

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

English is taught as a second language in Malaysian schools. The primary vernacular school students are first exposed to the formal teaching of English language in classrooms when they are in standard 3. This means that when they enter secondary schools, they have only studied English for four years. In secondary schools, the medium of instruction for all the other subjects is Bahasa Melayu. Consequently, some students find it difficult to converse and write well in English, especially those who come from a different language background and whose mother tongue is not English. This is also the case for primary national school students. Although they study English in primary schools from standard 1, that is, 2 years more than the vernacular primary school students, the exposure to the English language may still not be sufficient for the students as all the other subjects are taught in Bahasa Melayu.

These ESL students manifest many and a wide range of grammatical errors in their interlanguage. One of the most likely occurrences of errors is in the use of prepositions. Hence, language teachers try to adopt different approaches and methods to teach prepositions so that the learning of prepositions can be made easy and effective for the students. Very often, the learners' errors are not viewed as beneficial elements in the

language learning process itself. However in recent years, errors are viewed as a natural and integral phenomenon in the process of second language learning. Whether in speech or writing, errors indicate that actual learning is taking place. Besides that, an analysis of the errors may reveal the strategies employed by the learner in trying to master the target language. By knowing these strategies that cause errors, the language teacher is in a better position to use appropriate teaching techniques and strategies to overcome the difficulties in the learning of prepositions.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

This study focuses on the difficulties experienced by ESL students when using English prepositions in their writing. The subjects selected for this study comprise only Form 4 Malay ESL students. Research on the errors made by ESL students has indicated that the functions and the usage of English prepositions represent 'one of the prominent trouble spots' for most students irrespective of their language background. (Khamphang, 1974). Pittman (1966:57) also shares a similar view as he says, "English prepositions have a reputation for difficulty, if not downright unpredictability."

Many of the Malay ESL learners have difficulties in using English prepositions when they write in the target language. As a result, they are not able to use them in such a way as to satisfy the rules ascribed to them. One of the reasons for such a state of affairs is that the functions of some English prepositions are not similar to the functions of some prepositions in the learners' L1. Another reason could be that some existing

Bahasa Melayu prepositions lack the many forms, functions, and meanings expressed by English prepositions. Zughouli (1979) comments that in learning English prepositions, one obvious source of difficulty is the number of possible meanings each preposition carries.

The use of preposition is also found to be difficult as a preposition is a function word. Unlike a content word, it does not have any referential meaning by itself unless it is used with other referents or words, for example, 'on the table'. Besides that, some prepositions are not used in observable situations. The idea portrayed is abstract and thus, a logical explanation of its occurrence cannot be given, for example, 'to my surprise' and 'in my opinion'.

Buckingham (1972:125) states that "students of English face a variety of problems related to the use of prepositions, sometimes they omit the prepositions altogether, at other times they use the wrong prepositions." As for Close (1967), he establishes three distinct error tendencies with regard to the employment of prepositions, which can be observed. They are wrong selection of prepositions, omission of prepositions and unnecessary insertions of prepositions. Some of the examples of the error tendencies are as follows:

Wrong Selection of Prepositions

He is good ***in** writing. (**at**)

We were fascinated ***at** the results. (**by**)

We can give some thought ***on** the matter. (**to**)

Omission of Prepositions

They go ^ school by bus. (**to**)

They arrived ^ Port Dickson at 9 a.m. (**at**)

Unnecessary Insertion of Prepositions

He has gone ***for** shopping.

We must start ***up** saving money.

We reached ***at** there before noon.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives: _

1. to investigate the extent of the errors in the use of prepositions in the written work of Form 4 students.
2. to identify some common prepositional errors in the written texts of the students.
3. to explain the possible causes of the prepositional errors.
4. to investigate the error tendencies in different categories.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions in this study are as follows:

- 1 Which concept of prepositional meanings poses the most problem for Malay Malaysian Form four students?
- 2 What is the frequency of errors for each concept of prepositional meaning investigated ?
- 3 What are the plausible causes of the errors?
- 4 What measures can be taken to minimize the learning difficulties of English prepositions ?

1.5 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited in scope as it is carried out to investigate the common prepositional errors made by Form 4 Malay students in their written work. Therefore, this study is not exhaustive as only the common prepositions are investigated. Some words that function, as English prepositions are not included. Besides that, not all the meanings of preposition are studied as so varied are the meanings of preposition that to consider all of them would be too wide a scope for the researcher to handle within the limitation of this error analysis. In order to overcome the problem, the researcher has decided to narrow down the classifications in the meanings of preposition to the following:

Prepositions of Place

Prepositions of Direction

Prepositions of Time

Prepositions of Manner-Agent

Prepositions of Cause-Purpose

Prepositions of Similarity

Prepositions of Association

Prepositions of Verb-Prep

Prepositions of Adj-Prep

The corpus of the study is limited too as it involves only 150 Form 4 Malay students from a secondary school. However, a bigger sample can be used to produce a more comprehensive result. The first language of the subjects chosen is Bahasa Melayu. The researcher has excluded students from other races such as the Chinese and the Indians from the present study. Including them makes it necessary for the researcher to look into the grammatical systems of Mandarin and other Chinese dialects and Tamil of related dialects respectively. This scope would be too difficult to cover, as the researcher is not well versed in the grammatical systems of Mandarin and Tamil and other related dialects.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Many studies conducted on the errors of ESL learners often cover several aspects of the target language. The researcher feels that the presence of prepositional errors in

the learners' written work merits a separate investigation in itself. Moreover, from the studies carried out on the errors of ESL learners' written work, prepositional errors are found to be a major portion of the errors made by ESL learners. Focusing on one particular aspect of the target language makes it possible to gain a deeper insight into the specific problem of the use of prepositions encountered by ESL learners.

The result of the study will provide feedback for ESL teachers on the 'problematic areas' in the learning of prepositions. It will indicate the degree of difficulty for different concepts of prepositions investigated. Besides that, the possible causes of the errors and the logical explanation for the errors will be given. This feedback will guide the language teachers when planning their teaching strategies, preparing appropriate teaching materials, learning activities and written exercises so as to minimize the students' difficulty in learning prepositions.

The findings of this research will also show the error tendencies in the use of prepositions, in the wrong selection of prepositions, the omission of prepositions, and the unnecessary insertion of prepositions. By observing these categories of errors and the possible causes of the prepositional errors made by Malay students, the language teacher would be able to respond to the needs of the learners by adopting an appropriate teaching approach for these English prepositions so that an effective learning process could take place.