

Problem Areas in Teaching Personal Pronouns

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By the time a Malay pupil reaches the Lower Secondary School he should be able to use pronouns correctly if he has mastered what the Primary English Syllabus sets out to achieve. But very often in Form One and even when he has reached Form Three, he still finds difficulty in handling pronouns. The pupil who does not speak English other than in the classroom is the main culprit. He confuses the pronouns when speaking or writing English because the form that pronouns take in his mother tongue may differ from that in English. The first language interference is evident in varying degrees at various stages in the pupil's learning of the second language.

A teacher in the Lower Secondary School may encounter the following problems when he is teaching personal pronouns. A pupil who is good at the Malay language uses the personal pronouns according to his relationship or social standing in comparison with the person he is addressing. This is so because of the Malay tendency to grade pronouns according to politeness. Such a pupil may look for equivalents of these pronouns of politeness in the English language and in so doing he may alter or distort the meaning of the sentence. This is especially so when direct speech is involved.

e.g. ES. Ali asked the old man, "Where is your house?"
MS. Ali tanya orang tua itu, "**Tok**, rumah **tok** dimana?"

In English it is possible to address the old man as Mr. ..., if Ali knows his name. In Malay it is proper for the old man to be addressed in a polite form. In this case the word **tok** is used. The literal meaning is **grandfather**. From this examples it is evident that if a pupil thinks in his mother tongue and then tries to write in English he will have the problem of using the correct pronouns. The literal Malay equivalent for the English question "Where is your house?" is "Dimana rumah awak?" and it was pointed out earlier **awak** cannot be used by a young person to address an old man.

The literal English equivalent for "Tok, rumah tok dimana?" is "Grandfather, where is grandfather's house?" In this sentence the second **tok** is used as a possessive pronoun.

The next problem arises because English pronouns have different forms i.e. in the subjective, objective and genitive cases. There is also a change in form when they are possessive pronouns and reflexive/emphatic pronouns. Malay pronouns are invariable, that is, they do not change their forms to show whether they are being used as the subject or the object of a verb, and only the word order shows us if a pronoun is being used as a possessive. In English for instance **I** is used only as the subject of a verb, **me** as the direct or indirect object, and **my** as a possessive. In Malay, however, the word **saya** does the work of **I**, **me** and **my**. It is only the word order in a sentence that shows the specific function of **saya**.

e.g. ES. **I** live in Kuala Lumpur.
MS. **Saya** tinggal di Kuala Lumpur.
(**I** and **saya** are subjects.)
ES. Mr. Lee teaches **me** to read English
MS. Encik Lee mengajar **saya** membaca Bahasa Inggeris
(**Me** and **saya** are direct objects.)

- ES. Miss Lim gave **me** a letter.
 Cik Lim memberi **saya** sepucuk surat.
 (**Me** and **saya** are indirect objects.)
- ES. Don't keep **my** book.
- MS. Jangan simpan buku **saya**.
 (**My** and **saya** are possessive pronouns.)

Note: **Saya** is a polite way of referring to oneself and can be used by everyone when addressing others. The exception, however, is when one is addressing royalty. **Patek** has to be used instead of **saya**.

A problem may also arise when the use of **we** is taught. In English **we** is used as the plural of **I**. In the Malay language, however, **kami** or **kita** may be used according to the context.

Kami is used when the person addressed is not included.

e.g. ES. Where did you go to last night?

We went to a film show.

MS. Kamu semua pergi kemana semalam?

Kami pergi menengok wayang gambar.

As the questioner is clearly excluded from the answer, **kami** is used i.e. the person addressed is not included in the action.

Kita is used when the person addressed is included.

e.g. ES. **We** must read newspapers every day.

MS. **Kita** mesti membaca surat khabar tiap-tiap hari.

In this example **kita** is not just the plural of **saya**. It means **you and I** or **you and we**. The person(s) addressed is/are included.

Due to the existence of this difference in the 1st person between the English and Malay language, a Malay pupil will write **we and you** when he really means **we**. At first the teacher may not know that the pupil is making a mistake as **we and you** are quite correct in English. It is only when oral work is done in class and pupils are required to make sentences relevant to certain situations that this mistake becomes obvious. I discovered this in one of my classes and from then onwards I have made it a point to drill and practise the use of **we** in a situation where **kita** would be used in Malay.

Here I would like to include one of the situations I usually use (based on patterned responses):

'The class is planning to go on a picnic. Teacher is going with you. Let us each suggest something which we could do together.' (Individual pupils will be picked to give their suggestions). The teacher starts off by saying:

'All of you and I will go to (name of a place).'

We will go to (name of a place).'

When the pupils have given their sentences, the teacher then explains that **we** is used whether the speaker is included or excluded. This explanation could be given in Malay if necessary.

As I have explained earlier, there is no single word which could be used as **you**. The Malays are well-known for their politeness and the second person (singular and plural) has different equivalents in Malay. The choice of the word will depend on whom one is addressing.

e.g. When one is talking to one's employer one would say:

ES. Where are **you** going to?

MS. **Tuan** hendak ke mana?

Tuan in this sentence is equivalent to **sir** in English. However, in English **you** is used to address one's employer. In the Malay language **kamu** cannot be used in such a context.

e.g. When one is addressing a close friend or someone of one's own age group, one would say:

ES. I hope **you** will write a letter to me.

MS. Saya berharap **saudara kamu** akan menulis surat kepada saya.

A Malay pupil finds it difficult to use **you** for every person he is referring to in English. He tends to look for equivalents for the Malay terms he would use. This often leads to the wrong use of **Mr**, **Mrs** and **Miss**. This problem usually arises when a Malay pupil has to write sentences in direct speech.

The biggest problem area is the use of the 3rd person singular pronoun i.e. **he**, **she**, **it**. As mentioned earlier, the 3rd person singular pronoun in the Malay language has no gender contrast, i.e. **ia**, **dia**.

The only exception to the invariability of Malay pronouns is in the 3rd person singular, i.e. **ia** may be used only as the subject of a verb or of a sentence and cannot be used as an object or as a possessive pronoun. The objective and possessive form of **ia** is **dia**. In the written form **ia** is usually used as a subject and **dia** is used as an object. **Dia** can also be used as a subject in both the spoken and written forms. **Ia** and **dia** can be used for both masculine and feminine gender. One will be able to determine the gender through the context.

e.g. ES. Rahim lives near my house. **He** is my good friend.

I visit **him** every Sunday. I like **his** little sister.

MS. Rahim tinggal dekat rumah saya. **Ia** kawan baik saya.

Saya melawat **dia** tiap-tiap hari Ahad. Saya suka adek perempuan **dia**.

Malay pupils tend to confuse **he** and **she** and of course **his** and **him**, **hers** and **her**. They may write using a masculine subject and feminine possessive pronouns may be used to refer to the subject. It is only through constant practice in the usage of the 3rd person singular pronoun that one can hope to help Malay pupils to use the 3rd person correctly in English.

The 3rd person plural pronoun **they** causes the least confusion for the Malay pupil. **Mereka ini** refers to people close by and **mereka itu** refers to people who are a certain distance away or to people who have already been mentioned.

ES. **They** asked **them their** names.

MS. **Mereka** tanya **mereka** nama **mereka**.

When reference is being made to animals or objects (animate or inanimate) other than people, there is no equivalent for it in Malay. The animal or object has to be mentioned each time reference is being made to it.

e.g. ES. Ahmad has a **cat**. **It** eats fish every day.

MS. Ahmad mempunyai seekor **kucing**. **Kucing itu** makan ikan tiap-tiap hari.

If **dia** is used to replace **kucing** (cat) it would mean that Ahmad eats fish every day.

ES. Where is **my pencil**? **It** is in the drawer.

MS. Dimana **pensel saya**? **Pensel awak** ada dalam laci.

From all the examples that have been given it is quite evident that a Malay pupil will tend to find difficulty in using pronouns correctly. He will be confused by gender-contrast and case-contrast especially.

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