

The Interlanguage in Korean Sentence Structure Produced by Indonesian Students: A Study on Negative Transfer

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ABSTRACT: This study investigates the influence of Indonesian syntactic structure on sentence construction errors in Korean in the interlanguage domain and explores the affixation challenges faced by Indonesian learners of Korean. This study highlights how the transfer of Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structures from Indonesian into Korean, which follows the Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) pattern, causes common errors such as incorrect word order in sentences. In addition, this study also examines the difficulties in using Korean affixes, such as *-nim*, *-deul*, *-jae*, *-ssi*, which are unfamiliar to Indonesian learners due to the absence of a similar affixation system in Indonesian. These errors are caused by negative transfer, where elements of the learner's mother tongue are applied inappropriately into the target language. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method, utilizing data collected through interviews, classroom observations, and analysis of written texts produced by Indonesian learners from Korea. Interviews were conducted to understand learners' perceptions of Indonesian sentence structure and affixation, while classroom observations focused on how learners apply these elements in direct communication. Written texts were analyzed to identify common errors in the use of sentence structure and affixation. This study emphasizes the importance of understanding these challenges in order to develop more effective teaching strategies that meet the specific needs of Indonesian learners. By focusing on the structural differences between Indonesian and Korean, this study provides insights to improve learners' linguistic competence, so that they can use Korean more accurately and confidently.

Keywords: *Interlanguage, Syntactic Structure, Affixation Errors, Indonesian Learners for Korean*

I. Introduction

In the process of second language acquisition, learners often develop a transitional linguistic system known as interlanguage. This system represents a phase in which elements from the learner's first language (L1) are combined with features of the target language (L2), creating a unique and evolving language structure that is neither entirely L1 nor L2. As learners progress in their language proficiency, their interlanguage system continues to adjust and improve (Yu, 2024; Barone, 2024; Putra, 2024). However, it also produces specific learning challenges—particularly language errors resulting from negative transfer. Negative transfer occurs when linguistic features from the mother tongue are inappropriately applied to the target language, leading to mistakes in sentence structure, grammar, and vocabulary usage (Meng, 2024; Hasyim, 2025; Alfaifi & Saleem, 2024). While interlanguage is a natural and unavoidable part of learning a new language, it highlights the strong influence of one's native language, which can both hinder and shape the learning process.

One of the most influential factors in the development of interlanguage is the syntactic and morphological structure of the learner's native language. When these linguistic structures differ significantly from those of the target language, the learner often produces systematic and recurring errors. This is particularly evident in the case of Korean learners studying Indonesian. The syntactic structure of Korean, which follows a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) order, contrasts with the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) pattern of Indonesian. This difference often leads to sentence construction errors (Ferrer-i-Cancho & Namboodiripad, 2023; Wijaya & Kim, 2024; Meutia et al., 2022). Additionally, Korean learners face considerable challenges in mastering Indonesian affixation. Affixes such as *me-*, *di-*, *ber-*, *-kan*, and *-i* are integral to Indonesian sentence formation but are unfamiliar to Korean speakers due to the lack of a comparable affixation system in their native language.

These challenges are reflected in the common types of errors made by Korean learners. For instance, many learners mistakenly apply Korean word order in Indonesian, producing sentences like "*Saya buku membaca*" ("I book read") instead of the grammatically correct "*Saya membaca buku*" ("I read a book"). Similarly, errors occur in affix usage, with learners constructing sentences like "*Surat ini saya mengirimkan ke guru*" ("This letter I to send to the teacher") instead of "*Surat ini saya kirimkan ke guru*" ("This letter was sent by me to the teacher") or "*Saya mengirimkan surat ini ke guru*" ("I sent this letter to the teacher"). These examples demonstrate how negative transfer of syntactic patterns and unfamiliarity with affixation rules can result in miscommunication and misunderstanding.

This study aims to analyze the influence of Korean syntactic structures on Indonesian sentence formation and to explore the types and frequency of affixation errors among Korean learners of Indonesian. It also seeks to investigate the role of negative transfer in these errors and offer practical pedagogical solutions to address them. By understanding the root causes of these linguistic challenges, this research provides valuable insights for designing more effective and targeted instructional strategies. Ultimately, the goal is to enhance the communicative competence of Korean learners, enabling them to use Indonesian more accurately and confidently in real-life contexts.

II. Literature Review

Second language learning often involves the phenomenon of interlanguage, a transitional linguistic system in which learners blend elements of their first language with the target language. One of the most frequent errors made by Indonesian learners of Korean is the misuse of Korean prefixes, which often results from the influence of Indonesian sentence structures and affixation habits on the learners' Korean language production.

Interlanguage in Second Language Learning

According to Selinker (1972), interlanguage refers to a transitional linguistic system developed by second language learners, which incorporates features from both the native language (L1) and the target language (L2). Learners often apply grammatical rules from their first language or even create new rules that are not entirely accurate in the second language. In this study's context, Indonesian learners of Korean frequently mix Indonesian structures with Korean grammar, especially in terms of affix usage and sentence construction.

Influence of Indonesian on Prefix Usage in Korean

The grammatical structures of Korean and Indonesian differ significantly—particularly in how verbs are formed and how affixes are applied (Ramdhani & Wicaksono, 2025; Youngsun et al., 2024; Kyeongjae et al., 2025). In Korean, verbs are often created by adding “하다” (hada, meaning “to do”) to a noun, as in “공부하다” (gongbu-hada, “to study”). In contrast, Indonesian uses prefixes like *me-* or *ber-* to indicate verb formation and action. As a result, Indonesian learners may attempt to apply similar affixation logic to Korean, mistakenly assuming that all Korean nouns can become verbs by simply adding “하다.”

For example, an Indonesian learner might think that any noun can directly form a verb with “하다,” or

misunderstand how prefixes work in Korean due to interference from their native affixation system. This aligns with Cook's (2003) observation that second language learners often carry over rules from their L1 into the L2—a phenomenon known as transfer.

Connection to Transfer Theory

This affixation error can be further explained through the lens of transfer theory, as proposed by Lado (1957), which describes how learners apply structures from their L1 to their L2. In this case, Indonesian learners may overgeneralize their understanding of Indonesian prefix patterns, such as *me- + verb root*, and expect similar grammatical behavior in Korean. This can lead to inappropriate or grammatically incorrect constructions in Korean, such as misapplying “하다” or combining noun-verb forms unnaturally.

Influence of Indonesian Syntax in Learning Korean

Another common issue faced by Indonesian learners of Korean is in sentence word order. Indonesian follows a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure, while Korean follows a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) structure (Sachiya et al., 2025; Ko et al., 2025; Jung et al., 2025). Learners often carry over Indonesian word order when forming Korean sentences, resulting in errors like: 저는 읽어요 책을 (“I read the book”) — using SVO instead of correct Korean SOV: 저는 책을 읽어요.

According to Selinker (1972), such errors are examples of negative transfer, where L1 rules are inappropriately applied to L2. In this case, the persistence of Indonesian SVO patterns causes learners to construct Korean sentences with incorrect word order. These errors highlight the influence of L1 syntax on L2 learning and demonstrate how learners' existing linguistic knowledge can interfere with proper acquisition of Korean structures.

III. Research Methodology

Type of Research

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to examine the errors made by Indonesian learners of Korean, particularly in the use of prefixes and sentence word order. The aim of this approach is to describe these errors in detail and to understand their underlying causes. As explained by Creswell (2014), a descriptive qualitative approach is used to explore in depth phenomena that occur in social or educational contexts. In this study, the phenomenon being examined includes structural errors in sentence construction (word order) and incorrect use of Korean prefixes, which may be caused by linguistic transfer from the Indonesian language.

Data Collection

In this study, the primary data were collected through three main methods: interviews, classroom observation, and analysis of texts written by Indonesian learners of Korean. Interviews were conducted to understand the learners' comprehension of Korean sentence structure and their use of prefixes. Through these interviews, the researcher aimed to explore the learners' perceptions and the difficulties they face in applying Korean grammatical rules.

Additionally, classroom observations were conducted to document how learners use Korean in daily conversations. The main focus of these observations was to note errors in word order and prefix usage, which may result from the transfer of Indonesian language structures. Lastly, text analysis was carried out on the learners' written Korean sentences, with special attention given to errors involving word order and prefixes. This multi-method approach enabled the researcher to gain deeper insights into the recurring error patterns in the Korean language learning process among Indonesian learners.

IV. Results

Sentence Structure

In learning Indonesian as a second language, Korean native speakers commonly make two types of errors that reflect the influence of interlanguage: errors in sentence structure and affix usage. Learners often construct sentences using the SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) pattern, such as “*Makanan saya makan di rumah*” (“The food I eat at home”), which mirrors Korean sentence structure and differs from the standard SPOK (Subject-Predicate-Object-Adverb) structure in Indonesian. Additionally, they tend to overgeneralize the use of affixes, such as adding the prefix *men-* to the word “*sewa*” (“rent”), resulting in *men-sewa*, due to their habit of forming verbs in Korean by attaching elements like *hada* to nouns. These two types of errors represent *negative transfer*, which is the inappropriate application of first language rules to the second language, commonly observed during the interlanguage phase.

Data 1

저는 음식을 집에서 먹어요.

(S O Adv V)

저는 집에서 음식을 먹어요.

(*Jeoneun jibeseo eumsigeul meogeoyo*)

S Adv O V

In **Data 1**, both sentences—“저는 음식을 집에서 먹어요” (S – O – Adv – V) and “저는 집에서 음식을 먹어요” (S – Adv – O – V)—are grammatically correct in Korean and convey the same meaning: “*I eat food at home.*” However, the second version, “저는 집에서 음식을 먹어요,” is more natural and commonly used by native Korean speakers. Korean sentence structure allows more flexibility, especially in the placement of objects and adverbials. While the first sentence is still acceptable, it may sound slightly unnatural unless the speaker intends to emphasize the object *음식을* (“food”). This flexibility can be confusing for Indonesian learners of Korean, who are used to the more fixed Subject-Verb-Object-Adverb (S-V-O-K) structure in Indonesian. As a result, they might construct Korean sentences that are technically correct but sound awkward to native speakers. Understanding this syntactic flexibility is essential for Indonesian learners to produce more natural-sounding Korean sentences.

Data 2

그는 책을 도서관에서 읽어요.

(*Geuneun chaegul doseogwaneseo ilgeoyo*)

S O Adv V

그는 도서관에서 책을 읽어요.

S Adv O V

In **Data 2**, both Korean sentences — “그는 책을 도서관에서 읽어요” (S – O – Adv – V) and “그는 도서관에서 책을 읽어요” (S – Adv – O – V) — are grammatically correct and mean the same thing: “*He reads a book at the library.*” Korean allows a relatively free word order compared to Indonesian, so both structures are acceptable. However, the second sentence, “그는 도서관에서 책을 읽어요,” is more natural and commonly used in daily speech. The placement of the adverbial phrase *도서관에서* (“at the library”) before the object *책을* (“book”) is typical in Korean syntax. When learners of Korean, especially those whose native language (like Indonesian) follows a strict SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) pattern, try to apply their native structure directly, they might produce less natural Korean sentences, even if grammatically correct. Understanding the natural flow of Korean sentence structure helps learners improve their fluency and produce more native-like expressions.

Errors in the Placement of Suffixes and Prefixes

In the context of Indonesian learners of the Korean language, errors in the use of suffixes and prefixes are one form of first language (L1) interference with the second language (L2). This reflects the interlanguage stage—a phase in language development where learners mix elements of their native language, Indonesian, with elements of the target language, Korean. One of the main challenges faced by Indonesian learners is understanding the system of suffixes and prefixes in Korean, which is significantly different from that of the Indonesian language.

Data 3

저는 편지를 사무실에서 써요.
(S O Adv V)

저는 사무실에서 편지를 써요.
(S Adv O V)

Both Korean sentences — 저는 편지를 사무실에서 써요 (S-O-Adv-V) and 저는 사무실에서 편지를 써요 (S-Adv-O-V) — translate to "I write a letter at the office" in English. Although the word order is different, the meaning remains the same due to the use of grammatical particles that clearly mark sentence roles: -를/을 indicates the object (편지를 – letter) and -에서 marks the location (사무실에서 – at the office). This flexibility in Korean sentence structure allows elements like the object and adverbial phrase to be rearranged without altering the sentence's meaning, as long as the verb remains at the end. For Indonesian learners of Korean, who are accustomed to a fixed S-P-O-K (Subjek-Predikat-Objek-Keterangan) structure, this syntactic freedom can initially be challenging. However, understanding the role of particles helps them grasp the logic behind Korean word order and reduces errors stemming from direct translation from Indonesian.

Data 4

그녀는 영화를 집에서 봐요.
(S O Adv V)

그녀는 집에서 영화를 봐요.
(S Adv O V)

The two Korean sentences — 그녀는 영화를 집에서 봐요 (S-O-Adv-V) and 그녀는 집에서 영화를 봐요 (S-Adv-O-V) — both mean "She watches a movie at home." The difference lies only in the word order, not the meaning. Korean allows for flexible sentence structure due to the presence of grammatical particles: 를 marks the object (영화를 – the movie), and 에서 indicates the place of action (집에서 – at home). This flexibility can be confusing for Indonesian learners of Korean because they are used to the fixed sentence pattern S-P-O-K in Bahasa Indonesia. In Korean, as long as the particles clearly define each element's role and the verb stays at the end, the sentence remains grammatically correct and understandable. Thus, learning to recognize and use these particles properly is crucial for Indonesian learners to form accurate Korean sentences.

Data 5

그는 전화를 사무실에서 받아요.
(S O Adv V)

그는 사무실에서 전화를 받아요.
(S Adv O V)

In **Data 5**, both Korean sentences have the same meaning: "He receives a phone call at the office." The only difference lies in the word order: the first sentence follows the S-O-Adv-V pattern, while the second follows the S-Adv-O-V pattern. Although the word order is different, the meaning remains the same because the particle 를 marks the object (전화를 – phone call), and 에서 indicates the location where the action takes place (사무실에서 – at the office). In Korean, this flexibility in word order is made possible by grammatical particles, which clarify the function of words within a sentence. For Indonesian speakers who are used to a fixed sentence structure (S-V-O-Adv), this difference can be challenging. Therefore, understanding the role of particles in Korean is essential for constructing grammatically correct sentences.

Overuse of Affixes

Data 6

할머니님이 오셨어요.
(halmeonim-nim-i osyeosseoyo)

할머니가 오셨어요.
(halmeoniga osyeosseoyo)

The excessive use of the honorific suffix **-nim** in the word 할머니 (halmeoni – grandmother) results in an unnatural form: 할머니님. In Korean, 할머니 already conveys a polite form, so adding **-nim** is unnecessary. This error occurs due to the influence of Indonesian language culture, where honorifics are often doubled as a sign of respect, such as "ibu guru" (mother teacher) or "bapak dosen" (father lecturer).

Data 7

지민씨님은 한국에서 왔어요.

(Jimin-ssi-nim-eun hangukeseo wasseoyo)

지민씨는 한국에서 왔어요.

(Jimin-ssi-neun hangukeseo wasseoyo)

The suffix **-ssi (씨)** is sufficient to indicate politeness when attached to a person's name. Adding the honorific suffix **-nim** afterward to form **씨님 (ssi-nim)** results in a redundant and incorrect honorific form in Korean. This error reflects negative transfer from the Indonesian language, where honorific expressions are often doubled to convey a higher level of respect or politeness.

V. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the significant influence of Indonesian syntactic patterns and affixation logic on the sentence construction and morphological usage of Indonesian learners studying Korean. One of the major challenges identified is the negative transfer of Indonesian Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) sentence structure into Korean, which follows the Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) pattern. This structural interference often results in incorrect word order in Korean sentences. For instance, in several data examples, learners tend to place objects or adverbials in positions that reflect Indonesian structure, despite the syntactic rules of Korean which dictate otherwise. While native Korean sentences allow for some flexibility in word order due to particles, learners often follow an unnatural pattern influenced by their native language, as seen in the comparison between "저는 음식을 집에서 먹어요" and the more natural "저는 집에서 음식을 먹어요".

Additionally, learners experience difficulties in understanding and applying Korean affixes, especially honorifics such as **-nim**, **-ssi**, and plural markers like **-deul**. This issue is exemplified in cases like 할머니님 (halmeonimnim) and 지민씨님 (Jimin-ssinim), where the learners mistakenly apply multiple honorific markers simultaneously, assuming it increases politeness. These errors indicate an overgeneralization of affix use, stemming from the differences in the way Indonesian and Korean handle respect and plurality. In Indonesian, respect is often shown lexically (e.g., "Ibu", "Bapak", "Saudara") and not morphologically, leading learners to assume that affix stacking is acceptable in Korean too.

These phenomena are clear manifestations of interlanguage, the transitional linguistic system created by second language learners, where elements from both the first and target languages coexist. The learners' reliance on Indonesian linguistic norms during Korean sentence construction and affixation results in systematic but incorrect forms. These errors are not random but are structured according to the learners' internalized understanding of both languages.

The study also found that while learners are aware of the SOV rule in Korean, they often revert to SVO, especially in spontaneous writing or speaking. Furthermore, the absence of a robust affixation system in Indonesian leads to difficulties in mastering the morphological nuances of Korean, particularly when it comes to social hierarchy and context-appropriate expressions.

In light of these findings, Korean language instruction for Indonesian speakers should place stronger emphasis on contrastive grammar, focusing on syntactic structure differences and affixation usage. Teaching materials should include explicit examples that compare acceptable and unacceptable constructions, with context-based exercises that reflect real-life usage. Moreover, instruction in pragmatics and sociolinguistics is essential to help learners grasp when and how to use Korean affixes appropriately—not just grammatically, but culturally.

In conclusion, this study reveals that the structural and morphological interference from Indonesian significantly affects learners' ability to construct grammatically and pragmatically correct Korean sentences. Addressing these challenges through targeted teaching strategies can greatly enhance linguistic accuracy and communicative competence among Indonesian learners of Korean.

VI. Conclusion

This study concludes that Indonesian learners of Korean often experience structural and morphological interference due to the influence of their native language. The primary issue lies in the transfer of the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure of Indonesian into the Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) structure of Korean. This syntactic transfer leads to frequent errors in word order, especially when arranging objects and adverbials in sentences. Although Korean syntax allows for a degree of flexibility, the influence of Indonesian often results in sentence constructions that sound unnatural or incorrect in Korean.

Moreover, learners also encounter difficulties with Korean affixation, particularly in the use of honorifics and plural markers such as *-nim*, *-ssi*, *-deul*, and *-jae*. These affixes, which serve specific sociolinguistic and grammatical functions in Korean, do not have direct equivalents in Indonesian. As a result, learners tend to overgeneralize or misuse them—such as by stacking multiple honorific suffixes unnecessarily—due to a lack of understanding of their contextual use.

The errors identified in this study are not random but reflect the transitional nature of **interlanguage**, where learners construct a hybrid linguistic system influenced by both their native and target languages. These findings emphasize the importance of pedagogical approaches that explicitly contrast Indonesian and Korean grammar and provide contextualized practice, especially in affixation and sentence structure.

Ultimately, for Indonesian learners to achieve greater fluency and accuracy in Korean, language instruction must focus on both structural competence and pragmatic awareness. By addressing the specific linguistic challenges faced by Indonesian learners, educators can help students build a more accurate and confident use of Korean in both academic and everyday contexts.

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