LANGUAGE IDENTITY: VARIABILITY IN PHONOLOGY IN DIFFERENT RACES IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to determine the variants of phonology sounds /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ among different races which are Malays, Chinese, Indians and other races such as Kayan, Melanau and Dusun. In Malaysia, the English language is the second official language and there are varieties on how people of different ethnicity pronounce certain words in their speech.This study was mainly based on the investigation on the pronunciation of words which had those sounds of 32 participants from *Sultan Idris Education University*. The first language of these participants varied as we have selected eight participants from each category of races. This study was conducted by adapting the variability model developed by William Labov (1970). The findings indicate that the majority of the participants had varieties in the pronunciation of /θ/ and /ð/ sounds. However, for /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds, almost all of the participants managed to pronounce it correctly. The researchers found that each race has its distinctive phonology system. This study implicates that the differences of phonology sounds being studied may have an effect on how these races pronounce words in English.

Keywords: phonology, language identity, ethnicity, variability model

INTRODUCTION

English language has always been considered as one of the main and most important language that is used globally. As we can see nowadays, English language plays an important role in affecting the identities of Malaysian speakers. Malaysian speakers have different L1 language, thus when they speak English language, their L1 interferes the English pronunciation and this could reveal their racial identity. However, here we will be focusing on phonology sounds that differentiate the identity of each race. We have decided to use the sounds /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/. We focused on these speech sounds because these four sounds show distinctive differences among the main races. Each race basically has its own grammar, like in this case, these races have different stresses and pronunciation in these sounds. We were attracted to identify how different are the differences in these sounds as being compared to English language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Itmay be said from the outset that there is a lack of research or studies on the way language identity affects the pronunciation of English speakers in Malaysia. Lee, Lee, Wong and Azizah Ya'acob (2010) researched on the identity of Malaysian speakers of English particularly on the impacts of English on the identity of young Malaysian undergraduates using qualitative method. It was conducted among 20 Malaysian undergraduates of different races including Malays, Tamils, Chinese and Singhalese. They were from both private and public universities and of speakers of English. The findings indicate that some respondents adapted identities as they switched languages in different localized contexts, particularly switching to English when wanting to be direct. In a similar way, it can be said that English contributed towards a more reflective and critical outlook towards the culture of the respondents.

Normazidah Che Musa, Koo and Hazita Azman (2012) explored English language learning and teaching in Malaysia. The researchers discussed some of the key issues and competing discourses confronting English language learning in Malaysia. It used the qualitative research method and document analysis as its research methodology. It combines elements of content analysis and thematic analysis procedures to systematically review and synthesize research papers that examine English language learning in Malaysia from year 2000 to 2011. The study reveals that there is a strong influence of the national language or *Bahasa Malaysia* over the learning of English. As suggested by the study, interference of mother tongue language system in some ways contributes to the wrong use of English grammatical rules, morphology and syntax. Learners tend to refer to their first language system when writing in English, use direct translation and depend on dictionary meanings to comprehend English text (Ambigapathy, 2002)

The next study is by Lee (2003) on the impact of English language on the construction of the socio cultural identities. The study was conducted on 20 ESL learners in Malaysia. Through the findings, we are able to know that in a multicultural, post-colonial society like Malaysia, identity issues are complex and multi-layered. According to Lee (2003), identity shifts take place frequently in strategic and non-strategic ways, and the construction of identity of participants are heavily dependent on the localized contexts. The results of the study show that it is the non-use instead of the use of the English language that enhances conformity and acceptances. Lee (2003) also stated that using the English language within certain contexts where there is resentment towards the English language may bring about hostility, marginalization and even alienation.

In addition, Alias Abd Ghani (1995) conducted a study of variability in inter-language phonology of Malaysian learners of English. It investigates the patterns of style shifting in the speech performance of the Malaysian learners use of English as they vary according to various stylistic environments such as verbal tasks viz. minimal pairs reading, word list reading, dialogue reading and free conversation representing different contexts of situation ranging from the most formal to the most casual form of speech styles. The study adapted the variability model developed by Labov (1970, as cited in Alias Abd Ghani, 1995).

Based on the different studies and reviews, majority of the studies have discussed on the identity in language switch, grammar and spoken language. Only one study has discussed on the variability in phonology. Hence, this study aims to

replicate the study of Alias Abd Ghani (1995) by adapting the variability model developed by Labov to investigate the variability in phonology in different races in Malaysia. In Malaysia, English language is the second official language and there are varieties on how people of different ethnicity pronounce certain words in their speech. Hence, it is the aim of this study to identify the racial identity issues pertaining to Malaysians who are speakers of English language and how this affects their variability in phonology.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a quantitative and qualitative approach. It is a triangulation of two types of enquiries using questionnaires and a semi-structured interview. In this research, we have adapted a variability model which was developed by Labov (1970) where it studies the sound change. Labov used this sociolinguistics model when he conducted a study in the year of 1966 on the variability of the speech patterns on New Yorkers. Labov used five speech styles which are careful style, reading style, word list style, minimal pair style and casual style. Here, we have used this model to analyse some sounds by using four parts of his model which are careful style, word list style, minimal pair style and reading style.

Since our focus on this study is on the variability in the phonology sounds in different races in Malaysia, we decided to select subjects from four ethno linguistics background, which are Chinese, Malay, Indian and other ethnics in Sarawak and Sabah. The subjects of this study are student teachers at a teacher education institute in Peninsular Malaysia. All of these subjects have the exposure to the English language. Among these subjects, some are majoring in Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) while the others are majoring in other courses. We selected these subjects randomly on the basis of availability and easy access, and there were no restrictions on the semester of these subjects.

The total number of subjects in this study was thirty-two where we selected eight participants from each category, representing four ethnic backgrounds. As far as the identities of these subjects were concerned, we have kept it confidential and each subject was referred by number assigned to him/her. For Malay participants, they range from SM1 to SM8, SC1 to SC8 for Chinese participants, SI1 to SI8 for Indian participants and SO1 to SO8 for participants from other ethnic backgrounds. There were 23 female participants and 9 male participants. However, the focus is on the variability among races, not gender. Thus, the distribution of gender is not taken into serious consideration.

Among the participants, nearly half of them stated that Malay is their first language while other subjects stated that Mandarin and Tamil are their first languages. Other races such as Bidayuh and Kayan use their mother tongue such as Kayan, Dusun and Iban instead of English. Furthermore, majority of the subjects stated that they learnt English language through formal education. English is a compulsory subject in the Malaysian education system.

We decided to use variables /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ because we wanted to examine how each race utter the sounds of these variables. We adapted these variables because

we have observed that many of the university students have problems with /θ/ and /ð/ sounds. As for /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds, we wanted to analyse it because from our daily experiences we have observed that each race has different stress on these variables. We have based our variables on error analysis where we sought to identify the types and causes of these language errors. Error analysis has been conducted to identify strategies which learners to use in language learning, to track the causes of learners' errors, obtain information on common difficulties in language learning or on how to prepare teaching materials.

To carry out this research, we have adapted Labov-style tests which are careful style, word list style, minimal pair style and reading style. Firstly, a questionnaire was designed to identify the demographic details of the participants. In the questionnaire, we posted questions related to English language acquisition. Before the questionnaire was distributed, we first interviewed the participants to enquire on their English language acquisition.

The second component of our data collection method is Test One and Test Two. Each test consists of two sections. Each section has three parts. In part one, there are 20 words containing the variables that we intend to investigate and this part is called word lists. In part two, there are ten minimal pairs and in part three, there is a dialogue. As for the words, minimal pairs and dialogues, we adapted from the study by Alias Abd Ghani (1995) which is also based on Labov's methodology. There are also certain parts where we adapted from reliable websites on teaching and learning. As for the tests, we employed the Dickerson of index scores in which index scores for each part of the test and for each race were prepared. We adapted this method because it is appropriate with our research and to show the results of our data.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that the Chinese phonology did not have /θ/ sound. Thus, the Chinese respondents whom we have interviewed had some problems in pronouncing /θ/ sound especially when the sound is in the middle and final positions. When the /θ/ sound is at initial position, many of the participants were able to produce the sound of /θ/. Words like thought, thigh, third, thin, three, thanks, thumb, thick, thirty and Thursday scored high percentage as many of the respondents could pronounce the sound.

However, when this sound is at middle or final positions, for words like mouth, both, worth, path, faith, teeth, moth and month, the respondents tend to use /f/, /d/ and /t/ sounds. For example, the word mouth had 37.5% of the respondents using the correct sound of /θ/ while 50.0% used the /f/ sound and 12.5% did not pronounce the sound. Some respondents used the /t/ sound to complement /θ/ sound.

On the other hand, when it comes to /ð/ sound, majority of the Chinese students could pronounce because it resembles /d/ sound. However, the same issue of /f/ and /t/ still occurred when this sound comes in middle or final positions. For example, the words bathe, booth and smoother, these respondents pronounce /ð/ sound as more to /f/.

For /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds, the Chinese language also has similar sounds as these (Qiu, n.d.) and thus many of the respondents could pronounce the sounds particularly in Test 2. In contrast, asmall number of participants pronounced /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds as /s/ and /c/ sounds. For example, the words dish and stretch, one of the respondents pronounced the sounds as /s/ and /c/ respectively. This was because she is from the Chinese program and usually there would be four intonations in Chinese which have some pitch in them. Thus, we assumed that she was influenced by the pronunciation of /ʃ/ and /tʃ/. One of the respondents used /k/ sound when she pronounced the word 'chore' which was the overgeneralization of the sound /tʃ/.

The Indian participants were found to be able to pronounce all the sounds that we were focused on i.e. /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/. By looking at most of the respondents' first language, which is Tamil language, we noticed that Tamil language has all the four sounds in their language (Tamilmitra, n.d.). This is different for Malay language as the language did not have the /θ/ and /ð/. This explains the reason why Indian participants did not have much problem in pronouncing /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds. Particularly for /ð/ sound, the Indian respondents were quite good in pronouncing it as compared to other races. This is because Tamil language has this sound in different forms like /θ/ and /tha/ where it is pronounced as /ð/. In addition, most of the Indian respondents are TESL students and thus, they did not have any difficulties in pronouncing all these sounds.

Most of the Malay respondents could not pronounce the /θ/ words because /θ/ sound did not exist in their first language which was Malay language (My Languages, n.d.). Most of the respondents pronounced the /θ/ sound as /t/ sound when reading the listed words because the closest sound to /θ/ is /t/. For example, they pronounced it as 'tree' and 'wort'. The position of /θ/ did not affect the participants' pronunciation. Even though /θ/ is at the initial or final positions, majority of Malay participants tend to read the words with /t/ sound. Despite of the limitations mentioned above, there was one respondent who managed to pronounce all the /θ/ words correctly. The reason being was due to the fact that the participant was a TESL student and based on the interview conducted, the respondent uses English at home because his parents encourage him and his siblings to do so. In addition, one of his sisters is studying in London which gave him the privilege to further practice his English. Other than the Malay participants, other participants from other ethnicities also had the problem in uttering the /θ/ sound correctly.

However, all the Malay participants were able to pronounce the /tʃ/ words correctly because /tʃ/ sound exists in their first language. The /tʃ/ sound in English is similar to /c/ sound in Malay. For example, *check-cek, chip-cip* and *Chinese-cina*. However, /ʃ/.sound does not exist in Malay. Yet, the result of our findings showed that Malay respondents were able to utter /ʃ/ sound. This can be explained by looking at the participants' background which showed that they are all Muslims. Muslims society is generally aware of Arabic alphabets as their holy book (the Quran) is in Arabic language. The /ʃ/.sound in English is similar to 'ش' sound in Arabic language. Thus, this explains the reason why Malay participants were able to pronounce /ʃ/ sound correctly.

On top of that, even if there were words containing /ʃ/ sound in Malay these words were not originally from Malay's lexical. Most of the 'sy' (or /ʃ/) words were

borrowed-word. Take the words like shahid, syak, syahadah, syura and sharifah, they were borrowed from Arabic words and the words like shift and shilling were borrowed from English words. In Malay, some 'sy' words were sometimes spelled as /sh/. Example of the words are like *Sharifah, shif , and shahid*. There was no standardisation on the spelling but those words possess the same sound as 'sy' words.

Looking at the different problems in Test 2, we also noticed that one Malay respondent (SM6) pronounced the /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sound softly. The /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sound could be heard but it was not clear and we struggled to detect her voice in the recording. By referring to her questionnaire, we could deduce that this participant was quite shy and has low self-esteem when speaking English. In the questionnaire, SM6 claimed that she has low fluency level and informed us that she did not use English in her daily life.

Apart from discussing about /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds in Test 1 and Test 2 among the Malay participants, our findings also revealed that most of the participants dropped the /s/ sound at the end of plural words such as chips and chops. Even though their first language has the alphabet 's', and not to mention that they were aware of its existence, most of them still dropped the /s/ sound when they were asked to read a dialogue containing /s/ at the back of a word. This was because the plural forms in Malay are different from English. In English, we add 's', 'es' or 'ies' to indicate the plural form. This rule does not apply to Malay as Malay plurals are indicated by repeating a word twice, for instance, *lori-lori* which means lorries.

Other than that, we have also discovered some lexical issues. For example, most of the Malay participants pronounced the word thigh as 'tight'. We assumed that the Malay respondents are familiar with the word 'tight' than 'thigh'. This is because, when they went through the Test 1 to read all the listed words, they automatically pronounce it as 'tight' without pausing to confirm the actual word or having to have a look at the word again. In fact, some of the participants asked the meaning of the word 'thigh'. This indicated that they were not familiar with the word.

For the other ethnic groups, they share some similarities with the Malays as they could not pronounce the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds. For example, for words 'thought' and 'worth', only 50.0% of the participants were able to read the words correctly as they used variant /θ/ when pronouncing the two words. The other 50.0% of the participants failed to read the words correctly as they used variant /t/ instead of variant /θ/. Hence, instead of using the right variant, they tend to replace it with /t/ sound. This was because most of the races in the ethnic group share the same first language which is Malay language meanwhile only a few used their own mother tongue. In Malay and their own first language, there are no /θ/ and /ð/ sounds.

In addition, the participants have no problems in pronouncing the words 'tree' and 'tend', However, there was a participant who failed to pronounce almost all of the /θ/, /ð/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds due to her tendency to use /t/ sound. She had problems in using /θ/ sounds at the end of the words, for example, instead of saying /deθ/, she pronounces it as /det/. The same goes to other words which end with the /θ/ sound, for example, 'worth'.

In addition, the main cause of her problem was due to the fact that she did not use English in her daily life and she did not feel comfortable when using it. Overall, the rest of the respondents were able to pronounce the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds correctly mainly because 50.0% of them were TESL student teachers and they used English every day.

As for the /tʃ/ sounds, most of the partcipants were able to pronounce it. However, some were not. For example, the word 'cheat' and 'batch'. 87.5% read them correctly by using variant /tʃ/ and only one respondent (12.5%) was not able to read both words correctly as she used variant /ʃ/ instead of variant /tʃ/. The same respondent pronounced the word 'chip' as 'ship', and the word 'batch' as 'bat'.

Again, there was no /ʃ/ and /tʃ sounds in their first language. However, it was easier to pronounce /ʃ/ sound as some already have the basic in their first language as the sound is borrowed from Arabic. We think that for the few wrong pronunciation, for example, /ˈsiːʃɔː/ (some pronounce it as /ʃiːʃɔː/), it might be due to the slip of the tongue. As for some respondents who failed to pronounce /ʃ/ at the end of the word, we assumed that this was due to fact that their language differs from other language and the respondents' first languages did not have the /ʃ/ sounds at the back, hence they tend to follow their first language's rule.

CONCLUSION

In sum, most of the respondents who could not pronounce the words correctly were non-TESL students. Majority of the TESL respondents managed to pronounce correctly due to the fact that they used English in their daily life and were comfortable in using it during their conversation or overall interaction. In contrast, those who were not from TESL course found it hard to pronounce certain words, because English language was not their preferred language. There is one main similarity that we have found from this study. Majority of our participants were able to pronounce the /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds despite the fact that they were from different races. This was because in each of their language, they have the /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ sounds.

For the differences, we noticed that the majority of Indians managed to pronounce the /θ/ and /ð/ sound correctly. Other races like Malay, Chinese and other ethnics were unable to pronounce the /θ/ and /ð/ sound correctly. This is because they do not have this sound in their sound system. Only a small number of them managed to pronounce the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds correctly. However, those respondents who were able to pronounce the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds correctly were inclined to English language.

The next difference that we have noticed is the variations of /θ/ sound among the races. Even though it is the same sound, we noticed that different races have their own interpretation of pronouncing the /θ/ sound. Chinese tend to pronounce /θ/ as /f/, Indian tend to pronounce /θ/ as /d/ and both other races and Malay races tend to pronounce it as /t/. Thus, we can say that each race has distinctive pronunciation.

Although each race has their own speech performance but they did not differ much in these phonology sounds. There were some similarities and differences among these races on the way they pronounce those sounds. Some were affected by their

mother tongue while some on the environment that they grew up. This research has highlighted the differences is some of phonology sounds that exist among different races in Malaysia. Thus, in future, an analysis of different sounds such as consonants would help to better understand the different sound systems of a racial group as some languages do not share the same sound system. This study implicates that student teachers can have better understanding on the influence of their home and other environment on English sound system and how this would affect the process of acquiring the language.

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