# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

## 2.0    Introduction

This chapter deals with the following areas: distinction between errors and mistakes, concepts of Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis and Interlanguage followed by some explanations on possible causes of errors and finally, the conclusion.

## 2.1    Errors and mistakes

There is a distinction between errors and mistakes. Corder (1967) associates errors with failures in competence and mistakes with failures in performance. The errors of competence are systematic while the errors of performance, unsystematic. Competence errors reveal the learner's underlying knowledge of the L2 linguistic system. However, Corder (1971: 152) is inconsistent when he states that errors are 'the result of some failure of performance'. Bryne (1988) states that errors are made when learners have not mastered the rules of the language whereas, mistakes are slips of some kind. It means that students have learnt something but have either forgotten it or are careless, distracted or tired. On the other hand, James (1998) claims that errors cannot be self-corrected until further teaching or learning occurs, whereas a mistake is intentionally or unintentionally deviant and can be corrected by the learner if it is pointed out to him/her. Another suggestion by Faerch and Kasper (1983) states that defects due to L1 transfer are errors, whereas those caused by interference from

the L1 are mistakes. This implies that transfers are indications of L2 incompetence while interference reflects performance weakness.

According to James (1998) and Taylor (1986), to determine whether the deviant form is an error or a mistake, conferencing with the students is necessary. However, Ellis (1985) claims that mistakes and errors cannot be easily distinguished in practice. As stated above, if the deviant form keeps recurring, probably, it is an error. Thus, a measure of speculation is involved when deciding if the deviant form is an error or a mistake.

Corder (1967) claims that mistakes are of no significance to the language learning process. On the other hand, Johnson (1988, 1996) points out that too much attention has been given to errors whereas, mistakes are given less emphasis. As such, mistakes and errors should be given importance as they provide feedback to the teachers and learners.

## 2.2    Contrastive Analysis

In the 1950s and 1960s, the paradigm for studying Foreign Language/Second Language learning and teaching was Contrastive Analysis (CA) (Lado, 1957). This procedure involved comparing the linguistic systems of a learner's MT and TL in order to predict L2 difficulties which arose as a result of transferring L1 systems to L2. However, by the early 70s, the reliability of CA was questioned as it was

associated with an outdated model of language description (Structuralism) and a discredited learning theory (Behaviourism) (James, 1998). Furthermore, researchers working with learners' errors found that many errors predicted by CA did not turn out to be problems for the learners and many of the actual problems had not been predicted at all. Hence, CA failed in its claim to be able to predict errors based on compared descriptions. With its weaknesses, the next paradigm to replace CA was Error Analysis (EA) (Corder, 1967).

## 2.3    Error Analysis

This paradigm involves a linguistic description of the learners' native language and the L2 itself, followed by a comparison of the two languages in order to locate mismatches (James, 1998). EA involves the process of collecting, classifying and analysing L2 errors in order to determine the nature and causes of errors (Corder, 1967). EA claims that the MT had no part in this paradigm, for errors could be described in terms of the TL without referring to the L1 of the learners (Corder, 1967). However, it is impossible to deny completely the effects of MT on TL as seen below:

> The study of error is part of the investigation of language learning. In this respect, it resembles methodologically the study of the acquisition of the mother tongue.
>
> (Corder, 1974:125)

As stated earlier, EA is beneficial to the learner, the teacher and the researcher for it indicates the linguistic development of a learner and the learning process. Nevertheless, there are some disadvantages of EA. Bell (1974) attacks EA for its lack of reliability in its interpretations of errors and predictive power, while Hammarberg (1974) feels it is lop-sided as the errors are analysed and the description of the non-errors are neglected. Schachter (1974) notes a basic flaw in EA – learners tend to avoid TL structures they are not sure about. Hence, the employment of the avoidance strategy by learners may cause learners to avoid producing some difficult structures (Faridah 1985; Wee 1995).

## 2.4    Interlanguage

Interlanguage, the hypothesis introduced by Selinker (1972, 1992) is the learners' version of the TL. The term suggests the half-way position between knowing and not knowing the TL. Selinker (1971) defines it as a version of a foreign language which is spoken by L2 learners rather than native speakers. Selinker (1972 in Scarcella and Oxford, 1992: 20) claims that "interlanguage systems are unique in that they belong neither to the source language nor the target language". In a similar vein, Yule (1985) suggests that it is an in-between system used in L2 acquisition which has features of L1 and L2 but with rules of its own. Corder (1971) refers to it as the learners' idiosyncratic dialect of the TL standard. The concept of idiosyncratic dialect is a development of the 1967 concept of 'transitional competence' and resembles Nemser's (1971) ' approximative system'. Another label given is performance

analysis which is the 'study of the whole performance data from individual learners' (Corder, 1975:207) rather than groups of learners.

In contrast to the transitory nature of IL (Nemser, 1971), there exists a permanent status in the language learning process known as fossilization (Selinker, 1972). Selinker claims that fossilization occurs in a learner when the IL feature becomes permanent and is irreplaceable by a similar TL item, regardless of the input/ teaching given to the learner. In short, IL is an in-between language between L1 and L2.

## 2.5    Causes of errors

The causes of errors can be attributed to interlingual and intralingual factors. The interlingual factor comprises MT interference while the intralingual factors arise within the system of the target language.

### 2.5.1    Interlingual errors

Interlingual errors occur when learners transfer the L1 structures to L2. Positive and negative transfer may take place. Soars and Soars (1987) suggest that learners either translate consciously or sub-consciously, and doing this formally should ensure accuracy. Hence, there is evidence of positive transfer. However, some errors may be due to the interference of expressions or structures from the L1 which leads to negative transfer. Wilkins (1978) echoes the above thoughts:

When learning a foreign language an individual already knows his mother tongue, and it is this which he attempts to transfer. The transfer may prove to be justified because the structure of the two languages is similar – in that case we get 'positive transfer' or 'facilitation' – or it may prove unjustified because the structure of the two languages is different – in that case we get 'negative transfer' or 'interference'.

<div align="center">(Wilkins, 1978: 199)</div>

Wilkins' explanation of mother tongue interference is apt and interesting. It implies that in second language learning, elements that are similar in L1 and the L2 will be easier to learn than those that are different. In this study, since most of the students are Chinese and some are Malays, the L1 for both races is Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu respectively. It should be noted that unlike the L2, in both Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu, the relationship between the subject and verb does not exist. Hence, some errors may arise owing to the interference of structures from Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu which results in negative transfer, examples of which are as follows:

Mandarin: tā ɸ hěn gāo gēn sōu

Bahasa Melayu: Dia ɸ sangat tinggi dan kurus.

English: * She ^ <u>very</u> tall and slim. (is)

In Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu, the verb *BE* has no overt manifestation and the sentence structure does not contain subject-verb agreement features. Learners respond to the L2 version by transferring from the L1, thus omitting the verb *is* and

ignoring the subject-verb agreement which is an important aspect of the verb form in English. Hence, the error in the English version suggests negative transfer.

## 2.5.2   Intralingual errors

Apart from errors which arise owing to transfer from L1, the errors learners make may be due to other factors such as learner strategy-based errors, induced errors, performance errors and ignorance of grammar rules. The four main factors mentioned above, which can be the causes of errors, will be discussed as follows:

### 2.5.2.1   Learner –strategy based errors

Learner strategies are methods learners use for code-breaking when they are ignorant of a TL form and need to learn a needed item (James, 1998). Learning strategies can be the source of error. The learner strategy-based errors will be discussed under the following headings: overgeneralisation, misanalysis and approximation.

#### 2.5.2.1.1   Overgeneralisation

Overgeneralisation is the 'result of all-too-faithful use of certain rules' (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982: 156). In short, it is a learning strategy whereby learners apply particular rules indiscriminately. Another definition by Richards (1971:174) states overgeneralization as "instances where the learner creates a deviant structure on the

basis of his experience of other structures in the target language." Below are two examples to indicate overgeneralisation:

1. I <u>lives</u> at No. 2, Jalan Jaya. (live)
2. I usually <u>helps</u> my mother. (help)

The verbs in the above two sentences have been overgeneralised based on the learner's knowledge of the singular subject-verb agreement. The learner's hypothesis is that "*I*" is singular, hence, it should be followed by a singular verb, resulting in a deviant form.

### 2.5.2.1.2    Misanalysis

Misanalysis means forming a wrong concept concerning an L2 item and putting it into practice (James, 1998). The false concept causes the learners to misanalyse the TL. Below is an example:

I <u>work</u> my homework everyday. (do)

Learners have hypothesized that since the object is "homework", therefore, the verb, "work" should be selected. Hence, the misanalysis.

### 2.5.2.1.3    Approximation

Approximation is a communication strategy whereby learners use a near equivalent L2 item in place of the required form (James, 1998). Such an example is:

They always <u>read</u> very hard. (work/study)

The learners substitute 'read' for work/study, resulting in inaccuracy in meaning. The above example resembles Nemser's (1971) ' approximative system' mentioned in IL.


## 2.5.2.2    Induced errors


Induced errors refer to learner errors that arise more from the classroom situation rather than from either the students' incomplete competence in English grammar (intralingual errors) or L1 interference (interlingual errors) (Stenson, 1983). These errors are explained under the following sub-headings: faulty models, teaching methods and exercise-based induced errors.


### 2.5.2.2.1    Faulty models


Faulty models may be in the form of imprecise teacher instructions or the deviant spoken form that learners are exposed to in society. In spoken contexts, nobody actually focuses on grammatical accuracy (The Star, 28 February, 2000). Imperfect teaching may be due to teachers' incompetence in the TL. Below is a situation quoted by a parent about the teacher's lack of competence in the TL.


" A child wrote, ' Ali taps rubber at the plantation,' and the English

teacher  corrected it to, 'Ali tap rubbers at the plantation.'"

(The Star, 16 November, 1999, p. 22)

The child produced a correct subject-verb agreement form but the teacher made two grave errors in that the singular subject, "Ali" is followed by a plural verb, "tap" and that the uncountable noun, "rubber" contains the suffix "s". Thus, the teacher who is an imperfect model may be a source of learners' errors.

Another source of faulty models may be due to the deviant form of Malaysian English used in daily life. Faulty models may cause learners to produce errors as a result of being exposed to the spoken, deviant and acceptable form that learners hear from the community that they are in (George, 1972). An example of a spoken, deviant and acceptable form is as follows:

* "She/He do not like it". (does)

### 2.5.2.2.2    Teaching methods (Drills)

From the researcher's observation and experience, teachers tend to use drills to enable learners to familiarize themselves with the singular and plural subject-verb agreement. A drill is

a technique commonly used in language teaching for practising sounds or sentence patterns in a language, based on guided repetition or practice. A drill which practises some aspect of grammar or sentence formation is often known as pattern practice.

(Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992: 117)

Below are further explanations and examples of drills by Richards, Platt and Platt (1992).

There are usually two parts to a drill.

a.  The teacher provides a word or sentence as a stimulus (the call-word or CUE).

b.  Students make various types of responses based on repetition, substitution, or transformation. For example:

| Type of drill | Teacher's cue | Student |
|---|---|---|
| Substitution drill | *We bought a book.* *Pencil* | *We bought a pencil.* |
| Repetition drill | *We bought a book.* *We bought a pencil.* | *We bought a book.* *We bought a pencil.* |
| Transformation drill | *I bought a book.* | *Did you buy a book?* *What did you buy?* |

Through experience and observation, drills used by teachers may take the following subject-verb agreement forms:

| Subject | Verb |
| --- | --- |
| He/She/It | does |
| We/They/You/I | do |
| He/She/It | is |
| We/They/You | are |
| He/She/It | has |
| We/They/You/I | have |

Teachers use the drill-type of exercises to show the students how the subject and verb must agree. As such, learners tend to attend to the subject and verb and ignore the rest of the sentence (James, 1998). Below is an example of an error induced by the drill-type of exercise:

\* They <u>are</u> their work together. (do)

As a result of being drilled, learners attend to the first part of the sentence, *"They are"* which is correct in terms of the subject-verb agreement form. However, they seem to have ignored the context and thus produced a deviant form. As claimed by Nation (1990: 61) "the meaning of a word is spread over that word and the neighbouring words". Thus, though drills have their place in the teaching of English,

teachers should not adopt the patterned drills mechanically and students should be taught to study the context, that is, the surrounding words.

### 2.5.2.2.3   Exercise–based induced errors

Exercise-based induced errors can be seen in two forms: mechanical exercises in concord and exercises based on substitution tables.

### i.   Mechanical exercises in  concord

In most grammar books, a common form of subject-verb agreement exercise which requires the use of the auxiliary verbs (*BE, HAVE, DO*) contains the following rubrics as seen in Exercises 1, 2 and 3 below:

Exercise1:   Put in  *is* or *are.*

(a)  He ..... very diligent.

(b)  They ....  interested in playing netball.

Exercise 2:    Put in *has* or *have*.

(a)    They ..... many pets.

(b)    She .... beautiful, dark eyes.


Exercise 3:    Put in *do* or *does*.

(a)    It .... not sleep at night.

(b)    We .... our homework in the evening.


With reference to the above three exercises, when dealing with each exercise, students tend to focus on the subject-verb agreement and place less emphasis on the meaning. As claimed by George (1963), mechanical exercises in concord require little learning effort as the concord is not associated with meaning. Hence, subject-verb agreement errors related to the use of auxiliary verbs, (*BE, HAVE* and *DO*) are common as seen in the examples below:


(a)    * It <u>is/ has</u> not sleep at night.(does)

(b)    * We <u>are/have</u> our homework in the evening. (do)


The above shows that mechanical exercises in concord which require little learning effort may induce errors in learners.

## ii. Exercises based on substitution tables

Through the researcher's observation, in many English workbooks sold in the market, the substitution table related to subject-verb agreement contains errors. A substitution table is

a table which shows the items that may be substituted at different positions in a sentence. A substitution table can be used to produce many different sentences by making different combination of items. For example:

| The post office | | behind | the park |
| The bank | is | near | the hotel. |
| The supermarket | | across | the station. |

(Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992:363)

In comparison to the above substitution table, in a coursebook, "Better Grammar" for Year 4 students of the L2, published by a well-known publisher and first edited in 2000, the following substitution table is noted.

Substitution table

|  | Present Tense |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| I | have |  |
| He<br>She<br>The boy<br>The bird<br>It | has | a book.<br>many coins.<br>no money. |
| You<br>We<br>They<br>The cats<br>The children | have | a sharp beak.<br>long tails. |

The above substitution table which is based on the workbook shows that the heading in column 2 contains the "Present Tense" while the heading for columns 1 and 3 are left blank. As seen in the substitution table, emphasis is on the subject and the verb. The subject-verb items are correct. However, though the words in the third column belong to the same part of speech and are interchangeable, some of the sequential sentence patterns in the substitution table are erroneous as the subject-verb agreement form does not relate to the other words in the sentence. The examples cited below are based on the above substitution table.

1.  He/She/The boy has a sharp beak/long tails.

2.  The bird/It has many coins/no money/long tails.

3.  We / They have a book.

4.  I/We/You/They have a sharp beak/long tails.

5.  The cats have a sharp beak/ a book.

6.  The children have a book/a sharp beak/long tails.


The above sentences produced based on the substitution table are correct in terms of subject-verb agreement forms but the meaning is incorrect. Hence, such exercises may prompt students to concentrate on the subject and verb and neglect the object of the sentence, giving rise to errors. Such erroneous substitution tables, probably due to failure to edit or lack of competence on the part of the material producer, are found in many of the English workbooks and are probably some of the causes of subject-verb agreement errors among learners.


### 2.5.2.3    Performance errors


Performance errors are errors made by learners as a result of carelessness (Corder 1967, 1981). These errors will be discussed under causes of performance errors, namely, lack of attention and lack of practice in the /s/ and /z/ form.

### 2.5.2.3.1    Lack of attention

Lack of attention can be the cause of learners' errors. Such performance errors may be due to carelessness or lack of attention or concentration as seen in the following example:

\* "Mary likes to read novels but Swee Lee <u>like </u>to swim." (likes)

Based on the above sentence, the learner used the correct subject-verb agreement in "Mary *likes* to read novels". However, the subject-verb agreement in "Swee Lee *like* to swim" is incorrect. The learner used *like* instead of *likes*. The error may be caused by lack of attention.

### 2.5.2.3.2    Lack of practice in the –s form

In English, unlike Bahasa Melayu and Mandarin, the suffix /s/ and /z/ is attached to the Third Person singular verbs, such as, *does, has, goes, drinks*, etc. However, learners do not pay heed to the /s/ and /z/ form when they use the L2 (Shaughnessy, 1977). Below are examples of errors which suggest that the /s/ and /z/ form has been ignored:

1. \* She <u>drink </u>a hot drink. (drinks)
2. \* She <u>have</u> short hair. (has)
3. \* She <u>go</u> to bed at 10 o'clock every night. (goes)

Learners use the form of verb without the /s/ *and* /z/ form probably because the suffix "*s*" attached to the verb is non-existent in Mandarin and Bahasa Melayu, and does not provide a common ground for transfer. Perhaps, it requires more effort to pronounce the suffix /s/ and /z/ since such verbs have an extra phoneme (sound) and hence, learners tend to ignore the /s/ *and* /z/ form.

### 2.5.2.4    Ignorance of grammar rules

Learners make errors owing to ignorance of L2 rules (Paul, 1993) and ignorance of rule restrictions.

#### 2.5.2.4.1    Ignorance of L2 rules

As mentioned earlier, the rules governing subject-verb agreement specify that a singular subject takes a singular verb and a plural subject takes a plural verb. However, when learners are ignorant of such L2 rules, they make the following errors:

1.  * Millie and Mollie <u>is</u> in my class.(are)
2.  * The monkeys <u>is</u> tame. (are)

The above sentences are erroneous in that the plural subjects *Millie and Mollie* in sentence 1 and *The monkeys* in sentence 2 are accompanied by a singular verb *is* instead of a plural verb *are*. This shows ignorance of subject-verb agreement rules.

### 2.5.2.4.2    Ignorance of rule restrictions

Rule restrictions may arise when learners are not aware that there are exceptions to rules. The following sentences demonstrate this:

1. * Mathematics <u>are</u> my favourite subject. (is)
2. * Sports <u>are</u> my favourite activity. (is)

Based on the above examples, the subjects (*Mathematics* in Sentence 1, *Sports* in Sentence 2) with the suffix "*s*" indicate plurality. However, there are exceptions to this rule in that the above two subjects are singular uncountable nouns and should adopt the singular verb *is*. Hence, English with its inconsistencies, can pose a lot of problems to L2 learners who may be ignorant of rule restrictions.

To sum up, the causes of errors stem from interlingual and intralingual factors. The interlingual factor is basically MT interference while the intralingual factors are linked to learner strategy-based errors, induced errors, performance errors and ignorance of rules. The learner strategy-based errors comprise overgeneralisation, misanalysis and approximation. Causes of induced errors are faulty models, teaching methods, mechanical exercises in concord and exercises based on substitution tables. The performance errors stem from lack of attention and lack of practice in the */s/ and /z/* form. Lastly, ignorance of rules manifests itself in the ignorance of L2 rules and L2 rule restrictions.

## 2.6    Related studies on subject-verb agreement

There is immense research on verb errors made by second language learners. However, an indepth study of subject-verb agreement errors in English using a cloze test has not been undertaken yet. So far, studies on the English verb errors are mostly based on compositions (Chee, 1969; Lim, 1974; Wyatt, 1973; Meziani, 1984; Mohideen, 1984; Faridah, 1985; Nair, 1990; and Wee, 1995), dictation passages (Menon, 1983 and Lee, 1986), sentences (Teh, 1989), informal letters (Castelo, 1972 and Sheena, 1996) and structured tests and compositions (Kam, 2000). Hence, the need for a focused study on subject–verb agreement of the Present Tense form.

Studies on English grammatical errors show that English verbs make up a major percentage of errors among ESL learners. In a study on errors in 300 compositions written by Standard Six Malaysian school children, the findings by Chee (1969) revealed that subject-verb concord constitute the second highest percentage of verb errors which is 17.6%.

In a study on grammatical difficulties in the English compositions of Thai undergraduates, Krairussamee (1982) found that the common verb errors were in the use of tenses and subject-verb agreement. This finding is also consistent with the study on grammatical difficulties in the English compositions by Vongthieres (1974). Both suggested that mastering the English tense system poses difficulties for Thai students because the Thai language does not encompass tense to signal time relation.

Based on 300 informal letters written by 80 post-graduate Filipinos, Castelo (1972) studied verb usage errors and found that the lack of subject-verb agreement accounted for 7% of the verb errors. In a similar vein, Mohideen (1984) in his analysis of 80 compositions written by 40 Malaysians, revealed that the third highest occurrence of verb errors was in the verb BE and subject-verb concord errors which amounted to 33.3%.

In a study on verb tense errors in compositions made by 30 Malay undergraduates studying at Iowa State University, U.S.A., Faridah (1985) discovered that subject-verb agreement errors accounted for 56% of total errors in form which consisted of incorrect formation of verb tenses.

In an error analysis of Form Four English compositions, Rosli and Malachi (1989) found that the subject-verb agreement items had the lowest percentage of grammatical errors which is 6%. On the other hand, in a study of verb phrase errors in written English of undergraduates, Sheena (1996) stated that subject-verb concord selection errors made up the second largest number of errors with 17.3% (90) errors from a total number of 517 selection errors.

## 2.7    Conclusion

It can be concluded that though immense research on EA, especially on verb errors has been conducted by researchers, there is a need for a focused study on subject-verb agreement errors using a cloze test ( refer to 3.3.1). As such, this study seeks to

quantify the errors pertaining to subject-verb agreement of the Present Tense form, to investigate which aspect of the subject-verb agreement (Singular subject + singular verb or Plural subject + plural verb) poses more difficulty and also attempts to explain the possible causes of subject-verb agreement errors (interlingual and intralingual), among L2 learners so as to provide a better understanding of the nature of these errors.