

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to determine whether first language transfer influences the learning of English as a second language. The methodology adopted in this study consists of written exercises for the respondents and questionnaires for the respondents as well as their parents. The written exercises consist of sentence construction and writing guided compositions.

The questionnaires for the subjects , among other things, consist of 19 pertinent questions that delve into the usage of English by the subjects. A basic assumption made in this study is that the usage of English by the subjects is inversely proportional to the extent of first language transfer on the learning of English as a second language. In other words, a high usage of English corresponds to a low level of first language influence and vice versa. It is logical to assume such a reasoning because if English is often used, albeit erroneously, first language transfer will have less effect on the subjects' learning of English as a second language. On the other hand, if English is seldom used or not used at all, the subjects will always communicate in the first language and the effect of first language transfer in learning English will be more persistent.

This study will also delve into the most frequent errors (among the 10 classes of errors) committed by the subjects, whether gender is an issue in first language transfer and lastly, whether the socio-economic background of the subjects affects the learning of English as a second language.

### **3.2 Framework for the Study**

The framework for this study is based on Error Analysis. The framework is adapted from the classification of errors by Irene F.H. Wong and Lim Saw Choo in their 1983 study on "Language Transfer in the use of English in Malaysia." Their classification of errors is as follows:

1. Omission of the possessive suffix for possessive pronouns.
2. Omission of the plural noun suffix.
3. Omission of the verb suffix for the third singular subjects (present tense).
4. Omission of Be as auxiliary and as main verb.
5. Omission of Do-support in negativization.
6. Confusion in the use of the articles.
7. Use of Have in place of the existential "there is/are" construction.
8. Confusion of tenses.
9. Confusion in the use of pronouns.
10. The omission of "to" in verb phrases.
11. Errors in the matter of word order in noun phrases.
12. The transfer of syntax or structure.
13. Literal translation of Malay expressions to English.

The subjects in Irene F.H. Wong's and Lim Saw Choo's study are Form 4 students. The first group consisted of a class of Malay students who have studied ten years of English from Primary 1 to Form 4. The second group consisted of Chinese students who have studied nine years of English from Primary 3-6, Remove Class and Form 1-4. In other words, the subjects have at least nine years of formal education in English.

However, the subjects in the researcher's study are Primary 4 students who have only four years of formal education in English. The researcher had to make modifications to the thirteen classes of errors in Irene F.H. Wong's and Lim Saw Choo's study. Adaptations have to be made to the classification of errors because the Primary 4 students have very little exposure to English. They are only beginning to grasp the rudiments of English grammar. They are just being introduced to the use of the past tense and to classify their errors according to the errors of the Form 4 students is both unfair and inappropriate.

Since this study seeks to determine the influence of first language transfer on the learning of English as a second language, the researcher does not intent to delve in detail into the area of error analysis and contrastive analysis. The researcher is only using the results of error analysis and contrastive analysis to study the influence of first language transfer on learning of English as a second language. As such, the researcher is not trying to group the errors produced by the Year 4 students into the various classes of errors and to do a contrastive analysis on the

Malay language and English. To do so is entirely out of the scope of this study and will defeat the main objective of this study, namely the influence of first language transfer on the learning of English as a second language. With that in mind, the researcher adapted the classification of errors adopted by Irene F.H. Wong and Lim Saw Choo. The researcher intends to explain clearly the rationale for adopting or adapting each of the thirteen classes of errors in Irene F.H. Wong's and Lim Saw Choo's study.

For the first class of errors, 'omission of the possessive suffix for possessive nouns', the Year 4 students have been taught the possessive suffix "s" for the possessive nouns. The researcher has discussed thoroughly with the Year 4 English teachers the language skills and English grammar that has been taught to the subjects under study. For example, the Year 4 students have been taught the use of the possessive suffix for singular and plural nouns like "My sister's piano is very beautiful" or "The boys' toys were stolen by the thief." Furthermore there is no usage of the possessive suffix for the possessive nouns in the Malay language. For example, "My sister's pen is red in colour" in the Malay language is "Pen kakak saya berwarna merah." As such, the researcher is adopting 'omission of the possessive suffix for possessive pronouns' as a class of errors for this study.

The second class of errors in Irene F.H. Wong's and Lim Saw Choo's study is 'omission of the plural noun suffix.' The use of the plural noun suffix has been taught to the subjects since Year 2. The Year 4 English



teachers has informed the researcher that even below average students of English know the plural noun suffix for the plural objects. Hence it is inappropriate to classify 'omission of the plural noun suffix' as a class of errors in this study because the extent of first language transfer on the non-usage of the plural noun suffix in the Malay language cannot be determined.

The third class of errors, 'omission of verb suffix for the third person singular subjects (present tense)', can be accepted as a class of errors for this study because the verb suffix for the third person singular subjects is already taught to the subjects in Year 3. Furthermore, there is no verb suffix for the third person singular subjects in the Malay language. For example, "He cycles to school everyday" and "They cycle to school everyday" in the Malay language are "Dia menunggang basikal ke sekolah" and "Mereka menunggang basikal ke sekolah" respectively.

Similarly, the fourth class of errors, 'omission of Be as auxiliary and as main verb' can be accepted as a class of errors for this study because 'Be as auxiliary and as main verb' is non-existent in the Malay language. It is expected that negative transfer will result if first language transfer does occur. Students who intend to say "Saya seorang budak baik" will write "I a good boy" in English.

Likewise, the fifth class of errors, 'omission of Do-support in negativization' is also appropriate to be included as a class of errors for this study. The reasoning is that strong first language influence will make a

student write "Saya tak suka makan durian" as "I not like eat durians" in English.

However, a slight modification has to be made to the sixth class of errors, 'confusion in the use of the articles.' The subjects are only taught the use of the articles in Year 3. They are not likely to be confused by the use of the articles but they are more likely to make errors using them. Hence, 'confusion in the use of the articles' is modified to 'errors in the use of the articles.'

The seventh class of errors, 'use of *Have* in place of the existential *there is/are* construction', can also be used as a class of errors for this study because first language transfer of "Dalam keluarga saya ada lapan orang ahli" will become "In my family have eight members."

The eighth class of errors, 'confusion in the use of tenses', is not adopted as a class of errors for this study because the Year 4 subjects are just being taught the use of the past tense in Year 4. They just cannot confuse themselves in something they are not familiar with or just beginning to learn.

There is also a slight modification to the ninth class of errors, 'confusion in the use of pronouns'. The Malay word "dia" or "nya" can mean "he", "she", "him" or "her." For example, "Dia seorang pelajar yang cemerlang" and "Kek itu dibuat olehnya" in English are "He/She is an excellent student" and "That cake is made by him/her." Since "dia" in the Malay language can mean 'he', "she", "him" or "her", the subjects are likely

to err when using the pronouns. Hence 'confusion in the use of pronouns' is modified to 'errors in the use of pronouns.'

The tenth class of errors in Irene F.H. Wong's and Lim Saw Choo's study is 'the omission of *to* in verb phrases.' The use of "to" has been taught to the subjects since Year 1. Due to constant exposure and ingrained habits, good as well as below average students of English automatically uses "to" in front of verbs in verb phrases. They will most likely write "I like to eat satay" instead of "I like eat satay." Since the subjects cannot be differentiated on the use of 'to' in verb phrases, this class of errors cannot be used to study first language transfer of the subjects.

The eleventh class of errors, 'errors in the matter of word order in noun phrases' is one of the obvious case of first language transfer from the Malay language to English. We often hear students say "Hotel Hilton" instead of "Hilton Hotel", "Restaurant Ali" instead of "Ali's Restaurant" and "activity school" instead of "school activity." The reason is that in the Malay language, we say "Hotel Hilton", "Restoran Ali" and "aktiviti sekolah." Hence, 'errors in the matter of word order in noun phrases' is adopted as a class of errors in this study.

'The transfer of syntax or structure', the twelfth class of errors in Irene F.H. Wong's and Lim Saw Choo's study, is also adopted as a class of errors for this study. Students writing "I high four feet eleven inches and weigh 70 lbs" because the Malay version is "Tinggi saya empat kaki sebelas

inci dan berat 70 paun", which is the transfer of sentence structure from Malay to English, provides evidence of this.

The last class of errors in Irene F.H. Wong's and Lim Saw Choo's study is 'literal translation of Malay expressions to English.' When students are stuck in the midst of writing and trying to think of the English equivalents, some students use the easy way out by direct translation of whole expressions to English. One common example is the phrase "full my free time" which is deviant in English but is perfectly acceptable in the Malay expression "memenuhi masa lapang saya." Hence, 'literal translation of Malay expressions to English' is also adopted as a class of errors in this study.

The adapted class of errors (ten in all) for this study are as follows:

1. Omission of the possessive suffix for possessive pronouns.
2. Omission of the verb suffix for the third person singular subjects (present tense).
3. Omission of Be as auxiliary or as main verb.
4. Omission of Do-support in negativization.
5. Error in the use of articles.
6. Use of Have in place of the existential "there is/are" construction.
7. Errors in the use of pronouns.
8. Errors in the matter of word order in noun phrases.
9. The transfer of syntax or structure.

## 10. Literal translation of Malay expressions to English.

### **3.3 Sample**

#### **3.3.1 Subjects**

The subjects consisted of Year 4 students in two national primary schools in the Hulu Langat district of Selangor. The two schools are Sek. Ren. Keb. Jalan Semenyih(2), Kajang and Sek. Ren. Keb. Kajang, Kajang. Both schools are co-educational, that is, there are both male and female students in these schools. These two schools are chosen because Sek. Ren. Keb.(Satu), Jalan Semenyih is a racially mixed school and is representative of the former national-type English primary schools in Malaysia. On the other hand, Sek. Keb. Kajang is a predominantly Malay school and is representative of Malay primary schools during the colonial period. When the subjects in the two schools are summed up together, we get a situation that is representative of the Malaysian society.

Since the primary purpose of this research is to study the influence of first language transfer in the learning of English as a second language amongst Malay students in national primary schools, only the Malay Year 4 students in these two schools were chosen for the study. The students in Sek. Ren. Kebangsaan are predominantly Malays with a few Chinese and Indian students in each class. On the other hand, Sek. Ren. Keb.(1) Jalan Semenyih is a racially mixed school with the number of Chinese and Indian students almost equal to the number of Malay students.

Year 4 students are chosen for this study because they are in non-examination classes. The head masters in the two schools would never allow research studies to be done on Year 3 students because some of these students will be taking the public *Penilaian Tahap Satu* ( Level One Assessment ) examination. Year 1 or Year 2 students are only just beginning to learn English and will not be suitable for this study. Year 6 students will also be taking a public examination, *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* ( Primary School Assessment Test ). Year 5 students will be taking their UPSR examination the following year and the head masters concerned would not allow these students to be involved in this academic exercise. Ideally, Year 5 or Year 6 students are more suitable for this study because they are more matured and have much more exposure to English than the Year 4 students. However, the researcher has to concur with the decisions of the headmasters in order not to disrupt the preparation of the two schools for the public examinations.

### **3.3.2 Independent Variable**

The independent variable in this study pertained to the usage of English by the subjects.

### **3.3.3 Dependent Variables**

Errors in writing that can be traced to the influence of first language transfer and the scores in English of the subjects ( from the first and second semester examination results ) served as the dependent variables in this study.

### **3.4 Design of the study**

#### **3.4.1 Testing Instruments**

After extensive discussions with the Year 4 English teachers concerned, the researcher had prepared 4 sets of written exercises for the subjects. Initially the researcher intended to tape the conversation for first language transfer. However, the English teachers had advised the researcher not to do so as there were minimum interactions between the students in the English Language. Thus the researcher did a pilot study to determine the feasibility of taping the subjects' conversation and true enough there was little data to collect. Most of the students were passive during English lessons, and if at all they did speak among themselves, they spoke in Bahasa Melayu.

The teachers advised the researcher to concentrate on written English. Since only the English teachers knew the competency level of their students in the English Language, the researcher sought their advice in preparing the written exercises. Testing instruments to gauge the influence of first language transfer in the learning of English as a second language were administered to the subjects of both schools. The testing instruments consisted of 4 sets of written exercises, namely:

1) set A consists of a composition entitled 'My Family' and making sentences with nouns verbs and adjectives (see Appendix A ).

This title was suggested by one of the Year 4 English teachers because it is a common topic and primary students are usually enthusiastic of events

concerning their families. The family unit is also a topic stressed in Islamic religious studies ( for Muslim students ) and moral education ( for non-Muslim students ). They are also taught to respect their elders, especially their parents, and always to think of their families when they contemplate to do anything. Hence, " My Family " is a familiar topic for a free composition and even weaker Year 4 students are expected to write something about it. Furthermore this simple title allows the primary Year 4 subjects to express themselves freely with the limited amount of vocabulary that they have. The researcher has deliberately not put a limit to the length of the composition so that the subjects can write freely about their families. If the researcher had asked the subjects to write the composition in about 100-120 words, the brighter subjects would feel that they had more to convey than what was actually written. On the other hand, the weaker students would write non-pertinent contents to make up the 100-120 word limit. Moreover, the researcher is not focusing on the actual number of errors made by each subject but on the relative frequency of errors, that is, the total number of errors divided by the total number of sentences in the four writing tasks. In other words, the researcher is focusing on the average number of error per sentence and so the limit to the number of words for each writing task is not an issue here.

- 2) *Set B consists of sentence construction with nouns, verbs and adjectives ( see Appendix B ).*
- 3) *Set C also consists of sentence construction with nouns, verbs and*



adjectives ( see Appendix C ).

Set B and C were prepared after thorough discussions with the English teachers concerned. According to the teachers, nouns, verbs and adjectives are the most commonly used words in the primary English curriculum. As such, the subjects are expected to make sensible sentences, albeit not grammatically correct ones, using nouns, verbs and adjectives. As the objective of this study is to determine whether first language transfer influence the learning of English as a second language, the common grammatical mistakes such as using the present tense instead of the past tense for past events or the omission of the plural 's' are disregarded in this study. The researcher is specifically looking for errors that are traceable to the influence of first language transfer on the subjects.

4) Set D consists of four short guided compositions ( see Appendix D ).

Question 1 is about an Indonesian farmer whose personal particulars are given. The subjects were required to write a short paragraph about the farmer. An Indonesian farmer is chosen because Indonesia is a close neighbour of Malaysia and the agricultural sector is a major contributor to the Indonesian economy. The researcher could as well choose a Malaysian farmer but the aim is to give an ASEAN perspective on good neighbourliness and to add a variety to the writing task. The particulars given about the Indonesian farmer are his name, age, occupation, address, language spoken, number of children and monthly income.

Question 2 is also about describing personal details of a student, Lau Han Yew. Lau Han Yew is a typical Malaysian school boy who is also in Year 4. The particulars given about him are his age, address, school and hobbies. Question 3 is a composition about a pet. Many Malaysian families have pets and the subjects are expected to be keen on this topic. To facilitate their flow of ideas, a few pertinent questions about their pets are asked to guide them along the writing task. The questions ask about the kind of pet, its name, how the pet is obtained, appearance and what the subject does with his (or her) pet. Lastly, in question 4 the subjects were required to write a short paragraph about their mother by answering certain pertinent questions. The questions ask about the subject mother's name, age, appearance, occupation and the things she likes.

The researcher then marked and assessed the four sets of writing tasks. The errors made by the subjects were categorised into the ten classes of errors ( refer to Section 3.4.3 of this chapter ) used for this study. While marking the scripts for errors, the researcher also counted the number of sentences for each of the writing tasks.

### **3.4.2 Usage of English**

To obtain information on the usage of English by the subjects, the researcher has produced two sets of questionnaires; one set for the subjects and the other for their parents ( see Appendix E1 and F respectively ). Some of the questions in the students' questionnaires and the

parents' questionnaires are identical. The reason is that the subjects, at tender ages of 10 years, are not used to answering questionnaires. It is better to collate their answers with that of their parents to get more accurate data. The questions that are similar are (the parent's version in bracket and italics) :

1. How often do you use English at home?

*( How often does your family use English at home? )*

2. Do you need to use English at home?

*( Do your family members need to use English at home? )*

3. Do your parents encourage you to use English?

*( Do you encourage your child to use English? )*

4. Do your parents send you for English conversation courses?

*( Do you send your child for English conversation courses? )*

5. Do your parents send you for English tuition?

*( Do you send your child for English tuition? )*

6. Do your parents buy English story books for you?

*( Do you buy English story books for your child? )*

7. How often do you borrow English story books from the public library?

*( How often does your child borrow English story books from the public library? )*

The answers from the parents ( for these seven questions ) were used to collate the answers given by the subjects. If the answers given by a subject were different from his parents, the researcher would interview the student

concerned to get the true picture. There were a few cases in this study where the researcher had to resort to this line of action.

The questionnaire for the subject is then marked according to a 3-point Likert scale. In terms of award of points, the response for **always**=3, **sometimes**=2, **seldom**=1, **never**=0. The score for each subject is totalled. A high score means that a subject has a high usage of English and it can be logically argued that the influence of first language transfer is considerably less. A low score means that a subject has a low usage of English and it can be similarly argued that the influence of first language transfer will be greater.

### **3.4.3 Errors in Writing That are Attributable to the Influence of the First Language**

In this study, the researcher is dealing with primary Year 4 students who have only a rudimentary grasp of English grammar. Hence the researcher is adapting the classification of errors by Irene F.H. Wong and Lim Saw Choo (1983) to include the following ( the Bahasa Malaysia version in brackets ) :

- (i) Omission of the possessive suffix for possessive nouns.

Example : My mother occupation is a clerk.

( *Pekerjaan ibu saya ialah kerani,*  )

- (ii) Omission of the verb suffix for the third person singular subjects

( Present tense ).

Example : She live in Jalan Bukit.

( *Dia tinggal di Jalan Bukit.*  )

(iii) Omission of Be as auxiliary and as main verb.

Example : I studying in Year 4.

( *Saya belajar di Tahun 4.*  )

(iv) Omission of Do-support in negativization.

Example : I not like my Mathematics teacher.

( *Saya tak suka guru Matematik saya.*  )

(v) Error in the use of articles.

Example : I am Malay student.

( *Saya seorang pelajar Melayu.*  )

(vi) Use of Have in place of the existential " there is/are " construction.

Example : In my family has six children.

( *Keluarga saya mempunyai enam anak.*  )

(vii) Error in the use of pronouns.

Example : My best friend is Anita Bt. Ali. I like she.

( *Kawan paling baik saya ialah Anita Bt. Ali. Saya menyukai dia).*

(viii) Errors in the matter of word order in noun phrases.

Example : I like to eat in Restaurant Ali.

( *Saya suka makan di Restoran Ali.*  )

(ix) The transfer of syntax or structure.

Example : Three from my brother is teacher.

( *Tiga daripada abang saya adalah guru.* )

(x) Literal translation of Malay expressions to English.

Example : I cannot full my father expectations.

( *Saya tak dapat memenuhi permintaan bapa saya.* )

The total number of errors in the four writing tasks is then divided by the total number of sentences in the four writing tasks to give the relative frequency of errors, that is the average number of error per sentence. The mathematical formula used in the calculation is:

$$\text{Relative frequency of errors} = \frac{\text{Total number of errors in the 4 writing tasks}}{\text{Total number of sentences in the 4 writing tasks}}$$

For example, if a subject has made a total of 43 errors in the four writing tasks and he has written a total of 98 sentences in the four writing tasks,

$$\begin{aligned} \text{his relative frequency of errors} &= \frac{43}{98} \\ &= 0.439 \end{aligned}$$

The relative frequency of 0.439 can be interpreted as the subject having made an average of 0.439 error per sentence.

#### **3.4.4 The Subjects' Scores in English**

The subjects' scores in English were obtained from averaging their marks for the first and second semester examination. Their English scores are highly indicative of their performance in written English as the UPSR ( Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah or Primary School Achievement

Test ) format is used for both examinations. Then the scores of the students are graded according to the following grades :

Grade A : 80 - 100 marks

Grade B : 65 - 79 marks

Grade C : 40 - 64 marks

Grade D : 20 - 39 marks

Grade E : 0 - 19 marks

The subjects' scores in English are a reliable indicator of the level of proficiency of the subjects in written English. The scores are reliable because the questions given in the two examinations follow the UPSR ( Primary School Achievement Test ) format.

### **3.5 Implementation of the Testing Instruments and Questionnaires**

#### **3.5.1 Implementation of the Testing Instruments\_**

The researcher was in the classroom to administer the testing instruments. Initially, the researcher explained to the students about the writing tasks. Since there are four sets of writing tasks, the researcher spent four days for each of the six classes involved in the study. The students were given two teaching periods ( about one hour ) to complete each of the writing tasks. The researcher then gave simple examples on the black board to explain what they were required to do for the writing tasks. While the students were writing, the researcher helped the weaker students with prompts but the actual writing tasks were done by the students themselves. After the students had completed their writing tasks, the researcher tallied

the number of scripts with the number of students to ensure that every student had handed his script.

When the researcher administered Set A, Set B and Set C of the writing tasks, examples were given on the black board but different nouns, verbs and adjectives were used. The researcher also helped the subjects with the spelling of more difficult words used in the sentence construction. The researcher invigilated the whole hour that the subjects were doing the writing task to ensure that the subjects do not copy each other and defeat the purpose of this study. As for Set D of the writing tasks, the researcher explained the questions given in the four guided compositions. These questions were used to guide the subjects while they were writing their compositions. The researcher also helped the subjects with the spelling of difficult words and gave the English equivalent of Malay words if requested by the students. However the researcher refrained from helping the students to translate Malay expressions to English as that would defeat the main purpose of this study, that is to see whether first language transfer affects the production of written English.

### **3.5.2 Implementation of the Questionnaires**

The students' questionnaires were administered to the subjects during class lessons. The English teachers were kind enough to offer two teaching periods ( about 1 hour ) to administer the students' questionnaires. The researcher reminded the subjects to answer their questionnaires honestly and sincerely to ensure the accuracy of this study. Since most of



the subjects were answering questionnaires for the first time, the researcher explained each and every question carefully to the subjects. Each subject was also asked to bring home one set of parents' questionnaire for his ( or her ) parents to complete. The researcher collected the completed parents' questionnaires the day after.

However only 93 out of the 194 parents returned the completed questionnaires to the researcher. Out of these 93 parents, only 89 of them answered the question on total family monthly income. The total family monthly income is an essential piece of information for the researcher to assess the socio-economic background of the subject. As the researcher could not compel the parents to return the completed questionnaires, the researcher had to make do with what was available.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

Three Year 4 classes in Sek. Ren. Keb.(Satu) Jalan Semenyih and another three Year 4 classes in Sek.Keb. Kajang were chosen for this study. The total number of subjects is 194. The subjects were required to do four writing tasks and answer a set of questionnaires. The subjects' parents were also required to answer another set of questionnaires ( in which the questions are almost similar to the questions in the subjects' questionnaires). The answers given by the subjects were then tallied with the answers given by the parents so that the researcher can get a true picture about the usage of English.