

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methodology adopted in this study on the error analysis of the use of articles in German grammar by Malay students in a German A-Level Preparatory Programme (GAPP) class at the German-Malaysian Institute (GMI). It describes the subjects involved, the data collecting procedure, the classification of the data and the explanation of the errors.

4.1 The Subjects

The researcher's own students were not suitable subjects for this study because those who took German as an elective course either lacked exposure to German as they had only 56 hours of German language class or those who took German as a major in the undergraduate programme were too few. Besides that, the students had different mother tongues (Malay, English, Mandarin, Tamil, Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese, etc.), therefore no linguistic homogeneity. As the researcher does not speak some of these languages or dialects, it would also be difficult for the researcher to determine if the errors were caused by the interference of the learners' mother tongues or not.

Thus, the researcher decided to use the students of the German-Malaysian Institute (GMI) in the German A-Level Preparatory Programme (GAPP) as subjects for this study. GMI was previously situated in Taman Shamelin Perkasa, Cheras but is now located in Jalan Ilmiah, Taman Universiti, 43000 Kajang. GAAP is a programme that

prepares students for studies at tertiary level in the fields of science and technical courses in Germany. Students in this GAAP programme are those who had done well in their SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) Examination and are sponsored by MARA (Majlis Amanah Rakyat). The students in this programme have to undergo 6 levels of German courses that will prepare them to sit for Test DaF / Deutsch als Fremdsprache (German as a Foreign Language Test) in 22 months. Each level of the course consists of 14 weeks with 10 - 12 contact hours per week. At the time when the data was being collected, the students/subjects were in the tenth week in the fifth level of German language lessons. Thus, they have learnt German for at least 660 hours and had also sat for their *Zertifikat Deutsch* (German Certificate) in May 2006. There were a total number of 21 students, of whom 5 were female and 16 were male. The subjects were selected based on the following criteria:

- i. homogeneity of age (aged 18 and 19 years old)
- ii. linguistic homogeneity (Malay is their mother tongue)
- iii. the same level of proficiency in German (intermediate level)

4.2 The Instrument

Prior to deciding on the instrument for this study, the researcher had been teaching German for beginners for almost 3 years using the 'Themen neu' / 'Themen aktuell' books. Based on the researcher's own teaching experience, the researcher had found that quite often, quite a large percentage of her students were using the incorrect German articles when they had to produce longer compositions. Most of these students were able to use or choose the correct articles when this grammar item was

taught individually; for example Indefinite / Definite articles in Nominative Case, in Accusative Case, in Dative Case, and so on. Errors / mistakes only occurred when the students themselves had to decide the correct use of the articles (definite or indefinite, in what case, and so on) for longer compositions.

The researcher contacted Teacher B and obtained from her some background information regarding the German Programme offered by GMI (the GAPP and Elective). The students in GMI were also using the same 'Themen' books. Teacher B very kindly agreed to help the researcher to administer the test.

According to Nunan (1992: 136 – 137), one can obtain naturalistic samples from learners as they interact in the target language (in this case German), but such a procedure can be extremely time-consuming and difficult. Furthermore, it might not result in the outcomes that one desires as the learners may simply not use the language items that the researchers are interested in. Therefore, the researcher decided to use a test for her research. Based on the information provided by the two teachers in GMI and consultation with two other German language teachers who are native speakers, the researcher designed a test. The test of 50 fill-in-the-blank questions (where questions 41 – 50 were in the form of a cloze passage) was used as the instrument in this study. The students were given 30 minutes to answer all of the questions in the test. The 50 items are on German articles; definite and indefinite articles, zero article, *negativer Artikel* and preposition + definite articles in the contracted form. These categories are not in sequence and they were randomly put to form the test. The questions are basic syntactic structures taken from various sources and are in line with the syllabus set out in the students' textbook and workbook. These items will be further described and discussed in Chapter Five.

Besides the 50 questions, the test also comprised a small part where the subjects are required to fill in their age, sex, results for their PMR and SPM English, Bahasa Malaysia and other language (if they have any), and the language(s) spoken at home. This is to gather some background information on the subjects.

The instruction for the test is written in German and Malay. The students were told to answer all the questions, both orally and in writing.

4.3 Verification of Test Answers

Before the researcher graded the test, she approached 4 different people to provide answers for the test items for the purpose of verification of the answers, as the use of German articles is a complex grammatical area of study, with a number of intricacies. As the researcher is a non native German teacher, she felt that this verification process was necessary to validate the test answers. Two of the test verifiers selected were native speakers of German who also taught the language at an institute of higher learning. The third test verifier was a non-native German teacher also teaching at an institution of higher learning and the fourth person is a native German speaker who was not a teacher. The fourth person is more lenient because he provided quite a few more 'acceptable answers'. When queried, he explained that his answers were acceptable in spoken German. The other three verifiers, being German teachers, were more of the 'pure grammarian' type. Their answers were based on grammar rules and the context of the sentence. Since this is a grammar-based test which looked at a very specific area of German grammar, i.e. the use of articles, the researcher decided to take the 'pure grammarian' stand. For example, there are two acceptable answers for Item 25: 'Ich lege das Buch ins Regal.' or 'Ich lege das Buch aufs Regal.'

4.4 Interview with the Teachers

The two teachers who taught these students were also the subjects for this study as the researcher conducted short informal interviews with them. The teachers played an important role too in this study as both of them have taught the students for at least 2 years. The first teacher (A) had taught them for the first three levels, preparing them to sit for the *Zertifikat Deutsch (ZD)* and their current teacher (B), who helped to administer the test, had been teaching them for almost two levels. They were very familiar with the students and the students' weaknesses in the learning of the German language.

The first interview took place before the test to obtain some background information about the GAPP Programme and the German elective courses offered by GMI, the books being used and some information about their students. After the test was administered, marked, scored and analyzed, the teachers were again interviewed informally. The purpose of the interview was to verify some of the errors made by the students and why they thought the errors were made. Notes of the interview were made and some of the teachers' comments will be discussed in Chapter 5 and 6.

4.5 Implementation

The test was administered by Teacher B. The researcher handed 21 copies of the paper to the teacher before her class and briefed her on the need to ask her students to fill in the section on their background information. Teacher B distributed the test during her German language class. The students were told to fill in the necessary information and to read the instruction carefully before taking the test. They were

also told to answer all the 50 questions. They were given 30 minutes to complete the test.

A week later the researcher collected the test from the teacher. During the informal interview, the teacher commented that some of the students found the test rather difficult as they were confused about some items and hence were not able to answer some of the questions, while others explained that they had already forgotten what they had learnt earlier.

The researcher graded the test based on the answer key that were verified by three other German language teachers.

4.6 Data Analysis

All the test papers were assessed and all incorrect answers were duly noted as errors. The scores of the students and the individual items were tabulated. The items were divided into the five different categories of articles. Then the processed data was classified into different categories of errors as follows:

- i. choice of articles
- ii. agreement between the article and the noun
- iii. use of the contracted form of prepositions + definite article
- iv. 'pronoun and zero article'

When students chose the wrong article, the error was classified under 'choice of articles'. The category 'agreement between the article and the noun' dealt with errors

committed by students because there was no agreement between the article and the gender of the noun, or between the article and the case of the noun. ‘Use of the contracted form of preposition + definite articles’ referred to errors pertaining to the wrong choice of preposition and the wrong form of the contracted preposition + definite article (when the subjects used the correct preposition + article, but did not contract). Errors that did not fall into any of the abovementioned categories were listed under the ‘pronoun and zero article’ category.

These categories will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

4.7 Summary

This error analysis study intends to look at the types of errors made by the students when using German articles and identify some of the possible causes for the errors. The next chapter will put forward the data and its analysis and discuss the findings.