

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In a multilingual country like Malaysia, mastery of more than a language is perhaps a necessity, especially, Bahasa Malaysia (BM) as the national language and English as the second language (Ain Nadzimah Abdullah & Chan, 2003; Lee et al., 2010; Ong & Tan, 2008; Tan, 2005). English, which is seen as an indispensable resource especially for science and technology was introduced as the medium of instruction for teaching Science and Mathematics in Malaysian schools in year 2003 (Ainan Abdul Samad, 2003 cited in Ong & Tan, 2008).

Nevertheless, the students' achievements in these respective subjects especially in rural areas were not convincing which then led the government to amend the policy where the national language is reinstated as the medium of instruction which will be officially implemented in 2012. This is due to the fact that students are not proficient in the English language and therefore, mastering the subject matter with the language in which they are not proficient at might make the situation of acquiring knowledge even worse (Isahak Haron et al., 2008).

In order to strengthen the English language proficiency, the government, in early 2010, has introduced the policy "Upholding Bahasa Malaysia and Strengthening Command of English" that is also known as *MBMMBI (Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Memperkukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris)*. Various transformation measures have been announced by the government in order to strengthen the command of English

among the students especially by allocating more time for the subject to be taught by well trained teachers (i.e. teachers who are proficient in the language) (*The Star*, 2010).

Consequently, the English language teachers or instructors are being imposed on heavy responsibility to improve on the teaching methods which can enhance the students' English language proficiency. However, prior to developing various teaching techniques that might help to improve the command of the language, it is crucial to analyse the source of the problem which makes the students to face difficulties in using the English language that turns them to be unable to perform.

1.1 Background of the Study

It has been documented in previous studies that the inappropriate use of the target language (L2) is the result of L1 transfer (which is negative) and at the same time, the 'faulty' learning of the target language itself (Brown, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2000). For many of the Malaysian learners especially the Malay native speakers, it has often been suggested that the transfer of knowledge from their native language which is Malay seems to have a great influence in their English writings which to some extent results in inappropriate use of grammatical devices (Khazriyati Salehuddin et al., 2006; Marlyna Maros et al., 2007; Mohideen, 1996; Nor Hashimah et al., 2008). As an attempt to tackle this language learning problem Lardiere (2009:175), writing from a Universal Grammar perspective, argues, L2 learners need to "reconfigure" or "remap" the L1 as they use it during the acquisition of L2. In order for the learners to reconfigure the L1 knowledge what is more necessary is the explicit knowledge of grammar (Ellis, 2006).

Contrary to the necessity of learning the grammar, of both L1 and L2, Malaysian Education System prefers that the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is used to teach the English language among students which focuses on content rather than form.

Even though CLT has been practised for more than two decades, the ESL learners are still incompetent in the language, especially when it comes to the productive skills which are speaking and writing where inappropriate use of grammatical devices can be inevitably noticed. Perhaps, the limitation in this approach is, it does not encourage explicit grammar instruction; hence, there is a need to incorporate the CLT approach with the explicit grammar instruction to provide meaningful input to the learners within context to enhance their language proficiency (Hedge, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2000; Lopez, 2004). Thus, lack of explicit exposure to the grammar rules of the English language appears as one possible reason which might result in inappropriate use of grammatical devices among the Malay learners in their English writings.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Transfer is “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and imperfectly) acquired” (Odlin, 1989: 27). The concept of transfer vividly explains the role of the learners’ native language in acquiring the second language where the knowledge of the L1 is assumed to result in negative transfer when the learners are not proficient in their L2 (Brown, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 2000). As such, the ESL learners utilise or rather make use of whatever limited knowledge of the semantics and structure of their L2 which they perceived to produce their English writings.

It is perhaps not the learners’ L1 which impedes the learning process of their L2 but the learners’ limited level of proficiency in the target language itself becomes the source of the problem which later leads the learners to seek the knowledge of their L1 to produce L2. Besides, the CLT approach which does not encourage the explicit grammar instruction could be one of the reasons for the lack of proficiency among the ESL

learners which then lead to the scenario of cross-linguistic transfer or rhetorical transfer (Holyoak & Piper, 1997).

Tobin (1990) and Reid (1991) have developed a model which sees language as a system in a Saussurean sense, that is, each linguistic item in a language carries a vague or abstract meaning (invariant meaning) and to instil the understanding on how language works as a system, these meanings need to be highlighted in grammar instruction. As English and BM are two languages which originated from different language families, the system (i.e. semantics and structure) of these languages are also dissimilar where one should be taught not to merge English with Bahasa Malaysia system and vice versa.

For the Malay ESL learners, determiners, subject-verb agreement and copula 'be' are the three most problematic grammatical features in English which might be due to the learners' L1 influence (Marlyna Maros et al., 2007). Therefore, in this study, the researcher integrates the explicit contrastive grammar instruction of the use of determiners (i.e. demonstratives and quantifiers) between English and Bahasa Malaysia within the CLT approach by providing explicitly, the explanation on meanings of these determiners (in context) to develop the Malay learners' English writing skills in relation to producing noun phrases.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are:

- 1.3.1 To determine the core values/invariant meanings of determiners in English and Bahasa Malaysia.

1.3.2 To investigate whether the integration of meaning, explicitly, within the CLT approach helps Malay ESL learners to be able to make appropriate use of determiners in English noun phrases.

1.4 Research Questions

The research questions of this study are:

1.4.1 What are the core values/invariant meanings of determiners (i.e. demonstratives and quantifiers) in English and Bahasa Malaysia?

1.4.2 Is there any difference in producing determiners in English noun phrases between the experimental group (which received the semantic-based explicit contrastive grammar instruction of the use of determiners, i.e., demonstratives and quantifiers) and control group (which received no treatment)?

1.5 Hypotheses

The null hypothesis (i.e. H_0) and alternative hypothesis (i.e. H_a) of this study are:

1.5.1 H_0 – There is no statistically significant mean difference in producing determiners in English noun phrases between the experimental group (which received the semantic-based explicit contrastive grammar instruction of the use of determiners, i.e., demonstratives and quantifiers) and control group (which received no treatment).

1.5.2 H_a – There is a statistically significant mean difference in producing determiners in English noun phrases between the experimental group (which received the semantic-based explicit contrastive grammar instruction of the use of determiners, i.e., demonstratives and quantifiers) and control group (which received no treatment).

1.6 Scope and Limitations

This study only focuses on the Malay learners' writing skills in the English language which are believed to be influenced by the structure of their native language which is Malay (i.e. Bahasa Malaysia). Therefore, the findings obtained through the experimental design cannot be generalised among ESL learners from other ethnic background (i.e. Chinese, Indian and others who are not the native speakers of the language).

Moreover, time is another constraint for the researcher. This study involved two phases where the instruments (i.e. treatment) for the second phase (i.e. quasi-experimental design) were developed through the first phase of the study (i.e. qualitative analysis of the language samples). As such, the researcher had to complete the first phase (i.e. determining the invariant meaning of the grammar items) within a month in order to implement the experimental design on the students. Due to the obligation to follow the academic calendar of Malaysian polytechnics, the researcher had to plan the treatment to be completed within seven weeks (inclusive of pre-test, mid-test and post-test which consumed two weeks) with two hours of instruction per week.

Besides, human factor (i.e. students' attitude) was also identified as a limitation where the number of students who attended the class was inconsistent as there were

absentees sometimes along the process of the treatment (i.e. the whole period of seven weeks of instruction). However, the researcher had managed to arrange some separate sessions for these students in order to avoid the treatment process from being impeded.

Last but not the least, not being able to exercise complete authority over the institution while conducting the research was also seen as a limitation. Due to this, the researcher had to use intact groups as the experimental and control group which means that the students were not randomly selected from the population (i.e. the total number of first semester students enrolled in July 2009 at Politeknik Sultan Idris Shah).

1.7 Significance of the Study

Previous studies indicated that although not all inappropriate uses of grammatical devices are due to the learners' native language influence, a large number of inappropriate uses of determiners, besides other grammatical devices, reflected the transfer effect of the Bahasa Malaysia structure (Marlyna Maros et al., 2007; Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin et al., 2008). Contrary to this over-simplistic view that it is always transfer that causes the inappropriate usages, this study employs a semantic-based explicit contrastive grammar instruction method as a tool in its experimental design in order to see the differences that it may bring in the learning of grammatical devices, i.e., determiners especially demonstratives and quantifiers in English noun phrases.

In this study, the learning of meaning or function of a lexical item through the context of its occurrence rather than in isolation is practised, following Saussurean's idea who views language as a system rather than a rule-governed behaviour. The English language teachers may opt for the strategy of integrating semantic-based explicit contrastive grammar instruction into the CLT approach to teach the English grammatical category as according to Chung (2005), the Malaysian textbooks although

adopted the CLT approach in teaching the language, they are still rule-based and therefore, the expectation for the linguistic awareness is higher.

This study benefits both English language teachers and students in the ESL classroom in the teaching and learning process of the grammatical category which involves the explanation of ‘number’ that Tobin (1990) believes to be quite problematic in reality. Moreover, this might also be helpful in developing the English language proficiency among the Malaysian students and, to certain extent helps to sustain a high level of proficiency along with the government’s policy to strengthen the language proficiency. Apart from that, this study illustrates the importance of linguistic knowledge in educators where the meaning analysis performed on the linguistic data helps them to teach students how linguistic signs are interpreted through meaning(s) and message(s) which is being communicated (i.e. how the lexical items are being employed in the linguistic environment).

1.8 Definition of Concepts

The following are the definitions of some concepts used in this study:

1.8.1 Implicit Teaching of Grammar

Implicit teaching is a method used to impart the knowledge of grammar incidentally in context with meaningful function-based activities without any direct attention to the rules of grammar (Chitravelu et al., 2001) (see section 2.2, page 16).

1.8.2 Explicit Teaching of Grammar

Explicit teaching of grammar involves the teaching of the rules of grammar either inductively or deductively. Introduction to grammar rules inductively means that learners are exposed to the rules through varied language samples and practices.

Deductive approach, meanwhile, emphasises the presentation of rules before introducing any samples or practices. In explicit teaching, grammar rules are presented in isolation (Harmer, 1988) (see section 2.2, page 16).

1.8.3 Contrastive Grammar Instruction

The introduction to grammar structure of the target language (i.e. second language) through the comparison with the corresponding structure of the native language (i.e. first language) by disclosing the similarities and differences to improve the command of the language which is being learned (i.e. target language). In other words, it is a method used to teach “unfamiliar pattern of second language with familiar native language structure in a meaningful way” (Govindasamy, 1994:34) (see section 2.7, page 29).

1.8.4 Semantic-based Instruction

The integration of the study of meaning (i.e. semantics) into the teaching of grammar item(s) within the context of its occurrence where meanings and interpretation over the message which is being communicated is emphasised. This is also similar to the meaning-based approach (see section 2.7, page 29).

1.8.5 Entity Number

The analysis of grammatical number that determines the meaning of the noun entity either ‘ONE’ or ‘MORE THAN ONE’ (Reid, 1991) (see section 2.10, page 56).

1.8.6 Semantic Properties

The semantic properties of a lexical item are identified as various elements of the meaning of the particular word. These semantic properties are determined through

the characteristics (i.e. physical attribute) and the context of occurrence of the lexical item. In this study, the semantic properties of noun referent(s) is interpreted in terms of its countability (i.e. mass noun or count noun) and also singular and plural value which indicate the meaning of 'ONE' and 'MORE THAN ONE' respectively (Reid, 1991).

1.8.7 Invariant Meaning

Each linguistic sign or lexical item of a language conveys an abstract or a vague meaning which is called invariant meaning and this single meaning is universal as it should be applicable in various contexts of its use (Tobin, 1990) (see section 2.10, page 56).

1.8.8 The Zero Signal

It is an indicator which appears as '-Ø' which signifies the meaning of the noun entity as 'ONE' (Reid, 1991) (see section 2.10, page 56).

1.8.9 The '-s' Signal

This is a morphological identity which appears as '-s' which signifies the meaning of noun entity as 'MORE THAN ONE' (Reid, 1991) (see section 2.10, page 56).

1.9 Conclusion

The deterioration of the standard of English among Malaysian students was evident when Bahasa Malaysia replaced English language as the medium of instruction in schools in the beginning of 1970s (Noor Azimah Abdul Rahim, 2010). As such, the introduction to the new policy which announces the reversion of the teaching of Mathematics and Science to Bahasa Malaysia completely in 2012, albeit, might be

perceived as unnecessary by some, the idea of strengthening the English language proficiency through various teaching methods by the English language educators among the students need to be welcomed. Thus, this study is looking forward to see the possibility of developing the students' use of the English language especially the grammatical category of determiners (i.e. demonstratives and quantifiers) through the semantic-based instruction which is integrated with the explicit contrastive grammar.