

What kind of Spoken English?

CLIVE BRASNETT

English Department, Language Institute, Kuala Lumpur.

Teachers of English are often worried about the kind of English they should teach. Most of them are aware that there is a wide variety in the way different groups of native speakers of English pronounce the language. They can distinguish, for example, between a British speaker and an American speaker. The problem is complicated in Malaysia by the fact that English has been widely used as a lingua franca and for official transactions. Many Malaysians are so familiar with English that the question occasionally arises, "Why not teach 'Malaysian English'?"

This suggestion pre-supposes that there is a single version of the language which can be identified as 'Malaysian English'. This, however, is not the case. Several factors influence the way Malaysians speak English. What is their mother tongue? From whom have they learnt English? What form of English, if any, do they regularly hear and use? Such determining factors have led to the existence of a number of versions of 'Malaysian English'. Is there one version which should be preferred to all others? It may be proposed to adopt a version "used by educated speakers of the language". Leaving aside the problem of defining 'educated', we find that students who have passed through a university often speak a form of English approximating to one of the versions used by native speakers. If we can decide on one of these versions as a teaching model, and decide on how nearly we should expect our pupils to approximate to it, we can avoid the dilemma of trying to define 'Malaysian English' or adjudicating between the various versions of it. We shall have the advantage of being able to choose a model that is already well defined.

There will be another advantage, and this is to do with standards. The minimum standard we should expect of our pupils is that they should be intelligible when speaking English. Of course there are several levels of intelligibility. One may be intelligible to other users of the language within one's own community only, or throughout the country, or internationally. If we consider the teaching of spoken English important, obviously we must aim at international intelligibility, particularly now that the national language will be increasingly used for communication between Malaysians. Adopting a widely-used version of English as a model can help to ensure that our pupils become intelligible not only to native users of the language but also to the great number of others who use English as an international language for commercial, diplomatic, educational and other purposes.

If we agree that these two advantages make it desirable that we adopt one of the versions of English used by native speakers as a teaching model, which should we choose? For historical reasons, the kind of English taught in Malaysia in the past has been a version widely used by speakers throughout England which is known as 'Received Pronunciation' (RP for short). Based originally on the sort of English used by native speakers in south-east England, it became widely diffused when it was adopted as a model for B.B.C. announcers. The teaching of English as a second or foreign language by British teachers has also been widely based on this model. It has been carefully defined and described in textbooks and used in phonetic readers. It is the model widely used for dictionaries such as Daniel Jones's *Everyman's English Pronouncing Dictionary*. Many Malaysian teachers of English speak a form of English which is barely distinguishable from RP. For these reasons – its ready availability in books and on the air, the fact that it is already well established here and that it is widely understood and 'accepted' (or 'well received') throughout the world – RP seems to be the best version of English to serve as a teaching model in Malaysia. (Similar reasons may be adduced for using the version known as 'General American English' in the Phillipines.)

Obviously we do not expect our students to speak like B.B.C. announcers. How closely, then, do we expect them to approximate to RP? Let us consider the question of intelligibility again. One of the factors making for intelligibility is the ability to make distinctions between those various vowel and consonant sounds in a language which distinguish one word from another, which indicate, for example, that the word *bit* has a different meaning from the words *beat*, *pit* and *bid*. These vowel and consonant sounds which make differences in the meanings of words are called 'phonemes'. In RP there are 20 vowel and diphthong phonemes (21 in some speakers' variety) and 24 consonant phonemes. Do Malaysian speakers have difficulty in pronouncing any of these? Some of these phonemes do in fact give difficulty, one reason being the fact that they do not exist in the pupils' mother tongue. Teachers of English must, therefore, be aware of the existence of such sounds. (In examples which follow I shall confine myself to comparing English and Bahasa Malaysia. J.D.O' Connor's *Better English Pronunciation*¹

¹ J.D.O' Connor, *Better English Pronunciation*.
Cambridge/ELBS, 1970

has a section on the difficulties of English pronunciation for speakers of Cantonese, most of these difficulties being also applicable to Hokkien speakers. A further section of the same book on difficulties encountered by Hindi speakers will be found largely applicable to Tamil speakers.)

There are far fewer vowel and diphthong phonemes in Bahasa Malaysia than in English. This may tempt learners to use the same vowel sound in English words which should have different vowel sounds, to use, for example, the first vowel in *tidur* for both *bit* and *beat*, the first vowel in *telor* for both *wet* and *wait*, or the second vowel in *telor* for both *cot* and *court*. Obviously pupils should be taught both to recognize the difference between such pairs of English words when they hear them and to make the difference when saying them. They may not, however, pronounce quite the same vowel sound as RP speakers. Simply lengthening the nearest vowel sound used in Bahasa Malaysia will be sufficient to distinguish words such as *beat*, *wait* and *court* from other words which have shorter vowel sounds, such as *bit*, *wet* and *cot*. In the case of *wait*, it does not matter that the pupil will be using a long pure vowel whereas an RP speaker uses a diphthong. Making the necessary *distinction* between words of different meanings is the key to intelligible pronunciation and an approximation to the RP sound may be sufficient. Consider the diphthong used by RP speakers in words such as *go* and *know*. No such sound exists in Malay, but the vowel used in the first syllable of *boleh* will do equally well. To approximate to the RP English diphthong it should be made relatively long. A comparison of the vowel systems of English and Bahasa Malaysia will show that Malay learners need acquire few totally new vowel sounds in order to speak English intelligibly.

Some unaccustomed consonant sounds, however, must be learnt. There are 24 English consonant phonemes. We can make a total of 24 consonant phonemes in Bahasa Malaysia, too, if we include sounds occurring in words which have come into the language through Arabic or Persian (e.g. those at the beginning of words such as *zakiah* and *syarah*) or through English (e.g. the sound represented by 'v' in *universiti*). However, the lists of consonant phonemes in the two languages are not identical. English makes no use, for example, of the sound represented by 'ny' at the beginning of words such as *nyata*. On the other hand, Bahasa Malaysia makes no use of the phoneme represented by 'th' in the word *thin*, the different phoneme represented by the same spelling in *they*, or, thirdly, that represented by 's' in *pleasure*. Fortunately for the Malay learner this third phoneme occurs in only a few English words. Nevertheless, learners must acquire the ability to say it and not replace it by a sound available in Malay which could lead, for example, to the word *leisure*

being confused with *ledger*. Similarly, *thin* should not be pronounced as *tin*, nor *they* as *day*.

We must consider not only the total number of phonemes, but also their 'distribution'. Consonant phonemes may also come at the ends of words, but the final consonant in the word *back*, for example, does not occur at the ends of words in Bahasa Malaysia. The sound represented by 'k' in such words as *anak* is quite a different sound and the unwary pupil might be tempted to use this sound at the ends of words in English. Also, the consonant sounds at the end of words such as *bag* and *rob* do not come at the end of Bahasa Malaysia words. Pupils may tend to leave off these sounds when saying the English words. A problem also occurs with the sounds usually represented by 'p' and 't'. Although these occur at the ends of words in both English and Bahasa Malaysia, the manner of pronouncing them in such cases often varies in the two languages. English native speakers often pronounce them with a sudden release of air. (This depends on whether a pause follows or, if not, what kind of sound follows.) However, this sudden release of air in the pronunciation of 'p' and 't' coming at the ends of words is not a feature of Malay speech. If pupils do not practise it the sounds may not be noticed by other users of English and the word *seat*, for example, may be heard as *see*.

There is another feature of English consonant usage which causes difficulty, often great difficulty. This is the tendency to combine consonant sounds into 'clusters'. An extreme example can be heard in the word *strengths*, which has a cluster of three consonant sounds at the beginning and a further three at the end. In the phrase *next Spring*, six consonant sounds may be heard in sequence (though even native speakers tend to drop one of them). Consonant clusters are not a feature of Malay. In adopting a foreign word for a postage stamp Malaysians in their wisdom have adapted the word to suit the genius of the language, the resulting spelling, *setem*, accurately reflecting the correct pronunciation in Bahasa Malaysia. Pupils may well be tempted to slip in a vowel between the consonants making up a cluster in English. When these clusters come at the ends of words the temptation is to leave part of them unsaid, thus leading to a failure to make a distinction between words such as *fill*, *film* and *filmed*.

If all these pronunciation problems – those of vowel and consonant sounds, and of the combination of consonant sounds – are overcome, can we then be sure that our pupils' English will then be internationally intelligible? Unfortunately not, because we still have to consider problems of stress. (A third feature of speech, intonation, is not so important from the intelligibility point of view, though we must certainly consider it when we try to encourage our pupils to speak more expressively.)

Native speakers of English make a considerable difference between stressed and unstressed syllables, both in individual words of two or more syllables and in longer sequences of speech. Such stress differences are not a feature of Malay, of Chinese or of Indian languages. It is the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables which gives languages such as English their characteristic rhythm. In languages such as Malay all syllables are produced with more or less equal force. If this way of speaking is used by a pupil speaking English, other users of English may characterise his English as being 'jerky', or as 'having a 'jerky rhythm.'

As regards intelligibility, the problem of word stress is particularly acute. A word's stress pattern is an important clue as to its meaning for native users of English, so that words that look so dissimilar on the page as *character* and *corrector* may be confused if the stressing is incorrect. Furthermore, wrong stressing can lead to words not being recognised at all as part of the English language. The stress pattern of a word should, therefore, be taught along with its meaning and spelling. Fortunately, most English dictionaries give guidance on word stress.

Fortunately, also, there are very few differences in the way native speakers from different parts of the world use stress patterning. When we identify a speaker as being, for example, British, American or Australian we do so largely by noting how he pronounces the vowel sounds of English. Unfortunately, however, in order to become intelligible and expressive speakers of English Malaysian pupils do have to adopt a rhythm of speech which is not native to them in addition to taking care about the pronunciation of certain vowel and consonant sounds.

The problems are considerable, but Malaysia is fortunate in having a great many teachers whose own spoken English can serve as an excellent model for their pupils. The imitative powers of pupils should not be underestimated. Given a good model, and plenty of opportunity to speak English, most of them will acquire the necessary new sounds and the characteristic rhythm of the language. I hope that by identifying some of the problems I shall have helped teachers to help all their pupils to overcome them.