



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**AN INVESTIGATION ON THE VARIETY OF ENGLISH USED
BY STUDENTS IN THE ESL CLASSROOM**

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By

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**Project paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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DEDICATION

Dedicated to my parents
for seeing only the best in us (the children).



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Praise and glory to the Most High God through Jesus Christ my Lord and Saviour who has been my ever present Shield and Defender throughout the duration of my study in Universiti Putra Malaysia.

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March 1998

Supervisor : Dr. Malachi Edwin Vethamani

Faculty: Educational Studies

This study reports and discusses some of the common features evident in an English written composition of a group of Form Five students' from the districts of Kuala Pilah and Seremban in Negri Sembilan..

The results of the analysis suggest that the salient features identified in the written compositions are features of Malaysian English, which has been recognised as a new non-native variety of English.



Abstrak projek yang di kemukakan kepada Fakulti Pengajian Pendidikan Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi sebahagian syarat bagi mendapatkan Ijazah Master Sains.

PENYELIDIKAN DIATAS KEPELBAGAIAN DALAM BAHASA INGGERIS YANG
DIGUNAKAN OLEH PELAJAR DALAM KELAS BAHASA INGGERIS

Oleh

JOSEPHINE LEELA A/P V. DAMODARAM

Mac 1998

Penyelia : Dr. Malachi Edwin Vethamani

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Kajian ini merakamkan serta bincang ciri-ciri yang ketara dalam penulisan sebuah karangan Bahasa Inggeris yang ditulis oleh segolongan pelajar Tingkatan Lima di daerah-daerah Kuala Pilah dan seremban di Negeri Sembilan.

Kajian ini telah mengenalpasti ciri-ciri yang terdapat dalam variasi Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia yang merupakan sebahagian dari variasi Bahasa Inggeris Baru di dunia.



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background

There are more than 800 million people around the world who use English in one way or another. More than half of them, approximately 57%, are non-native speakers of English (Kachru, 1996). Most of these non-native speakers use English as a foreign language in a restricted functional range and in international trade and tourism. However, a large number of non-native speakers use English for intranational purposes such as, education, government, business and inter-ethnic communication, in addition to international uses. Countries where English is used for such intranational purposes and has official status and that of a second language include Burma, India, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore among others (Lowenberg, 1991). In these countries where English is used in new social, cultural and linguistic settings, it often develops new linguistic features that are widespread and systematic, thus giving rise to non-native varieties of English (Platt, Weber and Ho, 1984). These varieties differ phonologically, syntactically and semantically from the established native speaker varieties, such as British, American



and Australian English. Malaysian English is one of these 'non-native' varieties of English.

Advent of English in Malaysia

Malaysia is a country with three main ethnic groups, namely, Malays, Chinese and Indians. With the acquisition of Penang Island by the British in 1786, English was first introduced to the country. It then spread to the rest of the country through religious and educational activities from the early nineteenth century on. English medium schools were established and these schools existed alongside the Malay-medium, Chinese-medium (which used Mandarin), and the Tamil-medium schools. Each system of education was based on a different language and culture. English-medium schools were set up primarily in the urban centres.

Functions of English during Colonial Times

During the British colonial era, English was the language of government, administration and commerce (Wong & Thambyrajah, 1991). Thus, a knowledge of English was considered an asset among Malaysians, and as a result, the English-medium

schools became the avenue to better jobs as well as further educational opportunities.

Asmah Haji Omar (1975:22-23) states:

The English language first made its entrance as the language of a small group of people who held the reins of the administration of this country. With power in their hands, they made their language the most indispensable requirement in the achievement of social and economic status. The language came to be taught for all, and the people from the lowest to the highest stratum of the society realised the necessity and importance of English in their life. ... As a result, English-medium schools have far outnumbered vernacular schools, be they Malay, Chinese or Tamil.

Role and Status of English after Independence

When Malaysia gained independence in 1957, English lost its status as the main language of administration (Benson,1990). It was adopted as an alternate official language together with Malay until ten years after independence. The Language Act of 1967 deprived it of this role (Asmah Haji Omar, 1975). Today, the Malay language or Bahasa Malaysia is the official language of the country. In 1969, the Ministry of Education initiated a policy whereby all English medium schools were to become Malay-medium. Thus, from 1970 onwards, English was phased out as a medium of instruction in government schools. This process was completed nationwide at the primary through tertiary levels of education by the early 1980s (Lowenberg,1991).

English has been retained as the compulsory second language throughout all levels of primary and secondary school. It is still used as a prominent reading language in higher education. This situation has brought about a dramatic decrease in the use of English.

Development of Malaysian English

The diminishing use of English has resulted in a decline in the general level of English proficiency among Malaysians. Benson (1991) states that some decline in general levels of competence is inevitable when a language is no longer employed as a medium of instruction. He further explains that those whose use of English is confined to the school system rarely use it in their daily life. This situation is prevalent among rural Malaysians, where English remains a foreign language. However, it is an everyday language of the large cities. Thus, English in Malaysia, for the vast majority, is spoken and written by people for whom it is not the mother tongue. As such, a complimentary dialect of English in Malaysian schools for intergroup communication emerged. This variety is characterised by features found in the home dialects of the pupils, especially those of Malay, Chinese and Indian origin (Augustin, 1982). This influence is evident in their spoken and written language. Thus, Malaysian English spans a continuum ranging from the basilect, the lowest variety, to the highest variety, acrolect (Augustin, 1982). The acrolectal variety or Standard Malaysian English models itself after the standard formal and written native-speaker variety of English (Wong, 1983).

Statement of the Problem

Standard Malaysian English or the acrolectal form of Malaysian English is the unquestioned choice of a model for all language instruction. This is due to the fact that it is the variety that is codified in grammar and sanctioned by its use as a model for written language. Formal and written Malaysian English seeks to model itself after the standard formal and written native speaker variety of the language (Wong, 1983:135).

In schools, English is taught as a compulsory subject at all levels, primary and secondary. It is also a compulsory subject in institutions of higher learning. The English Language Syllabus is part of the Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah or KBSM (the New Integrated Secondary School Curriculum). It aims to develop the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and the accompanying grammar, sound system and vocabulary. It is the written form that is generally used to measure the proficiency level of the language.

Although the language used in formal language instruction is Standard Malaysian English, the vast majority of students use the sub-standard varieties of Malaysian English in their spoken and written discourse.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are to identify the lectal range of Malaysian English used by students in their written compositions and the salient features of Malaysian English that are evident in their compositions.

Research Questions

1. What is the predominant lectal range which is evident in the written work of the given sample?
2. What features of Malaysian English emerge in these students' written compositions?

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are used in the analysis of the sentences written by the students in their compositions. The lectal range refers to the lectal continuum of Malaysian English that ranges from the educated form, the acrolect, and moves through to the informal variety, the mesolect, and finally to the substandard or uneducated variety, the basilect. Baskaran's (1987) representation of the lectal range is used for this study. The acrolectal sentence is one which is internationally intelligible

and is error-free. The language used is accurate. Slight variations are acceptable especially for words that are used to give a more localised context. The mesolectal sentence is fairly accurate with a few minor errors of verb form and tense. Some deviation is allowed and intelligibility is still an important feature. Variations in lexis and in syntax, such as word-order, tense and aspect and determiners are tolerated. The basilectal sentence has substantial variation. It is heavily infused with local language items. A basilectal sentence is internationally unintelligible and intelligible nationally only among those who can modulate at that level. The meaning of the sentence is unclear and there is a heavy reliance on lexicalization.

In this study, Standard English, is referred to the linguistic forms of Malaysian Standard English normally used for government, business, academic and journalistic writing, for public speaking before an audience, on radio and television (Lowenberg, 1992). “Variation” and “deviation” in the sentences are based on the degree of structural divergence from Standard English at the syntactical and lexical levels. In this study, a ‘mistake’ is based on Kachru’s (1982) definition of one. Kachru (1982:62) states that a ‘mistake’:

may be unacceptable to a native speaker since it does not belong to the linguistic ‘norm of the English language; it cannot be justified with reference to the socio-cultural context of a non-native variety; it is not the result of productive processes used in an institutionalized non-native variety of English.

A 'deviation', on the other hand, is:

different from the norm in the sense that it is the result of the new "un-English" linguistic and cultural setting in which the English language is used; it is the result of a productive process which marks the typical variety-specific features; and it is systemic within a variety, and not idiosyncratic. There is an explanation for each deviation within the context of situation.

(Kachru, 1982:62)

What Kachru defines as "deviation" would be fully acceptable as linguistic innovations (Wong,1991). Wong (1991) refers to these 'innovations' as variations, and for the purpose of this study, the term "variation" would be used to denote "deviation" as explained by Kachru (1982).

Limitations of the Study

The study was carried out on all one hundred and four Form Five students in two schools in Negri Sembilan, one in the Kuala Pilah district and the other in the Seremban district. The study was based on only one written sample of the students.

Another limitation is that there is not much recent research that has been done on features of Malaysian English, especially in written discourse. Therefore, it was difficult to make comparisons between the samples and related literature.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Language is closely bound up with our everyday experience. It is the most common system of communication. Language, a vital part of our lives, gives expression to our thought and feelings. Many languages are spoken only by small groups of a few hundred or a few thousand persons. Each speech community has its own language. However, a common language enables human beings to work together in an infinite variety of ways (World Book, Vol.12, 1995).

English as a Universal Language.

As the number of users of English worldwide surges towards a probable two billion (Kachru, 1996), it is therefore the most widely spoken language in the world today (McArthur, 1987). English is an official or semi-official language in more than



sixty countries and has a prominent place in another twenty countries in the world. It is either dominant or well-established in all the six continents. It is the main language of books, newspapers, airports and air-traffic control, international business and academic conference, science, technology, medicine, diplomacy, sports, international competitions, popular music and advertising (Chew, 1996). She further adds that more than two-thirds of the world's scientists write in English, and three-quarters of the world's mail is written in English.

Another recent development that has propelled English to the forefront is the Internet. While the Internet has no government, no owners, no shareholders, no members, no time, no place, and no country, it has a language, which is English (Chew, 1996). Otsuka (1998) adds to this fact by claiming that about eighty-two percent of web sites use English and ninety percent of e-mail is in English. He further adds that large amounts of information appear in the English language. As information distribution grows in importance through innovations such as the Internet, so does the language. Although some quarters call the penetration of English via the Internet "a new form of colonialism", the fact remains that English is the lingua franca of the Internet. The English language is the most convenient tool for the purpose of the Internet, which is to exchange information and promote understanding (Otsuka, 1998). It is against this



backdrop of unprecedented social and political changes taking place in the world, that English has developed as a universal language.

The Rise of New Varieties of English

Baskaran (1987) points out that English has spread across the globe and it is no more the possession of its native speakers. She further adds that its global presence indicates that the number of non-native speakers today outnumbers that of native English speakers. Graddol (1997) estimates that the number of native speakers of English to be 375 million and non-native speakers to be about one thousand million speakers. This has resulted in the emergence of new and diverse varieties of English.

Many countries which had been colonized by native English speaker countries, such as Britain and the USA, use English as a functional language. The prime motivation for its use is for international communication (Wong, 1982). Vethamani (1996:29) further explains:

Non-native Englishes generally emerged and developed through one of two routes. One was through the colonial education system where English was used as a medium of instruction or taught as a subject in educational institutions, as in the case of India, Malaysia and some African

nations... The other route was the result of its development from a creole form, as in the case of the West Indies. .. as the English language was being used in new contexts, the language was subjected to change and these new non-native varieties developed their own distinctiveness.....

In his description of the spread of English beyond the British Isles, Kachru (1994), describes varieties of World Englishes as forming three concentric circles. The “Inner Circle” is comprised of English varieties that are usually known as “native varieties”, and they include American English, British English, Canadian English and Australian English. The “Outer Circle” is made up of what Kachru calls “institutionalized varieties” of English. These varieties of English are different from other non-native varieties in that they have an important status in governmental language policies, education, law or media. These varieties include Indian English, Philippines English, Singapore English and Malaysian English. The third concentric circle or the “Expanding Circle” is also made up of non-native varieties of English. However, these varieties do not possess any institutional status within the countries of the “Expanding Circle”. These varieties include the Englishes spoken in China, Israel, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia among others. Figure 1 further illustrates this point.

Graddol (1997) further adds that in the “Inner Circle” the estimated number of speakers is 320 to 380 million. In the “Outer Circle” the estimated number of speakers is 150 to 300 million speakers. In the “Expanding Circle” the estimated number of speakers is about 1000 million speakers.

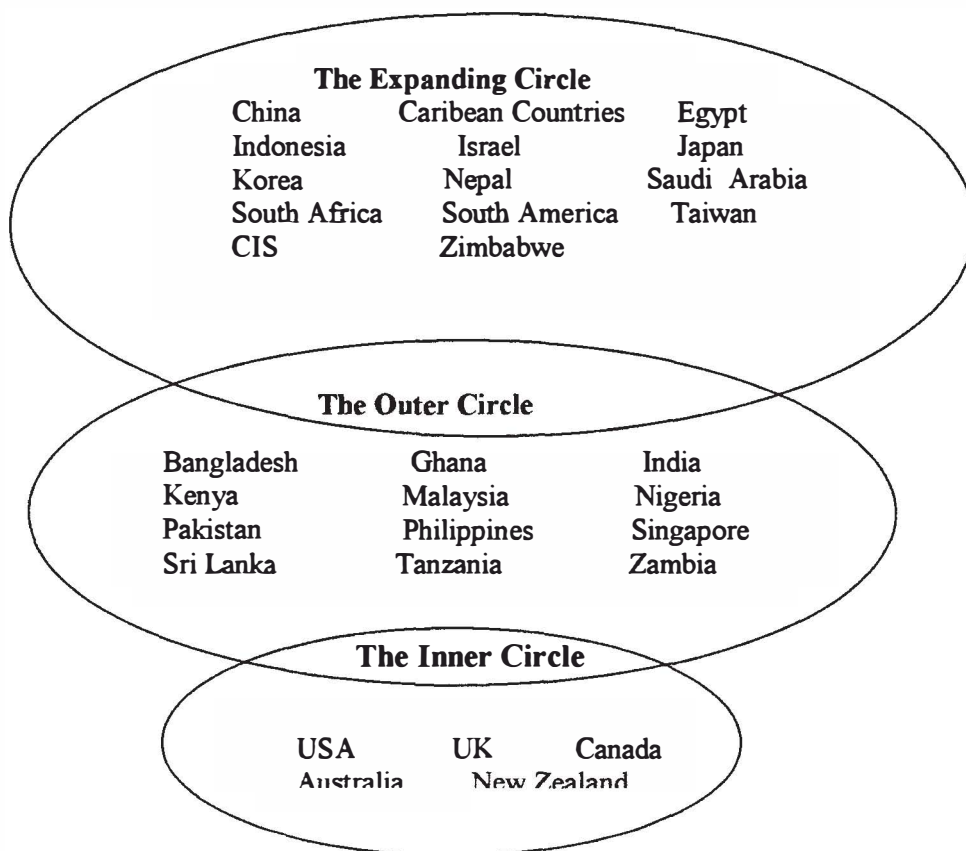


Fig.1 Three Concentric Circles of Englishes
(Kachru, 1994: 1)

The 'new' varieties, such as Indian English, Nigerian English, Malaysian English and Singaporean English have only recently begun to gain recognition and acceptance as legitimate independent national varieties of English. They should no longer be considered as deviant versions of some variety of native –speakers' English.

The Development of Malaysian English as a Non–Native Variety of English

Prior to the 1970's, English was the medium of instruction in a small number of elite schools in the country. It was the key to academic, social and economic mobility for school leavers (Abd. Aziz Ismail, 1989). Today, it no longer enjoys such preeminence in the Malaysian education system. English is now taught as an important second language in primary and secondary schools to ensure that Malaysians are able to communicate in English for the purpose of science, technology and international trade and commerce (Augustin, 1982).

Due to the change in the status of English in Malaysia, there has been a decrease in the use of English. This diminishing use of English has also seen a general decline in the level of English proficiency among Malaysians (Lowenberg, 1991). He further adds that the decrease in the use of the language and the limited amount of exposure to the language have resulted in many Malaysians being less proficient in

Standard Malaysian English. Standard Malaysian English is the variety used in language instruction in the country. However, as Wong (1983) points out Malaysian speakers have simplified the English Language to cater to their needs to communicate with others. She further explains that this is to be expected as Malaysians have found that a simplified form of Standard Formal English is sufficient to meet their requirements in less formal and familiar domains. Thus, Malaysian English has emerged as a new variety of English (Vethamani, 1997), ranging from the standard form, the acrolect, to the lowest sub-standard form, the basilect (Baskaran, 1987).

Indigenization of Malaysian English

Platt, Weber and Ho (1984), claim that a new variety of English will be ‘localized’ or ‘nativized’ by adopting some language features of its own such as sounds, sentence structures, words and intonation patterns among others. Due to these features, each non-native variety of English will be different from other non-native varieties.

“Indigenization” as such is a process by which innovations and changes are made to the English language by its new users in the new contexts to accommodate the demands made on the language in its new roles and functions (Moag,R, 1982). These innovations or changes have been referred to as ‘mistakes’, ‘variations’, ‘interference’