CHAPTER 3

3.1 SUBJECTS

The subjects for this study were fifty (twenty-five male and twenty-five female) Sarawakian Malay students from the MARA Institute of Technology, Sarawak chosen by random sampling. Etherton (1977) suggested the consideration of the following factors to determine the sampling of the corpus in error analysis studies:

a) the level of the learners (Part One Prediploma students);

b) the race of the learners (Malays);

c) the language used as a medium of instruction (Bahasa Malaysia).;

d) the gender of the students (twenty-five males and twenty- five females);

e) the geographical background of the learners (Sarawak);

f) the date of data collection (20 July 1994); and

g) the mother tongue of the learners (Bahasa Melayu Sarawak).

The selected subjects were between eighteen and twenty years old. They had studied English as one of the subjects starting from either kindergarten or Primary One up to at least Form Five. However, they failed to master the language even after they had between eleven and thirteen years of formal instruction in the language.

3.2 INSTRUMENTS

The fifty randomly selected subjects were asked to write in English three different types of compositions:

a) a narrative composition entailing the usage of past tenses;

b) a descriptive composition entailing the usage of present tenses; and

c) an expository composition entailing the usage of future tenses.

Each composition was about 150 words in length. The three compositions were based on stimulus given in the form of three different sets of pictures. They were also required to write the Bahasa Malaysia version of the three compositions.

The researcher also asked the subjects to fill in a simple questionnaire in Bahasa Malaysia in order to obtain some background information about them . The information supplied included responses to questions considering age, gender, ethnicity, places of origin and residence, mother tongue, the frequency of speaking English at home and with friends, names and places of schools attended, the beginning of exposure to English, the number of years learning English, grades in English and the overall grades obtained at Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP) and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) levels, interest in learning English and whether the English subject was interesting for the subjects.

Earlier on, a pilot test was conducted on ten subjects (five males and five females) to evaluate the effectiveness of the instruments used after which certain modifications were made.

3.3 ADMINISTRATION

The test instruments were personally administered by the researcher. The fifty randomly selected subjects were each asked to fill in a questionnaire in order to determine their interlanguage background. On completion of the questionnaires, the subjects handed back the forms to the researcher. She then distributed the first set of pictures. The subjects were instructed to write a narrative essay of about 150 words each in English. The essays had to be completed within twenty minutes after which they were collected. The subjects were then instructed to write another essay in Bahasa Malaysia along the same lines as the English version based on the same set of pictures. The completed essays in Bahasa Malaysia were then collected before the next set of pictures was given. The same procedure was repeated to elicit written data for the other two types of essays, the descriptive and expository .

In this study, pictures were given as stimulus to the subjects. The pictures gave the subjects some ideas on what to write on. This communicative task allowed the subjects to say what they had in mind. The subjects were given some guidance in their writing. The researcher managed to exert some control but this was done unobtrusively. The stimulus generated a narration, description or explanation but the subjects were given the initiative to organize their ideas in their own words, sentences and paragraphs. The controlled situation in the form of stimulus given gave the subjects some guidelines. The stimulus directed the subjects to produce only those tenses that the study focused on.

Corder (1981) refers to the two conditions necessary to make an authoritative interpretation and an authoritative reconstruction. These are:

a) the researcher has the chance to meet the learners; and

b) the researcher knows the mother tongue of the learners so that he can ask the learners in the mother tongue what they mean.

Instead of asking the subjects what they meant in relation to Corder's conditions, this study required the subjects to write three compositions in Bahasa Malaysia along the same lines as the English ones and also based on the same stimulus. The researcher was able to make an authoritative interpretation and an authoritative reconstruction of the learner's idiosyncratic dialect. The Bahasa Malaysia version was useful in helping the researcher to understand better the exact meaning of what the learner was trying to convey. This was particularly so in cases of ambiguity. An example can be illustrated in this sentence; * "Aminah saw three smugglers and they were trying to steal the goods." Smugglers do not steal goods but bring goods illegally into the country. This sentence was confusing as it was not clear whether Aminah saw three smugglers or three thieves. These two possible different interpretations meant that the student could be using the wrong lexical noun, "smugglers" for "thieves". Alternatively, the student could be using the correct lexical noun but the wrong verb, "steal" for "smuggle". The Bahasa Malaysia version stated "Aminah nampak tiga orang pencuri dan mereka cuba mencuri barang." The Bahasa Malaysia word "pencuri" means "thief" so the researcher could then conclude that the student meant that Aminah saw three thieves who were trying to steal the goods. In such cases, the Bahasa Malaysia version threw some light on the exact meaning the learner was trying to convey.