

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusion of the findings of the study. Pedagogical implications and suggestions on how to improve vocabulary learning are also given.

5.1 Conclusions

The study has revealed that the lexical errors produced by the subjects can be classified into 2 main categories based on the sources of errors. These categories are known as intralingual and interlingual errors. Intralingual errors refer to errors which result from the difficulties arising within the target language itself. Errors of this nature can be further divided into 7 subtypes. These subtypes are confusion of sense relations, distortions, confusibles, word class conversion errors, redundancy, collocation and lapses. Interlingual errors are those errors which originate from the interference of the mother tongue, which in this case is the Malay language. Interlingual errors can be divided into 4 types which are calque, code switching, confusion over verbs of movement and loan words.

A total of 1104 lexical errors are identified in the written data. Of these, 725 are intralingual errors and 379 are interlingual errors. Statistically, intralingual errors record a higher percentage that is 66.13 %. The percentage of interlingual errors is 33.87 %. The findings, therefore, indicate that the majority of the lexical errors produced by the upper secondary Malay students, are intralingual errors. Intralingual errors, in fact, outnumber the total number of interlingual errors by two-fold. The results of this study, thus, are similar to those conducted by other researchers like Grauberg 1971, George 1972 (cited in Ellis 1985 : 29), Tan (1994), Mi Yang (1996) and Raja Zarina (1997). They also discovered that the most frequent errors produced by second language learners of English are intralingual errors.

The present study reveals that the most frequent interlingual errors are those due to literal translation or calque. This kind of error constitutes 27.98 % of the total number of errors identified. Mi Yang (1996) who examined lexical errors produced by Korean EFL students also discovered similar results. Her data showed that as high as 32.7 % of the total number of errors found was due to literal translation from the Korean language. Tan (1994) also obtained similar findings pertaining to errors due to literal translation from the mother tongue. In her study, she discovered 8 % of the lexical errors are of such nature. The findings from these two studies confirm the findings of the present study and, hence, indicate that the learners often resort to translation in dealing with lexical items.

The most frequent intralingual errors produced by the subjects of the present study result from confusion of sense relations. Errors of this type account for 24.09 % of

the total number of lexical errors identified in the corpus. A study conducted by Raja Zarina (1997) showed similar results as well. Her data revealed 38.7 % of the lexical errors produced by her subjects were due to confusion of sense relations, which were the most frequent of all the lexical errors found in her study.

The highest percentage of lexical errors identified in the present study is calque with 27.98 %. Mi Yang's (1996) study also revealed that errors due to literal translation were the most frequent lexical errors committed by the learners. Both studies (Mi Yang's 1996 and Raja Zarina's 1997) indicated that even though intralingual errors outnumber interlingual errors, the most frequent error type is that of mother tongue influence. Wrong use of superordinate terms was the most frequent lexical errors found in Tan's (1994) data. Raja Zarina's research showed errors result from confusion of sense relations as the most frequent error type. These two studies differ from the present study and Mi Yang's (1996). Both Tan's (1994) and Raja Zarina's (1997) studies indicate that most frequent error type is due to intralingual influence. Having compared the findings of these 4 studies – the present study, Tan's (1994), Mi Yang's (1996), Raja Zarina's (1997) – it can be concluded that the most frequent type of lexical error is related to semantic. Calque or literal translation, confusion of sense relations and wrong use of superordinate terms are semantic errors in lexis (James 1998).

Generally, the possible sources of the lexical errors found in this study can be traced to both intralingual and interlingual influences. Based on the frequency of lexical errors in the present study, it is discovered that the main cause for the lexical errors is difficulties arising within the target language itself. Among these

difficulties are formal and semantic confusion which have resulted in errors due to confusion of sense relations and confusibles.

Inadequate exposure to the target language as well as imperfect knowledge of the rules and systems of the English language, have led to the production of word class conversion errors and collocation errors. Overgeneralisation has contributed to distortions. Learners may have overgeneralised the sounds and spellings of English lexical items thus committing such errors.

The other cause of lexical errors is interference from the native language. This influence has resulted in erroneous lexical items due to translation, confusion over verbs of movement and loan words. The use of Malay words in students' sentences or code switching is also noted as the result of interference of the native language.

In conclusion, the upper secondary Malay learners of English in this study have produced 2 main categories of lexical errors which can be traced to intralingual and interlingual influence. The most frequent errors committed are intralingual errors which in fact makes up two-thirds of the total number of lexical errors produced by the subjects. The remaining one-third are interlingual errors. The possible causes of the lexical errors can be attributed to the difficulties arising within the target language itself, strategies employed by the learners as well as interference of the mother tongue, the Malay language.

Another contributory factor is insufficient exposure to the second language. In countries where English is taught as a second or foreign language, the usage of English in daily communication is limited. Opportunities to use the language are normally restricted to English lessons in the classroom. The inadequate exposure to the target language can then bring about the production of errors in students' writings.

Errors that may have been caused by the insufficient exposure to the target language are those which have resulted from confusion of sense relations. Because of inadequate exposure, learners are not able to differentiate sense relations of paired words. There are lexical items in English which are near synonyms, for example "opinion"/"decision" and "now"/"present". They carry different nuances that are very subtle in meaning. Therefore, errors are easily committed if a learner is not aware of the minute difference in meanings.

Collocation errors can be said to result from inadequate exposure to the target language. Paired words have to be learned through practice. It is only through practice and sufficient exposure to the English language that a learner can know that "promise" is paired with "broken" as in "a broken promise" and not "a burnt promise". This is because there are no set rules to such combinations. So, if the students get enough exposure to the target language, they will be able to use the paired words correctly.

The next contributory factor is interference from the mother tongue. Lexical errors from the data have illustrated that the subjects, more often than not, resort to their

mother tongue when facing difficulties in choosing the correct and appropriate lexical items in their writings. As they are not adequately equipped with a wide range of vocabulary items in the second language, the subjects use the word-for-word translation strategy. This, however, creates deviant forms as the English and Malay words do not always share identical meanings. So, it is common to find that the learner uses the word “angry” when actually meaning “scold” because in Malay the word “marah” can mean both “the state of being angry” and “scold”.

Another type of error which is attributed to the influence of the mother tongue is code switching. The subjects in this study use words from their mother tongue in their sentences when they are unable to find equivalent words in the second language for their intended meanings. As a result, the sentences produced include non-English lexical items. With reference to this study, those are the sentences that include Malay words. The learner does not have the English term and uses an equivalent term from the mother tongue, for example, the use of the word “diikat” instead of “was tied” in the following sentence:

* At the house I diikat at one room. [was tied]

Most second language learners are incapable of presenting a clear explanation. So, they have no other alternative but to switch to their mother tongue.

Loan words pose difficulties to learners as well. Today, many words of English have been accepted into the Malay language. More often than not, the pronunciation of these lexical items is retained. The difference normally lies in the

spelling of the words, for example “university” with “universiti” and “grade” with “gred” . This slight change has somehow caused confusion to learners. To them, the spelling should be similar as the pronunciation is unchanged. As a result, errors are committed.

In conclusion, the errors identified in the scripts can be the result of several contributory factors. The factors can be classified as mother tongue influence, inherent difficulties of the second language, inadequate exposure to the second language, and mother tongue interference. Inherent difficulties of the English language and inadequate exposure to the second language are accountable for the occurrence of intralingual errors whereas mother tongue interference is responsible for the interlingual errors.

5.3 Essential Steps in Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary learning is vital in the process of second language acquisition. Without good vocabulary, students are not able to use the second language correctly and effectively. Thus, it is necessary for teachers to understand ways to aid the learners in learning and comprehending vocabulary.

Discussion of vocabulary learning is often divided between intentional and incidental learning (Hatch and Brown 1995). Intentional learning is defined as being designed, planned for or intended by the teacher or the student. Incidental learning refers to the type of learning that is a byproduct of doing or learning

something. Many first language experts agree that intentional learning, in particular instruction, does help in the learning of words (e.g Calfee & Drum, 1986; Chall 1887; Drum & Konopak 1987 in Hatch & Brown 1995). Several studies, however, have shown that learning from direct instruction does not teach student a wide range of vocabulary items. Many are learned incidentally (Hatch & Brown 1995).

Because of the gap between what is taught and what is known, more attention needs to be given to the issue of incidental vocabulary learning. Most of the studies with incidental learning have focused on the vocabulary which is learned through reading. Studies have shown that incidental learning through reading accounts for a large proportion of vocabulary growth among learners. (Hatch & Brown , 1995).

Due to the importance of vocabulary learning in second language acquisition, there is a need for teachers to know about the learner strategies, and what works and does not work well. Hence, the teachers can assist their students to learn the second language more effectively.

Teachers usually ask students to follow certain steps when learning the vocabulary. Normally, the learners are encouraged to write down the words they come across, then try to guess their meanings within the context or try to use any new words they have learned as soon as they have learned them. The following step is usually writing sentences using the newly learned words.

Payne (1988 in Hatch & Brown 1995 : 372) made a more formal study of vocabulary learning strategies used by English as a second language learners. The analysis provides a clear model on how to learn vocabulary effectively. Payne (1988 in Hatch & Brown 1995 : 373) has suggested five essential steps in vocabulary learning. These steps are (1) having sources for encountering new words, (2) getting a clear image, either visual or auditory, or both, for the forms of the new words, (3) learning the meaning of the words, (4) making a strong memory connection between the forms and meanings of the words, and (5) using the words. These steps are further explained as follows :

5.3.1 Encountering New Words

The first step for vocabulary learning is encountering a new word, which means having a source for words. Such strategies include 'learning a word by reading books', 'listening to TV and radio', and 'reading newspapers and magazines' (Hatch & Brown 1995 : 372). Other sources of words can be textbooks, teacher-assigned word lists, interactive video materials and dictionaries.

There are several factors that influence vocabulary learning. This may include students' personal interest, their own reasons to learn the words and the number of times they see the words to be learned. The more often the learners see the words the faster they learn them. In addition, if they have an interest in the vocabulary items, they feel a greater need to learn the word quickly.

In view of all the reasons, teachers, then, have to be sensitive to the area of interest of their students. Teachers must be aware of their students' likes and dislikes. Besides, they must also allow opportunities for students to encounter the words to be learned as frequently as possible.

5.3.2 Getting the Word Form

The second essential step is to get a clear image – visual or auditory or both – of the form of the vocabulary items. English vocabulary items exist in many forms which are determined by their functions or by the different parts of speech. Getting a clear image of a word is vital as it can help learners recall the words when they are required to. Learners ought to recognise certain aspects of a word so that they can salvage the words successfully. This aspect normally includes initial sound, final sound or the number of syllables for the words. Getting the correct form of the word is also significant when students are asked to define the lexical items. If the learners fail to get a clear image of the form of the word, they are likely to produce errors because they may have faced confusion in differentiating the many forms of the word.

5.3.3 Getting the Meaning of the Word

This is the third essential step in vocabulary learning. This step involves getting the correct and appropriate meanings of words in a given context. English words have

a variety of meanings. So, the specificity of the meanings that learners need may differ as well. Beginner learners seem satisfied with general meanings, more advanced learners often need more specific definitions in order to differentiate between synonyms. This notion is also acknowledged by Shaughnessy (1977) who studied the vocabulary used by basic, intermediate and advanced writers. Advanced learners, therefore, may find the thesaurus more useful and appropriate than dictionaries in supplying them with the different nuances of words that they need.

Another way of getting definitions is by having a bilingual friend or teacher to explain. Besides that, vocabulary can also be learned using the contextual clues to guess the meanings of the words.

5.3.4 Consolidating Word Form and Meaning in Memory

The fourth necessary step requires the learners' ability to establish a connection between the form and meaning of lexical items in their memory. Many types of vocabulary learning drills like crossword puzzles, matching exercises and flashcards help strengthen the connection between meaning and form. Another way that can be used to strengthen the form-meaning connection is through the keyword method which requires the word to be learned using contextual cues. At the same time, the learners also need to relate the new form of the word to those they have already known.

5.3.5 Using the Word

The final step in learning words is using the word itself. This step is necessary as it tests learners' knowledge and understanding of the newly learned lexical items. Practice enables the learners to check whether they have learned the words well. Once they realise that they are able to use the words correctly, they feel confident about their knowledge of the words. Consequently, they are able to expand their vocabulary and make less errors.

All the five steps mentioned above are important in vocabulary learning. Learners need to go through all the five essential steps in order to gain a full knowledge of the words they want to learn. Thus, it is the teachers' responsibility to ascertain that these steps are emphasised in their teaching of vocabulary items.

5.4 Recommendations

Other than having the knowledge of the five essential steps in vocabulary learning mentioned earlier, teachers can consider the following suggestions when teaching vocabulary to students. This section presents some pedagogical recommendations which can help reduce the number of errors committed by second language learners in the English lexis.

1. Loan word, contribute to spelling errors. Teachers could give dictation practice as regards to words in English which have Malay language

equivalents. Some examples are, “positive”, “strategy” and “aspect”, which are spelt in Malay as “positif”, “strategi” and “aspek”, respectively.

2. Teachers should encourage their students to write by giving constructive criticisms of the students' work. Over-insistence on correctness hinders the learning process. Words of encouragement should also be given to their students when necessary. This should be the teachers' way of acknowledging their students' performance. It will help boost the students' interest towards the language. Eventually, they may be able to grasp the complexity of the English language.
3. Teachers need to stress the importance of reading among students. Reading helps students to learn the correct spelling, enrich their vocabulary and internalize acceptable and unacceptable sentence constructions.
4. Teachers should provide an explanation to the students about the possible sources or causes of lexical error so that the students are aware of what could be the potential contributory factors.
5. Teachers could use students' lexical errors to explain to the class how the errors are produced and ways to avoid making such errors.
6. Teachers could conduct contrastive analysis in class to explain the similarities and differences between the rules and system of the mother tongue and target language.

In conclusion, teachers ought to discuss with their students how to identify their lexical errors and what the possible causes are. This would bring about a greater understanding of the pedagogical and psychological factors that contribute to linguistic errors.

5.5 Suggestions for Further Research

The present study is an attempt to identify, explain and determine the causes of lexical errors produced by 50 upper secondary Malay learners of English in their compositions. Lexical errors of other racial groups such as Chinese or Tamil learners as a second language can also be conducted to compare the types of errors produced. A comparison of lexical errors made by the low proficiency, intermediate and high intermediate students could also be carried out. Instead of using compositions, a structured vocabulary test can also be conducted to identify the types of lexical errors.