The Teaching of Pronunciation in Malaysia: State of the Art or No State at All?

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Introduction

Laments about the ‘poor’ pronunciation skills or incorrect pronunciation of Malaysians are common (e.g. Manglish-English Dilemma’, 2007; ‘Why Speak Manglish?’, 2007). In a rich linguistic environment like Malaysia, where there are many local languages as well as a localized variety of English, the protest about the state of English pronunciation can be expected to be even louder. Amidst such protests, there is also the issue of the extent to which pronunciation is actually taught in schools. As pointed out in Pillai (2008a: 42), “more often than not, the teaching of pronunciation is largely ignored, or gets sidelined as teachers scramble to deal with all the other elements in the English language syllabus and to prepare students for examinations”. Further, there is also an issue as to which pronunciation model is used in the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian schools. As would be expected of a former British colony, there is a tendency to lean towards a British model of pronunciation and “there is even the notion that the acrolectal variety of Malaysian English is similar to RP (Received Pronunciation)” (Pillai, 2008a: 42). Thus, it comes as no surprise that for the new English language curriculum, Standard British English has been selected as a pedagogic model “so that our students will know how to pronounce English words as spoken by native speakers” (the Deputy Prime Minister/ Minister of Education cited in Satiman Jamin, 2010).

However, such a choice is questionable given that Standard English is spoken in a multitude of accents (Trudgill, 1999), and thus, “in the context of global English, there is no longer in reality, any established standard for spoken English” (Pillai, Zuraidah & Knowles, forthcoming). In relation to this, Levis (2005: 371) points out that reliance on such models can lead to a “skewed view of pronunciation that may not serve learners’ communicative needs”. Graddol (2006: 117) emphasises this point further:

One of the more anachronistic ideas about the teaching of English is that learners should adopt a native speaker English. But as English becomes more widely used as a global language, it will become expected that speakers will signal their
nationality, and other aspects of their identity, through English. Lack of a native-speaker accent will not be seen, therefore, as a sign of poor competence.

Current trends in pronunciation teaching lean towards exposure to different English accents and a focus on intelligibility rather than imitating native models (e.g. Deterding, 2005; Jenkins, 2000). However, the trend in Malaysia seems to be going the opposite direction, focusing on a British rather than a Malaysian model. In relation to this issue, the study reported in this paper aims to obtain a preliminary view of the current state of teaching and learning pronunciation in Malaysia and how this fits in with the current English language syllabus. It also aims to examine the general perceptions of teachers and students towards a Malaysian English accent. The main research questions that this paper aims to address are as follows:

1. To what extent is pronunciation taught in a secondary school?
2. What are the perceptions of teachers and students towards the teaching and learning of pronunciation?

Literature Review

Pronunciation in the Classroom

The English Language Syllabus for Secondary Schools states the learners “are required to speak internationally intelligible English with correct pronunciation and intonation (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum, KPM, 2000: 1). In a similar vein, pronunciation is assumed to be an essential component of oral skills, where “oral skills will enable learners to convey their thoughts and ideas clearly in speech when they pronounce words correctly and observe correct stress and intonation” (ibid: 3). Intelligibility also appears to be equated with the use of correct pronunciation, stress and intonation in one of the three areas of language use, language for interpersonal use (ibid: 4). The sound system to be covered in secondary school is provided under the section of language content, and includes English consonants, vowels, diphthongs, consonants clusters in different combinations, past tense and plural forms, stress in two, three and four syllable words, stress in compound words, sentence stress and
intonation (ibid: 9-10).

Thus, the English language syllabus in Malaysia does provide an avenue for pronunciation skills to be included in classroom practices and ties in with the assumption that using ‘good’ pronunciation is important to communicate and to be understood: “without adequate pronunciation skills, a person’s communicative skills may be severely hampered, and this in turn may give rise to speech that lacks intelligibility, leading to glitches in conversation and to strain on the part of the listener” (Rajadurai, 2006: 42). Further, “with poor pronunciation, a speaker can be very difficult to understand, despite accuracy in other areas” (Fraser, 2000, cited in Nair, Krishnasamy & de Mello, 2006: 32). In fact, Morley (1991, cited in Rajadurai, 2006: 44) is of the opinion that not dealing with the pronunciation needs of students, “is an abrogation of professional responsibility”. In spite of this, the general feeling seems to be that not enough emphasis is being given to the teaching of pronunciation in the classroom (Pillai, 2008a; Rajadurai, 2006; Ramesh et al, 2006). For example Ramesh et al (2006: 31), in a study comprising 12 ESL instructor in Malaysia, found that the respondents felt that they did not have enough time to teach pronunciation and that they did not know how to do so effectively.

Accent Preferences

One of the pedagogic concerns for English language teaching is the standard of English to be used in the classroom. Where pronunciation is concerned, the fact that Standard English is spoken in a variety of accents make the choice of one particular accent a controversial one (Strevens, 1983; Trudgill, 1999). Further, the variety of accents stemming from multi-ethnic and multi-lingual speakers with different educational experiences make the choice of a particular accent as a model a challenging task in Malaysia. There is also a dilemma when it comes to the type of English accent preferred and speakers’ own accent. Previous studies in second language contexts have shown that there is often a struggle between speakers wanting to sound like themselves (that is, with a local accent) and an attested preference for a native model (see Crismore, Ngeow & Soo, 1996; Soo, 1990). This is evident in Pillai (2008b: 33), where only 29% of the 89 respondents felt that a local accent was acceptable when speaking in English, although nearly half of them agreed that they ‘sounded’ Malaysian. Yet, most of them disagreed that they did not sound professional or that people would not take them seriously if they used colloquial Malaysian English. Similarly, Crismore, Ngeow and Soo (1996: 325) also found that more than 70% of their respondents disagreed that foreigners will
not understand them if they speak to them in Malaysian English. Rajadurai (2006: 46) argues that much of this dilemma “stem[s] from a sense of insecurity and lack of confidence as learners. Underlying this dilemma is also the issue of accent and identity, that is, wanting to ‘sounding’ Malaysian when speaking English (Anis, 2005; ‘The Case for Manglish’, 1999) rather than wanting to sound British or American (Pillai, 2008b).

Methodology

In order to address the two research questions, a total of 150 students, 50 each from 3 classes in a secondary school: Form 1, 3 and 5 were surveyed. The rationale for using these three groups of students was to obtain a snapshot of the teaching and learning of across secondary education. The school was in the Klang Valley, and can be classified as an urban school with the majority of the students coming from middle-income backgrounds. The majority of students in each class are of Malay ethnicity, followed by those of Indian and Chinese descent as shown in Table 1. The language proficiency of the students in the three classes is considered as good for the Form 1 class and moderate for the Form 3 and 5 classes, based on feedback from their English teachers.

Table 1: Student Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Indian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Form 3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form 5</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>19</td>
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The students were given a questionnaire to fill in class. The questions were aimed at eliciting information about (i) the extent to which pronunciation was being taught in their English classes; (ii) their accent preference. Two of the teachers teaching these classes were also interviewed to confirm the answers given by the students and also to elicit their perspectives on (i) and (ii). Teacher 1 and 2 both had approximately 14 years of English language teaching experience each. Both of them trained as English teachers at local universities. Teacher 1 teaches Form Three and Form Four classes and Teacher 2 teaches Form Five and Form Six classes.
Findings

Feedback from the students

As shown in Figure 1, most of the students indicated that they sometimes learnt pronunciation in class (Form 1 (23%), Form 3 (18%) and Form 5 (23%). According to the students, the most commonly used activity to teach pronunciation is reading aloud (see Figure 2) during which time students are introduced to new words in the text book. While they are reading, the teacher will correct the errors that they make and teach them the ‘right’ way to pronounce the words. However, students from all the three classes said that learning pronunciation in class is not done regularly because teachers emphasize other components in English such as writing, grammar and literature as they want their students to excel in their exams which focus on these components. Based on the interviews, even the teachers feel that reading aloud is one of the best ways to teach students to learn pronunciation. This is because when students read a text that is given to them, teachers can observe if students are having problems pronouncing particular words, and deal with such problems immediately.

Figure 1: Frequency of Learning Pronunciation During English Lessons

The second most common activity that is carried out are listening activities, followed by language games, choral speaking and using the language laboratory. The least common activity is role play and from the interview with the two teachers, it appears that they do not like role play as a means to teach pronunciation because it is time-consuming and takes up the time needed to cover other aspects that students need to master in order to obtain good
grades in the exam. In other words, as expected, the focus of language teaching appears to be heavily influenced by the exams where teachers “teach the test” (Brindley, 1998: 52).

**Figure 2: Types of Activities Learning Pronunciation**

On the question of whether they thought pronunciation should be taught in class, most students agreed that pronunciation should be taught in class (see Figure 3). Only 10% of students from the Form 3 class did not want pronunciation to be taught in class. However, the older students, the ones in Form 5, all agreed that English pronunciation should be taught in class. All the Form 5 students also felt the it was important to speak English with the correct pronunciation (with the majority of the Form 1 and Form 3 students also agreeing that it is important as shown in Figure 4).

**Figure 3: Should Pronunciation Be Taught In Class?**
Most students (20% of Form 1, 22% of Form, 32% of Form 5) said that they only studied pronunciation sometimes. The rest of them said that they seldom learnt pronunciation on their own. Only 8% of the Form 1 students, 18% of the Form 3 students and only 6% of the Form 5 students always learnt to pronounce the words on their own (see Figure 5). Studying pronunciation by themselves may be difficult for students without any guidance.

About 43 of the Form 1 students, 23 of the Form 3 students and 30 of the Form 5 students indicated that they had difficulty in pronouncing English words (see Figure 6). Further, 30 of the First Formers, 25 the Third Formers and 33 of the Fifth Formers rated their English as moderate (see Figure 7). Approximately 25% of the students felt that their pronunciation is
poor due to a lack of reading and also communicating with their peers in English.

**Figure 6: Do You Face Difficulty In Pronouncing English Words?**

![Bar chart showing difficulty in pronouncing English words by Form 1, Form 3, and Form 5 students.]

**Figure 7: How do you rate your English pronunciation?**

![Bar chart showing the rating of English pronunciation by Form 1, Form 3, and Form 5 students.]

All of the Form 1 students, 22 of the Form 3 students, and 46 of the Form 5 students said that they did not change their English accent (see Figure 8). Those who said they did, indicated that they did this according to whether they were speaking to their peers, teachers, and someone that they just met. However, 28 of the Form 3 students and 5 students from the Form 5 class felt that conversing in a different accent made them feel that they are better in English and said that they sounded a little different from their other peers.
Figure 8: Do You Change Your Accent?

![Graph showing accent preferences]

A total of 40% of the students said that they preferred a British accent, while 45% preferred a Malaysian accent which is consistent with the type of responses obtained from other studies. There seems to be uncertainty about the validity of a Malaysian accent, and thus, the choice may be reflective of what the respondents think is the more ‘correct’ response or their choice may be motivated by a bias for native speaker English.

Feedback from the teachers

**English language teaching**

Teacher 1 enjoys teaching grammar whereas Teacher 2 enjoys teaching literature because she feels that students learn more through literature than in conventional ways of teaching grammar in class. Both the teachers said that they closely followed the English Language syllabus prepared by the Ministry of Education and claimed the teaching of pronunciation takes place all the time in class because they will correct the students when they mispronounced words during lessons. Teacher 1 prefers to use dialogues as they are more conversational and also uses reading aloud techniques to teach pronunciation. Teacher 2 said that she uses the textbook, flash cards, dictionary, materials from the newspaper and also reading aloud activities.
Importance of English pronunciation

Both the teachers were asked whether pronunciation is important for assessment and how much it contributes in public examinations like the PMR and SPM. They said that it is important for the oral examination as the pronunciation and intonation of the words are focused upon. In the oral examinations students are graded based on whether the students can converse on a topic effectively and give appropriate responses; speak fluently using correct and acceptable pronunciation; speak coherently; speak the language using a wide range of appropriate vocabulary within the context, and lastly speak using correct grammar (Based on the Certificate of the Oral English Test by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia).

Importance of English pronunciation

The teachers were trained to teach pronunciation during their degree programme. For both the teachers, good pronunciation referred to good intonation and enunciation and both of them rate theirs as good but admit that they are still learning. They feel that they can improve their English pronunciation by speaking and reading aloud.

English accent

Both teachers prefer a Malaysian English accent. However, they contradicted themselves when they said that they do not mind ‘following’ British English because it is more standard and in Malaysia, British English is used as a model. Despite this, Teacher 1 does not agree with the idea of the Ministry of Education hiring native speakers of English because according to her,

“we have good English teachers in Malaysia, and when these Malaysian teachers speak, they are easily understood and this is accepted by everyone and the language use is standard”.

On the other hand, Teacher 2 said that it would be a good idea to bring native speakers to teach because then Malaysians can change our way of pronouncing words and Malaysian students will have the experience of communicating with native speakers, thus, making them more confident. They felt that they were not ready to teach Standard British English because
they are not native speakers. Both the teachers think that the Standard British English is different from Malaysian English in the way that words are pronounced, and thus, more practise is needed in order for them to adhere to a British English model closely.

**Different accent while communicating**

Both the teachers were asked whether they changed their accent while communicating and according to Teacher 1,

“I have never changed the way I speak or how I speak to anyone in particular. The important thing for you to be able to speak to anyone across the globe is to be understood. So I don’t think I have to change to British English”.

In comparison, Teacher 2 said that,

“I do change the way pronouncing English when I talk to my friends and if it is to someone superior it is different of course and when I go into the classroom, it depends on the class. If the students are good I will change it to be better and to a higher standard and if it is a weak class I have to bring myself down to their level so they are able to communicate well”.

**Standard British accent by the Ministry of Education**

Recently it was announced that the new English curriculum to be implemented in primary schools in 2011 will be based on standard British English pronunciation (Satiman Jamin, 2010). When this question was raised to the teachers, Teacher 1 had this to say,

“Using the Standard British accent is most welcome. The yardstick is if it is beneficial, it is good, it is for the benefit of all of us here in Malaysia …but by using British English in particular focusing on the grammar, on the formal language that is used, I think it is good. But with the British accent then we need to bring the native speakers here.

In contrast, the second teacher’s opinion is;

“Standard British accent… it is good but then do our Malaysians need that? We have our own Malaysian English pronunciation and accent why not we just use that … Sometimes if we go overseas they are able to understand us so it is not that necessary that we learn or
expose our students to Standard British accent”.

Discussion

Going by the responses from both the students and the teachers, there is an awareness of the need for the teaching and learning of English pronunciation in the curriculum, and an acknowledgement that because it is not focused upon in the exams, not much time or effort is spent on pronunciation with much of the teaching being on-the-spot correction by the teachers. At the secondary level, we would expect less emphasis at the segmental level and more on prosodic and discourse features, yet based on the sparse information on prosodic features (apart from stress) on the latter in the syllabus, the focus remains at a segmental level, and this is reflected in the textbooks.

The current secondary school English languages syllabus specifies elements of pronunciation that need to be taught but does not specify which model of pronunciation to use. The focus in the syllabus is on being “internationally intelligible” which seems to be equated with being able to speak with “correct” pronunciation, stress and intonation. However, how ‘correct’ pronunciation should be measured is not stated, and going by the notion intelligibility this would leave the definition of ‘correct’ rather open. For example, if a student were to pronounce the word colleague as ‘keLIG’ would this be considered as intelligible but not correct, or as neither internationally intelligible nor correct but acceptable among Malaysians? The students and teachers themselves seem to be in a dilemma when it comes to accent preference and choice. This could stem from insecurities about using a local accent which they hear all around them, and a confusion about the need to for a native norm, far removed from their realities including their identity as a Malaysian (see Rajendran, 2000). The issue is whether having a British accent is a prerequisite to speaking internationally intelligible English. Given the multitude of English accents across the globe, who is to decide which of these are internationally intelligible when in the first place the global audience comprises people of various language backgrounds and varying degrees of exposure to different varieties of English?

Current research on Malaysian English pronunciation shows particular patterns of realisations among fluent speakers. Among these is the lack of quality but not necessarily length contrast
between traditionally paired vowels, especially the vowels in words like *bet* and *bat*, and *cot* and *caught* (Pillai, Zuraidah Mohd. Don, Knowles & Tang, forthcoming). Based on instrumental analysis, the quality of these vowels is obviously different from the Standard English pronunciation of, for example, BBC English or Educated Australian English pronunciation. Yet, one would not expect Australian English speakers to change the way they realise these vowels to mimic British English as these are distinguishing characteristics of Australian English. Similarly, while it is understandable that for pedagogic purposes, a point of reference is useful, what seems to be missing is the reference to current research on Malaysian English pronunciation and the current thinking on speaking Standard English with different accents in rationalising the choice of British English pronunciation as a pedagogic model. The question also arises about how Malaysians teaching Malaysians will be able to teach British English pronunciation when it is highly unlikely that they use such a pronunciation in their own communication. Rather, it may make more sense to take a look at the features that need to be focused upon and exposure to different varieties of English, particularly at the secondary level. For example, for English monophthong vowels, the focus can be on length distinction rather than on quality contrast between typical vowel pairs to distinguish between vowels, given that vowel quality is one of the distinguishing markers of different English accents.

**Conclusion**

The preliminary survey carried among three classes in a secondary school and the interviews with the two English language teachers confirms the lack of focus on the teaching and learning of English pronunciation. Much of the teaching and learning time is directed towards activities and tasks that can enhance the grades of the students in the exam, and since pronunciation is not a key element in the exam, it is relegated to ‘by-the-way’ slots. While the current syllabus does not implicitly state which model of English pronunciation to use, the new primary school curriculum is geared toward the use of British English pronunciation, and this is bound to be a controversial decision given the current endorsement that Standard English is spoken in a multitude of accents. What is more important is to have clear statements about what we realistically and practically expect Malaysian students to be able to do in terms of English pronunciation, keeping in mind issues of intelligibility and identity as well as current research on Malaysian English pronunciation. The way in which the teaching...
and learning of pronunciation is carried out and how it is assessed are also important elements that need to be carefully thought of in tandem and not in isolation by the parties involved in curriculum development, material production, assessment and the training of teachers, among others.

References


