Linguistic Errors in Speech Production: An Analysis of Slips of the Tongue among Malay ESL Learners in Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS)

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Abstrak

Slips of the tongue (SOT) merupakan kesalahan berbicara yang tidak disengaja dan mencerminkan proses kognitif serta linguistik yang mendasari produksi bahasa kedua. Penelitian ini meneliti frekuensi, jenis, dan faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi SOT pada pembelajar ESL asal Melayu di Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS) dengan menggunakan desain metode campuran (mixed-methods). Hasil menunjukkan bahwa 64,7% partisipan melakukan setidaknya satu SOT, dengan kesalahan tipe addition paling sering terjadi, diikuti oleh anticipation, reversal, dan substitution. Faktor afektif, termasuk kecemasan, rasa malu, dan terlalu percaya diri, teridentifikasi sebagai pemicu utama yang mengganggu proses bahasa dan kinerja lisan. Temuan ini menekankan pentingnya intervensi pedagogis yang tepat untuk mengurangi kesalahan berbicara dan meningkatkan kefasihan peserta. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi dalam pemahaman proses produksi bahasa kedua dan implikasi praktis bagi pendidik ESL dalam merancang strategi untuk meningkatkan kompetensi dan kepercayaan diri berbahasa lisan.

Kata Kunci: *Slips of the tongue (SOT), kesilapan pertuturan, pembelajar ESL*

Abstract

Slips of the tongue (SOT) are unintentional speech errors that reflect the cognitive and linguistic processes underlying second language production. This study examined the occurrence, types, and contributing factors of SOT among Malay ESL learners at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS) using a mixed-methods design. Findings showed that 64.7% of participants produced at least one SOT, with additions being the most frequent, followed by anticipation, reversal, and substitution. Affective factors, including anxiety, shyness, and overconfidence, were identified as key triggers, disrupting both language processing and oral performance. These results underscore the need for targeted pedagogical interventions to reduce speech errors and enhance learners' fluency. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of second language speech production and offers practical implications for ESL educators in designing strategies to improve oral competence and confidence.

Keywords: Slips of the tongue (SOT), speech errors, Malay ESL learners

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the process of acquiring a language beyond one's native language in both formal and informal learning contexts. Despite prolonged exposure and instruction, second language learners frequently encounter difficulties in developing sufficient vocabulary and overall linguistic competence (Surmanov & Azimova, 2020), as well as in overcoming pronunciation challenges arising from unfamiliar sounds and phonetic structures

(Gilakjani & Ahamdi, 2011). Limited lexical knowledge significantly constrains learners' ability to comprehend spoken and written discourse and restricts their capacity to express ideas accurately and effectively (Schmitt, 2010). Pronunciation likewise remains a major challenge, particularly when the target language contains phonemes or phonological patterns absent from learners' first language (Derwing & Munro, 2015). For example, many learners of English struggle to articulate the interdental sounds /θ/ and /ð/ in words such as think and this, which are not present in languages such as Malay. These difficulties often lead to reduced oral fluency, diminished confidence, and reluctance to participate in spoken communication (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Consequently, such linguistic constraints frequently manifest as speech errors during spontaneous production, as learners attempt to retrieve appropriate lexical items, apply accurate pronunciation patterns, and maintain fluency in real time.

Speech errors, commonly referred to as slips of the tongue (SOT), occur when intended utterances are unintentionally distorted due to affective or cognitive factors such as anxiety, lack of confidence or rapid speech delivery. According to Putri (2015), SOTs represent unintended deviations in a speaker's utterance that arise during the speech production process, resulting in expressions that differ from the intended meaning. These errors may surface at multiple linguistic levels, including phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and lexical, reflecting the underlying cognitive challenges faced by language learners. SOT has been widely examined within psycholinguistics as indicators of how language is planned, processed, and produced in real time. Several categories are proposed to classify these errors: anticipation, perseveration, reversal (or exchange), blend or haplology, misderivation, substitution, addition, and deletion. Each category reflects a distinct type of deviation that occurs when the complex cognitive and linguistic mechanisms underlying speech production temporarily fail or overlap.

Anticipation errors occur when a sound, syllable, or word from a later part of the utterance appears prematurely, replacing an element that should come earlier (Dell & Reich, 1981; Levelt, 1979). This type of error suggests that the speaker has planned upcoming segments in advance and that these units intrude upon earlier articulatory sequences. The key feature of anticipation errors is that the anticipated element typically appears again in its correct position. For instance, the phrase *"Take my bike"* might be produced as *"Bake my bike,"* where the /b/ sound from *bike* is anticipated and used in place of /t/ from *take* (Clark & Clark, 1977). Such errors reveal that language planning extends beyond individual words and involves the parallel activation of multiple linguistic units.

In contrast, perseveration errors occur when a linguistic unit that has already been articulated reappears later in the utterance (Zulaihah & Indah, 2021). This happens when a sound, syllable, or word from an earlier part of the sentence "perseverates" and affects subsequent speech. For example, *"He pulled a tantrum"* might become *"He pulled a pantrum,"* where the initial /p/ from *pulled* carries over to replace the /t/ in *tantrum* (Clark & Clark, 1977). Perseveration errors often occur under cognitive load, fatigue, or nervousness, suggesting difficulties in inhibiting previously activated articulatory patterns.

Substitution errors are characterized by replacing one linguistic unit with another, typically due to similarity in sound, meaning, or grammatical function (Al-Hamzi et al., 2021). The occurrence of this type of error indicates confusion or competition during lexical retrieval. Substitution error is the most frequent type of SOT reported in empirical studies (e.g., Naibaho et al., 2019; Zulaihah & Indah, 2021). For instance, a speaker may unintentionally say "*Give me the fork*" instead of "*Give me the spoon.*" Such substitution errors typically arise from competition

among semantically or phonologically related words in the mental lexicon, indicating that lexical retrieval is a dynamic process in which multiple lexical candidates are activated simultaneously before the appropriate one is selected.

Blend or haplology errors occur when two intended linguistic forms or expressions are combined or simplified during speech production (Rezai & Heshmatian, 2013). In blending, elements from two lexical items are merged to produce a hybrid form, such as *"grastly"* derived from *"grizzly"* and *"ghastly."* This phenomenon often arises when both target words are simultaneously activated in the speakers' mental lexicon. In contrast, haplology involves the omission of one of two similar or identical syllables occulting in sequence, as in *"libry"* for *"library."* Both error types demonstrate how overlapping sound planning and the tendency for easier articulation can lead to unintentional simplification in speech.

Reversal or exchange errors, also known as spoonerism, involve the transposition of two linguistic elements, such as sounds, morphemes, or words, such that each occupies the position intended for the other (Clark & Clark, 1977). This type of error reflects simultaneous planning of multiple linguistic units, where two elements are prepared in parallel and are accidentally interchanged. For instance, *"Katz and Fodor"* might be uttered as *"Fats and Kodor."*. Such reversals highlight the highly interactive nature of speech production, where multiple layers of phonological and lexical encoding occur at once.

Misderivation involves the incorrect application of morphological rules, where affixes or derivational morphemes are attached inappropriately. For example, a speaker might say *"unpatient"* instead of *"impatient"* (Herrera, 2023). Such errors often resulted from overgeneralization of grammatical rules or incomplete retrieval of the correct morphological form. This type of error is particularly prevalent among L2 learners, whose morphological encoding processes are still in the process of becoming fully internalized and automatized.

Addition refers to the insertion of an unnecessary sound, syllable, or word into an utterance (Carrol, 1986). This may occur when speakers overactivated certain articulatory patterns or attempt to maintain fluency during speech planning. For example, saying *"he is very handsomes"* instead of *"he is very handsome"* overgeneralize the plural -s. Additions can also serve as fillers or hesitations when speakers subconsciously insert elements to gain time for cognitive processing.

Conversely, deletion involves the omission of an expected linguistic unit, such as a sound, syllable, or word, resulting in an incomplete or reduced form (Carrol, 1986). For instance, pronouncing *"probably"* as *"prolly"* or *"friendship"* as *"frienship"* reflects the loss of phonological components. Deletion errors are frequently associated with articulatory simplification, fatigue, or rapid speech, and they can occur at both phonological and syntactic levels when function words or endings are inadvertently omitted.

In summary, these types of SOT provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how and why speech errors occur. Rather than being random mistakes, such slips reveal the intricate and multi-layered processes involved in language production, encompassing lexical retrieval, phonological encoding, morphological structuring, and articulatory execution (Fromkin, 1973; Carrol, 1986). By analyzing these error types, researchers gain valuable insight into the cognitive mechanisms that underlie spoken language, particularly in the context of second language learning where speech monitoring and linguistic planning are still developing.

In Malaysia, despite years of formal instruction, many Malay ESL learners continue to struggle with achieving fluent and effortless speech, often leading to unintended errors during oral communication. A recurring phenomenon observed in the learners' spoken communication

is the occurrence of SOT, which reflects underlying difficulties in language processing and production. These slips are frequently influenced by factors, such as limited lexical access, interference from the learners' first language (Bahasa Melayu), and communicative anxiety (Naibaho et al., 2019; Zulaihah & Indah, 2021).

Such errors not only disrupt speech fluency but also diminish learners' confidence and communicative competence. Previous studies have emphasized that affective factors, including anxiety, lack of confidence, and cognitive overload, are major contributors to the occurrence of SOT (MacIntyre & Gardner, 2012; Siregar, 2023). Emotional tension is known to interfere with the inrticate processes of speech planning, lexical retrieval, and articulation, thereby increasing the likelihood of SOT. Hence, educators are encouraged to cultivate supportive and low anxiety learning environments that enhance learners' confidence and willingness to communicate. Such environments not only help reduce the occurrence of SOT but also promote greater fluency, accuracy, and overall communicative competence in the second language.

Although slips of the tongue have been widely studied, existing research has largely focused on native speakers or examined speech errors in general rather than systematically investigating slips of the tongue among tertiary-level Malay ESL learners. Empirical evidence on the types and contributing factors of these errors in spontaneous L2 speech remains limited. This gap restricts understanding of L2 speech production in the Malaysian ESL context and its pedagogical implications. Therefore, this study aimed to address this gap by analyzing the frequency, types, and key factors of the occurrences of SOT among Malay ESL learners. The findings are hoped to offer valuable insights into the patterns and challenges faced by L2 learners in achieving oral fluency and communicative competence.

2. Method

This study employed a mixed method design which integrated both qualitative and quantitative approaches to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the occurrence of SOT among Malay ESL learners. The qualitative component consisted of interviews and classroom observations, which allowed for flexible questioning, deeper insights into participants' thought processes, and the capture of non-verbal cues that accompany speech errors (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The quantitative aspect involved a frequency count on the occurrences of SOT, enabling a systematic measurement of error types and their distribution across participants. This integrative approach not only strengthened the validity and reliability of the study but also provided a multidimensional perspective on the linguistic and psychological factors influencing slips of the tongue among second language learners.

The participants were selected using a purposive sampling method. A total of 17 students from Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS), who were at the intermediate to higher intermediate proficiency levels, were selected as the participants of this study. Participants were intentionally selected for their direct relevance to the research aims because their program enrolment and observed proficiency levels ensured a meaningful range of performance for comparative analysis. Ethical standards were followed throughout the study. Approval was obtained from the institution, participation was voluntary, and all information was kept confidential. Participants were also free to withdraw at any time without consequences. This purposive sampling approach helped ensure that the study included participants most relevant to the research goals while maintaining accuracy and ethical integrity.

The interview sessions, comprising both prepared and unprepared speech tasks, and observations were audio-recorded. The data were then analyzed using thematic analysis and frequency count to determine the distribution and frequency of the different types of slips.

Prepared speech refers to spoken output that has been carefully planned, structured, and often rehearsed prior to delivery. In the context of research interviews, this involves participants being informed in advance about the discussion topics or guiding questions, allowing them to organize their ideas and select linguistic forms more consciously. Consequently, prepared speech tend to be more, cohesive, and grammatically accurate, exhibiting a lower frequency of SOT production. This mode of speech reflects a speaker's linguistic competence under controlled or ideal conditions, enabling researchers to assess language performance when self-monitoring and planning are maximized. Moreover, analyzing prepared speech offers valuable insight into how speakers plan, regulate, and monitor their utterances, providing a meaningful point of comparison for examining spontaneous or unprepared speech production in second language contexts (Ellis, 2020).

Unprepared speech refers to spontaneous and unrehearsed language production in which speakers must respond immediately without prior planning. This method mirrors real-life communicative situations where individuals simultaneously think and speak, often encountering challenges in word-retrieval, sentence formulation, and pronunciation. Consequently, unprepared speech tends to contain a higher frequency of SOT, as speakers operate under greater time pressure and cognitive demand. Prior studies reported that spontaneous speaking increases cognitive load and anxiety, which in turn can negatively affect fluency and accuracy (Siregar, 2023). Comparing prepared and unprepared speech therefore allows researchers examine how planning and spontaneity influence language performance, providing valuable insights into the real cognitive processes underlying speech production and the occurrence of SOT.

Prior to the interview sessions, all participants were required to sign informed consent forms to confirm their voluntary participation and understanding of how the collected data would be used. The interviews were conducted in a quiet room and distraction-free environment to minimize background noise and enhance participants' focus. Each session lasted approximately 5 to 20 minutes, depending on depth and length of the participants' responses. Upon completion, participants received small tokens of appreciation as acknowledgement of their time and cooperation. Following the interviews, the audio recordings were carefully transcribed verbatim to capture every spoken word accurately. The transcribed data were then systematically coded, allowing the researcher to categorize and label relevant segments of speech in order to identify recurring patterns. The primary objective of this study was to determine the frequency and types of SOTs that were produced during the interviews. This analysis provided insight into both the prevalence and nature of SOT in participants' spoken performance.

Thematic analysis was used to identify and categorize slips of the tongue (SOT) from interview data, which were coded based on Fromkin's (1973) eight SOT types, such as anticipation, perseveration, shift, exchange, blend, substitution, addition, and deletion. A frequency count was then performed to determine the distribution and prevalence of each error type among participants. Complementing this, field notes were analyzed for non-verbal cues that might explain the occurrence of slips. This approach aligns with the qualitative focus on understanding patterns in human behavior (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

3.   Results and Discussion

3.1.   Frequency of Slips of the Tongue

The first research question explored the extent to which Malay ESL learners produced slips of the tongue (SOT). The results revealed that most participants committed at least one slip, with a total of 25 instances recorded. As presented in Table 1, participant R3 exhibited the highest frequency, accounting for 16% of all slips, followed by R2, R8, R11, R13, and R17, each contributing 12% of the total. Participants R1, R5, R9, and R12 produced only one slip each (4%), while R15 produced two slips (8%). The remaining participants, including R6, R7, R10, R14, and R16, did not produce any SOT. These differences likely reflect individual variability, such as anxiety levels or language proficiency, as learners with greater English proficiency generally demonstrate fewer speech errors (Fromkin, 1973).

Table 1. Frequency of Slips of the Tongue

Participant	Frequency of SOT	
	Frequency	*Percentage (%)*
R1	1	4
R2	3	12
R3	4	16
R4	0	0
R5	1	4
R6	0	0
R7	0	0
R8	3	12
R9	1	4
R10	0	0
R11	3	12
R12	1	4
R13	3	12
R14	0	0
R15	2	8
R16	0	0
R17	3	12
Total	**25**	**100**

3.2.   Types of Slips of the Tongue

The second research question aimed to identify the types of SOT produced by the participants during the interview sessions. Among the eight types of SOT proposed by Fromkin (1973), five were observed in this study: addition, deletion, anticipation, reversal, and substitution. Addition errors occurred more frequently, followed by deletion, while the remaining three types appeared less often. Examples of these SOT categories are presented in Table 2.

Addition and deletion emerged as the most frequent type of error among participants. Many learners added unnecessary sounds or words, such as R2's utterance "*everythings*" instead of

"*everything*," demonstrating an overgeneralization of plural forms. This aligns with the findings by Matiini (2016), who reported similar instances, "*peoples*" for "*people*", likely influenced by structural differences between Malay and English. Malay typically expresses plural through reduplication (e.g. *buku-buku*) instead of adding the suffix -s. Another example of addition was R8's phrase "*more better*," which resulted in redundancy and semantic distortion.

Conversely, deletion errors, occurred when key sounds were omitted, as shown in R9's utterance of "*semester reak*" instead of "*semester break.*" Such slips often arose when participants spoke quickly or experienced nervousness during the interview. Less frequent errors included anticipation errors (e.g., "*framily friendly*"), reversal (e.g., "*accodomate*" for "*accommodate*"), and substitutions (e.g., "*quite place*" for "*quiet place*"), all of which indicate brief disruptions in pronunciation or lexical retrieval. Perseveration and misderivation errors were not observed in this dataset, possibly because these types of errors are less common in casual or semi-structured speech contexts among ESL learners.

Table 2. Types of Slips of the Tongue

Participant	Types of Slips of the Tongue	
	Examples	*Types*
R1	'...one **specident** specialist student like is like I used to take care of'	Blend
R2	'…from TikTok that he **use** a timer…'	Deletion
	'I keep it simple and moderate umm to **accodomate** …'	Reversal
	'he use a timer for **everythings** that he…'	Addition
R3	'…because I have **sibling** they works…'	Deletion
	'…housewife so many **thing** that she…'	Deletion
	'…school and my **fathers** still work…'	Addition
R5	'I am a **framily** friendly person'	Anticipation
R8	'I set a **goals** like what I want…'	Addition
	'…and if I **cannonot** achieve today…'	Addition
	'…keep like **more better** and **then other of** that aaa I keep productive is to keep I always…'	Addition
	'…get together with my friends and umm like my **classmate**'	Deletion
R9	'During the semester **reak**…'	Deletion
R11	'…and my **matrics** number…'	Addition
	'…keep productive as a **students** so first…'	Addition
R12	'I think the last one as a **students** make sure…'	Addition
R13	'I was very young my **parents** divorce so…'	Addition
	'…and the follow the two	

Participant	Types of Slips of the Tongue	
	Examples	*Types*
	youngers sisters…'	Addition
	'in my opinion everyone *deserve* to be happy…'	Deletion
R15	'For *mysif*…'	Deletion
	'…Nervous actually it *mixeds feelings*…'	Addition
	'…he must be tired because he *follow* my instructions'	Deletion
R17	'…and *quite* place where…'	Substitution
	'I am a single *students* so I have no problems with…'	Addition
	'They are good students also they *helps* me a lot a lot of things…'	Addition

3.3. Factors Influencing Slips of the Tongue

The findings revealed marked differences in participants' speech performance between prepared and unprepared conditions. During prepared sessions, most participants exhibited greater fluency, coherence, and confidence, likely facilitated by the three-day preparation period, which allowed them to organize their ideas and rehearse their responses. In contrast, unprepared sessions were characterized by noticeable hesitation, nervousness, and disfluency, as participants struggled to formulate responses spontaneously. The demands of real-time speech production often led to rapid or unclear articulation, thereby increasing the frequency of slips of the tongue (SOTs). These observations align with prior studies indicating that factors such as anxiety, time pressure, and social evaluation can significantly influence oral performance, particularly in second language contexts (Siregar, 2023; Detrianto, 2017).

Furthermore, consistent with Wahyuningsih and Afandi (2020), this study found that affective and linguistic constraints such as lack of confidence, limited vocabulary size, shyness, and insufficient exposure to authentic English communication significantly contributed to the production of slips of the tongue (SOT). Limited productive vocabulary knowledge has been shown to impede efficient lexical access, thereby increasing the cognitive load during speech production and reducing fluency (Uchihara & Saito, 2019; see also Kormos, 2006). Moreover, individual differences in speaking anxiety have been empirically linked to lower fluency, higher error rates, and disrupted articulatory processes in L2 oral tasks (Sosa-López & Mora, 2022). The influence of first language (L1) interference also emerged clearly in patterns of error, as structural and phonological contrasts between Malay and English can exacerbate difficulty in accurate L2 production (Ellis, 1985; Lado, 1957). Additionally, pre-task planning and rehearsal, which enable mental preparation and reduce cognitive load, have consistently been shown to enhance fluency and decrease performance-related errors in L2 speaking (Ellis, 2009; Bygate, 2018). Overall, unprepared speech was more susceptible to performance-related anxiety and cognitive overload, whereas prepared speech tended to stabilize linguistic accuracy and fluency, underscoring the importance of incorporating both planned and spontaneous speaking tasks in ESL instruction to foster adaptive communicative competence across varied contexts.

4. Conclusion

This study examined slips of the tongue (SOT) among Malay ESL learners at Universiti Islam Selangor (UIS), focusing on the frequency, types, and contributing factors of these errors. The findings indicate that most participants produced SOT during unprepared speech, primarily influenced by affective and cognitive factors such as anxiety, hesitation, and rapid speech processing. The most frequent errors were additions (e.g., "and my fathers still work…") and deletions (e.g., "everyone deserve to be happy…"), often linked to first language (L1) transfer. Less frequent errors, including anticipation and reversal, were associated with nervousness and accelerated speech. These results underscore the significant impact of emotional and cognitive processes on second language oral performance and highlight the importance of pedagogical strategies that reduce speaking pressure while fostering fluency and confidence among ESL learners.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by the small sample size, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Additional challenges, such as scheduling constraints, participants' reluctance to be recorded, and occasional audio quality issues, also affected data collection. Future research should involve larger and more diverse participant groups to enhance generalizability and employ multimodal data collection methods, including video recordings, to capture non-verbal cues and behavioral indicators. Investigating these dimensions may provide deeper insights into the cognitive and affective mechanisms underlying SOT and further inform effective strategies for supporting oral proficiency in second language learning.

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