

## **Mandarin Chinese and English Transfer during German Language Acquisition Examples of Structural Properties Transfer**

**Subject Area: German Language Acquisition, Grammatical Error**

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### **Abstract**

*The transfer between background languages and a target language is an important issue in foreign language acquisition. This study investigates the common German grammatical errors in written form, both morphological and syntactical, made by Malaysian Chinese students at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), and the correlation of these errors with structural differences between the students' background languages and the target language, i.e. the German language. The principal objective of this study is to ascertain the direct correlation between the influence of the students' dominant language (Mandarin Chinese) and the language of instruction (English) with the extent of grammatical errors made whilst acquiring the German language. The students' perception of typological similarity between background languages and the target language was investigated, as all participants predicted that German and English languages have typological similarity. The study results revealed that common errors were influenced by background language as well as intralingual transfer.*

**Keywords:** background language, German language acquisition, transfer, grammatical error, typological similarity

## **1 Introduction**

The influence of the first language during a second language learning process has been an important topic in SLA research for some time. A recent development is the growing interest in the process of third language acquisition, and the question as to how three or even four languages interact with one another during the target language acquisition process. Previous research indicates that L3 learners often transfer from L2, and that this may even become the preferred form of transfer compared to transfer from the L1 (Dewaele, 2001).

The term of interlanguage was discussed by Larry Selinker in his paper in 1972. Till today, the interlanguage term is widely used and discussed by linguists to investigate the linguistic system in target language by second language learners. Interlanguage is also been discussed as the process or step in the acquisition of target language. This study determined the interlanguage of German by Malaysian Chinese who were basic users (A2) in UPM. The errors made by them reflected the interlanguage of Malaysian Chinese basic users of German.

The purpose of this study is to investigate typical errors made by Malaysian Chinese students learning German in a university setting. As the subjects have already mastered two languages prior to commencing German language learning, two major approaches are taken into consideration i.e. interlanguage and error analysis. Ellis's (1997) study showed that the learners' interlanguage is influenced by previously learned languages in a so called "cross-linguistic influence". In addition, learners also employ a phenomenon called "intralingual transfer" whereby they simplify the language learning process by over generalising rules within the same language. This study shows that the principles of both approaches are relevant when deviations from the target language within the L3 language learning process are analysed.

Cross-linguistic transfer occurs in several areas, including within the areas of structure, lexicon, and discourse. The most intensively studied property is the lexicon, as most language transfer seems to occur in this area. However, this study presents results that principally focus upon structural transfer, in other words, the transfer of grammatical forms. The subjects of the study are university students in Malaysia who speak Mandarin Chinese as their first language and English as their second. The errors these students made provided insight into the language production strategies that they employed, as well as reflecting their understanding of the rules of German language structure.

## **2 Background of the Study**

The authors of this paper are German language instructor and native German lecturer. The errors made by Malaysian Chinese students in the written form are viewed as the consequence of their confusion, as well as their limited knowledge of German. From the authors' previous observations, students tend to use their previous learnt language (English) to guide them during German acquisition.

Based on Wang's (2009) study, negative transfer in the English learning context was due to differences between the mother tongue and the target language. The interference during target language acquisition resulted from the influence of differences between previous language knowledge and the target language. There are limitations in previous studies due to interference during German language acquisition caused by the differences between Mandarin Chinese, English, and German grammar.

There is a lack of previous studies that have investigated common grammatical errors made by Malaysian Chinese students during the acquisition of German as a foreign language. There are many studies that have investigated the grammatical errors made by ELS learners, but not of German learners in Malaysia. Therefore, further study may be required to determine the common grammatical errors made by such German learners. "Error Analysis" has been widely used by researchers to establish the process of target

language acquisition. Therefore, this approach was used in the study to determine the common grammatical errors made by Malaysian Chinese students during German Language acquisition.

### **3 Purpose of the Study**

The aim of this study is to determine the common grammatical errors made by second year students in their German written form. This study attempts to analyse and explain the grammatical errors found in the German written form and to determine how background knowledge of Mandarin Chinese and English languages influences the acquisition of the German language. The study identifies the common grammatical errors made by German learners, which are useful in assisting them to produce grammatically correct sentences.

Language learners make errors during the acquisition of a target language. Krashen & Terrell (1983) pointed out that such learners used trial and error during the acquisition of a second language. Hence, trial and error is a very important tool in acquiring a target language. There is only one German language course (BBD 4211: Writing in German) provided by UPM, which students attend in the 3rd semester for 3 hours per week. As a result, common grammatical errors made by fourth semester Malaysian Chinese students can be acquired for further analysis. Lecturers can then use the students' common grammatical errors to measure their progress in acquiring German as target language.

Malaysian Chinese students routinely possess a command of two or more languages. Whilst German language students make many grammatical errors, not all are attributable to their respective L1, as language interference can be attributed to all languages that they have previously acquired. This research explores the interaction between German language acquisition and the learners' background languages, and principally focuses upon their dominant language plus the medium of instruction. This study investigates the influence of Mandarin Chinese and English at the morphological and syntactic level in German language acquisition.

In addition, the study seeks to establish the perception of participants of the typological similarity between the background languages and the German language. Irrespective of whether the background languages and target language are categorised to the same or different language families, Angelovska and Hahn (2012) pointed out that the language learners' perception of typological similarity is fundamental. Students may be influenced by knowledge of other languages which they perceive as being typologically closer to German, and their perception may cause them to link the language to German while they are constructing sentences in the language.

### **4 Review Studies**

Kärchner-Ober (2009) revealed that Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, and English play a primary role in the interference of German language acquisition at syntax, morphology and lexicology in her study. Learners' L1 influences the acquisition of the subsequent target language. However, in her study, there is no data that illustrates the influence of Chinese on the acquisition of other target languages. Although, the majority of participants in Kärchner-Ober's study were Malaysian Chinese, her study only showed that transfer from L1 (Bahasa Malaysia) caused imperfect English, and imperfect English influenced the learners' production of written German. Interference between background languages and the target language is important, as differences between them can cause errors in production. Therefore, there are limitations in investigating the interference of background languages on German by Malaysian Chinese students undertaking German language acquisition in the Malaysian context.

Within the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication at UPM, a recent research paper (Muftah & Rafic-Galea, 2013) analysed grammar mistakes among adult Arab - English language learners.

The research methodology comprised of a grammatical judgment task, (including grammatical and ungrammatical items), and an elicited written production task. In its key findings, the most frequent error types produced by the learners were listed, i.e. omission, phonological similarity, incorrect suffixation and substitution. Whilst the findings are relevant to this study's 1<sup>st</sup> research question, the focus on multilingual learners of German permits the current analysis to progress significantly further in exploring grammatical errors and interlanguage made in the acquisition of German by Malaysian Chinese learners.

Vahdatinejad's unpublished master thesis (2008) mentioned that grammatical errors in students' English written form revealed their lack of knowledge in certain language areas. Therefore, it is important for teachers to determine the grammatical errors made by students to provide them with guidance upon both the learners' needs and the areas that they themselves should focus upon in the teaching material. In this study, the common grammatical errors made by fourth semester students can be explained as the influence of differences in background language that result from a lack of knowledge of certain parts of German grammar.

Odlin (1989:p,27) determined that the differences between background languages (perhaps imperfectly) and target language, resulted in a transfer during target language acquisition. The target language is influenced by knowledge of another language, be it the similarities or the differences. An imperfect knowledge of any acquired background language may influence the transfer during the acquisition of the target language, and may cause the learner to produce grammatical errors.

With regards to research literature into trilingual issues, Clyne (1997) made a significant contribution, by pointing out that learning an additional language complicates language production. In this statement, the emphasis is upon "complicate", which means the knowledge of an additional language and the influence of a previous language makes production in the target language more difficult. It is essential for this study to establish whether the production of German has been influenced by the learners' previous language.

Wlosowicz (2012) pointed out that not many researchers focus on the influence of background languages on the target language at the grammatical level in a third or additional language acquisition. The morphological and syntactical aspects of German language are different to those of both Mandarin Chinese and English.

For example in morphological:

我爸爸买了一栋很大的房子。

*wǒ bà ba mǎi le yī dòng hěn dà de fáng zi.*

My dad bought a very big house.

Mein Vater kaufte ein sehr großes Haus.

Whilst the ending of the adjective in German is changed according to the article of the noun, there is no such change to the ending of the adjective in either Mandarin Chinese or English. Therefore, further research is required to focus on differences between the grammar of background languages and that of the target language, and it should be acknowledged that grammar plays an important role in language acquisition.

De Angelis (2005b) revealed that the influence will be greater if learners perceive their previous languages to be typologically closer to the target language. The perception of typological closeness between languages learnt is important for students when they are choosing a language to help them acquire a target language. In the study, the perception of typological closeness by fourth semester participants between Mandarin Chinese and German or English and German is noteworthy. Seeing that Malaysian Chinese has

the background language of Mandarin Chinese and English, it is interesting for researcher to investigate either Mandarin Chinese or English has typological closeness with German language.

## **5 Methodology**

### **5.1 Sampling**

There are 24 students in the fourth semester, which comprises of 20 Malaysian Chinese and 4 Malay students. From the 20 Malaysian Chinese, 17 of them learnt Mandarin Chinese as their first language and Bahasa Malaysia and English as their L2 or L3. Therefore, 17 of them were selected to participant in this study. Samples that varied on a single variable were collected, i.e. their background languages are the same (Mandarin Chinese).

### **5.2 Data Collection**

The study was located within the German class at UPM, and data collection was undertaken within the German Communication class. The study was populated by fourth semester Malaysian Chinese students learning German as foreign language, and are all aged between 20 and 22 years old. Their first and dominant language is Mandarin Chinese, and the medium of instruction in the German language class is both German and English. There are three main types of local school in Malaysia which are “National Malay”, “Chinese National”, and “Tamil National”. The medium of instruction of each school is different, and the study participants had all received their primary education in a “Chinese National” school where Mandarin Chinese was the medium of instruction.

A bespoke questionnaire was designed to collect data from the sample of 17 students. The questionnaire included two sections; Section 1 concerned basic information of the participant, including name, gender, age, current semester, current level proficiency in German etc.; Section 2 concerned their knowledge in other languages, including questions such as languages spoken with friends and family and the type of school previously attended. The objective of Section 2 was to determine the dominant language and the appropriate medium of instruction in the German language class.

Data relating to morphological and syntax errors was collected from the students’ German written compositions, and the study analysed the common grammatical errors contained. The total number and the percentage of errors was calculated, and from this data, participants’ various grammatical errors were determined. A written task was given in the class for which participants were given 30 minutes to complete without the use of a dictionary. Since all of them have acquired a basic knowledge of German, they were able to construct sentences. The composition requirement was to write a minimum of 100 words on: “What is the object that you can’t live without?”

### **5.3 Data Analysis**

The results were analysed using “Error Analysis” to identify, describe, and explain the errors made by the students, which were analysed with reference to the differences between Mandarin Chinese, English, and German grammar, which are explained below.

The accuracy of grammatical errors in the text was measured as a percentage by use of the following algorithm:

$$\text{The ratio of errors (\%)} = \frac{\text{Number of errors in each category} \times 100\%}{\text{Total number of errors}}$$

The calculation provided the frequency of occurrence of each error type in the participants’ essays.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Common Grammatical Errors

Whilst many researchers have used “Linguistic Category Taxonomy” to collect and classify their research, the study focussed on common German grammatical errors and interlanguage in participants’ compositions. Analysis of the data collected revealed the interlanguage of Malaysian Chinese in German compositions and 9 common grammatical errors made by participants from the various types that were determined, and were classified as follows with nine tables:

#### 6.1.1 Syntactic errors

**TABLE 1**

**First: Common grammatical errors in noun phrase of determine**

Example of errors	Correction
a) *...eine Leben.	a)...ein Leben.
b) *...die Handy.	b)...das Handy.
c) *Eine Handy...	c)Ein Handy...
d) *...die Bedarf.	d)...den Bedarf.

**TABLE 2**

**Second: Common grammatical errors in prepositions**

Example of errors
a)*..., kann ich Spiel mein Handy spielen.
b) *..., Video-Konferenzen in meine Handy machen.
c) *Ich kann keine Email zu schreiben.
d) *Ich kann nicht Twitter zu benutzen.
Correction
a)... , kann ich ein Spiel auf meinem Handy spielen.
b) ..., Video-Konferenzen mit meinem Handy machen.
c) Ich kann keine Email schreiben.
d) Ich kann Twitter nicht benutzen.

**TABLE 3**

**Third: Common grammatical errors in negation**

Example of errors
a) *Ich möchte nicht die Information im Internet suchen.
c) *Ich kann nicht Zeitung lesen.
Correction
a) Ich möchte keine Information im Internet suchen.
d) Ich kann keine Zeitung lesen.

**TABLE 4****Fourth: Common grammatical errors in word order**

<b>Example of errors</b>
a) *In Zukunft ich hoffe,...
b) *..., dann ich kann nicht einkaufen
<b>Correction</b>
a) In Zukunft hoffe ich,...
b) ..., dann kann ich nicht einkaufen.

**TABLE 5****Fifth: Common grammatical errors in conjunction**

<b>Example of errors</b>
a) *Als ich eine Studentin muss ich...
b) *Als ich diesem Handy bekommen habe, ...
<b>Correction</b>
a) Wenn ich eine Studentin bin, ...
b) Seit ich dieses Handy bekommen habe,...

**6.1.2 Morphological errors****TABLE 6****Sixth: Common grammatical errors in adjective**

<b>Example of errors</b>
a)*Das ist eine langweilig Leben.
b)* ... , dass ich einen moderne Handy haben
<b>Correction</b>
a) Das ist ein langweiliges Leben.
b) ... , dass ich ein modernes Handy habe.

**TABLE 7****Seventh: Common grammatical errors in conjugation**

<b>Example of errors</b>
a) *..., dass, ich einen modernes Handy haben.
b) *Ich wolle allein sein.
<b>Correction</b>
a) ..., dass ich ein modernes Handy habe.
b) Ich will allein sein.

**TABLE 8****Eighth: Common grammatical errors in cases**

<b>Example of errors</b>
a) *..., deshalb kann ich durch Internet mit meinen Freunde plaudern. b) *Wenn ich langweilig bin, ...
<b>Correction</b>
a)..., deshalb kann ich durch das Internet mit meinem Freunden plaudern. b) Wenn mir langweilig ist, ...

**TABLE 9****Ninth: Other errors**

<b>Example of errors</b>
a)*Zum Schluss, kann ich nicht gutes Leben mit ohne Internet. b)* Dann brauche ich das Handy, um meine Familie und meine Freunde finden.
<b>Correction</b>
a)Am Ende kann ich ohne Internet nicht Leben. b)Dann brauche ich das Handy, um meine Familie und meine Freunde anzurufen.

**6.2 Frequency & perception**

The following tables show the frequency of each kind of error and perception on the typologically similarities of participants.

**TABLE 10****The frequency of each kind of error occurring in the exercise**

No.	Type of error	Total of error	Percentage
1.	Errors in noun phrase of determine	19	6.9%
2.	Errors in prepositions	31	11.2%
3.	Errors in negation	12	4.4%
4.	Errors in word order	14	5.1%
5.	Errors in conjunction	12	4.4%
6.	Errors in suffix of adjective, pronoun, and negation	29	10.5%
7.	Errors in grammatical conjugation	12	4.4%
8.	Errors in cases	15	5.5%
9.	Other errors	131	47.6%
Total		275	100.0%

**TABLE 11**  
**Perception on the typologically similarities**

Typologically Similarity	Number of Participants
German vs. Mandarin Chinese	0
German vs. English	17

17 participants perceived that German and English languages are typologically closer than German and Chinese Mandarin.

## 7 Findings & Discussion

The findings and discussion relate to the common grammatical errors in noun phrase of determiner, prepositions, negation, word order, conjunctions, suffixes of adjectives, pronouns and grammatical conjugation plus cases that result from differences between the background languages (dominant language and medium of instruction) and the German language.

Lin (2006) pointed out that in English, every noun has a determiner but in Chinese it is optional. In Mandarin Chinese, classifiers are used to categorise the noun, whereas in German, determiners are used. This study established that Malaysian Chinese students experienced difficulty in differentiating the noun phrase of determine. There is no definite or indefinite article in Mandarin Chinese which categorises nouns in different ways when compared to either English or German. English classifies nouns into “a”, “an”, and “the”, whilst German classifies nouns into three gender grammar systems, i.e. masculine, feminine and neuter. German nouns are often accompanied by an article, which can be accompanied by either a definite or an indefinite article. The study revealed 19 errors (6.9%) of determiner, and Table 1 shows that participants had difficulty in differentiating whether the noun was masculine, feminine or neuter. In consequence, the difference between acquiring classifiers and articles in Mandarin Chinese, English, and German caused problems in the acquisition of the German noun phrase of determine.

Cao (2004) pointed out that the Mandarin Chinese preposition 在(zài) can be replaced by a number of different prepositions, e.g. “at”, “in”, and “on” can be used in English, and in German, “zu”, “in” and “auf” can be used. In this study, it was found that some students avoided using prepositions in their German sentence construction. Through “Error Analysis”, the survey revealed that participants were confused over the use of German prepositions, and limited their use only to occasions when they were confident of the usage criteria. However, there remained 31 prepositional errors (11.2%) The results from Table 2 showed that participants avoided and over generalised the use of prepositions, such as adding “zu” in front of the finite verb, and were confused over the use of “zu” in an unconscious situation. For example:

Error: \*Ich könnte auch kein Spiel zu spielen. (I could no game to play)

Correction: Ich könnte das Spiel nicht spielen. ( I couldn't play the game.)

The German word ‘spielen’ means ‘to play’ in English, and no preposition should be included in German. In English, the correctly constructed sentence is “I could not play the game”, (there being no “to” used in the English sentence). Hence, participants were confused in the translation influenced by English, which the students need to be more aware of.

This study also investigated negation words “nicht” and “kein”. In Mandarin Chinese, clausal negations use two words i.e. 不 (bù) meaning “not” and 没有 (méi yǒu) meaning “do not”. The meaning of the German “nicht” is “not” and “kein” is “no”, and in English sentence construction, “not” or “no” can be used for negation with uncountable nouns. However, this does not occur in German, and only “kein” can be used for uncountable nouns. There were 12 negation errors (4.4%) found in the students’ essays. Students

were confused by the use of “nicht” and “kein”, with some not knowing how to differentiate between them in German sentence construction.

The Mandarin Chinese sentence word order is subject, verb, and object (SVO), which also applies in English. However, in German, both SVO and OVS (object, verb, subject) are acceptable, and an object or complement can be placed in the initial position of a sentence. However, the verb must be placed in the second position. There were 14 word order errors (5.1%).

\*In Zukunft ich hoffe,... (In future I hope, ...)

In Zukunft hoffe ich,... (In future hope I, ...)

Participants were confused by the use of conjunctions such as “wenn” and “als”, whose meaning is quite similar, In English they mean “when” and “if” respectively, and in Mandarin Chinese, they mean “当 (dāng)”. The participants made 12 such errors (4.4%), and the “Error Analysis” indicated that they did not differentiate between “wenn” and “als”. “Wenn” is used to explain a recurring past event, whereas “als” is used to explain a non-recurring past event.

The change of German adjectival suffixes is based on both the case and the article of the noun, which is not the same in either Mandarin Chinese or English. The students made 29 errors (10.5%) in adjectival suffix, pronoun, and negation. In German, the change to “kein”, is dependent upon both the determiner and the case. The participants made such errors in “kein” due to differences between German and previous languages, which resulted in errors in intralingual transfer.

Lian (1993) pointed out that English conjugations vary, depending on the subject, number-and tense etc. Whilst the change occurs consistently in English as well as in German, verb conjugation in Mandarin Chinese does not change. The change in German is based on the gender, number and subject etc. The students made 12 such errors (4.4%). Although the change of a conjugation in English and German verbs is required, German learners need to memorize the German conjugation.

There are four cases in German, which is totally different to both English and Mandarin Chinese. Although English has cases, unlike German, they are only used with pronouns, and not with nouns. The determiners (article) do not change in English, and there are no cases in Mandarin Chinese. Participants made 15 such errors (5.5%) in their written essays.

There were 131 errors (47.6%) in the students’ compositions which have been classified as “other errors” due to their non-grammatical status. Participants used incorrect words in the context of their compositions in sentences that made no sense in German. There were also lexical errors and errors in semantics. Further studies should focus on these areas, as 47.6% of the errors that occurred were in semantics and lexical in the German written form.

All participants perceived that German and English are typologically similar compared to German and Mandarin Chinese. Therefore, the study established that English as a previous language has an important role compared to Mandarin Chinese for students when constructing German sentences.

## 8 Conclusion

There are difficulties faced by students when acquiring a new target language, and many errors in the study resulted from differences between Mandarin Chinese, English, and German. The categorization of data collected in the study was classified on common linguistic features, while providing frequency of occurrence of each error type. The errors in noun phrase of determine, preposition, negation, word order, conjunction, suffix of adjective, pronoun, and negation, grammatical conjugation, cases, and others have been revealed, thereby indicating that fourth semester German learners at UPM lack knowledge in these areas.

Although they made some grammatical errors in these areas, the study did not indicate that errors were made in the plural form of nouns. It is surmised that participants may have either successfully acquired

the German plural noun form or attempted to avoid using it. Further investigation will be required to clarify this area. The findings of this study showed that the differences between Mandarin Chinese, English, and German languages have caused the negative transfer by Malaysian Chinese to German. In comparing the grammatical errors that focused on oral communication in English in other studies and written form in German in this study, preposition, article, subject-verb agreement and tense are the common mistakes made by Malaysian students during the acquisition of the Germanic language. It is a significant finding that further study is required to investigate the common grammatical errors of other Germanic languages e.g. Dutch, Danish, Icelandic, etc.

Participants perceived incorrectly that German and English are typologically similar when compared to German and Mandarin Chinese, and invariably assumed that English grammar is similar to German for practical purposes. Therefore, lecturers should be made more aware of the differences between English and German grammar to counter the practice of Malaysian Chinese students transferring English grammatical structure to German.

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