

# “I HAVE NO MORE IDEAS TO TELL”: THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SAPIR-WHORF HYPOTHESIS IN EFL CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini dilakukan karena masih terbatasnya pembahasan hipotesis Sapir-Whorf di Indonesia. Hipotesis Sapir-Whorf mencakup gagasan tentang relativitas dan determinisme dalam bahasa dan memiliki dampak yang besar pada bahasa, budaya, dan pendidikan. Asumsinya adalah bahwa struktur bahasa ibu seseorang dapat sangat mempengaruhi atau sepenuhnya menentukan sudut pandang pelajar. Karena berfokus pada masalah kompetensi bahasa dan pemerolehan bahasa, maka teori ini juga memiliki implikasi yang besar bagi EFL, terutama metode dan strategi pengajaran bahasa. Hal ini dapat muncul dari leksikon dan struktur pidato bahasa Inggris siswa yang mengandung keunikan afiliasi budaya, variasi bahasa, dan istilah-istilah yang tidak dapat diterjemahkan. Penelitian ini mencoba untuk menyelidiki implikasi dari Hipotesis Sapir-Whorf yang diterapkan atau direfleksikan di kelas EFL. Penelitian ini menggunakan metodologi studi kualitatif, dengan menggunakan tugas-tugas siswa sebagai sumber data. Setelah menelusuri 23 karya tulis, penelitian ini menunjukkan tanda-tanda versi yang lebih kuat dari hipotesis Sapir-Whorf, di mana bahasa Indonesia dan bahasa daerah siswa dapat mempengaruhi cara mereka berkomunikasi dalam bahasa Inggris. Bahasa yang digunakan adalah bahasa lisan, di mana bahasa tersebut bergaya seperti transkrip tertulis dan terkadang tidak memiliki struktur tulisan yang tepat. Meskipun siswa sering menunjukkan kesulitan dalam menyampaikan ide-ide mereka, hal ini tidak menyiratkan bahwa siswa memiliki kemampuan bahasa yang lebih rendah. Sebaliknya, hal ini menunjukkan persepsi bahasa mereka yang terbatas dalam memandang penggunaan bahasa Inggris.

**Kata kunci: EFL, determinisme linguistik, relativitas linguistik, hipotesis Sapir-Whorf**

## ABSTRACT

The study is proposed due to the fact that the discussion on Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in EFL settings remains limited in Indonesia. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis covers the notions of relativity and determinism in language and has had a profound impact on language, culture, and education. It assumes that the structure of one's mother tongue may strongly influence or entirely determine the worldview of the learner. Because it focuses on issues of language competence and language acquisition, it can also have heavy implications for EFL, especially language teaching methods and strategies. It can emerge from the lexicon and structure of students' English speech that contains cultural affiliation idiosyncrasies, language variations, and untranslatable terms. This paper attempts to investigate the implications of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that is applied or reflected in the EFL classroom. It adopts a qualitative study methodology, using students' coursework as the data source. After scouring through 23 written works, it reveals the signs of a stronger version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in which students' Indonesian and local language influence how they communicate in English. The language is treated in an oral way, where it is stylized as a written transcript and sometimes not having a proper, written structure. Although students often showed struggling in delivering their ideas, it does not imply that students have lower language proficiency. Instead, it shows their limited language perceptions perceive their view of using English.

**Keywords: EFL, linguistic determinism, linguistic relativity, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis**

## INTRODUCTION

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has been a topic of extensive research and discussion in the field of the philosophy of language. The hypothesis posits that language plays a role in influencing and shaping our thoughts, perceptions, and understanding of other languages and the world (Lucy, 2001). This suggests that the structure, vocabulary, and grammatical features of a language can significantly influence how its speakers conceptualize and interpret their experiences. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has two proposals: linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism. Linguistic relativity or relativism believes that the structure of different languages constructs different realities, leading to variations in how individuals perceive and think about the world. On the contrary, linguistic determinism asserts that perceptions are strictly shaped by language. It suggests that the limitations of our thinking are intricately tied to linguistic structures and eventually make different communities possess different cognitive frameworks (Lucy, 2001, 2016; Rashid, 2013). Through these theories, Sapir and Whorf still gain controversies, stating that their theory has reductionist ways of thinking since it is restricted to an individual's experiences of an event or condition. This issue labelled the theory as having causal determinism (Shibarshina, 2014). While this hypothesis has faced criticism and its strong determinism claims have been contested, it remains a significant theoretical framework for exploring the intricate relationship between language, philosophy, and culture.

The implications of linguistic relativity and determinism exist beyond the theoretical linguistics approach. In linguistic relativity, different languages may offer distinct ways of understanding and representing reality. For example, some languages have more complex grammatical structures than others, which can make it difficult for speakers of those languages to learn languages with simpler structures (Ansorge et al., 2022). Another aspect resulting from linguistic relativity also points out that the variety of vocabularies does not reflect people's perception of the world. This means that although certain vocabulary may not exist in one language, people are certainly aware of what is meant by the ideas (Tahir & Sulaiman, 2021). These issues eventually led to the fact that diverse linguistic backgrounds

and world perceptions may lead to potential misunderstandings and miscommunications.

Meanwhile, linguistic relativity often being equalized with linguistic determinism. The belief highlights how language can influence our cognitive processes and shape our worldview. In other words, the concepts, words, and linguistic structures in a language may shape our thoughts and limit our understanding within the confines of that language (Lucy, 2001). However, this theory may have far-reaching consequences for how we perceive and interpret the world around us, influencing our cultural norms, beliefs, and behaviors. For example, conceptualization of time; in which different cultures have various spatial metaphors to express time. In Indonesia, which is a Muslim-majority country, prayer times are used as a time marker on a conversational basis. The same example may also happen in Eastern countries that are heavily influenced by their major religion. This is not the case for Western countries, which often used time as the legitimate time marker in any conversation. Considering this, understanding the implications of linguistic relativity and determinism in real-life contexts is crucial for promoting effective cross-cultural communication and fostering cultural sensitivity.

Considering its heavy connection to language and culture, it also has certain influences on the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and second language acquisition (SLA). In this case, language learning and proficiency development are complex processes that can be influenced by various factors; one of them is the relationship between language and cognition. Previous hypothesis suggests that learners' native language structures and conceptual frameworks can significantly impact their acquisition of a second language, depending on how strong or weak is their influence (Imai et al., 2016; Tahir & Sulaiman, 2021). A stronger version of the Sapir-Whorf theory holds an assumption that the structure of one's native language may greatly influence or entirely determine the person's worldview that they acquire while learning that language. Weak theories, however, postulate that structural differences between linguistic systems are generally accompanied by unspecified types of nonverbal cognition differences in native speakers of the two languages. Another assumption brought by this theory is learners may initially struggle with grasping new linguistic concepts and categories. This is due to differences in their native language's structure and vocabulary. This requires learners to

push their cognitive processes, affecting their language comprehension and proficiency.

In retrospect, understanding the implications of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in EFL/SLA can inform language teaching methodologies and strategies. Language instructors can design instructional materials and activities on the basis of this philosophical approach. By acknowledging the relativistic and deterministic nature of language and culture, teachers may address the cognitive challenges that learners may face when acquiring a new language through these instructional strategies or materials (Lucy, 2016; Rashid, 2013; Tahir & Sulaiman, 2021). As an illustration, teachers who have a better understanding of the language and cultural backgrounds of their students may know how to interact appropriately and effectively with them. They know that given their background, there will be specific features in their language use that influence their participation or results in the learning process. This eventually will lead to a more effective, yet nuanced language learning experience.

While the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis has received significant attention in the field of linguistics, there remains a research gap concerning its exploration within the context of English language learning, particularly in EFL classrooms. Limited studies have specifically examined the relationship between language, cognition, and language proficiency development in EFL, most of which are focusing on classrooms outside of Indonesia (Rashid, 2013; Tahir & Sulaiman, 2021; Yang & Shan, 2022). This research mainly discusses that between English and other languages, there are always gaps existing in the students' knowledge of the respective language and culture. This may show from the dictions and structures of students' English utterances, which contain informal idiosyncrasies, code-switching, code-mixing, and grammatical structures that are adapted from students' native language. It also covers the fact that there are moral and cultural values embedded in their statement. One prominent case, for example, presents that Pakistani students have sanctity over family relations, celebrations, and social relationships. There is also a perception coming from students that the Urdu language is incredibly indirect and polite, while also involving exaggerated expressions (Rashid, 2013).

In contrast, the situation in Indonesia presents a different case. To date, the available research on the implications of the Sapir-Whorf theory in the Indonesian EFL context remains limited.

Specifically, the researcher has come across only one study that explores the issue. Nonetheless, the research provides valuable insights into Sapir-Whorf theory implications in the Indonesian context. To begin with, the similarities between Indonesian students exist with other students from different countries; these students often allow their native language and cultural perceptions to affect their English proficiency and understanding. Things get different as this research also discusses Indonesian's lower proficiency in English. This often makes them not understand contextualized text provided in textbooks or material, such as using Western stories including Cinderella. The issues often make teaching material inserting Indonesian context into the material, such as using Timun Mas instead of Cinderella in the narrative text discussion. Inserting local contexts into material will give students new knowledge and vocabulary, creating an unconscious habit to follow English's linguistic patterns and cultural aspects (Maulana, 2020).

Due to the limited number of research in Indonesia, there is an urgency in bridging the existing gap between Sapir-Whorf theories in the Indonesian EFL context. Therefore, this research is investigating the implications of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis that is applied or reflected in the EFL classroom. The primary objective is to explore how language and culture influence the students' cognitive processes and language proficiency development of EFL learners. It is expected that the findings will contribute to the discussion of the Sapir-Whorf theory's implications in EFL classrooms, specifically in its teaching materials and pedagogical practices.

## METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology, which aims to describe a phenomenon and the reason that causes it (Given, 2008). The research focuses on a boarding public school located in South Kalimantan and specifically targets tenth-grade students as its subjects. The reason behind this decision is due to the school's reputation as a bilingual school, in which they are using English as the second language for the teaching and learning process. This leads to the assumption made by the school that the students possess an intermediate level of English proficiency, ranging from B1 to B2 under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) standards.

However, this paper is based merely on document analysis, all of which is gained from the fieldwork. The documents used for this research are students' course works. The reason this decision is being taken is due to the limited time of the research and the circumstance that students were taking their end-semester assessment during the research period. This hinders the possibility of having an observation in the classroom. However, the course works are a credible resource for the research, as it provides variations of students' linguistic styles— an aspect that mirrors their performances in the classroom. These coursework materials take the form of recount texts, which are produced as part of the lesson assessments.

The data collection process gained 23 students' written works, specifically their recount text describing their parents' or relatives' life event history. As mentioned earlier, this task that resulted in this written work instructs students to incorporate time markers into their writing. Time markers, in this case, involve the date and years of events, alongside time-marking vocabularies (i.e., during, while, at that time, in, and on). However, time markers can be a somewhat unfamiliar concept for students, as English has differing perceptions of time markers with Indonesian and other languages. For example, there are various concepts of temporal adverbial, which can be a complicated concept for intermediate language learners (Marliah, 2006). This is one of the aspects that sparks discussion on how the task may show implications of Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis in students' works.

The collected data is subjected to thematic analysis, a well-established approach in qualitative research. This approach enables the researcher to delve deeply into the data, identify recurrent themes, and discern underlying patterns within students' coursework (Guest et al., 2011). Through this approach, the researcher can uncover insights into the implications of language use and its relationship to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis as the theoretical foundation. This approach to data analysis also allows the researcher to understand the complex dynamics between language, culture, and thought— all of which may show in the classroom process and results.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To gain deeper insights into the discussion, this study focuses on examining notable samples

among the students' works, specifically, those produced by students with higher language proficiency and those with lower language proficiency. Analysing these contrasting cases eventually gives some confirmations on the implications resulting from the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. In order to do this, the aspects that will be examined further including language-specific concepts— especially vocabulary and time markers, grammatical structures, stylistic choices, cultural references, and possible misuse of pronouns and metaphorical phrases.

Generally, the findings support the presence of a stronger version of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, in which the structure and characteristics of students' primary languages, which are Indonesian and local language, exert a significant influence on their perceptions of using English. This means that students' language usage, including structures, word choices, and communication styles, demonstrates the hypothesis suggested by Sapir and Whorf. In this case, they often employ structures and patterns that align with the grammatical rules and norms of Bahasa Indonesia, indicating the transfer of linguistic and cognitive language habits from their native language to English. The issues are explained further in the sub-sections below.

### 1. Language-specific Concepts

The students participating in the study encountered numerous challenges writing their recount text, particularly in expressing localized contexts that are considered "untranslatable" in English. These localized contexts encompass specific cultural concepts, idiomatic expressions, and nuanced meanings that are deeply rooted in the students' cultural backgrounds. Despite the existence of equivalent phrases in English, the students, who are speculated for having an intermediate level of language proficiency, have limited awareness of such expressions. As a result, they struggled to convey their intended meanings accurately, leading to the production of sentences or phrases that deviated from standard English. Below, a sample of sentences taken from their works illustrates this issue:

*"[...] At the age of 21, my mother decided to go abroad to her first brother's place in Bandung." – L*

*"After graduating from high school, my father migrated to Central*

*Kalimantan to study at the University of Palangkaraya [...] - R*

The two sentences above are used by two separate students to describe a similar event that both respective parents experience: all of them are moving from one region into another. In Indonesian, "*transmigran*" and "*perantauan*" are the original word that the students want to use, depending on the context. For intermediate-level students, both of the words would be quite hard to the translated and written forms in English, as both Indonesian words have significant cultural concepts latched to them. "*Transmigran*" means someone who is moving from a densely populated area to the landless one, while "*perantauan*" has a similar concept to "diaspora"— someone who is moving to a different region due to many aspects. Simpler words such as "migrate" and "move" would be a better option to be used by students. Instead, the students use "go abroad" and "migrated," which are jarring selections of words, considering the strict contexts of those sentences.

The deviation of translating a concept between students' Indonesian and local language knowledge with English confirms the previous hypothesis presented for the Sapir-Whorf theory. As students have a limited understanding of the culture confined to both Indonesian and English, it makes them believe that certain vocabulary may not exist in one language, despite the existence of its idea universally (Lucy, 2016; Tahir & Sulaiman, 2021).

## 2. Grammatical and Stylistic Approach to Writing

The examination of students' coursework reveals that students' native languages affect their grammatical structure and stylistic approach to their writing. In this case, students made grammatical and spelling mistakes, along with questionable usage of time markers. In addition, there is also a tendency for students for writing in the oral form of English. The illustrations are as the following:

*"Well, now I am gonna tell you a story. It's quiet interesting, and maybe boring too, I don't know." – L*

*"My father went to school for 12 years, he attended elementary and middle school in his hometown,*

*while in high school he went to school in the Padang." – R*

*"What makes he be my inspiring figure because my father is from remote village [...]" – N*

Each sentence presented above has its own significant grammatical and spelling mistakes. The first sentence use "quiet" instead of "quiet," while combining both informal and formal writing forms. The second sentence, however, has issues with punctuation and the usage of "while" as transitional time markers. Though the two sentences do not possess any significant grammatical mistakes, these remain to show errors as they are trying to tell their stories in an oral storytelling manner-- a conclusion that is similar to the previous one. However, it is also likely that the phrasal of the sentences is based on Indonesian's subject-verb-object (SVO) structure, rather than English's structural tenses.

Another interesting aspect that needs to be brought up comes from the third sentence as well, where "he" is used as a pronoun instead of "him." Clearly, if it is translated into Indonesian, what the writer meant was "dia," meant as a neutral pronoun. Since Indonesian do not have a gendered pronoun, the concept of using "he" or "him" may be confusing for language learners. This shows how the linguistic and cultural values that Indonesia held on neutral pronouns led to students' confusion about English pronoun concepts.

A final intriguing observation points to be discussed is how students tend to treat English as an "oral"-like language. This perception implies that the students predominantly viewed English as a spoken language, prioritizing spoken communication over written expression. As a context, Indonesia, alongside its provinces, are built with a long history of oral tradition; in which stories and recollection of events are told from one generation to others orally. It is likely due to this factor, students' language acquisition experiences and exposure are predominantly involving oral interactions, such as conversational activities and listening exercises. As a result, their secondary language usage exhibited characteristics typically associated with oral communication, such as a focus on conversational conventions (the usage of fillers), colloquial language ("*I am gonna tell you*"), and less emphasis on formal written conventions. This further confirms that EFL learners adapt their

native languages' grammatical and styles to their second language learning (Rashid, 2013).

Despite the presence of grammatical and spelling errors in the students' works, no significant instances of code-switching or code-mixing were observed, as Rashid (2013) suggests these most likely show up in students' performance. However, this absence would make sense as these works are in the written form, while code-switching more often appears in contact linguistics (Davies & Elder, 2004). This suggests that while the students may have encountered challenges with certain grammatical aspects of English, they maintained a certain level of linguistic separation between English and their native language. Specifically, they made conscious efforts to maintain distinct linguistic codes when using English. In short, it suggests that while linguistic determinism may be evident in certain aspects of the students' grammatical usage and stylistic approach, they demonstrated an understanding of the importance of maintaining boundaries between their native language and English.

### 3. Cultural References

In the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, cultural background and references play a huge role in influencing one's language and worldview. It may come from the usage of certain phrases in certain situations or contexts. It may also appear from the language users' attitudes on beliefs, experiences, and societal norms. Interestingly, this case appears as well in one of the students' works, which is presented below:

*"My grandmother has 9 children with 6 sons and 3 daughters. His first son, my uncle, was born in 1951 when he was 19 years old. My grandmother continued to get pregnant and give birth until 1979."*  
– T

Structurally, the final statement can stir some confusion among the readers. Would this statement mean that the grandmother always expecting babies from a certain period until 1979? What would be the span of pregnancy between each child during that period? Although the idea is unclearly delivered in this passage, it makes sense in the cultural context of Indonesia. Earlier, the student states in their work that marriage at early ages or in the teenage years is quite common in Indonesia. It even still quite common in the current

age, as the minimum age for females in Indonesia is 19 years old (UNESCO, 2019).

This issue further signifies that there is a relativistic nature hiding in the students' language usage, as their cultural backgrounds significantly influenced their English language expressions. The student's cultural beliefs, values, and experiences shaped their choice of words to express a concept— in this case, child or teenage marriages— that is deeply rooted in Indonesian sociocultural aspects. It is quite tricky for high school students to describe such a concept as they have not been exposed to direct equivalents in English. Consequently, the students resorted to using words or phrases that reflected their cultural perspective, which could be seen as a manifestation of linguistic relativity.

### 4. Implications of Theories in EFL

As the researcher examines students' works, it is clear that students are struggling to express their ideas— which mainly come from Indonesian and localized contexts— in English. At the end of their assignment, one of the students wrote, "I have no more ideas to tell," revealing that writing recount texts are challenging task to do. This highlights the challenges they face in adapting their cultural and linguistic background to the English language. It is through these instances that linguistic relativity becomes evident, as their inability to translate certain cultural concepts directly affects their writing performance, or rather, most of their performance in the EFL classroom.

Regardless, it is essential to note that while linguistic relativity was not prevalent in all aspects of students' English skills, signs of linguistic determinism also emerged in specific areas. For instance, the students encountered difficulties in translating specific concepts from their native language into English, leading to the use of words that deviated from their actual meanings. As a result, these words took on new meanings within the English context, reflecting the influence of their native language and cultural background. This deterministic nature is evident in the students' reinterpretation of English vocabulary to align with their existing perceptions.

Students' confusion regarding the use of tenses and prepositions also aligns with theories that suggest the deterministic nature of language (Lucy, 2016; Rashid, 2013). This confusion can be attributed to the different grammatical structures and usage patterns between Indonesian and

English. The almost non-existence aspect of tenses in Indonesian and local languages continues to influence their understanding and application of English grammatical rules, resulting in errors and inconsistencies. While students with higher English proficiency levels exhibited a higher adherence to English linguistic patterns in their written works, the majority of the works produced by the class displayed a noticeable influence of Indonesian linguistic patterns. An explanation for this is that students often rely on their first language as a framework when producing English texts, unintentionally transferring Indonesian structures into their English writing. In particular, the absence of some grammatical structures in Indonesian grammatical rules may lead students to overlook or misuse these elements in English, especially when they lack sufficient exposure or practice with standard English forms.

The implications of these findings are significant for language teachers. Teachers need to recognize that the influence of the students' native language and culture on their perception of English is not a fatal flaw or indicative of a lack of language proficiency. Instead, it reflects the linguistic characteristics that have blended due to the diverse nature of languages. Understanding this influence, teachers should dedicate time and effort to guiding students in the learning process, while also helping them develop a clear separation between their native language and English. To do this effectively at the high school level, teachers can explicitly highlight the key differences between Indonesian and English structures. They can also design writing and speaking activities that focus on English-specific expressions, encourage peer editing to spot language transfer errors, and provide feedback that explains why certain constructions are incorrect. Using examples from students' own writing can also foster awareness and gradual adjustment. Such strategies can also help students consciously distinguish between language systems, rather than defaulting to patterns from their first language.

## CONCLUSION

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis has significantly influenced our understanding of how one's native language structure can greatly impact or even determine their worldview as one learns the language. This has implications not only for language and culture but also for language education-- specifically EFL. The results presented

a discussion on how linguistic relativity and determinism in language influence students' perceptions of the English language and its cultural context. These influences are reflected in unique cases where students express their ideas. They may deviate from the intended meanings due to localized contexts, adopt oral language styles in their writing, make grammatical errors influenced by their native language, and incorporate cultural references into their works. Although students often face challenges and confusion when expressing their ideas, it does not necessarily indicate a lower level of language proficiency.

Instead, it highlights their limited language perceptions and how they apply them in using English. It is therefore crucial for teachers to understand these difficulties while maintaining a clear distinction between English and the students' native language.

While the discussion of the Sapir-Whorf implications in EFL classrooms is limited due to the time constraints and the unavailability of classroom observation, it sheds light on students' cultural and language influences in EFL and SLA. Further research in the field could usefully explore how the existing implications may be manifested in EFL aspects. This would include the implications in the classroom interactions, both done by students with their peers or between the teacher and their students.

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