CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

This chapter will provide some background information on the role and status of English in Malaysia. The role of English at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) and the relationship of anxiety to performance will be briefly discussed. The problem and the significance of the study as well as the limitations of the study will be examined.

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 The Role and Status of English in the Malaysian Education System

In Malaysia, the English language arrived with the colonization of the Peninsula, Sabah and Sarawak from the late eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. During the colonial administration of the British, the use of English at all levels of government administration increased. It was the main language of the mass media. However, the role of English and its status underwent a considerable change with Independence. The National Language Act 1967 implemented a change where English was no longer the language of administration in Malaysia.
The Abdul Rahman Talib Report 1960, which advocated a change from English to Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction in all schools, directly affected the role of English in the education system. The new system was implemented in stages from 1970 to 1982. By 1978 all the subjects in the third year of secondary school were taught in Bahasa Melayu. By 1980, all the subjects in the fifth year of secondary school were taught in the Bahasa Melayu medium. Since 1983, all national schools in Malaysia have been using Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction and English is taught only as a subject.

With the implementation of the National Education Policy, Bahasa Melayu became the National Language. It replaced English as the medium of instruction in schools and relegated English to the status of a second language. The study of English is restricted to 5 to 6 periods a week in schools. The objective of learning English as a second language in schools is to enable the students to be proficient in reading, writing, speaking and listening. This has been the emphasis up to the present time.

English is a compulsory subject in primary and secondary schools. There are four public examinations in Malaysia. The first public examination, the Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) is taken at the end of the primary school years. The second public examination, that is, the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) is at the end of the third year of secondary school. The third public examination i.e. the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) is at the end of the fifth
year of secondary school. A pass in the SPM examination is a required qualification before students can pursue tertiary education at the diploma level in local institutions of higher learning. In the SPM, English is a compulsory subject but it is not compulsory to pass it. A failure in English does not affect the SPM overall results. Therefore the importance of English is often ignored. In the final public examination, the Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM), English is not offered as a subject. There is no English subject at this level but an English literature paper is available for candidates who are interested in this subject. In 1988, English ceased to become an entrance requirement for admission into local universities.

With Bahasa Melayu replacing English as a medium of instruction in schools, and then later in tertiary institutions, there has generally been a steady decline in the level of English amongst Malaysians. However, to arrest the decline in the level of English and to ensure that students entering local universities can cope with the demands of their courses, the Ministry of Education has made English as an entrance requirement for students seeking entry into undergraduate courses, starting from the year 2001.

Beginning 1999, the Malaysian University Entrance Test (MUET) was made a compulsory paper for all candidates sitting for the STPM. It is administered by the Malaysian Examination Council twice a year, in June and December. There are no passing or failing scores on the MUET. A six-band grading system ranging from Very Good User to Extremely Limited User is used. The students
are required to sit for the MUET in order to consolidate and enhance their English language skills so that they can cope with the English language encountered in their specific disciplines. When the MUET becomes an entry requirement, in general each institution of higher learning will determine its respective minimum acceptable level of achievement for entry into its various courses. However, certain universities require the MUET as an exit requirement.

1.1.2 English at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

UiTM is the largest public university in Malaysia preparing students at diploma level and degree level. English is a compulsory subject in all faculties and a minimum of a pass in English is required before students can graduate with a diploma or a degree.

For the diploma level students, UiTM has designed an English syllabus which is parallel to the MUET syllabus. This syllabus was designed not only to improve the students' English proficiency but also to prepare them for the MUET which will be required of these students when they further their studies at the degree level.

In UiTM, students at the diploma level take an English proficiency course for a minimum of three semesters. The English MUET type syllabus is spread out
over three semesters and covers the major areas of Grammar, Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking. The students do:

Semester 1: BEL 100 Preparatory English
Semester 2: BEL 200 Mainstream English I
Semester 3: BEL 250 Mainstream English II

The contact hours for each semester are 6 hours per week, totalling 3 credit hours. Each semester has 14 teaching weeks. A minimum of a pass in English is a requirement for a student to graduate. From the fourth semester onwards, students do English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses relevant to their various professional disciplines.

As the UiTM English language course is parallel to the MUET syllabus, the UiTM examination format is identical in style and format to the actual MUET. In semester three, students do the BEL 250 Mainstream English II. This final paper of the three-semester English proficiency course is a duplicate of the MUET.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Examinations are often viewed as part and parcel of school and tertiary education. Performance in an examination-oriented system is often stressful. Students are expected to be able to cope with the pressure and to perform well. The more important the examination, the more stressful is the situation. As a
result, the more important emotional factors become in determining examination performance. High levels of anxiety, especially in an examination, will affect the students' level of performance. The anxious person tends to concentrate poorly, be self-critical and self-occupied. Test situations bring about negative self-oriented responses which interfere with the tasks at hand. The anxious person tends to focus on his own internal thoughts and feelings.

At high levels of anxiety, performance is affected negatively. Some test-takers panic, become confused, experience physical discomfort, lose concentration and become easily distracted. Due to this, in an examination situation, anxiety disrupts and disorganises behaviour through a lowering of attention, concentration and intellectual control.

In an examination situation, test anxiety is generally experienced as the inability to think clearly in spite of adequate preparation. Some students experience mental blocks despite knowing their work well, are unable to concentrate and answer adequately and therefore are unable to achieve goals that are within their capability.

The relationship between anxiety and performance has been investigated extensively by psychologists for many years. The evidence from research is that a lower level of performance is associated with high levels of anxiety. Sarason and Mandler (1952) were among the first to discover a significant correlation between test scores and test anxiety. Test anxiety results in
deterioration of performance in tests. In a similar research, Alpert and Haber (1960) found that both grade point averages and examination scores are predicted by test anxiety. They consider that anxiety is debilitating if performance of the highly anxious individual is lowered and facilitating if the performance is enhanced. Spielberger (1972) viewed anxiety as being a trait anxiety and as a state anxiety. Trait anxiety is the stable type of anxiety pertaining to personality while state anxiety is more situation specific, such as in an examination situation. These researchers argue that a highly anxious person worries during examinations and as a result, concentration can be seriously affected.

Several studies that consider the role of anxiety in language learning have been conducted. A consistent finding (Stevenson 1979, Shohamy 1982) has been the contrasts between the amount of state anxiety generated by various types of language tests. Horwitz et al (1986) cite listening and speaking as the main sources of anxiety. Problems observed by Horwitz et al include poor retrieval of items from memory under anxious conditions such as examinations, over-studying, and fear of making mistakes that leads to silence. Oral language tests are likely to cause test anxiety and lower level of performance. MacIntyre & Gardner (1994) found that more anxious students tended to study longer and take a longer time to complete a test but they still obtained lower scores than the more relaxed students.
In the case of UiTM students, the entry level English proficiency of the diploma level students is poor. These students enter UiTM with a range of English grades from A1 to P7 but most of the students have grades in the lower ranges. These students would have had about twelve years exposure to learning English, i.e. six years in primary school, five years of secondary school and one year at UiTM. After learning English for many years, some of these students still fail to perform well in their English examinations.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study was undertaken for the purpose of investigating students’ test anxiety and their English language performance at tertiary level.

The first aim is to ascertain whether test anxiety exists in Malay students during ESL examinations. The second aim is to assess the correlation between test anxiety and test performance of the students. The third aim is to investigate whether there is a relationship between students’ English language class anxiety and test anxiety. The fourth aim is to find out whether female students register higher levels of anxiety than male students. The fifth aim is to find out the most anxiety-producing examination for the students, that is, whether it is the speaking, listening, reading or writing examination. The test performance in terms of examination scores for each skill was also collected in order to find out whether the students’ examination scores concur with the students’ perception of their ranking of anxiety-producing examinations.
As it has generally been thought in Malaysia that students from rural backgrounds are more lacking in exposure to the English language than those from urban backgrounds, the sixth aim of this study examines whether these students manifest higher anxiety than students from urban backgrounds when taking English examinations for their English course and specifically in the speaking examination. Speaking examinations tend to evoke test anxiety and communication apprehension. Students’ fear of making mistakes in speaking examinations where they are unable to express themselves in English as fully as they can in their first language might lead them to silence and non-participation. Finally, ways on how test anxiety for the speaking examination can be reduced from the students’ perspective were looked at.

The primary aim of the study is to determine the existence of test anxiety in Malay students for their English examinations at UiTM and if there is test anxiety, whether students’ test anxiety will affect their test performance in their English examinations. This study provides a research design that will answer the proposed research questions:

1. Is there test anxiety in Malay students during ESL examinations at UiTM?

2. Is there any correlation between test anxiety and test performance in the English examinations?
3. Is there a correlation between English Language Classroom Anxiety and test anxiety as measured by the English Achievement Anxiety Test (AAT)?

4. Would female students register higher levels of test anxiety than male students?

5. Which of the four skills is the most anxiety-producing examination and do the test performances on these four skills concur with the findings?

6. Do students from rural backgrounds have higher levels of anxiety than students from urban backgrounds?

7. Do students from urban backgrounds perform better than students from rural backgrounds
   
   (ii) in English examinations?

   (ii) in speaking examination specifically?

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study is significant in that its findings will contribute useful insights for language teachers teaching English to UiTM students. It provides information relevant to the language teachers and testers at the Language Centre as well as to other interested ESL teachers. It will also provide information on the test anxiety phenomenon among Malay students at UiTM and its effect on test performance. This study also provides insights on the relationship between gender and background of the students and English test-anxiety. Additionally, it
provides information on how test anxiety can be reduced for the students in the speaking examination. The results of the study would also prove useful for language teachers who need to ensure a more accurate evaluation of the students.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

1. The Achievement Anxiety Test (AAT) is a self-report instrument and therefore is subject to bias. Subjects may not have actually reported what they felt but what they considered desirable for them to feel or to give socially acceptable responses.

2. Although anxiety is a broad area of research, this study is limited in scope to the examination of test anxiety.

3. The study only focused on test anxiety in an English as a Second Language setting.

4. The population selected for this study was composed of five classes of students of one faculty at UiTM. The sample was not random and may have biased findings which precludes generalizing the findings to other populations of students.

5. This study was also limited by the relatively small research sample size of 93 subjects.

6. The study was conducted among Malay students at UiTM, Shah Alam campus only. There are 12 other branch campuses of UiTM in Malaysia and other institutions of higher learning with different student populations.
Responses typical of UiTM students may or may not be similar to responses typical of students from other institutions.

7. The results of this study cannot be assumed to represent the total population of all the UiTM students in the other campuses or in other tertiary institutions.

1.6 Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the study carried out. The status of English in Malaysia and at UiTM is presented briefly. Development of research on anxiety is briefly presented and the existence of test anxiety is discussed especially in an ESL setting. The purpose of the study, that is, to assess whether there is test anxiety among Malay students at UiTM and the impact of test anxiety on examination performance is presented. Research questions are proposed in the research design to investigate the anxiety-performance relationship. The significance of the study is presented in relation to its contribution towards aiding the understanding of this area of research. Limitations of the study are discussed with regard to the questionnaire used and the composition of the sample of the study.