CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In the process of learning a language, errors will occur. Learners' errors are an area in second and foreign language learning that continues to pose difficulties for language teachers. The word 'error' itself denotes something negative. However, studies into how a second or foreign language is learnt have revealed that errors are a necessary part of learning (Corder: 1981; Littlewood: 1984; Ellis: 1985).

Just like learning a skill, language learners need to know how a particular language works before they can use the language competently. Language learning can be likened to learning how to drive. First, the learners have to know the parts of a car and how it works. Before they can actually make a car move, they will have to carry out a few operations simultaneously: have a firm grip on the steering wheel, learn to change gears, and to coordinate between the clutch and the accelerator. To many first timers, this is a complex process and there are bound to be mistakes. The car will jerk, its engine may fail at the first few attempts, and instead of stepping on the brake, the learners may step on the accelerator. Similarly, the process of learning a language is highly complex, involving a sequence of activities. Learners have to know how the language works through its grammatical system, lexical and structural forms and meanings. Clearly errors are an inevitable by-product but they can serve as 'windows' into the learning process, signalling to teachers what difficulties learners have and what steps ought to be taken to help these learners to overcome their difficulties.

Chapter One presents the background of this study in which a short description of the German and Malay languages is given and the history of the teaching of German in Malaysia is elucidated. It then deals with the rationale and objectives of the study,

followed by the learning of articles in German, research questions, significance of the study, abbreviations used and finally scope and limitations of the study.

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 The German and Malay Language

The German language belongs to the West Germanic sub-branch (along with English, Frisian, Yiddish, Dutch, and Afrikaans) of the Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. Wikipedia (3rd March, 2009) states that German is considered a pluricentric language because standard German differs regionally, among the German-speaking countries, in vocabulary and in some instances in pronunciation, and even in grammar and orthography, and this variation must not be confused with the variation of local dialects. On the other hand, the Malay language (Bahasa Malaysia) belongs to the Western Austronesian family of languages. Like German it has its own variation of local dialects too. Both these languages use the Roman alphabet as the written script. Besides the 24 letters found in the alphabet, German has 4 more additional letters which are not found in Malay. They are 'ä, ö, ü and ß'.

Unlike Malay, German is an inflected language. German words take endings depending on their relationship to other parts of the sentence and this applies to verbs, articles and possessive adjectives and adjectives (Schenke and Seago, 2004: 2 - 4). An example is given below:

> **_Sie hat_** einen Bruder und **_ich habe_** auch einen Bruder.
>
> S   V   Acc Obj   Conj. S   V   Part.   Acc Obj
>
> **_Dia mempunyai_** seorang abang/adik dan **_saya_** juga **_mempunyai_** seorang abang/adik.
>
> She has a brother and I have a brother too.

Each German noun has a fixed gender and there are three genders in German: masculine, feminine or neuter. These genders do not refer to natural gender. They refer to grammatical gender. This feature does not exist in Malay.

Another feature that does not exist in Malay is the case system which is found in German. There are four cases in German: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive. This case system shows the function a noun performs in a sentence through its ending and the form of the article. Further explanation and examples are given in chapter 3.

In general, active sentences in Malay have the order of 'Subject – Verb – Object', whereas the active sentence structure in German is much more flexible. It can have the same order as that found in the Malay language, or it can have the order of 'Object – Verb – Subject' and it is still grammatically and semantically correct. Below is an example:

German: <u>Ich</u> <u>trinke</u> <u>einen Kaffee</u> . / <u>Einen Kaffee</u> <u>trinke</u> <u>ich</u>.

             S   V   Acc Obj   Acc Obj   V   S

English: "I'm drinking a coffee." / * A coffee drink I.

Malay: *Saya minum kopi*. / * *Kopi minum saya.*

There exist tenses in the German language for an action that happened in the past or is happening now or will happen in the future. Malay uses aspectual words like *telah* and *sudah* "already" to denote a past action, *sedang* "in the midst" for current action and '*akan*' "will" for the future.

1.1.2 The History of the Teaching of German in Malaysia

In 1991, a German language instructor, Michael Schmitz, conducted his doctorate research in the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya. He carried out a study on contrastive analysis of German and Malay together with an error analysis, focusing on the problems of source language interference among Malay learners of German (Schmitz, 1991: 15 - 16). At that time, German was only taught as an elective in three universities in this country: namely University of Malaya, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. It was also taught in one Polytechnic (Institut Teknologi Mara in Shah Alam, now known as Universiti Teknologi Mara) and in the Goethe-Institut of Kuala Lumpur. However, over the past decade, things have changed and today German not only is offered as a major at undergraduate level, it is also taught in some local schools.

According to the Curriculum Development Centre (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum) of Malaysia, efforts to introduce German as a foreign language in residential schools were made at the end of 1990 and at the beginning of 1991. In 1994, a group of 8 non-graduate teachers were sent to Germany to do a one year training course. The course consisted of ten to twelve months of German language courses along with courses in teaching methodology. The participants were required to sit for three examinations: the Certificate of German as a Foreign Language (ZDaF), the Central Intermediate Examination (ZMP) and the Central Examination for Advanced Level (ZOP). These three examinations are recognized world wide. After this initial batch, two more groups of 10 and 8 persons were sent in 1995 and 1996 respectively. This programme was initiated by the Ministry of Education (under 'Bahagian Pendidikan Guru' or Teacher Training Division) with the collaboration of the Goethe-Institut. Unfortunately, the Ministry's vision of having 50 trained teachers of German by the year 2002 could not

be realised because the programme was put on hold in 1997 due to the economic crisis. As a result of this programme, German started to be taught in secondary schools in 1995. Initially it was taught in six residential schools (Sekolah Berasrama Penuh). Now there are twelve residential schools offering German. (These twelve schools are listed in Appendix 1.)

The Curriculum Development Centre in its administrative meeting (Kertas 6/28/2002/D) on 2/10/2002 had agreed that the teaching of international (foreign) languages (including German) should also be taught in day-schools and not just limited to residential schools. It is necessary for these languages (especially German) to be taught in the schools in Malaysia in view of their importance in the field of high technology and the country's needs to compete globally and to prepare Malaysia towards being a fully developed country by the year 2020. Having a good command of these languages will also enhance the efficiency of international relationships politically, economically and socially. In the year 2005, German was introduced into three day-schools as a pilot project. (The names of the schools are listed as xiii – xv in Appendix 1.)

The teaching and learning of German in Malaysia has come a long way since the early 1990s. Besides having more universities (both public and private), colleges and institutes offering German as an elective or evening language courses, there are now 2 local universities offering a Bachelor Degree in German. The University of Malaya commenced its Bachelor of Languages and Linguistics (German Language) in 1998 and this was followed by Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) in 2001 with a Bachelor of Arts (German Language).

With the co-operation of the Ministry of Education and the International Languages Teachers Training Institute (Institut Perguruan Bahasa-bahasa Asing), the University of

Malaya started a programme in the 2006/07 academic session to help the Ministry of Education to train German language teachers. These graduates will later be sent to other day-schools to teach German.

There are also other programmes being offered to students who will be pursuing their tertiary studies in Germany. Hence there is a necessity to learn German before they can embark upon their undergraduate studies. University Teknologi Mara (UiTM) in its Section 17 Campus is running such a course, which is an A-Level German Programme, specially developed in 1995 with the help of the State of Baden Wurttemberg, Germany. Under this programme, selected students with good Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) results are prepared to sit for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level Examination (set by Edexcel International, the awarding examination body in London) and the German Language Examination (DSH- Deutsche Sprachprüfung für den Hochschulzugang ausländischer Studienbewerber). This five-semester programme is designed to prepare students for entry into German institutions of higher learning in technical disciplines.

The German-Malaysian Institute (GMI) is also conducting a similar programme like the one in UiTM. GMI was established as the result of a joint government-to-government effort between the governments of Malaysia and Germany to promote the transfer of technology through technical education and training. The GMI produces highly skilled manpower for industry through its Industrial Diploma programmes in the advanced and modern fields of Production Technology and Industrial Electronics. Short courses are also conducted to upgrade employees in the industries on the necessary technical knowledge and skills. Besides making German a compulsory course (Level 1 and 2) and an elective (Level 3 and 4) course for its Diploma students, GMI is also running the German A-Level Preparatory Programme (GAPP). This programme was established in

2001 to increase enrolment at the tertiary level particularly in the fields of science and technology. Under this programme, students will have to undergo a 2½-year preparatory programme in GMI and later further their studies at the Universities of Applied Sciences or Fachhochschule (FH) in Germany, if they obtain the A-Level grade of point 13 and above (MARA sponsored only) and pass the TestDaF (German as a Foreign Language Test) requirement.

1.2 Rationale and Objectives of the Study

As a language instructor of the German language at a local public institution of higher learning, the researcher has found the task a challenging one, and one area of interest for the researcher is looking at learners' errors specifically in German grammar. As in all languages, the grammatical structures serve as a basic framework in the acquisition of a language. There are many components of grammar and the study undertaken here focuses only on one very specific area, which is the '*articles*'. Hence, this study aims to:

    i.   describe the German articles and their use

   ii.   identify and categorize the errors made by Malay students in the use of German articles.

1.3 The Learning of Articles in German

Grammar is a very important part of a language. Some language teachers have even likened it to the bones in a body. When all the bones in the body are in harmony performing their individual duties, only then can the body work effectively. It is the

same with the learning of a language. Widdowson (1990: 97) and Lim (2001: 5) put forth the view that language learning is essentially grammar learning and it is a mistake to suppose otherwise, and the researcher agrees with this view. It is through grammar learning that a learner learns to form a variety of sentences, thus the possibilities to use the language effectively or creatively. Articles are part of grammar. Most students of German have found that learning German articles is one of the major hurdles that they have to overcome in their attempt to learn the language.

According to Rutherford (1998: 7), a second language learner possesses a set of habits which might either facilitate or hinder the new learning task because the learner has to adapt to a new system of speech and a new channel of thinking altogether. Malay learners of German might have greater difficulties in learning these articles because German is very different grammatically from Malay (as had been discussed in section 1.1.1). Chapter 3 discusses in detail the intricacies of the German articles.

Grammar might not be an end in itself, but it is a means to an end. It would be rather embarrassing for a learner to have a vast store of vocabulary but still makes grammatical mistakes for example, in the basic use of the articles. Or, others might not be able to understand him, because he is unable to express himself coherently. Worse still, when the sequence of what had happened is important, miscommunication might arise because of the wrong use of tenses.

1.4 Research Questions

This study will try to answer the following questions:

i.   What are the types of errors made by students when using German articles?

ii.   What are the possible causes for the errors?

iii. Is there interference from Malay, the students' mother tongue and from English, their second language? If so, to what extent?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Although Schmitz (1991) conducted his research on Malay learners of German, the section on German articles was only a very small part of his overall research. Therefore, this study could be considered as the first comprehensive study in this particular area.

As more Malaysians are taking up German, this quantitative study is a contribution to the area of foreign language learning and to applied linguistics. This research will have implications both on the teaching and learning of German. For the teachers, the identification of the problems faced by the Malay learners would help them to develop suitable teaching materials to help their students in the learning process. They might even be able to produce appropriate text books or remedial exercises that cater to Malaysian learners (not only Malay, but also learners from other ethnic groups in Malaysia) because presently almost all the materials used in the teaching of German are imported from overseas. As for the students, they might be made aware of the common errors committed by their fellow Malay learners and take conscious steps to avoid making the same errors. This study, therefore, will help to facilitate the acquisition of the German articles among Malaysian learners, especially those of Malay origin.

1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study

As this is a study that concerns only one area of grammar in German, i.e. the articles, no conclusive claims about the learning of German by Malay students in Malaysia can be made. However the errors identified have been given some in-depth treatment and it is hoped that the findings can provide some insights to the teaching and learning of the articles in the German language. Since this research is based on 21 students' performance at a test, the implications drawn are hence limited to this particular group. However it may not be wrong to say that learners of other foreign languages may also encounter similar difficulties. Some of the research limitations are briefly listed below:

   i.   Since this study aims to explore the problems of the learning of German articles by Malay learners, it will only discuss the difficulties encountered in this area.

  ii.   The focus of this study is in the types of articles, that is the definite and the indefinite articles, zero article, *negativer Artikel* and the contracted form of preposition + definite article.

 iii.   The examples used of this study are basic syntactic structures taken from various sources (for examples, from Dreyer and Schmitt (1994); Heiko et al. (2001); Helbig and Buscha (2002); Reimann (1999); Schenke and Seago (2004); etc.). In some cases, the researcher provided her own examples.

 iv.   Throughout this study, the incorrect answers given by the students are taken to mean linguistics errors. No distinction is made between *error* and *mistake*.

1.7 Abbreviations Used

A   Accusative

Acc Obj   Accusative Object

Conj.   Conjunction

D   Dative

Fem.   Feminine

G   Genitive

Mas.   Masculine

N   Nominative

Neu.   Neuter

S   Subject

Sg.   Singular

V   Verb

1.8 Summary

This chapter shows briefly the differences between the German language and Malay and puts into place the needs for the study and explains the rationale, objectives as well as lists the research questions and scope and limitations of the study. The next chapter will be on related literature review.