



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***THE PRESENT PERFECT IN THE ENGLISH USED BY
L1 CHINESE AND L1 MALAY LANGUAGE LEARNERS***

KWAN LEE YIN

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**THE PRESENT PERFECT IN THE ENGLISH USED BY
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By

KWAN LEE YIN

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies,
Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

September 2020

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

THE PRESENT PERFECT IN THE ENGLISH USED BY L1 CHINESE AND L1 MALAY LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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September 2020

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It is widely acknowledged that the English present perfect is one of the more challenging grammatical constructions for learners of English as a second (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) to attain. According to Leech (2004), there are four main functions of the English present perfect, namely State-up-to-the Present (SP), Indefinite Past (IP), Habit-leading-to-the Present (HP) and Resultative Past (RP). SP indicates a state that extends over a period lasting up to the present moment; IP refers to some indefinite happening (or happenings) in the past that are “at-least-once-before-now”; HP highlights “a state consisting of repeated events”; and RP denotes the result of a past event that is still in operation at the present time. The Chinese and Malay languages do not have a tense system, which means there is no exact equivalent of the English present perfect in Chinese and Malay. Due to the complex nature by which the English present perfect functions, teachers of English as a second language in Malaysia have observed that the English present perfect is often an area of serious difficulty for their students in English grammar.

Using the functional perspective governing the four functions of the English present perfect by Leech (2004), this thesis discusses the extent to which L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners in Malaysia know the full range of functions of the English present perfect and can use them in English production. The study also aims to find out the specific present perfect functions that the participants utilise the best and worst as well as the main factors determining the relative lack of success in the acquisition of the present perfect in relation to results obtained by L1 Chinese and L1 Malay participants of two proficiency levels.

A total of 60 L1 Chinese learners and 60 L1 Malay learners whose proficiency in English was intermediate and advanced participated in this study based on their performance in the Oxford Placement Test 2 (OPT2) (Allan, 2004). The participants were Literature and Linguistics students of the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication and medical students of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia. All were in the second to final year of their programmes. The instruments used consist of three elicitation tasks: a cloze task, a Grammaticality Judgement Task and a translation task. The data obtained from the three tasks were analysed quantitatively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25 programme with respect to descriptive statistics to obtain frequency counts and percentage. Comparison was made between the mean differences and the significant differences between the participants of the two language groups at the two levels of proficiency using *t*-tests. For multiple comparisons, Tukey's Post Hoc Test was also conducted. The data was analysed qualitatively i.e. the percentages of errors made in the use of the four functions of the present perfect were analysed and explained by identifying the differences between the participants' mother tongue and the target language and considering the participants' tendency to use certain verb forms in various situations.

The results of the study showed that the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners have not fully integrated the four principal meanings conveyed by the English present perfect form in a native-like way. Data collected attest to the fact that both groups of participants performed best in the use of the state-up-to-the present function of the present perfect and worst in the use of the habit- leading-to-the present function. The participants also tended to use the simple past verb form instead of the present perfect verb form in present perfect environments in spite of contextual markers that signalled the use of the present perfect. The persistent difficulty in correctly using the present perfect can be linked to interacting factors such as markedness, there being no equivalent form to express the English present perfect in Chinese and Malay and the complexity in meaning and ambiguous nature of the English present perfect itself.

The study highlights the importance of investigating the acquisition of the English Present Perfect by L2 learners and provides some pedagogical perspectives for L2 English instructors. Based on the findings, the researcher formulated important recommendations for language instructors to improve pedagogical language approaches to facilitate language learners in acquiring ease of use of the English present perfect.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PENGGUNAAN “PRESENT PERFECT” BAHASA INGGERIS OLEH
PELAJAR-PELAJAR L1 CINA DAN L1 MELAYU**

Oleh

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Adalah diakui bahawa “present perfect” bahasa Inggeris adalah salah satu pembinaan tatabahasa yang lebih mencabar untuk dipelajari oleh pelajar bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (ESL) atau bahasa asing (EFL). Menurut Leech (2004), terdapat empat fungsi utama “present perfect” bahasa Inggeris, “State-up-to-the Present” (SP), “Indefinite Past” (IP), “Habit-leading-to-the Present” (HP) dan “Resultative Past” (RP).

SP menunjukkan keadaan yang berlanjutan dalam jangka masa sehingga saat ini; IP merujuk kepada beberapa kejadian (atau kejadian) yang tidak pasti pada masa lalu yang “sekurang-kurangnya-sekali-sebelum-sekarang”; HP menekankan “keadaan yang terdiri daripada peristiwa berulang”; dan RP menunjukkan hasil peristiwa masa lalu yang masih beroperasi pada masa ini. Bahasa Cina dan bahasa Melayu tidak mempunyai sistem kala, yang bermaksud tidak ada persamaan yang tepat “present perfect” bahasa Inggeris dalam bahasa Cina dan bahasa Melayu. Oleh kerana sifat kompleks “present perfect” bahasa Inggeris berfungsi, guru Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua di Malaysia telah memperhatikan bahawa “present perfect” bahasa Inggeris sering menjadi masalah bagi pelajar mereka dalam tatabahasa Inggeris.

Dengan menggunakan perspektif fungsian berikutan empat fungsi “present perfect” bahasa Inggeris oleh Leech (2004), kajian ini membincangkan sejauh mana para pelajar ESL bahasa Cina dan Melayu di Malaysia mengetahui segala fungsi “present perfect” serta dapat menggunakannya. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengetahui fungsi “present perfect” yang mana para peserta mencapai pencaapaian yang terbaik dan terendah serta faktor utama yang menentukan kurangnya kejayaan relatif dalam penguasaan “present perfect” berkaitan dengan hasil kajian yang diperolehi

oleh peserta L1 Cina dan L1 Melayu dari dua tahap kemahiran bahasa Inggeris.

Sejumlah 60 pelajar L1 Cina dan 60 pelajar L1 Melayu yang mana tahap penguasaan bahasa Inggeris mereka adalah tahap perantaraan dan lanjutan berdasarkan prestasi mereka dalam ujian Oxford Placement Test 2 (OPT2) (Allan, 2004). Para peserta adalah pelajar Sastera dan Linguistik Fakulti Bahasa Moden dan Komunikasi dan pelajar perubatan Fakulti Perubatan dan Sains Kesihatan, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Semua peserta berada di Tahun Kedua hingga Tahun Akhir program mereka. Instrumen yang digunakan terdiri daripada tiga ujian: ujian “cloze”, ujian “Grammaticality Judgement Task” dan ujian penterjemahan. Data yang diperoleh daripada tiga ujian dianalisis secara kuantitatif dengan menggunakan program Pakej Statistik untuk Sains Sosial (SPSS) versi 25 berkaitan dengan statistik deskriptif dalam bentuk bilangan frekuensi dan peratusan. Perbandingan dibuat antara perbezaan min dan perbezaan ketara di antara dua kumpulan bahasa peserta pada dua tahap kecekapan yang dibandingkan dengan menggunakan ujian-t. Untuk pelbagai perbandingan, ujian “Tukey’s Post Hoc” juga dijalankan. Data dianalisis secara kualitatif iaitu peratus kesilapan yang dibuat dalam penggunaan empat fungsi “present perfect” dianalisis dan dijelaskan dengan mengenalpasti perbezaan antara bahasa pertama dan bahasa sasaran peserta dengan mempertimbangkan kecenderungan peserta menggunakan bentuk kata kerja tertentu dalam pelbagai situasi.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahawa pelajar L1 Cina dan L1 Melayu tidak mengintegrasikan empat makna utama yang disampaikan oleh “present perfect” bahasa Inggeris sepenuhnya seperti penutur asli. Data yang terkumpul membuktikan bahawa kedua-dua kumpulan peserta menunjukkan prestasi terbaik mereka dalam penggunaan fungsi “state-up-to-the present” dan menunjukkan prestasi yang paling rendah apabila menggunakan fungsi “habit-leading-to-the present”. Mereka juga cenderung menggunakan “simple past” dan bukannya “present perfect” dalam persekitaran “present perfect” walaupun terdapat petanda kontekstual yang menunjukkan penggunaan “present perfect”. Kesukaran yang berterusan boleh dikaitkan dengan faktor-faktor yang berinteraksi seperti ‘markedness’, pengaruh L1 dan kerumitan dalam makna dan sifat ambigu “present perfect” Bahasa Inggeris itu sendiri.

Kajian ini menunjukkan kepentingan menyiasat penguasaan “present perfect” Bahasa Inggeris oleh pelajar L2 dan memberi beberapa perspektif pedagogi bagi pengajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai L2. Berdasarkan penemuan ini, penyelidik telah mengemukakan cadangan-cadangan penting bagaimana pembelajaran “present perfect” boleh difasilitasi untuk memudahkan pelajar mempelajari “present perfect” bahasa Inggeris.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

1SG	First Person Singular
2SG	Second Person Singular
3SG	Third Person Singular
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Corporation
ABS	The Australian Bureau of Statistics
AFFIX	Affixes
ANOVA	Analysis of Variance
CAH	Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis
CEFR	Common European Framework of Reference
CI	Confidence Interval
CL	Classifier
CLI	Cross-linguistic Influence
CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
CRS	Currently Relevant State
<i>df</i>	Degrees of Freedom
EDA	Exploratory Data Analysis
ELT	English Language Teaching
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ESL	English as a Second Language
ETeMS	English for Teaching Mathematics and Science
et al.	<i>et alii</i> (and others)
<i>f</i>	<i>f</i> -value
FBMK	Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
i.e.	<i>id est</i> (that is)
IP	Indefinite Past
H ₀	Null hypothesis

HP	Habit-leading-to the present
IL	Interlanguage
KBSM	<i>Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah</i>
KBSR	<i>Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah</i>
KSSR	<i>Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah</i>
L1	First language
L2	Second language
LINUS	English literacy in the Literacy and Numeracy Screening Programme
M	Mean
MBMMBI	<i>Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris</i>
MDF	Markedness Differential Hypothesis
MEB	Malaysia Education Blueprint
MOE	Ministry of Education
MUET	Malaysian University English Test
NEG	Negation
OPT2	Oxford Placement Test 2
PCL	Particle
PFV	Perfective
p	p -value
PP	Present Perfect
PRO3	Third Person Pronoun
RP	Resultative Past
SBELC	Standards-Based English Language Curriculum
Sig.	Significance
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SLT	Situational Language Teaching
SP	State-up-to-the present

SPM	<i>Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia</i>
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
<i>t</i>	<i>t</i> -value
UG	Universal Grammar
UON	The University of Newcastle
UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the background to the present study and its statement of problem, purpose and objectives as well as the research questions. The chapter also discusses the significance and limitations of the study, provides the operational definitions related to the research and ends with an overview of the thesis.

1.2 Background to the Study

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is the process of internalising a new language that may be a second or foreign language to the learner, with the aim of using it to communicate with members of a community outside that of the learner's early orientation. The need for learning the English language as a second language arises from the emergence of the English language as the main means of communication in most, if not all, domains the world over such as the academic, business and technology domains, to name only three. The role of the English language in the academic domain requires learners to demonstrate adequate proficiency for performing required tasks successfully. However, mastering the English language can be a struggle for many learners of English as a Second Language (ESL).

As is the case with most, if not all, Commonwealth countries where English is not the first or native language, the language is widely used among the general populace at all levels and in all sectors (Rashid, Abdul Rahman, & Yunus, 2017). Malaysia uses the bilingual system of education in which *Bahasa Malaysia* literally 'the language of Malaysia', that is, the Malay language, as the national language, is the language of formal education in national public schools, but English is often used as a secondary language. Meanwhile, being a pluralistic society, Malaysia also allows the use of Mandarin and Tamil for instruction in vernacular public schools at the primary school level. The Malaysian Ministry of Education (MoE) institutionalised English as a significant second language (L2) in the Education Ordinance of 1957 and reaffirmed the importance of this second language in the Education Act of 1961 (Government of Malaysia, 1961, 1996) and the National Education Policy of 1970. The importance of the English language led the MoE to make it a compulsory subject at the primary (age 6-12), secondary (age 13-17), post-secondary and tertiary (age 18 and upwards) levels. English in Malaysian primary and secondary schools takes place in classrooms where learners are exposed to formal learning of English for a minimum of seven years for students who attend vernacular or

National-Type primary schools and a minimum of 10 years for those who attend National schools. Students will continue learning it at the tertiary level if they choose to further their education (Darmi & Albion, 2013).

1.2.1 An Overview of the Position of the English Language in the Malaysian Education System

The history of English language education in Malaysia spans two distinctive periods in the wider history of Malaysia as a sovereign nation, namely the periods before independence and after independence. The independence of Malaya, as the nation was known at the time, in 1957 was deemed a pivotal moment in the development of a national blueprint for education because before independence, “the education system that existed in Malaya was a fragmented education system” (Darmi & Albion, 2013, p.2), but after independence, the national education system presented a different landscape that was ready to grow an integrated and reformed curriculum for all levels as well as the structure to support it.

1.2.1.1 Before Independence

Schools in Malaya began using English for teaching after British occupation of the land commenced in 1824. Prior to that, the Malay language was the main language of communication among the Malay population. British governance led to ever widening use of English, and with the opening of English-medium primary and secondary schools by the British, English quickly became the lingua franca of political, economic and to some extent, social life in Malaya.

The Malayan education system was shaped by the Barnes Report of 1951, which proposed a national school system that offered six years of primary education delivered in the Malay and English languages. However, the Chinese and Indian communities residing in Malaya at the time resisted the idea and as a result, a bilingual education system as well as a trilingual education system came into existence. Malay schools were opened using Malay and English for instruction, while vernacular schools for Chinese and Indian schoolchildren were opened using the respective vernacular as well as Bahasa Melayu and English for instruction.

In 1956, with the objective of refining the Barnes Report, the Razak Report was released. A defining change in direction for the soon-to-be-independent nation’s education policy was the switch to Malay as the medium of instruction, with English being made a compulsory subject, while instruction in English, Mandarin and Tamil was retained in the vernacular schools. Clearly a move designed to aid the process of national integration, this milestone development, achieved through the Education Ordinance of 1957 that was based on the Razak report, established Malay as the national

language (Government of Malaya, 1957, p.1). With this monumental change put in place through the Education Ordinance, primary schools were established as Malay-, English-, Chinese- and Tamil-medium schools, whereas secondary schools were Malay- and English-medium schools.

1.2.1.2 After Independence

In 1957, Malaya gained its independence from the British, and Malay was declared the new nation's national language. Nonetheless, English was kept as the second most important language in the young country and used as the official language in all its administrative matters. In the 1960s and 1970s, the trend in the national education system was towards integration of a common curriculum and standardisation of public examinations for schools as a whole. To this end, the Malaysian government took the bold step of gradually phasing out the role of English as the medium of instruction in schools, paving the way for the Malay language to play a vital role in national integration.

In 1970, the New Education Policy was introduced, and it branded the teaching of English in schools as 'English as a Second Language' (ESL). Hazita (2016, p.4) identified the implementation of the double school system as beginning the decline of the English language in Malaysia. The medium of instruction for national schools was, and still is, the Malay language, with English taught as a subject starting from Year One. While the medium of instruction for the national-type schools was the vernacular, Mandarin and Tamil, Malay was taught as a subject starting from Year One, and English was taught only from Year Three onwards. This is still the case at present. This allows children in national schools exposure of 210 to 240 minutes a week to the English language, while children in national-type schools receive only 60 to 90 minutes of English language teaching a week. Also, children who attend national schools chalk up six years of English language input, but those who attend national-type schools receive only four years of English language teaching. In addition, while English is a compulsory subject in schools, it is unfortunately not mandatory for children to pass the subject in national examinations. While this was considered a positive change for national integration when the new education policy was introduced, a setback soon became obvious, as summarised by Rashid et al.: "The most significant of these reforms was the change of the medium of instruction from English to Bahasa Malaysia in 1961, which has affected the standard of English in the country" (2017, p.102).

In the 1980s, the most significant reformation to the national education was the introduction of the New Primary Schools Curriculum or *Kurikulum Baru Sekolah Rendah* (KBSR) in 1983 and the Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum or *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah* (KBSM) in 1989. The learning outcomes set in the KBSR curriculum were holistic, covering the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. It aimed

for the enhancement of learners' competency in the English language, that is, it set out "to equip learners with basic skills and knowledge of the English language so as to enable them to communicate both orally and in writing, in and out of school" (*Sukatan Pelajaran Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah Bahasa Inggeris*, 2001, p. 2). The main aim of the KBSM curriculum was the extension of the KBSR goal, namely "to extend learners' English language proficiency in order to meet their needs to use English in certain situations in everyday life, for knowledge acquisition, and for future workplace needs" (*Sukatan Pelajaran Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah Bahasa Inggeris*, 2000, p. 2). The full implementation of both curricula took place fully in the year 2000.

The move of changing the medium of instruction from English to Malay eventually led to a noticeable drop in English competency among Malaysians. Therefore, 'English for Teaching Mathematics and Science' (ETeMS) was implemented in 2003 to address this decline. This new strategy was to serve the purpose of reintroducing English as the medium of instruction for science and mathematics beginning Year One in primary school and Form One in secondary school by the Ministry of Education in 2003 (Stephen, 2013). However, the primary aim of ETeMS was to enhance the competitiveness of university students in science and technology as the nation prepared to raise a technologically advanced workforce able to access the latest knowledge and research in English (Darmi & Albion, 2013). However, socio-political conditions within the country led the government in 2009 to revert to the earlier policy, and this resulted in both subjects being once again taught in Malay (Nor Hashimah, 2009, cited in Darmi & Albion, 2013). Another new policy, *Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia, Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris* (MBMMBI, 'Upholding the Malay Language, Strengthening the English Language') was implemented in 2012 under the Tenth Malaysia Plan, 2011 to 2015 (Government of Malaysia, 2012). The policy aimed to "ensure the usage of [the] Malay language as a medium of communication in all schools, and to ensure that each child [could] master both [the] Malay and English languages well and fluently" (Ministry of Education, 2015, para 1).

1.2.2 Approaches in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Malaysia

English language teaching (ELT) policies in Malaysia have been implemented in three phases: Phase One from 1950 to 1970, Phase Two from 1971 to 1990 and Phase Three from 1991 to the present. The three phases are in line with the MoE's policies with regard to teaching methods and approaches (Selvaraj, 2010).

Phase One of English language teaching policies in Malaysia incorporated several traditional instructional methods, namely the Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method and Situational Language Teaching (SLT)

approaches. In the Grammar Translation Method, learners were taught to memorise grammar rules in the classroom. However, this led to lack of fluency in speaking and listening skills as these areas were neglected, according to Selvaraj. Due to the ineffectiveness of this classic method in yielding human capital with excellent communication skills, the Direct Method was engaged as a strategy to avoid the use of translation by stressing on the use of instruction and communication in the classroom. Nevertheless, teachers found a major setback in using this method too, namely that they wasted countless hours explaining every single new English word introduced in class as this method did not permit the use of the mother tongue. This second method too fail was replaced with the SLT approach, which promoted the mastery of high frequency vocabulary but encouraged the repetition technique used in the Grammar Translation Method.

Phase Two of ELT stressed on communicative language teaching (CLT). According to Richards (2002), CLT refers to the aims and activities utilised in teaching and learning in the classroom while integrating the idea of communicative competence and interaction. The use of interactive activities such as pair work, group work and oral practice was encouraged in this phase, but “grammar rules were to be acquired indirectly during the communicative process” (Richards, 2006, p.1). Consequently, reading, writing and oral components were incorporated in the English examination format for the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM) or the Malaysian Certificate of Education, which is equivalent to the ‘Ordinary’ Level of the British General Certificate of Education (GCSE).

English Language Teaching policies in Phase Three put emphasis on two instructional approaches, namely Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and the aesthetic approach (Selvaraj, 2010). CBI refers to the use of language learnt through integration with other content (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Consequently, teachers were expected to incorporate science and technology-related content in their lessons as a means of “using English to learn it” (Howatt, 1984, as cited in Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p.172). When this method was introduced in schools, the medium of instruction for mathematics and science in Malaysia was indeed English, an intentional move to ensure learners were better equipped to face the rapid advancements in science and technology. The aesthetic approach that followed next, on the other hand, promoted language appreciation by instilling reading habits as well as creative and critical thinking skills in learners (Rashid et al., 2017). The ELT curriculum utilised this approach in the new English Language Reader Programme introduced in 1990 and included a literature component in the national English language syllabus in 2000.

1.2.3 Current Situation of Malaysian ELT Education

In 2013, the new Malaysia Education Blueprint (MEB) 2013-2025 was launched with the birth of the Primary School Standards-Based Curriculum or KSSR in Malay, which included monitoring of English literacy in the Literacy and Numeracy Screening or LINUS programme. LINUS, targeted at improving literacy in both Malay and English, aimed at 100% literacy in Malay and not less than 90% literacy in English for primary schoolchildren by the end of Year Three (Government of Malaysia, 2012, pp. E9, E12). To ensure that the MEB would be successfully implemented, the English Language Roadmap for Malaysia 2015-2025 was launched. The MEB shows the way for developing curriculum and for teaching English with the stated aim of nurturing proficiency in the language that matches global standards, for which purpose it uses the Common European Framework of Reference as a guide (Rashid et al., 2017). With the implementation of the Standards-Based English Language Curriculum in 2013, which is in accordance with KSSR's objectives, English language teaching hours have been increased to six hours a week or 300 minutes to cover listening, speaking, reading, writing and language arts.

It has been shown that English as a second or foreign language is taught at three levels in Malaysia, namely primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Formal instruction of English starts at the elementary level as early as four years old and continues at the primary level from Year 1 to Year 6 for seven-to-12-year olds). English is a compulsory subject at primary level and is one of the subjects tested in the norm-referenced test, the *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (Elementary School Assessment) at the end of Year Six, that is, at the end of primary-level education. At the secondary level comprising Form 1 to Form 5 for 13- to 17-year olds, English continues to be a compulsory subject taught in schools. Students sit the SPM, a standardised norm-referenced entrance test at the end of their secondary schooling. However, performance in the SPM English language exam is not a deciding factor for university entry, as that is decided by students' performance in the Malaysian University English Test. At the tertiary level, almost all public and private universities in Malaysia use English for instruction except Islamic, Malay, Chinese and Tamil Studies.

Although the English language is a compulsory subject in the national education curriculum of Malaysia, making it a language that Malaysian learners should be competent at using, they still face difficulty in using it. This has been revealed in many past studies. Since independence, the Malaysian education system has been undergoing continual education reforms. Rashid et al. (2017) stated that the most important change that took place in education reform in Malaysia was the change of the medium of instruction from English to Malay in 1961. This resulted in the decline in proficiency in English among Malaysian students, as pointed out by Mohamed, Tumin and Omar (2008). With foresight on the part of the policy-makers, it may have been seen that turning the spotlight on Malay would

produce throughout the length and breadth of the nation classrooms of children who spoke the national language with ease and confidence but who might fall back when it came to conversing in English or using the second language in formal situations. This is indeed what did happen (Gill, 2012). In fact, the problem persists to this day, with Malaysian youths faltering in the use of English in tertiary educational institutions and in the working world, especially the business sector, where English is the predominant language. A common lament in modern-day Malaysia revolves around the high unemployment level among higher-educational graduates due to their unsatisfactory proficiency in English.

Gill (2012) highlighted a few possible reasons why Malaysians of Chinese and Malay origin may be weak in English. Firstly, it could be due to lack of exposure to the target language community that uses English as a first language. Secondly, the students may not have adequate background knowledge of the linguistic system of the second language. Thirdly, the teaching approaches and textbooks used in class may not be effective. Lastly, first language interference could be hindering acquisition of the second language. As this last reason is pertinent to the overall discussion undertaken in this work, it will be considered at greater depth in the following paragraphs.

The last reason noted in the earlier paragraph deserves closer consideration. Many studies have acknowledged that the learner's first language is the main source of syntactic errors in second language performance in adults (Lado, 1957; Brown, 2007). Certainly, it is not surprising that first language influence may be a recognisable source of error among second language learners. However, some scholars disagree with this (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1981; Ellis, 1985; Faerch & Kasper, 1987; Odlin, 1989; Gass, 2000). There have been many disagreements among linguists regarding cross-linguistic research. Some agree that language transfer is important in the process of second language acquisition, while others doubt it. Evidently, "among linguists and language teachers, there is still no consensus about the nature or the significance of cross-linguistic influence" (Odlin, 1989, p.3). Notwithstanding all the arguments, it is undeniable that the issue of transfer in second language acquisition cannot be overlooked as one of the main factors.

This cross-linguistic study keeps in view the different opinions among scholars regarding any possible retarding influence of first language on the acquisition of a second language while proceeding to look at the Chinese and Malay languages and the English subsystems and examining the similarities and differences between them. This contrastive study focuses on the grammatical features of Chinese, Malay and English, specifically focusing on the English present perfect functions to compare the use of this tense with what alternatives may be available in Chinese and Malay. The study attempts to provide an explanation regarding factors determining the

functional differences between L1 English and the interlanguage of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The English present perfect is widely acknowledged to be one of the more challenging grammatical constructions for learners to attain in acquiring English as a second or foreign language (van der Wurff, 1999; Cowan, 2008; Davydova, 2011). The present perfect contains two separate and autonomous grammatical categories of the verb, tense and aspect, each of which can operate independently of the other. The present perfect is treated as a combination of the two, making it a complex tense for ESL learners especially to learn and use correctly. In addition, the acquisition of the present perfect is also developed at a later stage in first and second language acquisition (Felix, 1978; Housen, 2002; Van Herk, 2008). This means, the acquisition of the present perfect is indeed a cognitively complex process. Hence, teachers of English as a second language have observed that the English present perfect is often an area of serious difficulty for their students in English grammar.

In Malaysia, the English present perfect is not introduced to Malaysian learners in primary school due to the complexity of its grammatical constructions. It is introduced to secondary school learners only in Form Two, and they study it up to Form Five. The English syllabus for secondary school treats the present perfect tense as a more complex structure in its list of the grammatical items, therefore it is not taught in Form One but only in Form Two upwards. The Form Two syllabus introduces the present perfect to the learners as an overview, treating the grammatical structure it produces as one that is completely new for the learners. The learners are taught the rules for constructing the structure, that is, what the structure should look like, what its function is and what it means. It is also introduced with an adverbial of duration i.e. the prepositions 'for' and 'since'. In the Form Three syllabus, the learners are taught simple present perfect use with the time adverbials 'just', 'already' and 'yet'. After the learners have become familiar with the rules of the structure, they are taught to distinguish between the present perfect simple and the past simple and between the present perfect simple and the present perfect continuous. In upper secondary school, the use of the present perfect is reinforced through further exercises or activities. The activities are controlled that is, they are designed to provide practice in using the new structure and are focused on meaning, learners' fluency and use in real-life tasks or situations.

Stranks (2003) mentioned that it is important to teach learners how to use the grammatical form in spoken or written discourse when teaching the new form. This aids the learners in learning to think about what circumstances might require the use of the new form. He added that if the learners had difficulty in using the new form, teachers could raise the learners' awareness

of form and function, and that could help them to use it appropriately. The Malaysian English syllabus of the present perfect in general puts emphasis on teaching the grammatical item by the rules. Stranks argued that the learners should be introduced to the function of the form and the meaning underlying the sentences before using the present perfect to produce their own sentences. He believed this would help learners to gradually learn to produce new language forms appropriately. Stranks does have a point here, as this makes for effective learning of the structure. In line with Stranks' viewpoint, it is therefore important that emphasis should be given to teaching of the functions of the present perfect. However, the researcher has observed that there has been no effort to teach the structure according to the four functions in the syllabus. Due to this gap, the researcher decided to investigate the use of the four present perfect functions that are found in Geoffrey N. Leech's *Meaning and the English Verb* among L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners.

In practice, the English present perfect is not introduced to Malaysian learners at an early stage in the primary school level. Nevertheless, in spite of this exposure to the tense in a later stage, a common problem in the Malaysian English language classroom is students' perplexity when confronted with the full range of the functions of the English present perfect. So perplexed are they that they continue to present errors in the use of the present perfect at the end of their 11 years of learning English in school. As may be expected, this state of affairs is apparent in other countries in the same region where English is taught as a second language such as China, Thailand and Vietnam (Svalberg & Chuchu, 1998; Hinkel, 1997, 1992). L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners in Malaysia are not an exception. Chang (2001) and Yong (2001) explored the interference effect of the Chinese and Malay languages on the learning of English. Both then indicated that even the most proficient L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners find it difficult to master the complexity of the English verb system. Previous research in the area of acquisition of English verb tenses by L2 learners (Kwan, 2016; Muneera & Shameem, 2013; Nurul Huda, 2012; Wong, 2012; Lim, 2007) has also confirmed that most second language learners have difficulty using the correct verb tenses in their English language production. Therefore, the researcher decided to compare the performance of learners who are at two different proficiency levels.

This study investigates the use of the English present perfect tense by L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners. The data were gathered using three elicitation tasks to test the learners' knowledge of the English present perfect functions. The Chinese and Malay languages are generally acknowledged to be languages that do not have a tense system. Chinese and Malay verbs do not distinguish between person, tense, number or aspect, that is, these two languages are said to be unmarked for these features. English verbs change based on the aspect of time but in Malay and Chinese, the verbs remain the same in present, past and future. In other words, there is no exact equivalent of the English present perfect in Chinese and Malay. These linguistic facts and other factors may be behind the difficulty that L1 Chinese

and L1 Malay learners face in acquiring the English present perfect. Furthermore, Chinese is similar to Malay in terms of tense system, but the Chinese and Malay learners differ in terms of their L2 English knowledge in general. This is due to the differences in the number of hours of exposure to English in primary schools in Malaysia. Therefore, the researcher believed it would be interesting to compare the performance of Chinese and Malay ESL learners in their use of the English present perfect functions. The findings of this comparison will be helpful to language teachers, who can then use them to formulate right strategies for effective teaching of the present perfect to different learners in a classroom.

The purpose of this study was to attempt to shed light on the problems explored earlier by examining the similarities and differences between Chinese and Malay and English with focus on the present perfect and to determine whether the structural features of the first language can aid or block the acquisition of a second language. In addition, this study intended to provide an explanation for factors generating problems and errors in the use of the English present perfect among L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners in Malaysia.

1.4 Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The background to the present study and the statement of the problem highlighted the fact that many L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners in Malaysia consistently face difficulty in using the full range of the English present perfect functions even at the advanced level of proficiency. This study examined specifically the use of the English present perfect functions, namely state-up-to-the present (HP), indefinite past (IP), habit-leading-to-the present (HP) and resultative past (RP). The specific objectives of this study were:

1. To find out if there were any differences between L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners in their use of the English present perfect.
2. To find out if there were any differences between more and less proficient ESL learners in their use of the English present perfect.
3. To investigate to what extent the functions of the present perfect in the interlanguage of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners are similar or dissimilar to the functions of the present perfect in English.
4. To identify the factors determining the functional differences between L1 English and the interlanguage of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay.

1.5 Research Questions

Based on the aims and objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Are there any differences between L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners in their use of the English present perfect?
2. Are there any differences between more and less proficient L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners in their use of the English present perfect?
3. To what extent are the functions of the present perfect in the interlanguage of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners similar or dissimilar to the functions of the present perfect in English as a first language?
4. What factors determine the functional differences in the use of the present perfect tense between L1 English and the interlanguage of L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners?

1.6 Conceptual Framework

The study focuses on examining the similarities and differences between Chinese and Malay and English with focus on the present perfect. By comparing the Chinese or Malay and English present perfect, how the structural features of the first language can facilitate or hamper the acquisition of a second language can be determined. The investigation of the matter is guided by the theories and concepts related to cross-linguistic influence in language acquisition.

The study focuses on examining the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners' use of the English present perfect and the cross-linguistic theories that are pertinent to studies on performance in an L2. First language influence, the Markedness Hypothesis, the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH), or Error Analysis (EA) are studied for their role as factors that generate problems and the source of errors in the use of the English present perfect. Analysis of learner language in oral or written language can provide information about learners' underlying linguistic knowledge (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). Error Analysis is valid and proper for identifying and explaining learners' errors committed by L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners in the acquisition process of English present perfect functions.

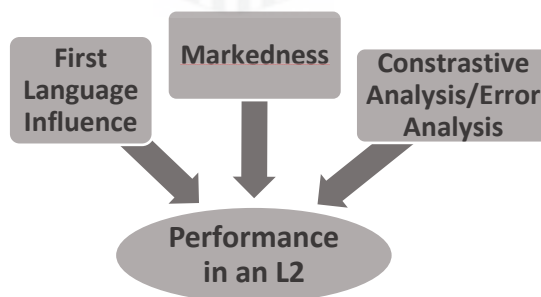


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study is an explanatory research adopting mixed methods design and utilising a cross-sectional design. The participants were selected mainly from the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication and the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Universiti Putra Malaysia. The participants were L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners in the second to final year of their programmes. One hundred and twenty learners were the target number of participants comprising 60 L1 Chinese learners and 60 L1 Malay learners whose proficiency in English was intermediate and advanced learners. Only two levels of proficiency were chosen due to the fact that convenience and practicality were the reasons of the selection.

The L1 Chinese and L1 Malay learners were selected as subjects of this research because Malay is the predominant language in Malaysia as ethnic Malays form the largest percentage of the Malaysian population (63.0%) and L1 Chinese is the second most widely spoken language in the country as Chinese Malaysians are the second biggest ethnic group in Malaysia (25.1%).

The present perfect tense was chosen to be investigated among other tenses as it is known to be one of the most difficult grammar categories to learn for second language learners. It would be interesting to know how well the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay could perform in using this difficult grammatical category.

1.8 Significance of the Study

This research project was conducted at a time when many studies were being conducted to address issues pertaining to the steady deterioration of English language proficiency among university graduates in Malaysia. This problem has increasingly become a major concern in relation to graduate unemployment due to low level of English competency. The ability to communicate and write English well is crucial for employment in the highly competitive private sector. An investigation into the current situation of ESL performance in using the English present perfect will play an important role in attempts to enhance the quality of learning and teaching English.

The acquisition of the English present perfect is considered one of the most difficult grammar categories to learn for second language learners. This study aimed to shed light on some of the intricacies of the acquisition of the English present perfect by L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners in Malaysia. The findings of this study, therefore enhance the understanding of the English present perfect, particularly, the four functions of the present perfect. In addition, the study was expected to identify the performance of

L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners of two different proficiency levels in using each present perfect function. This study was also expected to contribute to a better understanding of the meaning and functions of the English present perfect for better mastery of this grammatical construction. The research results can be used to improve the approaches to teaching and learning the English present perfect in non-native English-speaking countries like Malaysia.

The findings of the study can aid ESL instructors in their work because the knowledge obtained will enable them to understand the different linguistic features of this property in L1 English, L1 Chinese and L1 Malay. Hence, they may gain awareness of transfer issues in second language acquisition (SLA) by taking note of the influence of the first language. Secondly, the findings will help the instructors to find the reasons behind students' errors and inaccurate use to more effectively help them learn to use the language successfully. Thirdly, the findings provided information about which present perfect functions appear to be the most and least difficult to acquire, so that effective teaching strategies and improvements to the syllabus could be recommended for better classroom teaching. This is done in the last chapter. Furthermore, the findings on the acquisition of the English present perfect may contribute to the theory of second language acquisition in general.

1.9 Operational Definitions

The following definitions on second language acquisition are intended to facilitate understanding of the key terms used in this work.

1.9.1 First Language (L1)

An individual's first language, often called the native tongue, is the language the individual picks up from early orientation in the early years of life, as scholars, including Klein (1986), have acknowledged. The first language or L1, then, is the language with which the individual is likely to be the most familiar. It is the individual's native language. Native speakers, however, are not limited to operating in only one language. They may very well lay claim to having acquired other languages as well in early childhood. If they were acquired early in life outside a formal setting of language development and through the natural process of immersion in one or more cultures from infancy and up to puberty, such as might be true in the case of mixed-marriage families, they would have been naturally picked up, together with other cultural orientations specific to those cultures.

1.9.2 Second Language (L2)

Aside from a native language or 'mother tongue' as it is termed, a second language is also commonly acquired by many, especially in heterogeneous countries like Malaysia, which is home to a diverse population made up of several ethnic groups. A second language or 'L2' (Mitchell & Myles, 2004), in milieu composed of many language groups, is a useful and necessary tool that enables communication across those groups. Without a second language, social life and certainly business transactions in an increasingly global setting would come to a standstill. A speaker first encounters a second language as a foreign language. The L2 is acquired after the foundations of the L1 have been firmly laid and the speaker is using it in daily life as the chief or only means of communication (O'Grady, 1989). However, the concept of L2 is not seen in cases where, as in mixed-marriage families, for instance, children may naturally pick up the languages of both parents at the same time. This would be considered a bilingual environment. Mitchell and Myles have pointed out a person may have many L2s.

1.9.3 Interlanguage (IL)

Another common term that arises in studies on Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is 'interlanguage' (IL). As speakers come to SLA with the structure of their L1 already deeply internalised, they tend to refer intentionally or unintentionally to that structure when learning an L2. This makes familiar to learners, to an extent, traits of the L2 that they are attempting to now internalise. The process of internalising the L2 produces an understanding or a method unique to the individual of how to approach the rules and structure of the L2 in order to be able to use them effectively. This approach-method is termed the learner's 'interlanguage', and it stands apart from the L1 as well as the L2 that is being learnt (Selinker, 1972). Mitchell and Myles (2004, pp. 39) set apart interlanguage as a system in its own right that operates on its own terms and changes over time to accommodate changes or amendments in ideas and approaches that allow the learner to continue learning the same L2.

1.9.4 English as Second Language (ESL)

In contexts where English is a foreign language, such as among the aboriginal tribes of Malaysia, or a second language, such as in rural and urban areas of Malaysia, the teaching of English is called teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). Both terms tend to be used interchangeably, Brown (2007), for one, treated them as two different settings in which teaching English called for different approaches. A language that is foreign to some may not be so to others already familiar with it although they may not be good, fluent or expert

users of it. Learners of English who are residing in countries where English is the L1 or the native language who are from other countries or who are first-generation citizens would be ESL students, whereas learners of English in a region where English is not the first or native language, such as Malaysia, would be ESL students.

It is estimated that there are about 1.5 billion ESL learners today (Knagg, 2019) globally, centred in about 50 territories where English is not native, but commands respect. The status of English in these places, former British colonies such as India, Pakistan, Malaysia, South Africa, parts of East and West Africa and parts of the Caribbean, keeps it in the running for preferred second language. In Malaysia, about 60% of the population can speak English (Chepkemoi, 2018) at varying proficiency levels. This accounts for about 19,440,000 of the population, which was estimated by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2018) to number about 32.4 million in 2018. While English is widely spoken in Malaysia, it is not officially recognised as the national second language.

1.9.5 Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Whether students are learning English as a foreign language or as another language in addition to their L1, not necessarily the first 'other' language to their L1, the process is referred to as Second Language Acquisition or SLA. This is the learning of any language after the native or mother tongue is internalised and actively being used (Ellis, 2008). SLA is crucial for social integration in countries that are home to many language groups that have their own native or mother tongues such as Malaysia. SLA is believed to be somewhat different from second language learning. 'Acquisition' highlights the covert processes at work that align to enable the learner to internalise a second or foreign language, while 'learning' centres on the overt process of consciously, intentionally familiarising learners with the structures and features of a language to help them use it efficiently. This being the case, Krashen believed that students may 'acquire' or 'learn' any language at any time.

1.9.6 Errors

Corder (1967) and Brown (2007) differentiate between a language error and a language mistake. A language error is made when there is no prior knowledge of the relevant language rule, while a language mistake is committed when the relevant language rule, of which the user is aware, is incorrectly applied. It may be said that the first is due to lack of related knowledge and the second, to lack of mastery.

1.9.7 Tense

The grammatical category, tense, has to do with time frames. Human experience unfolds in time, and to capture that experience fully, it is necessary to relate experience to its occurring time frame, whether past, present or future (Comrie, 1976; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985). In a widely accepted definition, tense “indicates whether the situation described by a sentence is in the past, present, or in the future – in other words, whether it precedes, is simultaneous to, or follows the speech event” (Klein, 2009, p. 51).

1.9.8 Aspect

Aspect signifies the “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie, 1976, p. 3). There are two distinctive categories of aspect, the lexical and the grammatical. Lexically, aspect is concerned with how the predicate is structured semantically, while grammatically, aspect considers markedness such as morphological inflection.

1.10 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis is presented in five chapters, of which this chapter is the first. In the introductory chapter, the research topic and the background of the study about the difficulty of acquiring the English present perfect faced by L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners in Malaysia are presented, followed by the research questions that drive this thesis. The significant contribution of the findings to the body of knowledge in second language acquisition is also highlighted and the definition of key terms is established. This chapter ends with an overview of all the chapters that constitute the thesis.

Chapter Two reviews the literature and research studies related to the topic. Theories and concepts in relation to language transfer or cross-linguistic influence in language acquisition are presented first, followed by the concept of tense and aspect in English and a concise look at the present perfect of English and L1 Chinese and L1 Malay. The chapter highlights the main issues pertaining to second language acquisition, namely markedness, the influence of L1, and the significance of learners’ errors.

Chapter Three justifies the adoption of a mixed methods approach for this study. In this chapter, the research design, utilising a cross-sectional explanatory design, is described and data collection procedures, data analysis and reporting of findings are also outlined. The research instruments are detailed, including the development of the three elicitation

tasks and the piloting of the instruments before conducting the real study. The methods used for analysing both the quantitative and qualitative data are explained. Ethics considerations in conducting this study are also presented as a compulsory requirement for conducting human research.

Chapter Four reports the overall test scores of the three elicitation tasks in terms of the distribution of the four present perfect functions in present perfect environments for the advanced and intermediate levels of proficiency relevant to the L1 Chinese and L1 Malay ESL learners. The quantitative and qualitative data obtained are presented in the form of tables and charts before analysis is made.

Chapter Five discusses the findings of the data obtained in relation to the four research questions. The results of the entire study are summarised and the implications of the study are discussed. The recommendations for further studies in the field are presented.

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