

SOCIOLINGUISTICS: MALAYSIAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This writing is prepared in an attempt to gain insight knowledge on the Malaysian learners learning English as their second language and the English language use in Malaysian context which is focusing on 'Malaysian English'. The main focus of this assignment is to trace whether there is any connection between Malaysia learners learning English, their attitudes and styles with the internal influences they might be exposed to which we refer to the variety that found in Malaysia known as 'Malaysian English'. We have chosen three research articles collected from books and internet sources based on related area mentioned above.

INTRODUCTION

The first article that we have chosen is a study conducted by Raja Nor Safinas Raja Harun (2009) from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Perak focusing on *Understanding Learners' Participation in an ESL Classroom: A Sociocultural Perspective*. The second article is a study conducted by Alias Abdul Ghani (2003) from Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang on *Style Stratification in the Phonology of Malaysian Learners of English*. Both articles focusing on Malaysian learners learning English and discussing their attitudes and styles which influence the learner's participation in their learning and their performance in learning the language. Another article we have chosen is basically a study on *The Evolution of Malaysian English: Influences from Within* by Hajar Abdul Rahim (2006) who is also from University Sains Malaysia, Penang. The third article is focusing on the term 'nativization' which later we will discuss in an attempt to relate to a situation where Malaysian learners learning their English language.

This writing is divided into two parts. The first part will be looking at the three articles and the review of the contents. This part is basically describing and discussing the studies made by the three researchers on the related areas and their findings. It is hoped that the review on the articles will shed some lights to our discussion later.

The second part is the discussion and the conflation of the three articles. This part looks closely whether the three studies conducted, and their findings demonstrate to us that Malaysian learner learning English in some ways influenced by the English variety in Malaysia which is commonly known as 'Malaysian English'. Our discussion in this

part is to see whether there is any relation between Malaysian learners' participation and performance in learning English and the influence of '*Malaysian English*' in general use amongst learners towards their English learning.

ARTICLE REVIEW

ARTICLE 1:

Understanding Learners' Participation in an ESL Classroom: A Sociocultural Perspective

Raja Nor Safinas Raja Harun

This article is aiming to elucidate several issues on learners' participation in an ESL classroom and provides a wider view of understanding them from a sociocultural perspective. Raja Nor Safinas in her article highlights the idea that the way learners behave in the classroom is not just related to the anxiety of learning a second language, but they have other concerns that influence the way they participate in class.

This article looks at the classroom situation as one of the concerns which encourages and stimulates the learners to participate in their lessons in classroom. Hall (2002) cited in Raja Nor Safinas' article clarifying that a classroom is perceived as a sociocultural community that give rise to issues concerning the languages and the cultures of a classroom.

Raja Nor Safinas adds it is a symbiotic relationship that compliments cooperation between teachers and learners in order to ensure the success of a particular lesson. According to her, based on the report made by University Malaya in 1993, teachers face biggest challenge to make ESL learners to respond in classroom and even some of them take longer time to respond and speak in soft and low intonation.

In the article, Raja Nor Safinas mentions that teachers in classroom is an authoritative figure in classroom and responsible for all aspects of classroom management and decision making. In Malaysian culture, teachers are needed to be respected since they are older than the learners and one of the ways showing the respect is to speak only when is asked to do so in classroom. This situation seems to lay effects on learners when they play less active role than in other contexts, particularly involving verbal participation in classroom.

This article discusses the contrast between Malaysian learners' context and that in the western countries. From the sociocultural perspective, the learners' participation is different from those in the western areas and clearly implicated the roots that influenced learners' attitudes and actions in the classroom. Besides becoming quiet in classroom, the learners somehow chose to respond to teachers in chorus especially when teacher ask the questions at random, no particular learner is pointed. In this situation, teachers then will have to encourage them to answer individually and independently.

Raja Nor Safinas in her finding reveals to us learners in ESL classroom not only affected by the anxiety but it is other concerns related to teachers and learners' cooperation and understanding in classroom lessons. She adds that ESL classroom is unique and quite complex. In her conclusion, Raja Nor Safinas clarifies that both teachers and learners' engagement in the classroom were influenced by the

sociocultural context that they inhabited as a community of the classroom at large. She adds that it is due to multicultural diversities that existed among the classroom where members brought their own social identities and linguistic backgrounds into the classroom.

Another issue she raises is concerning learner's refusal to participate in the classroom is not always related to their anxiety or lack of self-esteem in speaking English but may be due to learners' own personal reasons. In the final part of the article, Raja Nor Safinas states that her findings should not be generalized to the whole population of ESL learners in Malaysia as different context will provide different kinds of information.

ARTICLE 2:

Style Stratification in the Phonology of Malaysian Learners of English

Alias Abdul Ghani

Alias in his study, states that the study is aiming to establish patterns of style stratification in the speech productions made by the learners of English. The main objectives also include to see whether any systematic patterning exist in the learners' pronunciation of the target English sounds both individual learners and across the group of subjects who came from different ethno-linguistic backgrounds. Alias in his study is also interested in looking at the extent to which Labovian '*attention to speech*' may be used as a causal explanation for variability in the speech production of the subjects.

Alias explains that Labovian '*attention to speech*' is discussing the '*attention*' which causes a speaker to produce a style that is closer to his formal norm which is characterized by high percentage of target language forms as well as features of the speaker's native language. The situation shows that when the speakers pay less attention to their speech, they would produce a more '*vernacular*' speech style.

Alias's study finds that second language speakers, like native speakers, demonstrate style differences in their speech behaviour. He clarifies that the speakers shift their styles according to varying social contexts and speech situations, and no single individual who is communicatively competent uses the same speech style all the time. Speakers shift styles to indicate varying degrees of social distance. Alias adds that we do not normally speak the same way to strangers as we do to people who are close to us. The same situation can also be seen in the formal and informal events.

Alias focuses on the learners with different ethnic background, and they are the Malays, Chinese and Indians who are the major ethnic races in Malaysia. In an attempt to collect relevant and valid information, Alias focuses on the learners who had been exposed to English since they attended elementary school and have the high level of English proficiency. The learners have the considerable exposure to British English (RP) and the sufficient knowledge of linguistic norms of correct pronunciation according to the standard British English.

The result in Alias's study shows that the learners of English perform the phonological variation which he refers as '*stylistic stratification*' and the variation seems to be systematic in nature. He adds that the speech performance of the Malaysian learners (his subjects) was responsive to the nature of the verbal tasks they were engaged

in and their production of most of the target English phonemes. Alias's finding suggests the teachers to expect variability in the speech performance of their English learners. The result of the study also suggests the learners' speech performance is sensitive to the nature of verbal tasks they are involved in.

Alias includes in his finding the empirical evidence of previous studies on language learners' language that learners' variable performance reflects their responses to various situational and linguistic factors. Therefore, he suggests the teacher to be careful in their judgements about their learners whenever they encounter 'faulty' pronunciation in their learners' speech performance.

The overall conclusion in Alias's study shows that the phonological variation in speech of Malaysian learners of English and this variation is not at all random but rather systematic in nature. The result reveals that in most cases there is no significant difference in the performance of the learners who came from different ethno-linguistic group that are the Malays, Chinese and Indians. Further in his conclusion, Alias suggests that the 'attention to speech' could be used to account for variability in the learners' speech performance of most of the target language phonemes based on the investigation he made to several related verbal task.

ARTICLE 3:

The Evolution of Malaysian English: Influences from Within

Hajar Abdul Rahim

Hajar's article discusses the term 'nativization' which implies the linguistic readjustment that a language experiences at the phonological, grammatical and lexical levels due to the influence of local languages and various socio-cultural factors. She adds that in varieties of New Englishes such as 'Malaysian English', nativization is a pertinent stage of cultural and linguistic transformation.

Hajar in her article investigates the use of local lexis instead of English lexical form and the prominence use of it by the Malaysian speakers especially the efficient bilinguals. She points this as a lexical style. She adds that the use of local lexis in the English variety is not just prominent to fill the linguistic gap or because there is no English equivalent to account for local cultural environments, but also because of the nuances of a local form is much more forceful than the English form to convey experiences, ideas, meanings and also environment that are closely tied with the local cultural and social situations.

The assumption of the situation guides Hajar's study on the nature of linguistic readjustment in 'Malaysian English'. The study purposely explores the trend in the use of local lexis in the standard variety of English in Malaysia to reveal new knowledge of semantic and discursive spaces that may or may not defy the conventions or norms of linguistic borrowing and the ideological implications of such use on the development of 'Malaysian English'.

Hajar in citing Joseph (2004:47) states that as a social fact, language shapes the culture and thought of people. She clarifies scholars suggest that much information about society or a community can be gleaned from lexis because the use of words is motivated by the linguistic needs of communication and often also the ideological effects of the

use. Hajar focuses on the ideological implications of the use of local lexis, particularly Malay words in the English used by Malaysians. She states that the use linguistically is considered borrowing and constitutes an integral process in the nativization or localization of new varieties of Englishes such as 'Malaysian English' which has emerged globally. The present study, according to Hajar looks at the inseparable link between language construction and identity construction is an important concern in discussing the motivation behind the trend in the use of the local words in nativizing or localizing English in Malaysia.

Hajar states that the varieties of English which emerged worldwide have generally been categorized based on two sociolinguistics factors that are the function and the political role of English. This refers to the inner circle, outer circle and the expanding circle countries where English spread and used. In her article, Hajar describes linguistic readjustment as what happens to 'Malaysian English', is a prominent feature in languages that are used in multiethnic and multilingual communities. These readjustments, according to Hajar are similar to what is linguistically known as nativization, a process that happens at the phonological, grammatical and lexical levels. Hajar further mentions that scholars consider New Englishes as varieties of English in their own right just like the 'older' Englishes. Nativization as stated in Hajar's study is one of the phases that the varieties experience.

'Malaysian English', according to Hajar is one variety that exhibits unique readjustments due to the diverse panorama of speech communities. Hajar finds that nativization or localization of English in Malaysia is especially evident in the Low (L) variety of the language, commonly used in informal speech situations. Nativization at the lexical level takes the form of lexical innovations. The process involves creating new words from existing English words as well as loanwords or borrowings from local languages used by the speech community. The standard variety of 'Malaysian English' embraces both forms of lexical innovation and it is in contrast to the Singapore English which according to Hajar, does not display the same characteristics. The localized forms of lexis have been produced to cater to the social and communicative needs of the society. Hajar includes in her article that in Malaysia, Malay language as the national language is the chosen language, the 'unifying element' towards achieving one identity for multiethnic and multilingual nation. Hajar describes the "Malaysian English" together with the linguistic process which she refers to 'codeswitching', a necessary linguistic process in multilingual and bilingual communities especially in oral communication however uncommon in the written form.

MALAYSIAN LEARNERS AND VARIETY IN MALAYSIAN ENGLISH

Two of the articles above demonstrate to us the situation of Malaysian learners learning English with various attitudes and various styles. Their performance and competency in learning the language is somehow affected and shaped by certain concerns and mostly does not show contrast even though they come from different major ethnic backgrounds. The learners after all are all Malaysians regardless of their race and cultures. Hence, we choose to see whether they might be influenced by the internal factors and therefore we

relate this view to the third article which discusses on 'Malaysian English'.

This part refers to the three studies conducted on Malaysian learners learning English. Their findings demonstrate to us that Malaysian learner learning English in some ways influenced by certain attitudes and styles. Raja Nor Safinas in her article finds that learners in ESL classroom tend to behave in such ways when they have to give response in ESL classroom. Her finding shows that the learners are reluctant to adopt active speech roles in the classroom due to their own anxiety and self-perceived weaknesses in the language. Raja Nor Safinas cites Hofstede (1986) saying that some people from certain cultures tend to avoid situations that they perceive as unclear or unpredictable.

Alias in his study looks at the learners who come from different ethno-linguistic background and later find out based on his statistical analysis that Malaysian learners shows no significant difference in the group's performance. At this point of discussion, I find that Raja Nor Safinas and Alias have collected information on learners learning English who come from different ethno-linguistic background. They perform their competency in English in certain style and attitudes that do not show prominent contrast regardless of their differences.

Alias states that the result of his study has important pedagogical implications for English language teaching in Malaysia, particularly in the area of pronunciation teaching. Teachers teaching the language must have the knowledge and responsibility to determine the learners' varieties in language learning and do not judge them based on their differences. Similarly, Raja Nor Safinas in her finding discuss the understanding that should exist between the teachers and the learners as their understanding and expectation are created through daily norms and routines that they themselves engage in. Her study implies to us that the teachers gain insights of learners as members of particular group and at the same time is made aware of individual learners with different abilities, as well as social and cultural backgrounds.

Raja Nor Safinas in one part of her study records the use of 'Malaysian English' patterns among the learners learning English. They seem comfortable using the patterns in their verbal communication even in formal classroom lesson. The insertion of the word '*lah*' in their speaking shows a very common sign of the 'Malaysian English' influences. Alias's study at one point illustrates the same situation. He includes that a variability study provides empirical data on patterns of variability in the phonology of Malaysian learners learning English. Based on the data to substantiate the nature of variability in their learners' speech production, Alias finds that teachers of English in Malaysia should be made aware of this linguistic matter and necessary pedagogical steps could be taken in order to facilitate learners' acquisition of their second language. In addition, Alias states that teachers of English in Malaysia are well aware of the fact that the majority of their learners have difficulty in producing some target language sounds.

Alias study hopes to offer insight into what causes variation in the learners' speech styles and to determine whether attention to speech could account for the cause of variation in the speech styles or whether there are any other processes that operate within the variability in the phonology of the subjects. He stresses that the study is to look at the process used by the learners as they shift their styles according to various stylistic

environment. Alias's study and its finding on the Malaysian learners learning English to a certain extent, is connected to the situation in Raja Nor Safinas's study. Both studies concern on the nature of how and what the Malaysian learners take to learn the language competently.

In this discussion, I find that Hajar has made her analysis in broader view regarding the evolution of 'Malaysian English'. Our concern in this discussion is that whether the Malaysian learners' attitudes, anxiety and styles in learning English is influenced or clearly understood, can be related to the environment and social situations where they learn the language. This discussion does not separate the Malaysian learners learning the written form and the spoken form of English but rather a mixture of both because both forms as stated in Hajar's article, exist together as a language.

It is interesting to look at the connection between the Malaysian learners' attitudes and styles of learning English as their second language and the environment where they learn the language which is not solely refer to the formal lesson in class but the socially and informally learning the language. Fishman (1965) cited in Wallace (1988) offers a way of looking at the language use of bilinguals in certain communities by asking us to consider **who** speaks **what language, to whom** and **when**. Fishman (1965) as cited in Wallace (1988) believes that with a particular kind of language behaviors which he points reading as the example, modify this to consider rather who reads what kind of things in what language to whom on what occasion and in what general context. In this discussion, the Malaysian learners who show the signs and influences of "Malaysian English" in their language learning can be seen, match with what has been discussed by Fishman (1965) and Wallace (1988). Even though Fishman (1965) refers to reading, I personally believe that Malaysian learners use such variety in their language learning because they feel more comfortable speaking and listening to the variety which is used widely and spontaneously by most Malaysians neglecting their differences in ethnic background. Simply say, everybody understands the variety and it is closely related to their bond with each other especially learners who mix around with other learners in Malaysia.

Raja Nor Safinas concerns on the learners' anxiety and attitudes in learning the English language in classroom while Alias concerns on their difficulties in pronunciation and, to a certain extent influence their performance and confidence in the language learning. Both researchers and their finding led to the same path that is to the sociocultural factor. Hajar in her study further cites Jackson and Ze Amvela (2000) to us that New Englishers become localized mainly through the influence of other languages of the region where they are used and also through being adapted to the life and culture of their speakers.

Hajar's discussion in her article reveals to us that the evolution of Malaysian English' spread and accepted by the Malaysians since some time ago till present. Therefore, the situation whereby the Malaysian learners facing difficulties and challenges in their learning to establish and achieve the high competency are most probably due to the influence of widely use of local lexis in 'Malaysian English'. Hajar clearly states that Malaysian English is one variety that exhibits unique readjustments due to the diverse panorama of speech communities. She adds that nativization or

localization of English in Malaysia is especially evident in the Low (L) variety of the language, commonly used in informal speech situations.

The same use of the particle '*lah*' in local intonation as mentioned by both Raja Nor Safinas and Hajar in their article is the example of widely use of local expressions in 'Malaysian English' that most learners neglecting their ethnic background, use it in their spoken language. The use of local intonation, structures influenced by the local structures and the prominent use of Malay particle '*lah*' are some of the more prevalent local features in this variety. In the standard or High (H) variety, generally used in formal language situations, localization seems to be most evident at the lexical level. Raja Nor Safinas has included the '*lah*' use by the Malaysian learners in formal classrooms lesson showing the influence is not in small scale.

Thomas and Wareing (2002) similarly find that attitudes towards language and language use are commonplace throughout the world. They add that people assign various attributes to language forms; they may feel that a language or 'variety' of a language is elegant, expressive, offensive, harsh, musical or that one language form is more polite or more aesthetically pleasing and displeasing than another one. The language level use is subject to notions of prestige and stigma which connected with speakers of languages and to do with social class and social or national identity, and with ideas about status, solidarity and unity.

Based on our own personal experience and observation, we find that some teachers use the same local expressions in their speech with the learners. It is not because they are lacking the competency but to attract the learner's attention as well as to minimize the gap between teachers with High (H) variety and the learners Low (L) variety during learning process concerning the verbal communication but not in writing. This situation is somehow having its own advantages and disadvantages that we can easily notice. I believe that the teachers are utilizing the 'Malaysian English' to alleviate the learners' nervousness and anxiety as well as difficulties in learning the language. Alias, even though does not discuss on the use of local lexis in speech, mentions about the interference of social and cultural factors in the learners' phonological difficulties. The closely similar situation is already discussed in Raja Nor Safinas's article and Hajar's discussion.

CONCLUSION

The three articles that we have chosen to focus on the Malaysian learners learning English and the influence of Malaysian English. Raja Nor Safinas finds that we have a unique and complex ESL classroom along with the Malaysian learners who learn the language within the sociocultural context. She clarifies that this is due to the multicultural diversities that existed among the classroom community where members (the learners) brought their own social identities and linguistic backgrounds into the classroom. According to Raja Nor Safinas, the learning does not occur only in classroom and therefore teachers should consider their understanding to a larger context outside the classroom. The learners, for example learns from home environments and social background they live in. Through these differences, Raja Nor Safina adds that, their

ideas and dispositions are negotiated and arrive a mutual agreement of learning the foreign language.

Alias in his article too, finds that the phonological variation in the speech of Malaysian learners of English and this variation is not all random but rather systematic in nature. Alias takes the Labovian attention to speech hypothesis to investigate the speech performance of the Malaysian learners and finds that the study is responsive to the verbal tasks they are engaged in and their production of most of the target English phonemes. Alias comes to his conclusion which demonstrates the similar characteristics to Raja Nor Safinas's study. These two studies and their findings are reliable to what Hajar also finds out in her study. Nativization and borrowing pattern in Malaysian English suggest that the users of the language do not borrow from local lexis only when it is necessary, but it is actually a heavy reliance to them. She adds that the heavy reliance on local forms is an indication of the fossilized state of English in Malaysia. The situation, to a certain extent influences the Malaysian learners' attitudes and styles in learning the language especially in Malaysian context and environment, within the Malaysian learners' differences in their ethnic backgrounds but the same engagement of learning the language.

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