

THE ENGLISH THAT WE HAVE AND THE ENGLISH THAT WE NEED

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ABSTRACT

The rapid globalization and development of the 20th and 21st centuries have called for the need of the people to be proficient in English. The current resurgence of English as the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics shows the recognition that proficiency in that language is one of the major determinants in enhancing education and knowledge, and a necessary prerequisite for career enhancement. However, the implementation of the New Education Policy 1971, making Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in all national schools, has pushed English into a 'low key position' (Asmah 1992), and this move is viewed as one of the factors resulting into the declination of the proficiency in English among Malaysians (Jamali et al 1980). In addition, Gill (1994 : 71) claims that 'we are developing a generation who is only able to speak what some parties call the colloquial variety or simply bad English'. Thus, this paper looks at some evidence on the use of this 'bad' English in several media of writing produced by students and academics, and discusses the need to improve such use of the language. This is because the majority of this generation has been criticized by both public and private sectors with regards to their quality of English. In addition, '... the government's chief concern is that declining standards of English could hinder Malaysia's progress towards achieving developed nation status' (Fong Chang Onn 1991).

INTRODUCTION

Although the language policy, which was enacted in 1967, has stated clearly that Bahasa Malaysia is the first and national language, English still occupies a predominant position in Malaysia. In fact, English has never lost its importance, even in some domains of the public sector where Bahasa Malaysia is supposed to be dominant. Facing the challenges of the rapid globalisation and competition of trade of the 20th and 21st centuries has called for the need of the people to be proficient in English. As the language of international diplomacy, business,

information and technology, there seems to be a crucial need for Malaysians to be proficient as 'whether we like it or not, it is the language most people understand' (Mahathir Mohamad in McGrum 1996 : 42). In our Malaysian context, the need is more imperative if we want to become an industrialized nation in 2020. This is because English is important as a means of gaining wider access to scientific and technical knowledge as

... three quarters of the world's mail and four-fifths of its electronic information is in English. The bulk of existing know-how in science and technology is in the language (Asiaweek June 1995).

(in Jamali et al 1998 : 81)

Thus, as Bunn Nagara clearly states, '... for Malaysians eager to play catch up in a fast globalising world where English remains the main international language, the choice is more stark; acquire English communication skills properly or be left behind' (<http://thestar.com.my/services/file=/2001/5/5>). This view is shared by Dato' Seri Najib Tun Razak (1999), who states that

... technology, business and diplomacy, a command of English is essential. There is a growing concern within the government that we have to make a very conscious effort to improve proficiency in English throughout the educational system. It is important for Malaysians to have a good command of English, particularly if we want to be an important global player.

(in Gill 2002 : 26)

There have been many other views and concerns expressed regarding the need to be proficient in English among Malaysians (Asmah 1987; Awang Had Salleh 1994; Gill 1994; 2002). It is this issue that this paper is going to address.

ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

The role and status of English in Malaysia has considerably developed over time, perception and attitude of the people, and the conditional need of the country. The pre-independence era saw English as a language of prestige, belonging to the governing power, exclusively used by the elites and the privileged locals. English was (and still is) seen as one of the major determinants in enhancing education and the necessary pre-requisite for career enhancements. However, during the new independent period, this language was seen as a tool to achieve nationalism and nationism. English was, then, propagated as the language of colonial masters, a tool for oppression and a symbol of elitism (Nair-Venugopal 2000). Thus, Bahasa Malaysia, being the indigenous language, was adopted as the national language in order to unite people, as well as a symbol of identity. Consequently, the New Education Policy, implemented in 1971, has made it compulsory for

Bahasa Malaysia to be the medium of instruction in all national schools. This move has pushed English into a 'low key position' (Asmah 1992), and is viewed as one of the factors 'resulting into the declination of the proficiency in English among Malaysians' (Jamali et al 1998 : 80). Besides that, the notions of national identity, nationalism and patriotism manifested by the nationalists have contributed considerably to the decadence of English today. In fact, it is claimed that '... we are developing a generation who is only able to speak what some parties call the colloquial variety or simply bad English' (Gill 1994 : 71). The majority of those who belong to this generation are criticized by both the public and private sectors pertaining to the quality of English spoken. Asmah (1987) reports that

... there has been a feeling among Malaysians, including the top leaders, that there has been a drop in the attainment level of proficiency in English among Malaysians. ... in the public sector, there has been a general decrying of the fact that the government officials of today are no longer efficient in handling tasks in English compared to their predecessors.

(in Gill 2002 : 48)

The present scenario regarding the low English proficiency, especially among the post-independence generation, is now the nation's concern. The oppositions from several nationalists and academics, arguing that the move towards the resurgence of English as a medium of instruction for the teaching of Science and Mathematics would undermine the role and status of Bahasa Malaysia are seen as no longer relevant. The impact of the level of proficiency in English on individuals, as well as on the nation, as far as career enhancement, becoming knowledgeable society and achieving Vision 2020 are concerned, is apparent.

For example, Syed Omar (2000) in his study found that employers tend to regard those with heavy Malay accented English as less educated and, hence, 'unfavourable'. This is in line with many other studies in this phenomenon (Giles and Bourhis 1975; Brennan and Brennan 1981; Callan and Gallois 1987; and Riches and Foddy 1989). Thus, the following message put forward by T.T.K Ipoh in *The New Straits Times* (2000) needs to be highly and critically pondered upon :

... with 36,000 jobless graduates desperately looking for employment while the country is still hiring a large number of foreign workers, the message is clear.

In other words, despite the growth and development of Bahasa Malaysia, English still retains its importance in the workplace – without its proficiency, one cannot 'meet the current job expectations' (*ibid*).

THE ENGLISH THAT WE HAVE

English is deeply rooted in Malaysia. The historical background and the education system that makes the English subject compulsory has been seen as a part of life of the Malaysian people. Having gone through the process of acculturation and interlingual development, English has developed by absorbing the local elements, in terms of syntax, lexis and phonology. These elements are adapted to suit the needs of the local users. This has given the English language used by the locals, or better known as Malaysian English or Manglish, unique and distinctive characteristics. As observed by T.T. Koh, Singapore's representative to the United Nation :

... when someone is abroad, in a bus, train or aeroplane, and when one overhears someone speaking, one can immediately say this is someone from Malaysia or Singapore.

(in Tongue 1979 : 17)

There have been numerous studies undertaken on Malaysian English from various perspectives regarding syntax, lexis and phonology (Tongue 1974; Platt and Weber 1980; Wong 1983; Baskaran 1987; Benson 1990). However, this paper only looks at the English use in terms of syntax and lexis. Thus, the next section only looks at these two aspects of Malaysian English.

The studies cited identify the subvarieties of Malaysian English, namely acrolect, mesolect and basilect. Baskaran (1987) describes these sociolects on the standard and formality continuum. The acrolect is the most standard form, and used for international communication. The mesolect, is used for intranational communication between various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Meanwhile, the basilect is only used within a speech community, and almost unintelligible for people outside the community. These sociolects have different features of structural, syntactical, lexical and phonological levels (Gill 1994). Most of Malaysian speakers of English today fall under the mesolect category (*ibid*). Since this sociolect is deeply rooted in them, most Malaysians are not aware that the English that they use is just a variety, not the standard English Language itself.

The following table looks at the syntactical and lexical aspects of these sociolects:

Table 1 : Features of Malaysian English Sociolects

	Acrolect	Mesolect	Basilect
Syntax	No deviation tolerated at all	Some deviation is acceptable although it is not as stigmatized as broken English (intelligibility is still there)	Substantial variation / deviation (national intelligibility)
Lexis	Variation acceptable especially for words not substitutable in an international context (to give a more localized context)	Lexicalization quite prevalent even for words having international English substitutes	Major lexicalization heavily infused with local language items

Source : Baskaran 1987 : 53

FEATURES OF MALAYSIAN ENGLISH

The features of Malaysian English can be categorized structurally, lexically and phonologically. However, only the first two will be discussed in this paper.

Structural Features

The following table summarizes the structural features of Malaysian English:

Table 2 : Structural Features of Malaysian English

FEATURES	EXAMPLES
1. Overgeneralization singular-plural distinction of nouns	<i>chalks, furnitures, staffs</i>
2. Omission	
a. copula as main verb or auxiliary	<i>He very selfish.</i>
b. pleonastic subject 'it/ there' and the copula and its substitution with 'got'	<i>Got two men at the gate.</i>
c. auxiliary 'do' from Wh-questions	<i>When he say that to you?</i>
d. object pronouns	<i>I would appreciate if you reply soon.</i>
e. inflectional markers of present and past tense	<i>She do it all the time.</i>
3. Reduction	
a. the question tags resulting in the invariant tag, 'isn't it?'	<i>She used to live here, isn't it?</i>
b. tense and aspect with the use of 'already'	<i>My father already pass away.</i>
c. the modals to only two main ones	<i>Can lend me your bike or not?</i>
4. Substitution	
a. many of the modal auxiliaries	<i>I think he telling tales.</i>
b. adverbials for the tense inflections in verbs	<i>Just now I see him in the park.</i>
c. functional particles that Indicate attitudes	<i>I don't like it what.</i>

d. multifunctional of particle
'lah' *Yes, lah.*

5. Restructuring

- | | |
|--|---|
| a. using the active voice
for the passive | <i>People say may be he retire
early.</i> |
| b. avoiding the use of
Modals through particles | <i>That George, aah?</i> |
| c. using 'why' clause to
express censure | <i>Why he not yet come?</i> |
| d. using 'how' as a form | <i>How can John so busy?</i> |
| e. preposing the direct
object for emphasis | <i>This kind we don't have.</i> |
| f. through pronoun copying
(head plus pro-form) | <i>My mother, she want me to
help around the house.</i> |

(Adapted from Nair-Venugopal 2000)

Lexical Features

Yen (1991) categorizes the Malaysian English lexicon into two. The first category contains the 'words borrowed from the vocabularies of the local languages or vernaculars' (80). In this category, words from the local languages, that do not have their equivalence in English are used. Examples of such words are 'bomoh' and 'sinseh'. In addition to this, we may also have compound words that are formed from the local languages and English such as 'dadah addict' and 'roti man'.

The other category contains English words that have been localized in terms of their meaning. The words have unique Malaysian meanings, this, only Malaysians would understand the use of words such as 'member', 'schooling' and 'shake leg'.

THE STUDY

Objective

The study seeks to:

1. highlight the evidence of inappropriate use of English in students' and academics' written products;
2. identify the types of English found in the written products.

Methodology

The researchers collected samples of written products by students and academics. The samples were taken from several sources such as assignments, posters, flyers, examination papers, notices and memos. The samples were then numbered 1 to 8. The errors were identified and discussed in terms of their classification, structurally or lexically.

Findings and Discussions

Sample 1: Invitation Card (Seminar on Taxation by Tax 480/540 students).

Sample 1 is a card produced by TAX489/540 students, inviting lecturers to a seminar on taxation. The front page reads:

*Invitation of Seminar on Taxation
"Introduction on Self Assessment System"*

The underlined words show the wrong use of prepositions, where 'on' and 'to' should be used respectively.

There are also some grammatical errors on page two as follows:

We would like to invite you to Seminar on
taxation about Self Assessment System,
which will be effective in year of assessment
2004

The more appropriate statement should be written as :

We would like to invite you to a Seminar on
taxation on Self-Assessment System for the
year 2004

In addition, there is an influence of Bahasa Malaysia's structure on the last page, where it is written :

Students Tax 480/540 BiAcc.

The correct structure of writing an adjectival noun in English should be :

Tax 480/540 BiAcc Students.

Sample 2: A notice for a debate competition

Sample 2 is a notice inviting the public to a debate competition. Both Bahasa Malaysia and English are used in this notice. The English sentence is:

BE there 2 fiNd oUt!

Although the use of mixed capital and small letters are meant to attract the public's attention in terms of punctuation, this is not acceptable. A notice should be written using correct punctuation especially if it is put up in an academic environment. Furthermore, the number '2' substituting the infinitive 'to' should not be used as it can be quite confusing for readers.

Sample 3: Students' class exercises

Sample 3 is an extraction of students' exercises in class. Errors commonly made by students are :

- a. *I and my friend decorated our room every week.*
- b. *I and my members study together.*

The phrase 'I and my friend' in sentence 'a' is commonly used, yet, structurally wrong. This again shows how students' English is very much influenced by our mother tongue, Bahasa Malaysia, of which when saying self and another party, the self comes first and this is the opposite in English.

The same can also be said for sentence 'b'. Not only the phrasal structure is wrong, the use of the word 'member' is also inappropriate. Here, the term 'members' is being over generalized as carrying the meaning 'friends', which is a common phenomena in any spoken interaction among Malaysians.

Another common mistake is shown in the following example:

- c. *In my room have a corner.*

This underlined phrase is a direct translation from the word `ada' in Bahasa Malaysia, as well as misunderstanding the concept of `have' which means possessing something.

Sample 4: A letter

Sample 4 is a letter from a student applying to be excused from class. This letter contains a lot of errors ranging from structural to lexical. The underlined words and phrases are errors in grammatical structure as well as lexical.

Dear Sir,

Appling For Excused Your Class

Referring to the matters above, I am Mastura Abdul Jalil repeater's students for BEL250 from class SE 3B. I would like to apply an executed for your class on Thursday 31, July 2003.

For your information, part 6 students from Banking Programmed need to go for a visit to Kuala Lumpur as learning purposes which is compulsory for us where it is one of the assignment's assessments of treasury subject for three days.

I hope that sir can accept my reason as I mentioned above and thank you very much for your co-operation.

Wassalam

Yours sincerely,

(MASTURA ABDUL JALIL)
B6A/SE 3B

Approved by,

(EN. RATHA KRISHNAN)
LECTURER TREASURY

The letter below would be an improved version of the above:

Dear Sir,

Absence From Class

With reference to the above matter, I, Mastura Abdul Jalil, a student of SE 3B would like to be excused from BEL 250 class on Thursday, 31 July 2003.

For your kind information, part 6 Banking students are required to go to Kuala Lumpur, which is compulsory for us who are taking Finance subject.

Thank you for your kind consideration.

Yours sincerely, *Approved by,*

(MASTURA ABDUL JALIL) *(EN. RATHA KRISHNAN)*
B6A/ SE 3B *Finance Lecturer*

Writing a formal letter requires one to be knowledgeable of the correct tone and language expressions so as to suit the purpose of the letter. In addition, a formal letter should always be written with politeness and error free. This is because a letter that contains errors and poor grammar implies that the writer is unaware or uninformed, and audience usually put little faith in an uninformed source.

Sample 5: A Newsletter

Sample 5 is a faculty newsletter produced in July 2003. The newsletter is distributed to students and lecturers in UiTM Pahang. Similarly, the articles contain some structural and lexical errors. Below are the identified errors from an extract of the newsletter:

...No matter *what* you feel today, *how about stay with us for a couple of minutes!*
Let us bind your mind with our first edition of "ON-LINE NEWS".

Let's together start this semester with giving no more trouble to everyone. Try to make the great city of Jengka *shinning* like sunshine...

A better version of this extract would be as follows:

...No matter how you feel today, why don't you spare us a couple of minutes? Let us enlighten you with the latest events and information in our first edition of "ON-LINE NEWS".

Let's start this semester afresh and trouble free. Try to enjoy your life in Jengka.

In the above newsletter, it is evident that the editor is using flowery language to get the reader's attention. However, as she is writing for a newsletter, the language should be concise and straightforward as a newsletter is meant to inform rather than to entertain. A flowery language is perhaps more suitable for writing poems and the likes.

Sample 6: A Memo

Sample 6 is a message written by a lecturer on her colleague's notice pad (on the door):

I will be staying with you at the hotel but I'lbe late.

The underlined phrases show errors in punctuation as well as the wrong form of contraction being used. The correct phrases should be:

I will be staying with you at the hotel but I will / I'll be late.

Sample 7 and Sample 8: Examination Papers

Samples 7 and 8 are taken from the final examination papers from April 2003 and October 2003 respectively.

In sample 7, the errors may not be seen as serious and gross to some people as they may be seen as a mistake in proofreading. However, carelessness on our part may reflect our quality as academics.

The followings are examples of such errors and the words supplied in brackets are the correct ones.

Part B

1a) What are the differences between IP and URL address (addresses).

6b) What is the final location of the answer register (1 marks) (1 mark)

7b) After the controller [^]carried out the instruction in this part of the memory, what will be stored in Top, Bottom, Answer and Location 101? (**has carried**)

Part C

1. Discuss the impact of E-commerce to our economy system (economic system)

Sample 8 also contains some grammatical errors that are quite obvious. These again, do not lend us, academics, much credibility. The examples are:

Part A

15. When a researcher holds a 90-minute discussion with a manager in order to determine the managers ideas about the feasibility of a new product launch, this is an example a (n). (**manager's ideas, an (n)**)

Part B

3 c) Built up THREE (3) hypothesis of the study. (**Build up THREE (3) hypotheses...**)

CONCLUSION

The decline of English should be a matter of concern for everyone. Some may argue that as long as speakers, or writers / readers understand each other, the message is communicated. The grammatical structures become less important. However, this is rather a short-sighted point of view. Smith (1983) paints the idea of the negative effects on one's perception and image of the speaker regarding this issue :

... it is often easy to understand a person's meaning from what is said even when that person isn't using grammatical sentences (i.e standard English). If we hear a person say, 'I miss too much my mother,' there is little doubt about the meaning but there is some doubt about the person's English education.

(Smith 1983, cited in Gill 1994 : 73)

In addition, one cannot just assume that the listener, or reader will be able to infer the meaning himself. We need to be aware of the issues of intelligibility that

... each of us must continue to be concerned with what is appropriate, acceptable and intelligible. The most basic concern is for intelligibility. If a person doesn't speak clearly enough to be understood, his message is lost. (*ibid*)

At the international level, our Prime Minister has strongly stressed on this matter of intelligibility that

... to negotiate treaties or agreements, your command of the English language must be precise because if you use the wrong words, you will commit your country to an agreement that is detrimental to its interests. .. Malaysia is now playing a much bigger role in international affairs and it is necessary for us to have an impact politically and economically as a trading nation.

(The Star, 9 August 1994)

Thus, as educators, we should not condone to such use of 'bad' English because there are standards that we need to observe, that, ' ... to refuse to do so is to indulge in ostrich-like behaviour. Standards, whether they are recognized or not, do exist... What is needed here is a change of attitude, not a denial of standards' (D'Souza 1993 : 43). Hence, the issue about national identity and being patriotic, as far as using Bahasa Malaysia, or using Manglish is concerned, is no longer relevant here. Perhaps the following view could explain more of the writers' point on this :

It is the government's opinion that once we have become a successful race, our language by itself will gain the respect of others. On the other hand, a race, which is not successful, will not be able to gain the respect for its language even though they hold strongly to it.

(New Straits Time 28 December 1993)

Besides the issue of international intelligibility, proficiency in English is also seen as a major determinant to employability and professional advancement. The finding of a survey conducted in ten Asian countries states that

Various attributes like leadership, experience, analytical skills and a good university were polled in the survey but fluency in English emerged as the most important skill.

(The Star, 17 September 1997)

This is in line with the claim made by Datuk Ani Arope, the then Chief Executive of the National Electricity Board, the company is not interested in graduated who could 'just fill in forms and write cheques' (1991 : 1). It strongly suggests here that proficiency in English rules over grades.

Thus, our immediate concern here is to produce graduates that are competent in English so that they are more compatible and marketable in the world of work. Datuk Mustapha Muhamad, the executive director of the government sponsored National Economic Action Council (NEAC), clearly states that the large number of graduates, which is approximately 25,000, are not able to obtain employment due to their linguistic incapability :

This is basically a Malay problem as 94 per cent of those registered with the Government are Bumiputeras, Chinese constitute 3.7 per cent and Indians, 1.6 percent. It has to do with the courses taken, and ... also their poor performances in and command of the English language.

(New Straits Times, 14 March 2002)

As a university that solely concentrates on Malay students, we should have a greater concern with number of Malay graduates that we might add to the scene if we do not do anything to rectify the problem. We need to know and be convinced that the colloquial Malaysian English that the students are using, and type of English that we are setting as a model, now are not acceptable for international communication. A statement cited from the European Commission report can sum up the whole argument of this paper – that '...those who fail [to master the English Language], countries, companies and individuals alike – risk falling far behind' (Business Week 13 August 2001 : 36).

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