

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Summary of findings

The general findings of the error analysis done indicate that the use of the French past tenses, namely the compound tense and the imperfect, constitutes a big problem among Malays students of French. The contrastive analysis that was carried out showed that the perspective of time as seen in Malay is very different from that in French and that the morphology of the French past tenses is very complex. The notion of tenses as used in French or English is non-existent in Malay. Thus the aspectual distinction of the French *passé composé* and the *imparfait* could not be easily grasped by Malay students resulting in a high incidence of improper use of the two tenses. The elaborate system of agreement of morphological forms in French proves to be problematic too. This supports Lado's assumption that "Those elements that are similar to his (the learner's) native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult." (1957:2)

In the analysis of errors we discovered that there is some transfer of the forms of English into French. This is to be expected as the students' second language is English. English and French tenses do not overlap. In English, the simple past tense is used in many contexts whereas in French there is a distinction between the *passé composé* on the

one hand and the *imparfait* on the other, for a one-off completed action or event and for a description of the state of affairs or physical or mental conditions. The *passé composé* and the *imparfait* are used respectively in the two situations above. In addition to this, English uses the simple past or "would" or "used to" to express a habitual action while French uses the *imparfait*, which is also used as a past progressive. Each of the two French past tenses in question has also at least two English equivalents. This partial correspondence in the use of the English and French past tenses causes some confusion. The students fall back on their experience with English to make their choice. We discovered that many errors in the choice of tense were the result of interference from English.

This study also reveals that although there is interference from the English tense system, those with a better command of English scored better in the choice of tense than those who are weaker in English. This indicates that the learners' knowledge of another language, which has a tense system, though different and therefore causing interference, facilitates the developmental process of learning the target language. According to Corder (1981:104) this interference is a learner strategy and is not to be considered as negative transfer but rather as "borrowing".

It is sometimes difficult to decide whether overgeneralisation or transfer is the cause of the errors. To base our analysis on the fact that the majority of French verbs are conjugated with *avoir* to form the *passé composé*, we could conclude that the students have generalized the use of

the auxiliaries in favour of *avoir*. However, as English is the learners' second language, the errors produced here, could also have been caused by the transfer of the English perfect tense (have + past participle). It is also highly probable that the two processes occur simultaneously and thus reinforce each other.

Another significant finding is that errors in the past participle forms are intralingual errors. The learners generalized by modeling the past participle form of some verbs on the past participle of other verbs with the same ending in the infinitive. There are also many cases of incomplete application of rules and ignorance of rule restrictions. This is another developmental strategy whereby the students fail to learn the more complex type of structure as they find that they could still get the idea across by using relatively simple rules. This applies to many other categories of errors. More than half of the respondents fail to apply the rules of agreement of certain past participles of verbs formed with *être* with the subject and also the rules of agreement for the past participles of verbs formed with *avoir* with a preceding direct pronoun complement. The non-adherence to the rule of elision is also another instance of incomplete application of rules.

The syntactic deviation in the use of the negation shows evidence of interference from the students' previous L1 experience. Many took the two parts of the negation (*ne...pas*) en bloc and patterned the French negation after the English or Malay construction by placing them before

the verb. These errors could also be intralingual, caused by the way the cue to use the negative form is given. The error frequency of forms is higher for the *passé composé* than for the *imparfait* as the former is a compound tense and there are therefore more possible syntactic structures. The *ne* is placed before the auxiliary and the *pas* after it in a *passé composé* construction. Some learners failed to respect this rule. They generalized by patterning the negation of the compound tense (*passé composé*) on model of the negative construction of the simple tenses (*imparfait* and *présent*).

The analysis also reveals that the majority of the students find the rule of the subject-verb agreement of the *imparfait* relatively easy. However there is a small number who fails to carry out the agreement. This is another instance of incomplete application of rules. The use of the infinitive as the stem to which the *imparfait* endings are added shows confusion with the forms.

The errors made by Malay students of French in the French past tense cannot be attributed to any specific process. Different processes overlap and work together to cause these errors. Transfer and overgeneralization represent aspects of the same underlying strategy of using previous knowledge to make sense of new experience. Incomplete application of rules, ignorance of rule restrictions and false concepts hypothesized are other developmental strategies that learners resort to, to overcome their problems.

Errors committed by students should not be looked at as negative indicators of language learning. They are manifestations of the learners' attempt at approximation of the target language. Corder (1967) states that errors are evidence of the learners' strategies rather than signs of inhibition. He claims that a systematic study of errors would provide information useful to textbook writers, teachers and learners.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

Tenses are one of the most difficult areas of the French language. The complex system of verbal inflections is compounded by the non-correspondence of the concept of time in the two languages. The present findings have confirmed this view. However the difficulties that Malay learners of French encounter could be reduced to a minimum by various teaching and learning strategies.

The verbal inflections could be taught by the inductive approach using many examples and pattern drills for sufficient practice. At the end of the practice-learning session, the students need to learn and memorize the rules of conjugation of the *imparfait* and the *passé composé*. Verbs with similar patterns in the past participle should be grouped and learned together. To remember the verbs that form their *passé composé* with *être*, strategies such as the use of acronyms, a story chart using those verbs or the pairing of verbs that contrast each other, could be employed to better remember them. The rule of elision and negative syntax should also be

internalized through oral and written exercises and pattern drills. The agreement of the past participle with the subject or a preceding object pronoun should also be taught through analogy. Sufficient practice and exercises should be given after which the students could be guided to deduce the rules for recapitulation.

The grammar in context approach could be used to introduce the use of the two past tenses. The students are asked to observe the different endings on the verbs and to locate examples of them. As the rules of usage of these tenses are not easy to deduce for students who are exposed to them for the first time and with time constraints, we need to teach them the rules. Practice should then be in various forms of structural exercises where the two tenses are brought into contrast. The different aspectual uses of the *imparfait* and *passé composé* should be practised. The exercises could be at sentence level graduating to short passages. For subsequent exercises, the students are then asked to analyze their answers and the rules are deduced for recapitulation.

The students should be encouraged to read more to reinforce what they have learned. More reading materials of graded levels of difficulty should be at their disposal. They should also be guided to seek learning and reading materials in the Internet which is a rich source of information.

For the students to seek and learn beyond the classroom, they should be motivated. One important factor is the teacher, who should

create among his students a positive attitude towards the learning of French. The teacher needs to vary his teaching methods and activities by using audio-visual aids, role-play, real-life situations to make his lesson an interesting and rewarding experience. Encouraging the learners to keep a diary where their past activities are noted in French could be another way to make them practise the French that they have learned, especially the past tenses. Songs and poems can also be exploited for variation and to reinforce learning of the tenses.

5.3 Limitations

Some limitations to the study have to be acknowledged. The study is limited only to the sample students who were taught the two French past tenses by the researcher. Some errors could have been caused by faulty teaching or materials e.g. some distinctions between the *passé composé* and the *imparfait* may not have been clearly explained or exemplified. The test did not include enough items on the negation and the agreement of the past participle with the subject or a preceding object pronoun. Hence, the results can only be tentative and limited to the study and not generalizable to the greater population of Malay students of French in Malaysia.

5.4 Directions for further research

This study was carried out among students taught by the researcher. Studies should also be done among students in other institutions, which could serve to confirm or refute the findings of the present study.

The *passé composé* and the *imparfait* are conversational past tenses and they are used in relation to the present. Future studies should include other tenses in the French verbal system.

Since the forms given by the students are sometimes difficult to interpret, an interview should be conducted to determine the causes of errors. A test of an objective nature can also be carried out to further reveal the areas or situations of the use of each of the two tenses that the students are weak in. We will thus discover in more detail how the knowledge of English and Malay is facilitative or inhibitive.

A more elaborate test on the use of a preceding pronoun object with the *passé composé* and the use of the negation should also be carried out to confirm the findings of the present study.

It is also proposed that the number of subjects be increased. A larger sample size would render more conclusive results. The number of students with a good command of English and those with an average command of English should be the same. This would lend greater validity to the findings. A similar study can also be extended to all Malaysian learners of French.