CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is confined to dealing with error-related definitions and theories as well as a review of literature pertaining to relevant error analysis studies.

2.1 ERRORS AND MISTAKES

For the purpose of this study, it is necessary to distinguish **errors** from **mistakes**. Errors are systematic, usually have repeated occurrences and are typically produced by language learners. These errors are known as *competence errors*. Errors of competence are errors, which are not random but systematic. They are primarily caused by the learner's inadequate and incomplete knowledge of the rules of the target language.

In contrast, mistakes are unsystematic, occasional and occur at random. Mistakes are also known as *performance errors*. Mistakes are made through carelessness, lapses of memory, fatigue, emotional strain or simply by a desire to communicate rapidly rather than precisely. The learners, in this case, know the correct grammatical rules or the appropriate lexical items but have failed to apply them in specific instances. Mistakes are generally made by native as well as competent speakers of a language.

2.2   CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS

Contrastive Analysis (CA) was developed and practiced in the 1950's and 1960's. It is a systematic comparison of the linguistic systems of a learner's native language with his second language (L2) in order to predict L2 linguistic difficulties. CA claims that the main barrier in learning a second language is the interference of native language habits. This hypothesis is based on the Behaviorist Language Theory. The behaviorists believe that language learning involves the process of habit formation. When a second language learner has acquired the habits of his first language (L1), it is quite difficult for him to eliminate these habits. It is these habits, from his first language, which hinder him when learning a second language.

Lado (1957) states that errors may occur because there is a lack of equivalent structure between the target language (TL) and the mother tongue (MT). In contrast, if there is equivalent structure between the TL and MT, then, second language learning becomes easier. Therefore, CA scholars believe that from a careful description and comparison of the structures of native language with the TL, it is possible to predict the types of errors second language learners will make. Lado (1957: 21) contends that,

... we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the language and the culture of the student...

Fries (1957) notes that learning a second language is very different from learning a first language. This is due to the fact that the basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language, but mainly out of the special "set" created by the first language habits. Learning problems common to second language learners can be predicted by comparing the L1 and L2 systems. Lado (1957) states that the greater the differences between the linguistic structures of L1 and L2 in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax, the more difficult it will be for the L2 learner to master the structures of L1.

The limitation of CA is, however, that researchers working with actual errors produced by learners found that many errors predicted by CA were not genuine problems for the learners. The linguistic difference between the L1 and L2 did not in fact equal to L2 learning difficulty. The majority of L2 errors were not traceable to L1 but were the result of complexities within the L2 itself as well as other linguistic strategies found both in the first and the second language learner.

The CA hypotheses claims that if a structure to be learned in the target language has a counterpart in the learner's mother tongue, then 'positive' transfer will take place and learning will be facilitated. Jackson (1982) states that if, on the other hand, the target language does not have a counterpart in the mother tongue, then 'negative' transfer will take place and learning will be hampered. Burt, Dulay and Krashen (1982) state that negative transfer will result in errors, while positive transfer will result in correct constructions. Critics of CA, Duskova (1969) and Selinker (1969), feel that these claims are not valid. For example, items that are different are not problematic to

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learners and are, in fact, easily learnt. Likewise, items that are similar are not necessarily easier to learn. In addition, meanings and sounds are difficult to learn, whether they exist between the L1 or L2, or within a particular language.

Another criticism of CA involves the assumption that all errors are due to negative transfer from the L1. Proponents of error analysis like Richards (1971) and George (1972) feel that interference errors are in fact only one of the many types of errors that L2 learners make. According to George (1972), only 33% of the errors L2 learners make can be attributed to L1 interference. Many of these errors, it must be noted, are phonological errors. Thus, contrastive analysis is more helpful in predicting the phonological difficulties the L2 learner may experience, rather than all the difficulties he will face in learning the L2.

2.3   ERROR ANALYSIS

Error Analysis (EA) is the study of the errors made by second and foreign language learners. EA focuses on the actual errors a learner makes in his L2 when compared to the correct L2 usage. It involves systematically describing and explaining the errors made by speakers of a second language in order to account for the different levels of difficulties and sources of errors (Corder, 1967). Proponents of error analysis like Corder 1967) and Richards (1974) regard errors as an indication that the learners are testing their hypotheses about the nature of the second language. Errors are not considered the product of native language habits but the learner's attempt to find out some system of the second language.

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EA has also provided a new perspective for viewing errors made by learners. EA hypothesizes that in order to learn a language, a person creates a system of 'rules' from the language data to which he is exposed, and this system enables him to use the language. In the error analysis perspective, the focus is on the learner and what his errors tell us about second language acquisition. EA takes the view that the learner plays an active role in the process of language learning.

Errors are no longer viewed as indications of a learner's lack of intelligence. They are indicators of learning strategies, and they provide us with data from which useful insights about the second language learning process can be derived. Thus, errors are proof that learning is taking place, and are deemed necessary for the learning process to take place.

The proponents of EA view errors as normal and unavoidable in the process of learning a second or foreign language. Errors are seen as evidence of learning. Corder (1967) states that errors signal that actual learning has taken place and show the success and progress in language learning. Also, errors provide useful data for teachers and researchers in giving evidence of the learners' competence in the language. This enables the teacher to evaluate the effectiveness of his teaching materials and techniques.

2.4   INTERLANGUAGE

The term "interlanguage" was first introduced by Selinker (1972), and refers to the learner's own language. Various terms have been used by different researchers to refer to the learner's own language. Nemser (1971) refers to it as "approximative systems", Corder (1973,1974) calls it "transitional competence" and "idiosyncratic dialects", while James (1977) calls it "interlingua".

Interlanguage is distinct from the learners L1 and L2, and it is believed to comprise linguistic elements, some of which show systematic features both of the learners L1 and L2, and some which show no obvious resemblance to the L1 nor the L2.

Selinker (1972) says that there are five principal processes in interlanguage. The five processes are:

(1)   language transfer – the result of interference from the native language.

(2)   transfer of training – the result of faulty teaching procedures and methods.

(3)   strategies of second language learning – the result of strategies that the learner uses in learning the second language.

(4)   strategies in second language communication - the result of approaches by the learner to communicate with speakers of the target language.

(5)   overgeneralization of target language linguistic material – the result of overgeneralization of rules in the target language.

Selinker (1972) states that many learners have difficulties in learning because their interlanguage has some rules which are different from those of the target language system. He calls this "fossilization". Fossilization occurs in a learner when an element in the interlanguage becomes permanent, and there is "cessation of further systematic development in the interlanguage" (Selinker and Lamendella, 1978; 65). Selinker's five central processes have been criticized by Kirby (1984) who says that they do not clarify what is peculiar to learning a language, and that these processes tend to overlap and, therefore, cannot be identified clearly due to ambiguity.

2.5   SOURCES OF ERRORS

Error analysis studies have suggested several sources of errors. However, it is difficult to determine the exact source of errors, as there may be several factors that are responsible for an error. Richards (1974) states that the main sources of errors are interlingual and intralingual errors.

Interlingual errors are due to interference from the mother tongue of the learner where there is a transfer of linguistic structures from the learner's L1 to his L2. Positive and negative transfer can occur, and when negative transfer occurs, the mother tongue will appear to be a hindrance towards second language acquisition. Dulay and Burt (1974) in a study of errors in English made by Spanish-speaking children reveal that only 5% of errors are due to negative transfer, whilst 87% are due to developmental strategies, and the remaining 8% are ambiguous errors which did not reflect either the first or the second language structure. Findings on error analysis studies in second language learning show that the majority of errors are not mainly due to interference from the L1.

Intralingual errors are errors that result from faulty or partial learning of the target language and may be caused by the influence of one target language item upon another. These errors take place when difficulties arise within the target language itself. Richards (1974) states intralingual errors reflect the learners' competence at a particular learning stage, and illustrates some characteristics of language learning. According to him, there are 4 major sources of errors.

They are:

        i.   Overgeneralization,

        ii.   Ignorance of Rule Restriction,

        iii.   Incomplete Application of Rules, and

        iv.   False Concepts Hypothesized.

i. OVERGENERALIZATION

Overgeneralization occurs when the learner creates a deviant form based on his experience of learning certain rules and categories in the target language. Selinker's (1972) five central processes include overgeneralization of TL as one of the strategies employed by the learner while learning a second language. He states that overgeneralization of the TL rule is evidence that the learner has learnt the rule in question but has not learnt the correct distribution or application of the rule or its exceptions.

Overgeneralization may be due to faulty teaching techniques employed by the teacher. When teaching tenses, the teacher uses pattern drills and students may overgeneralize the verb tenses and produce errors such in the following example:

*   Ali <u>is runs</u> quickly.

In the above sentence, the BE verb is added before the main verb. This can be explained as the learner having overgeneralized the verb forms based on his knowledge of the simple present tense and the present progressive tense.

Overgeneralization is associated with redundancy reduction or simplification. This is usually done when the learner leaves out items which do not carry any meaning to him, where he attempts to reduce his linguistic burden (Richards, 1971). In the example,

*   Yesterday I go to the university

the learner has not used the past tense form of the verb 'go' because the learner has made an overgeneralization that the past tense has already been indicated in the time modifier 'yesterday'.

ii. IGNORANCE OF RULE RESTRICTIONS

Ignorance of rule restrictions occur when the learner fails to observe the restrictions of existing structures. The learner applies a previously learnt rule to contexts where they do not apply. In the sentence,

* Annie told to me the news.

The above sentence is incorrect due to the learner's analogy of the structure 'said to me', i.e. the learner applies what he knows in a context which is not applicable.

iii. INCOMPLETE APPLICATION OR RULES

Incomplete application of rules occur when the learner makes errors from the application of a rule in English in an inappropriate situation. For example, a learner, when replying to a question asked by the teacher, gives the following type of statement which parallels the teacher's questions:

Teacher: What does Zaki have to do?

Student: *Zaki have to do the essay.

Here, we see that when replying to the teacher, the student has overgeneralized the above statement by using the question formation structure, thus producing the incorrect statement.

iv.   FALSE CONCEPTS HYPOTHESIZED

False Concepts Hypothesized derives from faulty comprehension of rules of the target language. In his effort to learn English as a second language, the learner often tries to build hypotheses or false concepts about the language from his limited knowledge of it. Richards (1974) accounts this to inadequate teaching or classroom presentation.

Other possible causes of language learners' errors can be attributed to:

1.   performance errors, where the learner makes errors as a result of slips of tongue or carelessness (Corder 1981, Norrish, 1983)

2.   failure of memory (Gorbet, 1979)

3. redundancy reduction, where the learner discards linguistic items he finds redundant to convey the intended message in the L2 (George 1972, Richards 1974)

4. teacher-induced errors where errors are committed by learners because of incorrect teacher explanations (James, 1998)

5. ignorance of some target language items (James, 1998)

6. errors due to the misuse of reference items (James, 1998)

2.6 SOME LIMITATIONS OF ERROR ANALYSIS

Although error analysis is useful, there are some weaknesses in EA. EA is limited to the study of errors, and does not account for the correct use of the language. Duskova (1969) states that the frequency of errors is not necessarily the indicator of the relative difficulty of the linguistic item used.

Schachter (1974) states that error analysis also fails to account for avoidance strategy where learners avoid target language items that they are not sure about, and thus do not commit errors which they are expected to commit. This is more so in the use of compositions where students have a free hand to the structures they produce.

Another criticism against error analysis is by Schachter and Celce-Murcia (1977) who feel that as the focus is mainly on errors, researchers will only know what the learners have done wrong, but not what enables them to learn a second language.

Bell (1974) states that the validity and reliability of EA is questionable on the basis of difficulty in identifying errors and the classification of errors. Stendal (1973) says that there are problems in determining the level of difficulty on the basis of the frequency of errors. Critics on EA feel that error analysis is mainly concerned with the study of errors, and not other aspects in learning a language, like the correct use of the language.

2.7   RELATED STUDIES ON TENSES

Studies have been carried out by linguists as well as teachers regarding errors made in the learning of English as a second language. In this research, some studies specifically related to the present and past tenses will be looked into.

A study was done by Castelo (1972) on 80 post-graduate Filipinos. He examined 300 informal letters written by these students and found that the highest occurrence of errors was in the tenses where 59.1% was in tense sequence, and 22.9% was in the confusion of tenses and aspects.

Lau (1974) did a study on errors in the compositions of Form Six students and found that the areas that were the most problematic were the tenses. He attributed the high frequency of tense errors to mother tongue interference and intralingual errors.

Ahmad Mezaini (1984) carried out a study on the problematic areas facing 50 Morrocan learners of English at the pre-University level, and the highest frequency of errors was in the tense category, which accounted for 39.2% of the total number of errors found in the corpus.

Elizabeth Riddle (1986) in her study, "The Meaning and Discourse Function of the Past Tense in English" concluded that one of the major causes of the inconsistent use of the past tense is the failure of the teachers and learners to distinguish between the present and past tenses in their discourse. She suggested that communicative and contextually-based exercises should be used as teaching materials as they could raise the learners' awareness of the past tense.

Wong (1986) in his study of errors in the written exercises of Form Two Chinese students found that 33.7% of errors were in the tense category. This accounted for the highest percentage of errors. He stated that students had difficulty in using tenses because of the lack of understanding on the rules of the tenses.

Chong (1987) studied errors made by Chinese students at a national type primary school. Again, errors on tenses had the highest frequency with a total of 28.31% from the corpus. His findings revealed that errors in tenses were mainly due to L1 interference.

Another study done in the same year was conducted by Leong (1987) on the errors in the essays of Form Four Malay students in rural and urban schools. The study showed that the grammatical aspect that was the most problematic was the tenses. The study also revealed that urban students made more errors in tenses as compared to rural students. This is because urban students are influenced by other outside exposure such as television programmes and reading materials like magazines that use different English varieties. Rural students do not have the advantage of getting other means of exposure like the urban students. They depend solely on the textbooks used in their schools. As a result of this, the rural students used the standard form of the English variety. Leong's aim of study was to suggest remedial work for the errors. In conclusion, he stated that errors in tenses occurred mainly because of three reasons. Firstly, that students were generally confused as to when to use the present and past tenses, and secondly, students could not understand the rules of the tenses, and finally, students were influenced by their L1 which interfered in the production of their L2 structures.

In a study done by Lim (1987), an error analysis of English essays written by 50 Malay High School ESL students was done. In his study, the highest percentage of errors (31%) were in the tenses. Lim stated that the causes of the errors could be attributed to first language interference. The learners used the rules of the Malay language when

dealing with the target language. In the Malay language, there is no specific identification of tenses. This is unlike English where the verbs are conjugated. Therefore, he concluded that this led to errors when using tenses.

Mohd Fauzi (1987) in his study of common errors of English compositions of 50 Form One students states that the tense system of English is intrinsically of the greatest complexity. The Malay language has a very different system from English, and it is this difference that confuses the students. The use of the simple present tense as an all-purpose tense constituted for about 70% of the total tense errors. Also, the use of the present for past and vice versa may at surface structure level, be seen as failure in form discrimination. In producing tense errors, the learners' fail to identify the correct tense to be used. This in turn is traceable to the absence of equivalent form distinctions in the first language.

Chan's study (1988) on error analysis of English essays written by law matriculation students in UKM found that students made errors in the use of the past tense. Chan studied the errors in 50 compositions written by 25 UKM pre - Law students. The most frequent errors were in the simple past form which consisted 21.3% of the total number of errors found in the data. Chan attributed the reasons for simple past errors to interlingual and intralingual factors.

Another similar study by Tan (1988) on errors in English compositions written by 50 1st year Engineering students in UKM found that the highest percentage of errors was in the tense category, and the highest percentage of errors was in the past tense (12.3%),

followed by the present tense (10.6%), future tense (7.3%), and other verb-forms 2.3%). The study revealed that the English tense-aspect system was the most difficult to master for the students. Like Chan, Tan too stated that the major cause of tense errors was interlingual and intralingual errors.

Chee (1989) made an analytical study of students' errors based on samples of compositions written by Standard 6 children from a few selected schools in Johor Bahru. The highest frequency of errors was in the tense category. The basic source of errors is the interference of the students' mother tongue.

A study done by Leong (1989) on 50 English compositions by Malay Form Six students found that errors in tenses had the highest frequency (34%) of the overall number of errors made by the students. Leong stated that it could be a result of first language interference where the students may have applied the rules of the Malay language when dealing with the target language. In the Malay language, there is no specific identification for tenses. This is unlike English where there are certain rules when dealing with the present, past and future tenses. Therefore, the students make a lot of errors when using tenses.

Shaari Awaluddin (1989) did a study and found that the past tense had the most number of errors. He found that most of his subjects were unable to produce the correct pattern when using the past tense because they did not know how to use irregular verbs. The research was done on 50 Malay students at a national high school. One of the major

causes of weakness in the use of the English tenses by the students was due to interlingual errors.

Nair (1990) examined the English Language errors of 120 students whose L1 is Malay. He discovered that the main difficulty of these learners was in tenses. Errors in the use of the simple past, simple present, the future, the perfect and the continuous tenses accounted for about 75.36% of the total errors produced. He observed that the students could not meaningfully operate the concept of tenses. They generally fell back on the stem form of the verbs used. This is due to the differences in the nature of the verbal systems of the two languages. While English is tense-ruled and uses tense inflections to indicate time and aspect, Malay is affix-ruled. The concept of time in Malay is aspectual and adverbs are used to indicate time. Besides this, certain words are used to indicate the time frame. Context is also an indicator of time. This difference in the concept of time is a major contributor to the difficulties of the Malay students in using the English verbs, which have an in-built function of tense-time-aspect matrix.

Haja Mohideen (1991) studied errors committed by a group of post-secondary students whose mother tongue was the Malay language. His study revealed a very high occurrence of errors related to the sequence of tenses. He attributed the occurrence of tense errors to the interference of the subjects' mother tongue, the Malay language, in which the sequence of tense is almost unknown.

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Shukri (1992) did a study on the English essays of ESL students in Malay High School. Shukri's findings found that the highest percentage of errors was in the use of tenses which constituted of 32.9% of the total errors. Past tense errors were 14.6%, present tense errors accounted for 11.4%, while other types of tense errors were 6.9%. Shukri concluded that tense related errors were made due to mother tongue interference and the lack of understanding of the English tense system.

According to Jassem (1993) who studied the use of tenses among 50 Malay students at the International Islamic University, the English tense system confuses Malay students as the students are used to the non-existence of tenses in their mother tongue. His study revealed that Malay students made more errors in the past tense as compared to the present tense, as the students were generally confused when using the past tense.

Ahmad Sandera (1993) did a study of errors generally made by 50 Form Four high achievers and average achievers. In the simple present tense, the errors made by the high achievers were 12% while those made by the average achievers were 38%. In the past tense, the high achievers' errors constituted 15%, while for the average achievers, it was 50%. Thus, Sandera concluded that students who were more proficient in the language made less errors that those who had on average proficiency. He further stated that the students had problems with the tenses because of their incompetence in these items, and thus, they should be given more practice in the use of these tenses. He concluded that errors were caused mainly by interlingual and intralingual factors.

Fatimah Julieza Zakaria (1997) in her study on errors in essays written by Malay and Chinese students analyzed the recurrent errors these students made. She found that for both the Malay and Chinese students, the highest frequency of errors was in the tense category which was 20.79% and 18.59% respectively. According to her, this might be traceable to the differences that lie between the rules of the Malay language and English, and also Chinese and English. She stated that in the Malay language, the verbs are not inflected in order to show time. Instead, the concept of time is understood from the context. This means that the same form of the verb can be used for the present time, past time and future time. It is also the same with the Chinese language where the verb system is relatively simple and does not require a change of verb to show time. Rather, tenses in the Chinese Language are indicated by the addition of auxiliary verbs and particles.

She also found that the differences that exist between the verb system of the Malay language and the English language make it difficult for the students to grasp the notion of tense in the English language. As the students' mother tongue does not require them to change the verb according to the time aspect, the students therefore tend to omit the inflection of the verb whenever producing sentences in English. She further concluded that most of the errors made by the Malay and Chinese students resulted from failure to fully internalize the English notion of tense and mother tongue interference.

2.8 CONCLUSION

It can be concluded from the related studies on tenses of ESL learners that tenses pose a learning problem for most ESL learners, especially Malay learners. Although mother tongue interference is one of the main causes of tense errors, there are other causes such as the linguistic difficulties inherent in the L2. The present study seeks to investigate the types of present, past, present progressive and past progressive tense errors made by Malay ESL students in their learning of English as a second language. The study also attempts to seek explanations for the possible sources of these errors, in terms of interlingual and intralingual errors, and also from the perception of the students themselves and their English teachers.