

A Contrastive Analysis of Cultural Transfer Errors Found in the Harry Potter Movie Dialogues

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Abstract

This study investigates cultural transfer errors in the dialogues of the Harry Potter film series within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Based on contrastive and error analyses, this study aims to identify types of cultural transfer errors and explain how differences in cultural and pragmatic norms between first (L1) and second (L2) languages contribute to learners' misinterpretation of meaning. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected from selected film dialogues containing idiomatic expressions, politeness strategies, and culturally embedded meanings. The findings reveal that EFL learners tend to interpret idiomatic expressions literally, resulting in the loss of emotional, evaluative, and pragmatic meanings intended by the speaker. These errors are primarily caused by L1 interference and limited cultural awareness, particularly regarding indirectness and idiomatic language use in English. The study concludes that cultural transfer errors extend beyond grammatical inaccuracies and significantly affect pragmatic competence. The study underscores the importance of incorporating cultural and pragmatic instruction into EFL learning and showcases the efficacy of film dialogue as authentic material for cultivating learners' cross-cultural communicative competence.

Keywords: Cultural Transfer Errors, EFL Learners, Pragmatic Competence, Harry Potter

INTRODUCTION

In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, language cannot be understood solely as a grammatical system; it must also be understood as a representation of its speakers' culture. Since EFL learners generally study English in environments where the language is not used for everyday communication, their understanding of its cultural and pragmatic aspects is often limited. This creates a gap between linguistic and cultural competence in English usage.

One problem that often arises in the EFL context is errors due to cultural transfer, also known as cultural transfer errors. These errors occur when EFL learners interpret or use English based on the norms, values, and cultural habits of their first language (L1). (James, 1998) asserts that language errors are related not only to linguistic structure but also to pragmatic and cultural incompatibilities affecting the meaning of utterances. In EFL learning, authentic media, such as English-language films, are often used to improve contextual language comprehension. Films provide

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examples of natural language use complete with idiomatic expressions, politeness strategies, humor, and social relations reflecting the culture of native speakers. However, without adequate cultural understanding, EFL learners may have difficulty grasping the implicit meanings in film dialogue.

The Harry Potter films are among the most popular movies for learning English. In addition to featuring fantasy elements, the films depict British culture through elements such as the boarding school education system, teacher-student relationships, social hierarchy, and Western moral values. According to (Feldt, 2016) Harry Potter reflects contemporary culture and strong social symbolism, which is evident in the dialogue between the characters.

The dialogues in the Harry Potter films contain many cultural expressions that do not always have direct equivalents in the language and culture of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Elements such as idioms, sarcastic humor, forms of address, and politeness strategies are often taken literally by EFL learners, which can lead to misunderstandings. These mistakes are an example of cultural transfer errors in the context of learning English as a foreign language. To examine these errors, contrastive analysis was used as the main theoretical framework. This approach focuses on comparing two languages and cultures to identify differences that could potentially cause errors. (Keshavarz, 2012) states that this approach effectively explains the influence of the first language on the use of the second language, including cultural and pragmatic aspects often overlooked in EFL learning.

Previous studies have shown that first language interference significantly influences the language errors of EFL learners. (Ara, 2021) found that the main sources of errors in ESL/EFL learners are the linguistic and cultural differences between their first language and English. Kazazoğlu (2020), meanwhile, emphasized that L1 interference affects not only structural aspects, but also language use in social and cultural contexts. Although extensive research has been conducted on contrastive and error analysis, most studies still focus on writing skills and language production in formal learning contexts. Research specifically examining cultural transfer errors in film dialogue, particularly in popular films like the Harry Potter series, remains limited. Film dialogues are an authentic form of spoken language that are highly relevant to the needs of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners.

Based on this research gap, this study uses a contrastive analysis approach to examine cultural transfer errors in the dialogue of the Harry Potter films. The study will focus on identifying types of cultural transfer errors and explaining how cultural differences between the source and target languages contribute to these errors in an EFL context. This study is expected to contribute to the fields of applied linguistics and

error analysis, particularly in the context of cross-cultural pragmatics and EFL. Practically, the results are expected to increase the cultural awareness and pragmatic competence of EFL learners, English teachers, and translators, making their use of English more appropriate and contextual.

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to identify and explain the various types of cultural transfer errors present in the Harry Potter film series. A qualitative approach was chosen because the research data consists of utterances and dialogues containing cultural meanings that require contextual interpretation and in-depth analysis rather than quantitative measurement (Cresswell, 2018). This study focuses on understanding linguistic phenomena in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), particularly errors arising from cultural differences.

This study uses a theoretical approach combining contrastive and error analyses. Contrastive analysis compares language and cultural usage in English dialogues with the cultural perspective of EFL learners. Error analysis identifies, classifies, and explains the types of cultural transfer errors found. This approach enables researchers to trace the origin of errors, especially those caused by interference from the native language with the understanding of English as a foreign language.

The data for this study comes from dialogue in the Harry Potter films. These films were chosen because they contain many British cultural elements and are often used to teach English as a foreign language. The research data consists of film dialogue transcripts containing idiomatic expressions, politeness strategies, humor, and forms of address and social relations that could cause cultural transfer errors for EFL learners. Data were collected using documentation and observation-recording techniques. The researcher repeatedly listened to the film dialogues and recorded utterances containing cultural elements. The collected dialogues were then selected based on their relevance to the research focus: dialogues with the potential to cause cultural transfer errors in EFL learners' understanding.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of a study that used a contrastive analysis approach within an EFL context to identify cultural transfer errors in Harry Potter movie dialogues. The discussion centers on how discrepancies in cultural and pragmatic norms between the first and second languages contribute to learners' misinterpretation of expressions embedded in culture.

The dialogue: "Yeah, and we're as close to getting rid of it as we are to finding the rest of them.."

In the Harry Potter movie dialogue, the phrase "getting rid of" does not simply refer to the physical act of removing something; it also carries emotional and evaluative meaning toward objects considered problematic or burdensome. Phrasal verbs in English are often used to express the speaker's attitude and assessment of a situation, so their meaning is not always literal. (Givon, 1993) explains that grammatical structures in English often convey pragmatic meaning and the speaker's attitude rather than describing an action.

In the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, the phrase "getting rid of" can cause cultural transfer errors when learners interpret it based on the framework of their first language (L1). EFL learners tend to translate the phrase as "membuang" or "menyingkirkan," which are generally understood in Indonesian as neutral, concrete actions. This literal translation loses the emotional nuance and negative attitude that the speaker wants to convey in English.

This phenomenon demonstrates the influence of the first language on the meaning of the second language, particularly at the pragmatic and cultural levels. (Gülden, 2021) asserts that L1 interference affects not only grammatical aspects of L2 learning but also how learners understand the idiomatic meaning and communicative function of an expression. Therefore, to avoid cultural transfer errors in interpreting the meaning of dialogue, EFL learners need to understand phrases such as "getting rid of" in the context of the speaker's culture and attitude.

"I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment."

Although the sentence "I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment" is linguistically simple, it has complex pragmatic and cultural meanings. In English, it not only indicates that the speaker is busy, but also conveys a mental or emotional state focused on a particular issue. In the context of the Harry Potter film dialogue, this phrase is used as a subtle and polite way to limit interaction. Therefore, its meaning cannot be understood lexically alone. Lexically, preoccupied refers to a state of mind filled or burdened by something. However, in practical English usage, the word is often used to express the speaker's unwillingness to engage in conversation or other activities. (Baker, n.d.) Emphasizes that the meaning of an utterance is often implicit and depends on the cultural context. Thus, translations that focus only on dictionary definitions may lose the utterance's communicative function.

For EFL learners, the expression "I'm a bit preoccupied" is often translated as "I'm busy" or "I have a lot on my mind." While this translation emphasizes the speaker's personal condition, it does not fully reflect the pragmatic function of the utterance as

a polite refusal or postponement strategy. Consequently, EFL learners may fail to grasp the social intent the speaker intends to convey in the film dialogue. This misinterpretation is a form of cultural transfer error that arises from applying first language (L1) communication norms to English (L2). In Indonesian culture, statements about busyness are often conveyed directly and explicitly. Conversely, in English culture, expressions such as "I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment" serve as indirect politeness strategies that maintain social relationships without offending the interlocutor. According to (Yusupova, 2021), a lack of cultural knowledge can result in the loss of pragmatic meaning when translating literary texts and film dialogues.

Additionally, J. K. Rowling's dialogue is often laden with contextual meaning and specific semantic relations. (Setianingrum, D. A., et al., 2021) demonstrate that vocabulary in the Harry Potter series functions not only semantically, but also constructs the social and psychological meanings of the characters. Thus, the expression "preoccupied" in this dialogue reflects the character's emotional state and personality, which EFL learners must thoroughly understand.

"It sets my teeth on edge."

The idiom "It sets my teeth on edge" cannot be understood literally. Although the phrase seems to refer to the physical condition of the teeth, it is actually used to express a feeling of extreme discomfort, annoyance, irritation, or emotional disgust towards something. It is often used when a sound, behavior, or situation causes a strong emotional reaction, such as restlessness or irritation that is difficult to resist. Compared to first language (L1) Indonesian, literal translations of this expression, such as "it makes my teeth feel uncomfortable" or "it makes my teeth ache" do not convey the intended idiomatic meaning in English. More equivalent Indonesian expressions are "it makes me very uncomfortable," "it's very annoying," or "I can't stand it." This difference shows that Indonesian tends to express emotional discomfort directly, while English often uses bodily metaphors to convey emotional reactions indirectly.

This comparison confirms the potential for cultural transfer error in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL), when learners translate idiomatic English expressions based on the literal meaning of their first language (L1). If EFL learners understand "It sets my teeth on edge" literally, they will miss the intended pragmatic and emotional meaning. Therefore, understanding idioms like this requires awareness that cultural differences influence how languages express emotions and that appropriate translations must consider functional and attitudinal meaning, not just word-for-word equivalence.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that cultural transfer errors frequently occur in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' interpretation of English film dialogue due to differences in cultural norms, pragmatic conventions, and meaning construction between their first language (L1) and the target language (L2). A contrastive analysis of selected dialogue from the Harry Potter films shows that expressions such as "getting rid of," "I'm a bit preoccupied at the moment," and "it sets my teeth on edge" have implicit emotional, evaluative, and politeness-related meanings that cannot be fully conveyed by a literal translation. When EFL learners rely on L1-based frameworks, they often interpret these expressions as neutral or purely descriptive. This results in the loss of pragmatic intent and communicative function. These findings confirm that language errors in EFL contexts are not solely grammatical, but deeply rooted in cultural and pragmatic mismatches.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of integrating cultural awareness and pragmatic competence into EFL instruction and analysis. Film dialogues, as authentic representations of spoken language, provide valuable insights into how meaning is constructed through indirectness, idiomaticity, and cultural symbolism. This study contributes to applied linguistics by employing a contrastive analysis approach to illustrate how cultural knowledge plays a crucial role in preventing misinterpretation and enhancing communicative accuracy. The results suggest that EFL learners, teachers, and translators should move beyond word-for-word equivalence and develop sensitivity to cultural context, speaker attitude, and social function to achieve more effective and appropriate English language use.

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