CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.0 Introduction

The former Minister of Education Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak stated that “Rural schools are still lagging in English” (The Star, 18. 8.1998). The fall in the standard of English is still seen throughout the country and the Ministry of Education has stated that the percentage of passes in public exams for English in the national type schools is very low and unsatisfactory. In fact, the English result in major public examinations “hovers at a low level of around 60% candidates achieving passes” (The Star, 8.11.2000). There was only a 25% pass rate in SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) English in rural schools in 1998 (The Star, 18.8.1998). Recently, it was also stated that the poor performance in English marred an otherwise marginally better performance in the 2000 Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR) examination, which is the national primary school leaving examination (The Star, 8.11.2000).

According to the Education Director-General Dr. Abdul Shukor, the English results for 2000 Penilian Menengah Rendah (PMR), which is the national lower secondary or Form three examination also showed unsatisfactory performance especially in rural schools. Overall it has also been reported that more than 40% (158,530) of 392,692 students failed PMR English in 2000 (The Star, 21.12. 2000). Furthermore, the percentage of passes in English among rural students is only 49.6% compared to urban students (72.8%).

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According to a local researcher Rosli (1995), the decline in English language performance in Malaysia has been due to the greater emphasis given to Malay, first as the official language in 1970 and then with the abolition of English, as the medium of instruction in 1971. Nowadays, rural students encounter difficulties in Form Five English examination papers or SPM even after undergoing the English program for six years in primary schools and five years in the secondary schools.

In order to find out the causes for the low proficiency in English, twenty students from the rural areas and ten teachers teaching in rural schools were interviewed and were asked about the types of problems they faced in learning English. In the interviews and questionnaires used in this study these student and teacher respondents presented their views on the problems they encountered. This study attempts to determine the common causes for the low proficiency in English in rural schools. It is hoped this study will encourage local academicians to conduct studies that focus on the rural setting.

1.1 Background of the study

1.1.1 The Malaysian Education System

The two objectives of our education system are closely related to national unity and human resource development, both gearing towards a united, liberal, democratic as well as advanced and modern society (Education Guide Malaysia, 1996). These objectives can be achieved through the setting up of three kinds of Malaysian school systems namely; fully government aided schools, semi-government and private schools. The common National Secondary Curriculum (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah or (KBSM))
is used at the secondary level. Although at the primary level, parents can opt to send their
children to national or national type schools where Malay and the vernacular languages
(Mandarin & Tamil) are the medium of instruction, Malay is the medium of instruction in
all secondary schools (Akta Pendidikan, 1996).

In Malaysia, there are four educational levels, i.e. preschool, primary, secondary and
tertiary. In fact, the Malaysian government provides free and compulsory education from
the ages of 6 to 14, i.e. primary and lower secondary level with a subsequent optional two
years of free education till form five i.e. upper secondary level (Akta Pendidikan, 1996).
Secondary education begins at the age of 12 to 19 and aims at promoting overall general
and specialized learning by equipping students with knowledge, insight and important
skills e.g. to read and write so as to form a strong foundation for lifelong education
(Education Guide Malaysia, 1996).

The bumiputras or the indigenous natives of Malaysia, a large majority of who are
Malays, form the majority of the populace in the rural areas. The government has
provided facilities, for example, special schools like Maktab Rendah Sains Mara
(MRSM) to help the majority bumiputra population in the rural areas. These schools
prepare the rural students for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) examinations, i.e. at
form five. This is a nationwide examination for all students at this level. This
examination is based both on the Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) syllabus,
and the MRSM’s own internal college assessment system which is called Grade Point
System. The learning of English in MRSM is predominantly for public examinations like
Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR), taken at the age of 15 and Sijil Pelajaran Menengah (SPM) generally taken at the age of 17 and internal college examinations. In MRSM, all students are expected to pass English in all internal college examinations. However, they can pass major examinations even if they have not passed the English paper in Malaysian public school examinations like PMR and SPM. This means that English is not accorded much status in these examinations (David, 2000).

1.1.2 The status and role of English

With the introduction of Malay as the medium of instruction in 1970, the status of English has become that of a ‘second language’. According to Asmah (1992:85) it is “the second most important language after Bahasa Melayu”. It is compulsory to study English in schools and English is the first foreign language learnt after the mother tongue. However, it must be emphasized that English is merely but a subject in schools and not the medium of instruction.

The Malaysian government has recognized that English “being the official language of global communication” (The Star, 4.11.2000) is important as a means of future development, a language of science and technology, a language of international trade and commerce and even a passport to advanced tertiary education. Hence its role in nation building is significant and unquestionable. A prominent local linguist Asmah (1992:66) states that the role of the Malay Language is for ‘nationalism’ while English is for ‘nationism’. The former is for national unity and identity while the latter for maintaining group cohesion and political ties among Malaysians.
English is gaining greater importance in Malaysia, as its plan to be an industrialized nation by 2020 requires all Malaysians to be proficient in English. In addition, it is clear that a good proficiency in English is essential for economic, commercial, occupational and professional advancement and hence to a better quality of life.

Even within the country English has an important role. David & Kuang, (1999:36) discuss its role as a "link language and medium of communication between Malaysians of various ethnic backgrounds”. English has the status of an L2 (a second language) in the Malaysian education system and is used for intranational as well as international communication (David & Taib, 1996).

More recently in 2000, English was made a compulsory subject (The Star, 30.8.2000) in all teacher-training colleges. This reflects the importance attached to English in preparing teacher trainees for “Information Technology” in this computer age. Information Technology is going to be an integral part of the school curriculum (The Star, 30.8.2000).

1.1.3 Concern for the standards of English

It is clear then that Malaysian ministers, public figures, teachers and even students recognize the importance of English. At the same time almost everyone is aware of the rapidly declining standard of English in schools as well as the emergence of a substitute English language, Manglish (a Malaysian version of Standard English). In 1997, the
lowest passing rate (63.1%) among all the subjects offered for the SPM examination was English (The Star, 5.4.1998).

More recently, the Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohammed stressed that "new graduates face a serious problem in English". It has been stated that 90% of Malaysian students entering local universities have insufficient English proficiency for study purposes, 44% have been classified as weak while 19% are very weak in the subject in 1996 (The Strait Times, 2.9.1996). These graduates are not conversant with English that has become a key medium of business worldwide. Graduates will have a much tougher time in getting a job if they are not proficient in English and will definitely 'lose to other applicants' (The Star, 11.8.2000).

It is found that Malaysians, including professionals and intellectuals, often find difficulty in expressing themselves even in simple English. Concern for such a situation is expressed strongly as the generation of poor English speakers have entered our universities and joined our workforce. It was found these graduates struggle to speak English in job interviews (The Star, 8.11.2000).

A number of reasons might be given to explain the decline in the standard of English among Malaysian students. First, the switch from English as the medium of instruction to Malay in all national schools has led to limited exposure and use of English. This has affected the motivation to learn and teach English, especially in rural areas, where English is considered a foreign language, not a second language. In the rural areas outside
the classrooms, one hardly hears English. Naturally this lack of exposure causes fear, lack of confidence and shyness in using English. David (2000) argues that though officially English is the second most important language in Malaysia, in reality, it is a foreign language in the rural areas, even if it may be the second language in urban areas.

Secondly, this situation is aggravated by the fact that English has a very low status in public examinations like Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) and Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia (SPM). It is not essential to pass English in these examinations. In addition, English until recently, was not offered or taught as an examination subject at the Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia (STPM) or pre-university level. In 1999 the Malaysian University Entrance Examination (MUET) was introduced and it is compulsory for graduates in Malaysian universities to pass English before they can graduate. Such a policy has upgraded the status of English in tertiary education.

Thirdly, it should be noted that the problem of poor proficiency in English is at times caused by the poor proficiency of the teachers in the target language. In fact, young English teachers are struggling with their own proficiency in English and this is reiterated by many parents, who question the proficiency of young English teachers in schools (The Star, 22.12. 2000).

Fourthly, students, especially in the rural areas, lack self-motivation and initiative to communicate in English as they resort to their respective native languages as a means of effective communication. Rural students do not need to communicate with foreigners,
hence they do not take the initiative to learn the language. To excel in the target language, there is a need to have both integrative as well as instrumental motivation (see 2.1.2).

1.2 Statement of the problem

The study is initiated by the researcher who has taught English for 18 years in rural schools. In the course of her teaching she found many stumbling blocks in the teaching and learning of English. The decline in the standard of English among rural secondary school students and the great difference in the proficiency levels of English between rural and urban schools is a reality (Gaudart, 1987). The researcher is interested to investigate, identify and analyze the factors for the poor proficiency in English in the rural areas. Such a study of the rural areas can help to create awareness of the problems and some solutions will be suggested in 5.2.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate what causes the low proficiency in English of rural students. Therefore the objectives of the study are 1) to obtain empirical data of the relationship between English proficiency of the students and “rural cultural factors” and 2) to provide suggestions and solutions to improve the proficiency in English among rural students.

1.4 Definitions of terms used in this study

1.4.1 Language proficiency refers to the knowledge and ability to speak, write and understand the target language of the language learners. Hence, it refers to the mastery of
the target language. In this study it is measured by using the students’ scores in PMR as well as a Cloze (Fotos 1991) and an Error identification test. The English scores obtained by the twenty students in the PMR examinations are recorded together with the scores they obtained from the modified test of Cloze & Error identification questions adapted from the SPM examination. Then the proficiency level is defined using the scale of the Reading Test Program from the Ministry of Education (see 3.4).

Cloze is claimed to be a global measure of language proficiency (Darnell 1970, Fotos 1991 & Oller 1977 & 1978) for both native and non-native English speakers. Fries (1945) argues that a person can be considered to have learnt a language if he has within a limited vocabulary, mastered the same sound system, that is when he understands the stream of speech and achieves an understanding production of speech and uses the structural choices of the basic arrangement of utterances. Proficiency in language and language achievement are usually related as higher achievers usually score Grade A and B while lower achievers Grade C, D and E. (see 3.4)

1.4.2 Second Language (L2) refers to the language learned after the mother tongue is acquired. Malay is considered the official language or L1 in Malaysia whereas English is usually used for further education and international communication. In this study, English is considered the second language or L2. But unfortunately limited exposure to English in the rural schools makes English a ‘foreign language’ instead (David, 2000).
1.4.3 Rural schools in Malaysia as classified by the Ministry of Education are schools located in towns or districts having a population of less than 10,000 (Rosli & Malachi 1990). Urban schools on the other hand, are located in bigger towns and districts with a population of more than 10,000 people.

1.4.4 Attitude

According to Allport (1954:45), "An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual’s response to all objects and situations with which it is related". Gardner (1985:9) regards attitude as "an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual’s beliefs or opinion about the referent". He pointed that there are two significant kinds of attitudes namely "attitudes towards people who speak the target language" and "attitudes towards the use of the language learnt". In layman’s term, attitudes are a set of beliefs the learners have towards the use and learning of the target language or towards the speakers of that language. These beliefs are translated into expression of positive or negative feelings towards that language. The perceptions of the people speaking the language and culture towards the target language also have an effect on learners learning that language.

1.4.5 Motivation

According to Gardner (1985:10), motivation is "the combination of effort and desire to achieve the goal of learning the language including favorable attitudes towards learning the language". Gardner and Lambert (1972) identified two types of motivation, that is,
instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motivation refers to a desire to gain social recognition or any reward through the learning of the language while integrative motivation is the desire to learn the language out of genuine interest or to be associated with the community.

1.4.6. Exposure, language environment, and use of language

This refers to the sum total of contacts with the target language. Mackay (1965) classified language exposure into three categories namely a) personal contacts with members of family, relatives, classmates etc, b) non personal contact through the media like TV, radio movies and c) non personal contacts through written forms such as newspapers, magazines and books. Language environment according to Dulay et al (1982) encompasses everything the language learner hears and sees in the new language.

According to Jamali (1992), use of language may include a wide variety of situations and exchanges in restaurants and stores, conversations with friends, watching television, reading street signs and newspapers as well as classroom activities or it may be sparse including only language classroom activities and a few books and records.

1.4.7 Peers.

Musgrave (1972) defines peers as “group of individuals who belong to the same age group of children or adolescents’. In this study the term refers to members of a group who are approximately the same age, of either sex sharing the same interests and attitudes and able to communicate and interact freely in school. Peers can influence the attitude of their friends towards the learning of a language (see 4.4.8).
1.4.8 Rural society

According to Murdock (1965), society refers to all members in a group staying together and whose patterns of behavior are learned and passed down to the next generation. “Rural” in layman’s terms “refers to a district or countryside locality far from bigger towns” (see definition of rural school in 1.4.3).

1.4.9 Social economic status

Social economic status refers to the way of life, parents’ occupation, level of education and the learned language. According to Berstein (1964) people from the lower socioeconomic status find it difficult to use or learn a complex and elaborated code of language. Muriel (1976) supports Berstein’s (1964) view that SES (socio-economic status) is closely associated with the learning of the second language. Berstein (1964) discovered that students from the high socioeconomic class could do better in language acquisition compared to learners from an impoverished environment. In this study, most of the rural students are from the lower socioeconomic class of the society, hence this may affect their language learning process and performance especially in the acquisition of the “more complex code” or language.

1.4.10 Culture.

According to the American Heritage Dictionary (1992), “culture” is “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thoughts”. It also refers to the patterns, traits and products considered as the expression of a particular period, class, community or population. Bourdieu’s (1994)
concept of culture needs to be mentioned as culture includes field or what is referred to as social relationship; habitus or the individual set of expectations based on the experiences a given individual encounters that can change the "rules of the games". Both field and habitus can vary over time and geographic boundaries. Bourdieu also introduces two types of capital namely, economic and cultural. Economic capital refers to monetary and property assets whereas cultural capital refers to cultural competence. Both are convertible and at different rates and the educational system creates a market in cultural capital with certificates as the currency (Garnham & Williams, 1990 cited in Lawley-Bourdieu (1994). In this study culture refers to the "transmitted pattern of traits, behavior and practice of a particular population" (American Heritage Dictionary 1992).

This study is an exploratory study of the cultural factors i.e. traits, attributes, beliefs and practices found among the people in the rural areas which impact the English Language proficiency of the students. Examples of the attributes of the rural population are the shared system of ideas, beliefs, and traditions in their life and their adaptation to the environment for instance earning a living by fishing or farming. They do not expect their children to work elsewhere even after they graduate. In fact they expect their children to continue the family's traditional way of life. It is also difficult for the rural students to learn English as anti-colonial beliefs are handed down for generations (see Chapter 4). Therefore this rural non-English speaking setting is not conducive for learning English and will affect the attitude of the students, motivation, peer influence, and even the teaching methods used by rural English teachers in the learning of English. As social interactions are within the rural boundaries, the students are shy to speak English. Rural
life is known to be simple, carefree and contented with much time and leisure of the rural population spent on religious activities. These are some examples of the exclusive rural cultural traits in this study.

1.5 Methodology of the study

This study investigates and examines rural students’ problems when learning English. This is carried out by semi-structured interviews with twenty students as well as ten teachers from six rural schools in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Open-ended questions were used in both the interviews and questionnaires. The ten teachers were also asked to fill in a questionnaire in order to obtain their views of the problems of learning and teaching English.

1.6 Significance of the study

It is hoped that the data collected would provide significant findings and invaluable insights into the teaching and learning of English in the rural areas. These findings will shed light on the relationship between the students’ proficiency and the rural cultural variables and may help to provide solutions for better teaching. These solutions will consequently help the rural students to attain a higher proficiency in English. These findings would be a helpful guide to teachers and educational authorities with regards to planning strategies, kinds of learning activities and appropriate teaching materials, especially in the rural schools. Hopefully, the curriculum planners can use the empirical data as a basis for future planning and organizing appropriate materials for Malaysian students who live in different learning environments.
1.7 Limitations of the study

This study is limited in its scope as data were collected from only twenty students and ten teachers. The fact that data were collected from shy, non-English speaking rural students therefore posed a number of problems. Most of them could not really understand most of the questions asked and the researcher had to translate the questions and responses into Malay. A large part of the interview was carried out either in code switched dialogue (English and Malay) in informal interactions or only one language-Malay. The students do not speak standard Malay but use the local dialect, Kelantanese, hence at times, the researcher who does not speak this dialect well faced problems in interpretation and transcription. The open-ended questions lend themselves to a quantitative data analysis. However, the overall analysis is qualitative in nature (see Chapter 4).