

Teaching Proper English to Malaysian Speakers: Focusing on the Vowels, Consonants, Syllable, and Stress

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The English spoken by a typical Malaysian tends to have a simplified sounds system, which makes the speaker unintelligible to native and other English speakers. This paper discusses the mispronunciations of vowels and consonants, misplaced syllable and improper stress when Malaysians speak in English. This paper also describes the teaching approach used by the author in conducting business communication trainings for both working Malaysians as well as Malaysian students to overcome the mispronunciations and wrong intonation. A survey was conducted among the students who were asked to evaluate the learning and teaching method. The findings indicate that most students rate the quality of the course and the quality of teaching as either “excellent” or “good”. The approach is effective among learners who recognize the weaknesses of their spoken English, and are willing to upgrade their intelligibility among native and other non-Malaysian speakers.

Keywords: Malaysian English speakers, proper English, vowels, consonants, syllable, stress

Introduction

Due to a long historical connection with the United Kingdom, English is widely spoken in Malaysia. However, the local languages and dialects have an immense impact on how the language is spoken in this country. The “Malaysian English” tends to have a simplified sounds system, which makes the speakers unintelligible to native and other second language speakers. There are fewer vowel sounds, and consonant clusters are reduced. The vowels “a”, “e”, “i”, and “o” are often pronounced incorrectly resulting in the words sounding differently. For example, there is little or no difference in the pronunciation of the words “bad” and “bed”, and between “sheep” and “ship”, “seat” and “sit” (King, 2013). Some consonants like “b” is pronounced as “p”, “d” as “t”, “g” as “k”, and “v” as “f” when they are in the middle or end of words. Thus, bulb sounds like “bulp”, dog like “dok”, love like “lofe”, and bad like bat are pronounced the same way. To the native English speakers and those who speak a standard form of English, these mispronunciations often impede comprehension (William, Krizan, Logan, & Merrier, 2010; Thill & Bovee, 2009).

The opportunity for the author to directly address this problem came in 2001 when he switched career from banking to academia. The author was offered by the University Malaysia Sabah, Labuan to lecture banking courses, and later he was also asked to teach business communication. Taking cognizance of the unique problems

faced by Malaysian speakers, the author began to incorporate a conversational English course in the tutorial portion of the business communication class. The students found it fun and enjoyable, and for the serious learners, positive result could be seen by the end of the semester. Realizing that the approach worked quite well with university students, the author began to offer industry consultancy using the same approach.

Roots of the Problem

Fewer Vowel Sounds

Malaysian speakers have problem in pronouncing the vowels “a”, “i”, and “o”, some words containing these vowels may sound different. The word “cat” sounds like “ket” or “kate”, thus when a man say “I love my cat”, it sounds like “I love my Kate”, giving standard English speakers the impression that he loves his girlfriend, or wife Catherine (Kate for short). For example, there is no difference between “bat” and “bet”. A speaker who talks about a bat hunter with a gambling habit may say “the hunter bets on the number of bets (bats) he can shoot down”. The vowel “i” is pronounced as “ee”, and thus there is no difference between “ship” and “sheep”. A Malaysian speaker referring to a ship full of sheep may say “the sheep that arrives at port Klang from New Zealand is full of sheep”. The vowel “o” sounds more like “oe” or “oh”. A few years ago the author met a person, and asked him where he worked, and the answer was “ESTROE”. Feeling confident that the author had not heard of the company before he commented, “it must be a new company”. The response was “noh, noh, it has been around for some time, it’s a TV station, and I *reat* (read) news”. “Oh”, “ASTRO” the author said, and “yes, ‘ESTROE’ TV” came the answer.

The Misunderstood Consonants

The most misunderstood consonants among the Malaysian speakers of English are “b”, “c”, “d”, “g”, and “v”. The consonant “b” is pronounced as “p”, “c” as “z”, “d” as “t”, “g” as “k”, and “v” as “f” when they are in the middle or end of words. Thus, a Malaysian who wants to replace a light bulb would go to the store and asks: “Do you sell a light *bulp*?” Or a waitress in a seafood restaurant would ask a diner: “*Wout* you like to *hafe* *crap* to go with your *friet* rice sir? We *hafe* sweet and sour *crap*, ginger *crap*, *blek* pepper *crap*, *crap* *friet* with *ek* and tomato *sos* all taste very *goot*”. An American or an English guy visiting Malaysia for the first time would definitely have a hard time figuring the sentences out, but one word that stands out would be “crap”, and the poor guy would probably lose his appetite. What a food! Only the Malaysians eat “crap”, everyone else eats crab.

Misplaced Syllable

The medium of instruction in the Malaysian schools is Malay, and Malay has a simple syllable which always ends at a vowel. For instant the words “ada” (have) pronounced “a’da”, “bapa” (father) pronounced “ba’pa” (*The Institute Dictionary*, 2005). When speaking in English most Malaysians would apply the same rule, and when they say the words “better” (bet’r), or “butter” (but’r), they would say be’tē, and bu’tē. Because of the misplaced syllables words like “balcony”, “canopy”, and “protocol” may not only be unintelligible, but unrecognizable as well. This is because the Malaysian would say “bal’co’ny” instead of “balco’ny”, “ca’no’py” instead of “can’opy”, and “pro’to’col” instead of “prot’ocol”.

Improper Stress

In the Malay language, there is no distinction between syllables, and all syllables in a word are pronounced evenly for instance “eko’no’mi” (eCOonomy), “eko’no’mik” (ecoNOmics), and “eko’no’mis” (econoMIST). Improper stress combined with misplaced syllable often results in a disastrous intonation. A typical Malaysian would pronounce the above words as “ec’no’mi”, “eco’no’mics”, and “eco’no’mist”.

The “Funny” English

Perhaps, the best way to illustrate these predicaments is to cite the experience of some non-Malaysians who unfortunately have learned to speak English the Malaysian way. When the author was a lecturer at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah, he was approached by a group of students from China who requested him to teach them proper English. They had studied in Malaysia and learned to speak English Malaysian style. While spending their long summer break in China, they met some expatriates from the US, UK, and Australia, and to their surprise, these native English speakers thought that they spoke “funny” English.

The irony is most Malaysians who speak English think there is nothing wrong with their intonation (Gaudart, 2003). Often they would ridicule those few Malaysians who speak the proper English for speaking “funny” English, and aping the Westerners. Consider a case of a student in the author’s communication class, she argued: “What’s wrong with the Malaysian English? I’ve been speaking English since I first learned to talk, and I don’t see any problem”. The author said: “As long as you speak to fellow Malaysians there shouldn’t be any problem, but you will have a lot problems if you’re in the US, UK, or Australia. You’ve to use sign language to supplement your spoken English to be understood” (personal communication, November 12, 2003).

For those Malaysians who recognize the problem and wish to improve their intelligibility in English, where do they go for help? Most would say “go to the Malaysian English teachers”. Wait! Consider the following passage from a retired professor of English, Hyacinth Gaudart (2003):

Many EFL teachers, including Malaysians, have problems with stress and intonation patterns of English. Sadly, they do not even realise that the problems exist. In a research done in 1979, I found that native and second language speakers who listened to Malaysian teachers speaking in English found it most difficult to understand the speakers when they used incorrect stress and intonation patterns. (p. 10)

Perhaps, another illustration would be useful. The author recalled a conversation which he had with professor Tazim Murtaza back in 2006. Professor Murtaza was a member of a panel of interviewers screening applicants enrolling in the School of Education and Social Development, Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The interview was conducted in English, and one particular applicant was an English teacher, and she requested if the interview could be conducted in Malay as she could not speak English well. The interviewers were puzzled and asked her how she taught English to her students if she herself could not speak the language. The answer was even more puzzling that she said she taught English in Malay (personal communication, October 25, 2006). Interesting?

Teaching Methodology

The author usually starts the lesson by asking volunteers to read a *Dogs and Cats Story* (2003) which is

designed to capture the mispronounced vowels and consonants, misplaced syllables, and improper stress. The story goes as follows:

Richard and Kate are good friends. Richard has two dogs, Job and Jog, and Kate has two cats called Bob and Twig. Richard and Kate love their dogs and cats, and always give them good food to eat. Bob and Twig are good cats; they help Kate to get rid of rats from the house. But Job and Jog are bad dogs; they dig holes in the garden and bark at Bob and Twig. Because of these bad dogs, Bob and Twig never get out of the house, and they eat their food in bed. (Baba, 2003, p. 2)

A lethal combination of mispronounced vowels and consonants, misplaced syllables, and improper stress would yield some strange words which are unintelligible to native or other proper English speakers. A typical Malaysian would sound as follows:

Richet and Ket are goot friends. Richet has two doks, Jop and Jok, and Ket has two kets called Bop and Twik. Richet and Ket lof their doks and kets, and always give them goot foot to eat. Bop and Twik are goot kets; they help Ket to get rit of rets from the house. But Jop and Jok are bet doks; they dik holes in the garden and bark at Bop and Twik. Because of these bet doks, Bop and Twik never get out of the house, and they eat their foot in bet.

This unintelligibility usually leads to miscommunication. To the native and proper English speaker, the Malaysian speaker is saying some strange, puzzling, and even obscene words. Below is what the native and other proper English speakers would hear.

Wretched and Ket are goot friends. Wretched has two docs, Jop and Jok, and Ket has two kets called Bop and Twik. Wretched and Ket lof their docs and kets, and always give them goot foot to eat. Bop and Twik are goot kets; they help Ket to get rit of rets from the house. But Jop and Jok are bet docs; they dick holes in the garden and bark at Bop and Twik. Because of these bet docs, Bop and Twik never get out of the house, and they eat their foot in bet.

Material and Resources

The teaching method is simple, and the main resources used are textbook (with CD), and dictionary (with CD). For the text, the author prefers to use *Communication Strategies* (2003) by David Paul from Thomson Learning, and the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2003). When the author was at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Labuan the additional resource he prescribed to his students was to listen to *Crystal FM*, the Brunei radio station. For the business communication class, the course was for the whole semester, and for the industry consultation group, the duration was 12 weeks. Every student was given the opportunity a role to play the dialogue in the text and benchmarked their performance against the original dialogue in the CD. Variations of pronunciations (British or American) were verified against the dictionary (with CD).

Beside the prescribed material and resources, students were also asked to write up their own material, usually in the form of dialogues. These may be between a waiter and a diner in restaurant, or a tourist guide and a tourist, or a hotel receptionist and a hotel guest.

Does the Method Work?

The author has not attempted any formal or systematic method of evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching approach. Casual observations indicate that the industry consultancy groups appear to have higher success rate than those in the business communication class. The author's explanation for this disparity is that,

for the industry groups, the participants volunteered to enrol in the course, and the classes were small, usually 10 to 15 persons. Since they willingly enrolled in the course, they were enthusiastic and motivated. As for the business communication classes, they were “forced” into the course and some of the students did not display much enthusiasm. Besides, classes were big usually 60-100 students making it impractical to give them personal attention.

For the serious students, their spoken English usually improved substantially by the end of the semester, at least when they speak with the author. Some examples would help to illustrate the point. When the author was with the Universiti Malaysia Sabah, Labuan this particular student was in his business communication class, and because there were a hundred more students in the class she never got the chance to talk, and the author was not aware of her progress. However, some time later they met, and when she spoke, the author was taken aback by her American accent. To the author’s surprise, he asked the student if she was in the American Student Exchange Program, she said “no”. And the author asked the student how long she has been learning to speak English. The answer was “since I was in Matriculation College”. “That’s three years”, the author said, “but where did you learn to speak American English?” Her answer was “Sir, remember? I was in your business communication class last year, and you told us to imitate you” (personal communication, March 30, 2004).

Another case was with the industry consultancy group. The author was engaged by one of the GLCs (government linked corporations) to teach their chauffeurs conversational English as these chauffeurs attended to international clients. The classes were quite irregular as they had to find time in the evening which was suitable for both instructor and students. After three lessons the class stopped, and when it resumed after three months, the author was greeted by a number of enthusiastic chauffeurs speaking almost native English. The author asked them if they spent the summer in the UK or US. The answer was amusing, they said: “No, we listened to *Crystal FM* (a radio station in Brunei modelled after the *Capital FM* of London) and practiced the dialogues in the CD”.

Some Empirical Evidences

The author’s casual observations at the Universiti Malaysia Sabah, and later at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak indicated that the students appeared to have fun and enjoyed themselves during the tutorial portion of the business communication class. When the author taught the same course again at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak in 2011, he decided to find out how the students perceived his teaching approach. This was done by analysing the course evaluation form which they have to complete at the end of the semester. As the evaluation was not a questionnaire specifically designed for this purpose, most of the data were not relevant. For the purpose of this analysis, the author only chose four items in the evaluation form which were related to his teaching approach. These items were clarity and ease of understanding, usefulness, and relevance of examples and illustrations, quality of teaching, and quality of course. The selected data were gathered from 80 sets of course evaluation forms that students completed at the end of Semester 1, Session 2011/2012.

Findings

Clarity and Ease of Understanding

For clarity and ease of understanding 95% of the respondents rated “excellent” and “good” as depicted in

Table 1. The high rating indicates that the students find it easy to understand the lecture when it is conducted in proper English.

Table 1

Understanding of Lecture

| Variable | Rating | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|--|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| The lecture is clear and easy to understand. | Excellent | 34 | 42.5 |
| | Good | 42 | 52.5 |
| | Fair | 4 | 5.0 |
| | Poor | 0 | 0.0 |
| | Total | 80 | 100.0 |

Usefulness and Relevance of Examples and Illustrations

As depicted in Table 2, an overwhelming 96.2% of the respondents rated the examples and illustrations as “excellent” and “good”. This finding explains why the students are enjoying themselves and having fun doing role-playing in class.

Table 2

Usefulness and Relevance of Examples and Illustrations.

| Variable | Rating | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|---|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| The lecture gives useful and relevant examples and illustrations. | Excellent | 36 | 45.0 |
| | Good | 41 | 51.2 |
| | Fair | 3 | 3.8 |
| | Poor | 0 | 0.0 |
| | Total | 80 | 100.0 |

Quality of Teaching

As summarized in Table 3, an overwhelming 95% of the respondents rated quality of teaching as “excellent” and “good”. The finding indicates that the students believe that they are receiving quality teaching.

Table 3

Overall Quality of Teaching

| Variable | Rating | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|--|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| Overall, how do you rate the quality of teaching of this lecturer? | Excellent | 40 | 50.0 |
| | Good | 36 | 45.0 |
| | Fair | 4 | 5.0 |
| | Poor | 0 | 0.0 |
| | Total | 80 | 100.0 |

Overall Quality of the Course

As depicted in Table 4, a vast majority (90%) of the respondents rated the quality of the course as “excellent” and “good”. The finding indicates the course is beneficial to most of the students.

Table 4

Overall Quality of the Course

| Variable | Rating | Frequency | Percent (%) |
|---|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| Overall, how do you rate the quality of the course? | Excellent | 33 | 41.2 |
| | Good | 39 | 48.8 |
| | Fair | 7 | 8.7 |
| | Poor | 1 | 1.3 |
| | Total | 80 | 100.0 |

Conclusions

In this paper, the author has identified four main problems faced by most Malaysian when speaking in English. These are the mispronunciation of vowels, mispronunciation of consonants, misplaced syllable, and improper stress. For those speakers who are aware and acknowledge they have such problems, a proper training would help them identify ways and methods to overcome these shortcomings. A good speaking habit, listening to good radio stations and watching good TV programs, and practicing proper English would help to elevate the speakers' standard of spoken English close if not to the level of the native speakers. Speaking intelligible English that is universally understood not only exudes confidence in the speaker, but it also reflects professionalism.

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