CHAPTER 5

5.1 CONCLUSIONS

5.1.1 Pedagogical considerations

This study only on written verb-form errors showed a high frequency of errors occurring in the use of the English tenses and subject-verb agreement. These are fundamental grammatical aspects of English which have to be mastered to ensure proficiency in the language. As such, this study supports Nair's (1990) view "that all may not be well with ESL learning strategies of the students. There appears a need to study the effectiveness of the teaching strategies used to help students to learn English" (Nair 1990: 151-152). There is a need for new learning and teaching strategies in the field of ESL.

According to Celce-Murcia (1977:2), "Experienced teachers will agree that the English tense-aspect system (hereafter ETAS) is one of the most difficult areas of English grammar for the nonnative speaker to master. Beginning and sometimes experienced teachers complain that they do not understand the system and are at a loss to know how to teach it effectively. Such feelings often persist even after the teacher has consulted numerous textbooks, reference grammars and linguistic studies dealing specifically with this topic." This can be due to a number of reasons.

First of all, the ETAS may be different from the system used in the learners' native language. It is complex and the learners, regardless of their mother tongue, will find it difficult to master. Most ESL teachers (including lecturers) and textbook writers have

difficulty in explaining and teaching the ETAS effectively. Even if they understand and can explain the workings of the ETAS, effective classroom material, exercises and strategies are not readily available.

The Malay students have difficulty in understanding the concept of time (such as past, present and future) expressed by the ETAS system. English also uses contextual clues for time reference. Therefore, the English tense system appears redundant to the Malay learners. The verbs in Malay do no change to reflect changes in time. Instead, contextual clues are used. This structural difference in verb-forms between English and Malay makes it difficult for the Malay students to master the ETAS. This interlingual factor is one source of the errors made. However, the complexity of the language itself also causes difficulties for the students. It is thus concluded that the errors occur due to an interaction of interlingual and intralingual factors.

According to McGuire (1980:13), "Choice of verb tense depends on three elements:

a. the time at which the question is asked;

b. the point in time of the event that the question is about; and

c. the duration of the event."

Verb tenses and aspects exist as a cohesive system. If the students can understand this time-aspect relationship, it is easier to understand the concepts of past, present and future. In addition to tenses, many students also make errors in subject-verb agreement. According to Wiener (1981:164), "For many students, errors in agreement will be the most persistent and its principles the most evanescent." Therefore, students need help in mastering subject-verb agreement in addition to tenses. Suitable exercises need to be devised to ensure successful teaching and learning in these areas.

ESL teachers and lecturers do not find it easy to explain the uses of the various tenses. This is because every tense in English (except for the 'used to' and 'going to' tenses), has more than one use. The so-called 'simple present' tense can be used to show (a) a habit (example, I take breakfast at 7:00 a.m.); or (b) 'real present' time, (example, I like to eat satay) or (c) future time + someone's plan. (example, We go to KL tomorrow); or (d) future time without such plan (example 'ask' in He'll come if you ask him.) Moreover, some tenses overlap in their uses, for example, 'I have lived in Kuching for two years' and 'I have been living in Kuching for two years' do not show any difference in their meanings.

The teaching material and textbooks used for teaching the Precommerce ESL classes (on which this study is based) are not effective. The outdated grammar books are meant for students with a British background. Thus, they are culturally inappropriate for our Malaysian students. If the students are given a passage that begins with, "It is a very foggy day in London" (Eckersley and Macaulay, Book 2 1986:82), they have difficulty in understanding the semantics. They have no personal experience of what a foggy day is. In classroom presentations, examples on the use of certain tenses may be given as unrelated strings of sentences. For example, in a lesson on the present continous tense, the students are presented with sample sentences such as,"I am writing on the blackboard. You are learning grammar. Tom is reading his book. The flower is dying. We are singing, 'Ten Green Bottles'. They are fighting." (Eckersley and Macaulay, Book 2 1986:48).

Some of these sentences are not relevant at all to the given situations. Contextualization is important to stimulate and motivate our students. An item that is practised meaninglessly in a grammar class does not enable the students to transfer the knowledge and skills in spontaneous production tasks. More effective teaching material needs to be used.

5.1.2 Educational policy

The ability of ESL lecturers to explain or teach the language has been questioned. While he was speaking at the opening of a medical education meeting for the Western Pacific region in Kuala Lumpur, Education Minister, Datuk Amar Dr. Sulaiman Haji Daud commented on the lack of the necessary skills of some university lecturers to impart knowledge to their students even though they had obtained their doctorate degrees. This was because they were not trained in teaching methodology (Sunday Tribune, September 25, 1994:1). The Minister was referring this inadequacy to lecturers in general but there is no exception for English lecturers. In the past, lecturers had been recruited from graduates in other disciplines such as Economics, Geography or Science to teach English because of the acute shortage of qualified English teachers. Even though they may be well-versed in the subjects that they major in, they may not have an adequate grasp of the subject matter that they have been assigned to teach. Billows (1977:180) notes that "where the number of skilled teachers available is small, no general improvement in language teaching can be expected unless steps are taken to support and improve the teacher."

5.1.3 Administrative set-up

Favourable teaching and learning conditions are necessary for effective language teaching to take place. The unsuccessful teaching and learning of English as a second language show that conducive teaching and learning conditions are not readily available. In ITM Sarawak, due to the dire shortage of English lecturers, the Precommerce classes (on which this survey is based) consist of about eighty students in each class. It is difficult to conduct effective teaching under such unfavourable teaching and learning conditions. Individual attention cannot be given to slow learners and those with behaviour problems in large classes. Small classes are more effective as the teacher is better able to direct, assist and listen.

5.2 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.2.1 Pedagogical considerations

Lecturers should provide meaningful contexts for successful language teaching to take place. Grammar should be taught in context, for example, McIntosh (1979) points out that the teacher is not teaching effectively if he holds up a book and asks, "Is this a book?" and requires the students to say, "Yes, it is." followed by "No, it isn't." There is a lot of emphasis on the communicative syllabus for schools but teachers and lecturers should be wary of failing to use language to communicate appropriately in classroom presentations. The second language teacher or lecturer should ensure that the target language is used appropriately in classroom presentation to communicate facts.

McIntosh (1979:235) emphasizes that "contextualization is not merely a nice decoration but a necessary integral part of any effective language lesson." The context must be suitable for the structural point taught. It should take into consideration the students' interests and needs. The presentation of a new tense is most effective if the lecturer can personalize it by relating it to the students' lives. The traditional way of teaching which relies heavily on textbooks may not work. Lecturers, particularly ESL lecturers, need to be more creative and innovative. "As far as possible, sentences which have real meaning for the learners should be given to illustrate any principles of grammar. We should never teach paradigms or naked verb forms without meaning, even sample sentences should have relevance to the life of the pupils or the situation of the classroom, or the imagined situation of a story. No piece of language material which cannot be absorbed should be given to the pupils" (Billows 1977:168).

As each tense may have more than one use, "to avoid confusing our students, we should be careful to distinguish very clearly between the various tenses and their various uses, and

to teach each use of each tense in situations and contexts in which it is appropriate" (Hill 1967:119). Each use of a particular tense should be treated as a separate teaching point as it represents a separate learning effort for the students.

A new tense can be introduced by giving demonstrations. The teacher, however, should suit his actions to the tense he is using, for example, when he says, "I am walking", he should be still doing so. Care should be taken to ensure that a particular tense is not taught in a situation in which a different tense ought to be used. The teacher should not say,"I am closing the door" when he has stopped performing the action. In this case, the present perfect tense, "I have closed the door" is correct. Oral practice in contextualized situations can be given after the presentation. Choral or group practices are more suitable for big classes. Instead of giving mechanicals drills to students, it is more useful to introduce meaningful and varied drills. For example, the teacher can put up his hand and the students chorus, "You have put up your hands or the teacher opens the door and the students chorus, "You have opened the door." This oral practice can be followed by reading comprehension with reinforcement exercises on the tense taught. Written questions are given to test the students' comprehension. Writing practice on the new tense can be given, for example, the students can copy sentences from a substitution table, choosing suitable combinations. Pictures can also be given for which students write suitable captions. When he presents tenses which cannot be demonstrated or practised in concrete situations, the teacher can create verbal situations instead of giving demonstrations. For example, if he wants to introduce the tense "will have been doing" assuming that "will have done" and "have/has been doing" have already been taught, the teacher can begin like this:

"I came to Kuching in 1990. Now it is 1995. How long have I been living in Kuching? Yes, five years. I have been living in Kuching for five years. Next year will be 1996. Next year, I will have been living in Kuching for six years. Yes, I will have been living

(stressing will) because 1996 is in the future. Now I have been living here for five years, but in 1996, I will have been living here for six years."

These can be followed by oral practice by the students. The teacher can stimulate the students' responses, for example, " I have been here for two days. Tomorrow?" The students take the cue and say "Tomorrow you will have been here for three days" and so on.

An item that is easily available such as the student information sheet can be used to teach simple tenses.

Name	State	Town	Native Language	Hobbies
Alfian Mohammad	Sarawak	Kuching	Bahasa Melayu	Fishing, swimming
Catherine Sawi	Sarawak	Sri Aman	Iban	Cooking
Mohamed Ali	Selangor	Banting	Bahasa Melayu	Stamp collecting

Such information can be used to practise and review certain tenses, for example:

a. simple present: Who comes from Banting?

Does Catherine speak Iban or Malay?

b. simple past: When did you first start to collect stamps?

Who taught you how to swim?

c. simple future: Will you go back to Banting this semester holiday?

Will you work in Sri Aman after you complete your studies?

"The learning of ETAS should take place in context. The teacher must, first of all, establish the appropriate temporal axis of orientation and, secondly, provide contexts that allow for natural practice of the form involved" (Celce-Murcia 1979:6).

Bull's framework posits four axes of time orientation: present, past, future and future-in-the-past. Each axis has a neutral or basic form and two possible marked forms - one signalling a time before and the other signalling a time after the basic time of the axis. The time axes and the forms in English are as follow:

Axis of Orientation	A time before the basic axis time	Basic axis time corresponding to the moment of reference	A time after the basic axis time
future time	He will have done it. (future perfect)	He will do it. (simple future)	no distinct form; rare usage
present time	He has done it. (present perfect)	He does it. (simple present)	He is going to do it.
past time	He had done it (past perfect)	He did it. (simple past)	He was going to do it.
future-in-the-past time	He would have done it.	He would do it.	no distinct form-rare usage.

The Bull system is particularly useful in the teaching of mixed tenses as it gives the students some ideas of the time reference.

Suitable charts with time clock may be used to teach tenses. Such charts can be used for the initial presentation of one tense or for the review of one or more tenses. However,

there are limitations with these charts, especially in the presentation of more complicated tenses such as the perfect or progressive tenses. An imaginary biography which gives details of someone's past, present and future life may be given to teach more advanced forms. Schemas can be written in note form. The students need to expand the notes into full sentences. "Such schemas place events in a definite time-space context, so that the tense of the verb can be seen in its context" (McGuire 1980:13). Students can be encouraged to write their own shcemas. An example of such a schema is given:

The life of Aminah Ahmad

2-10-1969	born in Kuching
1976	entered Primary One
1982	studied in secondary school
1985	obtained Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP) - Grade B
1987	obtained Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) - Grade 1
1989	obtained Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) - full certificate
July 1989	entered Universiti Malaya
July 1992	graduated with B.A. (Hons.)
August 1992	worked as a temporary teacher
now (1995)	joins ITM as a lecturer
1996	will pursue further studies
1997	will graduate with a masters degree
1997-2001	will serve ITM
2001	will do Ph.D.

Simulations can be created out of such schemas. The teacher/lecturer can set the time reference, for example, "1969". It is possible to introduce role-play. One of the students can pretend to be Aminah and the others can ask her questions in the second person, for example, "When will you do your Ph.D.?" The time of the clock can be used to write schemas. Schemas can also be written based on events in detective stories. Many

simulated situations can be created. "The main point is that time-tense alignment exercises should be used in such a way that they are amusing, lively and involving for the students" (McGuire 1980:15).

Error correction is a useful technique to teach grammatical rules to students. Students' written compositions which contain common grammatical errors can be used. The names can be erased and photocopies can be distributed to the students. They have to identify and correct the errors. Group work may be used for error correction exercises. Group work is useful in teaching big classes as it can reduce the burden of big stacks of marking. Celce-Murcia (1980) devises a technique to promote group work. Students are given homework exercises. The teacher checks to see that all students have completed the work before dividing them into groups. The students compare their responses and discuss their disagreements. Then, they come to a consensus and this is recorded on a clean exercise sheet by the recorder in each group. After that, the teacher corrects the response from the group. He provides the feedback and finds out what the general problems are. Follow-up exercises can be given to deal with residual problems. Instead of correcting eighty exercises, the lecturer using this group work method reduces the marking load. This interactive method of learning grammar which is more enjoyable to the students is recommended. Creating an awareness of the common verb-form errors made and explaining the proper grammatical rules as well as explaining the time axis as presented by Bull can help the students to understand the ETAS better.

The teachers or lecturers should provide the proper time axis before the students begin any form of writing, for example, "These are the things Ahmad does every day. Write a paragraph about them" or "Write in a narrative form the things that Ali did yesterday." Students should be given the opportunities to practise each of the four English time axes as much as possible. Celce-Murcia (1977:11) suggests that "the teaching sequence should

probably be: the present axis, the past axis, the future axis, and then the future-in-the past axis." Billows (1977:168) points out that, "as the present is most real and nearest to the speaker, the present tenses are most used and are therefore usually taught and revised first."

As subject-verb agreement proves to be an area of difficulty for ESL students, Wiener (1981:153) suggests that "those who violate the system of agreement will require instruction in the differences between the '-s'/'-es' inflection for the verb and for the noun and will need to develop a sense of when to use the '-s' inflection on the end of the verbs. A good syllabus provides instruction before this in subject-verb recognition so you have a foundation in key grammatical concepts upon which to build. "The teacher or lecturer can explain the concept of singularity and plurality in nouns by pointing out the differences in sentences such as "The boys laugh." and "The boy laughs." The students should be made to realize that there are some irregular nouns that do not end their plurals with -s. Adequate time should be spent to point out that a plural noun (which itself may or may not end in "-s") requires a stem-form verb after it in the simple present tense. Conversely, a singular noun is itself not inflected but requires a "-s" inflection for the verb that comes after it in the simple present tense. The task of the teacher or lecturer is to establish the concept of agreement in the students' minds. The students should understand this concept of subject-verb agreement and realize that no matter how far the subject is separated from the verb, this rule of subject-verb agreement must be adhered to.

5.2.2 Educational policy and administrative set-up

It is recommended that lecturers (including those from ITM) should be given in-service training to keep them in touch with new teaching methodologies. There should be special courses available, especially for ESL lecturers, particularly for those who do not major in the language. The ETAS which is the main area of the students' difficulty is complicated

and difficult to explain. ESL lecturers must have a clear idea of the structure and usage of the grammar. They have to be well-equipped with the knowledge and skill to be able to explain how the language functions and how the ETAS works. Ideally, a language class should be kept small in size for effective teaching to take place. It is thus suggested that the lecturer-student ratio be improved by reducing class size and increasing lecturer intake. However, due to the constraints of a tight budget, this may not be easily achieved. Administrative support for group teaching of students particularly for big classes may provide an alternative solution.

There is no doubt that there is room for improvement in the teaching of English as a second language. Besides providing our lecturers with the proper training in new teaching methodologies, there is an urgent need to review our teaching materials and textbooks as well as teaching methods to ensure that they have our students' interest in mind. The Malaysian Government's decision to amend the Universities and University College Act to allow the use of English as an additional medium of instruction shows that the language is regaining its importance in the country. English is the lingua franca of the corporate world. Therefore, Malaysians need to master this international language to keep up with the latest developments in this age of computers and telecommunications.