

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY**

China is rapidly emerging as one of the new economic powerhouses of the world and people in China are embracing the new era of high technology. The Chinese government seems to acknowledge that it is imperative to keep abreast with the up-to-date technology. The people in China are also aware of the importance of English education in order to imbibe the latest information in the area of technology.

China has enjoyed a phenomenal growth in the last decade or so. The importance of the English language could not be over-emphasized especially with the present boom in China's economy. This has led to the demand of employees with a sufficient knowledge and capability to communicate efficiently in the English language.

In addition, with the influx of foreign investors, the need to communicate with foreigners has also led to the importance of English. In the light of the demands for a productive and well-trained workforce which will be readily available to be absorbed when the need arises, the call from the Chinese government to emphasize on the importance of English has been taken up by educators throughout the country.

As for Malaysia, since the country is moving towards a rapid growth in industrialization as well as heading towards Vision 2020, English language is definitely becoming a widespread medium of communication in the arena of technology as well as in the commercial sector (Goh and Chan, 1993).

Malaysia's quest to become a technologically advanced industrialized nation by 2020 seems more certain with the advent of Information Technology. The changing trends in the economic sector reflect Malaysia's rapid move towards achieving industrialization. The country draws trade and investment by virtue of its stable, pro-business government and a strong tradition of democracy.

In line with this, a new need for competence in English has arisen. Realizing the importance of the English language, the Malaysian government is emphasizing on the importance of English in the educational institutions. This policy has given rise to the need of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in higher institutions. Particular attention in ESP is needed in order to improve the proficiency of the learners in order for them to be better equipped with communication skills needed at the workplace.

People in Malaysia believe that the country will be a "consumer of technology as well as a contributor towards scientific and technological civilization of the future" (Chitravelu, 1993). In addition, the economic growth in Malaysia has been tremendous. With the merit of having a "solid infrastructure, a productive and well-trained workforce, and a location at the heart of the world's fastest growing region"

(Wolf, 1994), Malaysia has become a lucrative and receptive market for many investors. As such, the need to use English efficiently is even greater due to these concerns.

## **1.2 A COMPARISON OF ENGLISH EDUCATION IN CHINA AND MALAYSIA**

### **1.2.1 English Education in China**

Under the current educational system of China, the 6-3-3-4 type of linear school system is in use. This means that students receive six years of elementary education, three years of middle school education, three years of high school education, and four years of college/university education. In China, the foreign language curriculum is based on the foreign language policy. According to the foreign language education policy, the general objective of foreign language education is to help students acquire all the four language skills, that is: listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the language they are studying (Ministry of Education of China, 2001).

In China, English education is introduced in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of elementary education, but it is not compulsory for students to take the English class. At the secondary level (middle and high school), English is given the status of a foreign language and it is a compulsory subject in the curriculum. A middle school student takes English lessons for an average of four hours a week for thirty-four weeks in a school year, while a

high school student studies English for at least five hours a week (Ministry of Education of China, 2001).

Although the official purpose of learning English in China at present is to enable Chinese to communicate with the outside world, it is to be remembered that English does not have any important intra-national role in China, in the sense that English is used neither as a medium of instruction nor as an official language for societal functions.

The Chinese government has recognized that English has become the most important language of international communication in virtually every major field. However, many teachers continue to use old methods of teaching, which put an enormous amount of emphasis on mastering grammar, due to the pressures of having to prepare students for examinations. Therefore, there is very little time for developing communicative competence in the language.

In China, English is taught and learned as a foreign language rather than as a second language. There are distinctive differences between an EFL (English as a foreign language) community and an ESL (English as a second language) community. An ESL community is one in which English is not spoken natively, but is widely used as a medium of instruction and a means of official and informal communication in schools, in a natural environment, and in publications. However, in an EFL

community, English is used neither as a medium of instruction nor as an official language for societal functions (Richards, 1974).

Thus, in China, English is studied only as one of the many academic subjects in schools, with limited time allocated for its instruction. Furthermore, as English is a required subject in the Chinese secondary school level curriculum, the language is learned within the artificial environment of the classroom. This has resulted in the target language not being used in everyday communication outside the classroom, whereby students are experiencing a handicap (Lou, 2001).

Therefore, students do not have sufficient reinforcement of what they have learned in the classroom. Since the Chinese language is the medium of instruction at all school levels in China and English is hardly used outside the classroom, the Chinese students do not have sufficient exposure to English, nor the opportunities to practice it in authentic social situations. Simultaneously, due to the lack of exposure, it is not so surprising that the Chinese students who are learning English face difficulties in acquiring the four skills of the target language.

Lou (2001) mentioned that another major factor that causes the difficulties, which in turn result in the low English proficiency among the Chinese students, is the English language teaching methods used in China. The main teaching approach adopted by most teachers of English in China is predominantly structure-based Grammar-Translation Method (GTM), in which English sentences are often translated

into Chinese word-for-word. Large classes and a lack of sufficient teaching aids seem to be causing the delay in the use of diversified teaching methods, which could help the Chinese students in acquiring English better.

Apart from that, teachers of English in China seem to be largely dependent on the use of the chalkboard and oral explanation, and the basic aim of learning English is to improve the reading proficiency and memorize the basic grammar, while speaking and writing are often ignored. Even though educators in China recognize the importance of English in various fields, not many Chinese schools can in reality afford to hire native English speaking teachers (Lou, 2001).

As such, in most of the schools in China, teachers continue to adopt the traditional grammar-translation methods in teaching English.

### **1.2.2 English Education in Malaysia**

The need to improve the learners' proficiency of the English language in Malaysia now arises from the fact that the overall proficiency of English has declined in the past decade. This is due to the Malaysian education system whereby Bahasa Malaysia is used as a medium of teaching in government schools. According to the New Education Policy 1970, the official status of English in Malaysia is the 'second most important language'. What is meant by 'second most important language' as given in the policy is that it is the language which is second in importance in the

education system, second in importance only to Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. The thinking underlying the New Education Policy is that English is an important language to help keep abreast with the scientific and technological development and in acquiring knowledge about international trade and commerce (Asmah Haji Omar, 1994).

The teaching of English in Malaysia is compulsory in all government schools, starting from primary 3 in national-type schools and primary 1 in national schools. Obligatory teaching of English in the schools not only means an increase in the student population learning English and using English, but also a wider spread of the language in terms of geographical distribution and socio-economic and socio-cultural status of the student population concerned (Asmah Haji Omar, 1994).

As stated by the Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum (2000), the English language syllabus for primary schools in Malaysia aims to equip students with the basic skills and knowledge of English so as to enable them to communicate both orally and in writing. Malaysian student should be able to listen and understand simple spoken English by the end of the primary school education, as well as to speak and respond clearly and appropriately in familiar situations.

The English language syllabus for the secondary schools in Malaysia aims to extend the learners' English language proficiency in order to meet their needs to use English in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition and for future workplace purposes.

The aims of the English language curriculum for the secondary school are for the students to read and respond to different texts and express ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken and written forms (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum, 2000).

English has played the role of official language in Malaysia until 10 years after Malayan Independence in 1957. The Language Act of 1967 deprived it of this role. The fact that English is no longer an official language in the country does not mean that it no longer discharges an official function. This situation is somewhat paradoxical in nature. But the paradox is real, and it runs throughout the official administration of the country. Although Bahasa Malaysia is used as the language of administration, for instance, in official correspondence, directives, minutes of meetings, the conduct of meetings, the unwritten rule observed by the government sector and institutions such as universities is that every official document or report has to have an English version besides the master version which is in Bahasa Malaysia (Asmah Haji Omar, 1994).

The purpose of this practice may lie in the desire to disseminate information in a manner that is fully understood by the people of various linguistic backgrounds, despite the fact that only a small portion of these linguistically variegated people have a proficiency that is high enough to enable them to comprehend the highbrow language of the reports. According to Asmah Haji Omar (1994), whatever the purpose



is, it does reflect an attitude which, consciously or unconsciously, recognizes the significance of English in officialdom.

Looking at the role of English in the Malaysian society, it is a long way from being relegated to the status of a foreign language, in comparison to that in China. The domains of life that are covered by the use of English are sufficient justification for not considering English in Malaysia as belonging to the same category as English in Indonesia or Thailand.

On the other side of the coin, neither can it be equated with English in Singapore or in the Philippines. English in Malaysia is a primary language, but a lesser primary one compared to Bahasa Malaysia. In short, English in Malaysia is a second primary language. It is through the process of voluntary acceptance by the country that the language had come to acquire this status (Asmah Haji Omar, 1994).

This situation in Malaysia is definitely different from that in China and as such it would be valid to say that the English language competency of the Malaysians is much better than that of the Chinese.

### 1.3 AIM OF THE STUDY

The changing economic climate in tandem with China's growth in technical arena has now resulted in increasing demands for the engineers who can both speak and write English well in accordance with international standards. It appears that the engineering field in China is destined to reach new heights, more so with the aspirations to make a rapid economic growth. Hence, there is a need to produce a workforce that will be able to operate effectively in the workplace.

As for Malaysia, the high economic growth, which the country is currently experiencing, has led to many businesses booming and thus enhancing potential growth in the technological sector. The growth would attract foreign participation in the economic sector and this would definitely require its workforce to be able to use English effectively in the workplace.

Therefore, this study will look at the English usage by the Chinese and Malaysian workforce. For this study, one particular multinational organization was selected. Two sites of this organization were chosen, one in Malaysia and the other in China. This study will focus on the English used in technical reports written by the engineers of both sites. Specifically two language aspects will be looked at, namely, sentence-types and the lexical items pertaining to the scientific and technical terms used in the reports.

Thus, this study is aimed at identifying the choices of sentence-types and investigating the frequency of the scientific and technical terms used by the Chinese and Malaysian engineers when writing technical reports. In this research, the scientific and technical terms investigated are those referring to nouns only. This is because most of the scientific and technical terms that engineers use in the arena of observations, experiments and processes are nouns. The fact that the words listed in the dictionary (the McGraw-Hill dictionary of Scientific and Technical Terms, sixth edition, 2003) that the researcher used to identify the scientific and technical terms are also mostly nouns shows that the majority of the scientific and technical terms are nouns. Therefore, this justifies the reason for investigating the nouns and not other word types found in the reports.

From these investigations, we can determine the writing needs of engineers of these two countries when writing technical reports in English. It will determine the sentence-types that engineers/potential engineers in China and Malaysia might need to use in writing technical reports. In addition, it will also highlight the frequency of the scientific and technical terms that these engineers might need to use in their technical reports.

Not only will the investigation of the two language aspects provide information about the writing needs of these engineers, it will also provide a reflection on their overall writing ability. According to the Senior Process Engineering Manager of this organization, "an effective technical report is one that has frequent usage of the

relevant scientific and technical terms as these references would enhance better understanding of the reports by their readers”.

Apart from that, the Senior Process Engineering Manager also said that the engineers’ ability to use complex rather than simple sentences would mean that they are more able in writing effective sentences, which could contribute towards cohesiveness and coherence in a technical report.

In addition, the engineers’ ability to vary the sentence-types in technical reports means that there is greater likelihood of them maintaining the interest of the readers of the reports (Webb, 2003).

Maintaining the interest of readers is very important, as engineers need to “communicate effectively with others about the information and knowledge they gained through experiments. If the written reports do not do justice to their achievements, much of the value of engineers’ work might be lost, since the written reports could be expected to serve as a source of reference to others” (Francis, 2002).

## **1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The focus of the study is on the preferences for sentence-types and the frequency of the scientific and technical terms used by the Chinese and Malaysian engineers. This would help them in knowing what kind of sentence-types need to be used and what percentage of the scientific and technical terms are usually used in writing technical reports in the different worksites. In order to achieve the aim of the study, the following research questions will be explored.

1. What are the specific sentence-types used when the Chinese and Malaysian engineers write technical reports?
2. What is the frequency of the scientific and technical terms used by the Chinese and Malaysian engineers when they write technical reports?

## **1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The comparison of the technical reports written by the Chinese and Malaysian engineers is an exciting new area of research. In recent years, people in China and Malaysia can hardly open a magazine or newspaper or turn on the television without coming across someone discussing the importance of learning English.

The fact that more and more people in China and Malaysia are endeavoring to learn English for workplace purposes has motivated this researcher to focus on this unexplored territory of making comparisons in English usage among engineers in China and Malaysia of a multinational organization.

With the advent of Information Technology, a new need for competence in English in both China and Malaysia has arisen. In light of the demands for a well-trained workforce that will be readily available to be absorbed when the need arises, the importance of English education has been taken up by educators in both China and Malaysia.

As English language training programmes will always be sought by multinational organizations that place importance on expanding their market to international levels, there is a greater need for employees to reach a certain level of language excellence in order to be marketable in the corporate sector. They need to be equipped with the necessary skills expected by the companies. One of these skills is to write reports effectively in English.

The results of this study could provide the empirical data valuable to both ESP educators and learners to explore the writing needs of engineers. The information obtained in this study may be able to make some practical suggestions for encouraging educators and learners to develop a more flexible approach to learning contexts and

tasks as different worksites require different needs in terms of writing technical reports.

As such, this research might be useful for the preparation of ESP materials for the engineers who are working for multinational companies as well as for the students who want to join any multinationals in the future.

The findings will, hopefully, not only benefit English educators in both China and Malaysia, but also Chinese and Malaysian engineers who aspire to improve their skills in the writing of technical reports. It is also hoped that this study will be useful in affirming and confirming the quest of English educators in both countries of creating skilled manpower for the rapid growth in the arena of technology.

As is noted by King (1989), "the advantages for the educator are that by working at the interface between industry and education, one remains acutely aware of the nature and social implications of technological change".

## **1.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The research was carried out within a few constraints. Firstly, this study relies on only a few technical reports obtained from the Chinese and Malaysian engineers. That is five technical reports from the Chinese engineers and five from the Malaysian

engineers. As such, this small-scale study may not reflect the general writing patterns of the engineers concerned.

Secondly, the engineers who wrote the technical reports are working for one particular multinational organization. Therefore, the findings of the study could not be generalized to other multinational organizations.

Thirdly, this study is only limited to two worksites of this organization. As such, the findings of the study may not reflect the general writing patterns of all the engineers who are working for this particular organization.

Lastly, this study only focuses on lexical items pertaining to the scientific and technical terms and nouns. Therefore, it is not analyzing other items like verbs and conjunctions.