

**Original Article****SENTENCE STRUCTURES OF INDONESIAN AND TETUN: A REVIEW IN THE CONTEXT OF BIPA IN TIMOR LESTE****Alexandre Dos Reis^{1)*}, Nuny S. Idris¹⁾, M. W. Rizkyanfi¹⁾**¹⁾ University Pendidikan Indonesia, Indonesia

* Corresponding Author, Email: alexandredosreis@upi.edu

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ABSTRACT

Background. Teaching Indonesian as a Foreign Language (BIPA) in Timor Leste presents certain challenges due to differences in sentence structures between Indonesian and Tetun. A thorough understanding of these similarities and differences is essential to improve the effectiveness of BIPA instruction.

Research Purpose. This study aims to analyze the comparative sentence structures of Indonesian and Tetun and their implications for teaching BIPA in Timor Leste.

Research Method. This qualitative study employs a contrastive analysis method, with data consisting of sentence structures from both languages examined in detail.

Findings. The results reveal significant differences in the word order of possessive noun phrases and the use of grammatical particles, which can cause negative interference for BIPA learners whose native language is Tetun. However, similarities in basic sentence patterns, such as the Subject-Predicate-Object (S-P-O) structure, can facilitate the learning process.

Conclusion. The study recommends that BIPA instructors develop teaching modules focusing on the sentence structure differences that pose difficulties, particularly those causing negative interference, to enhance the effectiveness of teaching Indonesian to Tetun-speaking learners.

Keywords: Contrastive Analysis, Indonesian, Sentence Structure, Teaching Indonesian as a Foreign Language, Tetun.

BACKGROUND

Indonesian plays a crucial role in Timor Leste, both historically and functionally. As one of the working languages, Indonesian is used in government, education, and commerce [1]. Proficiency in Indonesian is essential for the people of Timor-Leste to improve access to higher education, employment opportunities, and regional communication. However, in the process of second language acquisition, learners are often influenced by the linguistic structures of their mother tongue. In this context, Tetun, as the national language, plays a dominant role [2]. This phenomenon of linguistic interference, where the features of the first language (L1) affect the second language (L2), can be a significant barrier to learning [3].

Theoretically, Contrastive analysis is a linguistic method that compares two language systems (L1 and L2) to identify similarities and differences to predict learning difficulties [4]. This theory suggests that structural differences between L1 and L2 will cause learning difficulties (negative interference), while similarities will facilitate the learning process (positive interference). Interference or linguistic transfer is defined as the influence of the mother tongue on the second language being learned [5]. Understanding this phenomenon is

essential in BIPA teaching, as the difficulties that arise are not merely due to the learner's inability, but rather the influence of a different linguistic system.

In general, Indonesian follows a basic sentence structure of S-P-O-K (Subject-Predicate-Object-Adverbial) with a relatively fixed word order [6]. The subject is typically at the beginning of the sentence, followed by the predicate, object, and adverbial. Possessive noun phrases also have a consistent pattern: the noun is followed by the possessive marker. Example: *Rumah saya* (My house).

Tetun, as an Austronesian language with influence from Portuguese, has unique sentence structure characteristics. Although basic sentence patterns like S-P-O (e.g., *Ha'u han etu* "I eat rice") are common, there are significant differences in several grammatical aspects. One of the most prominent differences is in the structure of possessive noun phrases, where a possessive particle is often used. Example: *Uma ha'u nian* (literally: "House my own"). This difference is a crucial point of comparison with Indonesian.

The difficulties faced by BIPA learners from Timor Leste in mastering Indonesian sentence structures are often attributed to fundamental differences in the syntactic grammar of the two languages. Therefore, this study is designed to answer two main questions: (1) What are the differences and similarities in the basic sentence structures of Indonesian and Tetun? (2) What are the implications of these differences for teaching BIPA to native Tetun speakers? The research aims to identify the sentence structure patterns in Indonesian and Tetun, analyze the potential interference that arises, and provide practical recommendations for the development of BIPA instruction. Theoretically, this study is expected to enrich the body of comparative linguistics, while practically, the results can serve as valuable input for BIPA instructors and curriculum developers in Timor-Leste.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using a contrastive analysis design. Contrastive analysis is a linguistic method that systematically compares two language systems—in this case, Indonesian (L2) and Tetun (L1)—to identify similarities and differences in their structural features. The primary goal is to predict potential difficulties that learners might face when acquiring the second language, based on the contrast between the native and target language structures [7]. This method is particularly useful for informing language teaching by highlighting areas prone to interference or transfer errors.

The linguistic data consists of examples of basic sentence structures from both Indonesian and Tetun. Indonesian data is sourced from standard grammar references, while Tetun data is collected from linguistic literature on the language and verified through native informants when possible.

The data analysis procedure is carried out in three main stages:

1. Description: Describing the basic sentence structures of Indonesian and Tetun separately.
2. Comparison: Comparing the structures to identify points of similarity and difference.
3. Prediction of Difficulties: Using identified differences to predict the types of grammatical errors likely to be made by BIPA learners whose native language is Tetun.

FINDINGS

Based on the contrastive analysis of Indonesian and Tetun sentence structures, several

important similarities and differences were identified.

Similarities in Basic Sentence Patterns

Both Indonesian and Tetun share the basic Subject-Predicate-Object (S-P-O) sentence pattern. For example: Indonesian (BI): Ani membaca buku. (Ani reads a book.)

Tetun: Ani lee livru. (Ani reads a book.)

This similarity supports the theory of positive transfer, where shared linguistic features facilitate second language acquisition by reducing learner confusion and cognitive load. Such structural commonality helps Tetun speakers learn Indonesian basic sentence construction more easily, as confirmed in previous studies on Austronesian languages [8].

Differences in Sentence Structures and Their Implications

Possessive Noun Phrase Structure

Indonesian typically uses the construction: Noun + Possessive Pronoun (e.g., Buku saya – My book). Tetun, however, adds a possessive particle after the possessive pronoun: Noun + Possessive Pronoun + Particle (e.g., Livru ha'u nian – My book's).

This difference reflects a major source of negative transfer (interference) in BIPA learning, where Tetun speakers may erroneously apply their native pattern in Indonesian, producing constructions like "Buku saya punya" or "Rumah dia punya." This phenomenon aligns theory of linguistic interference, where structural divergence between L1 and L2 causes learning difficulty. The previous research by Fernando also identified similar possessive structure transfer errors in Indonesian learners related to Austronesia dialect.

Use of Grammatical Particles

Tetun frequently uses grammatical particles such as *nian* (possessive) and *ba* (directional), which Indonesian does not employ in the same way. For instance:

Indonesian: Saya pergi ke Dili. (I go to Dili.)

Tetun: Ha'u bá Dili. (I go Dili.)

The presence of these particles in Tetun leads to interference in particle/preposition usage when learners apply Tetun patterns directly to Indonesian, causing errors in the use of prepositions like *ke*. This confirms the interference theory's explanation that morphosyntactic differences between L1 and L2 increase error rates. Studies similarly documented BIPA learners struggling with Indonesian prepositions due to influence from their L1 particles [9-10].

Use of Pronouns

Indonesian uses two first-person singular pronouns—*saya* (formal) and *aku* (informal)—whereas Tetun primarily uses *ha'u*. Although seemingly minor, pronoun substitution errors are frequent among beginner learners, indicating challenges in pragmatic and sociolinguistic adaptation. This observation aligns with interlanguage theory, which emphasizes the learner's developing system as influenced by both L1 and sociocultural context [11-12]. Prior research has noted similar issues in pronoun use by language learners navigating differing politeness systems [13-4].

DISCUSSIONS

The similarities found in the basic S-P-O sentence pattern suggest a facilitating factor

in BIPA learning, consistent with positive interference theory, which posits that structural overlaps between L1 and L2 smooth the acquisition process. Conversely, the identified differences in possessive noun phrases, particle/preposition use, and pronoun choice represent significant sources of negative transfer that complicate learning.

These findings concur with the contrastive analysis hypothesis that structural differences predict learning difficulties. The distinct possessive particle in Tetun and its absence in Indonesian create a mismatch that learners must overcome. Moreover, the reliance on grammatical particles in Tetun impacts learners' acquisition of Indonesian prepositions, reflecting morphosyntactic interference documented in other language pairs.

Compared with previous research, these results align with studies on Austronesian language influences in BIPA learning and confirm well-established patterns of cross-linguistic interference identified. They also expand understanding of pragmatic difficulties with pronouns, which, although less studied than syntactic errors, significantly affect communication appropriateness.

CONCLUSION

There are significant differences in several aspects of sentence structure between Indonesian and Tetun, especially in the word order of possessive noun phrases and the use of grammatical particles. These differences have the potential to cause negative interference, which can be a primary source of difficulty for BIPA learners from Timor-Leste. On the other hand, the similarity in the basic S-P-O sentence pattern can serve as a positive foundation for the learning process.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that BIPA instructors in Timor-Leste:

1. Identify the points of difficulty caused by Tetun interference.
2. Develop teaching modules that focus on exercises and in-depth explanations of Indonesian sentence structures that differ from Tetun.
3. Utilize a contrastive teaching method to explicitly explain these differences, so learners can better understand why they are making errors.

Future research could expand the focus to analyze interference at the morphological level (e.g., use of affixes) or phonology, as well as test the effectiveness of teaching modules that have been adapted to the learners' linguistic context.

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