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MALAYSIAN PRONUNCIATION: IS IT WRONG TO SOUND MALAYSIAN?

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ABSTRACT

The status of English language in Malaysia has been long known and understood by citizens of Malaysia. From its native countries, English has spread to all parts of the world. In Malaysia, English was brought by the British colonialists. Now, English is the second official language in the country and it serves as the medium of professional communication. As English is now used globally, Malaysian English (ME) has emerged to be accepted as a legitimate variety of English. Phonology is one of the notable differences between ME and native English, mainly British English. Due to the differences, there have been endless debates and discussions whether it is wrong to sound Malaysian. The focus of this conceptual paper is to highlight the common mistakes among Malaysians, in particular the learners of the English language so improvements can be made. Also, it is to highlight the importance of good use of English when conversing. Although challenges and problems in pronunciation are understood and acknowledged, suggestions are made so that the level of pronunciation among Malaysians can be improved.

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1. Introduction

In the world of communication, learning different languages apart from the mother tongue is crucial as it brings benefits in so many aspects. In Malaysia, English has become prominent in

language learning as it upholds its status as a global language for decades. Thus, this international language functions as the main mean of communication for people to interact with each other.

The four major components of language learning are writing, speaking, listening and reading. In speaking classes, pronunciation is given less attention by both teachers and learners. As mentioned by Thirusanku and Melor (2012), there is no need for non-native users of English to sound like the native speaker, but simply to use language, which is appropriate, acceptable and intelligible. However, according to Pennington and Revell (2018), pronunciation is a significant feature of communication that is commonly recognized and pronunciation with articulated sound brings meaningful meaning to the spoken words. Marza (2014) has the same thought as Pennington and Revell (2018) who argued that it is very clear that pronouncing a language properly is a significant aspect to a comprehensible conversation.

There are different views about the practice of pronunciation in Malaysia as argued by Thirusanku and Melor (2012) and Pennington and Revell (2018). This conceptual paper on Malaysian pronunciation is not suggesting that Malaysians should, or even must sound like a native speaker when conversing in English. Malaysian English (ME) after all, carries Malaysian identity and has been accepted globally as a legitimate variety of English. The focus of this paper is to highlight the common mistakes in Malaysian English pronunciation so learners of the English language could work on improving their pronunciation of English words. Correspondingly, it is to highlight the importance of good and correct pronunciation when conversing.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Commonly Mispronounced Words by Malaysians

2.1.1 Vowels

According to Rasaki, Ikhsan and Pratiwi (2018), there are 45 phonemes which are divided into 24 consonants, 12 vowels and 9 diphthongs in segmental features, which have different sounds for each sound symbol in English. Diphthongs are a combination of two vowels in a single syllable. Ladefoged (2005) stated that a diphthong is a sound in which the vowel character changes within a syllable but because it occurs only in one syllable, it is classified as a vowel. According to Roach (2009), there are nine diphthongs [ɪə], [ɔə], [eə], [ʊə], [eɪ], [ɔɪ], [aɪ], [ɔʊ], and [aʊ] in English.

Ladefoged and Johnson (2011) described diphthong as a sound that comprises a change within one single vowel. For all diphthongs, they involve a movement or glide from one vowel to another (Roach, 2009). The first part of a diphthong is longer and more bulbous than the second (McMahon, 2002).

There are difficulties that arise in the pronunciation of diphthongs. Based on previous studies on pronouncing diphthongs, there are numerous reasons why non-native learners cannot pronounce diphthongs correctly. A study by Yousif (2018) stated that learners failed to pronounce the word 'boat' with precise diphthong as learners excessively replaced the diphthong with the long vowel /ɔ:/ so the transcription became /bɔ:t/ which is incorrect. Thus, the meaning of the word 'boat' is changed to 'bought'. Due to such mispronunciation, a misunderstanding can occur in a conversation between two speakers. A study by Rasaki, Ikhsan and Pratiwi (2018) claimed that the learners displayed inconsistencies in pronouncing diphthongs [ɪə], [eɪ], [aɪ], and [ɔʊ] sounds, which most of them pronounced as [eə], [əə] and [ɔɪ] respectively.

In the case of long and short vowels, Malaysians do not normally differentiate between the two. Phng (2017) mentions in her study that Malaysians pronounce the /ɒ-ɔ/ pair is similar, showing that Malaysians blend /ɒ-ɔ/ when pronouncing it and only one vowel is expressed to represent both sounds. One example is in the words 'these' and 'this'. In terms of meaning, they mean the same but wrong pronunciation of these two words can cause misunderstanding as they are plural and singular nouns respectively. Another example is a set of words without differentiating between the long and short sounds, they can cause misunderstanding. The words are 'sheep' and 'ship'. The former has a long vowel /i:/ and the latter has short vowel /i/. Malaysians do not pronounce the long /i/ vowel sound clearly as the sound does not exist in their mother-tongue (Tan, 2017)

2.1.2 Past Tense Morphemes

In an important series of studies, Lardiere (1998, 2000, 2003) reports on the speech of "Patty", which provides evidence from a Chinese learner of English who herself in an English-speaking environment for many years. Patty's speech is a low rate of suppliance of past tense morphemes (under 35%). She reports that irregular verbs are nearly always past marked in past contexts and when the past tense morpheme creates a word final consonant cluster, it is nearly always omitted. Regular past tense morpheme -ed rate of suppliance is much lower across all verb types (approximately 6%). She further notes that Patty systematically deletes -t and -

d in word final clusters in both inflected and monomorphemic forms. Hawkins and Liska (2002) challenged the feasibility of Lardiere's phonological account. The subjects who are two Chinese speakers in Liska's studies, are more likely to omit /t/ and /d/ in past tense contexts (37%) than in monomorphemic words ending in clusters (18%). They point out that data from Bayley (1996) show a similar divergence.

Another study on this issue is by Prevost and White (2000). They similarly found that the use of inflectional morphology by four L2 learners of French and German was not random but exhibited constraints indicative of an unimpaired syntactic representation. A study by Solt et.al. (2003) found that second language learners of English do not perceive the regular past tense morpheme /-ed/ in a target-like manner and this is applicable for both beginning as well as advanced learners. They also managed to decipher the lack of ability of these L2 learners to perceive the non-syllabic allomorphs /t/ and /d/ while they are able to perceive the syllabic allomorph /ɪd/ quite accurately. The study conducted by them elicited an important notion which is English phonology creates perceptual challenge for second language learners with regard to the regular past tense. The regular past tense morpheme is not consistently perceived by adult learners – even in the clear speech of native speakers. In conclusion, most of the researches with regards to this issue has yielded almost the same result which is L2 learners have some perceptual challenges with regard to the English past tense of regular verb. This does not only affect certain L2 learners but most L2 learners around the globe.

L2 learners tend to commit errors in the pronunciation that related to noun and verb phrase. The possible reasons for this are in the complexities of the overlapping structures. In a research conducted by Khan (2005) among 30 Form Five students, most of them commit mistakes and are weak in grammar. Vahdatinejad (2008) also found the same problem and Malaysian L2 learners committed errors in tenses, word choices and prepositions. The learners usually face difficulties in learning and understanding the grammar aspects of the target language, such as in the use of preposition, articles, tenses, and subject-verb agreement (Saadiyah & Subramaniam, 2009). In addition, they tend to make mistakes in their language production due to different rules in for Verb and Noun Phrases in their L1 and target language. For instance, the use of morpheme 's' does not exist in Bahasa Melayu as used in English to indicate plurality in Noun and singularity in Verb. It is therefore illustrated that when learning a second language, the learners tend to rely on their first language. The rules from one language system will intrude into the coordination of the other language. For instance, in forming plural nouns in the

English language s, es, or ies needs to be added to the original form of the noun [one bus, many buses] but such rules do not apply in the first language of the respondents whereby no s, es, or ies needs to be added to the singular form of the noun in order to form its plural version ; [one bus, many bus]. Hence, this interferes their L2 production. To successfully learn L2, it requires the learners to often exclude the L1 structures from the L2 learning process if the structures of the two languages are distinctly different.

English phonology creates a perceptual challenge for second language learners with regard to the regular past tense. The morpheme is not consistently perceived by adult learners, Malaysians in this sense. The inability to perceive the regular past tense morpheme consistently across allomorphic variants /t/ and /d/ is due to systematic perceptual deficit (Solt, et al, 2003). Systematic perceptual deficit is a barrier that the second language learners have in producing the morpheme in target-like manner. However, it is believed that the more advanced learners are able to discriminate the morpheme more accurately due to their ability to draw on contextualized cues to access their grammatical knowledge. In short, this shows that phonological factors play a role syntactic errors by L2 learners. It is well known that acquiring second language phonology is a challenge even many adult learners never fully master.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Phonology is one of the notable differences between ME and native English, mainly British English. Due to the differences, miscommunication can happen. Jenkins (2000) in Shak, Chang and Stephen (2016) pointed out that phonological problems are reasons for unsuccessful communications. Poor pronunciation comes across as unfamiliar sound and words, which makes it harder to comprehend. L1 interference like the absence of certain sounds in L1 or in the target language is also one of the factors hindering correct pronunciation. Understanding ME pronunciation may seem easy when speaking with Malaysians whose first language is the Malay language because this language uses almost similar phonemes as English. However, the English language has slightly more consonant sounds and vowel sounds than ME. There are 25 vowels including twelve pure vowels, eight diphthongs, and five triphthongs. Meanwhile, ME vowels were found to be slightly different in quality and quantity (Jassem, 2014). Therefore, when communicating with English native speakers, or speakers from other countries who also use English as their second language, miscommunication can occur. A study found that Swedish listeners did not understand a Malaysian speaker until the speaker was trained to modify her

realization of word stress, consonant clusters and long vowels. After the alteration, the Malaysian speaker has become more intelligible to the Swedish listeners (Jeong, Thorén, & Othman, 2020). Yiing (2011) also noted that in pronouncing a language, the influence of their mother tongue is one of the major problems. This is because their mother tongue has a significant influence when they pronounce the foreign words. Hence, learners become confused and make mistakes in pronouncing English words, especially when they pronounce English diphthongs.

Other problems in pronunciation in general occur because the learners were too focused to speak like the natives. Other contributing factors are the habits of imitating, mishearing, and mispronouncing which leads to fossilization. Errors in pronouncing words happen when they imitate wrong pronunciation from others. Non-native English speakers that they listen to a lot could also be their English teachers. This is why it is important for English teachers to use correct pronunciation. However, that is sometimes not the case. Asante-Nimako (2018) stated that many tutors have pronunciation problem and become bad examples for the students. Mustikareni (2017) states that another factor that contributes to the difficulties in English pronunciation is also the environment. Malaysians, logically, have Malaysian pronunciation because this is the environment they acquire the sounds from. Next, Suryatiningsih (2015) and Sembiring and Ginting (2016) states the other contributing factor towards mispronunciation is the unfamiliarity of the phonemes. Learners tend to speak using the common words that they are familiar with, hence, when they come across a word that is unheard of, the pronunciation may be affected. Finally, Yousif (2018) also indicates that the reason of mispronunciation produced by English language learners is the ineffective phonetic teaching process. When teaching phonetics, understanding and using the correct approach are crucial so that the learners can learn effectively on how to pronounce the words correctly.

Although the issues and problems that hinder non-native learners to pronounce certain words correctly are respectably acknowledged, a concern with such practice is in time, it will result in fossilisation. The concept of fossilisation in second language acquisition is the process in which incorrect language becomes a habit and cannot be easily corrected. Wei (2006) discusses one of the different types of fossilization is phonological fossilization. Phonological fossilisation refers to the repetition of phonological errors which result from the incorrect acquisition of pronunciation of L2.

3.1 The Current Situation of Teaching and Learning Pronunciation in Malaysia

There are many reasons pronunciation is not emphasised in English lessons. For Iranian teachers, there are external factors like lack of time, motivation, educational materials, and facilities (Pourhosein Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Second language learners understand that English pronunciation is a matter of concern (Abu Bakar & Ridhuan, 2015). However, pronunciation is not a priority in English classrooms in Malaysia. From a teacher's perspective, challenges in teaching pronunciation comes not only from the administrators lack of resources, and the curriculum with unrealistic goals, but also from uncooperative students. These challenges affect teachers' motivation to teach pronunciation (Ahmad Shah, 2014). In Malaysia, from students' perspective, pronunciation is not being taught properly in class because of the exam-oriented education system which leaves teachers with no choice but to prioritise the 'more important' language components that will be tested in the examination namely writing, literature, and grammar. At the same time, teachers think that pronunciation should be taught when error is detected such as during reading aloud session, or role play. However, they could not do these activities often because it is time consuming (Jayapalan & Pillai, 2011).

Unfortunately, time constraints is not the only reason some teachers think teaching pronunciation should not be emphasised too much in class. In the same research by Jayapalan and Pillai (2011), the interviewed teachers expressed their unreadiness to teach Standard British English. Conflicting views were found, however, when the government's decision to bring native speakers into schools to teach English is questioned by some because according to them Malaysian's English pronunciation has been generally comprehensible abroad (Jayapalan & Pillai, 2011). It is clear that these conflicting opinions may be caused by, or are the reasons there is lack of emphasis on English pronunciation in the Malaysian education system.

Besides teachers' reluctance and different stance in teaching pronunciation, Malaysians' perception of contemporary Received Pronunciation or RP and ME needs to be taken into consideration too. According to Noriah, Normah, and Kamalanathan (2007), though many Malaysians are more comfortable with MSE, they do agree that it may be incomprehensible in international level, and would change to more standardised pronunciation in formal situations. In addition, most think that ME is an identity of Malaysians and should be appreciated too (Noriah, Normah, & Kamalanathan, 2007). However, despite valuing Malaysian English and the use of it,

some perceive it as substandard to native-like pronunciation of English (Tan, Lee, Adi Kasuma, & Ganapathy, 2018).

Malaysians are encouraged to master pronunciation as one of the speaking skills in English language learning. Hartoto (2010) stated that pronunciation has been taught and already presented with manner of articulation, place articulation, visual transcriptions and all supra segmental features in the sounds. However, most Malaysians still have low proficiency in pronunciation. Their pronunciation is still not on par with Standard English pronunciation and is still far from correct English pronunciation. Although the aspect of pronunciation is included in the English language textbook of Malaysian secondary education, Rajadurai (2007) stated that "pronunciation is often taught with a rigid adherence to prescribed norms" due to the reasons as follows:

- a) Pronunciation is viewed as the most resilient to change component in the second language due to the influences of age and the first language thus leaving teachers to have very little control in teaching,
- b) As many ESL classrooms have embraced the communicative paradigm that emphasizes fluency, meaning and authenticity, the teaching of discrete sound elements does not seem to fit comfortably in those classrooms,
- c) Teachers do not find themselves well-equipped and comfortable to teach pronunciation, and it is also hard for them to incorporate pronunciation with other language skills,
- d) The oral proficiency of native speakers is used as the yardstick for many oral proficiency assessments, and
- e) Pronunciation is directly linked to social, cultural and individual identity issues.

Additionally, Priscilla et. al. (2016) stated among the prominent factors that contribute to the difficulties in producing the correct pronunciation of the target language are minimal interest in learning, minimal exposure, and the instructors' weakness of not highlighting the importance of pronunciation nor having the right tools to help their students learn proper pronunciation.

3.1.2 The Importance of Teaching Pronunciation

Nowadays, there are various computer-assisted pronunciation teaching (CAPT) softwares that can help teach and improve pronunciation (Saleh & Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2020, Tejedor-García, Escudero, Cámara-Arenas, González-Ferreras & Cardeñoso-Payo, 2020). Explicit pronunciation

instruction given to a group of Chinese mainland university students improved their pronunciation (Zhang & Yuan, 2020). In the meantime, it is advisable for instructors to consider various dimensions when improving the learners' pronunciation, namely awareness, accuracy, achievement, and affinity (Abu Bakar & Ridhuan, 2015).

Therefore, there are many efforts that need to be taken by all respective parties who are involved in this field in order to better improve this situation, considering that English language is a global language and there has never been a language spoken more widely in the world than English is today. More research should be conducted on Malaysians' perception on RP and how their perception affects the teaching and learning of English pronunciation.

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