

## CHAPTER 1: RESEARCH CONTEXT

### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Learning a language other than one's own mother tongue is never an easy task for anyone. A language learner has to undergo a different learning process involving changing beliefs and attitudes, making decisions, and assuming responsibilities. A language learner also has to find a learning approach, style and strategy that best help her/him acquire the target language. In addition, learning a new language requires full commitment and continuous efforts from the learner herself/himself; s/he needs to be actively involved in the learning process. However, the success of acquiring a new language does not lie solely on the learner. Factors influencing a learner's achievement such as her/his language teacher's teaching beliefs and attitudes, learning environment, personal and educational background, and the learning materials and facilities available could motivate or hinder the learner's language learning progress.

Furthermore, language teaching and learning innovations could affect the learner's beliefs and attitudes towards the language being learned. Being accustomed to the language learning traditions in one's own country may sometimes prevent a learner from adopting roles which are more suitable for a new learning approach. Likewise, language educators who are used to certain teaching traditions would sometimes resist change. In Malaysia, for instance, not all language teaching and learning innovations have been fully accepted by learners and language educators. According to Gaudart (1995), a new approach sometimes came well ahead of time that some teachers were not prepared for it. Hence, these teachers sometimes had difficulties encouraging their students to learn the specified language via the new approach. As a result, many 'newly introduced' teaching and learning approaches failed to achieve their objectives.

The Self-Access English Language Learning (*SAELL*) programme, which was introduced in 1995 at the Discovery Institution, a tertiary institution in Malaysia, was not excluded from this dilemma. From my observations as a member of the institution,

I noticed that it had not been fully accepted by the institution's students and English language lecturers. Having realised the existence of many factors influencing the students' and lecturers' perceptions of the *SAELL* programme at the Discovery Institution, and the need to investigate the effects of these factors on the programme, I decided to pursue case study research on this matter. I hope the findings generated from this study may contribute positively towards the teaching and learning of English at that institution, in particular, and at other educational institutions in Malaysia, in general. In carrying out the research, I have used both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies (Refer to Chapter 3 for a detailed description of this study).

The discussion in this chapter will cover brief descriptions on Malaysia and the teaching and learning of English at the Discovery Institution, the purpose and significance of the study. This chapter will then conclude with an outline of the thesis and a summary of each chapter.

## **1.1 MALAYSIA IN BRIEF**

In this section, I will present briefly the location and population of Malaysia, the English language development, and other issues relating to the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia.

### **1.1.1 Location and Population**

Malaysia, which is situated in the South East Asia, has two main regions: Peninsular Malaysia, which lies in between Thailand and Singapore, and East Malaysia, which is to the north of the Borneo Island, Indonesia. Separated by the South China Sea, these two regions are made up of 13 states and 2 federal territories.

In Malaysia, there is a diverse combination of ethnic groups. In Peninsular Malaysia, for instance, the Malays form the largest community, followed by the Chinese and the Indians. It also has other minority groups such as the Sikhs, Thais, Indonesians, Eurasians (descendants from intermarriages between Europeans and Asians) and Europeans. In East Malaysia, by contrast, the majority of the population are from the

indigenous tribes of Iban, Bidayuh, and Kadazan. Malaysia is thus a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith nation. Although each ethnic group has vigorously maintain its traditions, community structures, and languages, Malaysia has, it is claimed, managed to blend the races together to create a contemporary and unique diverse heritage (People of Malaysia, 1996).

### **1.1.2 English Language Development in Malaysia**

During the British colonial days, English was the language for government administration and the medium of instruction in educational institutions. However, after independence in 1957, it was demoted to the second language after Bahasa Melayu, the official language of Malaysia. Nevertheless, the wide use of both Bahasa Melayu and 'nativised' English has made the majority of Malaysians bilinguals. This nativised English, also commonly known as Malaysian English, has developed through the influence of the local languages such as Bahasa Melayu, Chinese and Tamil (Salasiah, 1996). In fact, both Bahasa Melayu and Malaysian English are now being used simultaneously by Malaysians in their daily communication.

Besides being demoted to the second language, English is also no longer the medium of instruction in most Malaysian schools and tertiary institutions. The medium of instruction in these institutions (with the exception of Chinese and Indians schools) had changed from English to Bahasa Melayu. This conversion process was completed in 1983 (Asiah, 1994) but English remained as a compulsory subject in all primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions. Students in all primary and secondary institutions will have to sit the English paper in the country's national exams; i.e. UPSR (Primary School Achievement Test), PMR (Lower Secondary Assessment) and SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education) while those in the tertiary institutions will have to pass the English paper as required by their institutions. This educational policy is exercised because the government realised that knowledge of and competence in English could help develop the country economically and technologically. It was also thought that by acquiring the English language, Malaysians would be able to keep up with the scientific and technological developments in the world, and to participate in international business and trade (Asiah, 1994).

Hence, the continuous use of English for international communication and higher education has resulted in the Malaysian government and some private sectors offering English courses for students, and carrying out studies and testing new approaches with the hope of improving the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia (Gomez, 1994). During late 70s and early 80s, the Malaysian government adopted several English language programmes including the TESL/TEFL (Teaching English as A Second Language / Teaching English as A Foreign Language) programme at all levels of educational studies in Malaysia (Gomez, *ibid.*). These TESL/TEFL programmes then went through a number of innovations, starting from a structural syllabus which emphasised grammar (Gaudart, 1995) to a communicational syllabus after the Malaysian Ministry of Education introduced KBSR (The Integrated Primary School Programme) in 1982 and KBSM (The Integrated Secondary School Programme) in 1988 (Gaudart, 1995 and Gomez, 1994).

The objectives of the communicational syllabus were to promote learner-centred learning environment, and to contribute towards students' physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual developments (Gomez, 1994). However, this communicational syllabus was not fully agreed by all language educators. Gaudart (1995) in her paper on Innovations in TESL in Malaysia stated that some English language teachers had either protested silently or vocally while others went along with the government's decisions to implement the communicational syllabus without complaining. Teachers who disagreed with the innovation argued that students should be taught the fundamental rules of the English language rather than to speak in class while those who agreed thought that it was time to stop 'drilling' and move into the real world of teaching 'real language' (Gaudart, *ibid.*). Like the teachers, students' reactions also varied. This new approach also meant that the students had to change their roles from being passive learners to active learners, increase student-talking time (STT), and take more responsibility for their own learning (Gomez, 1994).

Besides the need to be competent in the English language for the future of the country, the Malaysian government felt that it was important for the students at all level of education to be both interdependent and independent learners rather than to be 'spoon-

fed/forced-fed' all the time (Gomez, 1994). Due to this matter and other factors such as the lack of fully trained English language teachers, the limited contact time with English language in the classroom, and the teacher-dependent students, the Malaysian government had first worked with the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) to establish self-access English language centres in all teacher colleges (Brown, 1993). Then, in 1993, the national Self-Access Learning (SAL) project was launched in schools (Dazman, 1996), and soon the tertiary institutions adopted the SAL approach as a means for students to acquire the English language. However, like any other innovations in the educational field, the SAL approach took some time before the teachers, students and society could accept and digest this new learning approach. In the following section, some factors leading to the launching of the Self-Access Language Centres in Malaysia will be discuss.

### **1.1.3 Issues Regarding English Language in Malaysia**

Although English is a compulsory subject in the Malaysian educational curriculum, the students' English language proficiency level seemed to decline (Miller, 1992, and Pillay, 1998). When the passing grade for the SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education, equivalent to GCE 'O' Levels) English paper dropped drastically in 1990 (Azizah, 1996), there was a lot of public attention and extensive media coverage (Shireena, 1997). In a press conference, the Prime Minister had also highlighted the effects of poor English language proficiency on the development of the country's economy, industry and technology. He stressed the need for Malaysian workforce to be more competent in English (Pillay, 1998).

Apart from the conversion of English to Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction, several other issues seemed to lead to this phenomenon. Among them were the teachers' English proficiency levels and educational policy (Pillay, *ibid*), the students' English language learning attitudes (Chitravellu *et.al.*, 1995), and learning environment (Masdinah & Abdul Halim, 1996).

### **1.1.3.1 Teachers' Proficiency Levels**

Even though it maybe unfair to blame teachers for students' poor English language proficiency levels, public press statements relating to this issue indicated that the English language teachers' poor proficiency levels was one of the factors causing the problem to occur (Pillay, 1998). In her article on Issues in Teaching of English in Malaysia, Pillay gave several reasons as to why the proficiency levels among English language teachers were poor. Firstly, the use of Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction in teacher's training colleges had prevented the production of highly competent English language teachers. Secondly, the shortage of English language teachers had led to the appointment of teachers who were without an English language teaching qualification to teach English. Thirdly, the recession period in early 80's had encouraged the employment of applicants without adequate English language teaching background as English teachers.

Today, however, moves are in place to attempt to overcome these shortcomings. For example, the teachers' training programme are being upgraded, professional development are being enhanced, progressive teaching and learning strategies are being adopted, learning resources are being upgraded and diversified, innovative and progressive assessment system and effective monitoring are being provided, and research and development are being supported at all levels (Salasiah, 1996 and Pillay, 1998).

### **1.1.3.2 Educational Policy**

If after independence, English became just a subject in the national curriculum, today it is widely used at the tertiary levels in Malaysia, especially in the private institutions. These institutions were first permitted to use English as the medium of instruction in 1993 for the science and technology courses (Pillay, 1998). This was because many up-to-date references were still in English, and it was difficult to find equivalents to the terms used in the science and technological fields. Later, when the economic crisis hit Malaysia in 1997, private tertiary institutions were allowed to expand their links with foreign universities. This led to a vast number of foreign universities opening their branches in Malaysia, and an influx of foreign students furthering their studies in these

institutions. Due to this circumstance, the English language is once again the medium of instruction while Bahasa Melayu is retained as a compulsory subject (Pillay, 1998).

The frequent changes in policy regarding the use of English in the educational institutions in Malaysia have resulted in great confusion among the students. For years, they were only required to learn English as a subject in schools and they did not have to get good grades for the English paper to gain entry to tertiary institutions in Malaysia. Today, however, since English is now the medium of instructions in many international tertiary institutions in Malaysia, students have to worry about their English language proficiency because their proficiency levels might not be good enough for them to sustain their performances in their fields of study. Hence, to help students improve their English language competency, several progressive teaching and learning approaches including the Self-Access Learning approach were adopted in schools and tertiary institutions in Malaysia.

### **1.1.3.3 Students' Learning Attitudes**

In their book on 'ELT Methodology' which is customised for Malaysian needs, Chitravellu *et.al.*(1995) stated that the students' English language learning attitudes are likely to depend on the schools they attended, their beliefs and abilities, their past learning experiences, their socio-economic status and their ethnic traditions. They further stated that the attitudes of students who attended schools in urban areas were more positive than those who came from rural areas; these students were more exposed to the English language and knew better how to use it. Furthermore, if English was spoken at home, the chances of communicating in this language were higher (Citravellu *et.al.*, 1995 and Pillay, 1998).

The use of Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction appears to not only discourage some students from learning English but also affects their beliefs and attitudes concerning the English language. Based on my teaching experience and several informal interviews with students in schools and tertiary institutions, I found that some students learnt English only for the sake of passing the English paper in national examinations. In addition, since English is a requirement they had to fulfil, these

students would often unwillingly follow through the English language classroom activities. These students often felt that learning English is a waste of time because everything else is taught in Bahasa Melayu (Masdinah & Abdul Halim, 1996). One possible reason why these students have this English language learning attitude is because, as Gomez (1994) asserted in his paper on innovative approaches to teaching and learning English in Malaysia, they could not see the immediate needs for learning English despite their acknowledgement of its importance in the real (wider) world.

The students' ability to grasp new concepts and to learn without assistance could also affect their English language proficiency levels (Chitravellu *et.al.*, 1995). Chitravellu *et.al.* stated that there are three groups of learners, i.e. the slow, fast and average learners, and asserted that the needs of the average learners have always been the focus of most educational institutions for years. This was because the average learners were considered a great challenge for teachers as they differ a lot in terms of needs, interests and experience. Today, however, the trend has changed. According to Chitravellu *et.al.*, the English language educators are now more aware of their students' different learning abilities and background, and are designing lessons and activities that would help the students broaden their intellectuality, creativity and experiential horizons.

#### **1.1.3.4 Learning Environment**

The learning environment is also a factor affecting Malaysian students' English language learning attitude. For many Malaysian students, learning English outside the classroom seems quite impossible unless they come from a bilingual or multilingual family (Salasiah, 1996), or they have friends who use English for daily interactions.

It is also quite impossible to master the English language in today's Malaysian English language classroom as it cannot accommodate the needs of each individual student. Not only have the English language teaching practices discouraged students from participating actively in class but the large class size is also (more than 35 students in a class) not suitable for language learning (Masdinah & Abdul Halim, 1996). From their own teaching experiences and discussions with colleagues, Masdinah and Abdul Halim



concluded that teachers would sometimes intervene or assist their students using Bahasa Melayu as a medium when the students were found struggling to complete a task. In addition, Masdinah and Abdul Halim discovered that equal communication opportunities among the students seemed to be impossible in these large size English classes. Only those who were active and proficient would grab the chances to participate in class discussion, and in group or pair work. The slower and average students often felt more comfortable not to communicate in English.

## **1.2 TEACHING AND LEARNING OF ENGLISH AT THE DISCOVERY INSTITUTION**

In this section, I will first present a brief description of the Discovery Institution and the department where the fieldwork had taken place, and then followed by discussions on the English language courses on offer, and the Self-Access English language programme (*SAELL*).

As one of the technology-based institutions in Malaysia, the Discovery Institution's main objective is to produce competent technologists who are responsible towards the Creator and society. The degrees offered at this institution range from a certificate course to a Ph.D. course. Applicants who wish to take any of the offered courses must have at least a SPM certificate (equivalent to GCE 'O' levels) with credits in Bahasa Melayu, Mathematics or Additional Mathematics, and a satisfactory knowledge of the English language.

Despite the use of Bahasa Melayu as the medium of instruction for the courses offered, the local students are required to pass the English language subject before they graduate. By contrast, the international students are required to take Bahasa Melayu. Nevertheless, all the students can also take other language courses as electives. To accommodate the students' language requirements, the institution's language department offers several different language courses, i.e. English, Bahasa Melayu, Japanese, Mandarin and Arabic.

Since the study focuses on the *SAELL* programme at the Discovery Institution, the following sections will briefly explain the English language courses on offer at the institution's language department and the *SAELL* programme.

### **1.2.1 English Language Courses on Offer**

At the time of the fieldwork, the language department offered English language proficiency courses for undergraduates, post-graduates and the institution's clerical staff. All undergraduates who obtained a Pass (P7 and P8 - not a Credit or Distinction) or failed (F9) the SPM English language paper are required to take English courses. Those taking the first semester first year English courses are required to attend the *SAELL* programme as part of the English course requirement.

Besides the proficiency courses, the language department also offers degree courses with collaboration with the Faculty of Education, i.e. the Degree in TESP (Teaching English for Specific Purposes), Masters in TESP, and Ph.D. in TESP courses.

### **1.2.2 SAELL Programme at The Language Department**

The *SAELL* programme was introduced as part of the English language course requirement for several reasons. Firstly, it was to increase students' contact with the English language. Due to the reduction of English class hours from 5 to 2 hours per week, the *SAELL* programme was thought to be the best alternative for students to improve their English language proficiency levels. Secondly, it was to meet the students' different language learning needs, especially those who did not obtain good grades for their SPM English language paper. It was difficult to cater for the students' different needs in the classroom due to their English language learning experiences and large class size. Thirdly, it was to provide students with a English language learning channel where fundamental and supporting English language learning materials, and a variety of learning tools will be provided to help students improve their ability to use English in their studies and daily communications. Finally, it was to increase the students' capability to learn independently and to take more responsibility for their own English language learning. See Appendix 1 for the *SAELL* programme outline. From my observations and informal interviews with several *SAELL* programme