CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1   Introduction

This study is an attempt to identify the communicative events surrounding an actual working world situation in Malaysia.   Using the ethnographic method where observation is the main tool of inquiry, the researcher has immersed herself in an authentic working environment to explore the communication patterns of one particular community.   The community under study is the sales and marketing staff of a company involved in the hospitality industry.

Though the study looks at the company's communication in general, the focus will be on the use of English in the company.   While English is not a native language of the country, it can be considered to be extensively used by Malaysians in general and by the discourse community involved in the hospitality industry in particular. Through the study, the researcher hopes to provide an inside look at the role English as a language plays in the community mentioned above.

This introductory chapter will provide a background of the English language – the importance it has gained in the global community, as well as the history and role of English in Malaysia.   The chapter will also discuss the importance of English in the hospitality industry and give an overview of the study, including the significance and the limitations of the study.

1.2   Global Use of English

English is a language which has acquired a very unique position in the world. It would be reasonable to say that English is used in almost every country. It has more or less fulfilled the aims of Esperanto, a language which was created to be used by people from all over the world, breaking down the communication barrier. The spread of the English language from one continent to another around the world took place in a relatively short time.

When the British first began colonialising parts of the world, they brought with them their language for the administration of their empire. Slowly it began to spread from Britain to the Americas, Africa and the Asia Pacific Region including South East Asia. When colonialisation ceased to be popular, the British liberated these countries. However, the legacy of the English language continued. Ex-colonialists found it hard to totally drop the language from being used in the administration of their countries. Thus English was used extensively all over the world. Though the national languages of these countries have slowly usurped the supreme position of English in administration, the language continued to be used as it gained other functions all around the world.

With the concept of the global village, the world began to 'shrink' in size. The concept of distance and geographical barriers began to change. With technological advancement in transport and telecommunications, it is considerably easy and

cheap to contact people from all over the world. People began to realize the need to look outwards to other countries to survive. With this realization, the need for a common language to communicate began to arise. As a language that was already used by trade leaders such as the Americans, English naturally began to prosper. The West not only leads in trade, but also in science and technology. English therefore became the language of science and technology. Thus even countries with no British colonial background, like Thailand and Indonesia, took up English. There is a realization that being ignorant of the language will lead to being left behind in the race for survival. Presently, the information technology (IT) advancement has created a large impact on the lives of the citizens of the world. It is considered as the wheels of the future. All industries are now linked to IT and it has to be noted that most of IT's revolution comes from the West especially America. This advancement in IT has become an even greater catalyst to the spread of the English language.

However, though English is used all over the world, a standard variety does not exist. English has been adopted and molded to suit various cultures and communities. Various types or varieties of English have emerged all over the world. As this study focuses on the language used in one case-study in Malaysia, we now look at the history and role of English in the country.

1.3   English in Malaysia

When Malaysia was a British colony, English was used extensively in government and government-aided schools. It occupied a prime position, being the language of administration and elite education. After independence, English continued to be used but it slowly depreciated in value as nationalistic sentiments and pride demanded that the Malay language replace the position of English as a language for administration and education.

The National Education Policy, introduced in 1957, introduced the requirement of having a standard system of education where Malay will be the main medium of instruction (Asmah, 1982). Malay became the national language of Malaya. It took ten years before English was gradually phased out and the Malay language became the sole official language of the country, used extensively in government administration.

It took a longer time for Malay to be the main medium of instruction in schools. The Education Bill of 1970 required that English be taught as a second language in all schools but Malay was to be the main medium of instruction. By the mid-1980s, Malay had totally replaced English as the language of instruction in schools as well as local universities. This policy has certain implications for the development of English in Malaysia. As a compulsory subject, every student now has the ability to access the learning of the language. However, unlike in the case of the subject

Bahasa Malaysia, a pass in English is not one of the criteria for passing some of the major examinations like Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia or Sijil Rendah Pelajaran. Thus though English can be considered to have spread in Malaysia due to the education policy, the depth of usage is no longer what it once was. The education system has now created more people who are able to speak some level of English. In other words, there is quantity, but where quality is concerned, it has deteriorated badly (Asmah, 1982).

Recently the Education Ministry has introduced the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) to be taken by all pre-university students including those taking Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM), diploma and matriculation studies from public and private institutions. The reason for the introduction of this test is to "make Form Six more competitive and relevant to current educational needs" (NST, 22 Dec 98). Though this can be considered as an acknowledgement of the importance of English in the education system of Malaysia, again, it is not compulsory for the students to pass this test to enter universities. The introduction of MUET also indicates the importance of English in the working world as not all of the students who take the test will go on to further their studies. Some will enter the working world and the MUET result will be an indication of their level of English.

One of the main aims of education is to prepare the students for the working world. Education tries to satisfy the basic needs of employers. Educational qualification is thought to be a good gauge of the capability of a potential employee. Like in all

other countries, the employers in Malaysia are divided into two main categories, civil and private. For the civil service, the communicative emphasis is more on Malay. This is not surprising as Malay is the official language. For the private companies however, the need varies. However, it is fair to say that for most companies, English is very important. This is linked to the concept of globalisation, trade and technology. Multi-national companies especially, demand employees who are conversant in English. This is especially so for those at the management level. Le Vasan (1994) has discovered that most managers in the manufacturing company that she studied were overseas graduates. The company preferred overseas graduates as they were more confident of these graduates' abilities, including their command of English. This implies that the education system in Malaysia is still lacking in certain ways.

Thus in order to understand the needs of employers, many researchers, especially language teachers have gone down to the field to conduct their own needs analysis. They conduct fieldwork to discover the extent of English used in a certain working environment. This study too, intends to look at English and its use in a working environment. The environment chosen is one related to the hospitality industry.

1.4   Role of English in the Hospitality Industry

A survey of all the major airports in the world will come up with the result that English is the common denominator in terms of communication. Though native

languages are used to make announcements, most airports including Malaysia's own Kuala Lumpur International Airport, also use English to communicate with passengers, especially international passengers. The use of English will ensure better chances of the announcements being understood by these international passengers. Airlines also train their staff to use English to communicate with international passengers.

Besides airlines and airports, other companies involved in the hospitality industry, such as hotels and travel agents, have staff conversant in English. The members of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) also use English to communicate with each other. It is the main language used in PATA conferences. Delegates present papers and speeches in English. Thus it is fair to say that English is the lingua franca of the tourism industry. (In this study, the terms 'tourism industry' and 'hospitality industry' are used interchangeably. This is due to their close association with each other).

In the years before the economic downturn (1997), the tourism industry's revenue was only second to the manufacturing industry in Malaysia. Great efforts have been made by the Malaysia Tourist Promotion Board (previously known as Tourist Development Corporation) and the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism to promote Malaysia all around the world as a popular tourist destination. Both bodies woo foreigners to the country by organising campaigns like the 'Visit Malaysia Year'. They also actively participate in tourism fairs, exhibitions and

various other promotions via electronic and print media and cultural shows. What is significant about these events is that English is widely used to promote Malaysia as a tourist destination especially in the Americas and Europe. Thus unlike most of the government employees from other ministries, the civil servants in this ministry need to be conversant in English to perform their job effectively.

At the moment, great emphasis is laid on domestic tourism. It is hoped that domestic tourism will be the 'catalyst' to the recovery of the suppressed economy (NST, 12 June 98). Recently a local television station and the Sarawak Government held a campaign to attract more domestic tourists, especially from Peninsular Malaysia to visit Sarawak. Advertisements in both English and Malay were aired frequently over the station. Thus this shows that where tourism is concerned, domestic or international, English plays an important part.

The private sector of the tourism industry is concerned with living up to international standards. Image is very important and again where language is concerned, the common denominator applies. The common denominator in this case is English. Not only is English used to communicate with foreign tourists, it is also used to attract the local or domestic tourists. Most of the brochures found in travel agencies and hotels are printed in English. The staff in the hospitality industry are also trained to at least begin their communication with clients and patrons in English. As Malay is only understood by regional clients, English,

deemed to be more international in nature, is used to communicate with various types of clients and patrons.

1.5   Overview of Research

The research is a case study of one company's communicative events in the field of sales and marketing.   The company is in charge of the sales and marketing of a large chain of hotels. This study uses an ethnographic approach where observation is the main tool of inquiry.

1.5.1   Background of Company Chosen

For the sake of confidentiality, the researcher has code-named all the companies that she has come into contact with.   The Light Chain of Hotels (LCH) is a government-backed company which operates on a franchise system.   The LCH, with the collaboration of state governments, constructs hotels in various states.   The LCH also provides the guidelines of operation to individuals who have been successful in tendering to be franchisees.   The LCH is therefore the legal owner of the chain of hotels located all over Peninsular Malaysia.   One of the criteria to be a franchisee is that they must be interested in developing their hotel management skills.   Apart from providing them with basic guidelines on how to run the hotels, LCH will monitor them frequently to ensure that standards are maintained.   These hotels are rated two-star as amenities like showers, televisions, air-conditioners and

coffee/tea-making facilities are provided. The hotels also have self-service laundries for their guests. With a catch phrase like "...amazingly affordable", Light Hotels can be considered as no-frills budget hotels aimed at the local population rather than foreign tourists.

To market and monitor the operations of these hotels, LCH has enlisted the services of Total Management Sendirian Berhad (TM), a subsidiary of a major public-listed company, Dikari. Dikari is one of the forerunners of the tourism industry in Malaysia. This research was exclusively conducted at the premises of TM where the researcher observed the communicative events which unfolded during a 4-week stay.

1.5.2 Nature of Study

This research uses an ethnographic approach in its study of TM's communicative events. Ethnography, defined as "a field of study which is concerned with the description and analysis of culture" (Saville-Troike, 1989:1), has its origins in the world of anthropology. It was then synthesized into the field of linguistics by Dell Hymes (1962, in Saville-Troike, 1989) who emphasized the interrelationship between language and culture. With this synthesis, 'ethnography of communication' was born. Ethnography of communication has now been taken up as a practical and useful approach in researches by the ESL community, particularly ESP practitioners.

In an anthropological ethnographic study, the researcher's aim is "to provide a description and an interpretative – explanatory account of what people do in a setting (such as classroom, neighborhood or community), the outcome of their interactions, and the way they understand what they are doing (the meaning interactions have for them)" (Watson-Gegeo 1988:576). In this study, language takes the central role. The researcher is more interested in how language is utilized by the community under study (in this case, the community of TM) to fulfill the company's main objectives where the bottom-line is profit.

The subjects in this study are experts in their field who have already achieved 'communicative competence'. It is this communicative competence which allows them to function effectively in their roles and it is this communicative competence which is being investigated by this research. Saville-Troike (1989) explains:

> "Communicative competence extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles, what appropriate nonverbal behaviors are in various contexts, what the routines for turn-taking are in conversation, how to ask for and give information, how to request, how to offer or decline assistance or cooperation, how to give commands, how to enforce discipline, and

the like – in short, everything involving the use of language and other communicative dimensions in particular social settings."

<div align="right">(Saville-Troike 1989:21)</div>

In order to understand what communicative competence entails through an ethnographic approach, fieldwork is inevitable. Data gathering through fieldwork involves "observing, asking questions, participating in group activities and testing the validity of one's perceptions against the intuitions of natives" (Saville-Troike, 1989:14). As such, the emic concept is applied in ethnography. The informants or subjects under study are relied on heavily to clarify their communicative actions based on their perspectives and interpretations. However, it has been frequently admitted that the researcher is not a "cultural blank" (Anderson, 1987 quoted in Ainol, 1993:103) with no preconceptions of her own. In this case, the researcher has her own working experience and thus possesses certain knowledge of office proceedings. Nonetheless, it is important that the researcher suspends these preconceptions so as to allow judgement-free data to be collected. This is due to the qualitative nature of an ethnographic study where data is needed not to prove hypothesis, but more as a source for the researcher to seek "patterns and theories" (Ainol, 1993:103).

In an ethnographic study, the focus is on "people's behavior in groups and on cultural patterns in that behavior" (Watson-Gegeo, 1988:577). In this research, the group in question is the sales and marketing personnel of TM. They are the

members of the speech community that is to be studied.   Though it is the individuals who will be observed, it is taken that these individuals are representatives of the group.   Each and every individual's communicative action is sanctioned and approved by the community at large.   This also serves to indicate the holistic nature of ethnography where "any aspect of a culture or a behavior has to be described and explained in relation to the whole system" (Watson-Gegeo, 1988:577).

Another aspect of this study, which is vital to ethnography, is the need to observe the subjects performing their duties or roles in a natural environment.   The reality of a situation is very important in determining communicative actions to be taken. It is this natural situation which will expose unaffected behaviours and consequently the delicate intricacies of communication in the world of sales and marketing in one company.

Thus the ethnographic approach with its emphasis on detailed description and analysis of communicative culture is adopted in order to bring the researcher, as an ESP practitioner, out into the real world of sales and marketing.   This is in contrast to non-ethnographic ESP studies which focus on describing

"in formal terms the language varieties that are typically manifested by a community in particular kinds of events. . . Ethnolinguistic investigations, in contrast, reveal the cognitive

structures typical of the community, and the regulatory beliefs –
the norms and values – that affect communication practices."

<div align="right">(Boswood and Mariott, 1994:5).</div>

1.5.3   <u>Considerations in the Selection of Site of Investigation</u>

This ethnographical research can be classified as a case study. Yin (1984, quoted
in Swales, 1990:203) defines case-study as one that "investigates a contemporary
phenomenon within its real life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon
and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are
used."

Though case studies focus on the individual (person or company), it is taken that
these individuals are representatives of the others in their community. Though TM
is a single company, it is a member of a community that includes all the sales and
marketing sections in general. As a member, TM performs the same functions as
its contemporaries or rivals. The staff, also members of the same community, are
already initiated into the society and act within the boundaries expected of all
members.

The reason behind the choice of TM also lies in its size. There are less than 10
employees in the Sales and Marketing Section. Though the small size could be
construed as a disadvantage, this researcher feels otherwise. A large company with

many employees will tend to make the researcher feel intimidated and lost. It is also difficult to approach too many people given the limited time-period of the research. Though the section in TM is small, the members still perform the same function as other employees in any sales and marketing section. Furthermore, as the length of study was to be limited to 4 weeks, it was felt that the small size was ideal. It would be easier to observe and research the duties of every employee.

The most practical consideration lies in the fact that the researcher, or rather a family member, personally knew an 'insider' from LCH. The 'insider' works in the upper management level of LCH. It was hoped that a 'hello' effect would come into existence where the insider would assist the researcher to gain access into TM. The insider held the key to the gate which is controlled by the 'gatekeeper' in TM, in this case the GM of Total Management. It was the GM who ultimately decided on whether the researcher could conduct her study in his office. Another advantage of having an 'insider' lies in the fact that often subjects feel uncomfortable and even indignant when told that they were going to be observed. The presence of the insider often tones down these negative feelings. Thus difficulty in getting cooperation could be overcome faster and more effectively.

1.5.4 Research Questions

Ethnographers are often advised to suspend all hypotheses or preconceptions before entering into the community to be studied. Due to this, it is often difficult for the

researcher to formulate research questions. This is due to the fact that the researcher has no prior experience in the particular discourse community. The aim of an ethnographic study is to observe, describe and then seek patterns from the data available. Thus the research questions formulated are usually general in nature. In this study, the researcher took a bird's eye-view by trying to describe any communicative events that took place at the site of investigation. The general research questions are as follows:

a) What are the languages used by members of TM to communicate?

b) To whom do they communicate?

c) What forms of communication do they use?

d) What is being communicated?

1.6 <u>Significance and Purpose of Study</u>

This research is in essence a reality check. In choosing this topic to study as well as the ethnographic method, the researcher used some very pragmatic reasons as basis for choice. Most importantly, the researcher wanted to shorten the distance between language teachers and the real working world environment as too often teachers have been accused of being out of touch with reality.

Language teachers have often been charged with being cloistered within the four walls of the classroom. They are often said to be out of touch and generally dependant on textbooks to base their teaching. Though there might be efforts to try to stay in context, usually done by reading relevant materials, they are actually strangers to the culture and environment of the working world. There is a dire need to witness for themselves the mechanics of the real world. They need to see what exactly are the communicative events, channel and form used by practitioners of the target language. Language teachers cannot afford to be complacent and just teach based on what is in the syllabus. They must try to make the learning experience as useful as possible for the students. There is a need to have a close-contact view of the working environment, its culture, and its language requirements to avoid being out of touch. Thus this study has been undertaken with the aim of opening up the eyes of language teachers to the reality of the working world.

Almost all studies in the field of language are made with a pedagogical aim in mind. This study is no exception. As stated previously, this research is a reality check, especially for language teachers.

This study has its base in English for Special/Specific Purpose (ESP). Robinson (1991) defines ESP as "an enterprise involving education, training and practice, and drawing upon three major realms of knowledge: language, pedagogy and the students'/participants' specialist areas of interest" (Robinson, 1991:1).

Critics have often said that language teachers, including ESP practitioners, are divorced from the context of the real world by the four walls of the classroom. Roe speaks of the existence of ESP teachers who "have never been near a place where the target language is spoken" (Roe, 1993 in Ainol, 1993:102). Bhatia reiterated this view:

> "But we as ESP practitioners rarely, if ever make an effort to acquire the background knowledge of the discipline by getting associated with the professional community."
>
> (Bhatia, 1994:26)

Often, these practitioners satisfy the conditions of 'specificity' by using 'authentic' texts taken from whatever resources at hand. But the "notion of authentic communication is not simply restricted on the authenticity of the text alone" (Bhatia, 1994:23). There is a need for ESP practitioners to conduct a reality check, a need to look at authentic texts in authentic contexts.

This study aims to bring the researcher into authentic context. It is easy to find literature on business communication, or sales and marketing negotiation and strategies but by using these 'authentic' texts blindly, ESP practitioners are actually taking the risk of "guesswork" and it has been suggested that these guesswork be taken "out of ESP" (Roe, 1993 in Ainol, 1993:102). One way to do this is to

observe how these communicative texts are used in their environment by authentic role-players.

The researcher aims to observe communicative texts in action, to see for herself what forms are used, by whom, for what purpose, etc. It is hoped that the answers to these questions can clarify the importance of these texts in the real world of sales and marketing. Like Le Vasan's case study which aims "not so much to get data but to gain insights" (Le Vasan, 1994:31), this research hopes to present a better understanding of "the intricacies of real world communication as opposed to conventional classroom practice" (Ainol, 1993:144).

The insights gained in this study, it is hoped, will help ESP practitioners in their job. Though they are still within their classroom walls, this study aims to provide windows where they can observe, albeit through the researcher, the real communicative happenings of one case in the working world. It is hoped that the study will clear up assumptions which might hamper the effort of teachers whose aims are to better the abilities of their students to cope with the communication rituals in the working world.

When the researcher first embarked on the idea of doing an ethnographic study, only a few such studies had been carried out and these few ethnographic studies were more on classroom or academic research (see Ramani et. al. 1988 and Noraini, 1997). There was a lack of "thick descriptions", studies on the

communicative events of the working world. Two forerunners were Le Vasan's (1996) "System And Process In Computer Mediated Discourse: A Case Study of Business Communication in a Malaysian Corporation" and Ainol's (1993) "A Case Study of the Manufacturing Industry: The Ethnographic Way". This study is meant to continue the efforts of the earlier researchers in providing more information on the communicative events of the professional world. By doing this, the research hopes to give ESP practitioners a clearer picture of the real happenings of the working world.

It must also be mentioned that the researcher is a foreigner whose mother tongue is Malay. Though familiar with the Malay language, the researcher comes from a country where the medium of education is the English language. As such, the researcher needs to conduct her own study on the education system of Malaysia and how the product of this system copes with the working world. In this sense this research is a personal reality check for the researcher. The choice of using the ethnographic method, a method based on observation, leads to an advantage of clearing the 'cataract-like' layers of assumption that has filled the researcher's mind. Though the researcher has some basic knowledge of the Malaysian education system, this knowledge is gathered from books rather than experience. The results of the education system lay out there, in the authentic working world. Having worked in a non-teaching environment in a foreign country, the researcher needs to clear assumptions that she harbours about the working world in Malaysia. There is a tendency to equate the working environment in Malaysia with her own

experience in her country of origin. Thus the researcher hopes to clear these assumptions and create new impressions based on facts unearthed by this study. As an aspiring educationist who aims to teach in Malaysia, the researcher not only needs to know the syllabus but also what the working world in Malaysia is all about.

As recent news testifies, great emphasis has been placed on domestic tourism. The general assumption is that if a product is aimed at the local market, Malay will be the main medium of communication in attracting customers. However, these assumptions must be proven or disproven and this study hopes to present a clearer picture.

Ultimately, the study aims to help improve the understanding of English teachers of the communicative events of the working world, specifically, the sales and marketing section of the tourism industry. By providing "thick descriptions" of the professional world of sales and marketing, the research aims to bring the teacher closer into an authentic situation. With this clearer picture, the teacher could devise new strategies or update strategies in teaching of English for Special Purpose.

1.7   Limitations of the Study

An ethnographic study is qualitative in nature. Like most qualitative studies, the ethnographic study is one which requires the researcher to be able to critically

analyze the situation. At the same time, the researcher also needs to recognize and avoid bias while obtaining valid and reliable data.

Thus the weakness (or strength) of qualitative studies centres on the researcher. The demand on the researcher's ability to maintain an analytical distance while at the same rely on a good background of theoretical knowledge to interpret what is seen seems to be almost contradictory at times. There is also a need for an acute power of observation and good interactional skills.

In an ethnographic study, the danger of missing vital information during the observation period does exist. However, it is believed that the period of four weeks would be long enough to witness the vital happenings in the field. Furthermore, the events were mostly repetitive in nature, enabling the researcher more than one chance to witness the occasion. However, there were occasions which could not be observed due to unavoidable factors. Where this happened, the researcher relied totally on the reports of the expert informants themselves. The interpretations they make of these situations are considered irrefutable. Even in situations when the researcher could make her own interpretations, the professional informants are heavily relied on as they are experts in their field, members of a society who have already proven their communicative competence. Thus the researcher continuously referred to the staff of TM to clarify the situation.

Some might point out that the case-study method is a weakness as the communicative happenings or events of one company might be distinctive or peculiar to itself and should not be generalized. However the researcher feels that findings could be extrapolated and applied to other cases to a reasonable extent. This is especially so in this case as TM is a subsidiary of Dikari, a major public-listed company which is a veteran in the tourism industry. It has interests in inbound and outbound tours, hotels and ticketing services. As a member of that community, TM could be said to represent the staff of the hospitality industry.

Another area which could be seen as a limitation is the small size of the company. The staff numbers eleven in total. However, as previously stated, the researcher feels that the small number is an advantage in providing a clearer picture of the communicative happenings of the company. It must also be mentioned that the study was limited to the communicative actions of the sales and marketing staff. The communications of the accounting staff is not included.

Where tourism is concerned, assumptions are that foreigners will be the main patrons. However, in this case, the Light Hotels' main patrons are the local population. Thus the study is limited in the sense that the area of study was more or less focussed on domestic tourism. However, this could be construed as an advantage as no study has been made on the domestic tourism industry.