

WHAT ENGLISH DO WE TEACH?

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ABSTRACT

The English language has been taught in Malaysian schools since colonial days. Despite the change in its status, from that of a medium of instruction to that of a second language in the education system, it remains an integral part of the Malaysian education system. This paper will consider the teaching of English in Malaysian schools from the following perspectives: the aims of the English language syllabus in the KBSM, the English language teacher, the English language textbooks and some considerations on how English language teachers can achieve the aims of the KBSM.

Introduction

The English language was introduced into Malaysia through the colonial education system and today it is still entrenched in our education system. The Report of the Education Planning Committee 1956 ensured the continued teaching of the English language in Malaysia (Asmah Haji Omar 1992:84), and the teaching of English is still seen as an integral part of the Malaysian education system. It is taught as a compulsory second language right up to the university level. Students have to enrol for the subject, though attaining a pass grade may not be mandatory at certain levels in some institutions.

The Teaching of English in the KBSM

The English language syllabus in the KBSM recognises the importance of the English language both at national and international levels and also "to enable Malaysia(ns) to engage meaningfully in local and international trade" (Sukatan Pelajaran Menengah Bahasa Inggeris, 1987:1). Clearly, if Malaysians are to be able to participate in international communication, their language must be internationally intelligible.

This level of achievement is, however, often beyond the ability of many Malaysian students. The government is clearly aware of this and it is indicated in the Report of the Cabinet Committee on the implementation of the Malaysian policy:

The objective of the English language lessons, in accordance with its status as the second language, is to impart basic skills and knowledge with two specific aims; firstly, to enable the pupils to use the language in their work and for specific activities, and secondly, for a small group, to enable them to improve their skills, and increase their knowledge of the language to be used for specific needs at higher levels of education.

(Report of the Cabinet Committee 1985:57-58)

The teaching of the English language in Malaysia must be seen as two fold:

- i) to enable a large portion of Malaysian students to have sufficient knowledge of the language to be able to carry out basic communicative activities in English, and
- ii) to enable a smaller group of highly proficient students to achieve international intelligibility and to be able to use the English language for purposes of higher education.

This is an important notion. We want to produce students who will be understood in an international situation. In view of this, we need to ask what English we teach our students.

There is no denying that a new variety of English has emerged in Malaysia which is called Malaysian English. Malaysian English is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is part of global proliferation of new varieties of English in the twentieth century which witnessed the rise of the English in the twentieth century which witnessed the rise of the English language as a universal language (Kachru, 1986:127) and as an international language (McArthur, 1987:324; Strevens, 1992:27-47).

As a result of the contact with the local languages in Malaysia, the English language has undergone a process of indigenisation where local words have become incorporated into the English language. These borrowings of local words and also the processes of code-switching and code-mixing have all contributed to the emergence of Malaysian English (Vethamani, 1996:53).

Malaysian English has been described in terms of lectal ranges. Platt and Weber (1980) state that in Malaysia, "a speech continuum developed, from the basilect, a sub-variety spoken by those with little or no education, through mesolect to the acrolect, a sub-variety spoken by those with high level of education" (Platt and Weber, 1980:22).

Baskaran (1987) also observed the lectal range among Malaysian English speakers. She indicates that the lectal continuum ranges from the educated form (used in official

speech and writing), through the informal (though not uneducated) speech variety, and finally on to the uneducated substandard variety. She is of the view that the acrolect or educated form will evolve to represent the Standard form in Malaysian English.

The three lectal ranges can manifest themselves in a single speaker (Baskaran, 1987:5; Platt and Weber, 1980:109-113). An acrolect speaker could switch his lect, because of a change in interlocutor and location and also as a result of change in interlocutors' role relationships. As such, an acrolectal speaker would have the ability to move down the lectal scale and speak on a mesolectal or basilectal level depending on the interlocutors and situation. The lect switch is a unidirectional downward switch and consequently, the mesolect speaker would also be able to switch to basilect but the basilect speaker would not be able to use either the mesolect or acrolect forms. The informal or colloquial variety often manifests itself in less formal domains like the office cafeteria and school playground.

Both Platt and Weber (1980:169) and Benson (1990:22) suggest that, though the official standard may seem to be Standard British English, the unofficial standard may well be Malaysian English Type I (Malaysian English from the English-medium stream students, before Bahasa Melayu became the medium of instruction). Wong (1981) states that Malaysians "have come to realize that no longer is it necessary or desirable to aim at a foreign standard of English for themselves" (Wong, 1981:94). Baskaran recognizes this and is accurate in her categorization of the acrolect range of Malaysian English as the official standard for English in Malaysia (1987:53).

Thus, we can say that English language teachers in Malaysia should teach Standard Malaysian English as this variety has international intelligibility. Speakers of standard Malaysian English will be able to communicate with other speakers of English in an international arena.

The question that arises is whether Malaysian teachers speak Standard Malaysian English and if they are capable of teaching students to become internationally intelligible. I shall comment on some Malaysian English language textbooks and then consider the language used by Malaysian teachers based on a research I conducted among some English language teachers.

The English Language in Malaysian Textbooks

The English language in Malaysian secondary school textbooks is generally of an acceptable level and can be considered Standard Malaysian English. However, despite the various selection processes that are imposed by the textbook bureau there are many

textbooks with both minor and gross errors. Below are just two examples from books selected at random by this writer.

Example 1

Below is a comic strip used in a Form Three textbook.



taken from *English Form 3*

A couple of points need to be considered. First, how useful is this comic strip. Second, is the grammar in the utterance. In the second frame, the response of the second speaker is clearly ungrammatical. The correct response to the first speaker's question, "Can't you see there's a bee in my tea?" should be "No, I can't see any bee in your tea." and not "I can't see any bee in my tea".

Example 2

The following example is taken from the Preface of a textbook.

"Note To The Teacher

The teacher is requested to make full use of the following resources provided in the book for the benefit of their students."

The problem of agreement emerges here. The singular subject 'teacher' should have a third person singular possessive pronoun 'his/her' and not the plural form 'their'. It is indeed important for teachers to be extremely selective in their choice of textbooks and the materials they use in the classroom. It is important that the language in teaching materials is of a standard variety of the English language. The language in the textbook should serve as a model for the learner.

The Variety of English Spoken by Malaysian English Language Teachers

It is important that the language of English language teachers be taken into consideration. Today, teachers with a variety of qualifications become English language teachers in Malaysia. What should be considered is the professional training and the competence of the teachers in the English language. Also, out-dated labels like native speakers and mother tongue speakers of the language must be discarded as they “spuriously emphasize the biological” (Rampton, 1990:98). Prominence should be given to “expertise” (Rampton, 1990:98) in the language.

In Malaysian schools today, English language teachers use both the mesolect and the acrolect forms of Malaysian English. Clearly it is preferable that teachers use Standard Malaysian English, the acrolect. However, there is no denying that some teachers sometimes slip into non-standard forms unconsciously while others may use the mesolect form because of their lack of expertise in the language.

Below are some of the utterances this writer noted in the course of observing English language teachers in the classroom. The utterances are from graduate teachers, trained in TESL.

- U1 : “This is the first project we *are having* of this nature.”
- U2 : “What *can* you understand?”
- U3 : “ ... vocabulary, and *all these* stuff.”
- U4 : “Some might be weak and *things like* that.”
- U5 : “You’ll be going to school *or whatever*.”
- U6 : “Make the task *more* easier.”
- U7 : “Repeat the whole thing *again*.”
- U8 : “We will be collecting *back* the pictures.”
- U9 : “You can keep the pictures but *pass up* the descriptions.”
- U10 : “All those born in November, *hands up*.”
- U11 : “I *am hoping* not to move this book.”
- U12 : “The pictures in your head, *it changes*.”
- U13 : “You will need a *rubber*.”
- U14 : “The couple *are* from England.”
- U15 : “You teach grammar, *right*?”
- U16 : “Pictures, *isn’t it*?”
- U17 : “Too *much* activities.”
- U18 : Is it cheap *to wash* photographs here?”
- U19 : “My partner is X *whereby* he’s going to share what I’m teaching.”
- U20 : “Give them some words *whereby* they have to come up with some description.”
- U21 : “This is one of the activities *whereby* you can use for post-listening.”
- U22 : “The PMR is a public exam *whereby* you have to sit for in Malaysian schools.”

The above examples of teacher utterances in English can be grouped under various categories of common errors. They range from minor to gross errors. Some of these utterances in non-standard English are so commonly used that many teachers are unaware that these are in fact errors. I wish to highlight two set of utterances. The first set of utterances (U3, U4, U5) were from three different teachers. The teachers merely used some convenient expressions when they lacked the ability to provide more appropriate words.

The second set of utterances (U19, U20, U21 and U22) came from one teacher. The use of the word 'whereby' for various other words seems to be a part of his idiolect. The teacher was completely unaware of his over use and misuse of this word until it was pointed out to him.

Teachers sometimes do not seem to listen to what they say in the classroom. It might be worthwhile to consider how teachers express themselves in the classroom. Teachers need to bear in mind that they are models for their students. Therefore, they should be careful how they express their thoughts. If they fail to provide accurate language forms, then students will learn non-standard language from them.

The Variety of English Spoken by Malaysian Students

The variety of English spoken by most students tends to range between mesolect and basilect Malaysian English. There is no denying that there is often a small group of students who are capable of speaking acrolect Malaysian English in secondary schools. Generally, Malaysian students tend to code-switch and code-mix when they speak in English, especially outside the English language classroom. It is, however, important that the language variety in the English language classroom approximates standard Malaysian English.

It is the role of the teacher to encourage students to speak in standard Malaysian English. It might be worthwhile to inform students that the different sociolects or registers can be used for other purposes. For example, the students can be taught that the mesolectal and basilectal forms can be used on/during less formal and more intimate occasions.

Some Recommendations

In view of the aims of teaching English to Malaysian students, it is recommended that Malaysian students be taught standard Malaysian English. It is a variety which is understood by the local population and it also has international intelligibility. Teaching

standard Malaysian English will also help to remove other stigmas such as sounding like a foreigner or an *orang putih*.

Teachers can consider the following two recommendations as a means of creating more self-awareness of their own language in the classroom and use it as a means of improving their teaching.

First, consider taping your lessons. This will provide you with a means of examining your language in the classroom and also the kind of language generated by your students. It serves a dual purpose of studying your language and also your students' language.

Second, do peer observation. Partner with a colleague and ask her/him to pay close attention to your language. The observer could make notes and write down utterances that are non-standard. After the teaching session, the two teachers should spend some time discussing the lesson and their utterances.

Conclusion

Teaching the English language in Malaysia is a challenging experience. Teachers have to work with a mixed lot of students. They range from the enthusiastic to the totally unmotivated and indifferent. The language ability of the students is also mixed. It is also true to say that the language ability of Malaysian teachers is also mixed. The challenge for English language teachers is to make sure that they are competent both in their language and teaching skills.

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