

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the Study

Malaysia is a country with many different universities and colleges which offer a variety of choices of postgraduate courses. In the last few years the number of international students in Malaysian universities has increased. For example, 617 international students registered in the University of Malaya (UM) in the academic year 2001/2002, and the number has increased to 1315 in semester 1 of the academic year 2008/2009 (statistics obtained from Institute of Postgraduate Studies). Among this increasing group are Arab and Iranian students. Statistics show that 127 Arab and 10 Iranian students registered in UM in the academic year 2001/2002, but the number increased to 425 Arab and 374 Iranian students in semester 1 of the academic year 2008/2009.

English is the medium of instruction in most private and public universities in Malaysia and is the means of communication for Arab and Iranian students. Although these students with the exception of those who have IELTS or TOEFL degree, have taken part in the English language proficiency courses which is a compulsory course for all private and public universities, most of them still have problems in communication and find it difficult to get their intended message across to the listener. Only a few are fluent and they are those who have been using English daily in their conversations for different reasons (at work place, or lived in a country where English is the means of communication or studied in schools and universities where English is the medium of instruction).

1.2 The Problem

Arab and Iranian students must communicate in English in Malaysia but their lack of proficiency creates a problem in communication. They therefore tend to use communication strategies to overcome these problems. Corder (1977) defines communication strategies as, systematic techniques employed by speakers to express meaning when faced with some difficulty. In other words, communication strategies are used to facilitate communication during conversations. In order to compare the similarities and differences between different proficiency levels and the CSs used the study will investigate CSs used by two different proficiency levels (high and low).

1.3 The Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the communication strategies high and low proficiency Arab and Iranian students use when speaking in English with each other. The study will focus on the type and frequency of strategies used by Arab students who are fairly proficient in the target language when talking with Iranian students who are correspondingly fairly proficient, compared to Arab students who are not as proficient in the target language when talking with Iranian students who are also not so proficient in English. In addition the study will investigate the type and frequency of communication strategies of Arab students with both high and low proficiency in the target language, communicate with Iranian students with high and low levels of proficiency. In short, the study will examine the relationship between language proficiency and the type(s) of communication strategies employed; as well as the differences between strategies used when learners with differing levels of proficiency low with low, high with high and low with high English proficiency levels belonging to different ethnic groups interact.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions arising from the objectives mentioned in 1.3 are as follows:-

1. What are the communication strategies used by:-

- high proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers while communicating in English with each other?
- low proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers while communicating in English with each other?
- high proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers while communicating in English with low proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers?
- low proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers while communicating in English with high proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers?

2. Which communication strategies are most often used by:-

- high proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers while communicating in English with high proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers?
- low proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers while communicating in English with low proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers?
- high proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers while communicating in English with low proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers?
- low proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers while communicating in English with high proficiency Arab/Iranian speakers?

3. Are there significant differences in the use of communication strategies between participants of low and high proficiency levels of English?

4. What is the correlation between the use of communication strategies and low and high proficiency levels in English?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Most of the studies on communication strategies (Kasper & Kellermen 1997; David 1992; Poulisse & Schils 1990; Tarone 1989; Paribakht 1985; Ellis 1984 and Yule 1982) have been conducted on L2 learners in classrooms. There are only a few studies on communication strategies used outside the classroom domain (David 1993; Susila 1994;

Omar 2003; Cha 2007). This research does not focus on strategies learners use in a classroom setting, but is conducted on a number of university students who have finished learning English, in real time interaction outside the classroom domain. The current research has studied conversations produced in natural real time interaction. Two different ethnic groups (Arabs and Iranians) with different native languages (Arabic and Persian) but using English in interaction with each other have been studied.

It is hoped that this research will shed light on the nature and type of communication strategies used by language learners. Such knowledge can be incorporated in language textbooks to facilitate language learning and communication in English.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

This study investigated the communication strategies used only by *male* Arab and Iranian students, currently studying in the University of Malaya (UM) who are completing their Master's or Ph.D. program. The first rationale behind using only male students is that the research does not intend to study the influence of gender on the usage of CSs. Moreover, using mixed gender groups could result in cultural interference. In addition, the male students as compared to the female students were more willing to attend the meetings when the data was collected. The study is limited to the verbal communication of 12 subjects. The communication strategies investigated do not include non-verbal strategies (see Chapter Three).

1.7 Preview

In order to collect the data, topic-based verbal conversations of 12 participants of different ethnic groups (Arab and Iranian) having high and low English proficiency will be recorded for 6 hours. The participants will be divided into three groups with four subjects in each group according to the English proficiency of the participants. The

theoretical framework in this study will be based on the taxonomy for communication strategies by Dornyei & Scott (1997).

Chapter two presents a review of related Literature to the study, as well as the different aspects and definitions of CSs. It also presents a number of recent studies on CSs.