

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Errors are invaluable sources of information to teachers and learners in the learning of a second language. From the errors that learners commit, teachers can determine the level of mastery of the language system of their students. Errors provide feedback to the teacher as to how far the learner has progressed, and consequently, what remains for him to learn. Errors are also indispensable to the learner himself as the making of errors is a device the learner uses in the process of learning the target language. It is a way the learner has of testing his hypotheses about the nature of the target language.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

1.1.1 The role of English in Malaysia

The English language was introduced into Malaysia through the British colonial education system (prior to the days of independence in 1957) and was the medium of instruction in all National Type English schools, as well as the main language of government, administration and commerce (Wong & Tambyrajah,

1991). Knowledge of English was considered an asset among Malaysians, and as a result, English-medium schools became the avenue to higher education, better job opportunities and increased socioeconomic status.

When Malaysia gained independence in 1957, English lost its status as the main language of administration (Benson, 1990). Instead, it was adopted as an alternate official language together with Malay. However, the Language Act of 1967 deprived it of this role when its status as the alternate official language was also removed. Subsequently, in 1971, the Malaysian Government passed the Education Enactment bill that led to the abolition of English as the medium of instruction in schools. The bill was aimed at working towards a common education system, with Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. This change affected the status of the English language, not only in the government machinery, but also in schools. Since then, the English language has been taught as the official second language in the Malaysian education system.

Nonetheless, the English language syllabus in the KBSM recognises the importance of the English language, both at the national and international levels and also to "enable Malaysia(ns) to engage meaningfully in local and international trade" (Sukatan Pelajaran Menengah Bahasa Inggeris, 1987, p. 1).

Subsequently, the introduction of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction has also seen the decline in the general level of English proficiency among Malaysians (Platt and Weber, 1980; Lowenberg, 1991; Wong, 1992). A decline in the use of a language is inevitable when a language is no longer employed as a medium of instruction. This lends support to what is contended by Benson, an educationist, (1990) who further explains that those whose use of English is confined to the school system, rarely use it in their daily lives. This inevitably causes the subsidence of the use of the language. Such is the case among rural Malaysians, where English is hardly used at all outside the classroom.

The decline in the English language has caused widespread concern among educators and all other relevant authorities in the field of education. As was reiterated by Datuk Najib Tun Razak, the former Minister of Education,

There is growing concern within the government that we have to make a very conscious effort to improve proficiency in English throughout the educational system. It is important for Malaysians to have a good command of English, particularly if we want to be an important global player.

(Asiaweek, July 30, 1999, p. 29)

English, however, is still recognized as an important language that is needed to facilitate international trade, diplomacy, tourism, and the advance of science and technology in the country. The recent call for Malaysians to focus on the learning of English by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad points to the fact that English will definitely play a major role in achieving the goals of development and progress by the year 2020 (The Star, September 10, 1999, p. 7).

1.1.2 Background to Sekolah Menengah Tanah Merah Site 'C'

This study is confined to selected errors made by learners of English from a specific school, namely, Sekolah Menengah Tanah Merah Site 'C', which is a semi-rural school in Seremban. It has a student population of 1,200 and a total of 62 teachers. About 90% of the students are Chinese, while the other 10% consists of Malays and Indians.

A majority of the Chinese students come from financially sound families. Most of their parents are either pig farmers or harvesters. These students are expected to take over the pig farming business from their parents someday; therefore, they feel that there is no necessity for them to acquire more than the basic form of education, what more to study the English language. This is exemplified in their parents' lives where without any form of education, they are still able to earn good income from their pig farming business.

A majority of the students in this school are of low proficiency in the English language. They have limited exposure to English and from the researcher's personal observation, lack motivation to learn the language, as they see no relevance of this language in their daily lives. Without any kind of motivation, it is difficult to learn a second language as motivation is the crucial force that actuates learners and determines their success at second language learning (Littlewood, 1984; Cunningsworth, 1984; Harmer, 1991).

1.2 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The thesis is based on the researcher's own personal observation of the level of proficiency of students in her school, in the English language, after having taught there for three years. She finds that their competency in the language is low, particularly with reference to the grammatical aspect. The area that causes the most difficulty is in the use of the English verb system. The researcher feels that there is a need for her to carry out this study in order to have a better understanding of how to help her students use the correct verb forms. She has specifically chosen to study errors in the use of the simple past tense and the past progressive tense because she finds that her students do not know the correct usage of these tenses. Also the concept of past time reference is not realized, and hence, in many instances of writing, incorrect verb forms are frequently produced.

1.3 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to:

- i. identify the errors in the use of the simple past tense and past progressive tense found in the free-writing essays and structured tests assigned to forty students,
- ii. classify and describe the errors in the use of the simple past tense and past progressive tense which are found in the free-writing essays and structured tests, and
- iii. find out some of the possible causes of the high frequency errors which appear in the free-writing essays and structured tests.

1.4 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study deals with errors in the use of the simple past tense and past progressive tense which occur within the context of forty free-writing essays (each of about 350 to 500 words in length) and a structured test of forty students. The errors are examined in accordance to Corder's (1981) taxonomy of errors, namely, selection errors, omission errors and addition errors.

.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

- i. What are the types of errors in the use of the simple past and past progressive tense, found in the free-writing essays and structured tests?
- ii. What are the frequencies of occurrence of each type of error in the use of the simple past tense and the past progressive tense?
- iii. What are some possible causes of the high frequency errors, which appear in the free-writing essays and structured tests?

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

A study such as this would help the researcher locate the areas of difficulty in the English tense system and hence, gain a better understanding into the exact learning problems of her students. Therefore, she would be in a better position to give appropriate guidance in terms of remedial work, as she would be able to define the areas that pose difficulty to her students. It is hoped that the findings could provide insights concerning verb form errors, specifically in the use of the simple past and past progressive tense, made by students of similar

background, which in turn would help teachers correct students' errors and improve the effectiveness of their teaching. The information gathered from this study could be useful for teachers in preparing materials and would provide the teachers with a guide to the areas of learning that need special attention and emphasis.

This study is also significant because it goes one step further, in an error analysis research, to look at errors found not only in free-writing essays, but also in tests. The purpose for this is to get a more comprehensive distribution of errors. It should be noted here that many other EA studies have specifically studied errors found only in free-writing compositions (Khairussamee, 1982; Meziani, 1984; Wee, 1995; Sheena Kaur, 1996; Raja Zarina, 1997).

1.7 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited in its scope and coverage. The subjects consist of only forty Form Four students of low English language proficiency from Sekolah Menengah Tanah Merah Site 'C' Sembilan, a semi-rural school in the Seremban/Port Dickson district of Negeri Sembilan. The error analysis is carried out based restrictively on the incorrect usage of simple past tense and past progressive tense found within the context of forty free-writing essays and a structured test of forty students. Thus, the errors studied are limited in scope to only those found in the corpus.

Another limitation is that the types of errors found in the use of simple past and past progressive tenses could be influenced by the error collection techniques. As pointed out by Nickel (1989), different kinds of error collection techniques may produce different types of errors. Hence, the errors elicited in this study are not a comprehensive representation of all the possible kinds of errors found in the use of the simple past and past progressive tenses.