

## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### 1.0 Introduction

The study of language errors made by L2 learners has been a subject of interest among linguists and language teachers. In the 1940s – 1960s, errors were deemed to be products of native language habits that interfered with the learning of the L2 (Lado, 1957; Politzer, 1965). This approach, known as the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, was used to predict errors in the second language by comparing L1 and L2.

A new paradigm in the late 1960s saw the emergence of the Error Analysis Hypothesis which focused on the errors learners made. Instead of regarding the errors made by L2 learners as mainly interference of native language habits, the Error Analysis Hypothesis viewed errors as evidence of an underlying rule-governed system the learners had of L2. Corder (1967) regards errors as a necessary learning device while other linguists view them as a learner's strategy in gaining competence in the L2 (Richards, 1974; Corder, 1981; Gass and Selinker, 1993).

It is believed that a teacher's understanding of learners' errors would be of invaluable help and could prove to be a guide in the language instruction of L2 learners. Thus, this present study which employs a self-designed cloze test to elicit and quantify

data, seeks to investigate the subject-verb agreement errors in the interlanguage of ESL learners of a secondary school in Kuala Lumpur. It also attempts to identify possible causes of the errors made in order to give a better perspective of the nature of the subject-verb agreement errors.

### **1.1 Some background of English language teaching in Malaysia**

The teaching of the English language in Malaysia has seen three paradigms upon which classroom instruction is based. The emergence of the first paradigm in the 1950s advocated a behavioural approach to second language teaching and learning. The KLSM (Kurikulum Lama Sekolah Menengah) which was based on this approach focused on repeating patterned drills, memorization and grammatical accuracy.

The second paradigm, which was based on the cognitive approach, came into being in the 1960s. It emphasized analysis of grammatical structures and rules of the English language which resulted in the production of linguistic patterns (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). Thus, this approach recommended that learning of rules had to be attained before linguistic production to enable acquisition to take place.

The third paradigm, which was generated in the 1970s (Howatt, 1984), concentrated on the semantic nature of language. This brought about the KBSM in 1987 (Integrated Secondary School Curriculum) which adopted the communicative approach to language teaching in Malaysia.

To summarize, the teaching of English as a second language has seen a strong movement away from drilled-based to highly structured, grammar-based teaching and on to communicatively-based teaching which is an integral part of the present KBSM English language programme.

## **1.2 The KBSM English language programme**

English is taught in both the primary and secondary schools in Malaysia. Its position is that of a second language but in reality it is viewed as a foreign language (Chandrasegaran, 1981). The role of English is changing from being the language for education and official proceedings to being a tool of communication for international trade or for communicating with foreign visitors. It also provides an additional means of access to academic, professional and recreational materials. As such, the KBSM English language programme aims to provide the basis for these post secondary school needs.

The English language programme is part of the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum which seeks to develop the student intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically as well as to acquire the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing including grammar and vocabulary (Ministry of Education, 1988). Hence, the English language programme seeks the overall development of the student mentally, spiritually, emotionally and physically in addition to developing the language skills.

### **1.2.1 The role of grammar in the KBSM programme**

The KBSM syllabus recommends that the grammar items listed, to be taught in context and in a meaningful way (MOE: 1988). However, the communicative approach focuses on the use of language to promote fluency (Widdowson, 1978) and places less emphasis on the use of grammatical rules. On the other hand, Norasiah (1994) claims that grammar is not neglected in the KBSM programme but is taught in meaningful contexts to achieve fluency. McDonough and Shaw (1993) point out that accuracy is important and tasks assigned to students should be designed with accuracy as one of the objectives. However, educationists maintain that as long as students can communicate their ideas effectively, the purpose is served (Sunday Star, October 3, 1999).

In the researcher's opinion, since fluency in language is emphasized in communicative English, grammatical accuracy has taken a back seat. Moreover, in teaching communicative English, grammar is taught covertly, resulting in students having inadequate knowledge of the rules within the English language system. Based on the researcher's experience, it has been observed that since most students cannot differentiate between a verb and a noun, they may have difficulty in understanding the rule that a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb in English. Thus, this study attempts to explore the subject-verb agreement errors in the interlanguage of Form 1 students of a secondary school.

### **1.3 The research problem**

This study seeks to investigate the subject-verb agreement errors of the Present Tense form in the interlanguage of Form 1 students of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Menjalara, Kuala Lumpur. In the course of teaching, it has been observed that students make frequent errors in subject-verb agreement items which affect accuracy in students' writing. Hughes and Heah (1989) observe that mistakes in subject-verb agreement are very common. Hence, the focus of this study is on subject-verb agreement errors of the Present Tense form.

### **1.4 Purpose of the study**

The purposes of the study are as follows:

- i. to classify the Present Tense subject-verb agreement errors based on a self-designed framework;
- ii. to obtain quantitative data relating to the Present Tense subject-verb agreement errors based on a self-designed cloze test, and
- iii. to analyse the possible causes of the common interlingual and intralingual errors.

## 1.5 Scope of the study

This study focuses on the singular and plural pronouns and noun phrases, as well as countable and uncountable nouns with the Present Tense verb, as outlined in the self-designed framework in Chapter 3. The study attempts to seek answers to the following questions:

- i. What is the frequency of each type of error?
- ii. In which of the following areas do students make more errors?
  - (a) Singular subject + *does* or Plural subject + *do*
  - (b) Singular subject + *is/am* or Plural subject + *are*
  - (c) Singular subject + *has* or Plural subject + *have*
  - (d) Singular subject + *full verb* or Plural subject + *full verb*
  - (e) Countable nouns + *auxiliary verb* or Uncountable nouns + *auxiliary verb*
- iii. What are the possible causes of these common errors in terms of interlingual or intralingual factors?

## 1.6 Significance of the study

In the study of learners' errors, Corder (1973) suggests that errors are important to the teacher, the researcher and the learner. To the teacher, errors provide feedback as to the effectiveness of teaching materials and teaching techniques. As in the case of

subject-verb agreement items, errors made by students would indicate which areas have been inadequately learnt or taught and need further attention. The study would also enable the teacher to identify the problems ESL students face in learning subject-verb agreement items and to deal with these areas of difficulty.

The findings of the study would help the researcher, as well as materials producer and curriculum planners, to improve teaching materials and the syllabus. The feedback gleaned from the study would provide information for designing a remedial programme. Moreover, when causes of errors are identified, and the areas of difficulty noted, steps can be taken to overcome them. In addition, the study of errors also provides evidence of how language is learnt and acquired, and the strategies the learner employs in learning a second language.

As for the learner, the use of the incorrect subject-verb agreement forms reflects his /her learning strategies which he/she uses to test the hypotheses about the structures of the second language. Hence, the findings of the study would be of invaluable help and could also prove to be a guide to the language teacher, researchers and learners of English.

## **1.7 Definitions of terms**

The terms, as they are used in this study, are defined in the following order: the Present Tense, the subject of a sentence, pronouns, the verb, (full verbs and auxiliary verbs), subject-verb agreement and, countable and uncountable nouns.

### **1.7.1 The Present Tense**

In English grammar, the word 'Tense' denotes the Past and Present Tense forms (Zandvoort, 1975). In all the uses of the Present Tense, there is 'a basic association with the present moment of time' (Leech, 1971:1). Mc Evedy (1994) suggests that the Simple Present is usually used in six situations:

- i. Habitual time: I eat dinner at 6.00 p.m.
- ii. Universal time: The sun rises in the east.
- iii. Concurrent times: He is sad.
- iv. Frequency: They always play Scrabble.
- v. Future time: She goes to Malacca tomorrow.
- vi. Past time: Ali says Ching has left.

Since the Present Tense can be used in six different situations (Mc Evedy, 1994), is connected with the present moment of time (Leech, 1971), and is related to the subject and verb agreement usage, the researcher feels it is a very complex tense to master. Hence, learners often make errors in the use of the Present Tense.



### **1.7.2 The subject of a sentence**

Traditionally, the subject of a sentence is defined as being a noun or a noun equivalent (Gleason, 1963). In most cases, the subject is mentioned first. The most common kind of subject is a noun phrase, for example,

“*These cats*” in the sentence, “*These cats* are mine”.

The subject can also be formed by joining two nouns as in

“*Jack and John*” as seen in the sentence, “*Jack and John* are identical twins”.

The noun phrase can also be replaced by pronouns which are often used as the subject, for example, the pronoun “*He*” as in

“*He* has freckles on his cheeks”.

### **1.7.3 Pronouns**

A pronoun is a word which replaces a noun (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992). The word, ‘*He*’ is a pronoun which takes the place of a male. In this study, the focus is on ‘Personal pronouns’ which take the place of three persons as seen below:

### Personal Pronouns

First Person	<i>I, we</i>
Second Person	<i>You</i>
Third Person	<i>He, she, it, they</i>

Zandvoort (1975) looks at personal pronouns in terms of singularity and plurality.

Their distinct forms are as follows:

- a. for the singular (*I, he, she, it*), and
- b. for the plural (*we, they, you*).

#### 1.7.4 The verb

Hornby (in Soars and Soars, 1987:iii) points out that “the most important word in a sentence is the verb” and it constitutes a very complex area of the language. Palmer (1965) classifies verbs into full verbs and auxiliaries.

##### 1.7.4.1 Full verbs

Full verbs are lexical verbs (Quirk et al., 1993). They are either regular or irregular. A full verb consists of five forms. The forms for ‘take’ are *take* (base form), *takes* (-s form), *took* (past tense form), *taking* (-ing form or present participle form) and *taken* (-en form or past participle form). Since the focus of this study is on the Present Tense subject-verb agreement, the relevant forms are the base form and the -s form.

#### 1.7.4.2 Auxiliary verbs

Auxiliary verbs, used with full verbs, are known as “helping” verbs. Palmer (1965) suggests that auxiliary verbs do not have ‘regular’ –s forms. He classifies them into primary auxiliaries and secondary auxiliaries. However, the focus of this study is on the primary category (*BE, HAVE, DO*). Palmer (1974) also considers *BE, HAVE* and *DO* as full verbs. The following are the Present Tense forms of the auxiliaries:-

##### i. BE

The verb *BE* has an irregular finite form. In the Present Tense, the form for the first person singular is ‘*am*’ (*I am*), whereas, the third person singular and plural forms are ‘*is*’ (*He is, She is, It is*) and ‘*are*’ (*They are, We are, You are*) respectively.

##### ii. HAVE

In the Present Tense, the third person singular form of ‘*HAVE*’ is *has*, while ‘*have*’ is used for the plural forms.

##### iii. DO

The third person singular Present Tense form of ‘*DO*’ is *does*, whereas, ‘*do*’ is used for the plural forms.

### 1.7.5 Subject-verb agreement

Richards, Platt and Platt (1992 : 35) state the term, 'Subject-verb agreement' means a kind of "grammatical relationship between two or more elements in a sentence". Both or all elements show a certain characteristic which determines whether a singular or plural verb is the possible choice for agreement. Palmer (1965) suggests that there are certain limited features of agreement of the verbal form with the subject of the sentence. He states three kinds of concord but I shall adopt only two of them for the purpose of my study:

- i. All the verbs of the language except for the modal auxiliaries have two distinct Present Tense forms. One of them is used with singular pronouns (*he, she and it*), and a singular noun phrase (*The cat, The dog*). This is the *-s* form. The other form, the simple form, is used with all other plural pronouns, (*I, you, we and they*), and with plural noun phrases (*The houses, The plants*). However, the first person singular pronoun (*I*), is treated as plural since it is found only with the simple form and not with the *-s* form.
- ii. The verb **BE** alone in English has a special form for the first person singular of the Present Tense *-am*.

In general, verbs and auxiliaries in the Present Tense in English agree with the subject in number and person. The subject-verb agreement follows two rules:

Rule 1: Singular subject + singular verb,

for example, She sweeps the floor.

Rule 1 indicates that for Present Tense sentences with third person subjects, if the grammatical subject is singular, then the verb has an *-s* suffix.

Rule 2: Plural subject + plural verb,

for example, They sweep the floor.

Rule 2 suggests that if the grammatical subject is plural, then the verb has no *'s'* suffix.

#### 1.7.6 Countable and uncountable nouns

Countable nouns are things which can be counted (Alter, 1979). They not only include things but people who can be counted. Both have singular and plural forms, as seen below:

Singular nouns	Plural nouns
egg	eggs
cup	cups
boy	boys

Uncountable nouns are things which cannot be counted, such as, hair and skin, and is followed by a singular verb. However, there are some uncountable nouns which end

with an *-s*, as in *Athletics* and *Aerobics* and resemble countable nouns but are actually uncountable nouns. They are followed by singular verbs of the Present Tense form. This study also looks at some countable and uncountable nouns in the analysis of subject-verb agreement errors.

### **1.8 Limitations of the study**

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the sampling procedure used and the sample itself have limited the scope of the study. As the sample was confined to only one school, the results of this study is only applicable to this case. It does not reflect the entire student population. Hence, the results of this study cannot be generalized. Secondly, it by no means, investigates all the 'subjects' relevant to verb agreements. It is limited to singular and plural pronouns and noun phrases, as well as countable and uncountable nouns with the Present tense verb. Hence, the items tested are limited in themselves. Thirdly, the study employs one technique of eliciting errors – the cloze test. Since different techniques may elicit different errors (Nickel, 1989), a free-writing task, based on the Present Tense subject-verb agreement, to complement the cloze test, would have been a more effective instrument for measuring the language ability of the students. Fourthly, this study focuses on the subject-verb agreement of the Present Tense and excludes the Past Tense forms. Finally, only causes of common errors made by the majority of the students will be discussed. Hence, the above variables are omitted because of limitations of time, resources and mainly because it is beyond the scope of this study.