CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Background of the Study

Language is used as a tool to express thoughts, feelings and to communicate, in order to impress upon someone, either by expressing a verbal, mental or a given stimulus to seek response. Green (1989) accentuated that communication presupposes achievement of the intended effect of verbal action upon the addressee, of users being aware of using language, not only for the sake of the utterance of words but also for taking actions or responding to them as well. In the field of pragmatic study, this particular usage is known as the speech act; a study of how people obtain desired results with language. Studies of non-native language speakers' perception and performance of speech acts began some twenty years ago and much has been discovered through these studies. Among the discoveries include the differences in types of speech acts performed by non-native speakers with various language backgrounds and target languages (Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1987).

There are so many different types of speech acts that have been identified by linguists. Searle (1969) proposed five types of speech acts which are directives, commissives, representatives, declaratives and expressives. Directives would involve asking, commanding, or requesting someone to do or to stop doing something.

The realization of requests by second language learners has been an enigma to many researchers of this field. However, little research on this subject has been conducted in the

region of the South East Asia, specifically Malaysia. Therefore, this study intends to increase the exploration of the speech act, to the existing researchers, namely the realization of making requests in Malaysia. Incidentally, this study will only focus on the Malay students, as the population of the Matriculation Centre of the International Islamic University of Malaysia, of which the survey is conducted, is predominantly (99%) Malay.

The ethos of Malaysians is known for being concerned with promoting correct behaviour in all facets of life. Goddart (2001) had acknowledged that moral and ethical themes are more prominent in Malay discourse than in contemporary Western society. The Malays, especially, share the notion of not wanting to burden others with their problems. Thus, adding to the cultural ideal that they are always considerate and very protective where other people's feelings are concerned. Hence in light of the present study, an examination was undertaken in order to ascertain whether the same particular cultural ideals are employed in the utterance of requests. The inquiry was conducted in classroom observations, where interaction between friends and teachers occurs. Thereupon, it was discovered through empirical observation that the subjects did follow the cultural ideals, in various manners. Referring to the way utterance of requests were phrased, the choice of words used, as well as the setting of the context, it reveals the perceptions and practices of consideration and the avoidance of offending the hearer when expressing their requests. Some respondents utter request in a very direct manner while others were less direct and it all depend on the addressee of which the request were directed to and the setting of the conversation. Among the students from various backgrounds and programs, socially and academically, two programs were selected because they are seen as two of the most prominent, in which one (LAW students) is considered the extreme extrovert and the other (BAR students) the most

introvert population compared to other programs, where their social interaction is concerned.

Thus, the present study is an attempt to investigate the speech act of requesting by Malay learners of English, namely focusing on students of the two different programs; BAR and LAW, at an intermediate and advanced level of proficiency. Both programs involve professions, which deal directly with the society (BAR students may eventually become teachers upon graduation and the LAW students upon graduation may become lawyers). Furthermore, it is postulated that choices of request strategies made by the BAR and LAW students are different and the differences will be explained in this study.

For the purpose of this study, the second language learners of English at the Matriculation Centre of the International Islamic University (centre) were selected. In this research, the request strategies, opted for by students from two different streams: the LAW and the BAR programme will be investigated. The rationale for selecting this centre owes to the fact that the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) uses English as the primary medium of instruction. As such, the respondents at this centre think, speak and write in English as well.

1.1   Statement of the Problem

According to Blum-Kulka et al. (1984), the study of requests is based on the supposition that observed diversity in the realisation of speech acts in context may stem from at least three different types of variability, of which are intra-cultural ability, cross-cultural variability and last but not least, individual variability.

Intra-cultural ability or situational variability, implicates systematic differences in the realization patterns of speech acts, depending upon the social constraints embedded in the situation (Blum-Kulka et al., 1984). Cross-cultural variability looks at the tendency to express requests more or less directly by one member of one culture than members of another culture within the same set of social constraints, and the individual variability plays an important role in regard to continuous variation in speech act realization patterns by individuals within the same society (Blum-Kulka et al. Ibid). This variability depends on the individual personal variables, such as gender, age or level of education.

This observational design will highlight the speech realization act of request between the second language learners of English of two different programs, LAW and BAR. It is postulated that these students have certain differences in their selection of request strategies in their daily interactions.

This study will explore the individual variability, in order to analyse the diversity in the realization of speech acts opted by these students. Subsequently, students of both programs must sit for English proficiency courses as one of the pre-requisites in order to enrol in their core courses of their Kulliyyahs / Faculties.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent of differences in the choices of request strategies selected by the two chosen programs. The questions for this study include the following:

a) Do the BAR and LAW students adopt similar request strategies in interactions according to their level of proficiency?

b) Do they use different request strategies according to different situational contexts?

c) How does social distance (SD), as in status, power and dominance (D), influence the request strategies?

The study attempts to investigate the use of requests in the learning environment (context) of the Matriculation Centre and to explore the differences of request strategies that may occur in situational context, that are somewhat similar to interactional situations with peers, families and superiors.

1.3   Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is to complement existing researches that have been done by eminent pragmaticians and to add to the little that has been explored in the South East Asia region.

It is also hoped that this study would impart some awareness to the society about the importance of these request strategies. There is a need to incorporate this skill in the syllabus of our education programs at the school level. The teachers must be made aware of the importance of these strategies and they should teach them to the students. Consequently, the students are able to make effective interaction in their daily life by learning to make proper utterances in their requests.

1.4   Limitation of the Study

This study is limited to students from LAW and BAR programs and also to a guided condition, which is provided in the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The DCT may not

really represent the actual or original response expected when respondents are faced with similar situation which involve interactions with peers, families and superiors (see Chapter 2, Section 2.6). Most importantly, it is difficult to know to what extent the responses obtained could really represent what the respondents would actually say in spontaneous conversation. Other impending problems would be the limited space provided in the DCT. Most of the respondents would refrain from elaborating their responses because of the limited space given (see Appendix A).

1.5   Definition of Terms

Speech act refers to a common pragmatic principle with varying perceptions and perhaps uses due to diverse cultural backgrounds shared by people across cultures and languages.

Illocutionary meaning refers to the actual performance of stating a word, phrase or sentences which evokes a reaction from the hearer.

Request refers to the act of asking for favours or assistance from others, be it from friends, superiors or families.

Request strategies refer to the obligatory choice of the level of directness by which the request is realised.

Politeness refers to the restrictions or limitations to the human behaviour, specifically in interaction, which help to achieve harmony within a society.

Power refers to the social distance between the hearer and the speaker, neither of whom may be familiar with each other.

Status refers to the social stratification of the hearer or the speaker. Status will be represented in the dominance variable labelled as equal status (x=y), speaker dominant (x>y) and hearer dominant (x<y).