CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the last three decades, second language research has given a great significance to the role of errors in language acquisition. Errors have been viewed as windows to the language acquisition process. Errors are seen as overt reflections of a learner’s internalized knowledge of the language (Gaies, 1977:335). They are regarded as an inevitable part of acquiring a second language, and in some cases errors are the best evidence that language acquisition is taking place. Corder (1974:25) contends that learners’ errors are “important in and of themselves.” For the learner, errors are indispensable, since the making of errors can be regarded as a device the learner uses in order to learn.

The effectiveness of second language teaching can also lie on the teacher’s ability to identify the errors made by his/her learner. Among the different methods employed to classify these errors, the error analysis approach has
made an impact on second language teaching. Error analysis is concerned with the identification, description and explanation of errors made by language learners, either in its spoken or written form (Corder, 1974). Error analysis works on the premise that errors are significant if they occur systemically in the learner. According to Richards and Sampson (1974:15), at the level of pragmatic classroom experience, error analysis will provide one an opportunity by which the teacher assesses learning and teaching, and determines types of errors. Error analysis will enable the teacher to become familiar with the weaknesses of the pupils and thus assign remedial work accordingly. Strevens says:

The systematic analysis of recurrent errors using the categories and techniques in modern linguistics, is a fruitful area for further research. By concentrating on the more obvious points of difficulty, it makes an immediate contribution to the task of language teaching. (Strevens, 1978)

Thus, positive outcome of the error analysis approach has encouraged the researcher to study and examine the grammatical errors made in the written English of Tamil students in lower secondary schools in Malaysia.

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Malaysia is a multi-racial country, and its citizens come from different ethnic and social groups. The three main groups are the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. Each of these groups has its own language and dialects.
During the colonial administration, English and the vernacular languages were used as the medium of instruction in schools. At that time, English, being the official language, was widely used in all fields.

When the country achieved independence, the immediate attention was focused on nation building, and language was considered an important instrument for racial integration. Thus in 1957, the Malay language was proclaimed as the national language as stated in Article 152 of the Malayan Constitution. However, English was continuously used in most of the government and business sectors until the year 1967 when it was replaced by Malay as the sole official language.

The policy of using Malay, or officially known as Bahasa Malaysia, as the medium of instruction in schools was implemented progressively, starting with year one of primary schools in 1970. By 1983, the whole school system was using Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, although Chinese and Tamil medium primary schools were allowed to continue using Mandarin and Tamil respectively as the medium of instruction.

Despite the decision to use Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, the government was committed to a policy of maintaining English as a
second language. Consequently, English was taught as a subject from year one in all Malay medium primary schools, and year three in Chinese and Tamil schools.

With the change in the official language, the English medium schools were gradually phased out beginning from the year 1970. By the year 1975, all English primary schools were known as Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan (National Primary Schools) and were at par with National schools. The Chinese and Tamil schools continued to operate at primary levels.

The phasing out of the English medium schools did not hamper the use of the English language. English was made an important second language subject in all schools. English also occupied a position of importance second only to Bahasa Malaysia in most domains of use (Cabinet Committee Report, 1980). One of the objectives of language planning in Malaysia was the development of English as the second most important language after the national language (Asmah, 1992). Thus the importance of English was maintained. Noss observed this:

Although English was not identified with any ethnic group within Malaysia, it was the sole channel for higher education and for improving one’s socio-economic position. Due to its being the language used by those in power and the profession, English has acquired a prestigious position ... no longer the official language, it continues to enjoy the status of the most important second language.

(Noss, 1982)
Language planners made English the official second language in education communication, business and information technology.

In line with the National Education policy, English is to be taught as an effective second language in Malaysian schools. It is a means of communication in certain everyday activities and certain job situations. It is an important language to enable Malaysia to engage meaningfully in local and international trade and commerce. It also provides an additional means to academic, professional and recreational materials.

(Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran, 1983)

Vision 2020 emphasizes national development especially in the scientific, industrial and technological fields, and this has enhanced the position of English. Thus this being the status of the English Language in Malaysia, the aim of English language instruction in Malaysia is to enable learners to use English for different purposes. This means that Malaysians need to learn to listen and understand, read and understand, speak and write accurately, fluently and appropriately. To achieve this they need to learn pronunciation, grammar, appropriation and language skills (Chitavelu, 1995).

1.2 THE PROBLEM

In Malaysian schools, young learners who come from a non-native speaking environment have less exposure to English and this limits the domains for the use of English. Most often pupils use their own mother tongue to
communicate with one another in everyday life, therefore, decreasing the number of domains where English is used (Tahririan, 1986).

The present English Language syllabus stresses the teaching and learning of language items. However, the time for the learning of English is limited to only 200 minutes as prescribed per week. Therefore teachers often tend to choose only the important or suitable items from the syllabus mainly to cater for the written examination. The reinforcement of syllabus items through all the four skills, viz. listening, speaking, reading and writing is seldom done as observed by the researcher through her experience. Most of the teachers blame the extensive syllabus to cover for exams and time constraint for not using this integrated approach. The weakness in reinforcing the language items has adversely affected the learners and this is projected in the errors they commit in written English.

The main focus in this study is on the written aspect as it is integral in learning a language. Writing should be readable, coherent, appropriate and purposeful unlike speaking. In a conversation, we make sense of the dialogue in a complex back-and–forth process by negotiating meaning between the speakers, whereas in a written text this back-and–forth negotiation is not possible because the sentence is read as it is written. When
there is no possibility of negotiating meaning of written documents, the inevitable problems of misunderstandings are exacerbated.

Hence, we can say that writing is a complex task and is the most difficult of the language skills to acquire (Allen & Corder, 1974). Its level of difficulty varies between native speakers who think in the language used and non-native speakers who think in their own native language. Moreover, while writing, non-native speakers have, in general the tendency to think about all the rules that they need to apply. Therefore, non-native speakers are prone to making errors.

Grammar forms an integral component in any written language. Written work in the form of composition requires competence and mastery of grammar at the specified grade level so that the structures formed are meaningful to the reader. At present, there is a tendency to place greater emphasis on communicational skills which may affect the correct usage of grammar. The second language learner, interested perhaps primarily in communication, can achieve quite efficient communication without the need for mastering more than the elementary rules of usage (Richards, 1971b). Therefore, a failure to grasp the required level of grammar will allow young learners to commit a number of different errors.
The above stated situation and the causes which prevail in Malaysian schools, particularly at the lower secondary level, have prompted the researcher to look into the nature of English language errors occurring in the written work of learners. Errors may occur in different aspects of the second language or foreign language, from the very basic sentence construction level to the more complex free compositions, guided essays, translations, oral communication exercises, dictation and cloze procedures. This study is confined to the grammatical errors made by Tamil speakers in written English.

1.3 AIMS OF THE STUDY

As an English teacher, the researcher is well aware of the fact that Tamil speakers with an average proficiency of the English language at the lower secondary level commit a lot of errors in their written work. Hence, the researcher has decided to conduct an error analysis, the best tool to describe and explain errors made by non-native speakers in order to know the sources of these errors and the reasons behind their occurrence.

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

i. to identify and classify the grammatical errors in the written task made by Tamil students who are non-native speakers of English.

ii. to find out the frequencies of these errors.
iii. to identify the possible causes of those errors and a way for remediation.

iv. to find out the extent to which the socio-economic background of the students has influenced their acquisition of English.

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study examines the grammatical errors made by Tamil learners in written English. The errors examined are confined to the basic English word class - verbs, prepositions, articles, pronouns and conjunctions. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

i. What are the types of grammatical errors based on the error types described by Corder?

ii. What are the frequencies of these errors?

iii. What are the possible causes of these errors in terms of interlingual and intralingual errors?

iv. Has the social-economic status of students any influence on the acquisition of the English language in general?

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The learner's errors provide evidence of the system of the language that he is using at a particular point in the course. Corder (1967) feels that the errors
are significant in three different ways. First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal he has progressed and, consequently, what remains for the students to learn. Second, they provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Thirdly, errors are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn.

It is commonly observed that teachers are annoyed at the number of errors committed by their students especially in the written work. A study of error analysis makes it clear to the language teacher that no one can learn a language without committing errors. Teachers will realize that errors are part of their students' learning process. They should understand that errors are an integral part of language learning and allow their students to try and form hypothesis about the language, test these hypotheses and find out for themselves how the language works.

Understanding the significance of the errors as revealed through the study by error analysis would change the attitude of the teachers towards the errors committed by their students. They would look at the errors as not
something which hinders the process of language learning, but something which is a part of learning. Increase in error rates and new kinds of error can often indicate progress as a learner attempts to restructure his or her interim second language grammar (Long, 1987:126).

As a number of studies have been carried out in the area of error analysis (Selinker, 1969; Politzer & Ramirez, 1973; Richards, 1974; Hendrickson, 1981), teachers have come to understand that without committing errors no one can achieve competence in any language. Thus, in Malaysian schools it is noticed that the attitude of many teachers is slowly changing. They no longer consider errors as an annoying feature.

This study also helps teachers to become familiar with the concept of inter-language. A longitudinal study of the development of the system of language in individual learners is useful both to the teachers, as well as the learners. The teachers then will be able to provide timely help to the learners to develop their individual systems. At the same time, they will be careful not to interfere too often and spoil the learners’ efforts. An insight into the learners’ mind gained through the study of this kind should make it possible for the teachers to prepare materials appropriate to the learners’ needs.
A change in the teachers' attitude would eventually give more confidence to the learners. They would feel encouraged to use the language to express their feelings and attitudes. They would not be so dependent on the teachers and be passive learners spending most of the time copying things off the blackboard. They would actively participate in the language learning process.

This kind of study helps us to understand and prepare remedial materials, which are more systematic and scientific. Since the problems of the learners are studied in depth from various points of view, the solutions offered are specific. Many teachers understand that their students need remedial work at various stages, but they find it difficult to prepare and use suitable materials. This study, in a small way, will provide guidelines for the preparation of such materials.

This study will be useful to all educators involved in the propagation of the English Language – teachers, teacher-training lecturers, curriculum planners and even policy makers. The findings may function as a guide for teachers and lecturers. It would indicate to them the types of errors the young learners usually commit in written compositions so that they can plan and remedy such errors systematically. In other words, identifying and knowing
the main recurrent errors before embarking on the teaching and learning strategies would help them in pedagogy. Corder confirms that:

Errors provide feedback, they tell the teacher something about the effectiveness of his teaching materials and his teaching techniques, and show him what parts of the syllabus have been inadequately learned or taught and need further attention. They enable him to decide whether he must devote more time to the item he has been working on. This is the day-to-day value of errors. But in terms of broader planning they provide the information for designing a remedial syllabus or a programme for re-teaching.

(Corder, 1973:265)

The findings of this study will also be useful to the curriculum planners, viz. Curriculum Development Centre for future planning. The areas of difficulty would depict the necessity for alternative methods and strategies to be recommended for the teaching and learning processes. This would help to reduce errors in writing.

1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It is quite impossible to conduct a comprehensive analysis of all types of errors in English made by learners of the language. Therefore, this study is limited to the errors found in the written tasks Tamil students of English. The errors studied are also limited to five common grammatical errors, which the researcher finds more problematic to the students. The subjects under study are also limited to fifty students and thus, do not claim to be
comprehensive representative of a larger group of students. The data aims to provide an insight into problematic areas of grammar, and the reasons for the occurrence of errors of ESL Tamil students.

1.7 CONCLUSION

Studies have shown that errors are inevitable in the process of language acquisition. The researcher feels that it is important to understand the significance of the errors committed by the learners, rather than point out only the errors and ask the students to correct them. The aspects discussed in this chapter has clearly depicted what has prompted the researcher to conduct an error analysis study and the limitations of this study.