

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Learning a foreign language in a country not native to the particular language can be very difficult and sometimes even frustrating. Learners have to make the best out of the non-native language learning environment and try to compensate for it by allowing for some creativity in the language learning process. One such creativity is by interacting with either fellow language learners or with their non-native teachers of the language. During interactions in the language they are learning, learners have the tendency to employ communication strategies (CS) to compensate for their linguistic inadequacy in the target language. Researchers have also suggested that CS help improve students' communicative competence.

....communication strategies can be seen as devices which enable learners to bridge the inevitable gap between classroom interactions and various communicative situations outside the classroom, hereby increasing their communicative competence.... (Færch and Kasper, 1983:56)

According to Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983), there are four components of communicative competence. They are grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Strategic competence is what they refer to as CS.

CS have been the focus of study for many language researchers over the last two decades. However, studies pertaining to interactions between non-native interlocutors are rather few.

The aim of this study is to look at communication strategies employed by non-native Japanese language learners in their interaction with one another in the Japanese language. The subjects were Malay students in a Special Preparatory Program for Entry into Japanese Universities (RPKJ) at the University of Malaya.

1.2 Background of Japanese Language Education in Malaysia

The Japanese language was taught in Malaysia (then, Malaya) at the time of the Japanese occupation of Malaya during World War II. Specially selected Malay students were also sent by the Japanese government to study in Japan beginning in 1943 (Ban, 2001). Unfortunately, the Japanese defeat in the war had put a stop to almost all Japanese language education establishments in Malaysia. However, Japanese language began to be taught at the University of Malaya in 1966. This was followed by Japanese language education at MARA University of Technology (UiTM), (then, ITM), and other institutions such as The Japanese Language Society of Malaysia (JLSM) and The Japan-Malaysia Association.

In 1981, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohammed announced the Look East Policy. The Look East Policy is an initiative to learn from the experiences of Japan (and Korea) in the nation-building of Malaysia. Under this policy, the Malaysian government, with partial funding from the Japanese government has been sending Malaysian students as well as trainees to Japan to study the secret of Japanese

postwar success. A total of 6,912 Malaysian have been sent to study in Japan under the Look East Policy as of 2003 (source: Embassy of Japan in Malaysia). They were sent under different programs; i.e., Industrial Technical Training, Management Executive Practical Training, Undergraduate Study, College of Technology and Japanese Language Teachers Training programs respectively. Before these students and trainees were sent to Japan, some of them have to undergo a preparatory Japanese education program, which includes learning the Japanese language, in Malaysia. These preparatory education centers were established mainly in the RPKJ at the University of Malaya, MARA University of Technology (UiTM) and the Technology University of Malaysia (UTM).

Apart from these preparatory Japanese education centers, other universities and private institutions have also started their Japanese language courses due to the boom in Japanese language learning following the Look East Policy. This includes the Japanese courses conducted in private universities which started their operation in Malaysia in 1997. Japanese language was also introduced in the Residential Schools beginning in 1984. In 1997, there were around 6,000 Malaysians, making it a total of 0.03% of the population studying Japanese language in Malaysia.

At present, all the 16 national universities in Malaysia offer Japanese language as an elective course. The Science University of Malaysia (USM), The National University of Malaysia (UKM) and University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) offer Japanese as a minor course. The Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya offers Japanese language as a major course for one of its Bachelor Degree program while the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the same university offers Japanese language as a compulsory subject for students majoring in the Japanese Studies program.

The latest development to Japanese language education in Malaysia is the twinning program between MARA and 13 largely private Japanese universities which started in May, 1999. The objective of this program is to reduce students' period of stay in Japan therefore minimizing the high cost of education in Japan.

1.3 Background of Japanese Language Education in University of Malaya

Japanese language has been offered in the University of Malaya since 1966 as a subject in the Japanese Studies program at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. The Language Center was established in 1972, to provide language courses required by other faculties, academies and centers in the University of Malaya. The Language Center then evolved as the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics in 1996. The faculty offered its Bachelor of Languages and Linguistics Degree program to the first batch in the 1998/1999 intake.

The Bachelor of Languages and Linguistics Degree program offers courses in 9 majoring languages; Arabic, Chinese, Tamil, English, Italian, German, French, Spanish and Japanese. At present the faculty has a total of 39 students majoring in Japanese language. Besides offering Japanese courses for the majoring students, the faculty also provides teaching staff to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences for the teaching of the compulsory Japanese language courses required for their Japanese Studies program. Japanese language courses are also being offered to all students in the Bachelor Degree program as an elective course. The number of students taking these courses has been overwhelming principally due to the marketability of the language.

A year after the Look East Policy was announced, the Special Preparatory Program for Entry into Japanese Universities (RPKJ), formerly known as Ambang Asuhan Jepun (AAJ) was established in The University of Malaya. This program provides Japanese language and other academic courses in Japanese in a 2 year intensive preparatory program. Until 2003, a total of 2100 students have benefited from this program (source: the Special Preparatory Program for Entry into Japanese Universities (RPKJ) information leaflet)

1.4 Problems Faced by Learners in a Non-Native Environment

In this era of globalization, it has been a growing trend to study foreign languages. However, many have resorted to learn the foreign language of their choice in their own country mainly due to financial and time constraints. The increasing number of students learning Japanese language in Malaysia over the years clearly indicates that this 10th largest spoken language in the world is one of the most popular foreign languages in Malaysia. Thus, the need to “localize” foreign language learning syllabus design is paramount. A more systematic way of identifying and solving the problems faced by the learners is therefore needed.

Needless to say, a non-native environment provides a multitude of problems not usually faced by learners if they were in a native environment. Minimum exposure to the particular language and the lack of real life communication with native speakers (NS) are some of the more compelling problems, to name a few. In order to practice their communication skills, learners have to make do with their surrounding environment by communicating with other non-native speakers (NNS) especially with fellow learners or with their non-native language teachers. Hence, most of their foreign language

interactions are paired by non-native interlocutors. The non-native interlocutors' therefore, serve as speaking partners who not only provide conversational opportunities but by doing so also help learners expand their linguistic resources which will ultimately help build their confidence in communication in the target language.

As Rocky (1998) puts it, 'Even if the learner is unable to find the particular structure he needs, he is exposed to a number of other structures from his interlocutor and he would still be able to expand his linguistic resources'. Learners should therefore, be encouraged and exposed to as many interactions as possible to develop their confidence in communication, regardless of who the interlocutors are. During an interaction, the learners are presumed to be exposed to the linguistic resources, including to any of the strategies his interlocutor uses. Tarone (1980) believes all strategies can help expand linguistic resources. One such strategy is CS. Roslina (1999) in her study on CS, for example, concluded that students should be given exposure to CS to facilitate the development of their confidence in communication.

1.5 Objectives of Study

The objectives of this study are:-

- (1) To observe how learners cope with problems in communication when interacting in Japanese with their limited Japanese linguistic abilities.
- (2) To find out if there is any significance between the proficiency level of the interlocutor and the choice of CS employed.
- (3) To find out if there is any significance between the task and the choice of CS employed.

It is hoped that this study will generate pedagogical implications particularly in terms of syllabus and textbook design for CS to be included in classroom activities, in helping learners to speak and convey messages better with their limited linguistic abilities in the language.

The present study aims at obtaining answers to these research questions:-

- (1) Which proficiency pairs use the most CS?
- (2) Is there any significance between the interlocutor's proficiency and the CS used?
- (3) Is there any significance between the task and the CS used?

1.6 Significance of Study

Studies on CS in Japanese language interactions by Malay students are few. One such study was pioneered by Roslina in 1999. Roslina used subjects who were at that time studying at the Japanese preparatory education program in UTM. This study looks at students studying under a similar program in RPKJ at the University of Malaya. While Roslina's study focused on the production aspect and not the reception aspect of the learners' communication, this study will focus on the CS employed by learners to overcome communication problems from an interactional perspective.

Williams et al. (1997) stated that researchers have been putting too much emphasis on individual production as opposed to achievement of comprehension and mutual construction of discourse. As such, as mentioned also by Trosborg (1982), 'The interactional function of communication and the part played by the interlocutor...have most often been neglected.' Thus, this study will focus on the joint interaction by both participants in achieving an agreement of meaning. Findings from this study are hoped

to be adopted as a reference for the teaching and syllabus design of Japanese language in Malaysia, and consequently improve the level of Japanese language education in Malaysia in general.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of Study

This study looks at non-native versus non-native (NNS-NNS) oral interactions in a non-native learning environment. The subjects are 100% Malay learners with no distinction made to their gender, age, personality, social and education background. As the present study focuses on the interactional aspect of communication, the taxonomy used for the purpose of this study was developed with modifications from a combination of taxonomies proposed by earlier researchers. This taxonomy includes the interactional strategies proposed by Celce-Murcia, Dornyi and Thurell (1995). Further discussion on taxonomies and definitions of CS will be given in Chapter 2.