

LISTENING TO THE ETHNIC VOICE IN ESL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

A survey was conducted on Malaysian ESL learners to examine how their attitudes towards learning English and towards the language itself relate to their sense of ethnic and national identity. A questionnaire was administered to 331 undergraduates and secondary school students from different ethnic groups in Malaysia. The items were designed to obtain data on the following variables: learners' attitudes towards English and learning English, learners' perception of English as a challenge to national identity and a threat to ethnic identity, and their perception of the social-cultural importance of English in the country. Scores were analysed to study the relationship between variables and for significant differences across ethnic groups. The findings indicate that ethnic sentiment, sense of language ownership and language policies impact upon learners' attitude and motivation in the Malaysian context, where various mother tongues and English are associated with different degrees of political and historical importance.

Introduction

It is well known that language learners demonstrate different attitudes and degrees of motivation towards learning a particular language. Much research has related these differences to personality traits, or explained them in terms of instrumental and integrative motivation. However, language-learning behaviour cannot be attributed to these factors alone.

A person's language is an essential part of his or her identity (Norton, 1997; Spolsky, 1999; Wodak *et al.*, 2000), and learning a language always takes place within a cultural and political context. Thus, contemporary research needs to expand on language-learning theories by investigating the role played by the cultural-political context in which language learning occurs since this attitude towards learning a particular language can be shaped by the significance of the language, relations of power between speakers of different ethnic origins and a perceived threat to ethnic identity.

The value or significance attached to a language may be determined by at least two factors. One is the learner's ethnic identity, in that different ethnic groups may have unlike views about the significance and value of learning a particular

language. Another factor is the cultural and political context within which the language is learnt. This second factor is especially important in a context such as the Malaysian scenario, in which a multitude of ethnic groups, and where the Malay, Chinese and English languages are associated with dissimilar degrees of historical, political and social importance.

Language, Social Context and Identity

Language use and language choice cannot be considered in isolation from social practices and the concept of identity. As Lippi-Green (1997: 5) says, language is the most salient way we have of establishing and advertising our social identities.^f The link between language use and social identity has been critically studied (e.g., Gee, 1996; Hall, 1996; Lippi-Green, 1997; van Dijk, 1997). Gee, Lippi-Green and van Dijk, in particular, have looked at the ways in which language is used to break down boundaries, to establish membership, or to exclude members of particular groups.

These have pushed us to think about how social contexts relate to the acquisition and use of a second language, in particular, the English language, because of its penetration into and pervasive influence in many societies where English is not the first language. Much research on the ESL and the process of second language acquisition has tended to focus on pedagogical practices and the developmental aspects of second language (L2) learning. Schumann's (1986) well-known Acculturation Model, for example, was developed to explain the role of external factors or settings in L2 acquisition. What was oft overlooked in such models and research is the issue of how the learning or acquisition of English affects identity construction, which may subsequently have an impact on attitude towards learning the language, and how attitude is also impacted on by the societal, educational and political contexts within which the language learning is couched.

Central to this concern are, of course, issues of cultural and ethnic identity. More recently, therefore, studies have focused on the construction and shift of identity during the acquisition of a second language, highlighting the critical role that history and politics play in language learning. Researchers in countries such as the United States and Australia, to which immigrants flock, have felt it imperative to understand the implications that second language learning has on minority students and their self-perception, prompting research that looks at identity and language learning among immigrants (e.g., Boshier, 1997; Garcia, 2001; Miller, 2000; Urrieta & Quach, 2000) and discussion on language policy that oppresses and slowly transforms ethnic identity (e.g., Blommaert, 2004).

Historical backgrounds and legacies create milieus within which identity construction takes place, and where social stigmas become attached to particular groups or particular languages. Colonisation, for instance, is one process through which English is imposed as the dominant language while making all existent local languages subordinate. Ironically, access to this elitist language may also be denied or made difficult, thus making it a form of cultural and symbolic capital that only a few can master (Bourdieu, 1983). In other situations, the language is implemented as the medium of instruction in educational institutions, a policy that may meet with resistance by colonised groups whose native languages have lost their dominance. Yet, each colonised society is different. In a multi-ethnic society, for instance, English may be viewed with contempt by some groups within the society, while others welcome the imposition of a language that belongs to no particular group. The ethnic and political make-up of the society could thus result in varying attitudes towards English and the learning of the language. Gee (1996:127) explains how we use vary our language use to take on a particular social role that others will recognise, making discursive choices in order to demarcate our identities. In the same way, members of a multi-ethnic society mark their social and ethnic identities through the language(s) they choose to use: their native tongues (L1), L2 and possibly others. (Spolsky, 1999: 181) reminds us that language is not only a central feature of human identity but is also a powerful symbol of national and ethnic identity.

In the case of immigrants and their choices to use and learn English in their host country, research has shown that such choices are a reflection of their sentiments towards the language, very often coloured by a perceived threat to the survival of their own L1 and indeed their ethnic identities. In the context of a colonised society, therefore, where English was brought into the local scene and accorded dominance at some point in history, members of that society also make such sentimental choices, and these choices could determine the extent of their readiness or willingness to develop an intimate knowledge of English.

Malaysia, which was a colony of the British Empire for about two hundred years, represents one such arena where differing attitudes towards English may be found. Members of the Malaysian population consist of diverse ethnic and linguistic people who became residents of the country at various points in history and through events intricately bound up in the colonialist activities themselves. Malaysian ESL users thus live and learn in a complex linguistic context, where attitudes towards learning English are consciously or otherwise shaped by attitudes towards the language itself and by the extent to which English is perceived to be a threat to ethnic identity.

English in Malaysia: Brief History and Political Role

Malaysia was not always a multi-ethnic nation. The earliest settlers in Malaya or the Malay Peninsula, as the country was known then, were Proto-Malays or aborigines, of whom there are numerous groups speaking a variety of languages. With the coming of the Malays from various parts of the Malay archipelago, however, this latter group eventually gained political strength, as they had the advantage of literacy and a literary history. When traders from other countries frequented the peninsula in the 13th century, the Malay language became the *lingua franca*, the language of trade. The language has therefore had the longest history of use in the country.

Although traders from China, India and the Arab states had visited Malaya, some settling in the trade centre of Malacca, the multi-ethnicity of Malaysia's population really began only in the late 1700s, when the British colonised Malaya. During the 1800s, the colonialists brought in large groups of immigrant labour from China and India. The former were channelled into tin mines and urban businesses, while Indians were employed in rubber estates. The resident Malays and indigenous groups, on the other hand, were confined to rice fields and the agricultural domain. As a result, the Chinese gradually achieved a socio-economic advantage over the other groups, which became a source of dissatisfaction that spurred anti-colonial sentiments among the Malays in West Malaysia. However, by segregating the ethnic groups, the colonialists implemented a divide-and-rule strategy that segregated the ethnic groups and prevented a united front till the struggle for independence began to take root in the 1940s, culminating in the declaration of Malaya as an independent nation in 1957 (Perpustakaan Negara Malaysia, 2000).

During the colonial era, English became the official language and medium of instruction in government schools, downplaying the importance of the Malay language. This development explains why the immigrant races are generally less inclined to view the use of English in Malaysia as a challenge to their ethnic identities. After Independence, however, the Malay language, Bahasa Melayu (also referred to as Bahasa Malaysia) replaced English as the official language and medium of instruction, with English as a second language. Bahasa Melayu was also institutionalised as the national language for the purpose of national unity, and remained the *lingua franca* among the ethnic various groups. Thus, the mother tongue of the Malay race was accorded greater political and educational importance than the mother tongues of other races, contributing to racial tensions that began in the colonial era.

The historical and political developments surrounding the English language in Malaysia suggest that the sentiments associated with the language are likely to differ across ethnic groups, and reflect on their attitudes towards learning the language. A survey was conducted with ESL learners to explore this assumption.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of the study was to find out how young adult Malaysian ESL learners attitudes towards learning English as a Second Language, and towards the English language itself, may be related to their sense of ethnic identity.

Methodology

The respondents in the study consisted of 200 undergraduates enrolled in a local university and 131 Secondary school students. The respondents were from the three major ethnic groups residing in West Malaysia (Malay, Chinese, and Indian). There were also respondents belonging to various native races of East Malaysia, and these were grouped under Others. The distribution of respondents by race is shown in Table 1. Distribution by gender is also shown, although gender was not a variable under consideration in the study.

The average age of the respondents was 20, and their English language proficiency level was Low to High Intermediate.

A questionnaire consisting of 22 items was administered to the respondents. These items were designed to measure the following variables, based on a 5-point Likert scale:

- (i) Attitude toward the English language
- (ii) Attitude toward learning English
- (iii) Perception of English language as a challenge to ethnic/national identity
- (iv) Perception of socio-cultural and political importance of English in Malaysia

Table 1: Respondents by ethnic group and gender

Ethnic group	Number of male respondents	Number of female respondents	Total
Malay	25	67	92
Chinese	52	90	142
Indian	30	42	72
Others	13	12	25
Total	120	211	331

The respondents' scores were analysed to study the relationship between variables and to determine whether there were significant differences across ethnic groups. The results are presented in the following section.

Results

Three methods of analysis were applied to the scores from the questionnaire responses in order to obtain the results described below.

Table 2: Correlation between Attitude toward learning English and Perception of English as a challenge to ethnic/national identity, and Perception of socio-political importance of English in Malaysia

Variables	Perception of English as challenge to ethnic/national identity (CHAL)	Perception of socio-political importance of English in Malaysia (SPOL)
Attitude toward learning English (ATT Learn)	-.169	.321

Table 3: Correlation between Attitude toward English and Attitude toward learning English, Perception of English as challenge to ethnic/national identity and Perception of socio-political importance of English in Malaysia

Variables	Attitude toward learning English (ATT Learn)	Perception of English as challenge to ethnic/national identity (CHAL)	Perception of socio-political importance of English in Malaysia (SPOL)
Attitude toward English (ATT Eng)	.607	-.089	.368

Correlation tests were carried out to determine how attitude towards learning English (ATT Learn) correlated with (i) the perception of the socio-political importance of English in Malaysia (SPOL), and (ii) the perception that English is a threat to ethnic and national identity (CHAL). Table 2 shows a positive correlation

between ATT Learn and SPOL, and negative correlation ATT Learn and CHAL. Although the correlations are not strong, the directions of the relationships indicate that the more the learners perceived English to be socially and politically important, the more positive their attitude was towards the learning of the language. Conversely, attitude tended to be negative when there was a stronger perception that English is a threat to ethnic and national identity.

Tests were also conducted to study the relationship between attitude towards English itself (ATT Eng) and ATT Learn, CHAL and SPOL respectively. Table 3 presents the results. Again, it can be seen that ATT Eng tended to be negative when the perceived threat posed by English to ethnic and national identity was stronger, yet the perceived socio-political importance of English led to a more positive attitude towards the language.

These results suggest that Malaysian ESL learners view English in a more positive light and are willing to learn it as long as they are focused on the role that English plays in the socio-political development of the country, conceivably as a necessary economic tool as well, but as soon as the language is perceived to pose a threat to ethnic and national identity, attitudes toward it and towards the learning of it will change.

The study also looked at how the ethnic groups compared in terms of each variable. Table 4 shows the mean scores for each of the variables across groups. The scores indicate that Indian ESL learners have the most positive attitude towards English and learning the language. They also represent the group that most strongly perceived the socio-political importance of English in Malaysia. Chinese and Others came in a close second and third respectively. Malay respondents, on the other hand, were the group that most strongly felt English to be a threat to their ethnic and national identity. The Indians perceived this threat the least.

A post hoc Scheffe test was also conducted to determine significant differences in ethnic group means for the variables. The results show that there were significant differences for only two of the variables, ATT Eng and SPOL, as shown in Table 5.

With regard to the first variable, attitude towards the English language, there was a significant difference between the mean for Indian respondents (highest mean) and Chinese (lowest mean), and between Indians and others. Indians differed significantly with Malays in perceiving the socio-political importance of English in Malaysia, where Indian respondents showed the highest mean score and Malay respondents the lowest.

Differences in means across groups were also analysed for individual questionnaire items, using a one-way ANOVA. The analyses enabled the researchers to observe particular trends among the respondents. First, the Indian

Table 4: Mean scores for each variable by ethnic group

RACE	N	Variable			
		Attitude toward English	Attitude toward learning the language	English as challenge to ethnic/ national identity	Socio-political importance of English in Malaysia
Malay	41	23.9024	21.1463	15.2439*	16.3659
Chinese	36	22.8056	20.3333	12.8889	17.0000
Indian	28	25.0714*	22.4286*	14.3929	18.7500*
Others	16	23.9024	19.7500	13.5625	16.9375

**Highest mean for each variable*

Table 5: Results of the post hoc Scheffe test showing significant differences in ethnic group means for variables

Ethnic groups	Variable	
	Attitude toward English	Socio-political importance of English in Malaysia
Chinese vs Indian	.019	-
Indian vs others	.015	-
Malay vs Indian	-	.043

respondents were the ones who indicated the greatest comfort with the use of English, claiming to use it whenever they could, compared to the Malay learners who claimed the least comfort. Indians also viewed the ability to speak fluent English as an achievement to be proud of more than any other group. This sentiment was consistent with the results which indicated that friends approval of their speaking in English was felt most strongly by Indians and by respondents in the category of Others. For the Chinese respondents, it was the approval of family and relatives that they looked to most. Malays, on the other hand, did not indicate the presence of such strong approval from family and friends. Instead, they were the group with the strongest indication that they would be teased by friends of their own race if they were to speak in English. In addition, they represented the group whose friends of similar race would be the most unwilling to speak English with them.

There was also a marked difference between Malays and all the other groups with regard to the perception that locals who used English would start to behave like foreigners, and that if they used English in most of their interactions, it would mean that they were not patriotic. This ethnic group also indicated the greatest discomfort over hearing locals (non-native speakers of English) speaking to one another in English. The other groups did not share the same degree of sentiment in these aspects.

On the subject of whether they would be willing to learn English even if it were not a compulsory school subject, Indians, Chinese and Others again indicated significantly greater willingness than the Malay respondents. The same three non-Malay groups also agreed strongly that it should be compulsory to pass the English Language paper in the school exit (SPM) exam. Chinese and Indians indicated strong agreement with the idea that English be made the medium of instruction at all levels of education, compared to Malays who were largely undecided on the matter. Similarly, Chinese, Indians and Other races felt that it is more important to master the English than the Malay language, while Malay respondents clearly disagreed. The three non-Malay groups, however, were less decided about whether English should replace Malay as the official language of the country, while Malay respondents again strongly disagreed. Despite these areas of variance in opinion, all the groups expressed strong agreement on one point: they rejected the notion that English is superior to local languages. The general sentiment about English, therefore, seems to be that the language serves an instrumental purpose in Malaysia. This view is supported by the learners responses to the question of whether a knowledge of English is important for Malaysia s prosperity and development. Although there was a significant difference between the perceptions of Indians (whose group mean was highest) and Malays (who yielded the lowest group mean), the scores for all the ethnic groups fell within the category indicating agreement.

Summary of Findings

The findings of the study suggest that the majority of Malaysian ESL students have a positive attitude towards learning English and towards the language itself, largely because they recognise the functional importance of English and that it is a necessary tool for individual and national development and progress. Indeed, this instrumental motivation to master English seems to explain the perception among all the learners, except for Malay respondents, that it is more important to master English than the national language, Malay. However, no ethnic group seems ready for Malay to be replaced by English as the official language. These sentiments

suggest that young Malaysians ultimately do make a distinction between according a language functional importance and conferring upon it the status of a language that defines a nation's identity.

While instrumental motivation has a place in the field of second-language acquisition, it falls short in describing the language learner's situation because it does not describe the complex dynamic relationship between the learner and the social world. Some immigrants in English-speaking countries, for example, are aware that they need to become proficient in English for occupational purposes, yet they resist learning English precisely because it is the language of their superiors. The situation may not be exactly the same in Malaysia, but it is interesting to note that even young adult Malaysian ESL learners, fifty years after the country's independence from colonial rule, do not completely discard the perception that English might be a threat to their ethnic identities, even if it is not viewed as a strong challenge. Political history does appear to have some influence on sentiment surrounding the perceived value and significance of the English language. This sentiment is seen most clearly in Malay learners. Considered the indigenous race by virtue of their arrival to and settlement in the country before other races came, Malays appear to view the use of English as a threat to their identity more than other races do. In fact, their attitude towards English and learning English, more than for any other group, is dependent on whether others of their own race accept their use of the language and view it favourably. Other respondents, Indians in particular, are less threatened by the challenge English poses.

Conclusion

This study suggests that in working with ESL learners, it is important to consider how the learners' attitudes toward the language itself can affect their attitude toward learning it. To that end, it is important to uncover and understand underlying social and political factors that relate to social and ethnic identity, and consequently contribute to learners' acceptance, or lack of acceptance, of the English language. This effort may be especially imperative for ESL teachers who go to a foreign country to teach the language. It would be a mistake to assume that all ESL learners feel the same, and that the only obstacles to overcome are the cognitive and pedagogical ones. Before focusing on instruction, and the accuracy of grammar or pronunciation in ESL learning, it is sometimes important to first listen to the ethnic voice.

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