

PRODUCTION ERRORS AND INTERLANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS OF L1 MALAY ESL LEARNERS IN THE ACQUISITION OF THE ENGLISH PASSIVE

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ABSTRACT

Studies have shown that Malay ESL learners face difficulties in acquiring the English passive, but not much is known about their acquisition patterns as they advance in their proficiency in English. This study investigated the interlanguage development patterns of L1 Malay learners by examining the production errors of learners at varying English proficiency levels. Students from tertiary institutions in Malaysia completed tasks designed to elicit production of the English passive. The results indicated that overall, the main errors committed by the learners were related to the *be*-auxiliary and the past participle verb form, which are non-existent in their L1. Certain types of errors diminished at higher English proficiency levels, whilst certain others persisted in high proficiency learners. These results point to underlying differences in sources of errors

where some types of errors are more resistant to change, while others may be resolved as the interlanguage system develops to approximate the target language. Differential pedagogical interventions may be indicated for learners at different stages of L2 acquisition.

Keywords: English passive; second language acquisition; interlanguage development; cross-linguistic influence; Malay ESL learners; production errors

Introduction

Acquiring a second language (L2) is a complex and challenging task for the majority of L2 learners, who come to L2 learning having acquired at least one other language system. L2 learners need to acquire a new linguistic system and construct abstract representations of the target language which will account for the L2 input, which can be quite limited in their learning environment (White, 2003). Many Malaysian students (Abdul Aziz & Mohd Don, 2014) face difficulty learning various grammatical structures, particularly more complex structures such as the English passive, in school and even at tertiary learning institutions.

One of the properties of the English language that is particularly problematic for L2 learners is the English passive (Amadi, 2018; Wang & Pongpairaj, 2021). Studies on the English passive have shown that learners find it more difficult to use and understand the meaning of a passive sentence due to its structural complexity (Somphong, 2013). Even an advanced proficiency learner of English may find it challenging to produce an appropriate and well-formed English passive. Hinkel's (2004) analysis of English academic essays written by 746 speakers of seven languages (i.e. English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Arabic) showed that even after many years of L2 learning and usage, advanced non-native speaker students may still face problems with the passive structure in written academic discourse, along with tense and aspect.

Studies on errors committed by Malaysian students reported a range of error types amongst speakers of Malay as a first language (L1). Syntactic errors in argumentative essays in the Malaysian Corpus of Learner English (MACLE) written by L1 Malay ESL learners showed overgeneralisation of the *be*-auxiliary with inflected and uninflected lexical verbs in the constructions of *be + V* and *be + V-ed/V-en* (Abdul Aziz & Mohd Don, 2014). Omission of the *be*-auxiliary is one of the most common errors committed by Malay learners when writing in L2 English. The tendency for learners to omit the *be*-auxiliary has been attributed to the lack of an equivalent feature in the Malay language (Hashim, 2017). Studies on *be*-auxiliary errors amongst learners with L1s lacking its equivalence, such as in Chinese and Arabic languages, have also suggested that the absence of *be*-auxiliary is one of the major reasons for its omission in the target language (see Muftah & Wong, 2011). L2 learners tend to omit the *be*-verb where it is obligatory (Abdul Aziz & Mohd Don, 2013).

Other common errors committed by Malay ESL learners are related to verb form and subject-verb agreement (SVA). Verb-form errors in essays written by Malay ESL learners have been described as errors of omission, addition, malformation, and ordering (Wee, 2009; Wee et al., 2010). The high occurrence of SVA errors among Malay ESL learners has been attributed to the non-existence of the rule in the Malay language (Nayan & Jusoff, 2009). Further, Malay ESL students were found to use inaccurate forms of the passive verbs in their English narrative essays (Kalimuttu, 2016), and Malaysian ESL students of various ethnicities (Chinese, Malay and indigenous students) were unable to identify and use the passive forms despite their higher-level English proficiency, mistaking the past tense –ed as a passive indicator (Ting, 2011).

Various approaches have been used in investigating the diverse factors that affect learners' acquisition of an L2. One of the approaches used is by examining errors in specific structures in the L2 committed by specific groups of learners (see for example, Hirakawa, 2001; Lim, 2007; Malaiappan & Wong, 2020; Ursic & Zoghbor, 2020). This is in acknowledgement of the fact that a learner's L1 may have a role in influencing the learner's acquisition of the L2, and hence, groups of learners with different L1 backgrounds will likely encounter difficulties of differing nature. An investigation of this kind can reveal the acquisition challenges faced by a target group of learners and would be useful in informing pedagogical interventions for the group.

The current study focuses on the English passive because it is generally a difficult structure to acquire among Malay ESL learners, and also because the Malay language lacks equivalent grammatical forms, which are the *be*-auxiliary, the past participle verb form, and the tense and agreement features. This makes it likely that some of the learners' difficulty with the structure could have a cross-linguistic basis. Furthermore, research focusing on Malay ESL students' errors in using the English passive is limited (e.g., Kalimuttu, 2016; Ting, 2011). The current study seeks to extend knowledge on Malay ESL learners' acquisition of the English passive.

The Passive in English and Malay Language

In English, the canonical passive structure is formed by (*be*-auxiliary verb + past participle); structures which are absent in the Malay language. The Malay passive structure, on the other hand, is formed based on the pronoun person feature (Karim et al., 2015). There are three main types of Malay passive structures: the first person passive, the second person passive, and the third person passive. The first and second person passives are formed in the word order of Object-Subject-Verb. There is no passive morphological inflection to the verb and they are known as the bare passives (Nomoto & Abdul Wahab, 2012). For instance, *Buku itu saya tulis* "The book was written by me" and *Baju ini awak basuh* "The blouse was washed by you". Meanwhile, the third person passive, which is also known as the *di*- passive, is formed in the word order of Object-Verb-by phrase-Subject. The passive prefix *di*- is added to the verb, for example, *Nasi dimakan oleh dia* "The rice was eaten by her". The third person Malay passive is regarded as structurally similar to the English passive. In short, pronoun feature plays an

important role in the Malay passive formation, but not in English. Further, the passive formation in English in main clauses involves morphological inflections for tense, aspect and agreement, which is not the case for Malay language. With regard to the preposition *by* in the *by*-phrase, Malay language has an equivalent word *oleh*; however, it is optional in some cases, whereas *by* is obligatory in the English passive *by*-phrase.

Differences in the passive formation between learners' L1 and English have been shown to affect learners' acquisition of the English passive, where noticeable errors committed by learners of different L1s include incorrect past participle forms, subject-verb agreement errors, omission, incorrect form and overuse of the *be*-auxiliary (Choomthong, 2011). Examining how these differences influence the construction of the English passive among L1 Malay ESL learners can shed light on the extent of transfer from learners' L1 Malay language.

Studies on Acquisition of the English Passive among ESL Learners

A number of studies have been conducted on the acquisition of the English passive by learners of various L1 backgrounds (for example, Amadi, 2018; Ursic & Zoghbor, 2020). These studies compared the structural and pragmatic functions between the passive in English and learners' L1, examined the influence of L1 on learners' acquisition, investigated the factors that posed challenges to L2 learners as well as analysed learner's errors in the acquisition and use of the English passive. These studies have collectively highlighted difficulties in learners' acquisition of the English passive evidenced by errors in learners' interlanguage. For instance, it was reported that Thai tertiary ESL learners produced a high percentage of erroneous English passive structures (Somphong, 2013). Cross-linguistic influence or interference in several grammatical aspects, particularly in the use of morphological inflections when forming the English passive was observed. Similar findings were also reported in another study on Thai tertiary ESL students (Choomthong, 2011). The students found it difficult to grasp the concept of English verb forms and generally failed to use the past participle form when forming the English passive. This was attributed to the absence of the past participle structure in Thai language.

L1 Arabic postgraduate ESL learners have also been reported to have problems using the past participle form and forms of the *be*-verb when forming the English passive. They tended to omit the *be*-auxiliary in the English passive, this being attributed to the absence of an equivalent feature in Arabic. The learners were also confused with the word order in the English passive as it is different from the word order in Arabic. Another study on the use of the English passive by Arab ESL learners revealed that learners' errors were mainly malformation errors, substitution and omission errors due to influence from their L1 (Alasfour, 2018). Even though the verbal system in Arabic is morphologically rich and diverse, there are no auxiliary verbs and no structure equivalent to the English past participle (Hameed, 2016), which could have contributed to Arab ESL learners' difficulties in acquiring the English passive.

Learners' errors in the English passive among Malaysian students have also been described to varying degrees of detail (see Kalimuttu, 2016); however, these errors were not examined in relation to variations in learners' overall proficiency in English, which is an important dimension in illuminating the acquisition patterns of learners.

The Study

That a large number of studies have focused on the acquisition of the English passive points to the fact that the structure is potentially problematic for ESL learners to learn and produce. However, very few studies have addressed the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL learners, particularly in association with their overall English proficiency levels which is important for gaining insight into the interlanguage development patterns of learners. By looking at errors produced by learners of different levels of English proficiency, it is possible to shed light on the acquisition process of L1 Malay ESL learners at different stages of acquisition.

The present study is part of a larger study investigating the interlanguage representation of the English passive among L1 Malay learners. This paper focuses on the production aspect of the learners' interlanguage, and therefore, do not include results from the perception study. In this paper, we describe errors in the production of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL students in higher learning institutions in Malaysia and discuss how types of errors made by learners vary across different English proficiency levels. We also draw conclusions about learners' acquisition patterns as they advance in their overall English proficiency.

Theoretical Perspective

Interlanguage Hypothesis (Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 2018) refers to a specific linguistic system that indicates the learners' attempts to produce the target language in their learning process. The learners' developmental stages are reflected in the output of their interlanguage which is constantly developing and evolving with continuous input of the target language. An inevitable feature of the interlanguage system is the occurrence of errors. Learners' errors have become one of the most significant aspects that reflect the development of a learner's interlanguage grammar (Selinker, 1972). Some of the errors may be attributed to L1 influence and some to the inherent difficulty of the target language. The influence of L1, or cross-linguistic influence, affects language acquisition as it plays an important role in the development of an individual's interlanguage (Tarone, 2018). The occurrence of cross-linguistic influence has been attributed to the similarities and differences between an L1 and an L2 in relation to the acquisition of a particular L2 property. Positive transfer is said to occur when the L1 and L2 share similar features, whereas negative transfer or interference is present when the L2 has different features from the L1. Positive transfer may facilitate L2 acquisition/learning process (Gass & Selinker, 2008). However, this is not entirely conclusive as there has been evidence that

differences in particular features between the L1 and L2 do not necessarily cause difficulties for learners. In contrast, similar features in both the L1 and L2 could serve to confuse the learner and result in poorer learning (Braid, 1999).

Besides L1 interference, the complexity of the target language structure has been identified as another source of errors amongst L2 learners. These errors are known as intralingual errors (James, 1998), reflecting the common features of rule learning such as incomplete application of rules and failure to learn and use the rules. Intralingual errors do not reflect learners' L1 but occur due to generalisation based on partial knowledge of the rules of the target language. These types of errors are produced when learners attempt to use the target language with limited input and experience. Selinker (1972) and White (2003) posited that at the initial stages of L2 acquisition or learning, the learners' errors are typically characterised by L1 interference. However, over time, and once the learners have begun acquiring the L2 system, higher occurrence of generalisation within the target language starts to manifest.

Methodology

Participants and Sampling

The study comprised 499 L1 Malay students from nine higher learning institutions in Malaysia which were randomly selected from 410 public and private higher learning institutions in Malaysia (Malaysian Qualifications Agency, 2015). Approval from each institution was obtained and the list of classes was provided by each participating institution. A total of 940 students from 45 randomly selected classes were given the background information questionnaire and language tasks. The data were then screened to ensure that participants were native speakers of Malay and had scored at least 50 marks in the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004).

The final number of students was 499, with 236 students in the Elementary (EL) proficiency group, 163 in the Lower Intermediate (LI) group, 78 in the Upper Intermediate (UI) group, and 22 in the Advanced (ADV) group. Because of the unequal group sizes, care was taken to use only standardised measures for comparisons, such as averages and percentages of errors, where the percentages were calculated to represent within-group patterns. Additionally, there were more female than male participants (see Table 1). Nonetheless, the study does not report results differentiated by gender. The effect of gender is thus unaccounted for in the current study.

Table 1
Demographic Information of Participants

		Total
Gender	Male	148

	Female	351
Age	18-22	
	23-27	473
		26
Years of exposure to English		
	1-5	31
	6-10	263
	11-15	202
	16-20	3

Instruments

The participants completed three instruments: The Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a grammaticality judgement test, and a picture description test. The OPT was used to determine the participants' English proficiency level. The Picture Description Tasks (PDT) instrument was used to elicit the learners' production of the English passive. The PDT is a type of instrument that has been widely used in language acquisition studies to assess learners' comprehension and production of structures in the English language (Hirakawa, 2001; Izumi & Lakshmanan, 1998). Items in the PDT were taken from van der Lely (2005) and Marinis and Saddy (2013), totalling seven items using the transitive verbs *slap*, *comb*, *push*, *brush*, *play*, *kick*, and *eat*. The items were validated by 47 native English speakers through the online version of the PDT with an accuracy rate of 99.7 percent. Further, the instrument was piloted on 39 Malaysian participants, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .83.

Each item has a picture depicting an action, accompanied by three open-ended questions. The first and second questions require responses in the active form, and the third question, the passive form. Answers to the third question were analysed. The following is an example of an item in the PDT.

Picture 1: A tiger is shown slapping a dragon.

Question 1: Who/What slapped the dragon?

Question 2: What was the tiger doing?

Question 3: What happened to the dragon?

As this paper focuses on the production aspect of learners' language, results from the grammaticality judgement test are excluded.

Analysis

Students' production of the English passive from the PDT was examined for errors in the passive structure form. Errors were categorised and their distribution within each proficiency group was obtained. First, the average number of errors committed by each

proficiency group was calculated for comparison. Thereafter, types of errors committed by learners within each proficiency group were identified and described, and percentages representing their within-group proportions were obtained. For the errors committed by all proficiency groups, L1 influence may be indicated.

Results and Discussion

Malformed Passive Structures

Malformed passive structures are incorrect responses where production of the passive structure is attempted but the form is not correctly produced. The average number of incorrect responses for each proficiency group was compared (see Table 2). More errors committed by a group reflect a lower level of acquisition by the group.

Table 2

Group Averages of Errors in Producing the English Passive

Malformed passive structures	EL N=236		LI N=163		UI N=78		ADV N=22		Total N=499	
	f	Ave.	f	Ave.	f	Ave.	f	Ave.	f	Ave.
Total	391	1.66	228	1.40	91	1.17	15	0.68	725	1.45

Note: f= frequency; Ave. = group average number of errors; EL=Elementary; LI=Lower Intermediate; UI=Upper Intermediate; ADV=Advanced

The entire cohort of 499 students produced 725 errors in total. The average number of errors decreased with the increase in English proficiency of the students; the lower the proficiency, the more errors were made. Not surprisingly, acquisition of the passive moved in tandem with learners' advancement in their L2 proficiency. With more experience with the L2, reflected in increasing L2 proficiency, learners appeared to possess more ability to successfully configure the passive structure in their interlanguage to approximate the target form. In the next section, the errors are categorised to ascertain the types of errors committed by each group of learners.

Types of Errors

Errors in the production of the English passive were examined and categorised into five error types (following Burt & Kiparksy, 1972; Simargool, 2008; Somphong, 2013). Whilst the number of errors decreased with increasing proficiency, the relative proportion of error types within each group reflected different patterns prevalent in each proficiency group. The most frequent errors committed by the students for all proficiency groups were errors related to the *be*-auxiliary, followed by the use of incorrect past participle forms, incorrect subject/object, incorrect subject-verb agreement, and incomplete *by*-phrase (see Table 3).

Table 3*Types and Percentages of Passive Structure Errors within Each Proficiency Group*

Type of Error	Proficiency Level								Total	
	EL		LI		UI		ADV			
	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%
Errors related to the <i>be</i> -auxiliary	189	48.3	144	63.2	52	57.1	12	80	397	54.8
Incorrect Past Participle Form	143	36.6	54	23.6	16	17.6	0	0	213	29.4
Incorrect Subject/Object	18	4.6	17	7.5	13	14.3	3	20	51	7.0
Incorrect Subject-Verb Agreement	31	7.9	10	4.4	7	7.7	0	0	48	6.6
Incomplete <i>by</i> -phrase	10	2.6	3	1.3	3	3.3	0	0	16	2.2
Total	391	100	228	100	91	100	15	100	725	100

Note: EL=Elementary; LI=Lower Intermediate; UI=Upper Intermediate; ADV=Advanced

Errors related to the *be*-auxiliary were also the highest in every proficiency group. For the EL group, errors related to the *be*-auxiliary and incorrect past participle forms represented the two highest types of errors, amounting to more than 80% of within-group errors. For the LI, UI, and ADV groups, the errors related to the *be*-auxiliary were disproportionately higher than the other error types committed by students. For the ADV group of learners, in particular, only two types of errors were committed, that is, errors related to the *be*-auxiliary (80%) and incorrect subject/object (20%).

These observations indicate that students at all proficiency levels commit more errors related to the *be*-auxiliary than any other errors when producing the English passive structure. For the EL group, both errors related to the *be*-auxiliary and incorrect past participle forms made up the bulk of the errors. The proportions of the other types of errors were far smaller in comparison with these two. Interestingly, ADV students who have achieved a high level of competence in the language also committed errors in forming the passive structure, the majority of which were related to the *be*-auxiliary. Since errors concerning the *be*-auxiliary constituted more than half of the total percentage of errors committed by all the students, it can be deduced that the English *be*-auxiliary is indeed the most problematic aspect for L1 Malay learners. Further categorisation of the *be*-auxiliary error is discussed in the following section.

errors related to the *be*-auxiliary.

Errors related to the *be*-auxiliary include omission, use of incorrect form, and substitution of the verb (see Table 4).

Table 4
Errors Related to the be-auxiliary

Errors related to the <i>be</i> -auxiliary	Proficiency Level								Total	
	EL		LI		UI		ADV		f	%
	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%		
Omission	153	81	135	93.7	50	96.2	12	100	350	88.2
Incorrect form	20	10.6	5	3.5	1	1.9	0	0	26	6.5
Substitution	16	8.4	4	2.8	1	1.9	0	0	21	5.3
Total	189	100	144	100	52	100	12	100	397	100

Note: EL=Elementary; LI=Lower Intermediate; UI=Upper Intermediate; ADV=Advanced

Omission of the *be*-auxiliary was the most prevalent among the types of errors committed by learners when forming the passive structure. This was followed by the use of incorrect form and substitution. Overall, from the EL to the ADV group, the proportion of the omission errors made up 80% to 100% of all the errors within the respective groups. This type of error did not appear to diminish with the rise in students' competency level. In fact, in the ADV group, omission was the only type of error found in the data.

On the other hand, the within-group percentages of the incorrect form and substitution errors decreased with higher proficiency. As proficiency levels increased, the proportions of the incorrect form and substitution errors decreased in relation to the omission errors. Example (1) shows the *be*-auxiliary omission errors (the symbol *** represents the missing element), example (2) shows the incorrect form of the *be*-auxiliary, and example (3) shows the *be*-auxiliary substituted with *have*.

- (1) The dragon *** slapped by the tiger.
- (2) The bear been combed by the dog.
- (3) The dragon has slapped by the tiger.

The consistently high occurrence of omission error in all proficiency levels deserves attention. As the omission error has the highest percentage in all proficiency groups, it is worthwhile to consider whether there could be elements of cross-linguistic influence from the learner's L1 (see White, 2003). The lack of a *be*-auxiliary in the Malay language may result in learners frequently avoiding its use (Jalaluddin et al., 2008). Further, the *be*-auxiliary has also been described as semantically redundant as it does not affect the meaning of the sentence when omitted. Hence, lower proficiency students who have less experience with the language may be affected by both their L1 as well as the semantic redundancy of the *be*-auxiliary in the passive formation. The Malay language does have a *be*-like structure (i.e., *ialah* and *adalah*), which are used similarly to the copula-*be*, such as in the sentences *Dia ialah seorang guru* "He is a teacher", and *Senaman adalah baik untuk kesihatan* "Exercise is good for health".

Nevertheless, unlike the English copula-*be*, the use of *adalah* and *ialah* in Malay is not obligatory and does not affect the structure if omitted. Malay learners mistaking the *be*-auxiliary as equivalent to *ialah* and *adalah* in Malay may therefore commit the omission error.

Another possible reason for the omission error is the complexity of the verb itself. The English *be*-verb may be confusing to L2 learners due to its inflectional variations and irregularities (Wee et al., 2010). The English *be*-verb has a total of eight inflections and each inflection has to be aligned with tense, number, and person. Besides that, learners might also be overwhelmed by the multiple functions of the *be*-verb, which can function as 1) an auxiliary to mark progressive aspect and formation of passive constructions, and 2) a copula to link subject Noun Phrase to its complement, and 3) negative and interrogative operators. Considering the complexity of the forms and functions of the English *be*-verb, it is not surprising that L2 learners face difficulty using the correct form in the English passive structure.

An important observation is that whilst the number of errors diminished with increasing proficiency, the *be*-auxiliary omission error persisted. Hence, it could be presumed that when students with higher proficiency of the English language commit errors in forming the English passive, the error is highly likely to be of the omission type. This points to the possibility of a stronger L1 influence than grammatical complexity of the structure due to the absence of *be*-auxiliary in the Malay language. In contrast, the other two error types – use of incorrect forms and substitution errors – appeared to be resolved with increased mastery of the language.

incorrect forms of the past participle.

The second highest type of error committed by the students was incorrect past participle form. The error subtypes and their within-group percentages are shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Incorrect Past Participle Form Errors

Incorrect Past Participle Forms	Proficiency Level								Total	
	EL		LI		UI		ADV			
	f	%	f	%	F	%	f	%	f	%
Base form	50	34.9	28	51.8	16	100	0	0	94	44.1
Irregular past tense form	65	45.5	20	37	0	0	0	0	85	39.9
Present participle form	22	15.4	3	5.6	0	0	0	0	25	11.7
Overregularisation of - <i>ed</i>	4	2.8	3	5.6	0	0	0	0	7	3.3
Irregularisation of - <i>en</i>	2	1.4	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	0.9

Total	143	100	54	100	16	100	0	0	213	100
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Note: EL=Elementary; LI=Lower Intermediate; UI=Upper Intermediate; ADV=Advanced

The highest percentage of incorrect past participle errors was the substitution of the past participle with the base form (henceforth, base form error), accounting for about 44% of all errors. This was followed by substitution with the irregular past tense form, which was also a sizeable number (39.9%), substitution with the present participle form (11.7%), and overregularisation of *-ed* and irregularisation of *-en*. The last two errors were few, at 3.3% and 0.9% total errors respectively. No error of these two types were committed by students in the ADV group. For the UI group, the base form error was the only type of error committed. For the EL and LI groups, substitution with an irregular past tense form and the base form were the errors most frequently found.

The base form error persisted as a major error from EL to UI levels, but no longer manifested at the ADV level. This is an interesting pattern as overall, the errors remained consistently high up to the UI level. This finding suggests that only learners who have achieved a high level of proficiency are able to overcome the tendency to commit the base form error when producing the passive. Further, the presence of the other four types of errors in the production of the past participle (irregular past tense form, present participle form, overregularisation of *-ed*, and irregularisation of *-en*) were confined to the EL and LI groups only. Example (4) illustrates the base form error by students.

(4) The dragon was slap by the tiger.

Wee et al. (2010) noted that L2 learners often use the base form of verb in an attempt to simplify the target language rules, thereby reducing the linguistic burden or learning load. They posited that Malay ESL learners do this to apply a simpler rule (i.e. base form) to L2 structures whilst avoiding the use of a more difficult or complex rule. L2 learners usually attempt to construct an optimum grammar, a grammar which has the least use of rules to obtain the maximum outcome. Further, some students who attempted morphological inflection of the verb produced the irregular past tense form instead. This error type, as well as substituting the past participle with the present participle form, was characteristic of the EL and LI groups only as the higher proficiency groups showed no occurrence of this error type. The following examples illustrate the irregular past tense (5) and present participle form (6) errors produced by the students.

(5) The man was ate by the shark.

(6) The bear was combing by the dog.

Only a few errors of malforming the past participle through overregularisation of *-ed* were found in the production of the passive in the EL and LI groups. Finally, the irregularisation of *-en* was an issue found only in the EL group, and even then, one with

a low occurrence (1.4%). At the ADV level of proficiency, this error type appeared to have been eliminated.

The patterns of error in this category suggest that difficulties in working out the *-ing*, *-ed* and *-en* suffixation rule to form the past participle have resolved during the early stage of L2 acquisition, whereas the base form error may be more persistent, recurring up to the UI level of proficiency. At the ADV level, the application of L2 rules concerning the production of the past participle form in the passive appears to have been mastered by the students.

As the Malay language does not have any tense marking to the base verb, it is easy for L1 Malay learners to misapply the L2 rule, using the base form of the verb in simplifying the rules of the target language (Karim et al., 2015). Besides the base verb form, early stage learners also tend to use the irregular simple past tense and present participle in their formation of the past participle. This could be due to their earlier acquisition of these morphemes in the English language. In SLA development, the *-ing* form and past tense forms are generally acquired early by L2 learners (Dulay et al., 1982). Since the past participle form is used in a more complex structure, such as the passive and the perfect constructions, it is generally acquired by L2 learners at a later stage. Therefore, the less proficient learners tend to resort to the use of grammatical forms that were acquired earlier and overgeneralise their application when attempting to form the past participle.

incorrect subject/object, subject-verb agreement and by-omission in the by-phrase.

The three remaining error types, namely incorrect subject and object, error in subject-verb agreement (SVA), and omission of *by* in the *by*-phrase, were fewer compared to the *be*-auxiliary and incorrect past participle form errors (see Table 3). Despite their small number, the errors may highlight possible patterns of acquisition by the learners. The incorrect subject/object error appeared in all proficiency groups, including the ADV group, whereas the SVA and *by*-omission errors occurred in all groups with the exception of the ADV group. In forming the passive structure, the object in the active sentence is moved to the subject position, and the subject in the active sentence is either omitted or encased in a *by*-phrase as oblique object. This movement rule is obligatory, and incorrect placement of the subject/object of the passive sentence reflects an incomplete acquisition at the level of word order and application of the syntactic rule. Example (7) shows the incorrect placement of subject/object, where the positions of the subject and object have been inverted by the student.

(7) The dog was combed by the bear.

It may be expected that errors such as this would be performed by students in the lower proficiency groups; however, it was also found in the responses of advanced students in this study. It is unclear why advanced proficiency students would commit such an error. Upon checking the data, the errors were found to be committed by three different

students and with different verbs. This means that in all likelihood, the error was not a result of the type of verb or individual idiosyncratic behaviour. The explanation of why the error of subject-object inversion occurred is beyond the scope of this study.

The last two error types, SVA in relation to the *be*-auxiliary and omission of *by* in the *by*-phrase, constituted a small percentage of the total errors. They were present only in the three lower proficiency groups. Advanced learners did not commit these errors. The examples below show the subject-verb agreement (8) and *by*-omission (9) errors.

(8) The cat were being kicked by the squirrel.

(9) The dragon was slapped *** the tiger.

The occurrence of the SVA error was minimal (6.6%), a striking finding as it contradicted with previous studies that listed the SVA error as one of the most frequent errors produced by Malay ESL learners (Wee, 2009). Some researchers have attributed the SVA error to the non-existence of a similar rule in the Malay language (Nayan & Jusoff, 2009). In the Malay language, all subjects, regardless of number, correspond to the same form of verb. In this study, most of the learners were able to apply the agreement rule correctly in the passive formation by producing the correct form of the *be*-auxiliary. One possible reason is that the current data focused only on the *be*-auxiliary in the English passive construction; hence, it might be that even though Malay ESL learners have faced difficulties with SVA for various types of verbs as reported in past studies, the same rule applied specifically to the *be*-auxiliary in the English passive is less problematic.

The error with the lowest number of occurrence in all the proficiency groups was the omission of the preposition *by* in the *by*-phrase (2.2%). The errors were committed only by students in the lower proficiency groups. In the formation of the English full passive, the *by*-phrase is used to denote the agent/logical subject of the sentence. There is a similar structure in the Malay language where a type of Malay passive includes the addition of the word "*oleh*", corresponding to 'by' + agent, as in *Baju itu dibeli oleh ibu* 'The dress was bought by mother' (Karim et al., 2015). This structure is considered equivalent to the English *by*-phrase. This similarity might have facilitated learners' use of the *by*-phrase when forming the English passive. However, it is also possible to form a passive in the Malay language without the word *oleh*, such as in the sentence *Dia dimarahi ibunya kerana membeli permainan itu* 'He was scolded by his mother for buying the toy', where the agent *ibu* 'mother' is not preceded by the word *oleh*. This could be a source of confusion for some learners as the preposition *by* is obligatory in the English passive *by*-phrase.

Conclusion

This study investigated L1 Malay ESL students' acquisition of the English passive through the examination of their production errors in relation to varying proficiency levels. Observations were made on the learners' acquisition of the structure by identifying the

types of errors produced by learners, the percentage of errors within each proficiency group, whether the errors still appeared with increasing L2 proficiency, and whether errors were confined to specific proficiency groups to reveal the acquisition patterns among Malay ESL students. Certain error types, like the omission of *be*-auxiliary, persisted in some learners regardless of L2 proficiency, indicating a strong L1 influence. Whilst incorrect form/substitution errors appeared to be resolved with increased L2 proficiency, the same could not be said of the *be*-omission error. This suggests that there may be underlying differences in the sources of errors between the omission and incorrect form/substitution errors. Some Malay L1 learners may still be susceptible to the *be*-auxiliary omission error despite achieving high English proficiency. Meanwhile, no errors relating to the past participle form was committed by advanced learners, indicating that the high proficiency learners have fully acquired the past participle form. The findings suggest that early stage learners grapple with producing the past participle form as they work out the morphological inflections, some of which are generalised rules from their prior learning of simpler structures. These findings have important implications for instructors. Knowing the types of errors prevalent among learners, the possible sources of the errors, and the stage of L2 learning for specific types of errors allow English language instructors to understand learners' difficulties and plan different interventions for learners with different levels of L2 proficiency. Future research should aim to thoroughly examine the errors committed by advanced learners as these can provide important information on learners' acquisition patterns.

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