

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy".(Hamlet. Shakespeare)

#### 1.0 Introduction

My interest in Language learning began before I was exposed to linguistics and psycholinguistics. I was fascinated by what I observed as a language teacher. It was only after my sojourn at The Regional English Language Centre as an Applied Linguistics student that my interest was triggered by what I read and heard all around me. Chomskyan TG and innateness drew my attention more than anything else. As a teacher, I was often puzzled by the performance of my students, both in India and in Malaysia. The performance of my students, especially in grammar aroused serious doubts in me regarding the teaching of grammar and the sequencing of grammatical items, from a so-called simple grammatical item to more complex items. The sequence, some researchers claim is the order in which learners master grammatical proficiency. On the other hand, it has been observed that learners who were exposed to the language sufficiently long, mastered the language, and in turn internalised the grammatical items without having to learn them. At this juncture it is necessary to cite a few examples of learners who have mastered the language to native-speaker proficiency.

The first case is a unique one. He hails from the remotest part of Kerala in southern India. He went to a vernacular school and was not exposed to any

speakers of English, at home or in his village. His father and his uncle had a tremendous influence on him, especially during his formative years. They exposed him to all kinds of literature very early in life. By literature is meant English Literature. Thus began a lifelong habit of reading for pleasure. No one spoke in English or wrote in English in those parts of Kerala, the most literate state in the world. Govindakutty, was his original name but later he shortened it to Govind Menon, which was more fashionable. His only companion was The Voice of America and BBC. He read everything he could lay his hands on and listened to the radio every day. When he entered college, there was none who could speak or write like him. Perhaps, he was an exceptional case. Perhaps he is a good language learner as H.H. Stern and Robins would have described him. Today he refuses to speak in his native tongue to anybody except to his servants and his relatives whenever he visits them. This is a case I know very well because we studied together, stayed together in the same hostel and belonged to the same community. My second example is an English lecturer at the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics at Universiti Malaya. This lady grew up in a Tamil speaking home. Her exposure to English was limited in this sense. However, she was a voracious reader like Govind. She took every opportunity to read Enid Blyton storybooks. During my conversations with her she told me that she improved her English tremendously as a result of her reading. The third case is my classmate at Bukit Bintang Boys' School. Chenathiraja was also a voracious reader and scored a distinction for English in the Senior Cambridge Examination. But his competence in grammar exercises was pathetically poor and he fared

badly. His essays and his spoken English showed an excellent command of the English language. Again this is a case where a learner has internalised grammatical rules by his extensive reading. On the other hand, there were those who scored good marks for grammar but could not write half as well as Chenatharaja. A few years ago, a Chinese lady brought her son to me for English tuition. At the time, he could neither write nor speak intelligibly in English. For three years, I gave him lots of selected materials to read. Two hours a week for three years was enough for Lee Kuan to pass his P.M.R. with a distinction and later answer a S.P.M. paper and remark that it was very easy.

After I returned from R.E.L.C., Singapore, I began my teaching career with I.T.M. Here too, besides teaching the required topics in the syllabus, I experimented with some teaching materials which I thought might interest my students. Together with a colleague who was equally interested in my project, we carefully selected short stories written by Malaysian, Indian and other writers around the world. At first, we asked students to select their own stories. This approach was useful because they selected materials which were appropriate to their level of proficiency. We prepared pre-reading activities and post reading activities for our learners. This project was begun in 1991 and ended in 1996, the year I left I.T.M. From this project, I discovered that the students enjoyed the stories and continued to read on their own even after I had left them. Whenever I start a class, be it in I.T.M. or in TAR College I ask my students to write about themselves or their families. It serves two purposes: First, it reveals their background. Second, the essays that are good are by those who read

extensively for pleasure. In all cases, I receive the same answer. Another truth, I have discovered is that those who perform well in English tests are those who learn the language on their own.

## 1.1 Background

'In Malaysia, we have had the Grammatical Syllabus prior to 1970, the Structural Syllabus after 1970, and the Communicational Syllabus which was introduced to Form IV and Form V in 1976.' (Norasiah bt Ismail. 1994.) The writer emphasizes the importance of grammar teaching. The implementation of the new syllabuses in schools focuses on the teaching of grammar 'in context and in a meaningful way' (M.O.E. 1998). Writing in the June 1994 issue of Guidelines, Vol. 16, No 1, she argues that 'grammar is an important component in the new English as a second language program' and that 'it should be taught consciously in order to achieve fluency both in the oral (listening and speaking) and literacy (reading and writing) skills as stipulated in the implementation of the curriculum' (P.P.K. 1988). After years of implementing various syllabuses it is worthwhile to evaluate, to find out the extent of success or failure of the programme. As language teachers, many of us feel that the present standard of English, especially in Malaysia is a result of several factors. One important factor is the present status of English in the country and its importance in the school curriculum. Unlike in the past, a pass in English is not necessary to pass the SPM. Naturally, those who are weak or fear the language feel relieved and their interest and involvement will obviously slacken and the result is predictable. Another is the sheer number of learners compared to a few decades ago. Both learners and teachers have

increased and when numbers increase, standards fall. This state of affairs is not peculiar to Malaysia alone. Prince Charles speaking in London, at a function in 1989, criticised the English written by his staff. He stated that their writing was poor, because they were not properly drilled in grammar. I, now cite two, one a faculty member of the English Department of the University of San Carlos, Dolores F. Buscato (1987) who stated, 'I have observed a downward trend in students skills in English, both in speaking and writing. I have also observed that regardless of the efforts of English language teachers in making their teaching effective, students have still found it difficult to put across their ideas clearly. In oral discussions they resort to code-switching a change by a speaker or writer from one language or language variety to another one (Fishman 1971) while in writing they can hardly express their ideas in logical and acceptable sentences'. On 6<sup>th</sup> March 1998, the 'Star' carried a report in which the Director-General of Education, Dato' Matnor Daim stated that 'the majority of Malaysian students leave the school system with a poor grasp of English despite having been exposed to the language for 11 years. He was speaking in conjunction with the 'Read 4 Rewards' campaign launched jointly by Star-N.I.E and Pizza Hut. All these indicate that there is something wrong somewhere.

## **1.2 Rationale**

From my personal experience, the experience of others who have taught English for a considerable period of time and the information I have just stated, it can be inferred that there is a need to re-look at the approach to language teaching/learning and the philosophies in this respect. Classroom activities, no

matter how interesting they may be, require sufficient language input and every language learner requires a different amount of input, as we have different kinds of language learners: ' the good language learner ', who learns a language fast and the ' not so good language learner ' who needs a greater amount of input and perhaps a longer period of time. While the vast majority of students leave school with poor English' (Star 6<sup>th</sup> March 1998) a small number leave school with a high proficiency of the language. It is this small number's achievement that has to be examined and studied in detail as it would provide insights for future language programmes. My studies (in ITM and TAR) have revealed that they come from homes where English is widely used and they learn how to read from an early age. This reading habit has enabled them to write better. They have acquired grammatical competence without being exposed to the rules of grammar. There are so many learners who possess proficiency and yet do not know the rules explicitly. On the other hand, we find those who 'know the grammar but just can't use the language! (Finocchiaro: 1983). The teaching of grammar rather than the language itself puts the learner at a disadvantage. He resorts to code mixing, interlanguage and is constantly trying to apply the rules he has learnt to construct sentences in L2. Besides, there are several disadvantages of learning a language with minimum exposure or input. A learner is more often a victim of teaching-induced errors. It is analogous to learning how to swim without using water, or insufficient water, say, a puddle of water for him/her to practice and swim around in. Language learners should have sufficient target language input and grammar will be learnt in the process, of

learning. Brian Heaton conducting a testing seminar organized by MELTA at Rumah Universiti, U.M., in April 1994, showed that a language learner who learnt the rules of grammar made mistakes when he had used both the past tense and the past perfect tense.

He wrote: He had been born in ... died in....

The earlier action requires a past perfect tense and the latter action a past tense.

On the other hand, the learner who did not know this rule got the answer right.

The learner who made the mistake was taught that when two actions in the past occur in a sentence, the first action requires a past perfect tense and the second action a past tense. Examples such as;

when he reached the office, his boss had left were given to learners. This rule was taught and the learner learnt it, and applied it. The difference is that the learner who got the answer wrong learnt about the language, whereas the other learner who wrote correctly knew the language.

There are numerous examples of learners who have mastered the rules of English grammar, but can't apply them appropriately. This is partly due to the fact that the English grammar taught in schools is Latinised English Grammar or Traditional English Grammar. The purpose for which these grammars were written was 'for preparing to teach Latin grammar...' teaching English grammar was not an end in itself, but only a vehicle for teaching Latin grammar...' (Lester, Mark : 1990).

Naturally enough, when scholars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries turned to describing English, they employed the familiar terms and concepts of

Latin grammar. In other words, English was seen through the filter of Latin. A classic example, is that of Sir Winston Churchill who was once said to have written a sentence ending in a preposition that a junior staff member bravely (but not very wisely) corrected by moving the preposition from the end of the sentence to a place in the middle. Churchill wrote him a note saying. "This is the kind of errant pedantry up with I will not put." (Lester, Mark : 1990).

English and Latin are two very different languages and their infinitives and prepositions behave differently. To impose the rules of one language on another would be like 'our strange garments, cleave not to their mould. But with the aid of use.' (Macbeth 1.iii.145-146). Findings from the studies of researchers, experiences of teachers and those in authority (viz. the Director-General of Education and others) suggest that there are weaknesses that need attention. I feel that there is a need to find alternative ways, ways that would promote quicker and easier language learning. I suggest that extensive reading may perhaps improve learners writing proficiency, as other studies by several researchers have shown that learners exposed to reading do write better. From the Malaysian perspective, it is worthwhile cultivating such a culture for our young learners. Speaking at the opening of the International Literature Conference 1994 (Litcon 1994) the Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim stated that 'Malaysia faces a real danger of becoming a cultural wasteland' (NST, Nov.11, 1994). The editorial went on to say that 'whatever leisure that is still available, the ubiquitous television, pandering to mass preference with less than edifying programmes , has prior claims. Reading



comes very far behind. Then there was that infamous finding in 1988 which revealed that on the average Malaysians read less than a page of a book in a year and there is nothing to show that the situation has improved by much since then'. (NST Nov.11, 1994).

This is not to deny that people have learnt languages by learning the rules of languages. Exceptional cases have been cited in the past of scholars and others who have learnt a foreign language by self-study and by learning the grammar of that Language. They are the exceptions, not the rule. On the other hand, we find learners who having being exposed to a language long enough are able to acquired both fluency and accuracy.

### **1.3 Extensive Reading**

'Extensive reading is the reading of large amounts of material for pleasure and information, just as learners may do in their own language' (Bomford, 1984).

'Extensive reading and intensive reading are mutually dependent' (Hedge, 1985).

The materials used were descriptive and narrative materials, mostly stories by well-known writers; stories that get the learners' emotionally involved. The idea is to develop a reading habit and kindle aesthetic sensitivity.

### **1.4 Conclusion**

Learners are taught reading comprehension and related activities like dictionary skills, vocabulary, literal and critical appreciation. The syllabus and the teaching module did not include any grammar teaching.