difficulties in applying English inflectional morphology because of differences between the two language systems. Likewise, Yudhayana et al. (2021) explained that learners frequently simplify English word formation by relying on familiar patterns from their first language. More recent studies by Tanjung et al. (2024) and Fajrin et al. (2025) likewise concluded that first-language morphological influence remains a major contributor to grammatical inaccuracy in English writing. These previous findings strengthen the argument that morphological transfer is a persistent characteristic of English learning among Indonesian students.

At the syntactic level, clause construction represented the most dominant feature, followed by article usage, null copula, and word-order deviations. These findings demonstrate that students still experienced difficulty constructing English sentences in accordance with target-language grammatical rules. The omission of auxiliary verbs, inappropriate article usage, and Indonesian-based sentence organization indicate that learners frequently transferred Indonesian syntactic patterns into English. As discussed in the original findings, these errors emerged because Indonesian and English differ considerably in their sentence structures, particularly regarding obligatory grammatical elements.

The syntactic findings are consistent with previous studies by Yudhayana et al. (2021), Ramendra et al. (2023), and Adnyani et al. (2023), which reported that Indonesian learners frequently relied on first-language sentence structures when writing in English. The present study similarly identified clause construction as the most dominant syntactic feature in students' English written texts. Similarly, Hikmah and Wahyudi (2023) observed that Indonesian university students frequently produced English clauses that reflected Indonesian word order, resulting in syntactic inaccuracies. These findings are further supported by Gonzalez-Torres and Mayo (2025), who argued that first-language influence continues to appear in second-language production because previously acquired linguistic knowledge remains active during language use. Therefore, the syntactic deviations identified in this study reflect the continuing influence of Indonesian sentence structures on students' English writing.

From an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) perspective, these findings are particularly relevant to law students because their English needs extend beyond general grammatical accuracy. Legal education requires students to communicate information through academic and professional forms of writing, including legal essays, case analyses, reports, contracts, and case summaries. The morphological difficulties identified in the study, particularly in affixation and derivation, may affect students' ability to select and form appropriate lexical items when expressing legal concepts. Likewise, difficulties in clause construction, tense marking, and other syntactic features may affect the clarity and grammatical accuracy of written explanations, case analyses, and other forms of academic or legal communication. In this sense, the transfer patterns identified in the study are not merely general EFL difficulties but are relevant to the development of English writing

competence required in legal contexts. The findings therefore support the need for ESP instruction that combines attention to Indonesian–English structural differences with writing tasks related to students’ academic and prospective professional needs.

Overall, the findings confirm that cross-linguistic transfer plays an important role in shaping English writing among Indonesian learners. While positive transfer may facilitate learning when similarities exist between the two languages, the present study demonstrates that structural differences contribute more substantially to grammatical deviations. This conclusion is consistent with Mohamad (2025), who emphasized that first-language influence is an inevitable component of second-language acquisition, and with Nsengimana et al. (2024) and Guo (2026), who highlighted the importance of explicit instruction on grammatical differences between the first and target languages. Accordingly, the findings of this study reinforce the need to provide English writing instruction that emphasizes awareness of the structural differences between Indonesian and English to reduce the occurrence of negative transfer.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that negative transfer was the predominant type of cross-linguistic transfer in the English writing of first-semester law students, indicating that Indonesian linguistic structures continued to influence students’ written production in English. The findings revealed that transfer occurred at both the morphological and syntactic levels, with affixation and derivation emerging as the most dominant morphological feature and clause construction as the most dominant syntactic feature. These findings support the theory of cross-linguistic transfer, demonstrating that differences between Indonesian and English contribute to grammatical deviations in students’ writing. Furthermore, this study contributes to the understanding of first-language influence in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) context, particularly among law students, and provides useful insights for developing more context-sensitive English writing instruction.

Despite these contributions, this study has several limitations. The analysis was limited to the written texts of first-semester law students and focused only on morphological and syntactic features of cross-linguistic transfer. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve participants from different academic disciplines and proficiency levels, examine additional linguistic features such as lexical, semantic, pragmatic, or discourse transfer, and employ complementary data collection methods, such as interviews or think-aloud protocols, to gain a deeper understanding of learners’ writing processes. Future studies may also investigate the effectiveness of instructional strategies designed to reduce negative transfer and improve students’ English writing accuracy.

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