

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This study aims to ascertain the influence of first language transfer on the learning of English as a second language. Specifically, the research attempts to discover if first language transfer has an effect on the production of written English, the errors involved in first language transfer, whether gender and the socio-economic background of the subjects affect their learning of English as a second language.

This chapter describes the purpose and scope of the study, as well as its rationale and significance. The research questions are stated and the limitations of the study are defined. The last section of this chapter gives the definition of terms and concepts used in this study.

1.2 Background of the Study

1.2.1 Teaching of English as a Second Language in National Primary Schools in Malaysia

Malaya (now peninsular Malaysia) was a former British colony. As a result, it was not surprising that the English language was given prominence over and above the use of Malay, the language of the indigenous Malays, in the educational system. The rapid spread of missionary schools, in the major towns, led to the widespread use of English in education. English was the medium of instruction in most schools except

in the national primary schools where the Malay language was the medium of instruction.

After Malaya was granted independence by the British in 1957, the whole scenario began to change. The government of the day in Malaya realised that language could be a unifying factor to integrate the diverse racial communities in Malaya. The Razak Commission foresaw the use of the Malay language as a medium of instruction in all primary schools in the 1970s followed by secondary schools in the next decade. However, the government was wise in retaining English as a second language in all schools. English then was the lingua franca of the international community. In keeping with the National Education Policy, English is taught as a second language in all government-assisted schools in the country at both the primary and secondary levels of schooling.

English is used not only as a means of communication in certain everyday activities and job situations but also in local and international trade and commerce. Furthermore, English provides an additional means of access to academic, professional and recreational materials. Thus a knowledge of English will help Malaysia participate meaningfully in the world community.

The English language programme for primary school is planned in accordance with the goals of the National Education Policy. The National Education Policy aims to develop individuals physically, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally in order that they contribute to the betterment of

society and nation. This development will also contribute towards achieving the objective of making Malaysia a fully developed nation (Malaysian National Primary English Syllabus, 1995).

With the advent of the Internet and the explosion in access to information technology, the Malaysian government set up the Multimedia Super Corridor to gain a foothold in the high-tech 'race'. It is reasonable to suppose that a society that can contribute to the success of the Multimedia Super Corridor must have a superb grasp of English as the language is still the lingua franca of the international community. Hence the Malaysian government is progressively emphasising the teaching of English as a second language in all primary and secondary schools. More innovative methods of teaching have been imparted to trainee teachers in teachers' training colleges. In the coming decades, the Malaysian Ministry of Education hopes to exploit the use of computers in the teaching of English as a second language. Interactive programs which feature Walt Disney cartoons in vocabulary practice will most likely fire the imagination of primary school students rather than the conventional ' chalk-and-talk ' method. Hopefully all these efforts will materialise and uplift the standard of English in Malaysian schools.

1.2.2 The English Syllabus for National Primary Schools in Malaysia

The English language syllabus for primary schools aims to equip pupils with basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as

to enable them to communicate, both orally and in writing, in and out of school. By the end of primary school, pupils should be able to:

- (i) listen to and understand simple spoken English in certain given contexts;
- (ii) speak and respond clearly and appropriately in familiar situations using simple language;
- (iii) read and understand different kinds of texts for enjoyment and information; and
- (iv) write for different purposes and in different forms using simple language.

The English language syllabus at the primary level comprises the teaching of both the oracy (listening and speaking) skills and the literacy (reading and writing) skills. However, greater emphasis is placed on the teaching of the oracy skills in the first year of primary school.

Proficiency in the four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing is made possible through the acquisition of specific skills delineated in each skill component. These skills are to be taught in context through selected topics together with pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary which form the language content.

The scope for the selection of topics is specified ranging from what is immediate and familiar to the pupils' knowledge and experience to what is remote and unfamiliar. This is designed to foster pupils' interest in the English language as well as to develop a positive attitude towards it. For the purposes of teaching, teachers are encouraged to combine topics.

Topics stipulated include people, health, plants, animals, objects, food, activities, processes, events and transport.

It is emphasised that the skills, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary stipulated should be taught taking into account pupils' ability and rate of progress. Teachers may go beyond the stipulated requirements if their pupils are capable of handling them.

In the teaching of the language skills, a key feature that needs attention is the element of integration. Teachers are encouraged to integrate the skills and combine topics in the teaching-learning process. At the same time, pupil's intellectual development, the reading habit and appropriate use of the language also need to be carefully nurtured. In addition, the principles and practice of good citizenship and the Malaysian way of life should be emphasised. As such, the Malaysian setting should be used as the base and moral values inculcated to foster a uniquely Malaysian orientation and outlook (Malaysian National Primary English Syllabus, 1995).

The syllabus specifies the language skills as well as pronunciation, grammar and the word list which pupils should acquire by the end of the primary school. For the Year 4 syllabus, these are the essential items:

The Language Skills

A close lateral link with the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills is maintained. Vocabulary and sentence patterns introduced in the oral component need to be used also by pupils in reading and writing.

The Learning Content

The learning content or areas of interest for teaching are initially based on the immediate learning environment of the child. It then gradually expands in widening circles to include the home, village, town, state, country and the world. The areas of interest selected for Year 1 and Year 2 are those of the home, school and neighbourhood; in Year 3, the community, town and village; in Year 4, the state and country; in Year 5, the ASEAN region and Year 6, the world.

The Spoken Language

The aim in teaching children the sounds of English is for international intelligibility. As such, teachers should ensure that pupils produce the sounds of English well and pronounce words clearly with the correct stress and intonation so as to enable the listener to clearly understand what is being said.

Grammar

Grammar items have been selected from the list provided in the English language syllabus. In addition, sentence patterns are also provided to assist teachers in preparing their lessons.

Word List

The list of words selected for teaching is based on the Learning Areas. A sample of the more common or high frequency words associated with potential topics as well as its utility value in classroom activities has been identified. The suggested word list is only the minimum for the particular

year. Teachers are encouraged to widen this list according to the level and ability of their pupils (Explanatory Notes on The Integrated Primary School Curriculum Syllabus : Year 4 National Primary English Language, Ministry of Education, Malaysia, 1998).

1.2.3 Transfer and Interference in Language Learning

The controversy of transfer has had a long life not only among second language teachers and researchers, but also among linguists interested in questions of language contact and language change. It is believed that transfer is an extremely important factor in second language acquisition. First language transfer can thus be regarded as the presence in the learner's performance in the target language of mother-tongue like features which are incorrect according to the rules of the target language. (Corder, 1983).

Despite the conflicting views on the significance of language contact in historical linguistics, the notion of transfer remained uncontroversial among language teachers well into the twentieth century. (Odlin, 1989:15). There was a widespread acceptance among early linguists, including Fries (1945), that native language influences could greatly affect second language acquisition.

There were two claims made about transfer. The first was that the existence of cross-linguistic differences made second language acquisition extremely different from first language acquisition. In the

foreword to "Linguistic Across Culture", a highly influential manual on contrastive analysis by Lado (1957), Fries stated :

Learning a second language... constitutes a very different task from learning the first language. The basic problem arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special "set" created by the first language habits.

Fries subscribed to the behaviourist theory of linguistic competence as a series of habits (Bloomfield, 1933 as cited in Odlin, 1989:15). Native language influence was thus the influence of old habits, some potentially helpful, some potentially harmful.

The second claim was that the difficulties of second language acquisition could be determined through contrastive analysis :

We assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult. The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real learning problems are and can better provide for teaching them. (Lado, 1957:2).

Moreover, Lado stated that " the fundamental assumption " of his book, *Linguistic Across Cultures*, was that :

...individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign

language and culture - both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practised by the natives. (Lado, 1957:2).

1.2.4 The Contrastive Analysis Hypotheses

The practice of Contrastive Analysis (C.A.) is based on the principle that the two types of relationship (difference and similarity), which usually hold between the system of two languages, have significant implications for a person who has acquired the use of one, when trying to learn the other as a second language. This view arises from the belief that there are important differences between a first language (L1) and a second language (L2) not only in terms of their structure, but also in terms of their learning and teaching methods and situations. (Atoye, 1983).

The principle of transfer, on which contrastive analysts base their practice, is that the possession of prior competence in the use of their L1 will influence the learners' perception of the L2. Contrastive analysts often emphasise the inhibitive role of the difference between language systems.

1.3 The Purpose And Scope of the Study

English is taught as a compulsory subject in all Malaysian primary as well as secondary schools. The Malaysian government has placed much emphasis on the teaching of English since the language is widely used in the world of commerce and technology. No stones should be

left unturned to raise the standard of Malaysian English. Towards this end, all efforts should be directed to remove obstacles that impede the learning of the English language. This study is a small contribution towards this noble objective.

In this study, it is hypothesised that first language transfer affects the learning of English as a second language amongst Malay students in national primary schools. There are four specific objectives in this study :

1. to obtain empirical evidence of the relationship between first language transfer and the learning of English as a second language;
2. to examine specifically the influence of first language transfer on the production of written English;
3. to examine whether gender affects first language transfer; and
4. to determine the relationship, if any, of the socio-economic background of the students to the learning of English as a second language.

The scope of the study is confined to Year 4 Malay students in two national primary schools in Kajang in the district of Hulu Langat, Selangor. The schools are Sek. Ren. Keb.(1) Jalan Semenyih and Sek. Keb. Kajang. The table below summarises the number of subjects in both schools:

School	Boys	Girls	Total
SRK(1) Jln. Semenyih	38	30	68
Sek. Keb. Kajang	73	53	126
Total	111	83	194

Table 1.1: Number of subjects in Sek. Keb. Kajang and Sek. Ren. Keb.(1) Jalan Semenyih.

The size of the sample is 194 which consisted of 68 subjects in Sek. Ren. Keb.(1) Jalan Semenyih and 126 subjects in Sek. Keb. Kajang. There is a big discrepancy between the number of students in the two schools because Sek. Ren. Keb.(1) Jalan Semenyih is a racially mixed school so there are fewer Malay students. On the other hand, a majority of the students in Sek. Keb. Kajang are Malays. The researcher is interested to find out the extent of first language (i.e. Bahasa Melayu) transfer in the learning of English as a second language.

1.4 Rationale of the Study

Language acquisition is a complicated mental process that has baffled linguists throughout the ages. The behaviourist theory of language learning and Chomsky's theory of innate language learning are but two well-known theories that are expounded by linguists to explain this complicated process of language learning.

The main reason why this study has been carried out is that an understanding of first language transfer in the learning of English as a second language will help educators to plan and implement strategies to

facilitate the teaching of English. English, as an international language, is very useful in our Malaysian society. It is not wrong to say that one's career prospect and advancement is dependent on one's proficiency in English. Hence, in our Malaysian society, the learning of English is of utmost importance. Learning of English in primary schools is the stepping stone to secondary as well as university education. If we can discover how first language transfer affects the learning of English, we can help Malay students to master the English language. If, for example, we can discover that certain sentence structures in the Malay language will definitely give rise to errors if 'borrowed' into the English language, we can teach Malay students strategies of avoiding these errors. Impediments and obstacles can be slowly overcome if teachers are conscious that first language transfer does affect the learning of the second language.

In this study, the researcher is specifically looking at the influence of first language transfer on the production of written English. The rationale for this emphasis is that written English is formal and putting one's thoughts into words is the beautiful part of language learning. A student has to improve on his writing ability to excel in other fields. For example, a top student in business management will not get a job interview unless he can write an appropriate letter of application in English. Attention should be directed towards the primary students. If they have a firm footing in writing good English, then our national leaders efforts in setting up the Multimedia

Super Corridor will be fruitful. As we know, English is the lingua franca in commerce as well as in science and technology.

Another reason for this study is to find out whether boys and girls are equally affected by first language transfer. If, for example, it is found that girls are less affected by first language transfer, we would like to know the reasons for it and carry out a further study on it.

The last rationale for this study is to find out the influence of the subjects' socio-economic background in the learning of English as a second language. Is a student from a high income group likely to score better grades for his English or vice versa? The answer to this question can help educators to plan remedial classes for students from a low income group weak in English and to supply additional reading materials to them.

1.5 Research Questions

The following are research questions for this study:

1. Is there a relationship between first language transfer and the production of written English?
2. What are the errors that are involved in first language transfer in the learning of English as a second language?
3. Does gender affect first language transfer in the learning of English as a second language?
4. Is there any relationship between the socio-economic background of the subjects and the learning of English as a second language?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it seeks to confirm whether there is a need to reorientate the way that primary students learn English as a second language. Reorientate here means to transform the mind, to change the attitude and to set priorities in the learning of English as a second language. We know that a student usually has a set mind towards certain subjects, preferring certain subjects over others. The ease of learning a certain subject manifests itself in the student's attitude towards it. Setting of priorities in the learning process is also important in the pursuit of academic excellence.

If indeed it is found that first language transfer does affect the learning of English as a second language, students should be discouraged from thinking in the first language and then translating into English in their mental faculties before writing it down. Thinking in the first language and writing in English will most likely result in errors. A good example is, in Malay, adjectival modifiers usually follow the noun head they modify, whereas in English, the modifiers precede their noun head. For example, "Lido beach", "KFC Restaurant" and "school activity" in the Malay language are "pantai Lido", "Restoran KFC" and "aktiviti sekolah" respectively. The influence of the first language will most likely result in the production of sentences like " I like to eat in Restaurant Ali " or " Our family stayed in Hotel Hilton last year ". Students should be encouraged, in layman terms, 'to think in English and to write in English'.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, the study is confined to the two national primary schools in Kajang: Sek. Keb. Kajang and Sek. Ren. Ke.(1) Jalan Semenyih. The students in other primary schools are not involved because of constraints of resources and time. In addition, it is difficult to ascertain whether the so-called errors made by the students are due to first language transfer or other causes or a combination of other causes.

Another constraint is the tender age of the subjects. Although the researcher has explained clearly the procedures for filling the questionnaires, the weaker students still encounter difficulties. The researcher is afraid that some of the data from these students might not be valid because their minds are not matured enough to answer those questions.

The major constraint is that the weaker students wrote very little in their 4 writing tasks. Some of these students even copied the questions that are supposed to guide them in doing the writing tasks. If they wrote very little, their number of errors will be less than the brighter students who wrote considerably more than them. This unwarranted situation will invariably affect the accuracy of the data collected for this study.

1.8 Definition of Terms and Concepts

Errors

Mistakes made by the respondents in the course of completing their writing tasks which are contrary to the rules of English grammar.

Intralingual errors

Errors caused by generalisations based on partial exposure to the target language.

Interlingual errors

Errors caused by language transfer from the language known to the learner to the target language.

Mother tongue

The first language acquired by the respondents and is the main medium of communication used at home.

Language transfer

Language transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.

Borrowing transfer

In bilingual contexts, the influence found in the use of a person's native language that are due to the subsequent acquisition of another language.

Substratum transfer

In bilingual contexts, the influences found in the use of a second language that are due to the native language.

National primary schools

Fully government-assisted primary schools which have Bahasa Melayu as a medium of instruction and have the same medium of instruction if they had existed during British colonial rule.

Contrastive analysis

Systematic comparison of two or more languages.

Error analysis

Investigations that seek to determine the types and causes of errors (and often the frequency of the various error types).

Language distance

The relative degree of similarity between two languages.

Positive transfer

Any facilitating effects on acquisition due to the influence of cross-linguistic similarities.

Negative transfer

Cross-linguistic influences resulting in errors, overproduction, underproduction, miscomprehension, and other effects that constitute a divergence between the behaviour of native and non-native speakers of a language.

Overgeneralizations

Uses of a linguistic rule that go beyond the normal domain of that rule. For example, the use of the bound morpheme represented by '-s' on English

nouns frequently signals pluralization, but *mans* and *mouses* are overgeneralizations of the pluralization rule.