

LOCAL FEATURES OF ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION: TO EMBRACE OR IGNORE IN THE ELT CLASSROOM?

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Abstract: English around the world is spoken in a multitude of accents, and this includes spoken Standard English. Yet, in some ELT contexts, there is still a fixation with using a native model of pronunciation. Such targets do not tend to take into consideration local English pronunciation features. This leads to either the teaching of English pronunciation being largely ignored in the classroom, or in teachers attempting to teach features that students are unlikely to hear in the local contexts. In this paper, I will explore some of the features of pronunciation in Malaysian English, and show how these do not align with the curriculum specifications for pronunciation. I will then discuss how teachers in other ELT contexts can deal with these issues in the classroom.

Keywords: *Pronunciation; ESL; EFL; Malaysian English; Standard English.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the difficulties in dealing with English pronunciation in the classroom in English as a Second (ESL) and Foreign Language (EFL) contexts often stems from curriculum requirements that prescribe a native pronunciation model. This raises several questions, and one of them is whether there is a necessity to establish a standard for spoken English given that English, even standard varieties of English, is spoken in a multitude of accents (Trudgill, 1999). Levis (2005, p. 371) points out that a reliance on native models can lead to a “skewed view of pronunciation that may not serve learners communicative needs”. The other question relates to how local teachers deal with having to teach pronunciation based on a native model when they themselves speak with a different accent. There is also the question as to whether having a native accent, such as an RP-like British accent, is a prerequisite to being internationally intelligible. Further, the fixation with using a native model of pronunciation does not take into consideration local English pronunciation features, or what the current developments in English pronunciation in other English-speaking contexts are. This generally leads to the teaching of English pronunciation being largely ignored in the classroom, as is the case in the Malaysian context (Jayapalan & Pillai, 2011; Nair, Krishnasamy, & de Mello, 2006).

Using the Malaysian context as an example, I will first describe some of the features of pronunciation in Malaysian English (MaE), and show how these do not align with the curriculum specifications for pronunciation. In relation to this misalignment, I will then discuss how teachers in such English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts can deal with the teaching of pronunciation issues in the classroom.

Malaysian English pronunciation

MaE is an umbrella term encompassing all the different ways in which English is used in Malaysia in spoken and written contexts. In terms of spoken Malaysian context, differences in pronunciation can be attributed to speakers’ first language, socio-economic, education, and geographical backgrounds, as well as their level of English language proficiency, and whether they are using the more colloquial variety of MaE. Thus, MaE is spoken in a variety of accents from the more ethnically and geographically marked accents commonly heard in Colloquial MaE to the less marked on heard on national television news. Malaysian speakers also have a tendency to switch from one accent to another to accommodate to or assimilate with speakers from different ethnic groups (Pillai, 2008). Nonetheless, there are distinguishable features of pronunciation which distinguish MaE speakers from other nationalities. Some of these features are similar to those found in Singapore English, which is not surprising considering the geographical proximity, the shared history, and the similar ethnic and linguistic composition of the two countries. The following sections of this paper will describe some of the features of MaE.

MaE vowels

One of the more distinguishable features of pronunciation in MaE is the lack of vowel contrast between typical vowel pairs. This feature was described in previous work (Baskaran, 2004; Platt & Weber,

1980; Phoon & Maclagan, 2009), although most of the earlier works allude more to the lack of vowel length contrast between vowel pairs such as in the following pairs of words:

bit and *beat*
cot and *caught*
pull and *pool*
cut and *cart*

English vowels, however, do not just contrast in terms of vowel length. There is also the more prominent contrast between vowel quality in pairs like the ones exemplified above, and the vowels in words like *bet* and *bat*. The lack of vowel contrast between vowel quality among MalE speakers has been shown in studies that acoustically analysed the vowels (Pillai, Zuraidah Mohd Don, Knowles, & Tang, 2010; Tan & Low, 2010). Based on analysis of the first and second formants, both Pillai et al. (2010) & Tan and Low (2010) show that MalE speakers tend to produce these vowels similarly, resulting in these pairs of words sounding alike. This tendency was found regardless of whether the speakers were more fluent speakers (e.g. Pillai, 2014), or whether they spoke English as a first or second¹ language. For example, the lack of vowel contrast between vowels pairs is shown in the following scatter plots (Figures 1-4), where an overlap between the vowels in each word pair can be seen (from Pillai et al., 2010, pp. 166-167):

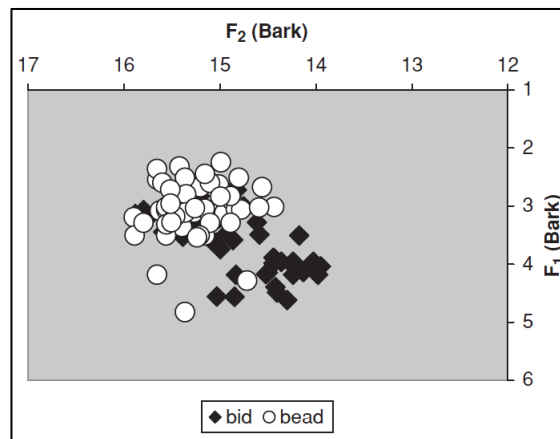


Fig 1. Scatter plot of the vowels in *bid* and *bead* in Malaysian English

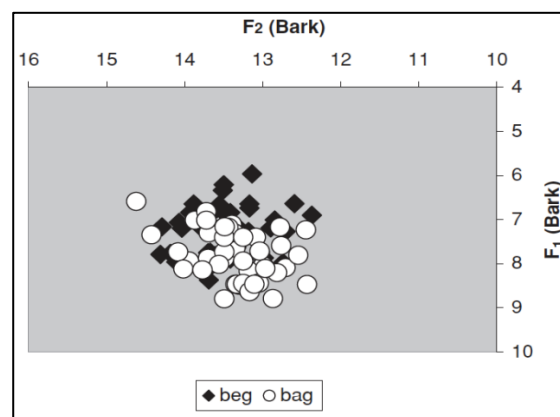


Fig 2. Scatter plot of the vowels in *beg* and *bag* in Malaysian English

¹ English may be the second language learnt in school. However, in many cases it is not in reality the ‘second’ language for many Malaysians who come from multilingual backgrounds. For example, Malaysians from Kelantan are likely to have the Kelantanese Malay dialect as their home language and then learn Standard Malay and English in school. A Chinese Malaysian from Penang who attended a Chinese medium primary school, may speak Hokkien at home, speak the Penang Malay dialect, and learn Mandarin, Standard Malay and English in school.

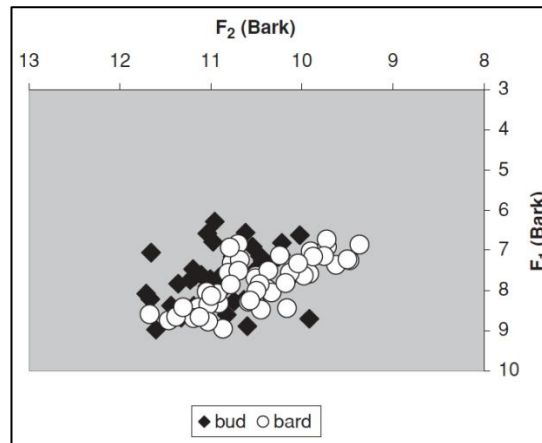


Fig 3. Scatter plot of the vowels in *bud* and *bard* in Malaysian English

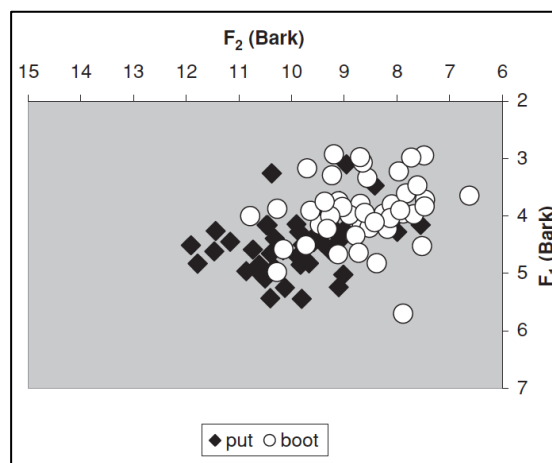


Fig 4. Scatter plot of the vowels in *put* and *boot* in Malaysian English

While the lack of quality contrast is apparent among Malaysian speakers, the lack of length contrast is more apparent among less fluent speakers. In contrast, Malaysian speakers who are more fluent appear to distinguish length as found in Pillai et al. (2010). Nonetheless, the lack of quality contrast among vowel pairs results in a reduced vowel inventory for MaE.

The reduced inventory is also contributed by the monophthongisation of some of the English diphthongs such as in the word *bear* (Pillai, 2014). Acoustic analysis of the diphthongs in words like *boat* and *bait* show little diphthongal movement, meaning that there is little tongue movement from the onset to the offset of the vowel as might be expected of a diphthong. Thus, the vowel in *boat*, for example, can be heard as [ou] or [o], while the vowel in, for example, *bait* as [e] or [e'].

MaE Consonants

One of the common features of pronunciation of MaE consonants is the use of syllable dental *th* sounds being substituted by /t/ and /d/ such as in the word *throw* and *brother*. Word final stops in consonant clusters like in the words *best* and *behind* also tend to be deleted (Phoon & Maclagan, 2009). Other features of MaE consonants include the devoicing of final fricatives such as in the words *leave* and *blouse* (Baskaran, 2004; Phoon & Maclagan, 2009).

In terms of rhoticity, MaE is traditionally non-rhotic having emerged from British English. However, instances of pre-vocalic *r* in words like *car* and *cart* have been reported in several studies especially among younger speakers (Pillai, Manuelli, & Dumanig, 2010; Pillai, 2015; Ramasamy, 2005). However, none of the studies, thus far, have shown a consistent use of rhoticity among MaE speakers. Rhoticity may be more apparent among speakers from the East Malaysian states, whose Malay variety is also reported to be more rhotic similar to Bahasa Indonesia (Asmah Omar, 1977).

Prosodic features of MaE

Studies on the rhythmic features of MaE suggest that this variety is syllable-timed (Tan & Low, 2014). This may be due to the influence on Malay on MaE, which is generally described as syllable-timed).

One of the contributing factors to a more syllable-timed rather than stressed-timed rhythm is the lack of perceivable lexical stress in MaE (e.g. Platt & Weber, 1980; Baskaran, 2004). There is also a lack of vowel reduction in MaE, which also contributes to the more syllable-timed rhythm.

Another prosodic feature found in MaE is the tendency to not mark new information with any distinct pitch change (Gut, Pillai, & Zuraidah Mohd Don, 2013). For question forms, a study by Gut and Pillai (2014) found that a rising tone was used for most question forms. A rising tone was used more frequently used for wh-questions instead of a falling tone (e.g. Ladd, 1996; Wells, 2006).

Curriculum specifications

Current developments on the teaching and learning of English pronunciation veers towards exposure to different English pronunciations, and a focus on intelligibility rather than using native models as pronunciation targets (e.g. Jenkins, 2000; Jenkins, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2007).

However, the trend in Malaysia seems to be to still use a native model, namely British English. This is clearly spelt out in the curriculum document as the following excerpts show:

“Teachers should use Standard British English as a reference and model for spelling, grammar and pronunciation.” (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2015, p. 8)

“Although there are varieties of English used, the Standard British English is considered as the official standard of reference for English where spelling, grammar and pronunciation are concerned” (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2016, p. 1)

It was even reported in the newspaper that the use of British English as a pedagogic model is “so that our students will know how to pronounce English words as spoken by native speakers” (Satiman Jamin, 2010, n.p.). The curriculum specifications related to pronunciation focuses on accuracy, presumably based on British English. For instance, in the secondary school curriculum document, under learning standard, it is stated that students should be able to do the following:

“1.1.1 Listen to, discriminate and pronounce accurately: (i) long and short vowels (ii) diphthongs
1.1.2 Speak with correct intonation, stress and sentence rhythm”

(Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2016, p. 24)

Given what was described about vowels and the prosodic features of MaE in the previous sections, these outcomes and the related performance standard are not easy to achieve.

The recently launched ‘English Language Education Reform in Malaysia - The Roadmap 2015-2025’ proposes the use of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to align the English language curricula at all levels of education (pre-school to tertiary level) to international standards (English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). The CEFR uses ‘can do’ statements to describe what language users at six different levels (English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, pp. 57-58):

A1 and A2 (Basic user)
B1 and B2 (Independent user)
C1 and C2 (Proficient user).

For pronunciation, for example, for a B1 user, under phonological competence, the focus is on intelligible speech “even if a foreign accent is sometimes evident and occasional mispronunciations occur” (English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p. 195; Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, 2001, p. 117). This concept of a *foreign accent*, however does raise some questions. Would a Malaysian who does not speak, for example, with Received Pronunciation or RP, be deemed to have a foreign accent? The underlying target for pronunciation in the CEFR is still a native model of pronunciation.

As previously mentioned in this paper, the use of a native model, especially in a context such as Malaysia, is questionable due to the fact that Standard English is spoken in a multitude of accents (Trudgill, 1999). Pillai, Zuraidah Mohd Don & Knowles (2012, p. 196) point out that “in the context of global English, there is no longer in reality, any established standard for spoken English”. As Graddol (2006, p. 117) points out that

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.

Thus, the use of a native model as a pronunciation model is removed from the reality of the nature of spoken English, and does not take into account the features inherent in MaE, some of which were described in the previous sections. Neither does it consider the use of spoken English in a regional or global context, and the implications of these for language teaching, learning and assessment. The fact that a more colloquial (as it does in countries like Malaysia and Singapore) or dialectal form of English (e.g. in England) may exist alongside an acrolectal or educated variety of English is also not taken into account. In the colloquial and dialectal forms, pronunciation is likely to be more ethnically, socially or geographically marked. Yet, speakers are able to shift to a more educated variety when the speaking context demands it. This is of course provided they have the latter variety in their language repertoire. Nevertheless, even within the educated variety, there is a variety of accents. The fact that we are speaking English with different accents, for example, at an international conference, does not mean that we do not understand each other. It should be made clear that speaking with, for example, a Malaysian or Indonesian accent, does not necessarily mean that one is using a colloquial or non-standard variety of English. Neither does it necessarily make the Malaysian or Indonesian speaker unintelligible.

Pronunciation in the classroom

Where pronunciation and English are concerned, we need to remember the following points (see previous sections):

- There is no one established standard for English pronunciation, and thus, even among native varieties e.g. American, Australian, British and New Zealand English, there are differences in what might be considered as an educated variety. For example, the pronunciation of the word *check* in New Zealand English sounds closer to *chick*. Would such a pronunciation be considered wrong based on RP standards? Would people outside of New Zealand have problems understanding New Zealand speakers because of their accent, especially if they have had little or no exposure to this variety of English?
- ESL and EFL speakers who are proficient in the standard variety of English need to be distinguished from non-proficient ones. In Malaysia, the latter will include the majority of students learning English in the classroom. Speakers who have both the more colloquial and standard variety of English, will be at an advantage. They can usually effortlessly weave in and out of the two varieties and the other languages that they speak. In terms of pronunciation, even the more proficient speakers are not likely to speak with a native like accent. The degree of ethnic or geographical marking, however, depends on the speaker and/or the speaking context (e.g. English news being read on national television in Malaysia).
- Most ESL, EFL and English as a first language (see Pillai & Khan, 2011) speakers in a country like Malaysia, would have learnt English from Malaysian parents and teachers, who for obvious reasons, are not likely to have a native English accent, be in British or any other native accent. And having learnt their English in a local context, are likely to display features of pronunciation that are common among Malaysian speakers.

Given these points, how can teachers then deal with pronunciation in the classroom, especially if there is a prescribed model for pronunciation? English language teachers should be aware of the phonetic and phonological system of English in general. The system most Malaysian teachers would have learnt is likely to be based on RP. However, just knowing the vowels and consonants of RP is not enough. Teachers must also know how these sounds are put together, and how sounds are realised in different word positions or next to particular sounds. Awareness of how these sounds differ from other native varieties at the segmental and prosodic level will also help teachers understand why different varieties of English sound different. Teachers must also develop awareness about the features of English pronunciation in their own variety, or the context in which they are teaching English, if this is different. Such knowledge will allow teachers to make more informed decisions about our classroom practices.

For example, understanding that the concept of vowel contrast includes both quality and length contrast, but that the latter is affected, among others, by the type of consonant following the vowel, and the placement of lexical and sentence stress. Coupled with an understanding about how vowels are realised in the local context, and in other varieties of English, teachers may then decide to focus on, for instance, vowel length contrast rather than quality. Teachers may also decide to make their student pronounce the pre-vocalic *r* as a means to distinguish homonyms like *cut* and *cart* in instances where learners or the local variety of English tend not to realise.

As teachers we can also focus on differences between our own variety of English and other varieties in realising particular sounds or in the way that prosodic features are used. For example, teacher

may decide to focus on the use of aspirated voiceless stops in English or in the way intonation is used for various question forms. Teachers can refer to intelligibility studies to explore how intelligible listeners find their own variety of English. By drawing on a knowledge of English phonetics and phonology, the features of their variety of English, and findings from intelligible studies, teachers can decide what pronunciation features to focus upon in class.

Exposure to different varieties of English, especially regional varieties which students are more likely to encounter in the form of listening tasks, is also useful. This is because such exposure to a particular variety of English likely to make this variety more intelligible to them. Audio and video material of other varieties of English is easily available on the Internet. Nevertheless, the speaking contexts of these materials should be kept in mind because of the tendency of more socially and geographically marked accents being used in the more colloquial variety and/or informal contexts. There are also websites that provide exercises for pronunciation practice (e.g. <http://www.onestopenglish.com/skills/pronunciation/pronunciation-skills-with-adrian-underhill/pronunciation-skills-what-accent-should-i-teach/>). However, most of these tend to be based on a native variety.

However, even if teachers did all these things, there is always the question of assessment. In a bid to prepare students for exams, teachers tend to focus on reading and writing, rather than on speaking and listening. Most teachers say that they do not have time to focus on these skills, let alone pronunciation. There are also, sometimes, tensions about the pronunciation target for the exams. Does the assessment specify a native target? How are students assessed in terms of non-achievement of this target? How do non-native teachers assess students' pronunciation in cases like these? With the use of CEFR across English language Education in Malaysia, it will be interesting to see how the issue of having a "foreign accent" (English Language Standards and Quality Council, Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015, p. 195) will be dealt with in terms of teaching materials, classroom practices and assessment.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have seen that whilst English (including standard varieties of it) around the world is spoken in a multitude of accents, in some ELT contexts, there is still a fixation with using a native model of pronunciation. Such targets suggest that there is one standard English accent. The features of English pronunciation inherent in a particular variety are largely ignored. In addition, the teaching and learning of pronunciation tends to be relegated to the side-lines as teachers devote their time to other elements of the syllabus. The adoption of the CEFR in Malaysia offers hope that we now have clear statements about what we realistically expect Malaysian students, teacher trainees, English language teachers and lecturers can do in terms of English pronunciation. However, the actual implementation remains to be seen.

Keeping in mind issues of intelligibility and identity, as well as current research on English pronunciation, the way forward for the teaching and learning of pronunciation is to boldly go beyond 'going native'. This does not mean that we are advocating an 'any accent goes' approach. Instead, we need to start thinking more carefully and critically about all the elements of English pronunciation.

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