

MOTHER-TONGUE INFLUENCE IN THE PRONUNCIATION
CONTRAST OF THE ENGLISH /i/ AND /ɪ/ VOWEL SOUNDS
AMONG
MALAYSIAN MALAY ESL SPEAKERS

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	ix
ABSTRACT	x
ABSTRAK	xi
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.0 Introduction : Background of Research	1
1.1 Statement of the Problem	4
1.2 Research Objectives	4
1.3 Research Questions	5
1.4 Research Hypothesis	5
1.5 Significance of Research	5
1.6 Scope of Research	6
1.7 Definition of Terms	7
1.8 Conclusion	9

2	REVIEW OF LITERATURE	10
2.0	Introduction	10
2.1	Related Literature	10
2.1.1	A Classification of Outcomes	12
2.1.2	Positive Transfer	12
2.1.3	Negative Transfer	13
	a. Underproduction	13
	b. Overproduction	14
	c. Production Errors	14
	d. Misinterpretation	15
2.1.4	Differing Lengths of Acquisition	15
2.1.5	Discussion of Phonetics and Phonology	16
2.1.6	Primary Stress and Stressed Vowels	20
2.2	Related Research	21
2.3	Conclusion	24
3	RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	26
3.0	Introduction	26
3.1	Research Design	26
3.2	Pilot Study	27
3.3	Population and Sample	27

3.4	Research Instruments	28
3.5	Procedure of Data Collection	29
3.5.1	Reading Text	29
3.5.2	Questionnaire	30
3.6	Procedure for Data Analysis	31
3.6.1	Analysis of Recordings	31
3.6.2	Analysis of the Questionnaire	32
3.7	Conclusion	32
4	ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	33
4.0	Introduction	33
4.1	Respondents' Profile	33
4.2	Answer to Research Question 1	35
4.2.1	The Vowel /i/	37
4.2.2	The Vowel /ɪ/	38
4.2.3	Summary of Answer to Research Question 1..	39
4.3	Answer to Research Question 2	40
4.3.1	Frequency of L1 Use to Determine Language Transfer	48
4.3.2	Attitudes Toward the Importance of Pronunciation	50
4.3.3	Factors Affecting L2 Learning and Acquisition - Individual Variation	51

4.3.4	Observation on Stress, Rhythm and Intonation	52
4.3.5	Summary of Answer to Research Question 2..	53
4.4	Conclusion	53
5	SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND	54
	RECOMMENDATIONS	
5.0	Introduction	54
5.1	Summary of Conclusions	54
5.2	Recommendations to Overcome Research Problem ...	59
5.2.1	Imitation	60
5.2.2	Isolating a Sound or Pronunciation Feature ..	60
5.2.3	Shift of Position	61
5.2.4	Articulatory Description and Distribution	61
5.2.5	Cutaway Facial Diagrams	62
5.2.6	Mirror	62
5.2.7	Teaching Segmental Phonemes	63
5.2.8	Internet Websites and Courseware CD-ROMs	65
5.2.9	Examples of Activities for Classroom Use ...	66
5.2.10	Summary of Recommendations	67
5.3	Recommendations for Further Research	68
5.4	Closure	70

BIBLIOGRAPHY	71
APPENDIX 1	74
APPENDIX 2	75
APPENDIX 3	78
APPENDIX 4	104

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 4.1 Respondents' Profile	34
Table 4.2 Percentage of Mispronunciation and Correct Pronunciation of /i/ and /ɪ/	36
Table 4.3 Word List - Correct and Wrong Pronunciation of /i/	37
Table 4.4 Variety of Mother-Tongue Dialects of the Malay Language, shown in absolute numbers	40
Table 4.5 Languages Spoken in the Home, shown in absolute numbers	41
Table 4.6 Use of Malay and English with Parents and Siblings, shown in percentages	42
Table 4.7 Percentage of UNIMAS Malay ESL Speakers Using Malay and English to Socialise	44
Table 4.8 Comparison of the SRP and SPM Examination Results, shown in absolute numbers	45

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1 A Vowel Chart for the Malay Language	17
Figure 2.2 An English Vowel Chart showing the relative vowel qualities represented by the IPA symbols	18
Figure 2.3 Phonetic Symbols for English Vowels	18

ABSTRACT

Language transfer has been a controversial topic that has been the debate of many linguists, language teachers and instructors. This paper investigates the existence of such transfer in Malaysian Malay ESL speakers in the production of the English vowel sounds /i/ and /ɪ/. It has been found that the majority of the speakers do not differentiate between the long and short vowel sounds. They do not pronounce the long /i/ vowel sound with accuracy as the sound does not exist in their mother-tongue language (Malay). The main reason for this is the frequent use of their mother-tongue and also the amount of exposure they have to Malay. English is only used occasionally as it does not play a major role in their communication everyday. Several factors are also speculated on in this paper, emphasising individual differences which may cause the problem. Among the recommendations suggested are activities that could be employed in ESL classrooms during English lessons in aid of students who face the similar problem.

ABSTRAK

'Perpindahan bahasa' merupakan suatu topik yang sering hebat diperdebatkan di kalangan ahli-ahli linguistik dan guru-guru bahasa. Kajian yang dibuat telah meneliti perpindahan bahasa sedemikian di kalangan rakyat Malaysia berbangsa Melayu yang menutur Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua mereka. Skop kajian ini mengkaji pertuturan rakyat Melayu terhadap bunyi-bunyi vokal Bahasa Inggeris /i/ dan /ɪ/. Kajian ini telah mendapati bahawa majoriti rakyat Melayu tidak membezakan bunyi-bunyi vokal tersebut. Mereka didapati tidak menutur bunyi vokal panjang /i/ disebabkan bunyi ini tidak didapati dalam bahasa ibunda mereka, iaitu Bahasa Melayu. Subjek-subjek kajian ini banyak menggunakan bahasa ibunda mereka, sama ada dengan ahli-ahli keluarga mereka atau pun rakan-rakan. Ini menunjukkan bahawa Bahasa Inggeris tidak memainkan peranan yang penting bagi mereka untuk tujuan berkomunikasi. Antara faktor-faktor utama yang menyebabkan masalah ini adalah faktor-faktor yang berkaitan dengan perbezaan individu. Beberapa cadangan juga telah diberi sebagai panduan bagi para guru yang menghadapi murid-murid yang bermasalah sedemikian.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION : BACKGROUND OF RESEARCH

This paper attempts to investigate the pronunciation errors that occur in a Malaysian Malay ESL speaker's speech. It is quite obvious that different languages have different sound systems. Therefore, there exists a difference between the Malay language sound system and the English language sound system. The phonetics concerned are within the scope of the vowel sounds in both languages. Due to the fact that languages vary in their sound systems, there may be interference of a speaker's native language in the acquisition of another language resulting in production errors in that language.

People all around the world use language to communicate with one another. Speech sounds, hand gestures and letters or alphabets are used to send messages from one person to another. Therefore, language can be defined as a system of signs used to communicate messages. According to Taylor (1990:241), infants have remarkable abilities in discriminating many pairs of speech sounds. This shows that since birth,

babies have been tuned to human speech sounds when they hear articulated structures of adult speech — that of their parents.

There have been differences in attitudes towards bilingualism through time and in different places. These attitudes have been consistently positive in Malaysia as many Malaysians are bilinguals. The Prime Minister of Malaysia has constantly reiterated the need for Malaysians to have a command of more than one language and he feels that the acquisition of foreign languages can only be an asset, never a liability (Gaudart 1996). The status of pronunciation within the Malaysian curriculum varied considerably over the years. The acquisition of adequate speech sounds and the importance of articulated speech in the target language is essential for successful second language use in terms of comprehensible communication.

Due to the fact that the Malaysian school syllabus stresses on a communicative syllabus, it is definitely very important to teach non-native speakers of the English language to be able to speak well, targeting towards the ability to speak like a native speaker. However, the articulation of spoken language has not been given a lot of attention in the school system as the curriculum revolves around an exam-oriented syllabus. It cannot be denied that both students and teachers are more concerned about the examinations and the results rather than focusing on the actual learning that takes place in the language classroom. Given very little emphasis on the oral production of the language, for example, in the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia examination, students are required to sit for an oral examination which only takes about 15 minutes. It is very

difficult to judge whether these students can actually perform orally in real-life situations based on a 15-minute examination.

Meanings must be made clear in a person's conversation. Malaysians are not native speakers of the English language. Therefore, there exists cross-linguistic influence in language learning for Malaysians who learn another language, namely their second language. Language transfer may happen in some cases and will magnify the influence of the mother-tongue in the process of acquisition of another language. As Weinreich (1967:11) simply puts it, "In speech, interference is like sand carried by a stream; in language, it is the sedimented sand deposited on the bottom of a lake." Thus, the native language of a person is the foundation of his or her language acquisition. As such, certain attributes of the native language may be transferred into the other languages learnt.

This chapter introduces the topic of research, the research objectives and questions, its hypothesis, the significance of the research and also some definition of terms used in this paper.

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Spoken language is made up of sounds. The sound system varies between languages and thus, when a bilingual speaks a foreign language, he or she may have problems because he or she cannot reproduce sounds that a native speaker will have no problems with (N. Chitavelu et al 1995:81). Therefore, generally, Malaysians face problems in the reproduction of English sounds as there seems to exist an interference of the first language, L1, or their mother-tongue. Basically, the purpose of this paper is to investigate the extent of the L1 interference into English (L2) of the Malay ESL speakers in Malaysia when producing the vowel contrast of the /i/ and /ɪ/ sounds.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research has two main objectives. They are :

1. To determine the extent of the pronunciation contrast of the English /i/ and /ɪ/ vowel sounds among the Malaysian Malay ESL speakers.
2. To find out how L1 influences the production of sounds in L2 for these speakers.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions of this research are:

1. What is the extent of the pronunciation contrast of the English /i/ and /ɪ/ vowel sounds among the Malaysian Malay ESL speakers?
2. How does L1 influence the production of sounds in L2 for these speakers?

1.4 RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

According to Taylor (1990), the extensive use of two languages may subtly alter a bilingual's phonetic, semantic, and syntactic structure and behaviour (339). Due to the reason that there exists no differentiation between a long and short vowel in the Malay language, namely the /i/ and /ɪ/ sounds, the majority (50% or more) of the Malay ESL speakers do not distinguish or contrast these vowel sounds when they speak English.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This research is important for the development of articulated speech and the accuracy in pronunciation in an ESL classroom. Not only should learners be able to learn to distinguish vowel contrasts, namely the long and short vowel sounds in English, they should also be exposed to the strategies that develop in the process of learning to

distinguish and articulate the vowel sounds. This will enhance their ability to pronounce more accurately in the target language and understanding in producing those sounds. This research will also generally assist teachers or instructors to further understand the problems faced in real classroom situations regarding pronunciation.

1.6 SCOPE OF RESEARCH

This research is carried out within a scope where there are certain limitations. Firstly, this research is carried out only in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), targeting the Malay ESL students. It is generally unfair to base the results on the assumption that it is the same for any other groups of Malay ESL speakers. Groups in different areas and locations would probably produce different results. Therefore, the results of this research cannot be used to generalise the Malay ESL speakers in the entire country. The sample of this research is necessarily small, consisting of 25 subjects.

Ladefoged (1993) stated that traditional articulatory descriptions of vowels are not very satisfactory. Being so, it is difficult to give a meaningful answer to any request to describe the tongue position of a vowel in one's speech. For example, if a few people were asked to describe their tongue position at the beginning of the vowel in the word 'imply', there would surely be a variety of responses. It is very simple for a person to repeat what they find in books regarding the position of the tongue in articulation.

Printed terms in books are but a set of labels. They are not absolute descriptions of the position of the body of the tongue.

This research is also limited in the sense of language skills whereby the main concern is the production skill (speaking). Other language skills are not taken into consideration, namely the listening, reading and writing skills. There could be varying outcomes if studies were to be done on the other skills. It is quite clear that a language learner learns to integrate all four skills in language learning. However, this paper is solely taking speaking into account. There is also only one reading text used for the recording which would account for the reason that this research is done on a small scale.

1.7 DEFINITION OF TERMS

1.7.1 Mother-tongue or L1

Mother-tongue or L1 refers to a bilingual's native language, whereby it is often, but not always, a bilingual's dominant language (Taylor 1990:327). In this case, the L1 refers to the Malay language used in Malaysia, inclusive of its different dialects, such as the standard Malay language (Bahasa Malaysia), the Sarawakian Malay, the Terengganu dialect, the Kelantan dialect, and so on.

1.7.2 Second language or L2

Second language or L2 refers to a bilingual's second language after their mother-tongue. In this research, the second language is the target language — English.

1.7.3 Bilingual

Muller *et al* (1981) state that 'bilingual' is a label which is wide-ranging in its applications and does not attempt to 'enumerate and evaluate the various definitions'. They define bilingualism as 'the alternate use of two languages in the same individual'. The word 'alternate' would seem to suggest that either each language is used separately and/or in different situations, or that at any moment during a conversation a 'bilingual' speaker may switch from one language to the other.

1.7.4 Language transfer

Language transfer can be divided into two main categories, positive transfer and negative transfer. According to Odlin (1994), there have been many problems in the actual definition of the term *transfer*. Because of this, he came up with a few observations about what transfer is *not*. They are:

- a. Transfer is *not* simply a consequence of habit formation.
- b. Transfer is *not* simply interference.
- c. Transfer is *not* simply falling back on the native language.

d. Transfer is *not* always native language influence.

In this paper and research, transfer is regarded as native language influence in terms of the phonological production of the long and short vowel sounds (/i/ and /ɪ/) in English, as there is no distinction of long and short vowel sounds in the subjects' native language. The transfer in this case is a negative transfer, which is also known as language interference.

1.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter mentioned the purpose of this research, based on the fact that there exists a need to identify pronunciation problems among Malaysian Malay ESL speakers in the production of the long and short /i/ and /ɪ/ vowel sounds. It deals with language transfer from L1 into the speaker's L2 and aims to investigate the extent of the influence of the L1.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of two main topics, namely, related literature and related research. Basically, related literature is any source of information related to the researcher's research. They include some theories and concepts. Related research describes other research and their findings that have been carried out which are related to this research.

2.1 RELATED LITERATURE

To know and use a language is to be able to speak the language. Pronunciation is an important part of a language. The acquisition of a good pronunciation in the target language is commonly held to be the most difficult of all tasks in language learning (Paulston and Bruder 1976). It is also a matter of physical fact that after the age of puberty virtually no one can acquire a native pronunciation. While all human vocal organs are structurally very much alike, each language has its own system of combining

the noises produced by the vocal tract, and it is this difference in the sound system which gives each language its particular quality.

Therefore, there is little doubt that native language phonetics and phonology are powerful influences on second language pronunciation. There have been many studies conducted on cross-linguistic influences as well as other factors that contribute to language transfer. Dechert, Bruggemeir, and Futterer (1984) believe that the literature on second language acquisition and language teaching is replete with descriptions of the difficulties that learners encounter in trying to pronounce sounds in a foreign language, and that contrastive explanations for such difficulties are quite common.

One of the difficulties faced by learners is the problem of phonic interference of one language in another. This concerns the manner in which a speaker perceives and reproduces the sounds of one language, which might be designated secondary, in terms of another, to be called primary. According to Weinreich (1967), "Interference arises when a bilingual identifies a phoneme of the secondary system with one in the primary system and, in reproducing it, subjects it to the phonetic rules of the primary language." In the case of this research, the primary system would refer to the native language of the speaker (Malay language), and the secondary system refers to the target language (English language). This shows that there would exist cross-linguistic influence for the Malay speaker to learn the English language. The major concern is the long and short vowel sounds. According to Stanfield (1986), Malay speakers would have difficulty

distinguishing between the /i/ and /ɪ/ vowel pairs. This is due to the fact that the Malay equivalent vowel is not as long as the English /i/.

2.1.1 A Classification of Outcomes

Due to the fact that there exists cross-linguistic influence in learning a second language, Odlin (1994) suggests a classification of the outcomes of the influence. The following classification offers some idea of the varied effects that cross-linguistic similarities and differences can produce:

- I. Positive transfer
- II. Negative transfer
 - A. Underproduction
 - B. Overproduction
 - C. Production errors
 - D. Misinterpretation
- III. Differing lengths of acquisition

(Odlin 1994)

2.1.2 Positive transfer

The effects of positive transfer are only determinable through comparisons of the success of groups with different native languages (Sharwood Smith 1986). Such comparisons often show that cross-linguistic similarities can produce