

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background to the study, statement of the problem, the objectives of the study, the research question, scope of the study, the significance of the study and the definition of key terms.

### 1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

#### 1.1.1 Conversational Skills

Conversation refers to the communication between two or more people. In the process of conversation, some essential skills are involved. Paul Grice, a notable researcher in this field outlined the principles of conversation (1975) which encompassed some of these skills. His theory known as Grice's Theory states the four maxims that we must observe in order to have meaningful conversations. They are known as maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner. Quantity refers to the amount of contribution in a conversation. This maxim states that we must not speak more than required or less than required. Quality refers to saying only the truth and avoid saying something we lack evidence of. Relation refers to saying only things that are relevant to the context. Finally, manner refers to saying something clearly, politely and without ambiguity.

Besides Grice, another team of experts on conversation Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1994) described activities that should be present in a conversation. According to them, the following skills are displayed in a conversation such as turn-taking, topic

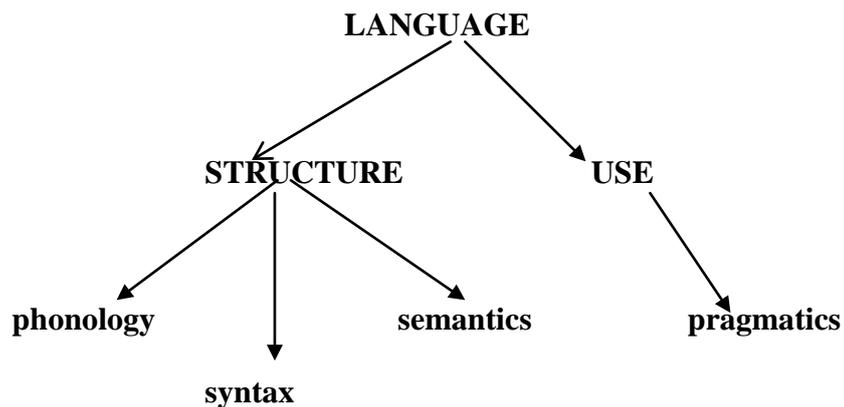
maintenance, repair, repetition, latching, interruption, topic opening, topic closing, initiating, clarifying, and responding spontaneously. Their approach to conversational analysis is known as the SSJ Model ( Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson model ).

Both Grice's Theory and SSJ Model described the conversational competency of normal people. So, what about the conversational skills for people with language disorder or people who are mentally-challenged? Are the above elements recommended by Grice and SSJ present in their conversations? Are they able to have conversation without some of the skills mentioned above? and What do they do to compensate their deficits? To clarify these enquiries, the researcher included a perspective from an authority on the conversational skills of people with language deficit, Evelyn Lucas. Lucas is a speech pathologists who work with language disordered children. She developed an assessment for evaluating the conversational skill of language disordered children. Her assessment method is referred to as LPA ( Lucas Pragmatic Analysis ).

Conversational skills of normal children are different from language disordered children ( Donahue, 1987). The latter group tend to draw attention to themselves and do not participate in the topic of discussion. They speak repetitively and with inappropriate intonation. These traits are common among children with ASD and related mental disorder.

### 1.1.2 Pragmatics and pragmatic disability

Pragmatics refers to the study of how language is used in context and how it is used to achieve social actions. Pragmatic is an important element in a conversation. Part of being in a society is to be able to converse with others, people around us and be able to get along with other people. In order to do this, a person must observe his manner; must be aware of the consequences of his utterances and must know how to use his utterances to accomplish social actions. They must be able to exercise good pragmatic skills. The difference between pragmatics and other components of language is summarized in Fig. 1.1.



**Figure 1.1 Pragmatics in the use of language**

The impairment in this aspect is known as pragmatic disability.

It refers to lack of knowledge in using language. Pragmatic disability can have a profound effect on a person's social life such as the ability to make friends in school and communicate with other people in public places. It refers to problems that children experience in using language to communicate. Generally, this problem is prevalent

among children with autistic syndrome disorder (ASD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), Asperger Syndrome, Down Syndrome and other related mental disabilities. Although many of these children are able to verbalize, but they speak inappropriately because they lack knowledge of pragmatics. Their utterances create confusion and fail to perform speech acts (Lucas, 1980). From the data analysis carried out, the subject's utterances showed that his conversational skills only fulfill the first level of the Speech Act Theory. His utterances failed to alter his listener's attitude or behaviour. These findings will be elaborated in the data analysis section.

This study chose pragmatic approach to analyze the conversational skills of the subject because it emphasizes on use of language instead of language structure. This approach will provide a more comprehensive description of the skills that the subject needs to function as an effective language user. In view of the role of pragmatic in interpreting utterances according to scholars, the researcher feels that it is suitable approach to be used for this study.

### **1.1.3 Subject of this study**

The subject of this study is autistic teenager named Yusoof ( Y ) who has limited speech a typical communicative behaviours. He is also known as Yuri or Azzari (as appeared in the transcripts and in the reports). His utterances are grammatical and he speaks with clear pronunciation. His family is able to understand him and carried out conversations with the subject because they understand most of the contexts and information related to the utterances produced by Y. The researcher feels that Y possesses reasonable language ability and that the real problem he faces is his pragmatic deficit.

Further details of this subject such as the history of diagnosis, the intervention programs he has experienced and his current development will be discussed in the Methodology chapter. Report of his diagnosis and comments from his therapists are included in appendix B.

#### **1.1.4 Pragmatics and Autism**

Pragmatic skills are often noted missing in children with autism. Many of them have linguistic competency but they are not able to use language in a normative manner. They have an unusual way of expressing their intention during a conversation, for example, they come too close to their listener, they repeat similar utterances over and over again, they are not able to maintain a topic and they switch topic abruptly. These signs of pragmatic deficits reflect that the children's pragmatic skills have not fully developed. These deficiencies are critical as they can have a profound effect on the children's social relationships and development. Conti-Ramsden (1992) emphasized that deficiencies in conversational problems could also be indicative of problems in other nonlinguistic areas such as slow cognitive processing skill and social skill impairments. It has been noted that many children with autism are often left out in social activities due to their poor conversational skill.

Pragmatics in children with autism have been thoroughly studied by researchers such as Bishop (1989 ); Wing ( 1988 ) and Lucas ( 1980 ) who discussed the relationship between pragmatic disability and autism. They, in general, agreed that autistic children have abnormal conversational pragmatics and that these abnormalities must be viewed as meaningful verbal communication. Their behaviours or gestures during conversation are not without purpose. This statement by the above researchers correspond with

Grice's "conversational implicature" which means that we must interpret the children's communicative behaviours and utterances above and beyond their literal meaning.

## **1.2 Prevalence of autism**

Autism is the fastest growing learning disability, accounting for a 900% increase in a particular ten-year study period (1992 – 2001). The incidence of autism has increased at least twentyfold in the last decade. Most records on the prevalence of this epidemic comes from the United States. Goldberg (2000), a paediatrician with the clinical teaching staff of University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) has urged the government to channel more funding towards reducing cases of autism. This call reflects the seriousness and urgency to face the consequence of autism on the society. It is a lifelong disability and thus, requires a huge financial commitment from the government to provide appropriate facilities for the autistic population.

Another documentation on the incidence of autism comes from the USA Department of Education. According to this department, the number of children diagnosed with autism who have registered under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is growing more than fivefold during the 1990s (Wikipedia 2006). The California Department of Developmental Services estimates that the number of diagnosed cases in that state had grown 273 percent during the 1990s (Wikipedia 2006).

Finally, a study done in Cambridgeshire, the United Kingdom, by the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge University, suggested that the prevalence of autism could be even higher than that suggested by many research studies. This study, completed in

2002, reported that as many as one in 175 primary school children may be suffering from autism. The researchers involved in this project said that their figures were “an underestimate, if anything”. They said that they only included children who had a definite clinical diagnosis, so any child that had been stated as autistic or with autistic spectrum disorders but not diagnosed clinically was not counted (Theresa, 2004).

### **1.3 Prevalence of autism and autism awareness in Malaysia**

There is no known record of annual cases of autism in Malaysia been documented by the authority yet. Information on the alarming increase of autism cases in Malaysia is obtained from NASOM ( The National Autistic Society of Malaysia ), community centers and special education programs. Similarly, many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) such as Skills Academy in Petaling Jaya, reported the number of children seeking help had been increasing. It had 16 autistic children in 2007 and 23 in 2008. Likewise, the Association of Putra Special Community (ASPEC) had 10 autistic children in 2007 and 15 in 2008. There were five children on the waiting list. One of the established support groups known as PR4A (Parents Resource 4 Autism) reported that the number of parents applying to become members has increased twofold every year. In addition, two secondary schools in Putrajaya (the new government capital city) which are SMK Putrajaya Precint 9 and SMK Putrajaya Presint 11 reported an increased enrolment of autistic children from five in 2007 to eleven in 2008.

The Ministry of Social Welfare, the body designated to care for societal affairs, maintains a register of persons with all types of special needs. The number of such persons registered at present (that is, till the end of the year 2000) is about 85,000. It

must be emphasized that this represents only those who are registered voluntarily. The total number could be a lot more. Going by the Department of Social Welfare's conservative estimate of 1% of the general population, the number of children with special needs should be easily more than 200,000 persons. Of this figure, how many may be autistic is difficult to determine, but based on the statistics of other countries, it could be quite a big portion (Toran, 2008)

Awareness of autism in Malaysia is still in infancy stage. The understanding of this syndrome has improved recently after the birth of cyberspace technology. With the internet facility, information about autism flows into the country rapidly so much so that many professionals working with children and parents are seeking recognition and help from the government to fight this syndrome. More campaigns and advocacy works are carried out to encourage parents with mental disorder children to register their children with the Welfare Department. In every state, there is at least one center that caters for children with autism. These centers belong to the parent organization known as The National Autism Society of Malaysia or NASOM. It has 13 centers nationwide and it functions mainly to provide early behavioral management for children with autism. In addition, the government has also taken the initiative by establishing special education classes in the mainstream schools. These classes are known as integrated special education programs which aim to include the special children in a normal school environment. Although the intention is good, unfortunately, the implementation is below expectation. The execution of the special need programs require a major overhaul. First of all, the Ministry of Education fails to realize that mental disability comprises many categories such as Down Syndrome, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), slow learner, dyslexia, hyperactive and autistic children. Putting them together in the same classroom is doing more harm to these children rather than helping them. Second,

teachers are not well equipped to manage all kinds of mental disabilities let alone to deal with autistic children.

This shows that knowledge about the need of special children particularly autistic children is still sorely lacking among the policymakers in the Ministry of Education. Although the country produces many special education teachers every year, they are not equipped with specific specialization. The teachers are given short courses on special need children which mainly focus on curriculum development, motivation and self-improvement for the teachers.

#### **1.4 Autism**

The term autism was first introduced by Dr. Leo Kanner in 1943. He described autism as a collection of symptoms which include the following similarities: difficulty in relating to people and objects, communication problem, eating problem, a need for sameness, repetitive behaviors, horror reactions to sensory over-stimulation, and a tendency to be anxious around people. This condition is also known as autistic symptom disorders (ASD). Another definition of autism by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), (1994) describes it as a pervasive developmental disorder which is characterized by impairments in communication and social interaction with restricted, repetitive interests and activities. Autism has been estimated to occur in as many as 1 in 500 individuals. It is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls. It knows no racial, ethnic or social boundaries and its occurrence is not affected by family income, lifestyle and educational level (Berkell, 2005). Though some aspects of conditions, as describes here, may be similar to that experienced by a particular child, it must be emphasized

that the way each child develops and how he or she reacts in his environment depends on the interventions he has received and the experiences he or she is exposed to.

#### **1.4.1 Features of autism**

Individuals affected by autism display a spectrum of disorders. However, all those affected tend to show three common characteristics, known as the Triad of Impairments: -

- i. Difficulties with speech, language and non-verbal communication It is not that the child cannot talk (although a small proportion never develop speech) but that they have difficulties in communicating.
- ii. Difficulties with social interaction: People, particularly children, with autism often have difficulties initiating and sustaining relationships with their peers.
- iii. Difficulties with imagination and inner language: Imaginary play, such as pretending a doll is a baby or a toy car is a real car, is a very important part of a child's development. Children with autism rarely show such imaginary play and thus, their development is hindered.

Usually, each autistic child has other idiosyncratic behaviours in addition to the above. They have considerable individual variations in the manner and depth of autistic characteristics being manifested. Autism is not just one disorder with a well defined set of symptoms but is a broad spectrum of disorders that range from mild to severe and is

commonly known as autistic spectrum disorders (ASD). This phenomenon makes it unlikely to find two autistic children that are alike.

## **1.5 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

### **1.5.1 Lack of studies**

There has not been any known study done on this topic in Malaysia yet, although there have been other topics related to autism being carried out. The problem that is being studied in this research is conversational ability of children with autism according to Grice and SSJ. Both theories have been used extensively on normal people but have not been applied on autistic people. There are many literatures available on autism, pragmatics and proper conversational skill but there is lack of studies on the ability of autistic children to observe Grice's maxims of conversation and their ability to carry out conversational behaviours recommended by SSJ.

### **1.5.2 Other related studies in Malaysia**

Some of the related studies that have been done on autism were by Paramalingam, M. (2001), Theresa, A. (2002), and Sethupathy, I. (2007).

Theresa, A. (2004) conducted a case study on the sociolinguistic skills of an autistic child. The subject was a 13 year old boy. Theresa's investigation highlighted the poor social skills of an autistic teenager due to his language disability. The subject did not enjoy friendship with other boys his age because he spoke strangely and he made funny gestures. She further emphasized that the lack of this essential skill inhibits

children with autism from improving themselves in other fields, including the academic field. Her study found that the subject's sociolinguistic skills match that of a 5 year old child.

Paramalingam (2001) conducted a study on language deficits of an autistic child. This study described the global language skill of his subject. His subject was a 10 year old boy who had clear speech but lacked vocabulary and produced monosyllabic responses. His sentences were generally incomplete and often did not have function words especially verb "to be" ; and the subject was often confused with the usage of pronoun reversal (especially 'you' and 'me'). The subject did not cooperate with his interlocutor because he remained silent most of the time, spoke too fast when the topic did not concern him and always tried to bring back the topic to his choice. He did not know the rules of conversation for example, turn-taking because he simply interrupted when his conversational partner was talking. The researcher concluded that the subject had general language disability except for articulation.

Sethupathy (2007) studied the communication deficits of an autistic boy and reported that in the area of pragmatics, her subject had an inability to initiate and to continue a conversation. He also showed no reaction to conversational breakdown. All his verbal responses were basic, monosyllabic and very often inappropriate for the context. There were times when he appeared rude when he remained silent and refused to respond to any initiations and enquiries from his interlocutors. The findings also showed that he did not follow the communication convention of turn-taking.

All of the above studies focus on the global language deficits of autistic children. However, there is a lack of studies done on autistic children's communication skills in this country. Therefore, this study adds new addition to the research in this field since it is looking at the conversational skills from a different perspective.

## **1.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of this study are:

- i. to discuss the conversational skills of the subject according to Grice's Theory.
- ii. to analyze the conversational skills of the subject according to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson model.
- iii. to evaluate the subject's pragmatic skills according to Lucas Pragmatic Analysis
- iv. to produce a pragmatic description of the subject's conversational skill based on Grice's theory.

## **1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The following research questions were formulated to assist the direction of this research. They were questions that were related to the objectives such as:

- 1.4.1 How did the subject interact with people in his immediate environment?

1.4.2 Did the subject observe or violate Grice's maxims of conversation?

1.4.3 How did the subject communicate in the following situations:

(i) Home – for example, with his parents and siblings

(ii) School – for example, with his teachers and peers, and therapists.

(iii) Community - for example, at the playground and restaurants

## **1.8 Theoretical frameworks**

This study is based on three theories. They are Grice's Theory which describes the proper rules of conversation; SSJ model which describes the general actions during conversation; and LPA that evaluates the conversational skill of language-disordered children. Some aspects of these theories and their basic principles have been discussed under the topic "conversational skills". The details of these theories will be presented in Chapter Three (Methodology).

The combination of these theories is significant in this study as this investigation to look at the conversational skills of normal people as a reference. These theories will be used to evaluate the conversational skills of the subject.

## **1.9 Definition of Key Terms**

The following are operational definitions of the key terms used in this study: autism, pragmatics and maxims of conversation.

### **1.9.1 Pragmatics**

There are several definitions of pragmatics. This study has chosen two definitions namely from Owens (1996) and Prutting (1982). The former defined pragmatics as a set of rules related to language use within the communicative context. It is concerned with the way language is used to communicate rather than with the way language is structured. It is about the functional and appropriate use of language that is more important rather than grammatical accuracy. The second definition comes from Prutting (1982) who ascertained that pragmatics is a discipline which analyzes what the speaker wishes to convey such as request, comment, protest or greeting. He emphasized on the use of language rather than the syntactical aspect.

### **1.9.2 Maxims of conversation**

This concept was introduced by Grice (1975) to refer to rules of conversation. His perception of effective conversation is that both speaker and hearer must cooperate to participate in the conversation and that both must observe some rules or maxims for appropriate interaction. According to him, there are four maxims of conversation:

i. maxims of quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required.

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

ii. maxims of quality: Do not say what you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

iii. maxim of relevance: Be relevant

iv. maxims of manner: Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

Be orderly.

## **1.10 SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

This section discusses the specific focus of the study, the justification for choosing a single subject and the method of data collection.

### **1.10.1 Focus of the study.**

This study focuses on the pragmatic aspect of the subject's conversational skills. It focuses on how the subject expresses himself, the appropriateness of his speaking styles from Grice's perspective; his communicative behaviours according to SSJ Model

and his pragmatic skills according to LPA. Other aspects of language such as syntax, semantics, phonology and morphology are not dealt with as they do not pose as a major problem in the subject's daily oral interaction. This study also exclude paralinguistic features and pauses that accompanied Y's speech. Therefore, symbols for these features are not included in the transcriptions.

### **1.10.2 Justification for single subject case study**

The researcher chose a single subject due to the uniqueness of the theme. This study is testing Grice's theory on an autistic person, which has not been done locally before. Each child with autism is different in terms of the variety and depth of the symptoms and range of disorders experienced. With the complexity of the syndrome, the researcher feels it is wise to test the theory on a single subject first and perhaps, in future, it can be tested on a bigger group. Previous studies related to autism which have been done in Malaysia were carried out on single subject too (Paramalingam, 2000; Theresa, 2004; Indira, 2007) for similar reason. In addition, this design allows flexibility in data collection since the subject's moods and cooperativeness is unpredictable. Some days, the subject participate in the conversation and some days he completely ignored the researcher or his interlocutors.

There are more examples of single subject case study carried out abroad. For example, Blythe & Scott (1985) who are social work researchers believed that studies related to this discipline is ideally conducted on single subject as there are many empirical data necessary to formulate a model. Empirical data are data obtained from observation, experiences and experiment. The experiment may be carried out according to a working hypotheses that are testable using observation or experiment. As such,

these data will be much easier to collect if the researcher works with one subject at a time. This argument is further supported by Milliard (1998: 370 – 73) who wrote in the International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders said that single-case design may be the best way to conduct research related to this field. This is because many speech disorders have a great diversity among individual patients, in the etiology, manifestations, and treatment. A group study, she claimed, would obscure this diversity, and yield an average result that had little usefulness for the treatment of most individuals.

Each child with autism is different in terms of variety and the depth of the symptoms and range of disorders experienced. With the complexity of the syndrome, the researcher feels that it is wise to test the theory on a single subject first and perhaps, in future, it can be tested on a bigger group.

## **1.11 Data Collection**

### **1.11.1 Video and audio recordings**

This is one of the methods of collecting data for this study. This method is suitable for research such as this study which is analyzing speech samples. Fourteen video recordings of the subject were taken in different contexts over the period of four years. The recordings were carried out when the subject was with his family, with his therapists, with peers in school, with his teachers and with his siblings. The duration of every recording was one hour. However, the number of dialogues obtained vary in every recording. In some sessions, the subject produced many utterances and in some recordings there were more pauses. The researcher felt that the number of recordings was sufficient as the subject spoke in the same manner in different contexts and time.

His speech had no variation in terms of topic and length of utterance even when he was put in different environment. Therefore, prolonging the period of video recording would not have produced variation in his conversational style.

## **1.12 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study puts forward important findings and discussions about the conversational skills of people with autism. Many of the issues mentioned are relatively new to the Malaysian society especially in understanding the communication styles and speeches of individuals with autism. Although the study focuses on only one subject, it provides new information on understanding the conversational skills of autistic people, the problems faced by their families and challenges faced by professionals working with them.

Another important contribution of this study is the analysis of Grice's Theory on autistic people. In many readings on Grice's theory, the subjects of the research have been normal people. Therefore, this study is significant as it tests the validity of Grice's maxims of conversation on autistic people; and the findings can be used as a platform for future research on pragmatic skills of autistic people.

It is hoped that this study would help parents, teachers and caretakers of autistic children understand how to identify the problems faced by these children and assist them in coping with their daily lives, especially by improving their pragmatic skills.

### **1.13 Summary**

In short, this chapter provides the background of the study and concepts related to the topic; explanation for the approach taken to conduct this investigation which is qualitative single subject case study and the theories that are used as frameworks. They are Grice's Theory for conversational rules, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson model (SSJ model) for conversation analysis and Lucas for pragmatic analysis (LPA) of children with language disorder. Subsequently, this chapter has included an overview of autism and its pragmatic deficit, the definition of pragmatics and a brief description of the subject. These discussions will continue in the following chapter.