



## Sentence structures of Indonesian and Tetun: a review in the context of BIPA in Timor Leste

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze the comparative sentence structures of Indonesian (BI) and Tetun, and their implications for teaching Indonesian for Foreign Speakers (BIPA) in Timor Leste. This qualitative study utilizes a contrastive analysis method, with data consisting of sentence structures from both languages. The results show significant differences, particularly in the word order of possessive noun phrases and the use of grammatical particles. These differences have the potential to cause negative interference, which is a major source of difficulty for BIPA learners who are native Tetun speakers. The similarity in basic sentence patterns, such as the S-P-O structure, can facilitate the learning process. This research provides practical recommendations for BIPA instructors to develop teaching modules that focus on these areas of difficulty to enhance teaching effectiveness.



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## INTRODUCTION

Indonesian plays a crucial role in Timor Leste, both historically and functionally. As one of the working languages, Indonesian is widely used in government administration, education, media, and commercial activities (Febriana et al., 2024; Sahril et al., 2019). Proficiency in Indonesian enables the people of Timor Leste to access higher education, broaden employment opportunities, and participate more actively in regional and international communication, particularly within Southeast Asia (De Jesus Lic & CSH, 2025). Consequently, Indonesian continues to function not only as a means of communication but also as a strategic linguistic resource in the socio-educational landscape of Timor Leste. In the educational domain, Indonesian is taught as a foreign language through BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) programs. However, the effectiveness of BIPA instruction is closely related to learners' linguistic backgrounds, especially their first language (L1), which significantly influences the process of second language acquisition (Fadhilasari et al., 2023). In Timor Leste, Tetun serves as the national and most widely spoken language, making it the primary linguistic reference for learners when acquiring Indonesian as a second language (Narawaty, 2023; Newman, 2021).

In second language acquisition, learners frequently transfer linguistic features from their mother tongue into the target language. Such cross-linguistic influence often manifests in structural interference, particularly at the syntactic level (Safitri & Maharani, 2025). Among Tetun-speaking learners of Indonesian, differences in grammatical structures between the two languages frequently lead to persistent errors in sentence construction (Anuno, 2025). Learners commonly experience difficulties in forming possessive noun phrases, using prepositions accurately, and applying appropriate pronoun forms in Indonesian sentences. Empirical findings reinforce this observation. Research conducted by Soares (2025) indicates that Tetun-speaking learners encounter challenges in understanding formal sentence structures, abstract vocabulary, and academic texts in Indonesian. These findings suggest that grammatical interference from Tetun plays a substantial role in shaping learners' errors and learning obstacles, rather than reflecting mere limitations in language aptitude.

Understanding the structural relationship between Indonesian and Tetun is therefore essential for improving the quality of BIPA instruction in Timor Leste. Without a systematic analysis of how

Tetun grammatical patterns influence Indonesian sentence construction, teaching materials may fail to address learners' actual structural difficulties. This limitation risks reducing instructional effectiveness, particularly at beginner and intermediate levels where syntactic transfer is most prominent. From a pedagogical perspective, identifying specific areas of syntactic interference is crucial for designing targeted and context-sensitive teaching strategies. A contrastive linguistic approach is particularly relevant in this regard, as it enables researchers to systematically compare two language systems in order to predict potential areas of difficulty.

Previous studies related to Indonesian language use in Timor Leste have largely concentrated on sociolinguistic dynamics (Prayoga & Palupi, 2020), bilingualism (Boon et al., 2021), or curriculum and material development in BIPA programs (Soares, 2025). Other research has examined phonological challenges and vocabulary acquisition among BIPA learners (Sukma et al., 2025), as well as broader bilingual phenomena in educational contexts (Fajeri & Samsuri, 2024). While these studies provide valuable insights, they do not specifically investigate sentence-level grammatical structures through a systematic contrastive comparison between Indonesian and Tetun. In particular, in-depth analyses of syntactic constructions—such as possessive structures, grammatical particles, and basic sentence patterns—remain limited in the context of BIPA instruction for Tetun speakers.

Based on this review, a clear research gap emerges in the absence of comprehensive contrastive studies focusing on syntactic differences between Indonesian and Tetun and their direct pedagogical implications. Existing research tends to emphasize sociolinguistic conditions or general learning challenges without explicitly linking learner errors to structural differences between the two languages. The novelty of this study lies in its systematic contrastive analysis of Indonesian and Tetun sentence structures at the level of basic sentence patterns, possessive noun phrases, grammatical particles, and pronoun systems. By directly connecting structural differences to potential learning difficulties, this study provides a more precise and linguistically grounded explanation of syntactic interference experienced by Tetun-speaking BIPA learners.

Accordingly, this study aims to identify and describe the similarities and differences in basic sentence structures between Indonesian and Tetun, analyze potential syntactic interference arising from these structural differences in the context of BIPA learning, and examine the pedagogical implications of these differences for teaching Indonesian to native Tetun speakers in Timor Leste. Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich the field of comparative and applied linguistics by contributing a detailed analysis of cross-linguistic influence at the syntactic level. Practically, the findings are intended to serve as a reference for BIPA instructors and curriculum developers in Timor Leste by providing a foundation for designing teaching materials and instructional strategies that are more responsive to learners' linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, this study supports broader efforts toward inclusive and sustainable language education, which are essential for preserving linguistic diversity while strengthening national and regional communication in a multilingual context (Anuno, 2025).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach with a contrastive analysis design as proposed by Creswell & Poth (2016). The linguistic data consisted of basic declarative sentences, consisting of Indonesian and Tetun sentences, selected to represent fundamental syntactic constructions relevant to teaching BIPA at the beginner level. These sentences were selected based on their representation of core grammatical patterns, including basic Subject–Predicate–Object structures, possessive noun phrase constructions, locative or directional markers, and the use of personal pronouns in subject and object positions. The Indonesian data were obtained from standard grammar references, specifically Suparni (2024). Grammar of Standard Indonesian, as well as other authoritative Indonesian grammar textbooks to ensure the accuracy of structure and normative usage. The Tetun data were collected from linguistic literature explaining Tetun syntax and supported by examples drawn from publicly accessible Tetun materials, including government publications, educational texts, and documentation of the use of the Dili Tetun variety, with further verification through consultation with native speakers to ensure grammatical authenticity and validity. The data analysis procedure followed three interrelated stages adapted from Lan et al. (2025) such as description, comparison, and difficulty prediction. In the

description stage, basic sentence structures of Indonesian and Tetun were analyzed separately to identify their formal syntactic patterns. This was followed by a systematic comparison to determine structural similarities and differences between the two languages. Based on the identified contrasts, the final stage involved predicting potential areas of negative transfer and identifying the types of grammatical errors most likely to be produced by Tetun learners in BIPA classes. Through this procedure, this study establishes a direct link between structural contrasts and pedagogical implications for teaching Indonesian to native Tetun speakers.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the contrastive analysis conducted, several significant similarities and differences were identified between Indonesian and Tetun sentence structures. These findings are important not only from a linguistic perspective but also in terms of their direct implications for BIPA (Indonesian for Foreign Speakers) instruction for native Tetun speakers in Timor-Leste.

### Similarity in Basic Structure: A Foundation for Positive Transfer

In general, both languages share the basic Subject–Predicate–Object (S–P–O) sentence pattern.

Indonesian (BI) : *Ani membaca buku.* (Ani reads a book).

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

This similarity indicates that learners do not need to fundamentally restructure the core word order when learning Indonesian. In second language acquisition theory, this condition is known as positive transfer, where the structure of the first language (L1) supports the learning of the second language (L2). Because the order of subject, predicate, and object is relatively parallel, Tetun learners tend to understand simple declarative sentences in Indonesian more quickly. This can serve as an effective starting point in beginner-level BIPA instruction. Teachers can utilize this similarity to build learners' confidence before introducing more complex structures such as passive sentences, compound sentences, or subordinate constructions. However, although the basic structure appears similar, differences begin to emerge at the phrase level and in certain grammatical elements.

### Differences in Sentence Structure and Their Implications

#### 1. Possessive Noun Phrase Structure

One of the most prominent differences is found in possessive constructions.

##### a. Indonesian:

The possessive structure follows the pattern *Noun + possessive pronoun*. Examples: *Buku saya* (My book) and *Rumahnya* (His/Her house). In Indonesian, possession can be expressed through free pronouns (*saya, kamu, dia*) or possessive clitics (*-ku, -mu, -nya*).

##### b. Tetun:

The possessive structure often follows the pattern *Noun + possessive pronoun + possessive particle*. Example: *Livru ha'u nian* (My book) The particle *nian* functions as an explicit possessive marker. Structurally, this construction is longer and contains an additional element that does not exist in Indonesian.

#### 2. Pedagogical Implications

Because Tetun regularly uses a possessive particle, learners tend to transfer this pattern into Indonesian. As a result, constructions such as:

a. *Buku saya punya*

b. *Rumah dia punya*

This phenomenon demonstrates negative transfer or structural interference. The error arises not from misunderstanding meaning, but from differences in syntactic systems. In the BIPA context, teachers should:

- a. Provide specific exercises on possessive noun phrases.
- b. Explicitly explain that Indonesian does not require an additional possessive particle like *nian*.
- c. Directly compare the two structures to raise learners' metalinguistic awareness.

### Use of Grammatical Particles

Another difference lies in the use of grammatical particles.

- a. In Tetun, particles such as *nian* and *ba/bá* serve clear grammatical functions, such as marking possession or direction. Example: *Ha'u bá Dili*. (I go to Dili.)
- b. In Indonesian, direction is expressed through prepositions such as *ke*. Example: *Saya pergi ke Dili*. (I go to Dili). Indonesian employs a more explicit and fixed prepositional system, whereas Tetun often integrates particles directly into the sentence structure without an exact equivalent preposition.

### Implications

Since Tetun does not use a prepositional system fully parallel to Indonesian *ke*, learners may experience difficulty with:

- a. Directional prepositions (*ke, dari, kepada*)
- b. Locative prepositions (*di*)

Common errors include:

- a. Omission of prepositions (*Saya pergi Dili*)
- b. Incorrect use of prepositions

This suggests that prepositions should be taught contextually, through communicative and situational practice.

### Use of Pronouns

Lexically, the two languages use different pronoun forms.

Indonesian : First-person singular: *saya, aku*

Tetun : First-person singular: *ha'u*

Although this difference appears minor, pronoun usage errors frequently occur at the beginner level, especially in:

- a. Distinguishing between *saya* and *aku* according to formal and informal contexts
- b. Using possessive clitics (*-ku, -mu, -nya*)

Tetun does not have a possessive clitic system identical to Indonesian. Therefore, learners must understand that Indonesian distinguishes between free and bound forms. Pedagogically, teaching pronouns in BIPA should not only present semantic equivalents but also explain:

- a. Levels of formality
- b. Syntactic functions
- c. The difference between free and bound forms

### Synthesis of the Discussion

Overall, the analysis shows that:

- a. The shared S–P–O basic structure provides a strong linguistic foundation for Tetun learners studying Indonesian.
- b. The primary differences lie in: Possessive phrase structure, Use of particles, Prepositional system and Pronoun system

- c. Most learner errors stem from first-language structural transfer rather than from misunderstanding meaning.

This study concludes that there are significant differences in several aspects of sentence structure between Indonesian and Tetun, particularly in the word order of possessive noun phrases and the use of grammatical particles. These differences have the potential to cause negative interference, which may become a major source of difficulty for BIPA learners from Timor-Leste. On the other hand, similarities in the basic S–P–O (Subject–Predicate–Object) sentence pattern can serve as a positive foundation for the learning process. These findings indicate that such structural differences constitute important areas requiring special attention in BIPA instruction. Instructors should be aware of this potential interference and design teaching materials that specifically target and address these predicted errors.

**Table 1. Systematic Comparison of Indonesian and Tetun Sentence Structures**

Structural Aspect	Indonesian	Tetun	Similarities	Main Differences	Potential Transfer in BIPA
Basic Sentence Pattern	S–P–O–(Adv)	S–P–O–(Adv)	Both follow SVO word order	Tetun is more flexible in spoken discourse	High potential for positive transfer in basic structures
Copula Usage	Not obligatory (e.g., “ <i>Dia guru</i> ” / “ <i>He teacher</i> ”)	Uses copulas such as <i>mak</i> or <i>hanesan</i> in certain contexts	Both allow nominal sentences	Tetun is more explicit in nominal constructions	Potential negative transfer in nominal sentences
Affixation System	Rich affixation ( <i>me-</i> , <i>di-</i> , <i>ber-</i> , <i>ter-</i> , <i>-kan</i> , <i>-i</i> )	Minimal affixation; more analytic	Both have morphological processes	Indonesian is morphologically more complex	Errors in affix usage (overgeneralization/omission)
Reduplication	Productive and grammatical	Exists but more limited	Both recognize reduplication	Grammatical function stronger in Indonesian	Limited positive transfer
Tense/Aspect Marking	Uses time markers ( <i>sudah</i> , <i>akan</i> , <i>sedang</i> )	Uses aspect particles ( <i>ona</i> , <i>sei</i> , <i>taha</i> )	No inflection tense	Tetun uses more explicit particles for aspect	Potential interference in aspect usage
Passive Construction	Productive ( <i>di-</i> , <i>ter-</i> )	Less productive; often active constructions preferred	Both recognize voice distinction	Indonesian has morphological passive system	Negative transfer in passive formation
Conjunctions and Clauses	Varied and complex	Simpler and more paratactic	Both use conjunctions	Indonesian subordinate clauses more complex	Errors in complex sentences
Noun Phrase Order	Head–Modifier ( <i>rumah besar</i> )	Head–Modifier ( <i>uma boot</i> )	Same structural pattern	Largely similar syntactically	High positive transfer
Prepositions	Various ( <i>di</i> , <i>ke</i> , <i>dari</i> , <i>pada</i> , <i>terhadap</i> )	More limited ( <i>iha</i> , <i>ba</i> , <i>hosi</i> )	Both use prepositions	Distribution and function differ	Potential preposition selection errors
Negation	<i>tidak</i> , <i>bukan</i>	<i>la</i>	Both use explicit negation markers	Different distribution in sentence structure	Negative transfer in negation placement

This table shows that typologically, Indonesian and Tetun share a number of fundamental similarities in core syntactic patterns (SVO and D–M patterns), which allow for positive transfer in BIPA learning in Timor Leste. However, significant differences in the affixation system, passive constructions, and subordination complexity have the potential to lead to negative transfer, particularly in morphology and complex sentence structure.

The results of the contrastive analysis indicate that the structural relationship between Indonesian and Tetun can be explained through the concept of language transfer in second language acquisition. The similarity in the basic S-P-O sentence patterns in both languages represents a form of positive transfer, namely, a condition where the structure of the first language (L1) facilitates the

acquisition of the second language (L2). Because the subject-verb-object structure in Tetun parallels that of Indonesian, learners do not need to undergo fundamental syntactic restructuring when forming simple declarative sentences. This situation reduces cognitive load in the early stages of learning and allows learners to achieve communicative success more quickly (Kirschner et al., 2018). Thus, this similarity in basic structure serves as a linguistic foundation supporting the initial acquisition of Indonesian by Tetun speakers.

Conversely, differences found in the structure of possessive phrases, particle systems, prepositions, and pronominal clitics indicate the potential for negative transfer. Negative transfer occurs when L1 structural patterns are projected into the L2 even though they do not fully match the grammatical system of the target language (Romano, 2021). For example, the use of the possessive particle *nian* in Tetun encourages learners to produce forms such as “*buku saya punya*” (my book has) in Indonesian. These errors are not random, but rather a systematic reflection of structural differences between the two languages. Thus, the resulting interference can be understood as a logical consequence of cross-language transfer at the syntactic and morphological levels.

This phenomenon can also be explained through the Markedness Hypothesis (Zhou et al., 2025), which states that more marked (more complex or grammatically explicit) structures tend to be more difficult to acquire in a second language. In this context, Tetun possessive constructions that use the explicit particle *nian* can be considered more marked than Indonesian constructions that do not require additional particles. Conversely, the obligatory and syntactically bound prepositional system of Indonesian can be viewed as more marked than the more flexible Tetun particle system. When the target language has more marked or bound features than the first language, the difficulty of acquisition increases. This explains why preposition omission in Indonesian is one of the most common errors among Tetun-speaking learners.

Furthermore, the findings of this study support the principle of predictability of errors within the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (Garde & Messenger, 2025), which states that learners’ learning difficulties and errors can be predicted based on structural differences between the two languages. Errors such as the omission of prepositions (I went to Dili), the addition of possessive elements (I have a book), or the inaccuracy of clitic usage are not sporadic phenomena, but rather patterns that can be anticipated through contrastive analysis. This means that the greater the structural differences between L1 and L2, the higher the likelihood of interference. Therefore, learners’ errors are more appropriately understood as the result of systematic structural transfer rather than as an indication of language proficiency deficits.

Overall, the integration of the concepts of positive transfer, negative transfer, markedness, and predictability of errors suggests that the relationship between Indonesian and Tetun is dual: on the one hand, it provides a structural foundation that facilitates learning, and on the other, it creates predictable points of vulnerability to interference. This theoretical understanding strengthens the urgency of a contrastive approach in teaching BIPA in Timor-Leste, because by identifying structures that are potentially marked and vulnerable to negative transfer, teachers can design learning strategies that are more targeted, explicit, and responsive to the learners’ linguistic backgrounds.

This study is in line with research conducted by Soares (2025), which shows that learners experience difficulties with abstract vocabulary, formal sentence structures, and comprehension of academic texts. They express a strong need for audio materials, structured listening exercises, and learning resources that reflect their local context. Culturally contextualized content—such as Timorese folktales and traditional practices—together with informal peer interaction and exposure to Indonesian media, significantly enhances learners’ motivation and confidence.

Furthermore, this study is consistent with research conducted by Anuno (2025), which emphasizes the importance of inclusive and sustainable language policies as an effort to preserve local languages and strengthen national identity in facing the challenges of globalization. This study is expected to contribute to the development of language preservation strategies and to enhance understanding of the relationship between language, culture, and identity in the context of a multilingual country such as Timor-Leste.

## CONCLUSION

This study concludes that there are significant differences in several aspects of sentence structure between Indonesian and Tetun, especially in the word order of possessive noun phrases and the use of grammatical particles. These differences have the potential to cause negative interference, which can be a primary source of difficulty for BIPA learners from Timor Leste. On the other hand, the similarity in the basic S-P-O sentence pattern can serve as a positive foundation for the learning process. Based on these findings, it is recommended that BIPA instructors in Timor-Leste identify points of difficulty caused by Tetun interference. They should develop teaching modules that focus on practice exercises and in-depth explanations of Indonesian sentence structures that differ from Tetun. Instructors are also encouraged to utilize contrastive teaching methods to explicitly explain these differences, so that learners can better understand why they make mistakes. Future research could expand the focus to analyze interference at the morphological level (e.g., use of affixes) or phonology, as well as test the effectiveness of teaching modules that have been adapted to the learners' linguistic context.

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