



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**THE ACQUISITION OF NEGATION BY MALAY ESL LEARNERS**

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**By**

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra  
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**August 2009**



**To Abah, Mak, Abang and Kiki**



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in  
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts

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It has been observed that Malay learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) have difficulty with sentential negation in English. It is postulated that the difficulty could be due to properties related to English negation that are not found in Malay. These are the *not*-placement rule and *do*-support rule in English. In English, various types of auxiliary verbs (modal, aspect and passive auxiliaries) can co-exist simultaneously in a sentence as in *The book might have been being stolen by Tom*. In a negative construction, the *not*-placement rule states that the negative particle *not* should be placed after the first auxiliary verb as in *The book might not have been being stolen by Tom*. This condition, however, does not apply in Malay as the language does not permit more than one auxiliary in a sentence. Additionally, unlike English, a *do*-support language, Malay does not require an auxiliary to be present in sentential negation with thematic verbs.



Inability to conform to these rules may result in the production of ungrammatical English sentences among the Malay ESL learners. This study investigates the Interlanguage of English negation among Malay ESL learners. Specifically, the study reports the extent to which learners are able to acquire English sentential negation with the copula *be* verb, auxiliary verb and with thematic verbs (which needs *do*-support) and see if transfer from the L1 is involved in the process. This cross-sectional study focused on 90 Malay learners. They were categorized into three levels of proficiency based on their age and performance on a standardized proficiency test (the Oxford Placement Test). Instrumentation for the study includes a grammaticality judgment task and an elicited translation task. The results indicate a gradual staged development from the elementary group to the advanced group, both in terms of age and proficiency level. It is also noted that learners seem to find sentential negation with the copula *be* more difficult than auxiliary verbs and thematic verbs. Two implications can be drawn from the findings. The first are the expectations ESL instructors bring to the classroom relative to the performance of our students. The second is how the presence of developmental sequences in learner language might influence what these instructors teach.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**TAHAP PENGUASAAN KATA NAFI BAHASA INGGERIS OLEH PELAJAR MELAYU**

Oleh

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Telah diketahui bahawa pelajar Melayu sememangnya mengalami masalah dalam penguasaan kata nafi dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Adalah diramalkan bahawa masalah ini berpunca dari ketidakwujudan peraturan kata nafi dalam Bahasa Melayu seperti dalam Bahasa Inggeris. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyiasat tahap penguasaan kata nafi oleh pelajar Melayu. Ia bertujuan untuk mengetahui sejauhmanakah pelajar Melayu telah berupaya menguasai pelbagai konstruk kata nafi yang melibatkan berlainan kata kerja. Sama ada ketidakwujudan peraturan pembentukan kata nafi dalam Bahasa Inggeris iaitu '*Not-placement rule*' dan '*Do-support rule*' akan menimbulkan masalah kepada pelajar Melayu juga dikaji. Seperkara lagi, kajian ini juga melihat sejauhmana tahap penguasaan Bahasa Inggeris responden mempengaruhi tahap penguasaan kata nafi. Kajian rentas ini melibatkan 90 orang pelajar Melayu. Responden telah dikategorikan



kepada tiga (lemah, sederhana dan tinggi) kumpulan berbeza berdasarkan kepada tahap penguasaan mereka dalam ujian kecekapan Bahasa Inggeris (*Oxford Placement Test*.) Data dikumpul secara eksperimen melalui penggunaan '*Grammaticality Judgment Task*' (GJT). dan '*Elicitation Translation Task*' (ETT). GJT merangkumi 3 bahagian meliputi item-item '*copula be*', '*auxiliary verb*' dan '*thematic verb*'. Ujian ini memerlukan responden menilai ayat-ayat yang diberi sama ada betul dari segi tatabahasanya (grammatical) ataupun tidak. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa responden berupaya menguasai '*thematic verb negation*' secara signifikan berbanding '*auxiliary*' dan '*copula be negation*'. Kajian ini memberi informasi yang signifikan kepada pengkaji bahasa kedua dan bahasa antarabangsa serta kepada '*linguist*' terutama kepada ahli '*linguist*' terapan untuk meneruskan kajian dalam bidang ini. Terdapat dua implikasi yang diperolehi; pertama, ekspektasi guru terhadap pelajarinya di bilik darjah dan kedua, pengetahuan tentang kewujudan aturan perkembangan pelajar yang tentunya akan mempengaruhi apa yang diajar oleh guru.



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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on **17 August 2009** to conduct the final examination of **Suliana bt Wan Chik** on her thesis entitled **“The Acquisition of Negation by Malay ESL Learners”** in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Arts.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.

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**SULIANA WAN CHIK**

Date: 28 AUGUST 2009



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

L1	-	First language
L2	-	Second language
TL	-	Target language
IL	-	Interlanguage
ESL	-	English as Second language
MT	-	Mother tongue
SLA	-	Second language acquisition
neg	-	negator
TAF	-	Transfer Analysis Framework
NS(s)	-	Native speaker(s)
SPSS	-	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
GJT	-	Grammaticality Judgment Test
ETT	-	Elicitation Translation Task



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the background to the study, the statement of the problem, theoretical perspectives adopted for the study, research questions and definitions of key terms. The chapter also discusses the limitations of the study.

### 1.1 Background to the Study

The importance of English language in Malaysia and in the world, generally, needs no further elaboration. The spread and influence of English language has reached almost every house and area in Malaysia (Devikamani and David, 2009:390). The government has, since a long time ago, declared English language as the second most important language in Malaysia after Malay language (see e.g. Mohd Faisal Hanapiah, 2002:2). Although the Malay language plays a key political role in creating a culturally homogeneous polity out of a multi-lingual society, the English language on the other hand, has a functional role (see e.g. Mustafa, 2003) by virtue of its use as an international language of communication in the economy of the nation to remain globally competitive.



In addition, the English language functions as the medium for acquisition of knowledge. It is taught both in Malaysian primary and secondary schools which means that adult learners should have had at least eleven (11) years of tutored exposure to the language by the time they complete form five. With this tutored exposure to English, it is believed that the learners should have mastered the language fairly well. As English is a means of communication in everyday activities especially in the private sector and certain job situations, the aim of the English language curriculum in schools is to enable learners to acquire proficiency in the language so as to equip them with appropriate communication skills and adequate knowledge of the language that will enable them to widen their horizon to information for general knowledge, and for work-related and leisure based purposes (English Language Syllabus, Ministry of Education,1998).

The results of the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia 2005* (Malaysian Certificate of Education) (Berita Harian, 14 March 2006), stated that only 74.9% out of a total of 438,132 candidates who sat for the examination passed the English language paper. 328,599 candidates passed with a minimum of grade 8E (see Appendix D1 for range of grades for each subject in this examination). Even though English has been taught to the candidates since they were in the first year of the primary school curriculum, the remaining 109,533 had failed to obtain a pass for the subject. This situation makes it difficult for



those involved to achieve the aim proposed by the Malaysian Curriculum Development Centre as stated earlier. Competence in English is highly prized as one of the aims stated in the English language syllabus is that students' inability to at least obtain a pass in this subject will clearly jeopardized their chances of acceptance at both local and foreign universities. It is also stated that competence in English will provide a coveted edge in the workplace.

After fourteen (14) years of teaching in Malaysian primary and secondary schools, and a teacher's training college, the researcher has made some observations pertaining to the English proficiency levels of the learners. Some Malaysian learners can converse fairly well yet experience difficulty in expressing themselves in writing while others can write well yet experience difficulty while speaking. Thus, learners seem to have persistent difficulty in acquiring the second language despite the extended exposure to the language. Many factors could have contributed to this state of affairs such as age, individual differences, affective and cognitive factors (Archibald, 1996: 523-526).

This scenario has sparked interest in the researcher to carry out this study, that is the acquisition of negation by L1 Malay speakers. As a language

instructor, investigation into the acquisition of English as a second language (ESL) particularly negation interests the researcher as the findings from such a study would benefit her in her ESL classroom. Negation was specifically chosen because from a literature search, no such studies have been conducted in the local context. Moreover, it has commonly been found that learners' development in a second language (Ellis, 1994: 100, Cazden, 1972, and Klima and Bellugi, 1966) follows a common route, even if the speed (or rate) at which learners actually travel along may be different (Mitchell and Myles, 2004:16). Therefore, it was important for the researcher to observe whether the acquisition of English (in this case negation) by L1 Malay speakers would follow a similar route taken by other second language (L2) learners. As the Malay language and English share the same basic structure in terms of word order, that is 'subject-verb-object' (SVO), carrying out a study using L1 Malay speakers as the respondents is one of the ways in understanding and solving this persistent problem in the acquisition of the target language despite 11 years of formal learning.

In researching the process of language acquisition, two phenomena that should be recognised are the logical problem of language acquisition and the developmental problem in language acquisition (Chomsky, in Towell and Hawkins, 1994:57). In studying first language (L1) acquisition, the logical problem explains the fact of how children manage to acquire the native

language very quickly and effortlessly with fragmentary samples of language exposure (Chomsky, 1981; in Myles and Mitchell, 2004). The developmental problem in language acquisition deals with the explanation of why children take time and go through stages in attaining the linguistic competence of the language (see e.g. Hyams, 1991; in Towell and Hawkins, 1994: 130).

Both problems also exist in the acquisition and learning of a second language. The logical problem deals with explaining the nature of the eventual knowledge that L2 learners ultimately attain on the basis of samples of second language (L2) exposure. On the other hand, the developmental problem involves the explanation of routes taken by the learners from the initial-state grammars towards the Target Language (TL) or L2 (Mitchell and Myles, 2004).

In investigating linguistic competence of L2 learners, linguists focus on the mental system (grammar) that allows learners to form and interpret the words and sentences of their language. A fundamental fact about words in all human languages is that they can be grouped together into a relatively small number of classes, called syntactic categories. Syntactic categories can be divided into two basic types: lexical categories (nouns, verbs,





adjectives, adverbs and prepositions<sup>1</sup>) and functional categories (determiners, auxiliaries, conjunctions and degree words) (O'Grady et al.1996: 182).

A type of functional category that has been investigated by researchers is the negation particles. According to the Macmillan English Dictionary (2002), the words *no*, *not*, *never*, *none* and *nowhere* can be grouped together as functional words to negate utterances. Some of these negators such as *never* and *none* also behave as adverbs (Villemarie, 2003:152) as in *She never goes to the doctor* and *The supply is none too great*. According to Crystal (2003), 'Negation is a process of expressing the denial or contradiction of some or all the meaning of a sentence' and 'negative forms (negators) include not, un-, etc.'

It has been observed anecdotally that L1 Malay ESL learners though having an L1 that is a head first language, similar to English, still have difficulty in the acquisition of sentential negation particularly negation with thematic verbs. This difficulty can be due to two significant rules which are not found in Malay: *Not*-placement rule and *Do*-support rule (Celce-Murcia and

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<sup>1</sup> A preposition is a word that occurs before a noun phrase making another phrase (a prepositional phrase) with it. The term itself reflects the grammatical place of prepositions, 'positioned before' noun phrases. Prepositions typically express relationships in time or space between things and events (Hurford, 1995). They are usually classified as a functional category although they are on the borderline as some prepositions (e.g. *above*, *below*) do have meaning.

