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**The Role of Prior Language in The Acquisition of English Language  
by Indonesian Adult**

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**Abstract**

Many factors influence the second language acquisition process for adulthood. One of the factors is the prior language (L1) that a person possesses. This research analyses the role of prior language in adults who are claimed hardly to acquire a second language (L2). This research also tried to figure out how the L1 affects the L2. This research is supposed to know whether L1 prevents adults from acquiring a second language or, instead, L1 helps adults acquire a second language (L2). It is descriptive qualitative research. The instruments are questionnaires via Google form and voice records to be analysed with the Speech Analyzer application. The population is employees who work in the branch office of a construction company with a total of about 100 employees. Their L1 is Indonesian, and their L2 is English. The sampling method used is a random sampling from various company divisions that communicate with foreign co-workers or clients and deal with documents written in English. This research shows that prior language (L1) determines adults' accents and pronunciation, interpreting the meaning, processing the information in L1 then producing it in L2. Significantly, the prior language does help adults acquire English as a second language. Because the purpose of the L2 acquisition for the respondents is to be able and have understandable communication rather than fluent communication, it can be concluded that L1 has a role in helping respondents to communicate in L2.

Keywords: prior language, adults, second language acquisition.

**Introduction**

The second language acquisition process is not easy, especially for adults. Adults are commonly believed to be insufficiently capable of learning a second language. The experts claim that the best age to acquire language is around puberty. After the age of 16, the ability to acquire language decreases. Nevertheless, adults have their process of acquiring a second language. Brown

(2007) mentioned Sorenson's (1967) research on Tukano's culture, where adults can acquire several languages.

Adults face difficulty in acquiring a native knowledge of the L2. They have strong phonological habits rooted in their mother tongue and lack brain plasticity that allows them to modify their pronunciation patterns (Castañeda, 2016). Adults may speak a second language fluently, but their pronunciation is close to their mother tongue. Castañeda added that older adult learners face difficulty in oral comprehension and language production because of the translation and grammatical methodologies they have been taught. Furthermore, adults hardly acquire the accent of the second language. Based on Brown (2007), the accent is gained during childhood. It happened because of the existence of muscles in our throat, larynx, mouth, lips, tongue, and other organs that are used in the articulation of human speech. When a child retains and is rooted in the L1 accent until adulthood, L2 knowledge may be acquired, but the pronunciation remains in the L1 accent. This idea is consistent with Long's (2015) claim that adults bring entrenched L1 process habits and optimise the L1 mechanism process for the SLA.

However, it is possible for adults to acquire a second language. Slabakova (2013) said that the language acquisition mechanism remains constant throughout life and adjusts depending on the age's ability to acquire language. Dbrowska, Becker, and Miorelli (2020) broke the stigma that adult learners are defective in their second language acquisition. Adults are efficient at learning some language competencies. In contrast to children, adult learners are more focused on getting the message across and hence attend to more aspects that contribute to meaning. Slabakova (2013) reviewed and observed that adult L2 learners do not become native speakers in all aspects and that adult L2 learners' competence is more relevant for applied purposes.

Many factors influence second language acquisition (SLA). One of the factors is the prior language, usually known as L1. As Zhanming (2014) said, L1 plays a complicated role in SLA. This research aims to examine the role of L1 in adults' L2 by investigating the process of utilising English for communication. Many researchers have conducted some relevant research. Zhanming's (2014) research reviews the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition. According to Zhanming's findings, the L1 can help learners classify the language input and improve their language learning ability. Studying the L1 and L2 acquisitions is about figuring out their differences. The

research from Bingjun (2013) identified the role of L1 in L2 acquisition and found that lexical, phonetic, syntax, semantic, and pragmatic transfers are all part of the L1 to L2 transfer. Derakhshan and Karimi (2015) have found that many factors cause the interference of L1 in L2 acquisition. The similarities and differences in language structures, the learner's background knowledge, the proficiency of the second language learner, and the structures of the consonant clusters in L1 and L2 are among the factors. Meanwhile, Hadadi, Abbasi, and Goodarzi (2014) have found that the L1 influence cannot increase or decrease L2 proficiency. The influence remains stable. Khan (2016) explored the impact of native language use on second language vocabulary learning by Saudi EFL students. The research found that students taught using the grammar-translation method have a better result in L2 vocabulary learning. Shatz (2016) looked at the large scale of a learner corpus to examine the effect of L1 and how the effect varies based on the L2 proficiency level during English learning as a second language. The findings showed no single pattern in L1 influence for all structures in language. The L1 influence on SLA was complex. The L1 influence takes a role not only during the initial stages but L1 plays a role throughout the acquisition.

Other research from Alonso (2016) reviews the main theoretical accounts of cross-linguistic influence, focusing on linguistic relativity, a multi-competence framework, and a cognitive-linguistic approach. This research found that conceptual transfer has increased the knowledge of similarities and differences in the lexical and grammatical categories of L1 and L2. Romero & Manjarres (2017) researched how the first language influences language learning at a language centre in England, which was carried out with a Saudi Arabian student for two months. Their research aims to analyse the influence of the first language on learning a foreign language. This research found that contrastive analysis (CA) and error analysis (EA) are effective ways to study and understand how the first language (L1) of a learner might influence the foreign language learning process. Meanwhile, Almoayidi (2018) reviewed the negative effect of using L1 in L2 classrooms.

The influence of the prior language in English as a second language is mostly analysed in educational institutions. Tamami (2022) observed the use of the Indonesian mother tongue in ESL classrooms at a junior high school. Agustin, Warsono, & Mujianto (2015) observed the usage of Indonesian as L1 during English-intensive classes in a university. Muqit et al. (2023) examined the usage of L1 among

Indonesian students and lectures at the university level. Moreover, the study investigating the role of the Indonesian language as L1 in English as L2 for adults beyond the educational institution is still rare.

There is still no specific discussion about the influence of L1 and how L1 plays a role in adults' L2 acquisition in workplace communication. L2 acquisition in classrooms and the workplace has a different purpose. English classroom interaction involves teacher and learner, which is different to a workplace interaction that employs natural communication using the L2. Therefore, L1 may have a different role in L2 for adults beyond educational institutions, specifically a company. Will L1 claimed to have more negative effects in L2 classrooms (Almoayidi, 2018) have the same role in workplace interaction?

The prior language is believed to influence second language acquisition. It affects all aspects of language and language transfer as well. This study will look at the role of prior language in Indonesian adults who are said to have difficulty learning a second language. This study examines whether L1 prevents Indonesian adults from acquiring English or, on the contrary, L1 aids adults in learning and speaking English as a second language. Therefore, the question supposed to figure out in this research are:

1. What is the role of prior language in adult learners' second language acquisition?
2. How does a prior language affect adult second language acquisition?

### **Research Methodology**

The type of this research is qualitative-descriptive. The questions we are supposed to figure out in this research are: what is the role of prior language for Indonesian adults in acquiring English as a second language? And how does the prior language affect Indonesian adults' use of English as their second language?

This study examines the process of communication in a global construction company. The employees are from different countries where communication is required to be done in English. The data collection method is documentation and observation. The documentation method studies human communication records, such as books, paintings, websites, and laws (Babbie, 2010:530). As an observer, I did not involve with the data and only received their answer on Google Forms. This study examines the communication process that happened in a global construction company. The procedure for conducting this research is creating the instruments,

asking permission from the respondents, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and result interpretation.

The instruments used in this research are questionnaires, interview guides and speech analyzer applications. The respondents are required to fill out the questionnaire via a Google Form. The questionnaires contain some questions about their personal information (name and age), background knowledge, request to write an English sentence and request to pronounce some identical words in English and Indonesian. The respondents were also asked to record their sounds while pronouncing some words in English and their mother tongue, Bahasa Indonesia. Their voice records were analysed with a speech analyzer application. This application detects a voice's phonetics, pronunciation, and tone. Two aspects analysed in this research deal with using the prior language and the production of the second language. The first aspect is language transfer, which focuses on accent and phonetics analysed using the speech analyzer application. The second aspect is the grammatical transfer analysis of their writing structure.

The employees are from different countries. Communication requires the use of English. The respondents are all Indonesian and are required to speak English in this company. The population is the employees who work in the branch office of a construction company, with a total of about 100 people. There are 15 people in the sample (15%). The sampling method used is a random sampling from various divisions in the company that communicate with foreign co-workers or clients and deal with documents written in English. The most possible sampling method is random sampling because the respondents are workers. It is quite difficult to ask for more respondents because of their busy schedules. Their age range is 25–43 years old. Their educational background also varies. Some adults may already have acquired English in childhood, and some may not.

The data is collected through *Google Forms* containing some questions and instructions. I asked the respondents to record their voice pronouncing some words and write some sentences in the questionnaire form. More detailed questions were asked to the respondents through interviews.

I use two methods in the analysis. First, I examine the voice records to see how the respondents pronounced identical words in English and Indonesian. I analyse the voice records using a *Speech Analyzer* application (Cahill, 2008) to see the phonological error made by the respondents. The application is available at

<https://software.sil.org/speech-analyzer/>. The application needs to be installed on the device. After the installation, I put the respondents' voice records into the application and analyse how the respondent pronounced some words I provide in the questionnaire. The respondents require to pronounce eight identical words in Indonesian and English. I use words that are close and relate to the respondents working activity. Second, I analyse the grammatical error in the respondents writing form. I compare the grammatical errors respondents made in English with the grammatical structure in their Indonesian writing. The result is elaborated descriptively to give detailed information on the phenomenon.

## **Findings and Discussion**

### **Findings**

L1 plays a role in determining the accent of adults. According to Castañeda (2016), adults face difficulties acquiring a native knowledge of the L2 because they have strong phonological habits rooted in their mother tongue and a lack of brain plasticity that prevents them from modifying their pronunciation patterns. Brown (2007) explained that accent is gained in childhood period. The existence of muscles in the throat, larynx, mouth, lips, tongue, and others used in articulating human speech was adjusted following the prior language used. A person does not acquire the authentic (native speaker) pronunciation of a second language after puberty. There is no doubt that adults have difficulty following L2 accents. Even though they speak L2 fluently, their mother tongue accent influences their pronunciation the most.

In this case, some adults can follow the English pronunciation because they have learned English since childhood and have continued to speak English until recent times. For some adults who did not learn English and did not speak English intensively, prior language knowledge helps them interpret and produce the sounds in English. For example, the word 'status' in English has the same meaning as 'status' in Bahasa Indonesia. The pronunciation in English and Bahasa Indonesia is different. The following are the English phonetics of some English words, according to the Oxford Dictionary:

**Table 1. Table of words for respondents to pronounce**

English words	English Phonetic	Bahasa Indonesia
Construction	/kən'strʌkʃn/	konstruksi
Architect	/'ɑ:kɪtekt/	arsitek
Status	/'steɪtəs/	status
Design	/dɪ'zaɪn/	desain
Character	/'kæərɛktə(r)/	karakter
Industry	/'ɪndəstri/	industri
Cable	/'keɪbl/	kabel
Career	/kə'riə(r)/	karir

Only one of the 15 respondents correctly pronounces the words that match the English phonetically. The one is the youngest respondent with the age of 25 years old. It was because he already knew English from elementary school. He has already been learning English since childhood. Moreover, he took English literature in college.

For the word 'construction', 13 respondents pronounce it as /kon'strʌkʃn/ instead of /kən'strʌkʃn/. 14 respondents pronounce the word 'architect' using their prior language, /arsitek/ instead of /'ɑ:kɪtekt/. Five respondents successfully pronounce the word 'cable' as /'keɪbl/. The remaining ten respondents pronounce it as /kebl/. 14 respondents pronounce the words 'status', 'design', 'character', 'industry', and 'career' the same as the pronunciation in their prior language, which is Bahasa Indonesia. The respondents who pronounce the words according to the English pronunciation can be seen in the table below:

**Table 2. Total respondents who pronounce the words to English pronunciation**

English words	English Phonetic	Respondents
Construction	/kən'strʌkʃn/	2
Architect	/'ɑ:kɪtekt/	1
Status	/'steɪtəs/	1
Design	/dɪ'zaɪn/	1
Character	/'kæərɛktə(r)/	1
Industry	/'ɪndəstri/	1
Cable	/'keɪbl/	5
Career	/kə'riə(r)/	1

Table 2. shows that only the respondent who intensively learned English had acquired English pronunciation. Other respondents may already be learning English in school, but their knowledge is limited. They maintain to speak their prior language

before they work in the company. When they communicate in English as a second language in their real work company, they may find difficulties, but they have no choice but to acquire English as a second language during direct communication.

The error was also shown in the writing competence of the respondents. 10 of the respondents wrote in English without considering English grammar. They are only concerned with how to express and deliver the message in their language structure, from Bahasa Indonesia to English. The language is literally transferred from Bahasa Indonesia to English as long as the interlocutor understands it. Here, the prior language influences the language structure during the language transfer.

Only eight respondents knew the subject and verb agreement well. Those are respondents whose ages range from 25 to 29 years old. Among the eight respondents, only three can mention the 16 tenses in English. Two people can mention the three tenses: simple present, simple past, and present continuous, and three people can only mention simple tenses. The rest of the respondents did not know about tenses. It can be seen in the following table below:

**Table 3. The Respondent's Grammar Comprehension.**

	Subject-verb agreement	Tenses
<b>Understand</b>	8	3
<b>Knowing few</b>	0	5
<b>I do not know at all</b>	7	7

Respondents who have had to learn English since childhood thought that grammar is important in speaking. This opinion differs from the other respondents, who did not pay attention to grammar. They prefer speaking and ignoring grammar because the most important thing is that they can deliver the message to the interlocutor. This also happens in the writing structure. For example,

They prefer saying, **\*I will on time for that day.**

Rather than, **\*I will be on time that day.**

That sentence was written by a respondent who ignored the grammar in his writing. He is 35 years old and weak in English. He followed the writing structure in his prior language. In Bahasa Indonesia, there is no 'to be' to join the grammatical subject and either an adjective, a noun, or an adverb. Another case of a writing error can be seen below:

They prefer saying, **\*I will got job near my home.**

Rather than, **\*I will get a job near my home.**

The sentence above was from a 29-year-old respondent in his prior language, Bahasa Indonesia. There is no Verb 1, Verb 2, Verb 3 form or the participle form in English. He did not know the forms of get, got, and gotten. In Bahasa Indonesia, the existence of articles did not have much influence on meaning. Contrary to English, the articles 'a', 'an', and 'the' are important to modify and number the specific or non-specific nouns.

During the observation, another fact was discovered. English is necessary for this company's communication. However, how can communication occur when more than half the company has insufficient English skills? Some respondents also said grammar is unimportant to them as long as they can convey the idea in their minds. They also realised that they lacked pronunciation. Misunderstanding sometimes happens because of this.

As a result of observation, Indonesian employees use any sources in their prior languages, such as the L1 parser and L1 grammar structure, as their strategies to communicate in L2. Therefore, those strategies enable them to build knowledge about L2.

## **Discussion**

### **The role of prior language (L1) for Indonesian adults in acquiring English as a second language**

They maintain to speak Indonesian before they work in the company. When they communicate in English as a second language in their real work company, they may find difficulties, but they have no choice but to acquire English as a second language during direct communication. They use their L1 knowledge as a reference to pronounce some L2 words with the same meaning but slightly different spelling. This result is similar to the research from Derakhshan & Karimi (2015), which concluded that the similarities between L1 and L2 make the learner have fewer problems and that errors may occur, but only a few.

Adult language learners have different advantages than other learners. According to Saville-Troike (2012), adults have advantages in learning capacity, ability to analyse, pragmatic skills, greater knowledge of L1, and real-world knowledge. Meanwhile, Steinberg, Nagata & Aline (2001) said that adults have a high intellectual process, medium memory, and low motor skill. To strategise this,

adults select the L2 knowledge that they only need. Adults have different characteristics than other learners, according to Michalska (2015), because they have experience in both the educational and working fields.

Some adults have no time to take English courses because of their work. They can survive with the vocabulary they have acquired. When they do not know a word in English, they will repeat the word in Bahasa Indonesia or mention words related to what they are referring to while drawing in the air using their hands.

This insufficient English from an Indonesian employee is understandable to foreigner. In this situation, they use foreign talk to make the conversation understandable. Foreigner talk is needed as an alternative means of negotiation in their communication. According to Ayuanita (2013), "foreigner talk" is one of the options for non-native speakers to acquire a second language. The native speaker will help the non-native speaker understand more about their language. They can speak grammatically and ungrammatically, depending on the circumstances and the level of their interlocutor. Because of the urgency of the communication, the foreign talk strategies used in this company's communication are ungrammatical input modifications. They can omit the grammatical structure, place the subject before an imperative verb, and replace post-verbal negation with pre-verbal negation.

### **How does L1 affect Indonesian adults' use of English as their L2?**

The L1 of adults seems to prevent them from speaking fluently, but the existence of L1 supports adults' ability to speak in L2. Of the 15 respondents, only one person can pronounce it similarly to the English pronunciation. The rest of the respondents' English pronunciations are similar to their native languages. Prior language does affect adults' pronunciation and accent. Furthermore, the accent is formed from childhood. According to the respondents, they did not pay attention to accent, pronunciation, or grammar. In case those seem less important to them. According to Dąbrowska, Becker, and Miorelli (2020), adults are efficient learners. Supported by adults' advantages, as explained by Saville-Troike (2012), Steinberg, Nagata, & Aline (2001), adults learn and acquire only what they need. The respondents' circumstances require them to be able to communicate; they can understand each other instead of having fluent expressions. Their needs are for vocabulary and simple grammar to support them in communication. Here, the L1 knowledge helps them express their thoughts and process the information they got

in English by translating and following their prior language vocabulary and grammatical rules. The existence of L1 helps adults produce L2. This result is supported by the research from Algazo (2018), which emphasises the positive role of L1. It helps to understand the practical aspects of L2.

Their communication goal is to be able to convey their intention without misunderstanding. Difficulty speaking English in Indonesia is inevitable for Indonesians. Grammar mistakes and mispronunciation commonly happen. Is that because they stick to their prior language? The grammatical structures and pronunciation in English and Bahasa Indonesia are different.

Even though the respondents did not have a strong command of English, they used their first language to construct a sentence word for word. They use it as a reference when they get stuck and have to find another way to deliver. Then, it combines with foreign talk with their foreign interlocutor. Each of them was questioning, repeating, and sometimes referring to words related to it until they were certain they were on the same page. L2 acquirers may have gained new knowledge in L2 due to questioning, repeating, and referring by the end of the conversation.

Prior language is believed to influence L2 acquisition. There is a transfer process from the prior language (L1) to the L2. As Meisel (2011) claimed, the L1 transfer is a natural process of language use. As their strategies to communicate in L2, they use any sources in L1 that can help them acquire words in L2 without them realising. When they begin acquiring the additional language, all L2 acquirers must have a comprehensive understanding of the first language and knowledge of other languages. After several years of proficiency in another language, many will begin learning their L2. As a result, prior language knowledge significantly impacts L2 acquisition (Ortega, 2013).

Some previous studies (Shatz (2016), Hadadi, Abbasi, and Goodarzi (2014), Khan (2016), Romero & Manjarres (2017), and Algazo (2018)) used high school and university students or adults intentionally learning English as their research subject. Meanwhile, I conducted this research with respondents who are not intentionally learning English but are speaking English by force. The two conditions are different because of the knowledge background and motivation. By utilising foreign talk and repeating Indonesian words to speak with native English speakers, the respondents successfully have an understandable conversation. The purpose of their L2

acquisition is not to be fluent but rather to be able to communicate. Even though the pronunciation is far from close, as long as the native speaker understands what they said, it means the communication purpose has been completed.

From the observation and questionnaire results, the respondents' L1 guided them not to get lost in communication. They can repeat and refer to L1 words with "foreign talk" until they get the same understanding between Indonesian and foreigners or English native speakers. Considering the factors and respondents' background, the prior language helps adults acquire English as a second language and successfully communicate with foreigners even though it may take time in the conversation.

### **Conclusion and Suggestion**

Adults have unique characteristics and advantages when it comes to learning. These characteristics and advantages make adults learn efficiently and only want to learn what they need. This factor relates to the fact that adults' characteristics differ from other learners' because they have educational and working experiences. In this case, the respondents need vocabulary knowledge and simple grammar. They put aside the matter of accent, pronunciation, and complex grammar. The respondents rely on their accent, pronunciation, and writing structure from their prior language knowledge. The prior language plays a role in determining their accent and pronunciation, interpreting the meaning, processing the information in L1, and producing it in L2. Furthermore, the prior language does help them acquire English as a second language, which they are necessarily able to speak and communicate in their works. English L2 acquisition for adults in this company happens through a process of questioning, repeating, and referring to both L1 and L2 as strategies to get a good understanding. Thus, adults accidentally acquire L2 through this effortful process.

This research is limited only to Indonesian adults from construction companies who are forced to speak English with foreigners. Other results may appear for different populations. Further research is needed to support or complete this research.

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