



*Malaysian Journal Of ELT Research*

**ISSN: 1511-8002**

*Vol. 7 (2), 2011*

## **The State of Teaching and Learning English Pronunciation in Malaysia: A Preliminary Study**

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### **Abstract**

The study was motivated by the criticism that Malaysian speakers ‘abuse’ English pronunciation, and also by the announcement that standard British English (presumably based on Received Pronunciation (RP) or BBC English) is to be used as a pronunciation model in the new English language curriculum in Malaysia. Underlying the issue of the choice of a pronunciation model are actual teaching and learning practices. In relation to this, this paper looks at the extent to which English pronunciation is taught in schools, and at the perceptions of teachers and students toward the teaching and learning of pronunciation. The findings indicate that the teaching and learning of pronunciation is a much neglected component despite it being in the syllabus and being regarded as important by the teacher and student respondents. Further, there appears to be an ‘ours-versus-theirs’ conflict between the use of a localized accent as opposed to a native speaker one such as British English.

**KEYWORDS:** English pronunciation, Malaysian English, teaching and learning pronunciation, classroom practices, perceptions.

## **Background**

Laments about the ‘poor’ pronunciation skills or incorrect pronunciation of Malaysians are common (e.g. Manglish-English Dilemma, 2007; Why Speak Manglish?, 2007). In a rich linguistic environment like Malaysia where there are many local languages as well as a local variety of English, protests about the state of English pronunciation can be expected to be even louder. Amidst such protests, there is also the issue of the extent to which pronunciation is actually taught in schools. As pointed out in Pillai (2008a: 42), “more often than not, the teaching of pronunciation is largely ignored, or gets side-lined as teachers scramble to deal with all the other elements in the English language syllabus and to prepare students for examinations”. Further, there is also the issue as to which pronunciation model is used in the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian schools. As would be expected of a former British colony, there is a tendency to adopt a British model of pronunciation and “there is even the notion that the acrolectal variety of Malaysian English is similar to RP (Received Pronunciation)” (Pillai, 2008a, p. 42). Thus, it comes as no surprise that for the new English language curriculum, Standard British English (presumably based on RP or BBC English) has been selected as a pedagogic model “so that our students will know how to pronounce English words as spoken by native speakers” (Satiman Jamin, 2010, n. p.).

However, such a choice is questionable given that Standard English is spoken in a multitude of accents (Trudgill, 1999), and thus, “in the context of global English, there is no longer in reality, any established standard for spoken English” (Pillai, Zuraidah Mohd.

Don & Knowles, forthcoming). In relation to this, Levis (2005, p. 371) points out that reliance on such models can lead to a “skewed view of pronunciation that may not serve learners’ communicative needs”. Graddol (2006, p. 117) emphasises this point further:

One of the more anachronistic ideas about the teaching of English is that learners should adopt a native speaker English. But as English becomes more widely used as a global language, it will become expected that speakers will signal their nationality, and other aspects of their identity, through English. Lack of a native-speaker accent will not be seen, therefore, as a sign of poor competence.

Current trends in pronunciation teaching lean towards exposure to different English accents and a focus on intelligibility rather than imitating native models (e.g. Deterding, 2005; Jenkins, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2007). However, the trend in Malaysia seems to be going in the opposite direction, focusing on a British rather than an endonormative model. Underlying the issue of the choice of pronunciation model are actual teaching and learning practices and this study aims to look at (1) the extent to which English pronunciation is taught, and (2) what the perceptions of teachers and students toward the teaching and learning of pronunciation are. These areas are examined with the aim of obtaining a preliminary view of the current state of teaching and learning pronunciation in Malaysia.

## **Literature review**

### ***Pronunciation in the classroom***

The English Language Syllabus for Secondary Schools states the learners “are required to speak internationally intelligible English with correct pronunciation and intonation (Sukatan Pelajaran Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah, 2000, p. 1). In a similar vein, pronunciation is assumed to be an essential component of oral skills, where “oral skills will enable learners to convey their thoughts and ideas clearly in speech when they pronounce words correctly and observe correct stress and intonation” (ibid, p. 3). The sound system to be covered in secondary school is provided under the section of language content, and includes English consonants, vowels, and diphthongs, consonants clusters in different combinations, past tense and plural forms, stress in two, three and four syllable words, stress in compound words, sentence stress and intonation (ibid, p. 9-10). At the secondary level, we would expect less emphasis on the segmental level and more on prosodic and discourse features and yet, based on the sparse information on prosodic features (apart from stress) on the latter in the secondary school English language syllabus, the focus remains at a segmental level, and this is reflected in the textbooks.

The English language syllabus in Malaysia does provide an avenue for pronunciation skills to be included in classroom practices and this reflects the assumption that using ‘good’ pronunciation is important to communicate and to be understood: “without adequate pronunciation skills, a person’s communicative skills may be severely hampered, and this in turn may give rise to speech that lacks intelligibility, leading to glitches in conversation and to strain on the part of the listener” (Rajadurai, 2006, p. 42).

A similar sentiment is echoed by Fraser (2000, cited in Nair, Krishnasamy & de Mello, 2006). In fact, Morley (1991, cited in Rajadurai, 2006, p. 44) is of the opinion that not dealing with the pronunciation needs of students “is an abrogation of professional responsibility”. In spite of this, not enough emphasis is being given to the teaching of pronunciation in the classroom (see Nair et al, 2006; Pillai, 2008a; Rajadurai, 2006). For example Nair et al (2006, p. 31), in a study comprising 12 ESL instructors in Malaysia, found that the respondents felt that they did not have enough time to teach pronunciation and that they did not know how to do so effectively. Despite the attested importance of pronunciation in English Language Teaching (ELT), there is a dearth of research in the area of teaching and learning pronunciation in Malaysia, and the current study attempts to help fill this research gap.

### ***Accent preferences***

One of the pedagogic concerns for English language teaching is the type of standard of English to be used in the classroom. Where pronunciation is concerned, the fact that Standard English is spoken in a variety of accents makes the choice of one particular accent a controversial one (Stevens, 1983; Trudgill, 1999). Further, the variety of accents stemming from multi-ethnic and multi-lingual speakers with different educational experiences makes the choice of a particular accent as a model a challenging task in Malaysia. There is also a dilemma when it comes to the type of preferred English accent and speakers’ own accents. Previous studies in second language contexts have shown that there is often a struggle between speakers wanting to sound like themselves (that is, with

a local accent) and an attested preference for a native model (see Crismore, Ngeow & Soo, 1996; Soo, 1990). This is evident in Pillai (2008b, p. 33), where only 29% of the 89 respondents surveyed felt that a local accent was acceptable when speaking in English, although nearly half of them agreed that they ‘sounded’ Malaysian. Yet, most of them disagreed that they did not sound professional or that people would not take them seriously if they used colloquial Malaysian English. Similarly, Crismore, Ngeow and Soo (1996, p. 325) also found that more than 70% of their respondents disagreed that foreigners will not understand them if they speak to them in Malaysian English. Rajadurai (2006, p. 46) argues that much of this dilemma “stem[s] from a sense of insecurity and lack of confidence as learners”. Underlying this dilemma is also the issue of accent and identity, that is, wanting to ‘sound’ Malaysian when speaking English (Anis Ibrahim, 2005; ‘The Case for Manglish’, 1999) rather than wanting to sound British or American (Pillai, 2008b). These studies highlight the issues relating to accent preference which is also relevant in the classroom context, especially in relation to the preferred accent of teachers and learners and the choice of the teaching model in the classroom, which is usually a top-down choice. There is still however, a need to examine such accent preferences in the context of ELT, which is what the current study aimed to do.

## **Methodology**

To examine the extent to which pronunciation is taught in the classroom, and perceptions on preferred accents and pronunciation models, a total of 150 students, 50 each from 3

classes in a secondary school: Form 1, 3 and 5 were surveyed. The rationale for using these three groups of students was to obtain a snapshot of the teaching and learning practices in secondary education. The school was in the Klang Valley, and can be classified as an urban school with the majority of the students coming from middle-income backgrounds. The majority of students in each class are of Malay ethnicity, followed by those of Indian and Chinese descent as shown in Table 1. Based on classroom assessment and feedback from their English teachers, the English language proficiency of the students in the three classes was categorised as *good* for the Form 1 class and *moderate* for the Form 3 and 5 classes,.

Table 1: Student respondents

Class	Ethnicity			Gender	
	Malay	Indian	Chinese	Male	Female
Form 1	19	17	14	22	28
Form 3	17	20	13	24	26
Form 5	21	19	10	20	30

The students were given a questionnaire to fill-in in class. The questions were aimed at eliciting information about (i) the extent to which pronunciation was being taught in their English language classes; (ii) their accent preferences. Two of the teachers teaching these classes were also interviewed to compare the answers given by the students and also to elicit their perspectives on (i) and (ii). Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 both had approximately

14 years of English language teaching experience each. Both of them trained as English language teachers at local universities.

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Feedback from the students*

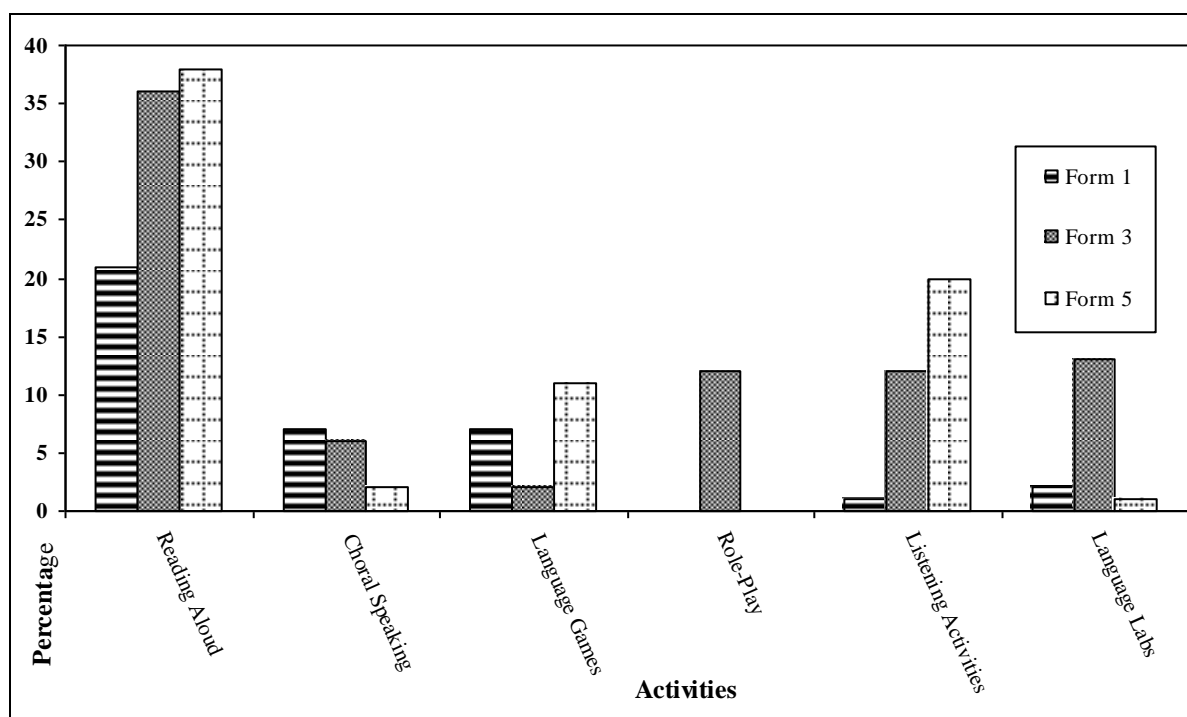
Most of the students indicated that they *sometimes* learnt pronunciation during their English lessons (Form 1 = 23%; Form 3 = 18%; and Form 5 = 23%). According to the students, the most commonly used activity to teach pronunciation is reading aloud (see Figure 1), during which time students are introduced to new words in the prescribed textbook. While they are reading, the teacher will correct the errors that they make and teach them the ‘right’ way to pronounce the words. However, students from all the three classes said that learning pronunciation in class is not done regularly because teachers emphasize other components in English, such as writing, grammar and literature, as they want their students to excel in their exams which focus on these components. Based on the interviews with Teacher 1 and Teacher 2, the teachers feel that reading aloud is one of the best ways to teach students to learn pronunciation. This is because when students read a text that is given to them, teachers can observe if students are having problems pronouncing particular words, and can deal with such problems immediately.

The second most common activity that is carried out is listening activities, followed by language games, choral speaking and the use of the language laboratory. The least common activity is role-play and from the interviews with the two teachers, it appears



that they are not fond of role-play as a means to teach pronunciation because they feel that it is time-consuming and takes up the time needed to cover other aspects that students need to master in order to obtain good grades in the examination. In other words, as expected, the focus of language teaching appears to be heavily influenced by the exams where teachers “teach the test” (Brindley, 1998, p. 52).

Figure 1: Teaching and learning of English pronunciation: Types of activities



In relation to the question of whether they thought pronunciation should be taught in class, most students *agreed* that pronunciation should be taught in class. Only 10% of students from the Form 3 class did not want pronunciation to be taught in class. However, the older students, the ones in Form 5, all agreed that English language pronunciation

should be taught in class. All the Form 5 students also felt it was important to speak English with the 'correct' pronunciation.

Many students (Form 1 = 20%; Form 3 = 22%; Form 5 = 32%) said that they only studied pronunciation *sometimes*. The rest of them said that they *seldom* learnt pronunciation on their own. Only 8% of the Form 1 students, 18% of the Form 3 students and 6% of the Form 5 students *always* learnt to pronounce the words on their own.

About 43 of the Form 1 students, 23 of the Form 3 students and 30 of the Form 5 students indicated that they had difficulty in pronouncing English words. Further, 30 of the First Formers, 25 of the Third Formers and 33 of the Fifth Formers rated their English as *moderate*. Approximately 25% of the students felt that their pronunciation is *poor* and the reasons given for this included a lack of reading and communicating with their peers in English.

All of the Form 1 students, 22 of the Form 3 students, and 46 of the Form 5 students said that they never changed their accent or switched accents when speaking in English. Those who said they did change their accent indicated that they did this according to whether they were speaking to their peers, teachers, or someone that they had just met. A total of 28 of the Form 3 students and 5 students from the Form 5 class felt that conversing in a different accent made them feel that they are 'better' in English as they sounded different from their peers.

A total of 40% of the students said that they preferred a ‘Standard’ British accent, while 45% preferred a Malaysian accent. This is consistent with the type of responses obtained from previous studies (e.g. Crismore, Ngeow & Soo, 1996; Pillai, 2008b; Soo, 1990). There seems to be uncertainty about the validity of a Malaysian accent, and thus, the choice may be reflective of what the respondents think is the more ‘correct’ response or their choice may be motivated by a bias towards a native variety of English.

### ***Feedback from the teachers***

#### *Teaching Pronunciation*

Teacher 1 enjoys teaching grammar whereas Teacher 2 enjoys teaching literature because she feels that students learn more through literature than from conventional ways of teaching grammar in class. Both the teachers said that they closely followed the English Language syllabus prepared by the Ministry of Education, and were of the opinion that they regularly focused on pronunciation in the classroom and corrected their students whenever they mispronounced words during their English lessons. Teacher 1 prefers to use dialogues as they are more conversational, and she also uses read-aloud techniques to teach pronunciation. Teacher 2 said that she uses the textbook, flash cards, the dictionary, materials from the newspaper and also read-aloud activities. However, they hardly ever dedicated an entire lesson to the teaching and learning of English pronunciation.

#### *Importance of English pronunciation*

Both the teachers were asked if they felt pronunciation is important for assessment and how much it contributes in public examinations. They said that it is important for the oral examination as pronunciation and intonation of words are focused upon in this method of assessment. According to the teachers, in the oral examinations students are graded based on whether they can converse on a topic effectively and give appropriate responses; speak fluently using correct and acceptable pronunciation; speak coherently; speak the language using a wide range of appropriate vocabulary within a given context, and lastly, speak using correct grammar.

#### *Importance of English pronunciation*

The teachers were trained to teach pronunciation during their degree programme. For both the teachers, ‘good’ pronunciation refers to good intonation and enunciation, and both of them rate their English pronunciation as *good* but admit that they are still learning. They feel that they can improve their English pronunciation by speaking and reading aloud.

#### *English accent*

Both teachers prefer a Malaysian English accent. However, they contradicted themselves when they said that they do not mind ‘following’ British English because it is ‘more standard’ and in Malaysia, British English is used as a teaching model. Despite this, Teacher 1 does not agree with the idea of the Ministry of Education hiring native speakers of English (see Sivanandam, 2011, p. 6) because according to her,

“we have good English teachers in Malaysia, and when these Malaysian teachers speak, they are easily understood and this is accepted by everyone and the language used is standard”.

On the other hand, Teacher 2 said that it would be a good idea to bring native speakers to teach because then Malaysians can change their way of pronouncing English words and Malaysian students will have the experience of communicating with native speakers, thus, making them more confident. They felt that they themselves were not ready to teach Standard British English because they are not native speakers. Both the teachers think that Standard British English is different from Malaysian English in the way that words are pronounced, and thus, more practice is needed in order for them to adhere to a British English model closely.

#### *Different accent while communicating*

Both the teachers were asked whether they changed their accent while communicating and according to Teacher 1,

“I have never changed the way I speak or how I speak to anyone in particular. The important thing for you to be able to speak to anyone across the globe is to be understood. So I don't think I have to change to British English”.

In comparison, Teacher 2 said that,

“I do change my way of pronouncing English when I talk to my friends and if it is to someone superior it is different of course and when I go into the classroom, it depends on the class. If the students are good I will change it to be better and to a higher standard and if it is a weak class I have to bring myself down to their level so they are able to communicate well”.

*Standard British accent by the Ministry of Education*

Recently it was announced that the new English curriculum to be implemented in primary schools in 2011 will be based on standard British English pronunciation (Satiman Jamin, 2010). When this question was raised to the teachers, Teacher 1 had this to say:

“Using the Standard British accent is most welcome. The yardstick is, if it is beneficial, it is good; it is for the benefit of all of us here in Malaysia ...but by using British English in particular focusing on the grammar, on the formal language that is used, I think it is good. But for the British accent then we need to bring the native speakers here.

In contrast, the second teacher’s opinion is as follows:

“Standard British accent... it is good but then do our Malaysians need that? We have our own Malaysian English pronunciation and accent; why not we just use that ... Sometimes if we go overseas they are able to understand us so it is not that necessary that we learn or expose our students to Standard British accent”.

Going by the responses from both the students and the teachers, it is clear that the teaching and learning of pronunciation is not a priority in the English language classrooms in this study. This is despite the fact that the learners were generally not happy with their English pronunciation, and felt it was important to learn English pronunciation in the classroom. Based on the responses from both parties, not much time or effort is spent on pronunciation with much of the teaching being ad hoc on-the-spot correction by the teachers. One of the reasons for the lack of focus on pronunciation is that it is not an integral part of the school or public oral assessment.

In relation to the preferred model for English pronunciation and preferred accent, the students and teachers in this study appear to be in a dilemma. This is likely to stem from insecurities about using a local accent which they hear all around them, and confusion about the need for a native English norm, far removed from their realities including their identity as Malaysians (see Rajendran, 2000). The teachers' preference for a Malaysian accent but at the same time, on the face of, it accepting the use of a Standard British English model suggests a conflict between what they are comfortable with (*Our English*) and what they deem to be the correct variety (*Their English*). This is not surprising if we consider the general tendency to equate Malaysian English with the colloquial spoken variety (which tends to be more ethnically marked) rather than considering Malaysian English as a continuum of overlapping varieties. In fact, the students' and even the teachers' insecurities about their own English pronunciation mirrors the underlying perception of Malaysian English pronunciation being inferior to a native accent, in particular British English. Such a deficit view tends to downplay the possibility of having

a local norm for pronunciation, and instead extols the virtue of an endonormative one such as British English.

Whilst it is understandable that for pedagogic purposes, a point of reference is useful, expecting Malaysians learners to “pronounce English words as spoken by native speakers” (Satiman Jamin, 2010, n. p.) is unrealistic and begs the question as to whether having an RP-like British accent is a prerequisite to speaking internationally intelligible English. Further, the choice of Standard British English as a teaching model, in particular British English pronunciation, needs to be rationalised with the context of English as a Global Language, and situated within the growing body of research on characteristics of English pronunciation in different varieties of English and their implications for language teaching, learning and assessment (e.g. Jenkins, 2007; Van den Doel, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The preliminary survey carried among three classes in a secondary school and the interviews with two English language teachers confirm the lack of focus on the teaching and learning of English pronunciation. Much of the teaching and learning time is directed towards activities and tasks that can enhance the grades of the students in their English language examinations, and since pronunciation is not a key element in the exam, it is relegated to ‘by-the-way’ slots. While the current secondary school syllabus does not implicitly state which model of English pronunciation to use, the new primary school curriculum is geared toward the use of British English pronunciation, and this is bound to be a controversial decision given that Standard English is spoken in a multitude of



accents. In light of this, it is surely more important is to have clear statements about what we realistically and practically expect Malaysian students to be able to do in terms of English pronunciation, keeping in mind issues of intelligibility and identity as well as current research on Malaysian English pronunciation. The way in which the teaching and learning of pronunciation is carried out and how it is assessed are also important elements that need to be carefully thought of, in tandem and not in isolation, by the parties involved in curriculum development, material production, assessment and the training of teachers, among others.

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