CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW

1.0   Introduction

The University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur is one of the many universities in Malaysia where the medium of instruction for postgraduate studies is English. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of international students especially from Middle Eastern countries coming to Malaysia to further their studies. They do this for a number of reasons: firstly the living expenses in Malaysia are low and secondly international students are offered a chance to further their education even if they do not have an official English placement score (except the Faculty of Law, Dentistry and Business Studies) such as the Test of English for Speakers of Foreign Languages (TOEFL) or The International English Language Testing System (IELTS). However, the University of Malaya requires students to have TOEFL, EILTS, Cambridge A Level or Cambridge O Level in English qualifications. According to the IPS, they accept the applications for those who do not have the above qualifications, but the respected faculty will make decision on which level of English course that applicant need to attend.

For all international students in Malaysia, being able to write and read English is very important because they need to deal with academic reading and writing daily. Furthermore it is important for them to learn   how to communicate in English as it is the language of communication between them and Malaysians and students from other countries.

1.1 Problems Faced by International Students

International students in University of Malaya face several problems when trying to communicate in English. Communicating in a new language can be an uphill task for any student because effective oral communication requires not only the ability to know words in the new language but also have the ability to use the language appropriately in social interactions. Communication involves not only verbal communication but also paralinguistic elements of speech such as pitch, stress, and intonation. In addition, non-linguistic elements such as gestures and body language/posture, facial expression, and so on may need to accompany speech to convey messages effectively. Dunn (1989) states that "Combinations of body and vocal language help an individual discriminate between truthful and deceitful messages" (p. 30).

In the process of communication, these students have often found themselves in a position, whereby they have to improvise in order to get their messages across and overcome any momentary inadequacies. Usually the obstacle in communication is the lack of vocabulary items, which either has not been learnt, or cannot be recalled at that point in time.

Another problem faced by International students is the inadequate knowledge or competence in the grammar of the English language. Often a compensating strategy is used to overcome the lack of grammatical competence by avoiding the grammatical item or by paraphrasing when they do not have the appropriate or correct grammatical form. Sometimes they ask the interlocutor for the correct form or use gestures to convey meaning, insert a word or a phrase from their first language

in order to achieve their communicative goals. These techniques or "communication strategies" help students to get the message across (Bialystok, 1990，p.1).

Problems arise among international students who have to communicate in English. This research describes the communicative strategies used by international postgraduate students at the University of Malaya when communicating with the front desk officers of the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS).

1.2   Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study is to study the problems faced by international students of Middle Eastern origin when communicating in English. The study will describe strategies used by international students from Saudi Arabia, Syria, Oman, Iran, Iraq, and Yemen when communicating with officers of the Institute of Postgraduate Studies (IPS) in the University of Malaya.

The language is strategic when it is used for a purpose. In this study, I consider CSs to be used by Middle Eastern non-native English speakers to overcome communicative lexical problems. In this case, the analysis has been restricted to lexical problems which may be occasioned by the lack of knowledge of L2 terms the speaker wishes to communicate, by retrieving problems or by insecurity as to lexical item selected to express a meaning.

The objectives of the study are:

i)   To investigate the range of communication strategies used by Middle Eastern postgraduate students of the University of Malaya while communicating with Malaysian administrative staff in the Institute of Postgraduate Studies.

ii)   To investigate which are the types of CSs frequently used by the Middle Eastern postgraduate students to carry on the conversations.

In order to fulfill the objectives of the study as stated above, the following research questions were devised:

RQ 1: What are the strategies used by postgraduate Middle Eastern students in the University of Malaya to overcome communication problems with staff (in service encounters in the Institute of Postgraduate Studies)?

RQ 2: Which are the types of communicative strategies most frequently used by them?

1.3   Background to the Study

In this section, a background is provided of the setting in the University of Malaya, its English language requirements and policies towards international students.

1.3.1   English Policy for International Students in the University of Malaya

The University of Malaya requires international students to have an English Proficiency qualification such as   TOEFL, IELTS, Cambridge "A" or "O" Level. Students who do not have any of the above qualifications with the exception of these who obtain A from internally run

English Replacement Test (EPT), are required to attend the University's English Proficiency

Program for four months (240 contact hours) before they start the Postgraduate program that they

had applied. An English Placement Test (EPT) must be taken by all international students who do

not have TOEFL, IELTS, Cambridge "A" or "O" Levels to show proficiency in English. The

English Placement Test (EPT) results are then used to determine whether the student needs to

attend the 4 month English Proficiency Program. Students who score an 'A' will be exempted from

the Proficiency program while the rest are placed according to their scores in the Placement Test in

one of the following levels: Intermediate 1, Intermediate 2, Elementary or Beginner.

1.3.2 Problems of Learning English in Middle-Eastern Countries

Postgraduate students of Middle Eastern origin at University Malaya come from the following

countries: Jordan (0.4%), Oman (2%), Saudi Arabia (4%), Syria (6%), Iran (25%), Iraq (10%), and

Yemen (5%) (Source: August 2009 IPS) (See Figure1.1).

Figure 1.1:   Map of Middle East

English language in the Middle East countries is considered either as a second language (Saudi

Arabia, Iran) or foreign language (Iraq, Yemen, Syria), or language learnt in school but not used

frequently. English serves as a language used predominantly in higher education, the legislature

and judiciary, commerce and so on. Spolsky (2004) discussing English in Middle Eastern states

that "Foreign languages, especially English remain important for economic reasons. English is

compulsory as a first or second foreign language in public schools. The national universities

require English, and some use English as medium of instruction" (p.141).

The important area of difficulty that Middle Eastern learners of English face is practice. This is due

to the fact that all these countries are mainly monolingual and opportunities to communicate in

English arise only in business and other working environments that involve non-native speakers of English. English is learned in secondary schools and the reality is that there is very little opportunity to speak and use the language. Furthermore English is taught with the native language (Karimnia and Zade, 2007, p.291). In Iran, for example, one-third of the Associate degree courses and one-sixth of bachelor degree courses are taught in Farsi (Karimnia and Zade, 2007, p.292). Most of the language learners and even students majoring in English use the English language only when they are obliged to, usually in the classroom.

The major problem with speaking English among Middle Eastern speakers of Jordanian descent is in possessing the right amounts of vocabulary. Middle East learners of English face many difficulties. Zughoul (1984, p.4) found that 'Jordanian language EFL learners commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English' (cited in Rabab'ab, p.181).

 Other difficulties that plague Middle Eastern English learners are grammar and pronunciation problems. For example Kambal (1980) analyzes that in Syria, most language learners make syntactic errors in the verb and the noun phrases.

Iraq English learners also face problems of grammar. Issam (2005) reports that in Iraq, school students commit errors and face difficulties in grammar such as sentence structure and syntax. Iraq English learners often commit errors in forming adjectives because of mixing their native language with English.

 In Yemen, Mukattash (1983) reported that most ESL learners are weak in phonetics. Yemeni ESL

learners have difficulty distinguishing third person, and plural "s" and "es" in adding the proper

use of intonation patterns. Another problem that Yemeni ESL learners face is grammar. The

difficulties are in the proper use of preposition, auxiliary, verbs, nouns and pronouns. (p.169). Syed

Ekhteyar (2007) also found that ESL learners commit errors when they speak English because the

nature of English is different from Arabic. For example sentences without verbs are acceptable in

Arabic but not in English (p.43).

In short, Middle Eastern English learners face Grammar and Pronunciations problems. Such

problems are caused because of the differences between English and Arabic (Rabab'ab, p.1984).

1.4 Significance of Study

The researcher observed that there were several problems faced by international postgraduate students when dealing with administrative staff at the Institute of postgraduate studies (IPS) service counter due to limited language proficiency. Students may not receive the necessary information required because of communication problems, which arise as a result of the differences in English language proficiency of the students and the Malaysian staff. In order to get the information they require they tend to use a range of communicative strategies which helped them to obtain the desired information.

This study is expected to shed light on the nature of the problems faced by international students at the University Malaya and findings gain in-depth understanding of the communication strategies employed by these students.   It is hoped that the findings of this investigation on communication strategies would result in a better understanding of communication problems encountered by international students and help English teachers in the University Malaya to address these problems. Thus the findings of this study would provide valuable insights into the teaching and learning of English.

1.5 **Limitations of Study**

This study focuses only on Middle Eastern students and therefore cannot be applied to all international students. Hence, the findings will be applicable only for the' communication problems faced by these students and should not be generalized to the other population of language learners in the University of Malaya.

It should also be pointed out that majority of the participants in the study are male (92%). This is due to the fact that Middle Eastern women were not willing to participate in the data collection because according to Arab culture, Muslim women are not allowed to "expose themselves" to anyone except their relatives. This posed a problem as the study employs data collection based on video taping which will necessarily "expose" the participants through film. As this was not acceptable to the women, majority of males were selected for this study.

The presence of other students were making noise when the researcher video-taped the conversation made it difficult to hear the conversation properly in some cases. However, despite the limitation, it was possible to transcribe student responses while they were communicating with administrative staff at the Institute of Postgraduate Studies.

1.6 **Organization of Thesis**

The report of this study consists of five chapters: Introduction, Review of Related Literature, Research Methodology, Data Analysis, and Conclusions and Suggestions.

In Chapter one an overview of the study is presented together with a background to the study explaining the problems faced by Middle Eastern postgraduate students in the University of Malaya. The objectives of the study and its limitations are also outlined.

Chapter two discusses the theories which are relevant to communication strategies. Previous researches related to this study are also discussed. Chapter three describes the methodology and the sample used. Chapter four provides analysis of the data. Chapter five concludes the findings of the study and provides suggestions for the teaching and learning of English language in the University of Malaya.