Papers on ELT

for Asian Countries

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INTI

Papers on ELT for Asian Countries

FOREWORD

Papers on ELT for Asian Countries is a collection of papers representing a range of topics, each dealing with a specific teaching or learning skill.

Successful learning stems from effective teaching. This collection of papers offers some alternatives to current classroom teaching techniques. Most of the ideas put forward in the papers have been adapted to suit both learners of English as a Second Language and English as a Foreign Language.

It is hoped that English Language practitioners will find the papers interesting and relevant to their classroom needs. It is the aim of **Papers on ELT for Asian Countries** to provide a source of materials from which teachers can draw upon to stimulate interest and participation in the English Language classroom.

INTI College
January 1997.

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ESL AND THE CHINESE-SPEAKING STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

Most of what I am going to say, you already know. Like many of our English as a Second Language (ESL) students, however, we need "reminders" every now and then. The problems I am going to highlight are our reminders of the role we have to play as sensitive, dedicated teachers ever willing to help our students solve their learning problems.

My first experience with ESL problems of Chinese-speaking students took place more than two decades ago in a school in Sabak Bernam, Selangor where I was both the form teacher and the English teacher of a Remove Class consisting of only Chinese-speaking students who came over from the local Chinese primary school.

One obvious thing I did was to tell my students to speak up and to use the English language as much as possible, to make mistakes if they needed to but they should try by all means to speak and to write in the English language.

LANGUAGE ERRORS

As a result of my effort to get my Chinese-speaking students to use the English language, I got a good collection of "Chinese English" and "Bahasa Malaysia English" expressions. Some of these are:

1. You take my one, his one no good.
2. One day come, one day no come, no good, day day come, very good.
3. Ketika I walk in the jungle I not takut, I got dog.
4. The man want to pukul my dog but my dog gigit him.
5. Ah Kow where you go lah?
6. I putted in already.
7. Let's pass water to stop fire.

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As language teachers, it is important to bear in mind that human language errors are natural and normal. How many of you have been asked:

"Do you have a servant to cook for you?"

How many of you have answered:

"No, no. I don't have a servant. I cook myself."

It is my contention that ESL students' language errors are unintentional deviations from an expected pattern. This expected pattern could be a linguistic form, a phonological or a grammatical rule. It could be the use of a certain form in a wrong situation. ESL speakers, for e.g., will often say "Good night" when they should say "Good evening." They have the right form, the right words and the right pronunciation but in English we say "Good evening" as a greeting and "Good night" as a leave-taking.

Language errors are not always made by ESL students only, be they Chinese-speaking, Malay-speaking or Tamil-speaking. Let me give you some examples of language "errors" made by native writers:

1. I had been driving my car for 40 years when I fell asleep at the wheel and had my accident.

2. I collided with a stationary truck coming the other way.

3. The other car collided with mine without giving warning of its intentions.

4. I am forwarding my marriage certificate and two children. One of which is a mistake as you will see.

5. In answer to your letter, I have given birth to a 10 pound baby, is this satisfactory?

6. Policy for visitors:
   Two to a bed and half hour only.

I could go on for hours giving you examples of language errors that people make. I have been collecting language errors for some time. The point of all this, however, is to put second language errors

in perspective. I want to emphasise that the errors which our students make are unintentional. They are, in fact, developmental, forming part of the language learning process. Students do not make errors because they want to in order to upset us and make us angry. They made errors because they could not help themselves, and often because they had to, in their efforts to get their messages across.

THE PROJECT

Having given you some observations I have regarding language errors, I would like to give you a brief report on some findings from an on-going research aimed at identifying the problems Chinese-speaking High School students experienced in their mastery of the English language.

150 Chinese-speaking students who were registered for a 3-month English language program in a private institution in Kuala Lumpur were selected for the study. These students, of both sexes, were preparing to further their undergraduate studies in the United States of America. They came from independent Chinese secondary schools all over the country and a total of 18 such schools were represented in this project study. All these subjects sat for and passed the Unified Examination in 1986.

The 150 subjects attended the English language program in which a total of 15 morning hours a week were devoted to academic learning and mastery of the language skills. The subjects were taught mainly correct use of language structures, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension and listening comprehension skills. In the afternoon, the program required the subjects to use the English language extensively in activity-based lessons where the subjects were expected to perform group discussions, oral interactions, and role play, to give impromptu short speeches, read and orally report to the class on their reading assignments. 6 hours a week were allocated for activity-based lessons. In brief, the morning lessons in which passive acquisition of the rudiments of the language took place were complemented by the afternoon communicative-based lessons in which active use of the language took place. The subjects were taught by a team of highly-qualified and experienced language teachers comprising an American ESL

trained teacher and three locally-trained English teachers. All of these teachers had honours degrees in English. Two of the teachers spoke Mandarin and English fluently and one had some twenty-five years of English language teaching experience.

DATA ELICITATION AND DATA ANALYSIS

For data elicitation, questionnaires were used, conversations were surreptiously tape-recorded and interviews were conducted. Results of three full-scale mock TOEFL examinations were utilized to help determine the specific language problems students encountered in listening comprehension, reading comprehension, the use of language structures in written expressions and vocabulary acquisition. An item analysis was carried out to further pin-point the precise language difficulties most students had in mastering the English language.

Analysis of the data collected reveals two sets of learning problems – a set as perceived by the Chinese-speaking students and another as perceived by the language teachers.

PROBLEMS PERCEIVED BY STUDENTS

The major problems as perceived by more than 85% of the Chinese-speaking students are:

1. An inability to perform quite simple transactions in the English language.

   There were frequent breakdowns in communication such as in making phone calls, stating one's identity, giving reasons for studying English, explaining a problem, or expressing one's feelings.

2. An inability to respond appropriately to quite straight forward questions from the language teacher.

   Most students were very embarassed to find that their comments and expressions were at best slow and labored, at worst only partly understood by the listener. Generally, they felt that they were "prisoners of the English language." They were forced to remain silent when they could make a perfectly valid point, there being insufficient time to work

out what they wanted to say. They seemed to be trapped into expressing themselves in ways which did not reflect what they thought – the language seemed to shape their thoughts rather than their thoughts determining the language.

3. An inability to follow much of what native speakers say.

   This made conversations and participation in discussions very difficult. This inability was particularly reflected in listening comprehension where students were expected to listen to and to comprehend, as much as possible, taped conversations of native speakers and video tapes of American documentaries, short stories and dialogues.

4. A general uncertainty as to how to behave in the language.

   Most often the students did not know how and when to make a suggestion, when to make a comment or how and when to apologise. Such circumstances left most students feeling ill-at-ease, both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

5. A general suspicion existed among students that their language problems were sometimes aggravated by the impatience and intolerance of the language teacher.

   Students often felt that their language teacher did not seem to want to find time to unravel their problems. They felt that almost every teacher seemed to experience difficulty in understanding even their shortest and most clearly enunciated utterances.

These five main problems were not confined to spoken English but applied to written English as well.

PROBLEMS PERCEIVED BY TEACHERS

The major problems as perceived by the language teachers are:

1. Limited experience of the students in using the English language to communicate.

   Much of the students' use of the English language had been limited to the closely contextualised and highly predictable language of the ESL classroom. Very little of the speech they

had attempted in the past had expressed what they felt or what they really thought, rather it had been what they had been drilled into uttering at the promptings of the English teacher in the classroom.

2. Poor pronunciation and a limited linguistic repertoire.

The majority of the students had difficulty with English stress-timed rhythm, with vowel length and with lexical stress. Students often had little awareness of the difficulties their pronunciation might cause for the native-speaker or for their language teacher.

3. Poor use of language resources by students

These students were particularly weak in matching spoken performance to whatever underlying language competence they possessed. They made "unnecessary" mistakes when put under pressure; they lacked the skill to sustain a conversation while giving themselves sufficient time to plan what they were going to say. They sometimes attempted unnecessarily difficult sentence structures when they were perfectly capable of expressing their meaning in simpler ones.

4. The majority of the Chinese-speaking students were "monitor over-users".

This situation came about as a result of inappropriate psychological attitudes. The students spoke very little inside and outside the classroom because they agonised over what grammatical rules they should employ. Generally, they did not like to take risks using the language. They made inadequate use of the language because they often seriously mistrusted their linguistic intuitions.

5. Students had inappropriate attitudes to learning English as a second language.

Most of the students saw the problem as one of good teaching in the classroom rather than efficient learning in the total language environment. Many students were reluctant to take responsibility for their own improvement even when the appropriate strategies for doing so had been spelled out to them. They continued to approach the language task as a "content subject" to be learned, to be memorised rather than

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a type of everyday behavior to be acquired. They preferred the security of listening to the teacher rather than the risk of being required to talk to him.

GENERALIZATIONS

In general, the Chinese-speaking ESL students selected for the project study seem to be unable to hit the appropriate target – their language is often too formal in informal situations, or too informal in situations that would require a certain degree of formality or social distance.

At this juncture one should consider again the kind of language that is taught in most of our ESL classes. To a very large extent, it is stylistically "hybrid." It is neither formal nor informal; it is, particularly in the early stages, not even realistic but rather what can be called "classroom English". Unless we expose our students to realistic varieties of language, unless we make them aware of socio-linguistic variables, it is unlikely that they will be able to produce an adequate formal report in English, or write a simple but good letter to a registrar of a college requesting certain information, or even feel comfortable using the telephone to order some books from a publisher or to call a taxi.

Preliminary investigations of the on-going research reveal that although all Chinese-speaking students would sit for a common English language paper in the Unified Examination there is no standardized, well-defined ESL syllabus for all Independent Chinese Secondary Schools in Malaysia. Similarly, there are no common specified text-books or workbooks in English for all these schools. As a serious consequence, there are no specific clear-cut guidelines regarding the teaching of ESL in Independent Chinese secondary schools in Malaysia.

It is discovered, from interviews with the students, that there exists presently different categories of ESL teachers with very different levels of language proficiency. It is found that teachers of these students have varied training in the teaching of ESL in schools. It has been found too that a great majority of teachers never attended any form of teacher-training before beginning their noble profession at the schools.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to stress that errors are plentiful in language learning and for ESL students I am always reminded by my English professor that "To err is human and to forget and understand is only common sense."

I am also reminded by another professor who said "To err is human, to forgive and understand is common sense ... and that is good pedagogy."

COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

The notion, "communicative competence", is much in use nowadays. The term was first coined by Dell Hymes but has found a ready chord in English language teaching circles. Communicative competence can be defined as the ability, in a given situation, to interact verbally and non-verbally with other speakers of the same language, so that the thoughts of the participants are expressed and understood effectively.

This ability to interact is generally understood to mean the ability to produce and understand utterances which are not only grammatical in a very formal sense of the word but are also appropriate in the given situation in which they are uttered or written.
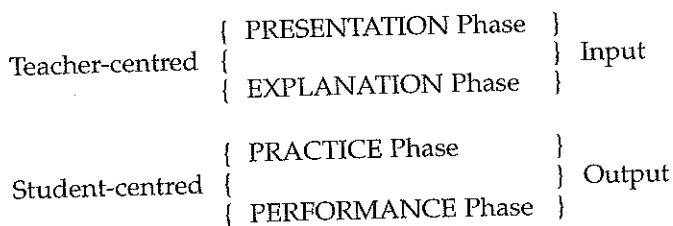
Communicative competence in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom consists of several well-integrated kinds of language skill and knowledge such as vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and listening comprehension but language in action is more than the sum total of its ingredients. There is in the process of communication a dynamic, creative quality which can only be studied, practised and mastered through "doing the whole thing personally" just as one cannot learn how to drive a car except by driving a car.

To achieve communicative competence in the ESL classroom that will successfully transfer to real-life situations outside the classroom, it is necessary to give time and opportunity in the classroom for activities that are genuinely communicative, or that realistically simulate communicative situations.

FOUR PHASES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

It is necessary for the ESL student in the classroom to pass through four teaching and learning phases in order to reach communicative competence. These phases are (a) presentation, (b) explanation, (c) practice, and (d) performance. The first two phases are teacher-centred while the last two are student-centred. The first two phases are also known as the input phases while the student-

centred phases are referred to as the output phases. Graphically, they can be represented as follows:

Teacher-centred { PRESENTATION Phase } Input
{ EXPLANATION Phase }

Student-centred { PRACTICE Phase } Output
{ PERFORMANCE Phase }

None of the four phases can be omitted entirely in the teaching and learning of communicative competence in the ESL classroom. There will, however, be varying degrees of emphasis and thus different amounts of time allocated to each of the four phases, depending on various theoretical and practical considerations. Since it is axiomatic that there is never enough time for language teaching in the language classroom, one of the phases is likely to be crowded out, and it is usually the last one, performance, partly but not wholly, because it comes last.

Traditionally, the phases of presentation, explanation, and practice have been dictated by structural consideration. The ESL students have learnt a particular structure, more or less somewhat situationalised and related to their own language needs, and quite occasionally they have been given the chance in class to use this structure to interact meaningfully with the ESL teacher and the other students. All too often, however, they do not get this opportunity until they leave school and travel abroad or happen to make friends with some English-speaking people. Since the most vital and difficult step in language learning is crossing the threshold between manipulating language and using language to express oneself, what might be called personalising the target language – teachers really should not commit this sin of omission, teachers should help their students to take this step, to cross the threshold, in their ESL classrooms.

The performance phase in the teaching and learning sequence serves three relevant functions: (a) as a means of evaluating the students' communicative competence, (b) as a means of achieving communicative competence, and (c) as the end itself – communicative competence. A student who successfully interacts

in a performance phase will presumably be able to cope with similar situations in real life outside the classroom.

There are several factors that affect the amount of attention which each teaching or learning phase receives. They include linguistic theories, learning theories, teaching techniques, educational technology, teacher competence in the classroom, size of the class, and level of proficiency of the students, to mention but a few. It is interesting, for instance, to trace how changes in theories of language and of language learning have been reflected in the amount of time devoted to various classroom activities in the four phases.

Both language theory and practice, in particular as reported in the Council of Europe's Threshold and Waystage Projects, have indicated that considerable emphasis should be placed on the development of communicative competence through a performance phase in the language classroom. Not least the development of new teaching techniques – new, that is, to ESL teaching – such as role play, has made it more profitable to spend time on this performance phase. Further development along these lines which involve material production and teacher training is a current need for all levels and types of ESL classes.

PERFORMANCE ACTIVITIES

Some performance activities which allow and encourage the process of communicative competence to develop in the language classroom are:

(a) Real activities in the classroom
    Conversation (verbal grooming)
    (Group) discussions
    (Off-the-cuff) talks

(b) Simulated activities
    Games
    Interviews
    Case studies
    Problem solving
    Everyday situations
    Information transfer
    Role play (student as self)

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Role play (student as someone else)
Telephone conversations.

All the above activities concern the spoken language in the classroom. There are, of course, performance activities for the written language such as: diary, reports, letters, articles, summaries, and publicity materials.

Writing, however, does not involve interaction in the classroom, so, although it is a highly important aspect of communicative competence, it does not necessarily cause the same problems as speaking does.

Many language teachers are quite naturally apprehensive about simulation activities, since they involve handing over the class to the students. These activities, however, are nearly always quite successful and are much appreciated by the students. One criticism of the performance activities is that they encourage fluency at the cost of accuracy, that they lead to sloppy language and therefore poor communicative competence. In reply to this, one could point out that a good deal of language produced off-the-cuff in some real life situations by educated native speakers does not stand up to traditional linguistic analysis: words are mispronounced and misused, sentences remain incomplete or change direction in mid-stream, even quite elementary grammar mistakes are often made. Nonetheless, these speakers are competent. One therefore should adopt different criteria for communicative competence in the informal spoken language than one applies to the formal written language. The two relevant criteria which should be applied are (a) appropriateness and (b) fluency. However, ESL students moving towards communicative competence, partly by the method of successive approximation, will inevitably make mistakes which a native speaker would not usually make. To deal with these mistakes there should be perhaps a fifth phase after performance. This might be called the post-mortem phase where both the teacher and his ESL students can bring up some of the language errors for discussion and correction.

Apart from the performance phase there is one other phase that needs particular attention in a classroom teaching sequence which leads to effective communicative competence. This is the presentation phase which must be based on the terminal student

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behaviour, that is, the language situation and the language needs in the performance phase should be clearly presented in the presentation phase. The model which the ESL students in the classroom are given should be as close as possible to the performance required of them. It is essential to have a clear line from presentation through explanation and practice to performance. Everything should be made to see that the students' language needs are met. Everything must be relevant to these students' language needs.

Generally, language is presented through a printed text. Even when this is recorded, it will still have various serious short-comings. It will be over-polished, over-organised, and over-correct. The alternative to this might appear to be the use of authentic language materials but for practical reasons these may be difficult to obtain. A pragmatic alternative is the utilization of "faked authentic" materials, language texts which are recorded spontaneously but by teachers who know what is wanted and teachers who work, not from a script, but at most, from a few key ideas and words.

It would be best of all if the presentation could be made visually, perhaps by the teacher himself acting in the classroom; or even more effectively by "movies", a video or film recording of the language situation. With the availability of cheap video equipment this does not seem too insurmountable a task.

One of the great advantages of simulation activities, and of role play in particular, compared with more traditional classroom performance activities (such as discussion and conversation) is that it broadens the range of language used in the classroom. Variety is in itself an advantage; but since communicative competence implies using appropriate language in a given situation, it is important that the students should be made to face a wide variety of language situations, so that they can practise different kinds of language use. This possibly cannot be attained through the analytical and somewhat intellectual language that discussion involves.

Finally, simulation activities nearly always activate all the students in a class, whether they operate collectively as a class, or more usually in pairs or small groups; so the usual situation of the teacher and one or two good students doing all the talking does not arise.

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SELF-CONFIDENCE AND MOTIVATION

Generally, simulation techniques, with the allocation of enough time to utilise them, can lead to the development of communicative competence among ESL students in the classroom. This is usually the case when the atmosphere in the classroom is conducive to interaction. For such an atmosphere to exist, two factors are vital: self-confidence and motivation.

Self-confidence, in the ESL teacher as well as the ESL students, depends largely on good teacher-student and student-student relationships in the classroom and outside the classroom. These in turn depend on a relaxed atmosphere, plenty of encouragement and a feeling of successful cooperation. Such simple matters as being seated so that everyone can see everyone else's face, and knowing each other's names are essential. So are frequent pairs and small group work in the classroom. Also, corrections should be made in a matter-of-fact manner in order to avoid creating tension amongst the students.

Motivation is also of the utmost importance. Some students come to the language classroom with high motivation, others do not. In any event, it is up to the ESL teacher to create and to maintain motivation in the classroom. His teaching techniques and materials will need to be varied, relevant, and demanding, without being over-demanding. Nothing succeeds like success where the students are concerned, and a sense of personal achievement can best be got by trying to do something that is just a little beyond what the class thinks it can do.

CONCLUSION

It is important for teachers to be aware that sometimes there is a risk that too much emphasis is placed on "doing the real things" in the classroom to the neglect of the very necessary preparatory stages. This would be fatal. The proportion of time allocated to performance activities should, of course, vary according to the level of the class.

In seeking communicative competence, the language teacher must not over-emphasise the performance phase and totally neglect

the other phases of language learning and teaching. At the upper secondary school level and at the university it may often be possible to move almost directly from presentation to performance. But even when performance is allocated a predominant role, ESL teachers should remember that its success will still depend on adequate previous language input and practice.

AMBIGUITY AND ESL STUDENTS:
A PILOT EXPERIMENT

INTRODUCTION

In the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL) some writers of grammar textbooks have dealt with ambiguity in English sentences while others have not considered ambiguity serious enough to affect the teaching and learning of the English language. Those few grammar books which include a section on ambiguity, however, have only superficially dealt with ambiguity. Leech and Svartvik (1983), for example, have briefly exemplified ambiguity as it appears in non-restrictive structures, particularly in non-restrictive adjectives and non-restrictive clauses.

In everyday use, "ambiguity" refers to the property of sentences that may be interpreted in more than one way. Transformational grammarians have developed a theory that defines three major levels at which ambiguity may occur in English sentences. These three levels, and the corresponding types of ambiguity, are termed by the transformational grammarians as (1) the "lexical" or word level, (2) the "surface structure" or derived structure level, and (3) the "underlying structure" level.

The term "ambiguity" is generally associated with "lack of clarity" or "equivocation", a phenomenon which according to Kooij (1971:1) "can be looked upon as a short-coming of language users, as a deficiency of the system of natural language or both." For the English as a Second Language (ESL) students, ambiguity is often an enormous obstacle to successful communication with native speakers of the English language and, as a consequence, many misunderstandings frequently arise.

Various research projects on ambiguity have been carried out. As early as 1950, ambiguity had attracted the attention of researchers. In his study, Kaplan (1950) examined the contextual resolution of ambiguity that arose from the difficulties which ambiguity caused in the field of machine translation. Research by McKay (1966), and McKay and Bever (1967) determined the time required for native speakers of English to perceive the two

meanings of ambiguous sentences. Other works on ambiguity have concentrated primarily on structural ambiguity as a stumbling block of structuralism (Nababan, 1970) and ambiguity in natural language (Kooij, 1971).

In the 1980s, research studies on ambiguity began to focus on subjects for whom English was a second language. The investigators too were not necessarily native speakers of English. Abdul Karim Taha (1983), for example, embarked on an investigation to identify the different kinds of syntactic ambiguity in English sentences. In 1985, Groevel undertook an investigation on ambiguity and examined ambiguity and its relationship with second language learning.

Very little research work has been done on ambiguity in connection with English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' capability to understand and/or interpret the different types of ambiguity present in the English language. Ambiguity may not present many problems to native speakers of English but it is very often a hindrance to successful and effective communication for the ESL speakers, especially when they have to interact with their native counterparts. Many linguists and ESL teachers might have taken for granted that the problem of ambiguity for ESL learners is not significant enough to call for any extensive research involving such learners.

This paper reports on a pilot experiment which involved a search for those types of ambiguity that would pose the greatest difficulty to ESL speakers' understanding of ambiguous sentences in the English language. It is true that some ambiguities in English sentences are more difficult to determine than others.

The pilot experiment was aimed primarily at determining the specific types of ambiguity in sentences that were most difficult for ESL speakers. From this, some insight could be gained as to how sentential ambiguities can be taught to speakers who use English as a second language.

THE EXPERIMENTAL PROCEDURE

TEST MATERIALS – Two sets of test items were prepared. For the first set 20 ambiguous sentences were selected. These ambiguous

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sentences were made up of sentences with (1) lexical ambiguity, (2) surface structure or derived-structure ambiguity, and (3) underlying structure ambiguity. For each of the ambiguous sentences, one correct interpretation was selected to accompany that sentence, making up a total of 20 pairs of sentences for the first set of test items. This set was typed out as shown in Appendix I on page 25. An example of a pair of sentences that consists of one ambiguous sentence and one unambiguous interpretation is as shown:

1. (a) They are visiting firemen.

   (b) They are visiting the firemen.

The 20 pairs of sentences were thoroughly randomized and about 10 ambiguous sentences appeared in (a) and the others appeared in (b).

The second set of test items consisted of the same 40 sentences as in the first set but these sentences were not arranged in 20 pairs. The 40 sentences were each given a number and they were thoroughly randomized before being typed out on handouts. They were arranged at random from 1 to 40. Appendix II on page 28 shows the arrangement of this second set of test items.

On each answer sheet a subject was asked to provide the following information:

(1) name,

(2) academic major,

(3) status: graduate or undergraduate,

(4) native language,

(5) length of time spent on studying the English language.

SUBJECTS – The subjects for the experiment were 40 ESL students made up of two distinct groups, a Graduate group and an Undergraduate Group. Each group consisted of 20 students. The Graduate Group spent an average of fifteen years studying the English language while the Undergraduates spent an average of eleven years studying the language. All the subjects were registered students at the Language Centre, National University of Malaysia.

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PROCEDURE – Both sets of test items were administered to the subjects when they were in their respective classes of studies. The set of test items first administered to the subjects was the one consisting of 40 sentences. The subjects were told to read through all the 40 sentences and to circle the number of each of the sentences that would appear to have two meaning. See Appendix II for this set of test items.

A week after the test was administered, the same subjects were given the other test which consisted of 20 pairs of sentences. The subjects were told to read through these 20 pairs of sentences and to circle the one item in each pair that would appear to have more than one meaning. See Appendix I for this set of 20 pairs of sentences.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

At the end of the experiment, all the answer sheets were corrected. The responses were analysed to determine:

(1) the scores of each subject in the two tests,

(2) the number of wrong responses for each of the ambiguous items, and

(3) the percentage scores of wrong responses for each of the ambiguous items.

Basically, step (1) above is an analysis of the coefficient of correlation while steps (2) and (3) form the item analysis of the study. From the analysis of data collected, it was possible to perform the correlation study of both tests (set 1 and set 2) and to draw up a table showing the order of item-difficulty for all the ambiguous sentences.

INTERPRETATION OF THE RESULTS

From the scores of each subject in the two tests it was possible to correlate the individual subject's performance. The coefficient of correlation between the subjects' performance in the first and second tests was found to be .78. The purpose of determining this coefficient of correlation was to examine the reliability and validity of the responses given by the subjects in both sets of test items.

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A perfect correlation would reveal a score of 1.00. If the correlation score had been .50 or below that, the ESL subjects might have to be rejected as that would mean that their responses to the two sets of test items were either very unreliable or haphazardly given. Generally, all the subjects did much better in the test where sentences were arranged in pairs. This was understandable as the close focus on each pair of sentences allowed the subjects to better discriminate the test items given.

From the item analysis the following table was drawn up:

Table 1   ITEM-DIFFICULTY

Item No.	Ambiguous sentences arranged in order of difficulty	Raw scores of wrong responses (N = 40)	% of subjects who failed to recognise ambiguity
1.	The sailors then learned how good meat tasted.	31	77.5
2.	She told me to go without any hesitation.	28	70.0
3.	Elisa took John's coat off.	25	62.5
4.	Italians like opera as much as Americans.	24	60.0
5.	The shooting of the hunter was terrible.	24	60.0
6.	She could not bear children after the accident.	22	55.0
7.	Small boys and girls are afraid.	22	55.0
8.	They fed her dog biscuits.	20	50.0
9.	Please stop hurrying people.	13	32.5
10.	Visiting relatives can be a nuisance.	12	30.0
11.	They are visiting firemen.	12	30.0

12.	He is in charge of shipping clerks.	11	27.5
13.	Mary likes entertaining guests.	10	25.0
14.	Jane's murder shocked us.	9	22.5
15.	Edward left his sister to paint in San Francisco.	9	22.5
16.	All of the students were not represented.	8	20.0
17.	My father drank vodka and orange juice.	7	17.5
18.	Linda was too far away to see.	6	15.0
19.	John loves his wife and so do I.	5	12.5
20.	Bob made the table in the kitchen.	5	12.5

From Table 1 it is revealed that if a test item had a percentage score of 50 and above, it means that 50 percent or more of the subjects did not know that the sentence in question was ambiguous. In other words, item No. 1 in Table 1 recording a score of 77.5% means that a total 77.5% of the experimental subjects DID NOT recognise that item to be ambiguous. On the other hand, item 20 shows a score of 12.5% and this means that only 12.5% of the experimental subjects did not recognise the item to be ambiguous.

Taking 50% as the border-line to mark the degree of difficulty and the degree of easiness, all items with scores more than 50% were considered difficult for the subjects. All those items with scores less than 50% were considered reasonably easy for the subjects to detect the ambiguity.

A breakdown of the scores obtained by the subjects shows that the top 7 ambiguous items (see Table 1) have percentage scores of more than 50%. Four of these items have derived-structure ambiguity while two of them possess underlying-structure

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ambiguity. One of them has lexical ambiguity. The following table, Table 2, indicates the types of ambiguity found in each of the top 7 items that posed the greatest problem to ESL speakers. It also reveals the percentage of students who failed to recognise ambiguity in each of the 7 items.

Table 2   TYPES OF AMBIGUITY IN 7 SENTENCES

Item No.	Ambiguous sentences	Type of ambiguity	% of subjects who failed to recognise ambiguity
1.	The sailors then learned how good meat tasted.	Derived-structure ambiguity	77.5
2.	She told me to go without any hesitation.	Derived-structure ambiguity	70.0
3.	Elisa, took John's coat off.	Derived-structure ambiguity	62.5
4.	Italians like opera as much as Americans.	Underlying-structure ambiguity	60.0
5.	The shooting of the hunter was terrible.	Underlying-structure ambiguity	60.0
6.	She could not bear children after the accident.	Lexical ambiguity	55.0
7.	Small boys and girls are afraid.	Derived-structure ambiguity	55.0

Table 2 reveals that in the pilot experiment sentences with derived-structure ambiguity are those that most ESL students would fail to recognise. The results also suggest that sentence length was another factor in the ESL speakers' recognition of the ambiguous and unambiguous sentences.

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The more difficult sentences – items No. 1 to No. 7 – are longer in length than those sentences in items 8 to 20 with the exception of item 15. As the results show, when the given sentences were short, the subjects could better recognise the ambiguity.

Item 15 was the longest item in the test but only 22.5 percent of the subjects had problems recognising it as ambiguous. The relative ease in recognising this item as ambiguous could be due to the presence of two contrastive head nouns "Edward" and "his sister". If "brother" is substituted for "sister", perhaps more subjects might have problems recognising the ambiguity.

Half of the subjects in the pilot experiment did not have difficulty recognising the ambiguity in sentences No. 9 to No. 13. These sentences basically demonstrated lexical ambiguity.

The item with lexical ambiguity that was the most difficult for ESL students was item No. 6, "She could not bear children after the accident." This item differs from the other lexically ambiguous items in that it has no "-ing" form of the word in it.

CONCLUSION

The pilot experiment reveals that most English as a Second language speakers have greatest difficulty in determining English sentences with derived-structure ambiguity. Underlying-structure ambiguity was the next form of ambiguity that was hard to determine, followed by lexical ambiguity. Ambiguous sentences which were significantly long – more than six words – appeared to be more difficult for detection of ambiguity than ambiguous sentences with six words or less.

Ambiguity does pose a problem for the listener, the interpreter, or the analyst. This is one aspect of the study of ambiguity and no conscientious ESL teacher can be contented with just making a passing mention of it. ESL teachers need to be fully aware that their students' lack of clarity in their written work can be due to ambiguity too and not just due to poor vocabulary or faulty grammatical construction.

It is necessary to teach ESL speakers to recognise ambiguity and

to prevent making ambiguous statements. In this way, ambiguity then will not be a stumbling block to either communication or structuralism for those who speak and use the English language as a second language.

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APPENDIX I

Name : _____ Major : _____

Your academic status : _____

Native language : _____

How long have you studied English ? _____

_____

(1) Read each of the following pairs of sentences carefully:

(2) Circle EITHER item a OR item b that you think may have more than one meaning.

1. a. Please stop hurrying people.

   b. Please stop hurrying the people.

2. a. Linda was too far away to see.

   b. Linda was too far away to see me.

3. a. Jane's murder shocked us.

   b. Jane's act of murder shocked us.

4. a. Elisa took the coat off John.

   b. Elisa took John's coat off.

5. a. Italians like opera and Americans too.

   b. Italians like opera as much as Americans.

6. a. She told me to go without any hesitation.

   b. She told me to go and not to hesitate.

7. a. Visiting relatives regularly can be a nuisance.

   b. Visiting relatives can be a nuisance.

8. a. She could not bear children after the accident.

   b. She could not bear the children after the accident.

9. a. They fed her dog biscuits.

   b. They gave biscuits to her dog.

10. a. Bob made the table that was in the kitchen.

    b. Bob made the table in the kitchen.

11. a. They are visiting firemen.

12.

13.

14.

15.

16.

17.

18.

19.

20.

b. They are visiting the firemen.

12. a. John loves his wife and I love mine.

    b. John loves his wife and so do I.

13. a. The hunter was a terrible shooter.

    b. The shooting of the hunter was terrible.

14. a. Mary likes entertaining guests.

    b. Mary likes those entertaining guests.

15. a. One of the students was not represented.

    b. All of the students were not represented.

16. a. My father drank vodka and orange juice.

    b. My father drank vodka and orange juice together.

17. a. The sailors then learned how good meat tasted.

    b. The sailors then learned that meat was tasty.

18. a. He is in charge of the shipping clerks.

    b. He is in charge of shipping clerks.

19. a. Edward left his sister to paint in San Francisco.

    b. Edward left his sister in San Francisco so that she could paint.

20. a. Small boys and girls are afraid.

    b. Small boys and small girls are afraid.