CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

Errors are unavoidable in the course of learning a language in spite of our best effort and they have become the interest of many researchers and linguists such as Strevens (1969), Richards (1974), Dulay and Burt (1974), Taylor (1975), Corder (1981) and James (1998). Errors play an important role in the study of language acquisition in general and in examining second and foreign language acquisition in particular. Researchers are interested in errors because they contain valuable information on the strategies learners use to acquire a language. According to Corder, errors are "not to be regarded as signs of inhibition or problems to be overcome but rather as evidence of learning strategies" (1981:12). Strevens shares a similar view. He states that if a regular pattern of errors could be observed in the performance of a learner, and if the learner is seen to progress through this pattern, his errors "could be taken as evidence not of failure but of success and achievement in learning" (1969, in Richards, 1974:4).

An error can vary in magnitude. It can cover a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, a phrase, a clause, a sentence or even a paragraph. This research deals with the lexical errors in the written work of Chinese educated students who study English as a second language. Lexical choice plays an important role in communication as wrong
lexical choice would not only sound odd but would lead to the production of funny utterances or meanings that are ambiguous. Noss (1979) claims that error analysis of any kind of students' products shows that lexical errors can be at least as confusing or misleading as syntactic errors, if not more so, such as “study” for “learn”, “snack” for “snag” and “baby sister” for “baby-sitter”, or vice versa (1979:12). It is therefore worthwhile to do an error analysis on word level.

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 The Malaysian Education System and the Chinese Educated Students

Malaysia is a multi-racial country. The Malays make up the majority of the population followed by Chinese and Indians. Each possesses its own distinct culture and language. Although Malay is the national language, the Chinese and the Indians are given the freedom to learn their own languages.

In the present Malaysian education system, there are two types of primary schools: National Primary Schools and National Type Primary Schools. In the former, Malay is the medium of instruction. The latter is sub-divided into National Type Chinese Primary Schools and National Type Tamil Primary Schools where Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil are the medium of instruction respectively. After six years in the primary schools, students will go to secondary schools. Those from the National Primary Schools will go to Form One, whereas those from the National Type
Primary Schools will either go to Remove Class or Form One depending on their Primary School Assessment (Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah or UPSR) results. Students who do not get a pass for Malay are required to remain one year in Remove Class. The main purpose of Remove Class is to strengthen the students' command of Malay because it is the medium of instruction in secondary schools.

Besides Chinese (Mandarin) and Tamil, students also learn English in the National Type Schools. English is learnt as a second language both in the primary and secondary schools. In the National Type Chinese Primary Schools, English is introduced in year three. This means that students in the above school have to learn three languages, i.e. Chinese (Mandarin), Malay and English from year three to year six. This also means that they have to work harder compared to students in the National Primary Schools who learn only two languages: Malay and English.

Students, in the National Type Chinese Primary Schools always speak Chinese (Mandarin) to their peers in school because they are more proficient in the language as Chinese (Mandarin) is the medium of instruction in schools. Even when they have gone to secondary schools they continue to speak Chinese (Mandarin) with their Chinese friends because, from the feedback given by the students, they feel more comfortable to converse in Chinese (Mandarin) rather than Malay and English.

In the primary schools as well as in the secondary schools, the teaching and learning of English is examination oriented. With the limited time allocated to the teaching of English and the exam syllabus, teachers are left with no choice but to complete the
sylabus or concentrate on topics that are popular in government examinations. They teach for a common purpose: for the students to pass the examinations. This is also the demand of students who study to pass the examinations rather than to gain knowledge. Besides that, students learn English by rote, and rote learning is common for Chinese students because in the Chinese primary schools students are encouraged to memorise Chinese poems and Mathematical tables. Rote learning is also used in the learning of English where formal drills and pattern practice is common in the classroom.

Although English is taught as a second language in schools, it is also a foreign language for the students because it is acquired in a non-target, non-naturalistic environment. Therefore, it is not easy to acquire the language without much effort from the students.

1.1.2 The Status and Role of English in Malaysia

English was introduced to Malaysia during the British colonial time in the early nineteenth century. English had received great prestige during the colonial period. It was the medium of instruction in English Primary and English Secondary Schools and universities. Besides being the medium of instruction, it was also used for official purposes, for example, for communication with government departments and to fulfil various official functions. Those with knowledge of English had the advantage in greater job opportunities either in the government or private sectors.
After the independence of Malaya in 1957, Malay became the national language and the status of English as the medium of instruction in the primary and secondary schools and university was slowly phased out in stages. In 1982, Malay took over the place of English as the sole medium of instruction in secondary schools. A year later, all the first year courses in the university were taught in Malay instead of English. Although English is no longer the medium of instruction it still holds a very important place in the Malaysian education system. It is taught as a second language and is a compulsory subject in all schools as stated in the Third Malaysia Plan 1976-1980:

While the Government will implement vigorously the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia, measures will be taken to ensure that English is taught as a strong second language. (1976:397).

English is emphasised in the Malaysian education system because it plays an important role in the economic development of the country. English is a tool for obtaining information on science and technology and a means of communication with the rest of the world. It is important for Malaysians to keep abreast with the scientific and technological developments in the world if they want to participate meaningfully in international trade and commerce. It is also crucial for Malaysians to possess the ability to communicate in English in view of the globalisation and internationalisation of the world economy (The Second Outline Perspective Plan, 1991-2000). The significant role of English has led to a recent call by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to all Malaysians to focus on the learning of English (The Star, September 10, 1999:7).
1.2 Statement of Problems

The initial impetus for this study came from the researcher's personal experience in teaching English Language in the National Type Chinese Primary School and that of the English Language teachers in the present school. In the course of teaching, it was discovered that one of the causes of students' poor writing is their poor command of vocabulary. As a result, this study is carried out to examine the lexical errors in students' essays.

Native speakers consider lexical errors in the learners' interlanguage to be more disruptive, irritating and less generously tolerated than other types of errors (Carter, 1987; James, 1998). According to Wallace (1982), one can know the grammar rules of a language and yet not be able to communicate. However, with a command of the vocabulary one needs in a certain situation, some form of communication is possible. This signifies the importance of vocabulary learning. Terrell (1977) agrees with Wallace. He states that if communicative competence is an immediate goal, we must establish as quickly as possible a large lexicon with very general syntax rules because it gives the student the ability to comprehend utterances and at least some ability to respond in real communicative situations. Thus, a knowledge of vocabulary and what words to use is significant for effective communication and this further prompts the researcher to carry out the present study.

The study of language errors made by learners in the process of learning English as a second language has always been the interest of language researchers and linguists
but problems regarding lexis has not been given significant attention. Zughoul (1991) commented that the study of lexical choice, an area that may be classified under interlanguage semantics, has not received as much emphasis as the other two interlanguage components, namely phonology and syntax in language learning or teaching research. Zughoul claims that learning or teaching materials is organised around structural topics where vocabulary is used as a "vehicle" for phonological and syntactic patterns. The lack of emphasis on lexis therefore makes the present study more meaningful and appropriate.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What types of lexical errors do students make in their essays?
2. Which category do most of these lexical errors fall into?
3. Why do such errors occur?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

Writing is one of the four fundamental language skills. In the course of writing, errors cannot be avoided. The general purpose of the study is to minimise students' lexical errors in writing.

The research is carried out with the following objectives in mind:

1. To identify the types of lexical errors in students' essays.
2. To classify the lexical errors identified.
3. To examine the frequency of the types of lexical errors made.
4. To explain why such lexical errors occurred.
5. To give suggestions that are valuable for pedagogical purposes.

1.5 Significance of the Study

The diagnosis of lexical errors is important to learners because it helps learners to understand why they have committed such errors and hence avoid repeating them in the future.

A better understanding of the nature and causes of lexical errors enables the teacher to gauge how well learners know the language and also how they learn and use the language. Such information is important for the design of teaching materials and the correction of vocabulary teaching methods.

The research findings would be of value to the curriculum planner as the empirical data will reveal students' difficulties in learning the language and this would serve as a basis for planning and designing materials for the teaching and learning of English Language.

Lastly, the most significant aspect of the research is hopefully to arouse teachers' awareness of the importance of vocabulary teaching because "without grammar
very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins, 1972:111), and hence some emphasis is given to this aspect of language learning. The classification of errors and its frequency provide an insight into the relative significance of an error type. This will enable the teachers to emphasise more on the errors that are most frequently made or items with which the students have most difficulty.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study focuses on the lexical errors in the written compositions of Chinese educated students. Errors in grammar are not examined in this study. The study is concerned with the competence errors of the subjects, not performance mistakes. As it is difficult to distinguish between competence errors and performance mistakes (Corder, 1981; James, 1998), an overlap in the two categories is possible or unavoidable. The findings of the study show that explanation of errors in the different categories is not mutually exclusive to each other because some errors have several sources. As a result, there is some overlapping in the explanation of errors. It is also necessary to note that the subjects in the study are all Chinese who know three languages: Chinese (Mandarin), Malay and English. Therefore the findings may not be generalized for other ethnic groups or Chinese students who have a different linguistic and educational background.
1.7 Definition of Terms

1.7.1 Lexical Errors

Lexis is a term used in linguistics to refer to the vocabulary of a language. 'Lexical errors' in the research title refers to the errors in the use of vocabulary. They are lexical items that are neither intelligible nor comprehensible within the given context due to semantic confusion, wrong selection of words or distortions.

1.7.2 Chinese Educated ESL Students

This refers to Form Four students aged sixteen or seventeen of Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Taman Connaught, Kuala Lumpur. They are Chinese students who have completed six years primary education in the National Type Chinese Primary School where Chinese (Mandarin), is the medium of instruction and Malay and English are compulsory subjects. They are students in the present secondary school where Malay is the medium of instruction and Chinese (Mandarin) is offered as an optional subject. They have learnt English as a second language (ESL) both in the primary and secondary schools.

1.7.3 Mother Tongue

In this study where the Chinese students are concerned, mother tongue refers to Chinese (i.e. Mandarin), the first language of the students. Although the students'
mother tongues could be the various Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, Hokkien etc., they also speak Chinese (Mandarin) at home and especially in school where it is a peer group language. For this reason, the Chinese students' mother tongue in this study is better seen as Chinese (Mandarin) rather than a Chinese dialect.

1.8 Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The introduction in Chapter One gives the readers a general preview of the research. Chapter Two discusses the literature and the theories that are behind the study. Chapter Three gives an account of the research method used followed by the findings in Chapter Four. The last chapter concludes the research findings.