CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0   INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, error-related definitions and theories as well as brief reviews of related studies pertaining to errors are discussed.

2.1   ERRORS AND MISTAKES

Errors should be distinguished from *mistakes*. According to George (1972), teachers define *errors* as "unwanted forms" (p. 2) which they find undesirable. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) consider errors as a deviation from "...some selected norm of mature language performance" (p. 138). Corder (1967) gives a satisfactory definition by describing errors as "systematic", and that they show the learner's "transitional competence" (p. 167). The errors are termed as *competence errors* by Corder (1973), and these errors are considered serious errors, as they are evidence of the learners' current linguistic ability.

On the other hand, *mistakes* are considered as inconsistent or unsystematic deviations that result from "...memory lapses, physical states such as tiredness, and psychological conditions such as strong emotions" (Corder,

1967, p. 167). Mistakes or performance errors as defined by Corder (1967) are not considered as serious "errors" and have little pedagogical significance.

2.2   CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

From the 1940s to the 1960s, researchers have carried out contrastive analyses (CA) by systematically comparing two languages - the native language and the target language, and predicting areas of potential error. According to CA advocates (Fries, 1945; Lado, 1957; Di Petro, 1971; James, 1980; Sheen, 1980, 1996), those elements of the target language that are similar to a learner's native language will be simple for him to learn, whereas those that are different will be difficult. The greater the difference between two languages, the greater is the problem in second language learning and the potential area of interference. This belief gave rise to the contrastive analysis hypothesis: where two languages were similar, positive transfer would occur; where they were different, negative transfer would result.

At that time, the field of language teaching was based on the theory of behaviourism - that language was acquired through habit formation. Thus, learning a second language was seen as a process of overcoming the habits of the native language, in order to acquire the new habits of the target language. Therefore, the CAH (Contrastive Analysis Hypotheses) was based on this view of language learning - that is, if potential errors could be predicted, errors might

be prevented and the formation of bad habits, too, could be avoided (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991).

However, there were strong criticisms against the CAH as the weaknesses were soon revealed. CA could only predict some errors and did not have a very high degree of predictive power (Duskova, 1969; Chamot, 1978; Arabski, 1979; Hammerly, 1982; Cook, 1993). While errors predicted by CA did not always occur, those not predicted sometimes did (Dulay and Burt, 1974; Hyltenstam, 1977; Norrish, 1983; Cook, 1993; James, 1998). Moreover, not all errors could be attributed to differences between the native language and the target language structures, as some errors were due to complexities within the target language itself (Gass, 1984; Selinker, 1992).

In view of the weaknesses found in CA, Wardhaugh (1970) proposed a distinction between a strong version and a weak version of the CAH whereby '...the strong version claims the predictive power of CA but the weak claims merely to have the power to diagnose errors made" (p. 123). This weak version could be used to explain the causes of some of the errors that occur. (Johansson, 1975).

2.3   ERROR ANALYSIS

By the late 1960s, researchers have found that not all errors made by second language learners could be explained in terms of first language transfer alone. As a result, a different approach to analysing learners' errors was taken by researchers. The approach was known as *error analysis* (EA).

Unlike contrastive analysis where two languages are compared and contrasted to predict errors, error analysis deals with actual errors committed by learners and aims at "...systematically describing and explaining errors made by speakers of a second language" (Johansson, 1975, p. 248). Proponents of error analysis like Corder (1967), Dulay and Burt (1972), Richards (1974), and Selinker (1972, 1992) regard errors as an indication that the learners are testing their hypotheses about the nature of the second language.

Error analysis is also based on the assumption that second language learning is systematic with its own rules, and is very much like the system of young first language learners (Ravem, 1968; Dulay and Burt, 1972; Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Lightbown and Spada, 1993). This is in line with Chomsky's theory of acquisition, where "...language acquisition was not a product of habit formation, but rather one of rule formation" (Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991, p. 57).

Once these rules have been acquired, learners would be able to create their own output. Studies done by researchers on children acquiring English as their first language indicated that errors committed were not imitations from the input they encountered, but rather internalization of the rules of the L1. Similarly, second language learners were found to commit errors that were not due to first language interference but rather like those made by children learning English natively (Dulay and Burt, 1974).

An error analysis can provide information about the strategies used by learners in their discovery of the second language and give evidence of the learners' competence in the language. It reveals the areas of difficulties learners face in learning the language, and this in turn, provides feedback to the teachers on the effectiveness of his teaching materials and techniques. The researcher contends with the statement made by Etherton (1977) that a systematic study of errors " may lead to improved teaching methods through a greater awareness of the nature and causes of the mistakes which pupils make" (p. 69). In addition, an error analysis can provide valuable data for the planning of courses, as well as for the preparation of teaching materials and textbooks (Corder, 1967, 1973; Johansson, 1975; Etherton, 1977).

.4   INTERLANGUAGE

The *interlanguage* (IL) hypothesis grew out of the observation that errors made by second language learners are different from both the linguistic system of the native language of the learners and the target language norm. The term "interlanguage" was first introduced by Selinker (1972) to refer to the learner's own language. Various terms have been referred to by different researchers on the same phenomenon; Corder (1973, 1974) refers to it as "transitional competence" and "idiosyncratic dialects", Nemser (1971) calls it "approximative systems" and James (1977) terms it "interlingua".

These terms refer to the learner's language as a separate linguistic system, which is distinct from both the native language and the target language. The terms suggest that the learner's language "...will show systematic features both of the target language and of other languages he may know, most obviously of his mother tongue" or "...may quite regularly exhibit systematic properties which show no obvious resemblance to the mother tongue or any other language known to the learner" (Corder, 1981, p. 67, 72).

Several assumptions underline interlanguage theory. Ellis (1985) quotes Nemser (1971) by stating the assumptions underlying interlanguage theory. They are: (1) the approximative system is different from both the mother-tongue and target language; (2) the approximative systems consist of the

developing stages from the learners first attempt in using the target language; and (3) that in a certain communicative situation, the approximative systems of learners at the same level of proficiency are quite similar.

Selinker (1972) suggests that five principal processes operate in interlanguage. These five processes constitute the ways in which the learner tries to internalize the L2 system. The processes are the means by which the learner tries to reduce his linguistic burden and, as such, they can be included under the general process of 'simplification'. The five processes are:

(1)   language transfer - the effect of interference from the mother tongue;

(2)   transfer of training - the impact of prior experience in language learning upon current learning;

(3)   strategies of second language learning – the effect of approaches by the learner to the material to be learned;

(4)   strategies of second language communication – the effect of approaches by the learner to communicate with a speaker of the target language;

(5)   overgeneralisation of target language linguistic material – the
        effect of the learner's overextension of a rule in the target
        language.

According to Selinker (1972), many learners stop learning when their
interlanguage contains at least some rules different from those of the target
language system. He refers to this as "fossilization". It is a psychological
process where there is a "...cessation of further systematic development in the
interlanguage" (Selinker and Lamendella, 1978, p. 240). Richards (1971)
hypothesizes that Selinker's (1972) five processes are "central processes in
second language learning and that each process forces fossilizable material
upon surface interlanguage utterances, controlling to a very large extent the
shape of these utterances" (p. 14).

2.5   SOURCES OF ERRORS

Errors can provide valuable insights into the L2 learning process (Corder,
1967; Dulay and Burt, 1974; Taylor, 1975; Gorbet, 1979; Chun, 1980;
Lightbown and Spada, 1993). By classifying learners' errors, researchers
could learn a great deal about the second language acquisition process
through the strategies adopted by second language learners. Richards
(1971a) proposes a three-way classification of errors, namely *interlingual*
errors, *intralingual* errors and *developmental* errors.

Interlingual errors are errors due to interference from the first language or mother tongue of the learner, whereby there is a transfer of L1 structures onto L2. The mother tongue would appear to be a hindrance towards second language acquisition when negative transfer occurs. However, common findings on error analysis studies in second language learning show that the majority of errors are not only due to interference from the L1 structure, but other variables independent of the L1 influence (Richards, 1971; Gass, 1984; Selinker, 1992).

A study done by Dulay and Burt (1974) reveals that a mere 5% of errors in English as a second language made by children are due to negative transfer, whereas 87% are due to developmental strategies. Another study by Richards (1971b) shows that language transfer could cause only a small percentage of errors in English made by French-speaking students. Nonetheless, L2 learning is still not entirely free from the influence of L1 interference.

There is a different class of errors, which Richards (1971a) terms as *intralingual* and *developmental* errors. He claims that due to the complexity of the English structure, these errors frequently occur regardless of the mother tongue. Intralingual errors result from faulty or partial learning of the target language rather than from language transfer, and may be caused by the influence of one target language item upon another. *Developmental* errors are errors due to a normal pattern of development and which are common among

language learners. Richards (1971a) attributes these errors to over-generalization, incomplete application of rules, ignorance of rule restrictions and false concepts hypothesized. These concepts are being discussed as follows:

(1)   Over-generalization

Faulty generalization or over-generalization occurs when the learner constructs a deviant structure based on his knowledge of the other L2 structures. Some typical examples are:

*He <u>like</u> to sing. (likes)

*She <u>want</u> to go home. (wants)

The omission of the third person –s in the examples above may be the result of the learner trying to reduce his linguistic burden. With the omission of –s in the above sentences, over-generalization enables learners to construct sentences without having to consider the rules for concord (Richards, 1974). Overgeneralization is linked to redundancy reduction (George, 1972) or the attempts to simplify the second language. This phenomenon is usually found among children (i.e. mother-tongue speakers) learning the same language (Ervin -Tripp, cited in Richards, 1974).

Factors which give rise to overgeneralization could be the way in which two language items were presented by the teacher which might have created confusion in the mind of the language learner, or the poor gradation of items in the textbook itself (Norrish, 1983; James, 1998).

(2)   Incomplete application of rules

The incomplete application of rules is another cause of intralingual errors. Richards (1974) points out two possible causes for this occurrence.   One possible cause is the systematic difficulty in the use of questions across background languages. Here are some examples:

Teacher: Do you cook very much?

Student: Yes, I cook very much.

or

Teacher: What does she tell him?

Student: She tell him to hurry.

The other possible cause for this occurrence could be due to the fact that the learner can communicate effectively using deviant structures.   Thus, there is more motivation to achieve communication than to produce correct sentence structures.

(3)   Ignorance of rule restrictions

Another major cause of intralingual errors is the failure to observe the restrictions of existing structures and the result is, the wrong application of grammatical rules in the target language.   This ignorance of rule restrictions is probably the cause for the following errors:

*Susan told <u>to</u> me the good news.

*I made him <u>to</u> do it.

The first sentence is incorrect due to the learner's analogy of the structure 'said to me' (Norrish, 1983). The error in the second sentence comes about as a result of the learner ignoring the restrictions on the distribution of the verb 'made' and incorrectly making use of a previously acquired rule in a different context (Richards, 1971b).

(4)   False concepts hypothesized

This type of error deals with false hypothesis based on a limited knowledge of the target language. According to Richards (1974) and James (1998), these errors could be due to poor gradation of teaching items or classroom presentation, which is based on a contrastive approach to language teaching.

Other possible causes of language learners' errors could be due to:

1. weaknesses or failure of memory (Gorbet, 1979).

2. performance errors, where the errors are the result of slips of the tongue, occasional lapses or carelessness (Gorbet, 1979; Corder, 1981; Norrish, 1983).

3. secondary causes, like materials presented in textbooks (Taylor, 1975).

4. ignorance of some target language items (Paul, 1993; James, 1998).

5. teacher-induced errors, where the errors are due to imprecise teacher explanations (Corder, 1974; James, 1998).

6. errors induced by pedagogical priorities, where the errors are due to the learners' perception of the teacher's expectation of what they will achieve (James, 1998).

7. look-up errors, where the errors are due to the misuse of reference aids (James, 1998).

2.6   SOME LIMITATIONS OF ERROR ANALYSIS

While the usefulness of an error analysis cannot be denied, there are some reservations about it. Hammarberg (1974) points out the weakness of error analysis in that it is limited to the study of errors, and does not take into account the correct use of the language. Moreover, the frequency of errors is not necessarily the indicator of the relative difficulty (Duskova, 1969).

Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977) feel that to focus only on errors would not provide researchers with the complete picture as they would only know what the learners have done wrong, but not what made them succeed in learning a second language.

Another criticism against error analysis is that it fails to account for all the areas in the target language, which are difficult for the learner. It does not take into account the aspect of avoidance strategy, which learners may employ in their attempt to avoid using structures they do not know. Many researchers share similar views on this. Schachter (1974), da Rocha (1975) and Kleinmann (1978), for example, contend that error analysis fails "…to recognize that learners have a tendency to avoid target language items that they are not sure about, and so not to commit errors which they would be expected to commit" (James, 1998, p. 18). Kleinmann (1978) quoted Schachter by arguing that

'...the EA approach is deficient because it is incapable of explaining the phenomenon of avoidance" (p. 94).

In addition to this, another linguist, Bell (1974) attacks error analysis for its validity and reliability, the subjectivity of its identification and classification of errors, as well as its lack of any predictive power.

2.7   RELATED STUDIES ON THE ENGLISH VERBS

In this section, some related studies pertaining to errors in the English verbs would be reviewed to find out the difficulties faced by second language learners in the use of verbs.

Castelo (1972) carried out a study by studying verb usage errors of 80 post-graduate Filipinos. He examined 300 informal letters written by these students and found that the highest occurrence of errors is in the violation of tense sequence (59.1%), followed by confusion of tenses and aspects (22.9%) and the lack of subject-verb agreement (7%).

Another overseas study by Meziani (1984) on the problematic areas facing 50 Moroccan learners of English at the pre-University level (final year of high school) showed that the highest frequency of errors was in the tense category, which constituted 39.2% of the total number of errors found in the corpus. The

subjects faced the most difficulty in choosing the correct tense. The highest occurrence of tense errors was in the use of the simple present for the simple past with 36%, followed by the use of the past perfect instead of the simple past with 28.5% and the use of the present perfect instead of the simple past with 7.3%, thus making up 71.8% of all the tense errors.

Similar findings were discovered by Krairussamee (1982) who did a study on the grammatical problems of 153 first-year university students in Bangkok, Thailand. These students were required to write a one-page composition. The results of the error analysis revealed that the highest frequency of errors was in the verb category, which constituted 34.25% of the total number of errors. Of all the verb errors, the highest frequency of errors was in the tense category (55.24%) and the second highest frequency of errors was subject-verb agreement (20.42%). Krairussamee feels that the English verb system is difficult for Thai students to acquire because a single Thai verb form can be used to express several English verb forms. Moreover, the Thai language does not have a tense system, so it is very difficult for Thai students to perceive all the rules in the English tense system.

In the local front, Wee (1995) did a study on the types of written verb-form errors made by 50 Sarawakian Malay ESL students from the MARA Institute of Technology, Sarawak, Malaysia. The students were between eighteen and twenty years old. These students studied English as one of the subjects either

from kindergarten or Primary One up to at least Form Five. The students were asked to write three different types of compositions in English: a narrative composition entailing the usage of the past tense, a descriptive composition entailing the usage of the present tense and an expository composition entailing the usage of the future tense. Each composition was about 150 words in length. Using Corder's 1981 framework, the errors were identified, described and analysed. Wee found that the highest percentage of errors were misformations (63.4%), followed by omissions (29%), additions (7.6%) and orderings (0.1%). As for tenses, the highest percentage of errors was found in the past tense (37.6%), followed by the present tense (33.7%), future tense (21.5%) and other verb-forms (7.3%). According to this study, it is found that the English-tense aspect system and subject-verb agreement pose the most difficulty for the students. Wee claims that the causes were due to mother-tongue influence and the complexities of the English language.

Another local study was by Sheena Kaur (1996) who investigated verb phrase errors in the written English of Malay undergraduates from the Academy of Islamic Studies in the University of Malaysia. The subjects were forty-two Third-year English language proficiency students undergoing their second semester of the third year. Each student was required to write two different free-writing tasks, which consisted of two informal letters of about 200 words each. The errors were then identified, categorized, described and analysed according to Palmer's (1980) paradigms of the English verb phrases and

Corder's (1981) taxonomy of errors. Of the total number of errors, selection errors accounted for the highest percentage, which constituted 59.9%, followed by omission errors (33.6%) and addition errors (6.5%). The findings of her study were found to be similar to those of Wee's, whereby Sheena noted that the most frequent errors were found in the past tense (40.7%), followed by the present tense (21.4%), the present progressive (17.5%) and the other verb-forms (20.4%). Sheena attributed the causes of errors to interference from the mother tongue, overgeneralization, simplification and avoidance of using the difficult verb phrases.

The most recent local study was carried out by Raja Zarina (1997) whose subjects were 80 first year Malay students majoring in English at the International Islamic University. This study analysed the verb and lexis errors found in their compositions. The subjects had to write two compositions of about 350 words each and the errors were identified, described, classified and analysed. Overall, in terms of categories, Zarina found that the highest percentage of errors were those of selection (57.3%), followed by omission (29.8%), addition (12.6%) and ordering (0.3%). There is a high occurrence of tense errors (63.7%) as compared to lexical errors, which constitute 36.3%. Like Wee and Sheena, Zarina attributed the causes to mother tongue interference and the inherent difficulty of English.

2.8   CONCLUSION

From the related studies on the grammatical problems of ESL learners, the conclusion to be drawn is obvious.   There is no doubt that the English verb system poses a major learning problem for ESL learners whatever their language background is.   The causes could be attributed to mother tongue interference and the inherent complexity of the English structure.   The present study seeks to look into errors in the use of selected tenses, which are considered to be problematic to a specific group of students, in their learning of English as a second language.