

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, the researcher will introduce the background of the study, followed by the rationale, the research questions and finally, the significance of the study.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

In the course of the researcher's twenty years of teaching experience in three primary and two secondary schools, it was noted that the level of competency in the English Language among Malaysian students was not up to the required standard. While teaching in primary schools, the researcher noticed that most of the students in those primary schools had a low competency level in the English Language. This was especially true of schools in the rural areas due to a lack of exposure in the target language. However, in the urban secondary school where the researcher is currently stationed, SMK Methodist (ACS), Malacca, there is a lower competence of English Language among most of the students there as compared to another secondary school where the researcher had taught previously, SMK Jalan Mengkibol, Kluang, Johore. The factors responsible for this lack of proficiency include the students' family background and their views or attitudes towards the language, which was mostly their second or third language as compared to their mother tongue, be it Bahasa Melayu, Chinese or Tamil.

It was observed that the students' family background; negative views and attitudes of learning a colonial language may be the main contributors to the students' plight. A

few students felt that since English Language was not a prerequisite to obtain a pass in their public examinations, either the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) or Sijil Peperiksaan Menengah (SPM), it was not worth their time and effort learning and mastering the language.

This study is carried out primarily to determine if those are the only reasons or if there are other possible ones for their negative views and attitudes towards the English Language with the hope of shedding some light towards assisting English Language teachers in Malaysian schools to understand their learners better and finally help those learners to raise their level of the language.

The decision to explore the factors affecting the learning of English Language among learners also arose due to a call by the former Malacca State English Language officer, Cik Anisa in the year 2000, that English Language teachers should teach English in English, and not code switch to Bahasa Melayu, Mandarin or Tamil. Cik Anisa had expressed this view to all the English Language teachers present at most of the courses conducted by the state's English Language Division. Many teachers who are faced with situations similar to those mentioned above had lamented that it was impossible to teach English without code switching to the students' first language or Bahasa Melayu. Most of the English Language teachers in Malacca including those from the researcher's current school feel that their efforts are like "talking to the wall" or "wasting a lot of time or effort" at the expense of not completing the syllabus and frustrating both the teachers and the students further. These comments are usually heard during the English panel meetings at school and district level meetings every year.

Another factor for exploring the influence of the first language, that is Bahasa Melayu in the acquisition of English Language among Malay students, is the lack of study done in the target language. Many studies have been carried out on the influence of other languages like Chinese, Tamil, Mexican, Spanish or French in the learning of English Language among students of other races and age groups (e.g. Wong-Fillmore, 1976; Crismore, A., Karen Ngeok, Y.H. and Soo, K.S., 1996). Wong-Fillmore cited by Skehan (1989) found that Mexican children in English-speaking school in California used social and cognitive strategies when interacting with Native American children thus improving their English Language proficiency. Crismore, Karen Ngeok and Soo (1996) studied the learning attitude of both Malaysian University students and university teachers towards English. Although there are a limited number of studies on the target language, a literature review on a few related researches will be discussed in Section 2.3. These together with the researcher's study are hoped to be able to benefit or assist other teachers in helping their students especially the Malays in acquiring the English Language and in upgrading the level of the English Language in Malaysia.

1.1.1 SUBJECTS OF STUDY

The subjects of this study are from an urban secondary school in Malacca. They comprise forty Form 1 Malay students from a total of one hundred and twenty-five Form 1 students in the school. The average age of this group is 13 years. Thirty-five of the forty respondents have completed their six years of primary education from seven primary schools in Malacca with two each from Selangor and Perak and one from Johore. Of the thirty-five respondents here in Malacca, two of them have studied a year in Remove Class as they were from Chinese-medium schools.

The instrument to obtain the data in this study was a set of questionnaire and a structured interview prepared in both Bahasa Melayu and English. The forty respondents were given a set of questionnaire and a structured interview in Bahasa Melayu to answer. Sections A and B of the questionnaire cover the respondent's educational and family background; exposure to the English Language and their attitudes towards the language. Section C is the structured interview, which covers the respondents' abilities to understand and respond to the teaching and learning activities in English and the strategies they normally used when learning English. The respondents were presented with the Bahasa Melayu version of the questionnaire and structured interview to ensure the respondents' complete understanding of the questions in the questionnaire and structured interview.

The findings from the questionnaire and structured interview were triangulated by an informal observation by the researcher on 15 selected respondents from the three proficiency levels. The researcher interviewed these respondents individually to obtain replies to the questions from Section C of the structured interview. The researcher noted each respondent's answers, interactions and behavioural reactions to the questions asked. Informal observation was carried out to obtain a more authentic feedback of the different respondents' reactions, feelings and attitudes when dealing with the questions.

After the respondents had completed the questionnaire and structured interview, and the observation had been carried out, the data were analysed. Each response was tabulated in numerical order and the responses calculated in percentage and also by using SPSS. Through these respondents' responses, the findings would provide answers to the research questions (See Section 1.3)

1.1.2 THE CHANGING ROLE OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS

The role of English in Malaysia has changed from a second language to a foreign language when the national language was given a high status especially since the 1970s as stated in Sunday Star Education (2001:5). This change of role has provided students with less opportunity and need to use English. This problem is further compounded by "the shortage of quality English teachers, an examination-oriented curriculum and a poor attitude towards the language" as reported in Sunday Star Education (2001:5). The changing role of the language can be chronologically seen in an article entitled **Brief History of the English Language Teaching System**, taken from Sunday Star Education (2001:5):

- Post Merdeka (1957 – 1970) – English Language was only taught in the English-medium national-type primary schools
- 1971 – English medium primary schools are converted to Malay-medium ones so English was a compulsory second language. Exposure to the language in schools was reduced to 200 – 300 minutes per week.
- 1977 – A communicational syllabus was implemented for upper secondary schools but many teachers complained it was lacking in basic grammatical foundation.
- 1982 – The New Primary School Curriculum (KBSR) was introduced where language teachers reported having difficulties in teaching since students were not streamed according to their levels of ability.
- 1988 – The Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM) was introduced which saw English as an optional requirement for admission into local institutions. These institutions also set their own levels of English requirement and designed their own English programmes.

- 1995 – English was not compulsory for passing the national public school examination (SPM)

Since this is the present scenario, many students especially those in the secondary schools are adopting a lackadaisical attitude towards the English Language. However, the then Malaysian Prime Minister, Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir recently urged all Malays to master the English Language. This is evident in the newspaper report from *The Star* (2001:2), where Dr Mahathir pointed out that as a whole, the Malays will be left out and become victims of the information technology (IT) age if they do not master the English Language. Dr Mahathir further reminded the Malays that by mastering English, they would not be "any less Malay or Islamic." Dr Mahathir also pointed out that in order to succeed, the Malays need to master the knowledge of IT and attract many to learn the language of the successful race. Dr Mahathir pointed out "only those (Malays) who master English would progress and succeed in the IT era." Dr Mahathir further reiterated his stand by informing that the Japanese, French and the Chinese who recognised this fact had started learning English enthusiastically.

On the education front in a similar report (*The Star* (2001:2)), the former Prime Minister also expressed his regrets as he found it upsetting to see Malay children performing below the required standard despite the Government's effort in helping the Malays with "more than sufficient" resources. In the same report, Dr Mahathir further stressed that the Malays themselves know that "many Malay children are lazy and uninterested in studying" and these Malay children preferred to loaf around. In this report, to support his stand, Dr Mahathir also pointed out that this habit was evident especially among the Malay male students even at tertiary level where the population of university students would be halved if not for the number of female students.

To address the decline in the standard of English, the government has decided to allow English to be used for selected subjects at institutions of higher learning. The Ministry of Education has also decided to upgrade the level of English at the school level through the KBSM English Language Programme. The KBSM English Language Programme has tried to provide a range of teaching and learning styles to suit students of differing abilities and levels of proficiency. It has also sought to reconcile seemingly opposing approaches to language learning – the 'academic' with the 'practical'. It aims to lay a strong foundation for the acquisition of language, content areas and language skills while at the same time alerting teachers to the importance of integrating these content areas and skills to form a whole. In addition, the use of literary texts in the language lesson had been advocated to enrich language work by teachers and to provide interesting language in context. The KBSM English Language Programme is skill-based, with emphasis on the integration of the four language skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing in the learning of the language aimed at enhancing the students' linguistic and communicative competence. The KBSM English Language Programme attempts to combine the best of both the 'academic' and 'practical' approach to make students proficient in all aspects of the language.

1.2 RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The researcher had for many years observed many students regardless of age and race resort to their mother tongue or first language when learning the English Language. From the researcher's observation of the students over a period of six months in 2001, it showed that the first language played a major role among most of the students when learning English. The researcher had observed all these Malay students who spoke

Bahasa Melayu when interacting with their friends and teachers while the Indians talked to their peers in Tamil or Bahasa Melayu and the Chinese used Chinese or Bahasa Melayu. These students, mostly from the low proficiency group were also seen to be automatically and unconsciously translating the instructions or activities in English Language into Bahasa Melayu or asking their peers or teachers for clarification in their first language after a task was given. In view of these observations, the researcher hypothesises that the mother tongue or first language plays a significant role in the students' acquisition of the second language. This study would identify the factors caused by the influence of the first language (Bahasa Melayu), among forty Form 1 Malay students in the learning of English Language, which is their second language.

This study focuses on the process rather than the product of their learning. The study also aims to find the common and normal strategies employed by the respondents in order to understand given instructions and tasks. The discussions on the extent of this influence and the strategies employed by the respondents will be further dealt with in Chapter 4. The findings will help English Language teachers to plan and implement strategies to facilitate the teaching of English to the students.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Why do the Malay students resort to their first language (Bahasa Melayu) during the learning process (of English Language)? This question has been of interest to the researcher for many years. The researcher noted that students kept falling back on their first language during the learning of English Language. Today, in this society, many people including students in this millennium are interested in the end product

but not in the process involved in acquiring knowledge. So it is not surprising to see students seeking the easy way out when learning the English Language. The question is whether teachers should encourage them to use this method or not! In order to address these issues, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Will an increase in the contact hours for English in National-type Primary Schools improve the Malay students' proficiency in the language?
2. Does the L1 of Malay students of all proficiency levels influence the learning of the English Language?
3. How does the socio-economic background of Malay students affect their learning of English in school?
4. Does a positive attitude of the Malay students help them in learning the language?
5. Do Malay students of different proficiency level of English employ different types of strategies in their learning of the language?

The researcher sets out to obtain the answers to these five research questions through a questionnaire and a structured interview in Bahasa Melayu, the first language or mother tongue of forty Form 1 Malay students in Malacca. The analysis of the findings will be discussed in Chapter 4.

1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study provides primary considerations to the learners' needs in the learning of English. The learners need to understand the importance of learning English so that learning will be more meaningful to them. This is due to the fact that learners usually have a set mind towards a certain subject as opposed to other subjects. The case of

learning a certain subject manifests itself in the learners' attitude towards it. Thus, if they set their priorities in the learning process, they will be able to take control of their own learning and only seek help of their peers and their teachers when the need arises in pursuit of academic excellence. In this way, the acquisition of English will be more spontaneous with the learners employing different strategies in order to achieve the desired end. This mastery of the language by the learners will upgrade the standard of English in Malaysia.

This study also aims to provide answers to English Language teachers on the influence of Bahasa Melayu in the learning of English especially in the classroom. If indeed the transfer of the first language does affect the learning of English as a second language, learners should be discouraged from thinking in the first language and translating into English mentally before speaking or writing to avoid high incidences of errors in both skills. This can be ascertained through the strategies employed by the learners to overcome their problems. With this knowledge, it is hoped that the perception and standard of the English Language among the students especially in this school will improve to at least 80% passes as compared to the 56% passes obtained by the Form 3 students during their Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) in the year 2000.

1.5 CONCLUSION

The call by the former Prime Minister in January 2001 that students from primary to tertiary levels should be more competent in English has brought about an urgent need not only by the students but also by their parents and all other concerned and interested parties that students should make a “concerted move” to improve their English proficiency. This is especially so in semi-urban areas, that is, areas which are on the fringe of the urban and rural boundary and rural areas which see a lower level of proficiency in the language. With globalisation and the call by the former Prime Minister himself to every Malaysian student to improve their competence in English, these show the importance of the English Language to the nation. Thus, Malaysians from all walks of life should lend a helping hand in realising the nation's Vision 2020. It is hoped that this study, which focuses on the strategies employed by the students when learning the English Language would benefit the students of all age groups and also ESL teachers in Malaysia.