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Cross-linguistic Influence in Lexical Acquisition among Third Language (Malay) Beginners in China

Yao Deng

[1]Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, [2]College of Foreign Studies, Guangxi Normal University

Email: gs65085@student.upm.edu.my

Salina Binti Husain

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Corresponding Author Email: linahusain@upm.edu.my

Ramiza Haji Darmi

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Email: ramiza@upm.edu.my

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Abstract

In China, the main groups participating in third language acquisition (TLA) include university students majoring in English and those majoring in less commonly taught languages (LCTLs). When they learn a third language (L3), they are invariably influenced by their previously acquired first language (L1) and second language (L2). Most Chinese learners of Malay have backgrounds in Chinese as their L1 and English as their L2. This study aims to explore the main factors triggering cross-linguistic influence (CLI) in the process of Malay lexical acquisition by Chinese students. A qualitative research design was adopted in this study, with purposive sampling selecting 23 second semester Malay majors from a university in province of Guangxi, China as participants. Their language learning sequence is: Chinese (L1) → English (L2) → Malay (L3), with both English and Malay learned through full-time formal education in school. The research instruments included semi-structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that psychological language distance is the main factor triggering cross-linguistic influence in the process of Malay lexical acquisition among Chinese students. The findings of this study can provide teaching insights for Malay language instructors, aiming to enhance the efficiency of students' Malay lexical acquisition.

Keywords: Malay, Lexical, Cross-Linguistic Influence, Third Language Acquistion (TLA)

Theoretical Foundations of CLI in L3 Acquisition

Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) is a critical concept in second language acquisition (SLA) and third language acquisition (TLA), which encompasses various factors such as language distance, second language proficiency, and the status of prior languages in the multilingual mind. Several theoretical models underpin the study of CLI in L3 lexical acquisition.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Lado, 1957) suggests that similarities and differences between languages result in positive or negative transfer effects. Meanwhile, the Typological Primacy Model (Rothman, 2010) argues that learners' perceived linguistic similarity plays a crucial role in determining the source of CLI. Additionally, the L2 Status Factor Hypothesis (Williams & Hammarberg, 1998; Bardel & Falk, 2007) proposes that L2 serves as the default provider for L3 acquisition, particularly in lexical retrieval.

The Psychotypological Distance Hypothesis (Kellerman, 1983) distinguishes between objective linguistic distance and subjective perceived language distance, emphasizing that learners' perceptions can influence CLI more than actual linguistic differences. De Angelis (2007) and Cenoz (2017) also highlight that the psychological distance between L1, L2, and L3 significantly impacts transfer patterns in L3 acquisition. These models collectively inform the present study by explaining why learners may rely on different previously acquired languages when acquiring L3 vocabulary.

This study examines CLI in the context of Chinese (L1), English (L2), and Malay (L3), focusing on three key factors: language distance, L2 status, and language proficiency.

Introduction

Research in third language acquisition (TLA) emerged in the 1980s, building on studies of bilingualism and second language acquisition, and developed through transfer theory. It has become one of the hot topics in contemporary linguistic research, with CLI being a significant aspect. Malay is considered a less commonly taught language (LCTL) in China, and currently, there are 12 universities offering Malay language majors, with approximately 350 graduates each year (Sichuan International Studies University Admissions and Employment Office, 2024). Previous scholars have focused on second language acquisition research regarding Chinese students learning Malay. However, in China, Malay language majors in universities start learning Malay from a zero foundation, with transfer effects not only from their L1 (Chinese) but also from other background languages such as English. According to the Chinese primary school curriculum, English has been a compulsory subject since the third grade since 2003 (Qi, 2016). Therefore, students majoring in Malay in Chinese universities possess both Chinese and English language backgrounds, which inevitably influence cross-linguistic transfer during Malay acquisition.

Thus, it is necessary to explore CLI in Malay lexical acquisition from a TLA perspective, rather than solely from a second language acquisition (SLA) perspective. Cenoz (2017) regards that CLI in TLA is evidently more complex than in SLA, involving transfer effects from both the L1 and the L2 to the L3. Therefore, this paper attempts to study Malay lexical acquisition from the perspective of TLA, exploring the CLI of Chinese (L1) and English (L2) on Chinese students majoring in Malay language.

Literature Review

Factors Affecting CLI in L3 Lexical Acquistion

CLI is an important term in SLA and TLA, which include many influence factors such as language distance, second language proficiency in TLA. Learners experience CLI from all previously acquired languages in the process of TLA, but the roles of the L1 and L2 differ in the comprehension and production of the L3 (Ringbom, 2007; Simon & Leuschner, 2010). The L1 functions as an external tool, primarily affecting conversational pragmatic transfer, supporting multilingual interaction, and influencing L3 pronunciation over the long term. The L2, as an external supplier, acts as the default provider for new words in the L3, with previously acquired L2 knowledge exerting significant control in L3 verbal behavior (Williams & Hammarberg, 1998).“The factors of CLI in the process of TLA are complicated, which can be classified into language factors and learner factors.”(Xu & Yang, 2019) In this paper, three language factors will be elaborated respectively, which are language distance, L2 status and language proficiency.

Psychological Distance

Language distance is widely recognized as a significant factor in TLA, particularly in determining the similarity of language types. It encompasses both objective language distance and psychotypological distance (Kellerman, 1983). Early contrastive analysis hypotheses emphasized the importance of linguistic similarity between L1 and L2, along with the psychological distance involved in language learning. During this period, language distance was primarily considered within the framework of language typology, with a greater focus on objective language distance as defined by linguists (De Angelis, 2007). However, recent research has increasingly revealed that language distance not only includes objective linguistic differences but also involves the subjective perception of language distance by learners (De Angelis, 2007). This indicates that the closer learners perceive the target language to their known languages, the more likely they are to rely on that language to influence their acquisition of the target language.

Psychotypological distance, or perceived language distance, is a crucial concept in TLA research. It describes the learner's subjective perception of the similarity or difference between their known languages (L1 and L2) and the target language (L3). This perception can significantly impact the degree of CLI and directly affect the ease or difficulty of acquiring a new language. Psychotypological distance is grounded in learners’ subjective judgments of language similarity, which often diverge from objective linguistic assessments. Studies have shown that learners tend to rely on their perceived language distance when transferring knowledge from L1 or L2 to L3 (Rothman, González, & Puig-Mayenco, 2021). Although objective language distance and psychotypological distance often align, research suggests that psychotypological distance often exerts a more significant and complex influence on language learning (Kellerman, 1983; Hammarberg, 2009). Specifically, learners may not always accurately perceive similarities between objectively similar languages; conversely, even when two languages are objectively distant, learners may still perceive similarities based on certain features.

Cenoz (2001) highlighted this phenomenon in her study of children who speak Basque and/or Spanish as their native languages while acquiring English as an L3. She concluded that beyond the objective linguistic distance, cross-linguistic influence patterns are closely related

to learners' psychotypological distance. She found that older students, due to higher metalinguistic awareness, were better able to perceive the lower relatedness between Basque and English, regardless of whether Basque was their L1 or L2.

For Chinese students acquiring L3 vocabulary, the significant language distance between their L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English) means that when the distance between L2 (English) and L3 (Malay) is relatively closer, students are more likely to be influenced by their L2 when learning L3 vocabulary (Chen & Zhang, 2019). Specifically, Chinese and Malay have considerable linguistic distance in terms of grammatical structure, vocabulary systems, and phonological aspects. In contrast, English and Malay are relatively closer in language distance, with notable similarities in vocabulary and writing systems, despite significant differences in grammar and pronunciation. These similarities are evident in lexical borrowing, such as "*电脑*" (*dian nao*, L1 Chinese, meaning "computer"), "computer" (L2 English), and "*komputer*" (L3 Malay, meaning "computer"). In this context, learners acquiring Malay vocabulary may be more inclined to rely on their L2 (English) lexical knowledge, especially when the acquisition status of L2 and L3 is similar, leading to more pronounced cross-linguistic influence.

By delving deeper into the multidimensional effects of language distance, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of its complex impact on third language acquisition, particularly in the area of vocabulary learning. Psychotypological distance clearly emerges as a critical variable in cross-linguistic influence, shaping the trajectory of TLA in significant ways.

L2 Status Factor

According to Williams and Hammarberg (1998) , Bardel and Falk (2007), the "L2 status factor" or "foreign language effect" refers to the significant influence of a previously learned L2 during the initial stages of L3 acquisition. This influence not only affects L3 lexical acquisition but can also interfere with positive transfer from L1 to L3. This term was first introduced by Williams and Hammarberg (1998). Hammarberg (2001) further explained that learners often suppress L1 transfer and rely on L2 because they do not consider L1 a foreign language when approaching L3.

There is some debate among researchers regarding the role of language distance and L2 status in CLI in TLA, with empirical studies showing mixed results (Cenoz, 2001; Llama, Cardoso & Collins, 2009). Additionally, L3 learners tend to transfer recently learned or frequently used non-native languages during target language production, as these languages are more activated and easier to retrieve.

L2 status can enhance or impede L3 lexical acquisition through CLI. Factors such as typological similarity, proficiency in L2, and the context of L2 learning affect how L2 knowledge is transferred to L3 (Rothman et al., 2021). De Angelis (2020) studied Spanish speakers learning English (L2) and German (L3). The research found significant positive transfer from English to German, particularly in vocabulary acquisition. The learners used English cognates and similar grammatical structures to aid their German learning.Li and Liu (2022) investigated Chinese speakers learning English (L2) and Spanish (L3). The study highlighted both positive and negative transfer effects, with English aiding in the acquisition of Spanish vocabulary through shared lexical items and phonological patterns, while also causing interference in cases of false cognates.

In this study, the learners' Chinese (L1), English (L2), and Malay (L3) belong to different language families: Chinese is part of the Sino-Tibetan language family, English belongs to the Indo-European language family, and Malay is classified under the Austronesian language family. From the perspective of vocabulary and word formation, these three languages exhibit significant differences. Malay has relatively simple word forms, primarily using affixes (such as prefixes and suffixes) to create different meanings, but it lacks the complex inflectional changes found in Indo-European languages. English vocabulary, on the other hand, shows complex inflectional variations, including verb conjugations, noun plurals, and adjective comparatives. In contrast, Chinese word forms remain unchanged, with no tense, number, or gender changes, relying mainly on word order and context to convey information about time and quantity.

In summary, from the perspective of language types, the linguistic distance between Chinese, English, and Malay is relatively large. Compared with previous studies focusing on Indo-European languages with closer language distances, whether the L2 status factor will influence L3 acquisition in this study requires further investigation and validation.

Language Proficiency

Language proficiency is a critical factor influencing lexical acquisition, which is the process of learning and retaining vocabulary in a new language. Proficiency in the L1 and L2 can significantly affect the acquisition of L3.

In the factors influencing transfer in TLA, language proficiency can be divided into target language proficiency and source language proficiency. Regarding target language proficiency, many scholars suggest that transfer is more likely to occur at the beginner level. Singleton (1987) pointed out that during this period, learners lack sufficient knowledge of the target language and need to fill gaps with related knowledge (Gu, 2011). However, this does not mean that transfer does not occur at advanced levels.

As for source language proficiency, no empirical studies have accurately tested this variable so far (Gu, 2011). Tremblay (2006) studied English (L1)-French (L2)-German (L3) learners and examined the influence of L2 proficiency and L2 contact on L3 production. The results showed that higher L2 proficiency and more L2 contact increased the transfer of L2 information to L3 (Im, 2015). Additionally, if L2 proficiency is below a certain level, the influence of L2 on L3 decreases. Therefore, sufficient L2 proficiency is required for transfer to occur.

Conversely, Dewaele (1998) pointed out that, at least in the early stages of L3 learning, target language proficiency is more important than formal similarity. Higher proficiency levels in L1 and L2 are generally associated with better vocabulary retention in L3. Proficient learners tend to have more robust cognitive and metalinguistic skills, which facilitate the acquisition and retention of new vocabulary(García-Mayo & Rothman, 2019).

For Chinese students learning Malay (L3), English (L2) proficiency may influence Malay acquisition, particularly in vocabulary learning. While English serves as the primary reference point, students with limited English proficiency may struggle to utilize positive transfer effectively, potentially leading to more errors in Malay lexical acquisition.

Lexical Transfer in TLA

Research on SLA indicates that language transfer can occur at three levels: vocabulary, phonology, and syntax. Similarly, transfer phenomena in TLA also involve these areas. Lexical transfer primarily manifests in pure code-switching, borrowing, lexical innovation, word order adjustments, and word representation (Cenoz, 2001; De Angelis, 2007; Rothman, 2013). Unlike SLA, where transfer is primarily influenced by L1, TLA is significantly affected by both L1 and L2. Factors influencing L3 lexical transfer include the psychological type of the language, the learner's proficiency in L2, and the degree of language input (Ringbom, 2001).

During L3 comprehension and production, the influence of L1 and L2 manifests in varying forms and degrees. In the early stages of TLA, learners often tend to use L2 vocabulary more frequently. When L2 influences L3, this transfer can take the form of partial or complete lexical migration from L2. As TLA progresses, the reliance on lexical forms diminishes, giving way to a more structured, meaning-based language network. Even when L2 and L3 share significant linguistic similarities, meaning-based or procedural transfer is often still rooted in L1. However, when L1 and L3 belong to entirely different language families (e.g., Chinese or Arabic learners of English as L3), the influence of L2 becomes more pronounced due to its closer connection with L3 compared to L1 (Ringbom, 1987; 2001).

Ringbom's research (1987; 2001) further distinguishes between semantic transfer and formal lexical transfer, positing that semantic transfer in TLA primarily originates from the more proficient language. Regardless of whether it is L1 or L2, if the learner's proficiency is high, the language's semantics may significantly influence cross-linguistic transfer. Building on Ringbom's classification, Lindqvist (2010; 2012) further subdivides CLI into formal CLI and meaning-based CLI (Bardel, 2015).

Lexical transfer in TLA is influenced by multiple factors, including the psychological distance between L1, L2, and L3, the proficiency levels of L1 and L2, the stage of TLA, and the learner's dominant language. For instance, Chinese students typically begin learning English from elementary school and continue through university. However, the influence of English as an L2 is often overlooked by learners who generally perceive that English does not significantly impact their Malay learning. One reason for this is that learners often underestimate their overall English proficiency, particularly in spoken communication, leading them to believe their English is insufficient to affect Malay learning. In reality, English education in China primarily focuses on grammar and vocabulary; thus, despite limited fluency in spoken English, learners typically have a relatively good grasp of basic English grammar and vocabulary. Consequently, even without learners' awareness, L2 English lexical and grammatical knowledge may still influence L3 Malay vocabulary production. Whether this effect is influenced by psychological language distance requires further research and validation.

Methodology

Design of Study

In order to implement this study, researchers have been using qualitative research. The open-ended questionnaire survey for this study was distributed during the 17th week of the second semester's Malay language major course (the second semester consists of 19 weeks). Subsequently, based on the questionnaire results, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the form of focus group interviews. This study to explore CLI in Malay lexical

Acquisition by Chinese Students. The order of language acquisition is: Chinese as the L1, English as the L2 and Malay as the L3. The research questions are as follows:

1. How is the CLI manifested in Malay lexical acquistion among Chinese students?
2. What are the main factors affecting CLI on Malay lexical acquisition?

Sampling

This study selected participants using a purposive sampling method.Due to the relatively few universities in China offering Malay language Major, and the varied levels of proficiency among Malay language learners in these universities, the situation is even more diverse among social learners. To facilitate sampling and better control for factors such as language proficiency and L2 status, the participants in this study were 23 students from the same class in the second semester of the Malay language major at the same university. These participants had undergone two semesters (approximately 12 months) of systematic Malay language learning and had no prior training in Malay language skills, they are Malay language proficiency is at the beginner level.

Instrument of Study

This study primarily collects data on the CLI of Chinese and English in the process of Malay lexical acquisition by the participants. The use of survey method using questionnaire facilitates researchers to get cooperation from respondents (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the main tools for data collection are semi-structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured questionnaire includes both closed and open-ended questions and is mainly used to gather information about the obstacles and reasons encountered by participants during the process of Malay lexical acquisition, thus revealing specific manifestations of CLI. The semi-structured interviews further explore the CLI of Chinese and English in the participants' Malay lexical acquisition process, based on the results of the questionnaire, to identify the main factors triggering cross-linguistic transfer effects.

Data Collection and Analysis

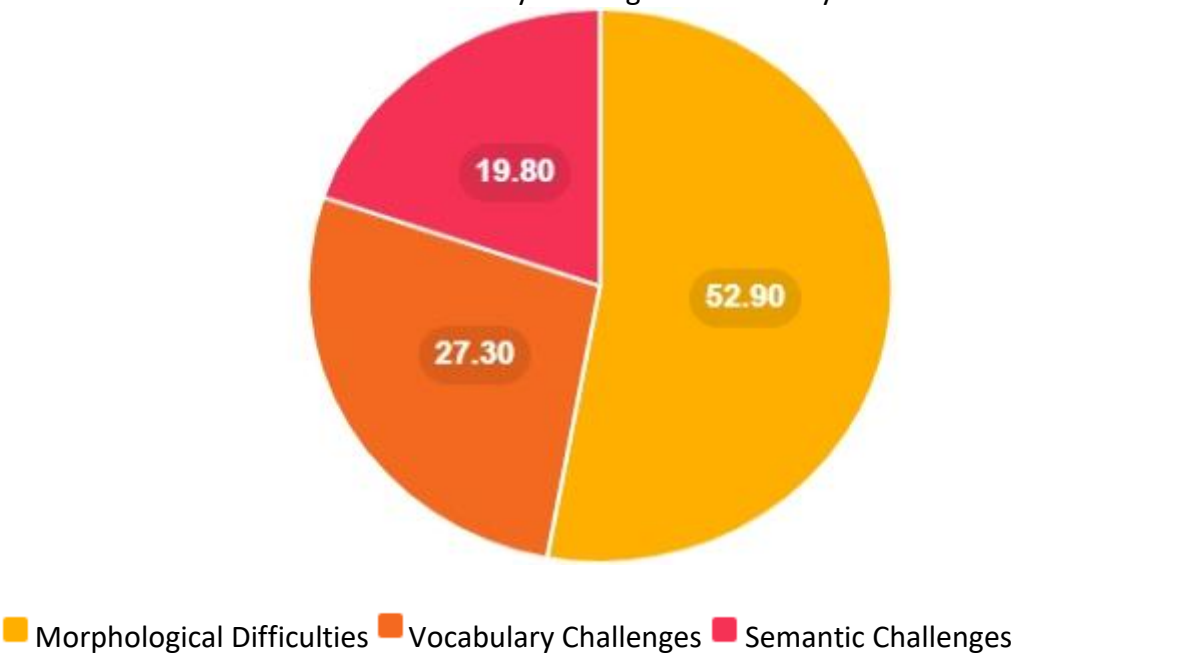
All the empirical data was collected through the research instruments introduced above. The questionnaire was sent out and completed online through “Questionnaire Star”. The language used in the questionnaire is Chinese, considering students can answer the questions in a better and more authentic way. The questionnaire was pre-tested with good validity and reliability. The Cronbach Coefficient of reliability analysis was 0.821, indicating good internal consistency of the scale. The results of validity analysis showed that the significance level (p value) was 0.000, indicating that there was a significant relationship between variables. A total of 23 questionnaires were distributed, with 21 valid responses, resulting in a response rate of 91%. Then, the responses were analyzed using content analysis.

The semi-structured interviews are conducted face to face in a conference room. The communication language is Chinese for better understanding. Each student is interviewed for about 15-20 minutes. The interview was recorded with the interviewee’s permission. The data were transcribed into words by an electronic recording pen. Then, the researcher read and analyzed the interviewees’ responses repeatedly. Finally, the results were classified and summarized according to the research questions.

Research Results and Discussion

CLI on Malay Lexical Acquisition

The qualitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed using content analysis.Here is the pie chart illustrating the difficulties faced by participants in acquiring Malay vocabulary. The chart shows the distribution of Morphological Difficulties (52.9%), Vocabulary Challenges (27.3%), and Semantic Challenges (19.8%).The basic morphological components and affixation system of Malay are relatively complex. The basic morphological components and affixation system of Malay are relatively complex. Additionally, students' difficulty in remembering Malay vocabulary is exacerbated by their inaccurate pronunciation of Malay words and the confusion between Malay and English vocabulary.



Among them, 78% of the students mentioned that some Malay words are easily confused with English words, indicating the negative transfer effect of their L2 (English), on the acquisition of Malay lexical, only 22% of the participants believed that English did not affect their Malay vocabulary acquisition. Regarding the CLI of L1 (Chinese), the questionnaire analysis revealed that 80.35% of the participants believed that Chinese did not affect their acquisition of Malay lexical, while 19.65% thought that Chinese did impact their Malay lexical acquisition. This indicates that both Chinese and English have cross-linguistic transfer effects on Malay lexical acquisition, with the CLI of the English (L2) being much greater than that of the Chinese (L1). In the process of acquiring Malay lexical, the CLI of English is dominant, and the negative transfer effect of English is greater than that of Chinese.

Regarding methods for memorizing Malay vocabulary, 61.82% of the participants used rote memorization, 75.67% relied on English, and 51.81% relied on Chinese. Since the questionnaire items were multiple-choice, this indicates that participants might use all three memorization methods simultaneously. This suggests that the acquisition of Malay lexical by the participants is influenced by both their L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English), demonstrating CLI.

The study found that there is a CLI in the process of Malay lexical acquisition. The learners' L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English), have transfer effects on the acquisition of Malay lexical. In the initial stages of TLA, due to the lack of information in the target language, the learners' already acquired first and second languages are activated and compete with each

other (Rothman, 2015). In the process of Malay lexical acquisition by beginners, the CLI of English played a dominant role, confirming Cenoz (2017) finding that the L2 serves a default supplier function in L3 lexical acquisition, while the L1 plays an instrumental role in L3 phonetic acquisition.

The Factors Affecting CLI

Among the 22 valid questionnaires collected, 13 participants (59%) reported that they tend to confuse Malay words with English words in spelling, leading to spelling errors. Since both English and Malay vocabularies use Latin letters and some Malay words are borrowed from English, having similarities in spelling and meaning (as shown in table 2), the L2 status of English in the early stages of Malay learning is more prominent, causing CLI.

Table 2
The Similarities between the English and Malay Vocabulary

Malay vocabulary	English vocabulary
Karbon	Carbon
kelas	class
gelas	glass
institut	institute
telefon	telephone
televisyen	television
mesin	machine
bank	bank
stesen	station
doktor	doctor
polis	police
universiti	university

Additionally, 41% of the questionnaires indicated that the similarity in meaning between Malay and English helps them remember Malay vocabulary. In the interviews, participants stated, “Although English words and Malay words look similar, their pronunciation is different. However, English does not interfere with the pronunciation of Malay words because Malay words have regular spelling patterns and do not require phonetic symbols for pronunciation, as the letters themselves form the word's pronunciation.”

The above analysis indicates that despite English and Malay not belonging to the same language family, the psychological distance in language triggers a CLI of English on the acquisition of English loanwords in Malay. In reality, Malay belongs to the Austronesian language family, and English belongs to the Indo-European language family, having no linguistic genetic connection. However, during the process of acquiring Malay lexical, especially the English loanwords in Malay, due to their similarity in form and meaning, learners psychologically perceive a shorter linguistic distance between English and Malay at the lexical level. Nevertheless, such CLI is limited to the acquisition of English loanwords in Malay, indicating that the cross-linguistic transfer effect of English in the learning process of Malay loanwords by Chinese students is limited in scope and thus not a universal characteristic. Regarding how Chinese influences the acquisition of Malay vocabulary, 63% of

the participants in the semi-structured interviews indicated that they do not rely on Chinese because it is not helpful due to the lack of similarity.

This shows that the similarity between English and Malay leads to the CLI of English, where the psychological distance in language similarity between English and Malay triggers cross-linguistic transfer from English, becoming the main source of multilingual CLI in Malay lexical acquisition for beginners. On the other hand, Chinese and Malay do not share similarities, hence the transfer effect on Malay lexical acquisition is minimal. In the interviews, only 37% of the participants mentioned that Chinese Pinyin and Malay word pronunciation have similarities and can be helpful, but this situation is limited to some Chinese loanwords in Malay, as shown in table 3 ：

Table 3
The similarity between Malay and Chinese Pinyin

Malay	Chinese Pinyin	Chinese
mihun	*Mi fen*	*米粉*
sampan	*San ban*	*舢板*
cawan	*Cha wan*	*茶碗*
Pau	*Bao zi*	*包子*

This indicates that the positive transfer effect of Chinese on the acquisition of Malay loanwords is based on the similarity in pronunciation and spelling to Chinese Pinyin, rather than on genetic relationships between Chinese and Malay, as Chinese and Malay do not belong to the same language family. This similarity in pronunciation and spelling is perceived psychologically by the subjects, meaning that the psychological distance in language has triggered CLI of Chinese on the acquisition of Malay loanwords.

In summary，59% of participants confused Malay words with English words in spelling, leading to errors. This suggests that English plays a dominant role in CLI due to orthographic and lexical similarities between English and Malay. 41% of participants reported that Malay-English vocabulary similarities facilitated memorization but also led to interference. Only 37% of participants believed that Chinese Pinyin and Malay pronunciation share enough similarities to aid learning, highlighting the impact of psychotypological distance. These findings align with the L2 Status Factor Hypothesis, further supporting the view that L2 (English) is the primary source of cross-linguistic influence in L3 (Malay) lexical acquisition. The role of psychological distance in CLI is evident, reinforcing theories proposed by De Angelis (2007) and Kellerman (1983).

Conclusion

This study's findings theoretically supplement and refine the CLI theory of L3 acquisition, demonstrating that when the L1, L2 , and L3 belong to different language families, the CLI of L1 and L2 is limited and not universal. Additionally, for beginner learners of an L3, due to their low proficiency in the L3 and not high proficiency in the L2, the psychological distance in language is more likely to trigger CLI than other factors.

Furthermore, the findings of this study have practical implications for the teaching of Malay vocabulary. For teaching Malay vocabulary to Chinese students, it is essential to fully consider the CLI of their L1 (Chinese) and L2 (English), adopting appropriate teaching strategies to improve teaching effectiveness. In the initial stage of Malay learning, it is beneficial to leverage students' background knowledge, acquisition experiences, and learning strategies from their L1 and L2 to reasonably utilize positive transfer and effectively reduce negative transfer.

This study preliminarily explores Malay lexical acquisition from a L3 perspective; further in-depth research is needed on the various aspects of CLI in Malay lexical acquisition, such as pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and the pragmatic and cultural meanings of words. Moreover, this study mainly employed qualitative research methods. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research, to further reveal the nature of CLI in Malay lexical acquisition.

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