CHAPTER 1

1.1 INTRODUCTION

1.1.1 Background to the study

Sarawak is one of the thirteen states in Malaysia. As such, it follows the national educational policy. The Education Act 1961 which provided for the use of Bahasa Malaysia to replace English as the main medium of instruction was extended to Sarawak. This integrated the state and national education systems. With effect from 1st January, 1977, the State Education Department converted all government and government-aided English primary schools into national primary schools. Bahasa Malaysia was introduced in stages (starting from Primary One level) as the main medium of instruction. By 1989, all national schools in Sarawak up to Form Six level were using Bahasa Malaysia as the main medium of instruction. With the implementation of Bahasa Malaysia to replace English as the official language and the medium of instruction in all government schools in Malaysia, English became a second language.

The year 2020 has been targeted for Malaysia to achieve a fully developed status. A good command of English among Malaysians is necessary to achieve Vision 2020. Malaysians, particularly managers, need to be proficient in English so that they can communicate well in every important aspect. They neeed to be able to deliver speeches, conduct negotiations and prepare drafts of agreements effectively in English. Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohammad, the Prime Minister of Malaysia points out, "If they do not reach that level of proficiency, especially in international business, our trading will be confined to domestic transactions. These restrictions will be a disadvantage to us" (New Straits Times, Saturday, 3rd December, 1994: 2). As a result of the the fast economic development of Malaysia and the need to attract foreign investment on a large scale, a wider use of English is needed. English is the language of science, trade, communication

and technology. Therefore, Malaysians need to be competent in the language to keep abreast with current developments and advancement. Zaidan (1993:9) states that "at present English is recovering and reasserting itself .... Its prestige has been regained and Malaysian are improving as far as communicating in English is concerned."

Bahasa Malaysia is the dominant language in Malaysia and the Malaysian ESL learners are more exposed to the reduced variety of English used locally. George (1979:81) points out that "for the Malay and Chinese students, their verbs are not inflected for tense or person." It may be unrealistic for second language learners to aim at perfect native competence but their levels of proficiency should be reasonably good to ensure intelligibility and effective international communication.

Realizing the importance of English to help stimulate the nation's growth, the Malaysian Government is taking steps to improve the standard of English in the country. The existing Universities and University College Act will be amended. A Bill will be tabled in Parliament soon to provide for the use of English as a medium of instruction in local institutions of higher learning, in addition to Bahasa Malaysia. The Private Universities Bill which provides for the establishment of private universities in Malaysia will also be introduced. Experienced and qualified lecturers for the local and private universities can be recruited from established universities in other countries, particularly from English-speaking countries. If Malaysia is to be the centre for higher education in the ASEAN region, there is no doubt that English with its international status will have to be the principal medium of instruction.

MARA Institute of Technology (ITM) is a well-known institution of higher learning in Malaysia. It aims to train Bumiputera professionals in the fields of business, commerce, science and technology. It also strives to achieve academic excellence in education and professional training.

The ITM campus in Sarawak (where this study is conducted) is one of the nine branch campuses of ITM. It was set up in July 1973 with an initial intake of ninety-four students. The first four Diploma courses offered in this branch campus were Accountancy, Business and Management, Public Administration and Applied Science. ITM Sarawak has expanded tremendously over the years. By January 1995, its student enrollment reached 2123. The courses offered have been modified and new courses are also introduced. At present, ITM Sarawak offers full-time Diploma courses such as Accountancy, Banking, Business Administration, Secretarial Science and Public Administration. Precommerce and Prescience are the two Prediploma courses offered. Working Bumiputera adults can enrol for various courses under its off-campus and long-distance education programmes. The former includes Advanced Diplomas in Accountancy and Business Studies (Marketing), Diploma in Accountancy and Certificate in Computer Programming. The latter consists of Diplomas in Business Studies, Banking and Public Administration. Its academic staff are encouraged to carry out research projects, a number of which have been successfully carried out. They are also involved in various consultancy projects in collaboration with the State Government.

The Precommerce course (from which the subjects for this study come) is a two-part course. Each part is taught over one semester. Students must obtain either Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Vocational SPM or their equivalents with at least three credits (one of which is Bahasa Malaysia) in order to qualify for admission to this course. Priority for admission is given to students with passes in English and Mathematics. Upon successfully completing the Precommerce course, students can take up Diploma courses such as Accountancy, Public Administration, Business Studies or Banking. As only students who have obtained at least five credits (three of which are Malay, English and Mathematics) at SPM, Vocational SPM or their equivalent levels can be admitted directly into the Diploma courses, those who do not qualify for this need to complete the Precommerce course successfully first. This is a preparatory course which prepares students for admission to the Diploma courses.

1.1.2 The teaching and assessment of English in MARA Institute of Technology Sarawak

English is a compulsory subject in ITM and the teaching of English is given a special emphasis. The Precommerce English course is divided into Part One (ENL 030) and Part Two (ENL 080). Each part is taught over one semester which lasts fourteen weeks. The course aims to remedy the students' weakness in English and to raise the students' English proficiency level. Both ENL 030 and ENL 080 comprise seven hours of lessons a week. These lessons include reading comprehension, grammar, writing and some oral work. Most of the teaching hours (four hours a week) are spent on the teaching of grammar. The allocation of marks in the progress tests and final examinations is reading comprehension 40%, grammar 40% and writing 20%.

ITM stresses the importance of mastering grammar in both the teaching and assessment of English. This is because students need to have a good knowledge of grammar to ensure proficiency in the language. Grammatical errors can interfere with intelligibility making communication less precise and less definite. In certain cases, ambiguity and misinterpretation may result, for example, if someone sends a message, "He back home at seven o'clock", the receiver may find it difficult to decide the time of the event referred to. It may be in the past, present or future.

Part One Precommerce students who score 3.00 point or 65% and above in all subjects are directly admitted to Part One Diploma courses. Only a few of them qualify for this each semester. The majority (including even those who fail their ENL 030 English course) go to Part Two Precommerce course. After successfully completing the Precommerce English course, the students are promoted to do Foundation English One and Two followed by Intermediate English. These courses include reading comprehension, grammar, writing, dictation, listening comprehension and some oral lessons. Advanced ESL students are required to do English for Special Purposes (ESP) courses such as Report Writing, Business Correspondence, Interviews and Meetings. Thus, ITM students are expected not only to master the correct grammatical usage but also to be able to use English competently in their working environment.

1.1.3 The scope of study

This study tried to identify, describe and categorize written verb-form errors found in three tenses (past, present and future tenses). A taxonomy was set up to describe the error category. Dulay and Burt's scheme (1982) was used as a guideline to categorize the errors under omission, addition, misformation and ordering. The researcher also tried to trace the sources of the errors identified. Interlingual errors were traced to the mother tongue (Bahasa Melayu Sarawak) and were related to features of the mother tongue carried over to the target language (English). Bahasa Melayu Sarawak is the local variety of the Malay language which is closely related to Bahasa Malaysia. These two varieties of the same language exerted similar influence on the learners. Intralingual or developmental errors which were related to the difficulties found within the target language were also discussed in this study.

This cross-sectional study classified the causes of errors based on an examination of the errors made at a particular point in time. The limitation of such a study is pointed out by Swain (1978:125), " By looking at an error at a particular point in time, one becomes falsely secure in labeling its cause. By examining the changes in errors over time, it becomes obvious that few errors can be exclusively related to one cause. The changes are not random but the causes cannot always be unambiguously identified nor can they be considered in isolation. Changes are due to a complex interaction of the influence of the native language with the influence of difficulties inherent in the second language itself." Despite the limitations of such a study, it is still a useful indicator of the main problem areas of the students. This knowledge is of practical use for pedagogical purposes as it allows the teacher to focus on the main areas of difficulty. Suitable remedial work can also be tailored to meet the students' needs.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out with the following objectives:

a) to identify the written verb-form errors found in three tenses (past, present and future tenses) made by Sarawakian Malay students learning English as a second language;

b) to classify the errors identified;

c) to set up a taxonomy to describe the errors based on tense and nature of error categories;

d) to seek explanations for the errors made; and

e) to provide recommendations that are valuable for pedagogical purposes.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Common errors are repeatedly made by learners of English as a second language. Analysis of such errors is valuable to the teachers and curriculum planners. "The relevance of error analysis to ESL teaching and material preparation makes it a useful area of investigation" (Lim 1976:23). Error analysis is important because information about errors provides important feedback to the teachers and learners (Corder 1973 and Svartvik 1973).

1.3.1 Feedback to curriculum designers

Error analysis reveals the difficult elements for students so that curriculum developers know which areas to focus on in teaching materials. According to Johansson (1974:248), "An analysis of the learner's errors gives us evidence of his competence in the foreign language. We also gain valuable information concerning the learner's difficulties at different stages. Such information is important for the planning of courses and constructions of teaching material." Errors made by a particular group of learners provide insights into the inherent problems faced by the particular group in learning the second language. Error analysis is useful to plan programmes for the group under investigation. It can also facilitate the planning of similar programmes for similar groups of students in the future. This is based on the assumption that "students of the same age

and with similar language and teaching backgrounds are likely to have similar problems" (Abbot 1981:21).

1.3.2 Feedback to teachers

Teachers can evaluate and improve their teaching methods based on an analysis of the common errors made by their students. Etherton (1977:69) points out, "The errors may show a teacher areas where his teaching has not been effective. A systematic study of errors may lead to improved teaching methods through a greater awareness of the nature and causes of the mistake which pupils make." The error analysis researcher can suggest modifications in teaching techniques or order of presentation. Difficult words, structures or verb forms in the syllabus can be deferred. Students' errors show "how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently what remains for him to learn" (Corder 1967). Error analysis is particularly useful for teachers to design remedial work (Corder 1973, Wyatt 1973, Cohen 1975 and Mckeating 1981). It shows the common weakness in which the learners need help and indicates which learning items require special attention or extra practice. The teacher can inform the learner that his hypothesis is wrong and provide him with the right source of information or data to form a more adequate concept of a rule within the target language.

1.3.3 Feedback to students

Common errors that are identified need to be brought to the attention of the learners. Corder (1967) points out that "errors are indispensable to the learner himself because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. It is a way the learner has of testing the hypotheses about the nature of the language he is learning." Error correction is important because a learner cannot learn unless he knows where he has deviated (Allwright 1975). Errors need to be corrected to prevent "fossilization". The concept of fossilization refers to a mechanism which is assumed to exist in the latent psychological structure. "Fossilizable linguistic phenomena are linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a particular NL (native language) will tend to keep in their IL (interlanguage) relative to a particular TL (target language) no matter what the age of

the learner or amount of explanation and instruction he receives in the TL" (Selinker 1972:215).

1.3.4 Arguments for the present study

A number of error analysis studies (Suffian 1968, Mohamed Dom 1969, Chee 1969, Yap 1973, Lim 1976, Tunku Mohaini 1983, Menon 1983, Quah 1986, Lee 1986, Nair 1990 and Martin 1992) were carried out in Peninsular Malaysia. Only Nair's (1990) study focused on verb-form errors. George (1972:21) states, "The verb is the central feature of the sentence in English and to a large extent, the grammatical form of the sentence has to be fitted to its verb.... A study of verbs and associated sentence constructions should therefore give some picture of the degree of system or the degree of reliability in prediction of syntax which the language offers." Godman (1982) stresses on the centrality of the verb in syntax from examining the structure of the patterns of English clauses and sentences. He points out that "the mastery of the meaning and use of verbs is the most difficult area of language learning" (Godman 1982:37). Nair's (1990) study on verb structure errors was based on data collected from Malay students in Peninsular Malaysia but this study was based on a different sampling of written data collected from Sarawakian Malay students. It might perhaps contribute new insights to the field of error analysis as the students were from a different geographical, linguistic and cultural background. The researcher hoped that recommendations made would have valuable implications for the teaching and learning of English as a second language.