

Sociolinguistic Competence and Malaysian Students' English Language Proficiency

Mohan K. Muniandy

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

Academy of Language Studies, Kuala Pilah Campus, 72000 Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Tel: 60-6-483-2130/ 60-12-611-8478 E-mail: mohan691@ns.uitm.edu.my

Gopala Krishnan Sekharan Nair

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

Academy of Language Studies, Dungun Campus, 23000 Dungun, Terengganu, Malaysia

Tel: 60-9-840-3825/60-12-900-2602 E-mail: gopal792@tganu.uitm.edu.my

Shashi Kumar Krishnan @ Shanmugam

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

Academy of Language Studies, Kuala Pilah Campus, 72000 Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Tel: 60-6-483-2182/60-12-323-6945 E-mail: shash011@ns.uitm.edu.my

Irma Ahmad

Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)

Academy of Language Studies, Kuala Pilah Campus, 72000 Kuala Pilah, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

Tel: 60-6-483-2396/60-19-759-8177 E-mail: irma@ns.uitm.edu.my

Norashikin Binte Mohamed Noor

MA (Applied Linguistics) Nanyang Technological University

Ministry of Education Singapore

Tel: 02-653-153-051 Email: norashikin_mohamed_noor@moe.edu.sg

Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the importance of teaching sociolinguistic competence to ESL learners in Malaysian schools. Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of socio cultural rules of language and of discourse. This type of competence requires an understanding of the socio context in which language is used. It is proposed that carefully designed language activities be carried out by instructors in order to impart sociolinguistic skills to learners. The importance of universal intelligibility should be stressed, as opposed to native accent. Furthermore students should also be taught proper contextual use of English, in accordance to cultural reference and cultural appropriacy should be part of the learners' core sociolinguistic competence.

Keywords: Socio-cultural rules, Sociolinguistic competence, Formal language, Colloquialism

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-racial society which is strongly bounded by its system of monarchy. However, Malays form the largest portion of its demography, with Malay as its national language. Though Malay is still the most commonly used lingua franca among Malaysians, English is gaining more importance and relevance in the country. In fact, Malaysians have come to realize that it is no longer necessary, nor desirable to aim at an English native speaker's speech to achieve their communicative function. However, there has been a strong decline in the levels of English proficiency in the country. This is evident in Malaysians' everyday speech, which are often marred by grammatical and phonological errors or at times too loaded with "suffixes" (e.g. *lah*, *lor*, *meh*) and loan words from other languages.

English is the second most important language in Malaysia. It is used in various professions and is an important requirement in Malaysian academic settings. The academic setting is a microcosm of the Malaysian population, which is a mix of interlocutors of different racial and language backgrounds. They may also differ in their English language proficiency levels. Therefore, it could be assumed that in Malaysian schools' unique language environment, sociolinguistic competence contributes to Malaysian students English language proficiency.

2. Malaysian School Language Policy

When Malaysia got its independence in 1957, the government of Malaysia set out on a program to establish *Bahasa Melayu* as the official language, to be used in all government functions and as the medium of instruction at all levels in the education system. The introduction of a new primary school curriculum which goes by the Malay acronym, KBSR (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah), and the new secondary school curriculum which goes by the acronym, KBSM (Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah), is an approach to provide holistic, balanced and integrated development of an individual's potential; intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical aspect. However in 2002, the government announced a reversal of policy, calling for a switch to English as a medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science at all levels in the education system. Since 2003, Science and Mathematics have been taught in English. Therefore, teachers will be forced to code-switch to make pupils understand the subject matter.

3. Sociolinguistic Competence

Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and of discourse. This type of competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the rules of the participants, the information they share, and the functions of the interaction. Only in a full context of this kind can judgement be made on the appropriateness of a 'particular utterance', as mentioned by Brown (2000). Lyie Bachman's (1990) sociolinguistic competence comprises aspects, which deal with factors such as politeness, formality, metaphor, registers, and culturally related aspects of language. For students learning English in Malaysia, sociolinguistic competence should take into account those aspects as proposed by Bachman.

Broersma (2001) stated that the process of learning sociolinguistic competence is challenging even in one's first language. He also proposed that evidence of this can be found in the popularity of "Miss Manners" columns. He claims if we all had perfect sociolinguistic competence, we wouldn't need advice about the proper way to send wedding invitations or give a dinner party. Having good sociolinguistic competence means knowing how to "give every person his or her due." It means knowing when to be quiet, and when to talk, when to give compliments to others, and when to apologize. It also means being able to read situations and know what is the right thing to say or do. There are an infinite number of combinations of roles, tasks, contexts, and feelings that govern what is appropriate in any given encounter.

4. Sensitivity to Dialect or Variety

The standard variety of English used in our country is the variety that is taught formally in schools and the Standard British English is the linguistic model in the education system of Malaysia. However in Malaysia, English, being the second language, is learnt for a functional purpose. The most important measure of success when a language is learnt for a functional purpose is communicative effectiveness; that is, whether the language enabled the learners to achieve the purpose of learning.

A dialect is a language variation spoken by a particular ethnic, social or regional group and is an element of the group's collective identity (Ogbu, 1999). Each dialect within a language is just as logical, complex and rule-governed as the standard form of the language (often called standard variety). Malaysian English (or Manglish) is a non-native variety of English and is one of the most prominent features of Malaysia's linguistic corpus. Baskaran (1994) has categorized 'Manglish' into three sociolects, which are:

- Acrolect ('high' social dialect) - used for official or educational purposes, considered to be the standard educated sub-variety that approximates native competence and is used in formal speech as well as in written forms by speakers who have been educated in English;
- Mesolect ('middle' social dialect) - used in semiformal and casual situations, a sub-variety that is used in informal situations among fellow Malaysians.
- Basilect ('low' social dialect) - used informally and colloquially as a 'patois' shades into a pidgin used mostly by village peddlers when talking to tourists and other potential customers.

5. Different English Varieties.

There are different varieties of English used here in Malaysia. The important issue here is what would be considered as an acceptable variety of English for Malaysian students? In Malaysia, there is a strong tradition of teaching English when learners are still very young. Also, due to home language interferences and strong media influence, which at times popularises *Manglish* as a more convenient spoken variety, Malaysian students might not have enough exposure to models of Standard English. Parents might communicate with their children in

strong accented English which is unique to each cultural/racial group, or/and even in broken or grammatically incorrect English. This variety of English could be incomprehensible at times.

5.1 Malaysian English (ME)

Some words of ME reflect the multilingual traits of the country. The existence of loan words in the lexis of ME is very rampant and common, especially since Malaysia is a Malay dominated country both in language and culture. Moreover there are no lexical equivalents of certain Malay words in English. Listed below is a list of commonly used borrowed words and phrases which have made their way into the repertoire of speech among speakers of *Manglish*.

At the lexical level, some words of ME used by students reflect the multilingual traits of the country. There exist loan words from contact languages such as Chinese (*ta-paw*, *pu-yao*) and Bahasa Malayu (*makan*).

Using substrate lexemes plural in the usual English way is common, e.g. *kopios coffees* (kop-o, black coffee), *Menteri Besar* (head of state government) and *pengarahs* (directors). Other cultural expressions adopted in ME, for instance:

- *Kadhi* (religious judge) impose a fine for *khalwat* (illicit proximity to the opposite sex)
- Don't act so *ulufied* (backward, not hip) Wear something more *stylo* (stylish)
- Lets go *ngerdate* (dating), an Indonesian slang very common among the Malays.
- Hello *thamby*, (boy) one cup of coffee please.

An example of a short conversation in colloquial Malaysian English (non-standard English) may sound like this:

Housewife : Your fish so flabby, no good one.

Fishmonger : Like that already hard •what. How hard one you want? You
want stone, want wood. I can't find.

Housewife : You half-past six lawyer one. Give little bit cheap la, this fish.

Fishmonger : Oh, that's why you said that kind, said my thing flabby, you want
Cheap-cheap.

Housewife : You don't want give, I look other places.

Fishmonger : Look, look la, wait you come back look for me also.

(Adibah Aroin, New Straits Times, 3V December 1992)

6. Awareness of language differences in the classroom

Though the use of Standard English is very much desired, one must not dismiss the significance of other varieties of the language, particularly *Manglish*. Students must be made to realise the importance of Standard English in academic and formal settings; but at the same time be conscious of the communicative function of *Manglish*. *Manglish* helps learners to bridge the gap between the use of acrolect among proponents in an academic setting and the basilect used among their peers to facilitate understanding. More importantly, *Manglish* has a social function of fostering ties. It motivates students to move from one speech to another level through the opening up of communication channels across the sociolects.

Students must realise that the main objective of learning English is not to acquire native speakers' competency but rather to be intelligible among international English speakers and those within their 'community'. Students must be conscious that dialects are not inferior languages and that they should be respected, and that Standard English is necessary only in a formal context.

6.1 Intercultural Media Language

The English language and its varieties would make excellent vehicles to create cross-cultural awareness. Students are able to use print and non-print resources of language such to compare the language used in British newspapers and the local dailies. Students will find differences in the use of lexical items and would be able to familiarize themselves with the constructs of 'Manglish'. They will then proceed to examine larger texts such as novels and plays. This will encourage students to accept their own variety and 'overcome reluctance to approach another variety once they found that the texts in these other varieties were accessible to them' (Kachru and Nelson: 1996)

6.2 New English Literatures

An excellent method to introduce other varieties of English is through literature. The area of literature opens up multi-traditional aspects of human life, which encourages students to broaden their horizons. By introducing literatures that is very much Malaysian, students will be exposed to new uses and forms of their own language.

6.3 Manglish Discourse

Materials, which have features of 'Manglish' such as advertisement, obituaries and excerpts from TV and conversations, provide excellent resources in discussing discourse markers. In this way, students are able to study speech acts such as negotiating, persuading, and apologizing within the structures and cultural context which is most familiar to them. Rather than perceiving it as an obstacle to learning the English language, the recognition of 'Manglish' by educational bodies may perhaps be of a great value.

6.4 Importance of Standard Variety

I would suggest that students learn to handle formal language in schools. This is because they can easily revert to conversational and colloquial language as and when the context arises. However if one only learns to speak at the colloquial level, one can never rise up to the occasion to speak formal English when the need arises. Formal English requires usage of proper grammar and syntax with appropriate vocabulary. It takes a lot of practice before one can master English at this level. So why short change our students by accepting communication that is only up to the non- native variety level? In fact there is worry in many English speaking countries that teenagers are so used to using colloquial English in their 'SMS', that they cannot manage formal English, especially at the written level

7. Sensitivity to Registers

The notion of 'developing a language' means, adding to its range of social functions. This is achieved by developing new registers. According to Halliday (1978:195), a register is a set of meanings that is appropriate to a particular function of language, together with the words and structures which express these meanings'. Registers are commonly identified by certain phonological variants, vocabulary, idioms and other expressions that are associated with different occupational or socio-economic groups.

7.1 Importance of Registers to Learners

The term register includes different aspects of language in various contexts such as field of discourse, modes of discourse, style of discourse and discourse domain. It is important for students to develop styles and registers and recognize how to use them appropriately and be conscious of the need to do so.

7.1.1 Field of Discourse

The knowledge of discourse enables students to have the ability to communicate with specialists in a particular field once they've understood the use of terminologies used in that field. In The STAR online, 24h March, there was a write up from a concerned parent who felt that teachers needed help in the field of Maths and Science and how crude errors are made such as '8 push 4 is 4' a literal translation from BM (8 tolak 4 ialah 4). Therefore it is important for students to be exposed to mathematical and scientific terminologies because knowledge is power

Having knowledge in various fields will help students in their future studies or career such as being proficient in delivering speeches, conducting negotiations, preparing drafts of agreements and in routine business communication.

7.1.2 Modes of Discourse

Modes of discourse can be either written or verbal. Students who are not very well versed in their speech may produce ungrammatical, short, incomplete sentences, filled with false starts, fillers and pauses. Tongue (1968:83) has defined '*fillers*' as a term used to indicate those items of language which communicate no particular denotative meaning but which are used to indicate the emotive, affective attitudes of the speaker, or sometimes simply to fill a pause or a moment of hesitation or reflection in the stream of speech. The most well known is the "suffix" *lah* or sometimes pronounced *la*, which realises different pragmatic functions as illustrated below:

- Emphasizing support e.g. I agree lah
- Persuading e.g. ... you must do it in a proper way lah
- Complementing e.g. that's a good idea, good lah

Other common fillers used are 'bah' (by the Sabahans), 'mah' (by the Chinese) and "a?" or "ah". "Ah" serves to function as fillers or breaking points as well as bringing out a question force as shown below.

- No point helping friends who are not interested, do you agree with that, *ah?*

Other features of Malaysianess include the use of tag questions in particular the use of "isn't it?" and adding the phrase "or not" to the preceding instead of presenting two alternatives.

- We've done it, isn't it?
- You want to follow or not?

Students must be mindful that usage of such a variety of English is accepted in informal settings. However in a formal setting, the standard variety of English is necessary and is the acceptable norm. With the changing role and the decline in the standard of English in Malaysia, it is found that instances of deviation from Standard English have increased in frequency. Though there is an attempt to use the Standard English, inadequate exposure and lack of knowledge result in the many basic Standard English deviations, which are found even in the speech of educated users of the language. As far as Malaysian students are concerned, these irregularities are usually tolerated and overlooked, as long as they do not interfere too greatly with communicative purposes.

At present, indication of these irregularities may be observed in the spoken mode, as many students seem to feel quite free to incorporate features of the local dialect, into their speech, be it in a formal or informal situation.

7.1.3 Style of Discourse

An important issue is how students use their verbal repertoire and what are the uses they will put them to. According to Halliday (1978), there are factors, which affect the way people use language. Halliday classifies this as field, mode and tenor. Field refers to 'why' and about what a communication takes place, mode is about 'how', and tenor is about to whom. For example, in writing a letter, one might start: "I am writing to inform you that..." but in another letter, the same person might write:

"I just want to let you know that..."

According to Joos (1967), there are five types of formalities:

1) *Frozen style* is more characteristic of writing than speech

e.g. Students should make their way at once to the upper floor by way of the staircase.

2) *Formal style* uses sentences that show careful planning and logical development of ideas

e.g. Students should go up the stairs at once.

People who have limited shared background use consultative style; sentences are complete and some background information is given e.g.

Would you mind going upstairs right away, please?

People who have a shared background use casual style; it is marked by slang, profanity and incomplete sentences e.g.

Time you all went upstairs now.

Intimate style is the style, which is highly economical and is accompanied by a lot of non-verbal communication; people who know each other very well use it e.g.

Up you go, fellows!

It seems to me that it is in the area covered by consultative, formal and frozen, that our students need to be competent in. They ought to know which style to use when an occasion arises.

Once a student said to his teacher in class: "Would you be so kind to explain again?" and a moment later, he said, "I want you to explain this question again". This shows that the student is not consistent in the level of formality. In a classroom situation, the second one is acceptable but the first one is too formal. Our students fail to take into account the relationship between participants and situations or settings. Students need to be aware that a formal setting requires formal speech and that they may use colloquial words or phrases in an informal setting. They need to be aware that using language often involves how formal one needs to be in a situation.

8. Cultural References and Figures of Speech

An overall understanding of the significant role of cultural variables in cross-cultural interactions will act as a bridge to mutual understanding and acceptance in situations of cultural conflict. Students must be aware that in certain cultures, the people are expected to respond to certain utterances in an appropriate way, which is of the linguistic norm.

8.1 Importance of Cultural Appropriacy

A possible way of dealing with varied cultural behaviour is to sensitise students to the unique characteristics of other cultures. Students should develop cultural tolerance and show understanding for other people's differences.

The ability to be tolerant is necessary for anyone hoping to avoid miscommunication. It involves the learner recognizing that every culture has its own logic, its own integrity and that no one culture is any better (or, for that matter, any worse) than any other. Malaysian idiomatic expressions used by learners could only be understood at the local context. Some are even fond of the idea of contextualization these days. It truly gives a Malaysian flavour to our speech. Localised expression appeals to the average man in the street. Having a common speech pattern somehow helps some students to bond quickly and so it helps to establish friendship between like-minded people.

9. Ways of Improving Students Sociolinguistics Competence

The lack in cross-cultural understanding or sensitivity on the part of the teacher has serious implications because it affects classroom management and consequently, student's learning. There are various activities that can be carried out in classrooms to instil cultural understanding. Learning how to perform particular speech acts in both formal and informal settings, learning particular "ways of speaking", like story telling, narratives, joke-telling, simply learning to chitchat, are all important in learning how to speak proficiently. Syaharom Abdullah (1995) believes that students will become conscious of the values and expectations, which are basic in a culture through dialogue practice or role-play. In learning English, the student has to learn how to use and interpret the sociolinguistic rules of English in various contexts. To achieve this, the learner must develop an awareness of areas in which the sociolinguistic system of his own culture differs from those of other cultures. Teachers can design some problem-solving exercises in order to do so.

10. Conclusion

It is obvious that sociolinguistic competence offers more insights in learning a language. Problems may arise for students' who may not be familiar with the various context of language use. By means of getting acquainted with the various cultures of Englishes and updating their knowledge about language learning, students may be better able to accomplish the goals of engaging themselves in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purpose. It is important that the second language instructors in Malaysia be familiar with sociolinguistics. Teaching language is not just about learning the rudiments of the language but also various cultural refinements. Students must be made aware of formal and informal language use. They should be knowledgeable as to appropriate expressions for different context. Students must be mindful as to when they can resort to colloquial language and when formality is necessary. Lastly students need to be made aware that mastering English does not mean acquiring native proficiency, but rather having universal intelligibility.

References

- Adibah A. (1992). *The New Straits Times*, SO"1 December.
- Bachman, L. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford University Press.
- Baskaran, L. (1994). *The Malaysia English Mosaic*. English Today 37 Vol. 10. Brown H. Douglas, (2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, Fourth Edition, Longman.
- Broersma, D. (2001). "'You're So White, So Fat, and So Hairy!': Developing Sociolinguistic Competence in a Second Language." In *Helping Learners Develop Second Language Proficiency*, L. J. Dickerson (Ed.), pp. 200-205. Colorado Springs: Mission Training International.
- M.A.K. Halliday. (1978). *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*, Baltimore: University Park Press, 1978; London: Edward Arnold, 1978.
- Joos, Martin. (1967). *The Five Clocks*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Kachru. B.B. and Nelson, C.L. (1996). *World Englishes*. In *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*. USA Cambridge University Press.
- Morias, Elaine. (1994). *Malaysian Business Talk: A Study of Conflict and Non-Conflict in Verbal Interactions*. PHD Thesis, University of Malaya.
- Syaharom Abdullah. (1995). *Thai Tesol Annual Conference, January 1995*, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Test/cultural kind-html.
- The Star On Line, 24th March, 2003.
- Tongue, R.K. (1979). *The English of Singapore and Malaysia*. Singapore, Eastern University Press.
- Ogbu, J.U. (1999). *Beyond Languages: Ebonies, Proper English and Identity in a Black- American Speech Community*. American Educational Research Journal, 36 147-184.



Note: The picture clips display some of the errors made by our learner.