

English Language and Its Impact on Identities of Multilingual Malaysian Undergraduates

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Abstract

Despite the increasing prominence of English as a world lingua franca, there seems to be little research into how the use of English affects the identities of Malaysian speakers. Twenty years ago, Asmah Haji Omar observed that interest among Malaysian sociolinguists in language and identity seemed to be confined to studies on national identity (1998). Identity at the level of the community or group has not been given as much attention. A recent doctoral study of the identity of Malaysian speakers of English found that there was resentment in certain localized contexts amongst the Malay respondents in the study towards the use of English (Lee Su Kim, 2001, 2003). Expressions of resentment and ambivalence towards the use of the English language were also prevalent amongst the non-Malay respondents within certain contexts (Lee Su Kim, 2006). This paper presents the preliminary findings of an ongoing research study which sets out to investigate the impact of the English language on the identities of young Malaysian adults who are undergraduates in selected private and public universities in Malaysia. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study aims to explore on a larger scale the role of English in the identity construction of a younger Malaysian cohort. The findings presented here are from a few selected case studies that provide the qualitative data. The discussion will focus on how different multilingual Malaysian undergraduates regard English *vis a vis* the other languages in their repertoire and how it has affected their identity constructions and everyday negotiations.

Introduction

Today, the English language is a global language and an international lingua franca. However, despite the fact that there are more people who speak English as a second or foreign language than those who speak it as a first language, its impact on culture and identity remains an under-researched area. In Malaysia, English has a rather complex and ironic status. It is an “inherited” language, a “legacy” of the British colonialists, an inevitable consequence of its role in our national history. Among Malaysians, English is viewed rather paradoxically. On the one hand, it is regarded as an important second language for instrumental purposes, a neutral language for social integration and a pragmatic one for professional growth and career advancement. On the other hand, it is perceived by certain quarters, as a language that threatens the status of the national language and erodes local cultures (Lee Su Kim 2008).

Yet, there has not been much work done on the impact of English acquisition on the identities of its learners in Malaysia. Among the studies that have been carried out on identity related issues are Maya Khemlani David's (1996) study on Sindhis, a minority group, Asmah Haji Omar's (1991) study on a group of bilingual Malay academics and also her study (1998) on the correlation between language and ethnicity, and Lee Su Kim's study on the impact of English on the identities of a group of selected Malaysian speakers of English (2001, 2003, 2005 and 2006).

There is a dire need for more research that looks at issues of language and identity in the complex and diverse linguistic landscape of Malaysia. The study that we are currently conducting investigates the impact of English on the construction of the social and cultural identities of a group of Malaysian undergraduates. These young Malaysian adults have acquired English as one out of a repertoire of languages or as a second language. This paper will discuss one facet of this study.

Identity as a concept

Identity is a theoretical concept that is derived from social sciences disciplines such as psychology and anthropology, and also from interdisciplinary studies such as cultural studies. Identities are seen as the means by which people care about and care for what is going on around them. They are considered “important bases from which people construct new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being ” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain 1998). Identity construction is not a conscious process but rather it is influenced by unconscious psychological processes. It is an on-going, evolving and dynamic process which is pluralistic in nature. Norton (1997:410) defines identity as “... people understanding their relationship to the outside world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future”. Hence, language learners are seen as selves and as persons that have to exist in various contexts, and they need to constantly negotiate and transform their selves; construct , co-construct and re-construct their identities to cope and deal with their own world and the realities of the world around them.

Research on Impact of English and Identity Construction

A research study of Malaysian speakers of English by Lee Su Kim (2001, 2003, 2005 and 2006) found that there was resentment in certain localized contexts amongst the Malays towards English. Using English was perceived as an attempt to “show off”, being “boastful”, a relic of colonialism, being elitist, and a betrayal of the Malay cultural identity and the Malay language. This resentment was also prevalent amongst the non-Malay students. (Lee Su Kim, 2006). The Chinese participants reported that they were regarded as “too Westernized” because they could only speak in English and were not fluent in Mandarin. However, the English language also had significant positive outcomes on identity. Mastering English was an empowering experience. It was claimed to possess a quality of directness and neutrality, enabling access to alternative views, and reducing ethnocentrism. It was also seen to facilitate a more reflective and critical attitude towards one’s own culture. Multiple identities are fostered through ownership of

multiple languages, allowing participants to switch and “mask” (Lee, 2008) their identities dependent on the changing contexts.

Research Methodology

The sample for the qualitative part of the research consists of 20 Malaysian undergraduates, ranging from 20 to 24 years of age. Out of the 20 undergraduates, seven were Malays, eight were Chinese, four were Indians and one was Singhalese. There were four males and 16 females. These undergraduates were from both public and private universities. Twelve undergraduates were from public universities and eight were from the private universities. They are either bilingual or multilingual and English is in their repertoire of languages that they have learnt.

Data were obtained from interviews conducted with these undergraduates. The interviews were semi-structured and based on Carspecken’s critical ethnography interviewing techniques (Carspecken, 1996). Questions for semi-structured interviews were formulated to allow for some degree of flexibility and manoeuvring. Six main topic domains were selected. The domains are: language repertoire, experience of learning English, social Interaction, culture, literary exposure and identity. For each topic domain, one lead-off question was formulated and a few follow-up questions were prepared. Each respondent was interviewed individually by one of the four researchers involved in the study and the session was audio-taped. On the average, each interview was between 30 to 45 minutes. All the taped interview sessions were transcribed verbatim. The profile and case study of each respondent was written by the interviewer based on the six topic domains mentioned earlier. The case-studies gave the researchers a comprehensive insight into each respondent. Themes were identified from each case study. The case-studies of all the respondents were then scrutinised and common themes across the respondents were drawn. Coding was then carried out on the interview transcripts based on the common themes identified.

The Findings

Some dominant themes that have emerged from the analysis of the case studies are:

1. **Multilingualism with English emerging as the dominant language**

Although all respondents could speak at least two languages fluently, they reported that they were far more comfortable using English. The main reason for this is usually that English is one of the languages spoken at home, or because they generally socialize with friends who also speak English. Besides the two main factors, their preference for English may also be due to any of these other factors:

a) At least one of their parents is English educated and he/she used English to the respondent from young. The parent may have tutored the child in the language when s/he was young. A case in point is Jim Min¹, a Chinese undergraduate studying in a public university. He speaks mainly Cantonese and Mandarin at home. When he was young, he attended a Chinese Primary School. His mother, believing that Chinese school students were generally weak in languages, took it upon herself to teach him English when he was five years old. As Jim Min explained, “...*she know that um, many, for many Chinese, their English is not that good ... (so) ... my mother give me tuition herself*”. He further elaborates, “*when I started my primary school ... throughout my whole primary school, my English level was like, according to my friend, my teachers, higher than many other people*”. Similarly, a few other respondents whose parents are proficient in English recalled being taught to read by their parents prior to entering primary school.

b) The school that the respondents attended was originally an English medium school and it had retained its strong English heritage. Such schools were no longer English schools but have become national schools whose medium of instruction is Malay, with English as just one subject in the curriculum. Nevertheless, many English-speaking parents would send their children to such schools. Hence, there were more children who could speak English there.

Children who were sent to such schools could acquire English not only formally but informally by mixing with other children from English-speaking homes. This is the case with Kasey and Raj who both attended such "mission" schools. Kasey went to a convent school and Raj went to a LaSalle mission school. According to Kasey, her parents sent her and her younger sister there because they wanted them to learn English so they could converse in English with their two older sisters who attended Chinese school. Kasey believes that her proficiency in English was not acquired from the classroom alone but more from mixing with friends who could speak English.

According to Raj, there were still a few old La Salle brothers in the school when he started school there, retaining some English use in the school traditions. Besides, his school friends also influenced him. He says, “... *most of my friends are Chinese friends and they are so used to talk-.. they are more towards English as well, so eventually when they speak English, I tend to reply them in English also*”.

c) There are ample opportunities to use English outside of the immediate family circle, such as the friendship and school domains. Most of the respondents tend to mix with friends who are English speaking. In addition, some of them are taking courses that are conducted in English. It is therefore easier for them to discuss in English. For example Jim Min said that he uses mainly English to communicate with his course mates who are from different races as they have been taught Science in English since they were in upper secondary. In university, their programme, Genetics, is conducted mainly in English so it is natural for them to use English among themselves regardless of race. Jessy said her friends are mainly TESL students and they speak more in English.

As a result, the respondents use English naturally as their language of choice in virtually all domains: family, friendship, academic and social. English is no longer merely a language for communication but a first language - used spontaneously for expression of emotions and even in their dreams!

2. **English is viewed as a pragmatic language and a language of empowerment**

Most of the respondents who use English predominantly do not feel that being fluent in English is prestigious. This could be because they have grown up using the language, and they see everyone around them speaking the language. They do not see it as being elitist although they recognise that English is important and that there are clear advantages to being fluent in English (at interviews, for overseas travel, for understanding lectures etc).

However, there are a few respondents who feel that speaking in English gives them a feeling of prestige and puts them above their peers who do not speak the language. To them, English is a tool that provides them with a window to another world and to differing world views. To them English has a modernizing influence and has made them more western in their outlook. In this sense, English has empowered its users.

3. **Varying degrees of ‘Othering’**

‘Othering’ here refers to the sense of being excluded by members of their own ethnic group experienced by speakers of a language. There appears to be varying degrees of othering among the respondents depending on their proficiency in the other languages and the community that they are from. Respondents who are multilingual and are able to switch comfortably between different tongues did not generally report any apparent sense of being "othered". However, there is a sense of “us”, those who speak English, and “them”, those who speak local languages like Malay or Mandarin. The Chinese respondents who are not fluent in Mandarin recognise the need to also be a part of “them” and most of the Chinese respondents report making efforts to learn, to improve and to speak Mandarin. The respondents also see a difference in the ways of seeing the world, in the thinking, attitude and behaviours between the more Chinese-centric, Malay-centric and Indian-centric students and the more English or cosmopolitan ones.

Other respondents, particularly the Malay subjects, reported being referred to as “bukan Melayu” or “mat salleh celup” to being described as trying to show off. Some of the subjects reported that they were seen as “showing off”, “arrogant” or “proud” when English is used in their social interaction. However, the respondents appeared not to have experienced any sense of resentment or conflict .

Conclusion

The findings presented seem to suggest that English can quite easily be considered the dominant language in all domains, and, in a few cases it seems to be detrimental to the mother tongue (the language/s spoken by the community). The implication here is the danger of attrition of the various ethnic languages that make up the colourful diversity of the Malaysian cultural inheritance. Language loss is a high price to pay for mastering a language of global currency because with it goes the sense of our own cultural heritage . There is already some evidence that some of the respondents seem to have a rather diluted understanding and appreciation of their ethnic culture and legacy. In our eagerness to embrace English as a language for nationalism, let us not neglect to strengthen our multicultural and multilingual base for nationalism .

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1 The name used to refer to a respondent is a nickname and not the real name of the respondent