

**“MUDDIED WATERS: THE ISSUE OF MODELS OF ENGLISH FOR
MALAYSIAN SCHOOLS**

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Abstract:

Which model of English should the Malaysian English language teacher emulate and teach? This question has been debated but not seriously addressed in the recent history of Malaysian ELT. The recent changes in the Malaysian Language policy in my view, makes it even more pertinent that we clarify this issue. This paper will attempt to give a perspective on the issue from the point of view of key players in the Ministry of Education and current developments in ELT.

The paper will begin by outlining the views and expectations of the different divisions in the Ministry of Education concerning the issue of models of English that should be used in Malaysian schools. The focus of the discussion will centre on spoken and written models of English. This paper will then address some of the challenges and critical issues that arise from the discussion and suggest ways to guide teachers' practice.

1. Background

Which model? Acceptable models? “Malaysian Standard English vs. Manglish?” These are issues and questions that have been debated in ELT circles in Malaysia during the last thirty years. Our newspapers have published news items where politicians, captains of industry and the general public have commented on the standards of spoken English amongst university graduates. Parents have written in letters highlighting the errors made by English teachers. Lately however, the spotlight has shifted to the mathematics and science teachers. In my view there are other issues in this debate and in this paper I hope to highlight some of them.

This paper will first discuss the issue of models of English. It will then highlight the positions of the different divisions of the Ministry of Education with regards to the models of English they advocate. The threats to models of English and implications for the classroom will be discussed.

.2. The Debate on Models of English

The debate on which models of English one should teach/use often arouses controversy. Fifty years ago many ex-British Colonies such as Malaysia would have advocated adopting the British model of English i.e. Received Pronunciation without reservations because of its association with the governing class. But independence from British rule has brought about changes. The debate and the increasing literature on World Englishes indicate that the colonies are fighting back and there is growing tension between what Kachru (1991) terms the inner circle (standards of British and American English) and the outer circle (ex-colonies of the British empire) and what now is termed as the expanding circle nations such as China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Eastern Europe

who are making extensive use of the English language. This will have many implications with regard to the future of English. In fact, Graddol estimates in time to come (1997:11) “those who speak English alongside other languages will outnumber first language speakers and will increasingly decide the global future of the language.”

3. Varieties of English

Varieties of English have usually been associated with nationalities e.g. American, British Polish etc. But it appears that even this is being redefined as English takes its place as the lingua franca of the world. Current classifications of English center around three norms. The first is Standard American-British English, which is also known as S.A.B.E. This refers to “native” English as used in USA, Australia, United Kingdom and the rest of the English-speaking world. Then there is the Oral and Vernacular Englishes also Known as the O.V.E. These refer to languages which are a mixture of English and local languages. These versions incorporate lots of English “pop” and commercial phrases. Examples would include Japlish, Singlish, and Malaysian English and there are many examples of this through out the world. The third norm is International Colloquial English or I.C.E. which is referred to as “a rapidly mutating “world language” which based largely on English but has borrowed a large number of words from other languages and also American street slang. It also includes text messaging style abbreviations and even symbols. Crystal estimates that I.C.E. English is increasing at the rate of 5,000 new words every year (BBC News On Line:UK : 2001) .

For the purposes of this paper, I wish to make a distinction between the spoken model of English and the written model of English. The way we speak and the way we write have always been different. The spoken model is defined more by the accent, rhythm and pronunciation rather than by grammar. It is difficult to codify the grammar of spoken English because it contains too many regional variations, slang, idiosyncratic use and it responds to changes more quickly than written

language. Hence the spoken model of English has not been codified the way the written model has been. So it is difficult for teachers and learners to say precisely why one form is acceptable or not.

Secondly, because the spoken form is more intricately bound with one's culture and personality, it is more prone to adopting unique socio-cultural features of individual which then gets categorized as one of the Englishes spoken in the world. As the English language is exported to the "outer circle" and "expanding circle" (Kachru 1992) we are going to see the development of more spoken regional varieties of English, influenced in many parts by the dominant language and cultures of the region (Just as we have in this region developed the Malaysian variety with many sub-varieties in between).

Thirdly, the spoken model responds to changes much faster than the written model because we hear it being used on the media and speakers soon adopt the new forms. As English becomes the lingua franca of the world, new words are rapidly intruding into the English language. As Crystal says "Change is so fast that attempts by the Oxford English Dictionary to record and codify all the new words and ways in which they are used, are trailing way behind. They can't keep up. Nobody could" (BBC News On line: UK 2001). Hence adhering to one particular model for teaching both the written and spoken forms of English in Malaysia is not practical.

4. The Spoken Model of English Advocated by the Ministry of Education

Which spoken model of English does the Ministry of Education want Malaysian students to master? The answer to this question is not so simple. The Curriculum Development Centre(CDC) has one response to the question- a model that is "internationally intelligible". Officials from the CDC feel although we may insist on a British model, the fact remains that the media is predominantly dominated by programmes which use the American model of English. As

such, they feel it is pointless to insist on a model of English, which is seldom heard or used in the country.

Further in the evaluation of computer software for English Language teaching, officials from the CDC say they focus more on the content, quality and suitability of the materials than on whether the spoken model of English in the software is American or British. Hence teachers can expect software in schools that uses American and British models of spoken English.

In a recent document on Guidelines for school based oral assessment, the Examination Syndicate made a case for “clear speech”. Amongst the criteria listed for assessment of oral English, are fluency and rhythm, pronunciation and intonation, grammar and vocabulary, ethical (etiquette) and manners. The Textbook Division says that they instruct vendors producing materials with samples of spoken language to adhere as far as possible to the British model that is Daniel Jones R.P. They admit that they are well aware of the difficulties of finding speakers but hope the vendors would find “models of clear speech.” However they admit that they do not have the resources or expertise to monitor the models of speech in spoken samples materials in the way they would like to.

In teacher training, the students are taught to use the IPA as guide to improve their pronunciation. Generally the British model of English is favoured as we have drawn our expertise from United Kingdom. Generally most teacher trainers aim for the development of clear and intelligible speech.

5. Internationally Intelligible English

Which model should the Malaysian teacher teach? What do all these people mean when they say “clear speech” or “internationally intelligible speech” Is there a determined standard? What do

these standards look like? How are they to be defined? What type of recognizable accent does it have?

In the introduction to the revised English Curriculum Specifications for Form one, the notes with regards to sound systems says “to help learners pronounce words correctly and speak with correct stress, intonation and rhythm, specific sounds (e.g. blends, diphthongs) have been identified for teaching. The objective of this exercise is to aim for clear speech and intelligibility.”(Ministry of Education 2003:3) But this description does not tell us the type of accent/pronunciation stress and intonation to teach. So where does that leave us the English teacher?

Unfortunately for us, it is a question to which international linguists themselves are searching for answers. They themselves are also trying to determine what “internationally intelligible” English should sound like. Crystal (1998) for instance writes about a World Standard Spoken English (WSSE). It is not clear what it will sound like but Crystal is of the view if WSSE “is to bring about successful communication, interlocutors will do their level best to mould their pronunciation as needed to foster comprehension.” (pg.15). In another article, Crystal (1999) describes how this variety of “internationally intelligible” form of English seems to be prevalent in the European Union. He called it “Euro-English” that is a form of spoken English by politicians, diplomats and civil servants from Britain who work in Brussels. They appear to accommodate their use of English to speakers of other languages by using an increasingly syllable =timed rhythm, (as in French) the avoidance of idioms and colloquial vocabulary, a slower rate of speech and the avoidance of some assimilations and elisions that would be natural in a first language setting.

Smith and Rafiqzad (1983) however can offer us some insights into the term “internationally intelligible”. They use three criteria. The first is one of “intelligibility”, which is word level recognition. If a person understands the words that he hears as intelligible English words, then the language/speaker is intelligible to the hearer.

The second criterion is “Comprehensibility” which is defined as the degree to which a recipient finds a text meaningful. “Could you please sit down” has a concrete reference to an activity the hearer is to perform. But comprehensibility can be affected by some uses of indigenous words which could complicate understanding. For instance, if I were to say to an American “Please don’t sit there. The “feng Shui” is no good”. That might cause some problems of comprehensibility because of his lack of understanding of some words but there is general understanding of the message.

Interpretability is the third criteria and it refers to “apprehension of intent, purpose or meaning behind an utterance.” Smith (1988:274) points out that contrary to what we teach about correct use of grammar, “interpretability is at the core of communication and is more important than mere intelligibility or comprehension.” Let’s take the example of “Could you please sit down”. The polite markers may indicate it is a polite request but a rising or a falling tone could have other hidden meanings. So if you interpret this request as something you could turn down because you are offended by the tone that also indicates interpretability. The interpretability of text is what makes something acceptable or unacceptable, offensive or inoffensive to a person.

Smith and Rafiqzads’(1983) investigations on the role of native speakers and the relationship of the inner circle model of spoken English to other Englishes, reveal some startling information. In a study focusing on intelligibility they found, that the native speaker was always found to be

amongst the least intelligible speakers (in the study). (Average of 55% only, speaker from Hong Kong scored 44%). Smith (1988) replicated the study and included the levels of comprehensibility and interpretability and came up with the findings that native speakers of English were less understood than non-native speakers of English.

In 1992, Smith carried out an experiment using speakers of nine varieties of English- China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, Taiwan, United Kingdom and United states with the purpose of discovering whether “the spread of English is creating greater problems of understanding across cultures” (Smith 1992:88). His research indicated that there was no evidence of a breakdown in communication among the speakers of the different national varieties of English. What is interesting is that he found “native speakers (from Britain and the US) were not found to be the most easily understood nor were they, as subjects found to be the best able to understand the different varieties of English” (Smith1992:88). These propositions have important implications

In my view, the non-native speaker of English is better able to decipher the sounds of English as spoken by different national speakers of English. The multilingual background of non-native speakers enables them to ignore the different tunes and focus on the message. Most of us here have the ability to understand the different varieties of English in comparison to native speakers of English. Recently, I have found when there are speakers of different varieties of English in some of the programmes broadcast on National Geographic, Discovery Channels productions and CNN, there is a tendency to put sub-titles of the words on to the screen. It as though the variety of English being spoken is incomprehensible to native speaker audiences whilst I suspect this audience would find it perfectly comprehensible. So it appears that the native speaker needs help in recognizing the language that was once considered his domain. As Hill (2003) says “native-like use may even be a disadvantage in a multinational setting. It is the native who is likely to misunderstand and be misunderstood. Indeed, English speaking countries may suffer irreparably

if they don't start running courses in effective international communication for their own business people and academics".

6. Implications for Teachers

All these has important consequences for teachers of English, in that it has always been assumed that native speakers of English would be more easily understood than non-native speakers of English or that it would be the preferred model of Malaysians. However a study by (Gill 2002) seems to indicate other wise. In a survey she asked respondents a theoretical question that is which model of English they would consider as suitable for teaching in Malaysian schools. From a theoretical point of view 95.9% of the respondents indicated that they would prefer an educated British English speaker with an RP accent. 89.9 % indicated that they would prefer an educated Malaysian who speaks English with an unmarked accent which is neither strongly Malaysian nor strongly British and makes no grammatical mistake. However when they were asked to listen to a taped sample of the two varieties of English and indicate their preference as to which model they regarded as suitable for teaching, the preference for RP dropped to 50.1 % whereas preference for the educated Malaysian variety was 79.2%¹.

Hence, it appears that Malaysians seem to consider an educated Malaysian variety rather than RP as suitable. Thus a goal of making learners speak like the native speaker is unrealistic and perhaps even damaging to learners. Students will be fearful of speaking and would consider themselves poor speakers of English unless they sound like the American or British native speaker. A goal of making students "internationally intelligible" would be more appropriate. We in Malaysia should teach our students a regional standard that resembles an educated variety of English as this will give them greater geographical and social mobility, access to higher education and professional employment opportunities. Native speaker models could be introduced in the classroom but not as

¹ The study included responses to other varieties of Malaysian English. For the purposes of discussion in this paper, I have chosen to focus on the results of two of the models.

models to emulate but as models of comparison. Inevitably, I think at the end we would be teaching and speaking a mixture of Standard American-British English because these are the models to which we receive greater exposure.

Effort should also be made to teach our students the differences as to “Manglish” as opposed to what I would term ‘educated variety’ of Malaysian English. Various Malaysian socio-linguists have used the terms like acrolect, acro-mesolect and mesolect to distinguish the varieties of Malaysian English that are in use. What teachers need to do is to teach our students the appropriate use of the varieties of Malaysian English. Our learners need to develop their use of the varieties and to be comfortable with this flexibility because language is also a means of expressing our culture. We cannot expect our speakers to develop the use of English without adding cultural expressions or norms, which are appropriate in our culture. At the same time these conventions may not be understood in the international community of English language speakers. So, in order to continue being competitive in the economic markets our learners must be taught to distinguish between a variety of English that is used in informal social contexts and a variety of that is more appropriate in formal contexts.

Further, we should recognise that non-native speakers are using English with other non- native speakers. “The English that they use need not reflect any “Anglo” cultural values. What they need are materials that provide some knowledge of the culture of the people they are dealing with. The cultural values and daily lives of the people in the region who are using English as regional lingua franca become more important than the cultural values associated with native speakers” (Kirkpatrick 2000). We need to learn and teach cultural and discourse conventions that are being reflected in these new varieties of English.

Thirdly, I think there should be more use of the dictionary as a tool of reference for models of good pronunciation. Too little use is being made of the dictionary in the classroom and neither are

our students being trained how to check for the pronunciation of words so that they can further improve their pronunciation skills. Teachers need to make the pronouncing dictionaries a tool of their trade as well as showing students how this tool could help them speak the “internationally intelligible” English.

7. A Written model of English

It is easier to determine a model of written English because the model has been codified in books on grammar and in dictionaries. In fact in 1995 when Crystal talked about a WORLD Standard English and he focused on the written features. He said “the linguistic features of Standard English are chiefly matters of grammar, vocabulary and orthography (spelling and punctuation). In this area we find that the British and the American Englishes have had a head start because there are standards of codifications of both Englishes. Because of this codification there “exists an unspoken mechanism, operated through the global ELT teaching, which has the effect of preserving the unity of English in spite of its great diversity. As Stevens (1992:39) says “Throughout the world, regardless of whether the norm is native speaker or non-native speaker variety, irrespective of whether English is a foreign or second language, two components of English are taught and learned without variation; these are its grammar and its core vocabulary... the grammar and vocabulary of English are taught and learned without variation.”

The model of written English advocated by CDC is based on the British model. This refers to grammar, vocabulary and spelling. Textbook writers are also given instructions to conform to the standards as sets out in British grammar. The officials feel the written form of the language must have consistency and standardization. Writers are told specifically to refer to the Oxford Dictionary for spelling conventions. The Examination Syndicate adopts the British model of grammar as the standard. But where spelling is concerned it accepts American and British

conventions. Teacher training has adopted the British model of written English. All references and course books are based on British the British model.

Unfortunately not all Malaysian publications seem to conform to one accepted standard unlike our neighbour Singapore where the British convention has been adopted as official policy. We see a mixture of both American and British spelling in our newspapers and magazines. There is of course the influence of a third convention that is English words that have modified to suit Bahasa Melayu. Hence our students tend to use all three in their writing.

8. The threat of Internet Communication

But a far greater threat to the written model of English is going to come from the new forms of written communication that are being used through out the world. Instant messaging and e-mail will challenge the conventional norms of written grammar and spelling and invade our classrooms. Crystal says that the Internet represents the biggest challenge in communication in the whole of human history. “So far we have been communicating in speech, writing and with sign language. But the Internet is neither speech nor writing. It has aspects of both and represents a new form.” (BBC News Online: 2001). E-mail, ICQ he says is not just a faster means of communication but more like a “brand new – a dialogue between two or more people happening instantly.” There is no example from human history of anything like this happening before” (ibid). He believes that it will affect the way people communicate and it could lead to entirely new forms of communication and styles of writing.

Baron (2000:253) who studied the linguistic profile of e-mail says at the end of 1990s the profile of e-mail looks something like this:

Social Dynamics: Predominantly like writing

- Interlocutors are physically separated
- Physical separation fosters personal disclosure and helps level the conversational playing field

Format: (Mixed) writing and speech

- Like writing e-mail is durable
- Like speech, e-mail is typically unedited

Grammar:

LEXICON: predominantly like speech

- Heavy use of first and second person pronouns

SYNTAX: (Mixed) writing and speech

- Like writing, e-mail has high type-token ratio, high adverbial subordinate clauses, high use of disjunctions
- Like speech, e-mail commonly uses present tense, contractions

Style: Predominantly like speech

- Low level of formality
- Expression of emotion not always self monitored

So it appears that the gap between spoken speech and written speech may be closing in the future and grammarians in future will be battling over whether to change/adapt the rules of the written

grammar of English. For teachers, this will mean pedagogical challenges as they have to cope with the interim decisions whilst the Examination Syndicate mulls over a decision to accept or not to accept these “new fangled forms”.

9. The threat of “text messaging”

Text messaging will also form another major challenge. As Crystal (2001:229) says “the challenge of the small screen size and its limited character space (about 160) as well as the small keypad, has motivated the evolution of an even more abbreviated language...” Sentences can be reduced to sequence of initial letters e.g. SWDYT (So what do you think?), new forms e.g. C%l (cool) and users seem to use consonants instead of vowels e.g. TXT (text). “Text messaging” has caught on like wild fire. So widely used is text messaging, that it appears to have an impact on written work. A spokesperson for the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) said “There is a trend of text “linguaging” that is in use by young people and this is migrating across to examination papers” (BBC News: 2003). The authority said that “the growing problem has been identified as a barrier to attainment for pupils. ... This is the first time it has been specifically mentioned in a principle assessor’s report ...” (ibid).

This issue was debated on the BBC website under the title: “Is txt mightier than the word?” (BBC News 2003)A thirteen-year-old Scottish student sent an English essay written in “text” to her teacher claiming it was easier than Standard English. She wrote, “My smmr hols wr CWOOF. B4 we used 2go 2NY 2C my bro,his GF & th3:-kid FTF. ILNY, it’s a gr8 pic.” (Translation “My summer holidays were a complete waste of time. Before, we used to go to New York to see my brother, his girlfriend and their three screaming kids face to face. I love New York. It’s a great place”) (ibid).

This has set off a debate amongst teachers with many calling for a complete ban on it in the classroom. Sensible teachers however have said that it could be used in the classroom to highlight the differences between text and normal written language. Norbrook (2003) suggests that text messages offer opportunities for the English teacher because they provide a realistic basis for writing exercises. She says fewer letters are being written but writing is as relevant. Hence we need to teach learners to recognize a variety of registers so that are able to switch depending on whether it is formal or informal, serious or light.

Text messaging has spread like wildfire in Malaysia and there was a debate in the press in 2004 as to whether text messaging has been responsible for the decline in the standard of English in the SPM examination. All though it is too early to draw any conclusion, I wonder what will be its effect on the written standard of English amongst school and college students in the near future.

10. Challenges for English language teachers

The challenges with regard to written model of English are somewhat different. We have in place a recognizable standard in codified form we can refer to and which is accepted as a code of correctly written English. The challenges we have had thus far was how to get our students to write in grammatically correct English, coping with the interference of mother tongue grammar generalizations imposed onto English, vocabulary and spelling. But the coming challenge comes in form of coping with new forms of communication, which are going to affect the formality and textuality of written communication. Coping with this might prove more difficult because it appears to be a sweeping tide affecting communication among the younger generation of English users.

Conclusions

The debate on which models of English we should adopt is indeed a timely one. The issue as I have shown is a little “muddied” as there does not appear to be a clearly defined model of spoken English for us to adopt in the classroom. Whereas where the written language is concerned, there appear to be a clearer consensus. But the written model of English also faces its challenges and this too is going to pose problems for us teachers of English in the future. As we enter into an era where our students are going to be exposed to greater numbers of English language users and speakers in the school, it is important that we adopt a model of spoken English that is easily understood.

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Biodata

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