Some Ways of Speaking in English: A Malaysian Perspective

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Abstract

With varying 'Englishes' from varying cultures, it is inevitable that ways of speaking, albeit in English, would vary too. This paper looks at some ways of speaking in English in Malaysia and implications for English language teaching. It is based on qualitative research involving proficient TESL undergraduates and post-graduates, as well as non-Malaysian L1 and L2 speakers of English who have been in Malaysia for at least six months. It offers examples of speech patterns used by Malaysians when speaking in English and the reactions of the non-Malaysian L1 and L2 speakers of English to the ways of speaking. Gender differences, however, were not considered as the Malaysians in the study were mainly female.

Introduction

Cultural concerns in communication are not something new. For half a century, ethnolinguists like Hymes (1962) have suggested that beyond syntax and phonology, cultural differences is another dimension that needs to be given due consideration. Unfortunately, very few curricula have given this aspect of language much consideration, leading to misunderstandings and negative feelings.

Smith (1976) held that it was not necessary for L2 speakers to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers. Now, 30 years later, we need to go one step further and recognize that while L2 speakers of English do not need to internalize the cultural norms of L1 speakers of English, they need to be aware of cultural differences, not just between their ways of speaking and that of L1 speakers of English, but also between their ways of speaking and other L2 speakers.

At the same time, L1 speakers of English who do business of any kind outside their own country will also have to be prepared to understand the cultures of the countries they are in. Cultural differences can even exist between two countries where English is L1. Collins and Mees (2008) observe that besides the British Isles and the USA, English is also L1 in countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the countries of the Caribbean. Each country would naturally have its own cultural peculiarities. English is also used widely as a second language for official purposes, again by millions of speakers in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and many countries across Africa.

The use of English across so many unique cultures lends to a variety of 'Englishes'. Therefore, it is inevitable that communication in English across cultures must take into consideration the cultural norms of the various speakers of English. This paper considers some cultural differences that impact the way English is used. In doing so, this paper proposes that knowledge of such differences is important in English language teaching.

Method

The paper is based on case-study research, carried out with 42 Malaysian undergraduate student teachers, 15 practising Malaysian English Language teachers, who were also graduate students at the time, and 11 non-Malaysian native and second language speakers of English who had been in Malaysia for at least 6 months and possessed tertiary level qualifications. The undergraduate students were selected for their proficiency in English and were those who had scored A's in their English 1119 paper, had Principal level English for the STPM, or had at least a MUET Band 5.

The non-Malaysian participants included
- 3 from Ghana,
- 1 from Sierra Leone,
- 2 from the Philippines,

- 2 from England,
- 2 from the United States,
- 1 from Australia

Data was collected through:
- Observations by the designated researchers, as well as by the students themselves;
- Interviews with the students, as well as by the students when they observed a cultural difference or interesting phenomenon;
- Discussions with the non-Malaysian subjects;
- Journals written by the Malaysian subjects;
- Recordings of conversations at special functions, like dinner parties, birthday parties, Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Christmas get-togethers. Conversations which were not mainly in English were discarded.

Definition of Terms

The first term that needs to be defined is "Intercultural" or "Interculturalism". It has been defined differently by different people. To some people, the terms "Intercultural" and "Multicultural" are interchangeable. To others, the terms are not interchangeable. Khoi (1994) holds that "Multicultural" refers to knowledge about cultures without apparent connections among them. "Intercultural", however, implies comparisons, exchanges, cooperation and confrontation. Cushner (1998) feels that Intercultural Education is a term favoured in Europe, whereas Multicultural Education is favoured in North America, Britain and Australia.

For the purposes of this paper, Intercultural Communication will be considered as communication outside the boundaries of a speaker's own culture either with speakers whose first language is the target language or with speakers who have learnt English in addition to their own first language. This would mean communicating with persons outside one's culture either within one's country or outside the country. For most learners, this would mean exposure to numerous cultures for written and oral communication.

The term 'varieties of English' or 'Englishes' also needs to be defined. When we say we are teaching English, we often assume that English is universal. But those who are teaching English for global communication need to realize that there are different varieties of English, varying especially in terms of pronunciation, lexicon and cultural norms. In this paper we consider the cultural norms, especially what Hinkel (2001) describes as 'Invisible Culture' which includes socio-cultural norms like speech acts and the rhetorical structure of texts.

People bring into an interaction their previous knowledge which is grounded in their culture. This is the culture they are most comfortable with and forms the basis of their internal culture. As they come into contact with other cultures, it is likely that they will accept certain aspects of other cultures which they then adjust to suit themselves. This internal culture is unconscious and very difficult to change. It becomes the yardstick for everything a person says and does. It influences a person's interpretation of whatever is happening or is being discussed. When two people use their own internal cultures in a transaction, and their internal cultures do not match, we have a culture clash.

Results

The data from the research presented here focuses on 'communication clashes' which were brought about by varying pronunciation, lexical choices and ways of speaking. We look at examples of such clashes that were observed in instances of:

- Greetings
- Farewells
- Forms of address
- Accepting compliments
- Interacting at informal gatherings

Greetings

A greeting may not be a simple language function in intercultural communication. Two examples of greetings between Malaysians and Americans that caused some difficulty to the interlocutors were noted.

Example 1
An American was standing outside his apartment, smoking a cigarette. A neighbour came by. The American greeted the neighbour with "Hi! How're you doing?"

  The neighbour responded, "Hi! Have you eaten?"
  "Not yet," he answered.
  The neighbour smiled, walked on, got into his car and drove away.

The American could not understand why the man had asked him if he had eaten, and then simply went away! The American explained to the researcher that, the question, "Have you eaten?" was the preamble to an invitation to a meal. When he said that he had not yet eaten, the American expected the response of the Malaysian to be, "Would you like to join me for lunch?" or "How about trying this new restaurant I know," or something like that. However, for many Malaysians, asking if someone has eaten is simply a polite greeting, and it is commonly used in Chinese as well as Malay communities.

Example 2
Ten Malaysian undergraduate students went to the University of Hawaii for six weeks, to take a course and transfer the credits back to the University of Malaya. They were all fluent in English. In an interview before they left, all of them felt confident that they would not have any problems communicating with other students on campus or understanding the lectures.

Interviews with them two weeks after they had been in the United States revealed that while they had few problems understanding the lectures, they did encounter difficulties in informal situations interacting with American students.   One function they found difficulty with was when they were greeted with "What's up?" by the American students. They knew it was a greeting but had no idea how they were supposed to respond to the greeting. They had been taught to say "Hi, Hello, and Good Morning," and so on, but not how to respond to "What's up?"

Farewells

Choisser (2008), in discussing leave-taking, implies that those who take a long time to say their farewells are 'Face Blind' because they are unable to effectively end an encounter. Cultural differences may also play a role in 'face blind' situations. People may delay their farewells, not because they do not know how to say, "I've got to go now!" but because saying that and leaving would appear too abrupt and rude. Beare (2008:2) points out that closure in Italian "is almost always a much more drawn out process" compared to in English. The present study indicates that saying farewell is also long drawn among Malaysians. Here is an example taken from a participant's journal:

Situation: My little niece's birthday. However, there were more adults than children.

Speech Act: Leave taking:

> When it was time to leave, we said our goodbyes, but stood around the living room, still talking.Next we moved to the door and put on our footwear. We stopped and chatted for a few more minutes. The next stop was at the gate. We chatted again. I was getting impatient with my parents. I wanted them to hurry up because I had some reading to do.Then we reached the car. Guess what? We stopped to chat some more. When we finally got into the car, I thought we would take off. But my uncle's family came to the car and they talked some more. When we finally left, I remembered that I should have timed how long it took us from the first leave-taking to when we finally went.

The participant was a Malay student. However, other participants in the study also did not see a lengthy farewell as a strange phenomenon. One of them said it "was a pattern" because Malaysian felt it was impolite to leave too quickly. It might send the wrong

signals to the host that the guest could not wait to get out of the house. Whether this applies to all races in Malaysian has yet to be ascertained.

Forms of Address

Forms of address vary from culture to culture. In the English-speaking world, there appears to be some uniformity in the use of Mr, Mrs, Miss and Ms. However, according to the participants in the study, Americans prefer being called by their first name rather than as "Mr. …", even by their subordinates. In contrast, the participants say that Malaysians feel bound to use full titles. In fact, even addressing someone in a subordinate position with Mr. or Encik, is believed to give him greater recognition or respect. As a result of this contrast, problems arise when Malaysian are confronted with the choice of using forms of address when interacting with non-Malaysian speakers of English.

Example 1

Children in Malaysia are taught at an early age to address elders as 'Uncle' and 'Aunty', even though they are not related to the person in question. It is a form of respect. The Filipino participant in the present study said that the same was true in the Philippines. However, the American, British and Australian participants admitted that they did not feel comfortable being addressed as 'Uncle' and preferred that the children addressed them by their first name. They recognized that it was a Malaysian way of speaking and therefore did not say anything that would offend the parents.

Example 2

The Malaysian Chinese participants noted problems non-Malaysians had with Chinese names. Someone named "Tan Poi Lim" was addressed as "Mr. Lim" instead of "Mr. Tan". In Hawaii, one of the students was addressed as "Miss Yen" and she failed to respond.

Example 3

On the other hand, the participants observed that Malaysians addressed people by their first names and added the Honorific. For example, Bill Clayton would be referred to as Mr. Bill. When such cases happened, it took foreigners a few seconds to realize that they were the ones being addressed.

Accepting Compliments

The Malaysian students in the study showed an apparent reluctance to receiving compliments, unlike the non-Malaysians who readily accepted compliments. The following are examples taken from the recordings of conversations:

Example 1

> A: Wah! Your dress very nice, lah!
> B: Nah lah! Bought from Pasar Malam. Cheap … cheap only.
> A: Pasar Malam also still nice what!
> B: No response.

When interviewed, participant B said that she appreciated the compliment but that she felt she had to downplay it so as not too appear too vain. There were other similar instances of rejecting compliments. The responses to the compliments were similar – that the clothes were cheap or old. There was however one example in which the response was totally unexpected. It was a compliment about a job well done:

Example 2

> A: Now that is really good work. Well done!
> B: Thank you, Prof. I worked hard. Didn't sleep!

It appears that compliments about work are more easily accepted. There were more such examples of similar responses to compliments regarding work taken from conversations with the graduate students.

Interacting at Informal Gatherings

Interaction at informal gathering such as dinners occurred a few times during the study. The data revealed that participant's expectations differed depending on whether the dinner was at home or at a restaurant. When the Malaysian participants were invited by the non-Malaysians, some interesting observations were made.

Entertaining at home
In a Malaysian home, the role of the host appeared to be persuasive. The host prompted, cajoled and even insisted that the guest had more food than he or she could manage. A refusal by the guest was interpreted as 'shyness' on the part of the guest, and the host sought to overcome that shyness and make the guest feel welcome by insisting that the guest eats more. This is illustrated in the following example where participants A and B are the hosts, and C is the guest.

Example 1

> A: Come. Please come. Come to the table.
> C: I mustn't be the first.
> A & B: Come on.
> C: You, B?
> B: Yeah.
> ….

B: Come, C. Just take a plate and help yourself.
C: I know. I feel so bad. I'm the first one to … eh … carry on.
B: If nobody begins then they'll all stand on ceremony.

In the following example, the host pours the guest another drink even though the guest appears reluctant to accept. Again, A and B are the hosts. C and D are husband and wife and guests.

Example 2

A: What, C doesn't drink?
C: I do.
D: Have some sherry.
A: Get C a sherry.
B: Glass of sherry, C?
C: Well, when I finish this, B.
B: Okay. We'll give you a fresh glass.
C: Oh no! Not so much. D, is it sweet or dry?
B: It's … eh … slightly dry.
C: Eh, B, I hope you don't mind, eh. I think half will do.
B: Uh?
C: Half will do. Half, half.
B: It's such a small glass.
D: It won't harm you, C …
B: Listen, listen to me.
E: If you can drink a Bacardi Coke, I don't see why you can't drink that.
B: There's nothing to it. (Gives C a full glass)

Example 3

A: You must try this. I only make it once a year.
B: I haven't tasted it before.
A: Good. You can taste it now.
B: Ey, not so much!
A: So little how to taste?!
B: Little first then can take some more.
A: Ah! Your husband can take some more.
C: Thank you, Aunty. I think I've had enough.
A: What enough! Man must eat like a man!
        (Puts more food on his plate)

In contrast, the following extract is from a journal kept by a Malaysian participant on a visit to Britain:

Example 4

One of the lecturers invited three of us to his house for dinner. I was shy to go, but didn't know how to say I didn't want to go. Would it be rude? On the way there, the other two said they were also shy to go.

When we got to his house, he served roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. There was a problem. One of the girls is a Hindu and doesn't eat beef. The Yorkshire pudding was not a dessert. It was like a lump of dough. She had to eat it. We also ate it. The beef was nice but the pieces were very thin. I was too shy to ask for more. He asked us if we wanted some more, but we all said we were full, even though we were not.

Among Malaysians, there appears to be more concern about what guests can or cannot eat. Here is an extract of a conversation among Malaysians:

A:	What we having for barbecue? Chicken or …
B:	Chicken … chicken legs. Mixed.
C:	Take some chicken, some … no Hindus eh? Any Hindus eh? No Hindus. Can take beef lah. Beef sausages.

Entertaining in restaurants

The conversations and journal entries related to entertaining guests in restaurants and cafes were less complicated. Basically people ordered what they wanted and the small talk covered politics, social events and gossip about lecturers and mutual friends. There was one extract however that was interesting and is shown below. The scene was a Chinese wedding dinner. The journal entry was written by a Malay lady.

> *It was my first time attending a Chinese dinner. I knew what to expect – there would be a number of courses. I sat at a table with some of my coursemates so I didn't feel shy, even though Mr ___ was seated next to me and I had not met him before. Then the food came. The menu said it was "Four Treasures". It looked really interesting and tasty, but for a few seconds we all stared at the dish and no one started to eat. Then, to my surprise, Mr ____ took something from the dish and put it on my plate. I was so embarrassed! After that everyone started to eat. Later, when the next course came, he did the same thing. He picked a juicy piece of chicken and put it on my plate. I decided to ask him why he did that. He said it was so that everyone could start eating. He said he was hungry and if he did not do that, he could not eat too!!*

Conclusion

Advanced learners in schools have complained that they learn nothing in their classes, and they say that the curriculum is too easy for them. At the same time, teachers of advanced learners say that their students are fluent in English and so there is nothing

much to teach them. This may not be entirely true. Teachers can teach their students to vary their language according to what is appropriate when talking to different people and what would be appropriate in different situations when speaking in English. In other words, what forms would be suitable for various functions.

Teachers can also work with their students to identify similarities and differences between Malaysian culture and the cultures of L1 and L2 speakers of English in other countries. Understanding what would be appropriate according to the beliefs and values of the various cultures would lead to better understanding and prevent culture clashes.

At present, identifying forms and functions are part of the English language curriculum in schools. However, comparisons among cultures are not required and the teachers interviewed in the study said that they only attempted cultural comparisons when dealing with literary texts that demanded a cross-cultural approach.

If contact with L1 and other L2 speakers is encouraged, it would make it easier for the students to better understand cultural differences. Some schools are indeed encouraging such interaction by accepting foreign students into their schools for a few months or even for a year. It would be interesting to observe these students and see how they adjust to Malaysians and how the Malaysians adjust to them.

However, since not all schools can have access to foreign students, using authentic materials with advanced students would make their lessons more interesting and lively. These materials could include snippets from films / movies, documentaries, news broadcasts, television shows, photographs, magazines, newspapers and printed material like brochures, menus, advertisements, and so on.

As mentioned before, the use of literary texts would also be a boon in the class. The important thing would be to have texts available for students, other than the text being used in the literature component. This would give the students a variety of materials to choose from and add to their voyage of discovery.

Where teaching techniques are concerned, the use of role play and drama would also assist the students in interpreting body language as well as interpreting differences in meaning brought about by differences in intonation.

For all this to take place, however, English language teachers need to be competent and informed about culture. Teachers need to interact with L1 and L2 speakers of English, watch movies and TV programmes in varieties of the target language.

It will not be easy to completely overcome communication problems caused by cultural differences. The important thing, however, is to recognize that there may be differences so that one will be prepared to understand the other person. This, of course, applies not just to L2 speakers of English but also to LI speakers of English who are communicating

outside their own cultures, as it is indeed a fifth skill that needs to be acquired (Larsen-Freeman, 2001).

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