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Breaking the Syntax Barrier: Syntactic Simplification as Avoidance Strategy in L3 Indonesian

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ABSTRACT

Syntactic avoidance is a recurring yet underexplored phenomenon in third language (L3) acquisition. This study investigates how learners of Indonesian as an additional language simplify or circumvent complex structures in order to sustain communication. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, oral tasks, and written samples from eight multilingual participants representing six different first language (L1) backgrounds. Thematic analysis identified consistent avoidance patterns, including the omission of subordinate clauses, avoidance of passive voice marked with the di- prefix, simplification of conjunctions, and substitution of relative clauses and modifiers with simpler alternatives. These strategies were found to be shaped by cognitive processing limitations, structural divergence between Indonesian and learners' prior languages, and sociocultural concerns such as politeness and risk of negative evaluation. The study also revealed modality differences, with avoidance more frequent in oral than in written production, suggesting that planning opportunities reduce syntactic simplification. These findings confirm that avoidance is not merely a sign of deficiency but an adaptive interlanguage strategy consistent with cognitive and sociocultural models of multilingual development. Pedagogically, the results highlight the importance of scaffolding complex syntax through sequenced tasks, cross-linguistic awareness, and supportive classroom practices that encourage experimentation. Beyond the classroom, the study underscores the value of understanding avoidance as a dynamic adaptation that reflects multilingual learners' agency in managing communication.

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: 18 August 2025 | Revised: 1 September 2025 | Accepted: 12 September 2025 | Published Online: 3 November 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i12.11691

CITATION

Yulianto, B., Margana, Zaim, M., et al., 2025. Breaking the Syntax Barrier: Syntactic Simplification as Avoidance Strategy in L3 Indonesian. Forum for Linguistic Studies. 7(12): 97–111. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30564/fls.v7i12.11691

The study concludes by recommending future longitudinal and cross-linguistic research to further explore the interplay of cognitive, pragmatic, and sociocultural factors in L3 Indonesian acquisition.

Keywords: Syntactic Avoidance; Third Language Acquisition; Interlanguage Strategies; Cognitive And Sociocultural Influence; BIPA Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Multilingualism has become a defining feature of contemporary education and communication. Globalization, international mobility, and regional cooperation have created conditions in which individuals frequently use more than two languages in academic, professional, and everyday contexts. Recent statistics from UNESCO estimate that over 60% of the global student population now receives instruction in at least two languages [1]. Similarly, the OECD reports that multilingualism is increasingly regarded as a core competency for 21st-century citizenship, with governments emphasizing language learning in national curricula to prepare students for global participation [2]. These international developments have profound implications for Southeast Asia, where linguistic diversity has historically been a cultural hallmark and where regional integration through ASEAN has heightened the value of multilingual proficiency [3].

Indonesia is no exception to this trend. The government has promoted Bahasa Indonesia internationally through programs such as Bahasa Indonesia untuk Penutur Asing (BIPA). According to the Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, more than 59,000 foreign learners in over 52 countries are currently enrolled in BIPA programs [4]. The expansion of these programs reflects not only cultural diplomacy but also Indonesia's increasing geopolitical presence and soft power initiatives. Within ASEAN, Indonesian functions as both a national language and a lingua franca, particularly in trade, education, and cultural exchanges [5]. As a result, BIPA has become a critical site for examining how multilingual learners acquire Indonesian, especially as a third language (L3).

Despite this growth, empirical research on L3 acquisition in the context of Indonesian remains underrepresented. Most studies on language learning in Indonesia have traditionally focused on English as a foreign language [6], Mandarin as a rising regional language [7], or general bilingual education programs [8]. While these studies have generated important insights into vocabulary development, cultural integration, and communicative competence, they have rarely addressed syntactic development in L3 Indonesian. A recent bibliometric review of BIPA-related publications reveals that less than 10% of peer-reviewed studies explicitly analyze syntax, and even fewer explore the avoidance strategies that learners use to manage syntactic complexity [9]. This gap is striking given that syntactic competence is widely recognized as a core dimension of language proficiency and an important predictor of learners' ability to engage in complex discourse [10].

The concept of avoidance in second language acquisition (SLA) has a long research history. Early studies identified that learners often bypassed complex grammatical structures such as relative clauses, passives, or subordinate clauses in favor of simpler alternatives [11,12]. Schachter argued that avoidance should be seen as an important phenomenon because it does not leave traces in learner errors but instead manifests as absence of expected structures [11]. Kleinmann built on this by suggesting that avoidance is not necessarily a marker of deficiency but can represent a conscious decision to maintain communicative effectiveness [12]. More recent studies extend this perspective by framing avoidance as a form of strategic competence that reflects learners' ability to adapt their linguistic resources to contextual demands [13].

In the domain of third language acquisition, avoidance strategies become even more complex due to the interaction of multiple linguistic systems. De Angelis emphasizes that multilingual learners activate different parts of their linguistic repertoire depending on the communicative situation, which can both facilitate and obstruct the acquisition of new forms in the L3 [14]. Jessner's Dynamic Model of Multilingualism similarly posits that learners' languages form a dynamic system in which cross-linguistic influence is not linear but constantly shifting [15]. Within this framework, syntactic avoidance in L3 contexts can be interpreted as a dynamic adaptation shaped by cognitive load, linguistic distance, and sociocultural norms.

Indonesian presents particular challenges in this respect. Although it is often described as structurally simple because it lacks verb conjugation for tense or person, it poses unique difficulties for learners whose prior languages differ typologically. Features such as flexible word order, frequent ellipsis, the use of the di- prefix for passive constructions, and reliance on the relative clause marker yang create mismatches with many learners' L1 and L2 systems. For example, Korean and Tagalog learners may struggle with subordinate clause ordering, while Arabic speakers may resist using passives in contexts where they would prefer active forms [16]. These challenges are compounded by sociocultural expectations in Indonesian communication, where politeness and indirectness often influence syntactic choices [17].

The interplay of cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors in syntactic avoidance has been documented in other multilingual contexts. Research by Ortega demonstrates that syntactic complexity is sensitive to task conditions and learner proficiency, with learners often simplifying under pressure [10]. Skehan's Limited Attentional Capacity Model further suggests that learners facing high cognitive load will prioritize fluency over complexity, leading to avoidance of structures that require greater processing resources [18]. From a sociocultural perspective, Kasper and Blum-Kulka argue that interlanguage pragmatics, how learners manage meaning in context, often explains why learners refrain from using certain structures for fear of being inappropriate or impolite [19]. In Indonesian classrooms, these dynamics are particularly salient because learners are navigating not only unfamiliar grammar but also culturally embedded norms of interaction.

While avoidance has been traditionally framed as a limitation, more recent perspectives emphasize its adaptive value. Bialystok redefines avoidance as part of a repertoire of communication strategies that allow learners to remain engaged in interaction while managing uncertainty [20]. From this standpoint, simplification of syntax is not simply a lack of knowledge but a pragmatic decision to sustain communicative flow. In line with this, Cenoz and Gorter advocate for translanguaging practices in pedagogy, which enable learners to strategically draw on multiple languages to scaffold their understanding of new forms [21]. In the Indonesian context, translanguaging has been shown to support not only vocabulary and comprehension but also syntactic development when integrated into plurilingual pedagogical models [22].

Given these insights, this study aims to fill a critical gap in the literature by systematically examining syntactic avoidance in L3 Indonesian acquisition. Specifically, it seeks to answer three interrelated questions: (1) What types of syntactic structures are most commonly avoided by L3 Indonesian learners in BIPA contexts? (2) What cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors shape these avoidance strategies? (3) How can insights into syntactic avoidance inform pedagogical practices in multilingual classrooms? By addressing these questions, the study contributes theoretically to interlanguage and multilingualism research while offering practical guidance for language educators.

This investigation is particularly timely. As BIPA programs continue to expand globally, understanding how learners manage syntactic complexity has direct implications for curriculum design, teacher training, and classroom practice. Pedagogical strategies that treat avoidance not as a failure but as an adaptive process can foster more supportive learning environments. Moreover, highlighting the intersection of cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors aligns with current calls in applied linguistics for more integrative approaches that reflect the realities of multilingual learners. In doing so, this study not only addresses an underexplored aspect of L3 acquisition but also contributes to the broader effort of making language education more inclusive and context-sensitive.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Syntactic Avoidance in L2 and L3 Acquisition

The phenomenon of syntactic avoidance has been central to second language acquisition (SLA) research since the 1970s. Schachter's pioneering study showed that learners often refrain from using relative clauses not because of ignorance but due to an awareness of their complexity, resulting in what she termed "avoidance behavior" [11]. Kleinmann built on this insight, demonstrating that adult learners of English deliberately avoided passives and other complex structures that they found difficult to process, even when they could recognize them in input [12]. Later studies by Tarone highlighted avoidance as part of broader communication strategies, including paraphrasing, substitution, and circumlocution [23]. Together, these works established

avoidance as a strategic rather than merely deficient response to linguistic challenges.

In L3 contexts, avoidance becomes even more nuanced. Multilingual learners must navigate overlapping influences from their prior languages, often activating or suppressing certain structures depending on task demands. De Angelis argued that L3 acquisition cannot be fully understood without considering the interplay of all linguistic systems a learner possesses [14]. Jessner, through her Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (DMM), further emphasized that multilingual development involves a constantly shifting balance of activation and inhibition across languages [15]. As a result, avoidance in L3 settings may arise not only from structural difficulty but also from the competition between familiar syntactic patterns from L1 and L2. Research in European and Asian contexts shows that learners frequently circumvent complex subordination or passives in L3 use, preferring safer constructions that draw on familiar templates [24,25]. These findings underline that avoidance is an essential component of multilingual strategic competence.

2.2. Interlanguage and Syntactic Complexity

Interlanguage theory, proposed by Selinker, provides a powerful framework for analyzing avoidance behaviors [26]. Learner language is conceived as a transitional system, distinct from both L1 and the target language, characterized by systematic patterns and variability. Within this system, syntactic development is often reflected in the gradual incorporation of more complex forms such as subordinate clauses, relative clauses, and passive voice [27]. Ortega's synthesis of L2 research confirms that syntactic complexity is a strong indicator of proficiency, yet learners frequently simplify their structures under communicative pressure [10]. This tension between competence and performance explains why learners may recognize complex syntax but avoid producing it in real-time communication.

In multilingual settings, the dynamics of interlanguage become more layered. Learners may possess advanced knowledge of complex structures in one language but choose not to transfer them into the L3 due to typological distance or pragmatic concerns. For example, studies of Korean and Arabic learners of English reveal frequent avoidance of relative clauses and passives, reflecting structural mismatches with their L1s [28,29]. Similar patterns have been documented in BIPA classrooms, where learners prefer short declarative sentences and avoid embedding clauses marked by yang or passives marked by di- [9]. This evidence suggests that interlanguage in L3 Indonesian is shaped by both universal processing constraints and specific typological factors tied to learners' language backgrounds.

2.3. Cognitive Constraints and Strategic Competence

From a psycholinguistic perspective, avoidance can be understood as a response to cognitive load. Skehan's Limited Attentional Capacity Model posits that learners cannot simultaneously maximize accuracy, fluency, and complexity; under pressure, they prioritize fluency to sustain interaction [18]. Kormos further explains that spontaneous speech production requires rapid allocation of attention, which often leads learners to default to simpler syntactic forms [30]. Empirical studies support these claims: Foster and Skehan found that learners use fewer subordinate clauses in unplanned speech than in planned tasks, reflecting the cognitive burden of real-time production [31].

Strategic competence, as articulated by Canale and Swain, provides another lens for understanding avoidance [13]. Learners actively use strategies, such as simplifying sentences, repeating familiar patterns, or omitting challenging structures, to maintain communication. Bialystok expands this notion by framing avoidance within a taxonomy of communication strategies that reflect learners' pragmatic decision-making under uncertainty [20]. Rather than viewing avoidance as a failure, this perspective highlights its role in enabling learners to participate in interaction while minimizing risk. In the context of L3 Indonesian, such strategies are particularly salient because learners must navigate both cognitive processing limits and structural unfamiliarity.

2.4. Cross-Linguistic Influence and Avoidance Behavior

Cross-linguistic influence (CLI) has been widely acknowledged as a determinant of avoidance. Odlin argued that structural distance between languages often leads learners to circumvent unfamiliar forms rather than attempt inaccurate transfers [16]. Ringbom similarly emphasized that both similarity and dissimilarity influence acquisition, with greater

distance correlating with higher avoidance [32]. Recent studies confirm this in multilingual settings: Spanish learners of German, for example, avoid verb-final subordinate clauses, while Chinese learners of English tend to bypass relative clauses [33,34].

In Indonesian, CLI plays a crucial role given the typological divergence between the language and learners' L1s. Korean, Tagalog, Burmese, and Arabic speakers in BIPA classrooms have been observed to avoid subordinate clauses and passives, aligning instead with the linear SVO patterns of English or their L1s [9,22]. Such avoidance underscores the importance of comparative instruction that explicitly maps structural differences across languages. Without targeted scaffolding, learners may continue to default to safer constructions, reinforcing avoidance rather than overcoming it.

2.5. Sociocultural and Pragmatic Factors in Avoidance

Avoidance is not merely linguistic or cognitive but also deeply sociocultural. Kasper and Blum-Kulka's work on interlanguage pragmatics shows that learners make decisions based on politeness norms and cultural expectations, sometimes avoiding complex structures to reduce the risk of sounding impolite or inappropriate [19]. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis adds that anxiety, low confidence, and fear of negative evaluation inhibit learners' willingness to experiment with complex syntax [35]. In Southeast Asian classrooms, cultural norms of deference and face-saving can amplify these effects, leading learners to favor safe, formulaic expressions over syntactically ambitious ones [36].

Studies in BIPA contexts confirm that affective and sociocultural dimensions strongly shape avoidance behaviors. Dewi and Asteria found that Filipino and Korean learners often limited themselves to short sentences due to both structural unfamiliarity and fear of making mistakes in public [9]. López Otero and Bleotu, in their study of Romanian and Spanish bilinguals, similarly observed avoidance as a coping mechanism to maintain fluency in high-stakes contexts [37]. These findings underscore the need for classroom environments that reduce anxiety and encourage risk-taking. Pedagogical strategies that normalize error as part of learning can help lower affective barriers and foster syntactic experimentation.

2.6. Recent Studies in BIPA and Southeast Asian Multilingualism

Recent scholarship increasingly frames avoidance within broader debates about multilingual education. Cenoz and Gorter advocate for pedagogical translanguaging, which enables learners to draw on all their linguistic resources to scaffold new learning [21]. García and Li Wei similarly argue that translanguaging affirms learners' identities and reduces affective resistance, thereby encouraging experimentation with complex forms [38]. In Indonesian contexts, plurilingual pedagogical models have been proposed to integrate cultural content and language instruction, creating conditions for learners to gradually expand their syntactic repertoires [39]. Recent work in the Indonesian context shows that translanguaging can also serve as a tool for maintaining minoritized languages, highlighting its potential beyond classroom scaffolding [40].

These developments highlight that avoidance is not simply a barrier but a starting point for pedagogical innovation. By recognizing avoidance as an adaptive strategy, instructors can design tasks that gradually increase syntactic demands, provide explicit comparisons between L1/L2 and L3 forms, and create psychologically safe environments for risk-taking. Such approaches align with calls in multilingual education to move beyond deficit models and toward strengths-based perspectives that value learners' adaptive strategies as resources for growth.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive design, which is increasingly recognized as suitable for applied linguistics research where the goal is to present participants' perspectives with minimal abstraction. Sandelowski notes that qualitative description emphasizes "staying close to the data," allowing findings to be expressed in terms familiar to participants while still systematically analyzed [41]. In SLA research, qualitative description has been employed to explore learner strategies, affective experiences, and classroom practices that may not be adequately captured by experimental designs [42].

The choice of this design was also pragmatic. As

Creswell and Poth argue, descriptive approaches allow researchers to build context-specific insights while maintaining methodological flexibility, which is crucial in multilingual settings where learner experiences are highly diverse [43]. In L3 research, Aronin and Singleton stress the need for designs that can account for the complex interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural factors shaping multilingual development [44]. Hence, this study prioritized rich description and interpretive depth over statistical generalization, consistent with calls for more nuanced accounts of language learning in multilingual classrooms [45].

3.2. Participants

Eight participants were selected using purposive maximum variation sampling, ensuring diversity of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This approach aligns with Patton's recommendation that small, diverse samples are effective for exploring patterns across varied experiences [46]. All participants were enrolled in an intermediate-level BIPA program at a large Indonesian public university, had studied Indonesian for at least one semester, and possessed knowledge of two or more prior languages (L1 and L2). **Table 1** below shows the background of the research participants..

Table 1. Participant Information.

Pseudonym	Country	Age	L1(s)	L2(s)	Duration of L3 Learning	Gender
MU	India	27	Hindi	English	12 months	Female
MD	Saudi Arabia	20	Arabic	English	8 months	Male
LU	Myanmar	22	Burmese	English	7 months	Male
HS	Philippines	22	Tagalog	English	7 months	Male
DI	Philippines	32	Tagalog	English	12 months	Female
DN	Uganda	37	Luganda	English	24 months	Male
AM	South Korea	22	Korean	English	24 months	Female
PY	India	22	Hindi	English	12 months	Female

3.3. Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian, with occasional English use for clarification. Each interview lasted 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant consent. Semi-structured interviews were chosen for their balance of structure and flexibility, allowing comparability across participants while leaving room for unanticipated insights [47].

The interview guide included prompts about syntactic difficulties (e.g., "What kinds of sentences are most difficult for you to say in Indonesian?"), avoidance behaviors (e.g., "Can you recall a situation where you chose a simpler sentence instead of a longer one?"), and sociocultural concerns (e.g., "Do you feel nervous making mistakes in front of Indonesian classmates or teachers?"). This approach is consistent with best practices in applied linguistics qualitative interviewing [48,49].

All interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and double-checked for accuracy. Pseudonyms were used to protect participant identity. Transcripts were coded in their original Indonesian where possible, with English glosses added for analysis and reporting.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase procedure: (1) familiarization, (2) initial coding, (3) theme development, (4) theme review, (5) theme definition, and (6) reporting [50]. This approach has become a standard in applied linguistics research, valued for its systematic but flexible framework [51]. The workflow is illustrated in **Figure 1**.

To strengthen the credibility of the analysis, inter-rater reliability was employed. A second coder, an applied linguistics doctoral candidate trained in qualitative analysis, independently coded 25% of the data. Inter-rater reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, yielding $\kappa = 0.82$, which indicates strong agreement [52]. This step follows methodological recommendations in SLA research, where coder triangulation is encouraged to strengthen trustworthiness [53,54]. An audit trail of coding decisions and theme refinements was maintained, ensuring transparency in the analytic process.

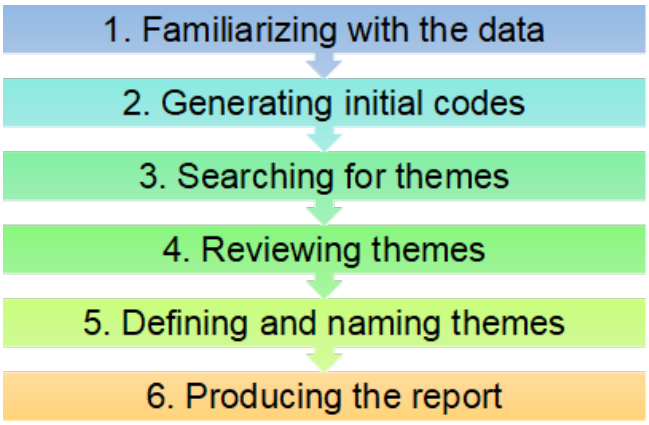

Figure 1. Avoidance Strategy in L3 Indonesian Research Flowchart.

4. Results

4.1. Patterns of Syntactic Avoidance

The data reveal that most L3 Indonesian learners consistently avoid using complex syntactic structures in spoken interactions. Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three major categories of avoidance, consistent across most participants: (1) omission of subordinate clauses, (2) avoidance of passive constructions, and (3) simplification of conjunctions. These categories resonate with earlier findings in SLA research that identified subordination, passivization, and clause chaining as particularly vulnerable structures for learners under cognitive or affective pressure [11,12,25].

a) Subordinate Clauses and Sentence Embedding.
Learners consistently favored independent clauses over embedded structures. AM, a Korean L1 speaker, explained: "Saya hanya pakai kalimat pendek. Kalau panjang, saya bingung urutannya" ("I only use short sentences. If they are long, I get confused with the order"). This reflects Skehan's argument that complex syntax is often avoided when attentional resources are taxed [18]. Similar tendencies have been documented among Chinese and Arabic learners of English, who often bypass relative clauses due to structural mismatch with their L1s [34,55].

b) Passive Voice and Inversions.
Several participants reported avoiding passive forms marked by the di- prefix. DI, a Tagalog L1 learner, stated: "Saya lebih suka pakai kalimat aktif. Kalimat pasif membuat saya bingung" ("I prefer to use active sentences. Passive sentences confuse me"). This aligns with studies showing that learners of typologically distant languages often underuse passive constructions even when exposed to them frequently [43,56].

c) Conjunction Chains and Complex Connectors.
The avoidance of complex connectors was evident across multiple participants. Instead of using karena ("because"), sehingga ("therefore"), or walaupun ("although"), learners often broke ideas into simple clauses linked by dan ("and"). PY, a Hindi L1 learner, remarked: "Kalau mau bilang banyak ide, saya pisah saja" ("If I want to say many ideas, I just separate them"). Similar patterns of conjunction simplification have been observed in multilingual learners of German and French, where parataxis is favored over hypotaxis under processing pressure [44].

These patterns demonstrate a tendency toward syntactic simplification, particularly in oral communication, where cognitive demands are higher.

4.2. Cognitive, Linguistic, and Sociocultural Influences

Avoidance was shaped by overlapping cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors. These findings reinforce the interdependence of cognitive load, cross-linguistic influence, and affective constraints in shaping learner output.

a) Cognitive Load.
Learners often acknowledged that real-time processing made complex structures overwhelming. LU, a Burmese L1 learner, admitted: "Saya tahu kata-katanya, tapi kalau mau buat kalimat panjang, saya tidak bisa

cepat" ("I know the words, but when making long sentences, I cannot do it quickly"). This reflects Ortega's synthesis showing that unplanned tasks reduce syntactic complexity as learners trade accuracy and complexity for fluency[10].

b) Linguistic Transfer.
Several avoidance patterns were linked to L1 or L2 influence. DN, a Luganda L1 learner, explained: "Saya tahu artinya, tapi kalau harus gabung dua ide jadi satu kalimat, saya tidak tahu caranya" ("I know the meaning, but if I have to combine two ideas in one sentence, I don't know how"). This reflects Odlin's finding that structural distance between languages often results in avoidance when learners cannot map L1 structures onto the target language[16].

c) Sociocultural Anxiety.
Avoidance was also shaped by fear of negative evaluation. HS, a Tagalog L1 learner, stated: "Kalau saya salah, saya takut ditertawakan" ("If I am wrong, I fear being laughed at"). This mirrors Krashen's affective filter hypothesis[47] and Kasper and Blum-Kulka's observations on interlanguage pragmatics, where learners limit risk-taking to maintain social harmony[19]. In BIPA classrooms, where learners interact with native speakers, this anxiety may be heightened by unfamiliarity with Indonesian politeness norms.

Moreover, the unfamiliarity with informal or cultural speech styles in Indonesian contributed to the preference for simpler, safer structures.

4.3. Cross-Case Synthesis

Thematic analysis of interview data from eight L3 Indonesian learners revealed recurrent patterns of syntactic avoidance, primarily driven by linguistic complexity, cross-linguistic influence, and sociocultural considerations. The findings are synthesized in **Table 2** summarizes the avoidance strategies, ensuring consistency with the corrected participant data.

Table 2. Patterns of Syntactic Avoidance Across Participants.

Participant	L1	Avoided Syntax Type	Language Interaction	Dominant Cause
AM	Korean	Subordinate clause	Korean-Indonesian	Syntactic transfer & processing load
DI	Tagalog	Passive voice	Tagalog-Indonesian	Typological distance
HS	Tagalog	Conjunction chains	Tagalog-Indonesian	Affective hesitation
DN	Luganda	Relative clause	Luganda-Indonesian	Cross-linguistic interference
MD	Arabic	Subordinate clause	Arabic-Indonesian	Processing difficulty
MU	Hindi	Passive voice	Hindi-Indonesian	Limited exposure
LU	Burmese	Sentence modifiers	Burmese-Indonesian	Lexical substitution habit
PY	Hindi	Complex predicates	Hindi-Indonesian	Code-switching preference

Table 2 illustrates that subordinate clauses were among the most commonly avoided structures, particularly by learners whose L1s exhibit agglutinative properties or structurally divergent syntax from Indonesian. For example, AM (Korean L1) and MD (Arabic L1) consistently opted for simple declarative sentences, circumventing embedded clauses due to processing difficulties and unfamiliarity with clause-linking mechanisms in Indonesian. Similarly, DI, a Tagalog speaker, demonstrated avoidance of the passive voice, likely due to typological distance and reduced exposure to such constructions in informal spoken contexts.

HS, whose first language is Tagalog, often avoided using multiple conjunctions in a sentence. Instead, he preferred to break down ideas into separate, simpler clauses, a strategy likely driven by his need for clarity and a desire to minimize the risk of grammatical errors. DN, a native Luganda speaker, had particular difficulty with relative clauses. Rather than attempt them, he often opted for nominal phrases or incomplete sentence structures. This tendency reflects cross-linguistic interference, as the relativization patterns in Luganda differ significantly from those used in Indonesian, making direct transfer challenging.

LU, whose native language is Burmese, consistently steered clear of sentence modifiers like meskipun, padahal, or walaupun, instead choosing to express contrast through lexical substitutions or tonal shifts. PY, a Hindi speaker, frequently simplified complex verb constructions and relied on code-switching when she encountered syntactic uncertainty.

Overall, these learners tended to avoid more complex syntactic forms by substituting them with simpler construc-

tions, drawing on English or L1 templates, or hesitating in their speech. These patterns highlight the cognitive demands involved in producing a third language and the deliberate strategies learners use to prioritize fluency over syntactic precision.

While oral data dominated the analysis, it is important to note that this study did not systematically compare spoken versus written performance, an acknowledged limitation. Future research could contrast both modalities to evaluate whether syntactic avoidance persists across different production contexts.

4.4. Modal Differences: Speaking vs. Writing

An important emergent theme was modality. While learners frequently simplified structures in speech, several reported greater willingness to experiment with subordination or passives in writing. For example, HS was able to produce relative clauses in written assignments but avoided them in oral communication. This supports findings by Ishikawa, who observed that L2 learners show higher syntactic complexity in writing than in speaking due to planning opportunities[57]. Similarly, Hao et al. confirm that modality effects significantly shape multilingual learners' syntactic development[58].

5. Discussion

5.1. Subordinate Clause Avoidance

The analysis revealed that subordinate clauses were consistently avoided by learners across diverse linguistic backgrounds. For example, AM (Korean L1) and MD (Arabic L1) frequently resorted to short declarative sentences, despite having the vocabulary to express more complex ideas. When prompted to produce longer utterances, they often abandoned the attempt midway, reformulating into simpler clauses. This indicates that avoidance was not incidental, but rather a deliberate communicative choice driven by the perceived difficulty of embedding clauses.

This pattern aligns with cognitive models of second language production. Skehan[18] argues that learners face an attentional bottleneck: they cannot simultaneously maximize fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Under real-time communicative pressure, they often prioritize fluency, which explains why learners in this study defaulted to independent clauses. Ortega[10] further emphasizes that syntactic complexity is highly sensitive to task demands, and our participants' avoidance of subordination exemplifies this principle.

The influence of L1 structures also helps explain this avoidance. Korean expresses subordination through suffixal markers, while Arabic relies heavily on conjunctions such as lianna ("because"), both of which differ significantly from Indonesian's use of yang and bahwa. Odlin[16] suggests that when structural transfer is not possible, avoidance becomes the preferred option. Thus, the learners' hesitation was not a sign of ignorance but the result of structural mismatch and the absence of ready transfer pathways.

From a strategic perspective, subordinate clause avoidance can be seen as a pragmatic adaptation. Bialystok[20] describes avoidance as part of learners' communicative strategies: they simplify structures in order to ensure message delivery. Our data confirm this interpretation. Learners like AM and MD deliberately minimized syntactic complexity, demonstrating not failure but resourcefulness in managing interaction.

Within interlanguage theory, avoidance constitutes a developmental stage. Selinker[26] notes that interlanguage is both systematic and variable, and our participants displayed variability across modalities: they sometimes attempted subordination in writing, but rarely in speaking. This suggests that avoidance reflects not a lack of competence, but performance constraints imposed by the immediacy of speech.

Pedagogically, subordinate clause avoidance signals the need for graduated instruction. Learners may benefit from structured progression, from simple coordination using dan to more complex contrastive (tetapi) and concessive (meskipun) connectors. Task-based learning research demonstrates that sequencing tasks by complexity can gradually build learners' capacity without overwhelming cognitive resources[38]. Instructors should therefore scaffold subordination incrementally, transforming avoidance into opportunities for development.

5.2. Passive Voice Avoidance

Avoidance of passive constructions emerged prominently, especially among DI (Tagalog L1) and MU (Hindi L1). These learners consistently defaulted to active forms, even in contexts where Indonesian conventionally favors

passives, such as formal or academic registers. In interviews, they admitted confusion when faced with the di- prefix and often reformulated sentences to avoid its use.

This difficulty can be traced to differences in voice systems across languages. Tagalog features a complex focus system that does not correspond neatly to Indonesian's agent–patient distinction, while Hindi passives are less common in everyday speech. Hinkel [59] and Collins [60] both found that learners from non-Indo-European backgrounds frequently underproduce passives, linking this to discourse traditions in their L1s. Thus, the learners' avoidance was not simply an individual weakness but a structural challenge.

Discourse norms also shaped this avoidance. In many contexts, active voice is pragmatically preferred, and learners may transfer this preference into Indonesian. Odlin [16] highlights that avoidance can arise from discourse-level transfer as much as from structural interference. In this case, learners' habitual reliance on active voice shaped their Indonesian output.

Seen from a strategic angle, passive avoidance demonstrates learners' awareness of communicative economy. By avoiding uncertain forms, they minimized the risk of producing ungrammatical utterances. Bialystok's [20] framework suggests that this is a legitimate strategy for maintaining interaction, even though it reduces syntactic diversity.

The persistence of passive avoidance highlights a need for targeted instruction. Research by Hinkel [59] shows that explicit teaching of passives in authentic academic contexts leads to higher learner uptake. Similarly, Rahayu and Margana [61] demonstrate that code-switching-based instruction can enhance speaking performance and reduce learners' tendency to avoid complex structures. For BIPA classrooms, role-play and writing tasks situated in formal discourse could encourage learners to experiment with di- passives, reducing avoidance over time.

5.3. Conjunction Simplification

Learners such as HS (Tagalog L1) and PY (Hindi L1) regularly simplified clause linking by overusing dan ("and"), avoiding more complex connectors like meskipun, sehingga, or walaupun. Their speech thus consisted of shorter, loosely connected clauses rather than integrated hypotactic structures.

This tendency reflects the cognitive demands of clause chaining. Pan, et al. [34] found that Chinese EFL learners also relied heavily on parataxis under pressure, showing that this is a cross-linguistic phenomenon. Our participants' avoidance thus reflects the universal cognitive difficulty of managing complex clause integration.

Learners also admitted avoiding conjunctions to prevent errors. HS explained that using simple sentences helped him avoid embarrassment in front of peers. This supports Krashen's affective filter hypothesis [35] and Kasper and Blum-Kulka's observations that politeness concerns shape interlanguage pragmatics [19]. Recent evidence from Indonesian higher education confirms that students' motivation and willingness to engage in syntactic risks are strongly influenced by their perceptions of teachers' beliefs and instructional strategies [62], which helps explain why some learners persist with avoidance while others attempt more complex constructions.

To address this, teachers should gradually introduce conjunctions through controlled tasks. For instance, learners could start by combining two simple clauses with dan before progressing to concessive or causal connectors. Such sequencing reduces anxiety while expanding learners' syntactic repertoire. Developing textbooks that integrate higher-order thinking skills, as suggested by Margana and Widyantoro [63], can further encourage learners to take syntactic risks rather than default to parataxis.

5.4. Relative Clauses and Modifiers

DN (Luganda L1) avoided relative clauses, preferring nominal phrases or fragmented sentences. LU (Burmese L1) similarly avoided concessive modifiers such as meskipun or padahal, opting for lexical alternatives. These avoidance behaviors show how learners actively restructure discourse to circumvent challenging forms.

Structural divergence explains much of this avoidance. Luganda marks relativization morphologically, unlike Indonesian, which uses yang. Burmese also employs simpler contrast markers that do not correspond directly to Indonesian's concessive system. Odlin [16] argues that such mismatches predict avoidance, and our findings confirm this.

Rather than risk incorrect usage, learners substituted safer alternatives. DN used noun phrases, while LU relied on contrastive adverbs. This strategic substitution underscores that avoidance is often creative rather than purely reductive.

Teachers can help learners overcome these patterns by providing explicit cross-linguistic comparisons, illustrating how Indonesian relativization and modification differ from their L1s. Such awareness-building can reduce reliance on avoidance strategies. Moreover, creating a translanguaging space in the classroom[64] allows learners to negotiate complex forms more confidently, as they can strategically draw on their linguistic repertoires instead of avoiding challenging structures. This strategic substitution underscores that avoidance is often creative rather than purely reductive. In parallel, recent research on BIPA learners reveals that code-mixing frequently emerges as a compensatory mechanism, enabling learners to bypass syntactic limitations while maintaining communicative flow[65].

5.5. Speaking vs. Writing Modalities

A cross-modal comparison revealed that learners were more likely to attempt complex syntax in writing than in speech. HS, for example, successfully produced relative clauses in written assignments but consistently avoided them in oral interaction.

This supports Ishikawa's meta-analysis[57], which shows that learners produce higher syntactic complexity in writing due to planning opportunities. Hao et al.[58] also found that modality significantly affects multilingual learners' syntactic performance, with writing providing a safer space for experimentation.

These findings suggest that avoidance is not a fixed deficiency but a context-dependent strategy. Learners adjust their syntactic choices depending on modality, reflecting the dynamic nature of interlanguage.

Recognizing this, teachers should design activities that leverage writing as a preparatory space for oral production. Written rehearsal can scaffold learners' confidence before transferring complex syntax to speech. Recent studies also show that culturally adaptive AI tools in BIPA classrooms can provide learners with low-risk rehearsal environments tailored to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, further reducing avoidance behaviors and supporting gradual syntactic experimentation[66]. Task sequencing supported by multimodal materials has been shown to reduce processing costs in academic listening and writing[67], suggesting that similar approaches could be applied in BIPA pedagogy to gradually increase syntactic complexity.

5.6. Interplay of Cognitive, Linguistic, and Sociocultural Factors

Overall, the findings demonstrate that avoidance arises from the intersection of multiple factors: cognitive processing constraints, structural distance, and sociocultural pressures. Each participant's pattern reflects a unique configuration of these influences. This resonates with studies showing that translanguaging supports both pedagogical outcomes and minoritized language maintenance in Indonesia[40], underscoring the broader sociocultural significance of learners' strategic adaptations.

This triangulation supports Jessner's Dynamic Model of Multilingualism[15], which emphasizes that multilingual development is shaped by the interaction of linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Avoidance is not random but a patterned response to the complex demands of L3 learning.

By interpreting avoidance as adaptive, we move away from deficit models and instead view learners as strategic communicators. This perspective has important implications for both theory and pedagogy, highlighting the resilience of multilingual learners in negotiating new linguistic systems. Syntactic avoidance factors can be concluded through **Figure 2** below.

6. Conclusions

This study has shown that learners of Indonesian as a third language employ syntactic avoidance not as random errors but as systematic strategies shaped by cognitive, linguistic, and sociocultural factors. Patterns such as the omission of subordinate clauses, avoidance of passive voice, simplification of conjunctions, and substitution of relative clauses or modifiers reveal how learners adapt their language use to balance fluency, accuracy, and complexity under real-time pressures. These findings affirm that avoidance reflects adaptive interlanguage behavior consistent with Skehan's cognitive model and Jessner's dynamic perspective on multilingualism, highlighting learners' agency in managing communication rather than simple deficiency. Pedagogically, the results suggest that avoidance should be treated as an opportunity for scaffolded learning through task sequencing, explicit cross-linguistic awareness, and supportive classroom practices that reduce affective barriers and encourage experimentation. Practically, they point to the need

for materials and assessments that acknowledge learners' strategic simplifications, particularly in oral performance, while gradually guiding them toward more complex forms through integrated written and spoken tasks. At the same time, limitations of the present study, particularly its focus on oral data and small sample size, indicate the value of future longitudinal and cross-linguistic research that contrasts modalities and examines avoidance across diverse language backgrounds. Together, these insights extend theoretical models of interlanguage and multilingual acquisition while providing practical guidance for more inclusive and effective BIPA pedagogy.

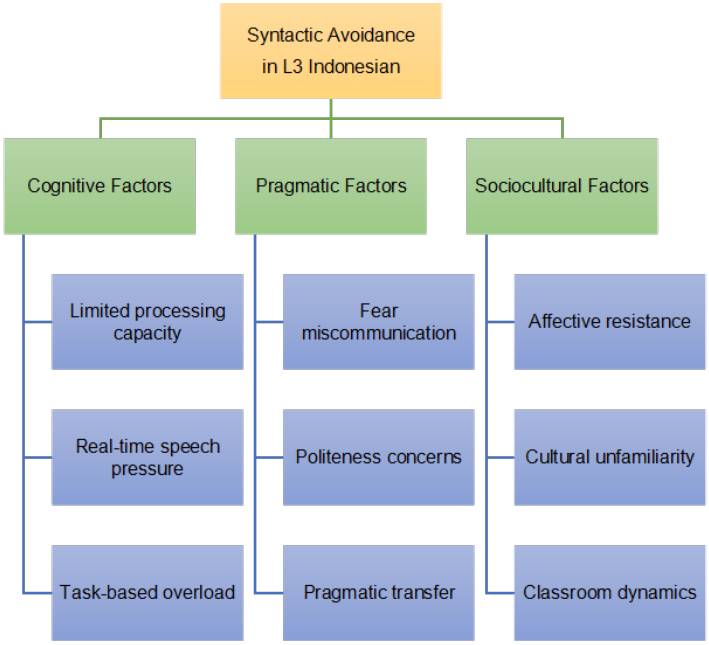

Figure 2. Syntactic Avoidance Factors in L3 Indonesian.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, B.Y., M., and M.Z. (Muhammad Zaim); methodology, M.Z. (Muhammad Zaim) and P.V.A.; validation, M. and P.V.A.; formal analysis, A.K. and R.K.H.; investigation, B.Y., M.Z. (Muhammad Zaim), and M.Z. (Muflihatuz Zakiyah); data curation, P.V.A. and M.Z. (Muflihatuz Zakiyah); writing original draft preparation, P.V.A. and B.Y.; writing review and editing, P.V.A., M.Z. (Muhammad Zaim), and M.; supervision, B.Y., M., and M.Z. (Muhammad Zaim); project administration, P.V.A. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding

This research was funded by the Riset Kolaborasi Indonesia (RKI) programs, involving Universitas Negeri Surabaya (UNESA), Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta (UNY), and Universitas Negeri Padang (UNP).

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the participants of the BIPA program for their invaluable contributions, as well as colleagues at Universitas Negeri Surabaya, Universitas

Negeri Yogyakarta, and Universitas Negeri Padang for their support and collaboration.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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