

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In recent years, interest in the uses of the English language among Malaysians has increased. While the English language is maintained as the medium of communication for business, science and information technology in many countries, many studies have discovered that communication is more than just choosing the right words to say or uttering words or phrases using the appropriate intonations.

More new varieties of the English language have emerged (Kachru, 1981) and Malaysian English is one of them. The term “new” is used for a variety which is only recently known for its linguistic features and literature, although the variety already has a long history of acculturation in geographical, cultural and linguistic contexts.

For Malaysia, a country once colonized by Britain, the spread of English (in non-native settings) plays an important role as the second language in a multilingual setting. In many ways, the uses of English - particularly in spoken English, are influenced by the different cultures and customs which make Malaysian English unique and special. This can be observed through the peculiar distinct features, lexical choices and particle choices.

The above features and the influence of the cultural background of bilinguals in Malaysia, have resulted in many groups of researchers conducting studies on the Malaysian variety of English (Platt, 1980). Many have highlighted communicative strategies as an

interesting area to further understand the variety of English. Along this line, the aim of this study is to identify the communicative strategies used by bilingual college students. This study also hopes to discover the reasons why the strategies are adopted.

1.1 Background of the study

The movement of English language around the world began with the pioneering voyages to the Americas, Asia and the Northern Hemispheres. English is now the dominant language in over sixty countries (Crystal, 1995), inevitably, and is rapidly becoming the language of power in the British territories of South East Asia.

The British colony of Penang was established by Captain Francis Light in 1786. This colony along with Malacca and the island of Labuan off the coast of Borneo later became the British Crown Colony, The Straits Settlements, an entity that lasted until the Japanese occupation in 1942. According to Platt, it was in these colonies that English was most important, and consequently where its acquisition was felt to be an advantage (Platt, 1980).

The British influence over the Malay states extended and by 1892, four states namely Selangor, Pahang, Perak and Negeri Sembilan formed the Federated Malay States with British Residents as the Sultans' advisers. As soon as Kuala Lumpur became the capital of the Federation, the use and importance of English increased with the development of the British administrative and judicial system at the time.

By 1914, the Malay states saw the immigration of the Chinese who worked as indentured labourers for the tin mines. The 20th century then saw the coming of southern Indians, mostly Tamils, who came as contract labourers and rubber tappers (Platt, 1980).

The education system went through various stages of development as well. In the beginning, there were the "*sekolah pondok*" (small huts built for religious learning). Later, English-medium education commenced in 1816 with the establishment of Penang Free School by the Colonial Chaplain of Penang (Oxford Companion to the English Language, 1992). 'Free School' meant no restrictions were placed on the entry of pupils due to race or religion. Other 'Free Schools' and Mission Schools followed. By 1931, there were 82 English medium schools in the region, with the total enrolment of about 30,000.

Due to the expansion of the British colonial administration and British commercial enterprises, employment for English medium educated Asians became necessary. English had been regarded as a language of prestige, whereby those who were able to master the language, would have wider opportunities towards preferred and better employment. The 1957 census had reported that 400,000 people claimed to be literate in the language (Oxford Companion to the English Language, 1992).

Malaysia had then become a multi racial country. The British had power and authority to check that the use of English was up to the required and 'preferred' standard. Nonetheless, after the independence and the withdrawal of the native speakers in the 1950s, the use of English had somewhat been influenced by local flavours, as a result of being a multi lingual country (Oxford Companion to the English Language, 1992). There were

marked differences in terms of areas such as pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary between what was termed as Malaysian English and British English (or even American English).

1.1.1 Cultural Profile and showing “Budi Bahasa”

Malaysians are always admired for their emphasis on social relationships. It is more important for them to maintain interpersonal harmony rather than accomplish tasks (Jamaliah, 2000). Confrontations and conflicts are not something that most Malaysians would like to be involved in. Malaysians are generally receptive to those who display good manners in face-to-face interaction, especially when they are “communicating with those from the same ethnic group” (Jamaliah, 2000). Thus, within the Malay community, a person who does not demonstrate proper refined behaviour and is coarse (by means of choosing the wrong pronoun or the wrong honorific) is described as rude (Jamaliah, 2000).

1.1.2 Culture, Context and Communication

Values and beliefs differ among cultures and are independent of each other. It is unlikely that speakers adopt strategies of communication, and infer particular meanings in particular situations (Jamaliah, 2000). These choices are seen as reflections of sectional interests, beliefs and values, which are representatives of the culture of the speakers.

The study of cross cultural communication is essential and relevant because it addresses contemporary issues in developing a better understanding of language and the people who use it – the speakers. It does not only provide insights and awareness of the language in use, but also provides the knowledge necessary for interpreting the common

meaningfulness of utterances by speakers. Tannen (1984) noted that,

“by examining interactions in which habits exist, expectations about how to show what is meant by what is said are not shared; we can see semantic processes that show how language means – which are harder to observe in the seamless surface of successful communication”.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The topic of the new varieties of English, which has emerged in multilingual countries has generated much interest. Many studies have been conducted to identify the features of these new varieties, which further enhance understanding of these varieties in relation to the standard English, namely the British English and American English. This study hopes to contribute to the study of the new English variety among Malaysian college students, which is also known as the Malaysian English (ME henceforth). The first few paragraphs will look at the definitions of the terms related to the topic and the hypotheses, the aims as well as the research questions.

Communicative strategies have been described as ways to solve a momentary communication difficulty. The fossilized aspects of inter-language are the results of an identifiable approach by the learner to communicate with the native speakers of the target language, when we are dealing with strategies of second language communication (Selinker, 1972).

For this research, it is hoped that analyses can be made to see how code-switching and mixing are used as a communicative strategy for making clarifications, interpretation, establishing solidarity and rapport in multilingual discourse. Moreover, this study hopes to

also discuss the linguistics, psychological and socio-linguistic implications on the study of the Malaysian English variety.

To achieve the above aims, the discussions will be based on the premise that the term 'bilingualism' means 'fluency in two (or more) languages' and not that of 'semi bilingualism' to mean the state where code-switching and mixing occur when the individuals do not know how to express certain meanings in one of the languages concerned (Tay, 1989).

The majority of individuals living in a multi-racial country like Malaysia are bilinguals - able to speak, even write in more than one language, their mother tongue and a second (or third or more) language(s) (Mackey, 1970). This results in various combinations of the languages in Malaysia and English has become indigenous over the years. As said by Tongue (1980), anyone who has been only a short time in Malaysia will have had the remarkable experience of listening to a speaker who "conversing in near-native discourse suddenly switches to an informal Malaysian English when he speaks to someone familiar only with the substandard form, or chats on the telephone with an intimate friend" (pg 8).

There are positive and negative reactions towards code-switching. Many have "wrongly" accused second language speakers/learners of not being competent and proficient in the language, speaking as the native speakers do when they include words or phrases from their mother tongue or other local variety in their English conversations. "Interference" may be viewed in a negative way, as the transference of elements of one

language to another at various levels including phonological, grammatical, lexical and orthographical (Berthold et.al., 1997).

On the other hand, Skiba (1992) and Crystal (1987) opposed this by saying that code-switching is not language interference on the basis that it supplements speech. As opposed to switching because of lack of vocabulary in the English language, switching actually helps to sustain a conversation and provides continuity rather than “interfering” with the discourse. The socio-linguistic benefits of code-switching have also been identified as a means of communicating solidarity, or affiliation to a particular social group. Code-switching should therefore be viewed from the perspective of providing a linguistic advantage rather than an obstruction to communication.

Code-switching and mixing have generally been studied in terms of one of the following approaches: (a) the linguistic constraints that determine the form of code-switching and mixing, and (b) the socio-linguistic functions which determine when, with whom and why code-switching and mixing take place (Tay, 1989). Nevertheless, little is known about how they are used as a communicative strategy in multilingual communities among proficient speakers. This study hopes to fill this gap by analysing spontaneous conversations which involve code-switching and mixing between English and Malay.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The aim of this study is to discover the communicative strategies used by bilingual students and to find out the reasons why students have adopted the strategies. Also, this study hopes to discover if non-verbal communication does contribute to the speakers' ability to achieve successful communication.

1.4 Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the communicative strategies used by the bilingual students?

This question aims to identify and analyse the communicative strategies used by students with the ability to speak in both English and Malay.

2. For what purpose(s) have they chosen the communicative strategies ?

This question aims to identify the reasons why students adopt certain communicative strategies in their attempt to have successful communication.

3. Does non-verbal communication contribute to the speakers' ability to achieve successful communication ?

This question aims to analyse if non-verbal communication (such as facial expression, hand gestures, body movements etc.) influences a speaker's ability to communicate and achieve his or her intentions in a communicative situation.

1.5 Background of students and PTPL

Advanced Management and Technology Centre (PTPL, henceforth) was established in 1996. PTPL, the first private college in Malaysia to be awarded recognition by the National Accreditation Board (LAN), claims to be the leading provider of quality education in meeting the growing demand for professionals in the country. (www.ptpl.edu.my)

The student population at the college comprises approximately 2,100 multi-racial and multi-ethnic students. It is observed that this diversity in cultural background and spoken language influence the students' communication and adoption of communicative strategies – which this study tries to explore.

For this study, 26 students from PTPL were selected to participate in the group discussions. The level of proficiency among the students was determined using bands already specified at the PTPL college in Shah Alam during the students' final exams for the subject English Language Proficiency Level III (LBIL 1012). The students selected for this study, were those with Bands 5 and 6. The aggregated scale and description of bands can be viewed in Appendix 19.

It is important to note that this examination tests all four language skills namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking. The results were based on the combination of all the performed skills. However, for this study, only the speaking skills were studied. Thus, some students who may have performed better in the examination for other language skills (and not in the speaking skills), might not appear competent and proficient in this research.

1.6 Significance of the study

It is hoped that this study would significantly contribute insights to the language teachers, particularly ESL language teachers in understanding the use of communicative strategies among Malaysian language learners. The findings of the study would also shed light on some of the patterns of English usage and how often these features occur in students' speech. It is hoped that these insights will be helpful for ESL language teachers in many ways such as effective lesson planning, classroom teaching and others.

1.7 Definition of Some Words and Processes

1.7.1 Latching

This is one of the features or communicative strategies that is identified among Malaysian speakers. 'Latching' happens when a speaker finishes another speaker's speech or utterance (Jamaliah, 2000). For example:

M1 : I disagree with the statement because I find that it has side effects/
instead of helping the child/ we have more problems/ like the child
will be shy/ he will/ will =

I1 : = isolate himself

M1 : Yes/ that's true (Jamaliah, 2000: 111)

From the above example, it is observed that speaker I1 completes speaker M1's speech when the latter was unable to find the appropriate words. M1 later confirmed that I1 understood his intended meaning.

1.7.2 Duetting and Philharmony

Duetting and philharmony refers to behaviours in which "the turn constructional units produced by two or more speakers provide evidence of co-operative enterprise (Jamaliah, 2000: 92). In other words, duetting and philharmony takes place when two or more speakers contribute in a conversation and they achieve a joint construction of meaning in the end. For example,

W(m) : We've agreed that there's an imbalance/ here stereotypic role/ erm/
the place of women erm =

H(c) : = for example/ you see the place of women/ ah/ ah/ is always in the
kitchen/ girls are often seen in pictures cooking

R(i) : I see the situation is not like that anymore/ anyway not so la/ there
are also [case of working women]

S(m) : [working women]/ my MOTHER still cooks/ washes dishes / never
my father/ (Jamaliah, 2000: 93)

1.7.3 Code-Switching and Code-Mixing

Code-switching and code-mixing have been studied in terms of forms, types and functions (Tay, 1989). From the studies, many definitions had also been given – some view code-switching and mixing as having similarities [Crystal (1987), Cook (1991) and Skiba (1990)], while others have observed them as being otherwise [Morais, (1990) and Tay (1989)]. For this study, the researcher will view code-switching and code-mixing as two different phenomenon. In addition, code-switching and mixing will be observed based on the definition given by Morais (1990) that is code-switching is the switching within languages and varieties (inter-sentential) whereas code-mixing is defined as inclusion of linguistic elements from various languages (intra-sentential).

1. 8 Conclusion

After independence from Britain in 1957, Malaysia has developed its own bilingual education policy that resulted in the unique Malaysian English that is found today. Apart from Bahasa Melayu and English, other official languages are also taught in schools i.e. Mandarin, Tamil and Arabic (for religious classes). Thus, it is inevitable that there would be the influence of one language on the other and so on.

Observations of communicative strategies have generated the researcher's interest to study bilinguals' use of the English language in a multi-racial society. This study's main focus is on the communicative strategies and the reasons why bilingual students adopt those strategies. It is hoped that further understanding of these strategies will provide more insights for language teachers (and maybe learners) in the future.