CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.0 Introduction

The study of errors made by learners in the process of acquiring a second language has always been of interest among linguists (Corder 1981, James 1998). Beginning in the 1940s and continuing into the 1960s, there was a strong belief that influence of the native language could affect the acquisition of the second language (Lado 1957). A procedure called contrastive analysis was later developed to analyze learner’s errors. This approach compares the linguistic systems of the two languages, namely the mother tongue and the second language. Contrastive analysis claims that the main problems in learning the second language are the result of interference from the first language.

By early 1970, however, the reliability of the contrastive analysis hypothesis to predict errors was questioned. New findings of research such as that carried out by Dulay and Burt (1974) showed that many errors produced by second language learners could not be explained in terms of interference of the learners’ mother tongue. The failure of contrastive analysis as a reliable tool in investigating learner errors has resulted in the emergence of error analysis. According to the error analysis hypothesis, second
language learners’ errors are not only the result of interference of mother tongue but are also due to the difficulties arising within the second language itself (Richards 1971, James 1998). Learner’s errors are also seen as an indicator of the learner’s present knowledge of the second language he is learning (Richards 1974, Corder 1981).

It is believed that an analysis of a learner’s errors provides invaluable information about the learner’s progress in learning the second language. Thus, this study is an attempt at analysing errors produced by a group of second language learners of English in the hope of understanding the difficulties faced by these learners in acquiring the second language, specifically in the acquisition of lexis.

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 The Status of English in the Malaysian Education System

Until 1970, all schools in Malaysia used English as the medium of instruction. The education system was then converted to the Malay medium of instruction. In 1971 all English medium primary schools experienced a major change in the system. All the “National – type” primary schools were converted to “National” schools or, in other words, Malay medium schools (Sunday Star 14 January 2001). By 1977, English language was no longer the medium of instruction for primary and secondary schools.
The conversion was completed in 1983 when all tertiary institutions started using the Malay language as the medium of instruction, with the exception of the International Islamic University.

After the conversion of the medium of instruction from English to the national language in the education system, English was made a compulsory subject to be learned in schools. Its status changed from being the medium of instruction in the education system to being a second language. This change in status limited the use of English among students within the school environment. Instead of studying Science, Mathematics, History – to name a few subjects – in English, students only learned the language during English lessons. Students’ exposure to the language was, thus, limited to either five or six periods per week, or approximately 200 to 300 minutes weekly. Exposure to English in real-life situations became comparatively reduced as communication, instruction and administration was commonly conducted in the national language, the Malay language. The researcher believes that this limited exposure has given students very little opportunity to use the language, and this has inevitably affected the students’ performance in English.

In the year 1988, the English language stopped being a requirement for admission into local institutions (Sunday Star 14 January 2001, Appendix A). Individual institutions were to determine the level of English required and to design and prepare their own English courses for the students. This step, thus, further lessened the need to learn the language.
Beginning 1995 (Sunday Star 14 January 2001, Appendix A), the Malaysian Education System did not require a compulsory pass in English in all its public examinations, be they at primary or secondary levels. The position of English language in the education system became less significant with the introduction of the open certificate system in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Examination in the year 2000. Under this new system, students were not graded by the aggregate that they scored but rather by the number of passes they obtained. To obtain a certificate in this examination, students only needed to pass the Malay language paper. The students were still eligible to get a certificate of pass for the examination even though they had failed the other subjects. English was of no importance in this matter at all.

Today, even though the grade obtained in the SPM English paper does not affect students’ eligibility to be awarded an overall pass in the aforesaid examination, school leavers are required to sit for the Malaysian English University Test (MUET) if they wish to secure a place in the local institutes of higher learning. This test was introduced in 1999. In MUET, there is no passing mark or grade. The test employs the band system, Band 1 to Band 6, with Band 6 being the highest band. Again, there is no emphasis to obtain a pass in this test. Consequently, students merely sit for the test as it is required by the universities.

Based on the researcher’s teaching experience, the current position of English in the education system has somehow influenced the students’ attitude towards learning the
language. Science students, for example, seem to be more interested in their electives — Chemistry, Biology, Principle of Accounts, Additional Mathematics — than in English as good grades in these subjects are important in their application for tertiary education. Students only need a pass in English when applying for most courses at tertiary level except for certain courses like the English Matriculation Programme in International Islamic University and the Pre-ESL (English as a Second Language) Programme in MARA University of Technology which require a distinction in English (Ministry of Education 2002). Students consequently regard English as a ‘less important’ subject to master as there is no pressing need to obtain good results in the English language paper.

The present proficiency level in the English language has been one of the most talked about topics in the nation. The Prime Minister himself, expressed his concern over the decline of English proficiency among Malaysians, especially students (Sunday Star, 14 January 2001, Appendix B), and this statement sparked discussions, recommendations and suggestions from members of the public, educators, administrators, ministers and even the government. With specific reference to the forum organized by the Star Publications as reported in the Sunday Star dated 14 January 2001 (Appendix C), several factors have been mentioned to be responsible for the decline. These factors, among others, include a low level of English proficiency among teachers, ineffective teaching methodology and shortage of qualified English teachers. The panelists also came up with possible solutions that could curb the problem such as a revamp in the teacher-training courses, the
introduction of refresher courses for teachers and ‘concrete policies’ regarding English.

The latest proposal put forward in response to the decline in the standard of English is to reintroduce English as the medium of instruction in schools (New Straits Times, 7 May 2002, Appendix D). This measure has received different responses from several parties. Educationists feel that it is more realistic to introduce various subjects in English in a “slow and steady manner” (The Star, 9 May 2002, Appendix E). This idea was supported by UMNO Youth president, Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein, who further elaborated that English should be used as the medium of instruction for ‘a few selected subjects’. In a related report by The Star dated 9th May 2002 (Appendix E), Malacca Chief Minister, Datuk Seri Mohd Ali Rustam, however, felt that “the reintroduction of English medium schools could help the younger generation to be proficient in the language.” The decision to make English the medium of instruction in school is still under consideration (at the point of this research).

The decline in the English language has been related to the minimal significance the language has received so far as stated by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the New Straits Times when he commented that “with less emphasis given to English in recent years, the Government found that those lacking a good command of the language were handicapped in integrating and facing the challenges of the new economy” (New Straits Times 7 May 2002, Appendix D).
The importance of mastery of the language was also reiterated by the Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad who commented that "we are living in the era of globalisation where we need to communicate with the international community which predominantly uses English." (New Straits Time 7 May 2002, Appendix D).

Both remarks support the need to master the English language. Malaysian students, the future generation, should be equipped with a good command of the language in order to keep up with the world's progress. The comments and views presented above have proven that it is very crucial to master the English language.

1.1.2 Background of the School

The school in which the research was conducted is located in the vicinity of Tapah, a small town in southern Perak. Like many other secondary schools, this school also experienced a change in the medium of instruction in the 1970s. The school was formerly known as the Government English Secondary School or GESS, and was one of the earliest schools to be established in the town. After the conversion of the medium of instruction from English to Malay, the school was named Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Buyong Adil, Tapah, after a local prominent resident. The school is categorised as "type A" school (a school with more than 1000 students) and given the status ‘a town-school’ or ‘an urban school’ as it is situated within the boundary of Tapah town. This school has been in existence since the pre-
independence era and is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. SMK Buyong Adil is a double-session, co-educational, non-residential school.

The students come from a multi racial background. To date, there are 1284 students studying from Form One up to Form Six in the school. The Form Three, Form Five and Six students are in the morning session, whereas the Form One and Two students are in the afternoon session. 629 (48.99 %) of the total number of students are boys and the remaining 655 or 51.01 % are girls. There are 914 (71.18 %) Malays, 282 (21.96 %) Indians, 87 (6.75 %) Chinese and 1 (0.08 %) student of other races. The majority of the students studying in this school are Malays.

There are 76 teachers teaching in this school. 59 teachers are graduates and 17 are non-graduates, with 53 teaching in the morning and the other 23 teachers teaching in the afternoon. With regard to the English subject, currently, there are 10 teachers of English in this school. All these teachers are TESL-trained (Teaching of English as a Second Language).

In this school, the minimum number of periods allocated for an English lesson in a week is 5 periods of 40-minutes each. A few classes in Form Four (the low achievers) are allocated an extra period for remedial teaching. The Form Six students, however, are allocated a total of 8 periods or 320 minutes of English each week.
1.2 Statement of the Problem

Based on the researcher's observation teaching the students in this school, it is found that the Malay students in general seldom or rarely communicate in the English language. They prefer to converse in their mother tongue which is Bahasa Melayu or the Malay Language, which is also the national language, when talking to their friends who are of different ethnic backgrounds. It is only during the English lessons that the Malay students communicate in English. But then again, there are students, especially the low achievers, who use their native language during the English periods.

Even though the Malay students have learned English for eleven years, from Primary One (at the age of seven) to Form Five (at the age of seventeen), the majority of them are still weak in various aspects of the language such as grammar, vocabulary, speaking and writing. In this study, the researcher intends to examine lexical errors in written compositions by Form Five Malay students. The reason for choosing written data as the corpus of analysis is because of the importance placed on the writing component in the SPM examination which the students are studying for. In Paper 2, students are required to answer one question from each section which consists of Directed Writing, Summary and Continuous Writing. The marks allocated for Paper 2 are 100 which is more than that allocated for Paper 1 (68 marks). These marks will later be finalised by the Lembaga Peperiksaan Malaysia or Malaysian Examinations Syndicate. Students' compositions are evaluated by impression marking, taking into consideration grammar, language usage as well as content. To score, students need to
write grammatically correct sentences. Precise and appropriate vocabulary is also of influence in making the compositions interesting. Because of these examination requirements, students need to have good writing skills.

The researcher, from her experience as an English teacher, discovered that the main problem faced by Malay students is in vocabulary. The researcher observed that the learners' choice of words is usually 'common' and very general. Their words usually lack precision and nuances. For instance, many students would use the general term "walk" to describe any manner of walking as that is one word that they are familiar with. Other related vocabulary items like 'stroll', 'shuffle' and 'tiptoe' are rarely found in their writings as the students' knowledge of the second language is insufficient. Some may even use words which are directly translated from their mother tongue in their essays. One of the most common examples is the use of 'to story' in place of 'to inform'. This happens because the word 'story' is literally translated from the Malay word 'cerita'. So, the student assuming that 'story' shares the same meaning as 'cerita' has erroneously used this particular lexical item.

Besides the researcher's own personal observations as a language teacher, studies have also shown that lexical errors are the most frequent errors committed by language learners (James 1998). He puts forward 5 reasons to undertake a lexical error analysis study (James 1998: 143 – 144). They are:
i. morphological aspects of words which used to be considered as parts of grammar, can also be viewed as part of the words; such in the case of derivational morphology whereby words of different form class can be derived from the root. For example, adjective (bright), noun (brightness), adverb (brightly). Thus, lexical items can be analysed better;

ii. learners themselves believe that vocabulary is very important in language learning. They sometime equate a language to its vocabulary. Such learner-belief indirectly influences learning;

iii. lexical errors are the most frequent types of errors. Grauberg (1971 in James 1998: 143) found 53% of written errors produced by a group of advanced English learners of German to be lexical errors. Meara (1984 in James 1998: 143) also shared a similar opinion and suggested that lexical errors outnumber other types of errors three or four to one;

iv. native speakers view lexical errors in learners’ interlanguage to be most “disruptive and irritating than other types of errors” (James 998: 143) and

v. vocabulary carries a “heavy functional load especially in early interlanguage” (James 1998: 144). As there is little grammar in the
learner's IL, thus, the message has to be inferred, "mainly from the lexical items assembled for its representation" (James 1998: 144).

Considering James's (1998) reasons for conducting lexical errors analysis and realising the importance of using correct lexical items, the researcher has embarked on a study of lexical errors produced by second language learners. As a language is formed by words or lexical items, it is therefore important for students to learn how to use lexis. It is hoped that the analysis of students' lexical errors will provide useful information about the students' difficulties in learning the English lexical items. Consequently, more effective remedial work can be provided for the students so that they can learn how to use English vocabulary effectively.

1.3 The Purpose of the Study

The general purpose of the study is to examine the types of lexical errors produced by 50 upper secondary Malay students in their compositions. These students are second language learners of English. The study also attempts to investigate the frequency of lexical errors and the possible causes of these errors.
1.4 Research Questions

The present study aims to seek answers to the following questions.

i) What are the types of lexical errors produced by 50 upper secondary Malay students in their English compositions?

ii) What is the frequency of the lexical errors found in the 50 compositions produced by upper secondary Malay students?

iii) What are the possible causes of the lexical errors produced in the English compositions of 50 upper secondary Malay students?

1.5 The Significance of the Study

Errors are undeniably significant to linguists and language teachers as they provide insights into the learner’s strategies of learning the second language. This notion is supported by Corder (1974: 25) who considers learner’s errors as “evidence of the system of the language that he is learning (i.e. has learned) at a particular point in the course (and it must be repeated and it is not yet the right system)”.
With this knowledge at hand, language teachers can design teaching materials that aid learners to avoid making the same errors. This information may also be useful because it can be used in preparing remedial teaching. As contended by Lim (1976),

One of the aims of error analysis is to help teachers assess more accurately what remedial work would be necessary for English as a Second Language (ESL) students preparing for an English test, so as to help these students avoid the most common errors.

(Lim 1976: 23)

Corder (1981) shares similar views regarding the function of error analysis as a means of providing pedagogical feedback. He states that,

...the pedagogical justification, namely that a good understanding of the nature of error is necessary before a systematic means of eradicating them could be found, and the theoretical justification, which claims that the study of learners' errors is part of the systematic study of the learners' language which is itself necessary to an understanding of the process of second language acquisition.

(Corder 1981: 1)

In this study the researcher focuses on lexical errors produced by second language learners of English. The researcher has decided to concentrate on lexical errors because vocabulary is essential to linguistic communication (Ellis 1985). Words or lexis form language. The ability to use lexical items enables the expressions of thoughts and feelings. Therefore, it is crucial that learners know how to use lexical items effectively. It is hoped that the findings of this study would provide information about the difficulties faced by second language learners in acquiring the English lexis.
It is hoped that the results of this study would be useful to teachers in preparing teaching materials and remedial work that, in turn, would help language learners of similar linguistic background to acquire the English vocabulary.

1.6 The Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is limited to an investigation of lexical errors in compositions produced by 50 Malay students studying in Form Five. No attempt is made to analyse content, organization and the quality of the writing style of the compositions as those are beyond the scope of the present study. The lexical errors to be analysed are only limited to the errors found in the 50 compositions produced by the research population. This is a descriptive study which seeks to describe the types of lexical errors and explain the possible causes of the lexical errors in terms of interlingual and intralingual errors.

The frequency of the lexical errors may not be a true reflection of the students' difficulty because the students may have avoided using certain lexical items. The researcher is aware of this avoidance strategy. This is a limitation of an error analysis study of such nature, and therefore, this study is concerned only with the description and the causes of lexical errors found in the data.
1.7 Conclusion

This study concentrates on the analysis of lexical errors among Malay upper secondary students who are second language learners of English. The corpus for the analysis is written compositions produced by the learners. This study is justifiable as it is the first such research done on subjects from the chosen school. This study is conducted by means of the error analysis hypothesis. The reason for limiting the research to lexical items is mainly because lexis is very important in linguistic communication as lexical terms represent the message that needs to be relayed (James 1998: 144). The crucial role of vocabulary is also supported by Allen (1983: 5) who comments that "communication breaks down when people do not use the right words."