Speaking English the Malaysian way – correct or not?

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An examination of the give and take between local varieties and the expectations of classroom English

Introduction

Like a microcosm of World Englishes, English in Malaysia is spoken in a multitude of accents characterizing different ethnic groups, socio-economic, education, language and geographical backgrounds. It is also not unusual for Malaysians to *accent-switch* according to context. Amidst the cacophony of local accents arise issues about whether such accents are *correct* or *good* or *acceptable*. This paper discusses the tension between speaking English with a Malaysian accent and the need for a pronunciation model from another variety, typically British English, in the teaching of English in Malaysia. Based on ongoing research on the pronunciation of Malaysian English, this paper suggests how this tension can be alleviated.

Background

Given the diversity of 'Englishes' around the world, it is inevitable that English today is spoken in a wide variety of accents. This diversity challenges traditional reliance on native-speaker models, such as Received Pronunciation (RP), in the teaching of English as a Second Language. In contexts where local varieties of English flourish, such as in Malaysia, it is inevitable that there will be conflict and even confusion about the model of pronunciation in English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts. In Malaysia, English is learnt either as a first, second or other language. Given the myriad of local accents among both teachers and learners, the selection of any pedagogic model for pronunciation is bound to be problematic. More often than not, the teaching of pronunciation is largely ignored, or gets sidelined as teachers scramble to deal with all the other elements in the English language syllabus and to prepare students for examinations. Nevertheless, the issue of which model of pronunciation to use surfaces, for example, during the curriculum review process when questions are raised as to the viability of using RP as a reference point, or during material development that involve audio elements where the question of which accent the voiceovers should have are raised. Generally, there is a tendency in Malaysia to favour RP over other models of pronunciation, and there is even the notion that the acrolectal variety of Malaysian English is similar to RP (Baskaran 2005; Brown, 1988), resulting in a lack of research in this sub-variety of Malaysian English.

In addition, there are issues relating to having and using a local accent. While on the one hand there is the desire to use our own brand of English to construct a sense of belonging and identity (Ibrahim, 2005; 'The Case for Manglish', 1999), there is still the underlying notion that Malaysian English is *wrong* or



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incorrect English as indicated by letters and comments in local newspapers (e.g. 'Manglish–English Dilemma', 2007; 'Why Speak Manglish', 2007). One of the reasons for such reactions is the tendency to equate Malaysian English with the colloquial variety instead of viewing it as an umbrella term that comprises all the sub-varieties of English used by Malaysians (Baskaran, 1987; Gaudart, 1997; Morais, 2001). Studies on the perception of attitudes towards Malaysian English also reflect this dilemma (e.g. Crismore, Ngeow & Soo, 1996; Soo, 1990). For example, a study of 89 Malaysian undergraduates found that whilst approximately half the respondents agreed that they sounded Malaysian, only 29% of them agreed that a local accent was acceptable when speaking English (Philip, Pillai & Jeyam, 2007).

However, what constitutes a Malaysian accent is in itself difficult to define given the many ethnic groups, language backgrounds (Malay and Chinese dialects, Indian and indigenous languages) and geographical origins (e.g. East and West Malaysia). Yet within this cacophony of different accents, there must exist common characteristics that enable listeners to discriminate between, for example, a Malaysian of Chinese origin and a Chinese from China or Hong Kong. Further, Malaysian speakers can also vary their accents depending on the context of use (Rajadurai, 2004). For example, their accents may be less ethnically or geographically marked when they are using an acrolectal variety of English or in a more formal context. Perhaps this in why, in a perceptual test conducted as part of a preliminary study on the pronunciation of fluent speakers, the listeners could only accurately identify the ethnicity of the speakers 50% and below of the time (Pillai, Knowles & Mohd. Don, forthcoming). In relation to this, speakers can also choose to be more or less marked to construct or to emphasise different identities (e.g. as a Malaysian Tamil, a university lecturer, a daughter, a close friend), to emphasise solidarity or otherwise, and to communicate a particular stance or emotion. Thus, it is not uncommon to observe Malaysians weaving from one accent to another (usually in tandem with a more or less formal or colloquial variety as well). The use of more *marked* versus *unmarked* (Gill, 2002) accents is frequently utilised in radio advertisements as a tool to portray different social and ethnic groups (and often the stereotypical characteristics that are attached to particular accents) and to distinguish between the more serious brand message and the rest of the advertorial content (Pillai, 2001; Pillai & Kamaruddin, 2006; Rajadurai, 2004). As expected, the more marked accents tend to be used with the more colloquial variety of English, which in turn is associated with the less serious content in advertisement. Nevertheless, what constitutes this so-called unmarked Malaysian accent has not been systematically described.

Research on Malaysian English pronunciation

Early studies on Malaysian English pronunciation tended to describe it together with Singapore English (e.g. Brown, 1988; Platt & Weber, 1980; Tongue, 1974), with most of the focus being on colloquial and learner varieties of Malaysian English. Most of the previous research on Malaysian English is generally impressionistic in nature. Such traditional methods sometimes resulted in stereotypical descriptions of Malaysian English pronunciation and as pointed out in Pillai, Knowles & Mohd. Don (forthcoming), they 'may not be precise enough to capture significantly patterned variation in the data'.

In terms of vowels, instrumental analysis of Malaysian English vowels is ongoing under the Corpus of Malaysian English (COMEL) project and preliminary findings indicate that Malaysian English predictably shares more characteristics with neighbouring Englishes compared to, for example, British or American English. For instance, the vowel in the word *north* produced by the subjects in COMEL appears to be more fronted and open compared to the same vowel produced by the British English speakers reported in Deterding (1997). Analysis of vowels produced by the subjects who are fluent speakers of English also indicates that the perceived lack of contrast between vowels pairs (e.g. *bid-bead*, *bet-bat*) is more evident in terms of vowel quality rather than length (Pillai, 2008; Pillai, Knowles & Mohd. Don, forthcoming). Independent sample t-tests indicate that the differences between the vowel pairs were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) with the exception of *board* and *pod*, which incidentally showed more contrast in terms of quality. However, these findings will need to be confirmed using a larger

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data set and different speaking contexts as the data for this study comprised target words embedded in the carrier sentence, *Please say _____ again*. The formal nature of the read sentences could have resulted in length distinction being maintained. These differences in vowel quality do not mean that the speakers are pronouncing their vowels *wrongly*, but they are an indication that Malaysian English pronunciation is developing in a particular way. Notwithstanding ethnicity, language and educational background, Malaysians generally sound similar to each other. Such development is to be expected given the way in English is learnt (as a first, second or other language), taught and used in Malaysia and this surely has implications for the teaching and learning of English pronunciation in the class.

Pedagogic implications

The choice of a particular variety of pronunciation as a model or standard needs to be re-examined not only because Malaysians produce, for example, vowels in a particular way, but also in light of the fact that English is spoken in a variety of accents. Current practices would lean towards placing more emphasis on awareness of and exposure to different varieties of English and on intelligibility rather than accuracy of pronunciation, with models of pronunciation serving as points of reference rather than being prescriptive. Pronunciation models should also enable speakers to express their identities, and thus attempts to impose one group's accent upon another raises its own set of issues. Given the many varieties of not just Malaysian but global accents of English, the question is to what extent RP or BBC English is a realistic or practical model of pronunciation for Malaysian students being taught English by mainly Malaysian teachers and who will be communicating mostly with fellow Malaysians. Further, for intra-national communication, especially within peer-group interaction, speaking English differently can negatively affect one's group membership and sense of identity.

However, attempts to suggest moving away from, for example, RP are bound to be fraught with accusations of lowering the standard of English in Malaysia and of making it unintelligible to non-Malaysians. Such reactions tend to arise when the term *Malaysian English* is associated with the colloquial variety paired with a marked local accent. The reality is that it is possible to shift in and out of different styles and levels of formality, from the more colloquial to a more standard variety of Malaysian English. The latter can be spoken with a variety of accents. For example, compare the accent of newscasters on local television networks with that of the Malaysian Prime Minister at a press conference or a Malaysian minister being interviewed on the BBC or Al Jazeera.

Despite the current thinking that Standard English can be spoken in a variety of accents (see Trudgill, 1999), it can be anticipated that English language teachers, who have to deal with students from a diverse range of socio-economic, ethnic, language, geographical and rural–urban backgrounds, will expect the English language syllabus to stipulate a particular model of pronunciation for the simple reason that they need a reference point and expect some standardisation across the curriculum. This in turn will have an effect on measurements of accuracy or acceptability in the classroom and in oral examinations.

Reconciling differences

In Malaysia, the dilemma of accepting a diversity of accents from a linguistic and social standpoint, on the one hand, and of needing a reference point for pronunciation for the classroom, on the other hand, remains a thorn in the ELT circle. Part of the reason for this dilemma stems from the different parties – language teachers, researchers, curriculum developers, material producers, exam developers, working in isolation and not being an active part of research on English pronunciation and the teaching of English pronunciation within the general context of English as an International Language or English as a Lingua Franca. In order to begin addressing this dilemma, more in-depth research on Malaysian English pronunciation needs to be done with a view to developing a more practical reference point for pronunciation, which should take into account the way in which Malaysian English pronunciation is currently developing. This includes examining the extent to which there are differences in what has been termed the *acrolectal* and *mesolectal* variety of Malaysian English.

Such a model will also be a move towards providing a legitimate base for Malaysian

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English pronunciation, showing that sounding different does not necessarily mean being deficient. In terms of teaching and learning, it would also be helpful if the syllabus suggested areas of pronunciation to focus upon for different groups of learners rather than merely provide an inventory of English sounds to be learnt. As idealistic as all these may seem, it would be a step in the right direction, dealing with the reality of the different accents that make up Malaysian English and confronting the issue of whether we need to use someone else's pronunciation as a reference point. Perhaps more importantly, it would give us more confidence as Malaysians to speak English our way.

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