

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The problem

English is taught as a second language in Malaysia, and ESL classrooms are generally found in public and private primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and universities. ESL classrooms are mainly found in primary and secondary schools because English is an integral part of the Malaysian school curriculum. ESL classrooms are also found in colleges, university colleges and universities where English is taught for general as well as academic purposes. However, English is no longer taught and learned for the sole reason of it being a part of the curriculum. These days, English is learned for the purpose of pursuing further education and knowledge, gaining employment and career advancement, enhancing one's social status and enabling socialising (Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh, 2005). The emergence of new reasons for learning the language has contributed to the growth of privately-owned commercial language centres that specialise in the teaching and learning of English. Hence, ESL classrooms are found in both mainstream institutions of learning, namely primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and universities as well as non-mainstream institutions of learning, namely language learning centres.

Wherever an ESL class takes place, successful English language learning is its fundamental objective. Whether English language learning is successful or not depends on the teachers, the learners as well as motivation and learning styles of the learners (Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh, 2005). The English language teacher is one of the keys to successful language learning because of the many roles he or she performs within the walls of the classroom. According to Harmer (2001), the English language teacher juggles the roles of controlling, organising, assessing, prompting, participating, being a resource, tutoring and observing. As a controller, the language teacher takes

charge of students and classroom proceedings. For instance, the teacher organises activities, gives explanations, makes announcements, tells students to do things and maintains order in the classroom. Secondly, the language teacher is an organiser who arranges and manages classroom activities. Such a role involves providing students with explanations and instructions, assigning pairs or groups, and obtaining feedback by asking questions or leading a discussion. Thirdly, the language teacher comments, corrects and evaluates students in the role of an assessor. Fourthly, the language teacher prompts students tactfully and encouragingly when they are unable to continue a classroom activity in functioning as a prompter. In other words, he or she offers suggestions in the form of vocabulary, grammatical structures and ideas when students have difficulties in completing tasks. Furthermore, the language teacher takes part in classroom activities in his or her role as a participant. As a resource, the language teacher provides information to students when they request for it. In fulfilling the role of being a resource, the teacher must also point out other sources of information and encourage students to use these sources. Besides, the language teacher is both a prompter and a resource in his or her role as a tutor. He or she offers suggestions and information to individuals or groups to help them proceed with class activities. Finally, the language teacher is an observer who studies students' performance and response within the class for the purpose of providing feedback as well as evaluating the effectiveness of resources and activities included in the lessons. Most of these roles entail the language teacher telling his or her students to perform certain actions.

Successful English language learning is also dependent on the learners themselves. To succeed in learning a second language, students should adopt certain learning strategies, which include seeking explanation and confirmation in addition to seeking feedback (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). In other words, students should ask teachers to provide further explanation and examples if there is any ambiguity or lack of

comprehension on the part of the students. Students could also ask teachers questions to check their own understanding. Moreover, good language learners ask their peers for comments on their own performance for the reason of improving and avoiding repetition of mistakes. These strategies also require students to tell others to do certain things.

In examining the roles of teachers and students in English language teaching and learning, actions such as asking, requesting, instructing and directing are revealed to be essential in order for successful language learning to occur. The linguistic structures used to carry out these actions are also known as directives – utterances with the function of causing the hearer to do something (Searle, 1979).

In view of the significance of directives in the ESL classroom, it is noteworthy to examine directives used by teachers and learners in Malaysian ESL classroom discourse and how these directives are realised in relation to politeness phenomena.

## **1.2 Objective of the study**

The present study focuses on directives including politeness strategies utilised by teachers and students to perform these directives within the context of ESL classes in private language learning institutions in Malaysia.

There are two reasons for focusing on this area of research. First, much research has been conducted on directives in non-academic contexts (e.g., Aoyama, 2002; Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989; Chen, 2006; Felix-Brasdefer, 2005; Fukushima, 1996; Skewis, 2003). Nevertheless, research on directives in academic contexts especially within private institutions of learning is sparse. In fact, no empirical data on the use of directives in Malaysian ESL classrooms could be found prior to the present study. Second, although researches on politeness in non-academic contexts have been conducted (e.g., Liang & Han, 2005; Lin, 2005; Ruzickova, 2007; Shigemitsu, 2003),

there is limited literature on politeness in classroom directives especially that which focuses on Malaysian ESL classes.

Hence, the current study intends to discover the forms and functions of directives expressed by teachers and students in Malaysian ESL classrooms as well as the factors that influence the choice of these directives. Moreover, this study seeks to discover the politeness strategies used by Malaysian ESL teachers and students in realising directives in the ESL classroom as well as the factors that affect the choice of these strategies. In sum, this study seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

- 1) Are there any similarities or differences between teachers' and students' use of directives in Malaysian ESL classrooms?
  - a) What types of directives are performed by teachers and students?
  - b) Why are directives performed by teachers and students?
- 2) Are there any similarities or differences between teachers' and students' use of politeness strategies in performing directives in Malaysian ESL classrooms?
  - a) What politeness strategies are used by teachers and students in performing directives?
  - b) What are the factors that affect teachers' and students' choice of politeness strategies?

### **1.3 Significance of the study**

Directives are indispensable in the ESL classroom. In fact, directives are one of the factors that determine the success of classroom activities and ultimately language learning. Thus, empirical research on directives in ESL classroom discourse contributes towards the body of knowledge in the area of English language teaching and learning as well as educational linguistics. Availability of data on the forms and functions of

directives utilised in ESL classes enables reflection and evaluation of the effectiveness of these directives for successful language teaching and learning.

Furthermore, directives in Malaysian ESL classrooms is an under-researched area of study. Therefore, this study represents a significant contribution to the body of literature on not only speech act theory and politeness theory in pragmatics but also educational linguistics. This study is relevant to policymakers, teacher trainers, teacher trainees, teachers and educators, students and those interested in the study of pragmatics and educational linguistics specifically in the area of speech acts and politeness phenomena.

#### **1.4 Scope and limitations of the study**

The current study encompasses five chapters. In this chapter, the problem and significance of the study have been outlined. Chapter 2 presents the theoretical framework of this study and reviews previous studies that are related to the present one. Searle's (1979) speech act theory, Bach and Harnish's (1979) classification of directives as well as Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, upon which the theoretical framework of this study is based, will be examined in detail. Earlier studies on classroom discourse, directives and politeness, which are related to the current study, will also be reviewed. Chapter 3 describes the data collection and data analysis process utilised in this study. The rationale for the selection of methods and samples are also presented.

In Chapter 4, the findings of this study are presented and discussed. The types of directives found in the data and the factors that influence their occurrence are examined. The politeness strategies employed and the factors that affect the choice of strategies in realising each type of directive are also analysed. Chapter 5, which is the concluding chapter, summarises the findings of the study by answering the research questions posed

in this chapter. The implications of this study and recommendations for future research will also be presented.

There are two significant limitations to the current study that should be noted. First, this study is limited with regard to its data collection method. The data on which this study is based was collected in three two-hour ESL classes in a single English language learning institution in which the teaching staff is comprised entirely of females and the body of students comprised mostly of Chinese males and females. In addition, the stationary position and the limits of the audio range of the recording device in relation to the size of the classrooms and the low audibility of some participants resulted in some utterances being muted and unclear.

Second, this study is limited to directives in teacher-student interaction during lessons. Although directives could be inter-exchanged between teachers, between students, between teachers and administrators, and between students and administrators during lessons, only directives exchanged between teachers and students, namely directives from teachers to students and from students to teachers are examined.