



Faculty of Language and Communication

**THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND ON
THE MISPRONUNCIATION OF /l/ AND /r/ AMONG
MALAYSIAN CHINESE UNDERGRADUATES**

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**Bachelor of Arts with Honours (Linguistics)
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak**

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MISPRONUNCIATION OF /l/ AND /r/ AMONG MALAYSIAN CHINESE
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This final year project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the mispronunciation of /l/ and /r/ in English words among Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in relation to their educational background. The objectives were to determine the frequency of mispronunciation of English words containing /l/ and /r/ according to phoneme, phoneme position, and mispronunciation characteristics among Malaysian Chinese educated (CE) and non-Chinese educated (NCE) undergraduates. A quantitative approach was employed in the study. Word lists with /l/ and /r/ in initial, medial, and final positions were provided for 60 Malaysian Chinese undergraduates to pronounce. Recordings of the participants' pronunciation were then transcribed and transformed into numerical data. The descriptive statistics were analysed according to the research objectives. The results of the study show that Chinese educated Malaysian undergraduates tend to mispronounce English words containing /l/ in medial and final position. Words containing /l/ in medial position tend to be substituted while words with /l/ in final position tend to be deleted or vocalized.

ABSTRAK

Kajian tersebut telah mengkaji sebutan perkataan Bahasa Inggeris yang mengandungi fonem /l/ dan /r/ oleh mahasiswa Malaysia yang berbangsa Cina berdasarkan latar belakang pendidikan mereka. Objektif kajian tersebut adalah untuk mengetahui kekerapan kesalahan bagi penyebutan perkataan Bahasa Inggeris yang mengandungi fonem /l/ dan /r/ mengikut fonem, posisi fonem dan ciri kesalahan yang dilakukan oleh mahasiswa Malaysia dari sekolah aliran Cina dan sekolah aliran bukan Cina. Kajian kuantitatif telah dijalankan dengan menyediakan senarai perkataan Bahasa Inggeris yang mengandungi fonem /l/ dan /r/ dalam posisi awal, tengah dan akhir kepada 60 mahasiswa Malaysia yang berbangsa Cina. Rakaman penyebutan para pelajar telah ditranskripsikan dan ditukar kepada data berangka. Statistik deskriptif telah dianalisis berdasarkan objektif kajian. Hasil kajian tersebut telah menunjukkan bahawa mahasiswa Malaysia berbangsa Cina yang berasal dari sekolah aliran Cina lebih cenderung melakukan kesalahan semasa menyebut perkataan bahasa Inggeris yang mengandungi fonem /l/ dalam posisi tengah dan akhir. Perkataan yang mengandungi /l/ dalam posisi tengah akan mengalami proses penggantian manakala /l/ dalam posisi akhir akan mengalami proses penghilangan atau vokalisasi.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Acronym	What it stands for
CE	Chinese educated undergraduates
NCE	Non-Chinese educated undergraduates

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Chapter overview

This chapter describes the background of the study along with the research problem, research questions, aim and objectives of the study. The operational definition of terms and significance of the study are also included.

1.1 Research problem

The English language is becoming an undeniably useful language in communicating with people of different cultures. The nature of this language has earned many names for itself such as English as a lingua franca, English as an international language and English as a global language. Firth defines English's role as a lingua franca to be the "contact language" in enabling the interaction between people of completely different cultures that speaks an extremely different native language (Seidlhofer, 2005). According to World Population Review (2019), English is the language that has the most speakers from all over the world and the spread of its usage can be defined using Braj Kachru's three circles model. In this model, the smallest inner circle represents countries where the people are native speakers of English. The second largest circle consists of countries where there are several native speakers of English and the majority uses English as a second language. The final and biggest circle contains countries where English is learned as a foreign language. In this model, Malaysia is placed in the second circle.

According to Yong, Tan, and Yong (2012), pronunciation plays an important role in good communication skills. Rajadurai states that poor pronunciation can hinder the flow of a conversation due to the reduced intelligibility between the speaker and listener (as cited in Shak, Chang, & Stephen, 2016). Rajadurai further stresses on the importance of pronunciation in

speaking English because it is an international language. A language cannot be labelled as an international language if speakers do not understand each other while using the language. Seidlhofer further explains that an individual's identity and association to a specific community depends heavily on one's pronunciation in daily speech (as cited in Shak et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the importance of pronunciation is not realized by many Malaysians. According to Shak et al. (2016), Malaysian teachers focus more on the intelligibility of English spoken by the students as compared to pronunciation. Furthermore, Malaysian students are not interested in improving their pronunciation skills because they believe that grammar and vocabulary is of utmost importance (Yong et al., 2012).

According to Ahmed, undergraduates of different ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia face difficulties in pronouncing English words (as cited in Nur Syahida Mohd Yazid & Zairil Azmir Zaiyadi, 2017). Thus, this study looks into the pronunciation difficulties among the Chinese community in Malaysia. Malaysian Chinese have a long and complicated history in China before their migration to Malaysia. They are the second largest ethnic group and takes up an estimated 23% of the population in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019). Most of them are usually bilingual or multilingual especially those who speak the standard Mandarin and Chinese dialects (Ting, 2013). However, there is a common pronunciation problem among the Chinese community, which is the pronunciation of English words containing /l/ and /r/ that will be further discussed in Chapter 2. In addition, this study also focusses on a specific group of Malaysian Chinese, which is the undergraduate group. According to JobStreet.com (2013), employers do not hire fresh graduates based on just their academic results but also their communication skills and the command of English. A study by Wong, Lee, Lee, and Azizah Yaacob (2012) shows that Malaysian undergraduates are starting to view the usage of English as their own identity. This means that Malaysian undergraduates are starting to understand the

importance of English and are using the language more. However, in a study by Gill (2007), graduates from private and public universities have a different level of command of English due to the medium of instruction used in their universities, which are English and Malay respectively. The better command of English among private university graduates has contributed to a higher demand of employment by private sectors. This is because employers are starting to value employees with good communication skills in English to provide a good impression of the company to the customers (Halim Said, 2017). According to Shak et al. (2016), Malaysian graduates are facing a common problem of unemployment due to their poor pronunciation. Unfortunately, limited studies have been carried out to investigate the pronunciation difficulties of these specific phonemes among Malaysian Chinese undergraduates.

Furthermore, the Malaysian education system is one of the most unique systems as compared to those of other countries. The medium of instruction varies according to the type of school such as national, national-type and independent schools. National schools use Malay as the medium of instruction, national-type schools use the mother tongue which are Mandarin and Tamil while independent schools, which are usually Chinese independent schools, use Mandarin. This education system has brought up many Chinese individuals who have different language choice. A study conducted by Kow (2003) found that an individual's language choice throughout his or her life is affected by the medium of instruction. Moreover, studies have discovered that Chinese-educated Chinese feel more comfortable in using Mandarin (Lee & Ting, 2016) while Malay-educated Chinese preferred Malay and English (Ting, 2013).

Generally, the current study plans to investigate the effect of educational background on the pronunciation of /l/ and /r/ in English words among Malaysian Chinese undergraduates to answer the following research questions:

1. a) Is there a significant difference in the frequency of mispronunciation of English words containing /l/ between Chinese (CE) and non-Chinese (NCE) educated undergraduates?
b) Is there a significant difference in the frequency of mispronunciation of English words containing /r/ between CE and NCE?
2. a) Is there a significant difference in the frequency of mispronunciation of /l/ in English words according to phoneme position between CE and NCE?
b) Is there a significant difference in the frequency of mispronunciation of /r/ in English words according to phoneme position between CE and NCE?
3. a) Is there a significant difference in the frequency of each mispronunciation characteristics of /l/ in English words according to phoneme position between CE and NCE?
b) Is there a significant difference in the frequency of each mispronunciation characteristics of /r/ in English words according to phoneme position between CE and NCE?

1.2 Aim and objectives of study

The aim of this study is to investigate the mispronunciation of /l/ and /r/ in English words among Malaysian Chinese undergraduates in relation to their educational background.

The objectives of this study are:

1. a) To determine the frequency of mispronunciation of English words containing /l/ among Malaysian CE and NCE.
b) To determine the frequency of mispronunciation of English words containing /r/ among Malaysian CE and NCE.

2. a) To compare the frequency of mispronunciation of /l/ in English words according to phoneme position by Malaysian CE and NCE.

b) To compare the frequency of mispronunciation of /r/ in English words according to phoneme position by Malaysian CE and NCE.
3. a) To determine the characteristics of mispronunciation of /l/ in English words according to phoneme position among Malaysian CE and NCE.

b) To determine the characteristics of mispronunciation of /r/ in English words according to phoneme position among Malaysian CE and NCE.

1.3 Operational definition of terms

Specific terms used in this study are defined in this section.

1.3.1 Malaysian Chinese

The Chinese community whose ancestors have migrated from China and continued their history in Malaysia. The ethnic language of the Malaysian Chinese is Mandarin. Different descendants of Chinese from various parts of China speak different dialects such as Hakka, Hokkien, Teochew, Foochow and Hainanese.

1.3.2 Mispronunciation

According to Yong, Tan, and Yong (2012), mispronunciation is defined as the production of an incorrect sound for a particular sound in a word. Donselaar also defines this phenomenon as the act of replacing an original phoneme in a word with an incorrect phoneme (as cited in Yong et al., 2012).

1.3.3 Educational background

Educational background is an individual's schooling history based on the medium of instruction. In this study, educational background refers to Chinese-educated and non-Chinese educated. Chinese-educated are those who have attended Mandarin medium schools which are Chinese national-type primary school and Chinese independent secondary school. On the other hand, non-Chinese educated are those who have received their primary and secondary education in national schools where Malay is the medium of instruction.

1.3.4 Phoneme position

Phoneme position is the position of a phoneme in a word. It can be classified into three positions which are initial, medial and final. Trask (1996) defined each position as:

- i. Initial : The first position in a word or syllable.
- ii. Medial : The position of a segment which is neither at the beginning nor at the end of a word.
- iii. Final : The position of the last segment in a word.

(Trask, 1996)

1.3.5 Characteristics of mispronunciation

Characteristics of mispronunciation is the way or a method of pronouncing a phoneme incorrectly. Examples of mispronunciation are shown below with its definitions:

- i. Deletion: the loss of a phoneme.
- ii. Vocalization: the conversion of a consonant into a vowel or glide.
- iii. Epenthesis: the insertion of an additional phoneme into a word.
- iv. Substitution: the replacement of one phoneme with another phoneme.
- v. Glottalization: the replacement of an oral plosive with a glottal stop.

- vi. Assimilation: a phoneme becoming similar to the next phoneme.
- vii. Aspiration: a period of breath added after a phoneme, usually an obstruent.
- viii. Devoicing: a voiced phoneme becomes voiceless.

(Ingram, 1986; Trask, 1996)

1.4 Significance of study

Many researches have been conducted on the pronunciation of English words by Chinese students from China to investigate the common mispronunciations and pronunciation features. Some studies have also compared the pronunciation of English words by Chinese students from China and Malaysia. However, past researches did not focus on the pronunciation of the two specific phonemes /l/ and /r/ that are famously known to have caused many difficulties for the Chinese community. Furthermore, the educational background of the sample from previous research have not been taken into consideration as a factor that influences the pronunciation of English words. Therefore, this study enlightens whether Chinese and non-Chinese education can affect the pronunciation of Malaysian Chinese undergraduates. Also, the results of this current study are expected to contribute to the research findings on the pronunciation of English by Malaysian Chinese to understand the factors and patterns of mispronunciations. It is also hoped that this study will assist English language teachers in Malaysia understanding the pronunciation problems among Malaysian Chinese students and to develop various teaching methods to solve this problem.

1.5 Chapter review

This chapter has provided an overview of the importance of good pronunciation while communicating in English and the educational background of Malaysian Chinese. The aim and objectives of the research, significance of the study, operational definition of terms used in this

research as well as the significance of this study were also stated. A detailed literature review is provided in Chapter 2.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Chapter overview

This research aims to look into the mispronunciation of /l/ and /r/ in English words among Malaysian Chinese undergraduates who are from different educational backgrounds. This chapter describes the educational background of Malaysian Chinese in primary and secondary education. Then, the pronunciation difficulties of different ethnicities, especially the Chinese community in Malaysia are discussed. Reviews of previous studies related to the mispronunciations made among Chinese from China and Malaysia are discussed. Then, the conceptual framework of this study is explained to provide an outline of this study.

2.1 Educational background of Malaysian Chinese

The education system in Malaysia can be divided into mainly three levels, which are primary, secondary and tertiary. Malaysian children are provided with fundamental education that consists of primary and secondary education which takes a total of 11 years (Lee, 1999). Primary education takes 6 years to complete whereas 5 years are allocated for secondary education, which can be further divided into lower and upper secondary education (Lee, 1999). The primary schools consist of national and national-type primary school where the former uses Malay and the latter uses the mother tongue such as Tamil and Mandarin as the medium of instruction (Ting, 2013). Since Malay is the national language of Malaysia, national-type schools are required to teach the language as a second language to the students (Ting, 2013). For secondary education, national secondary schools maintain the usage of Malay as the medium of instruction. On the other hand, independent secondary schools, which are mainly Chinese schools, conduct their classes in Mandarin while Malay is taught as a second language.

Although Chinese independent secondary schools have their own operating system, they are still required to report to the Ministry of Education (Rozita Ibrahim, 2007).

Therefore, Malaysian Chinese parents have various options in terms of types of schools to enroll their children in. Most Malaysian Chinese attend Chinese national-type schools and then further their secondary education in national schools (Ting, 2013). However, many Chinese families send their children to both Chinese national-type primary schools and Chinese independent secondary schools in fear that they might lose their identity and fluency in the mother tongue (Rozita Ibrahim, 2007). Parents believe that national-type schools can aid their children in learning their mother tongue (Kow, 2003). Contrastively, a minority of the Chinese community attended national schools for both primary and secondary education since it gives them a higher chance of furthering their studies in higher educational levels in Malaysia (Chiu, 2000). This has created a variety of Chinese who have distinct fluency in different languages.

Various studies have investigated the language choice among Malaysian Chinese from different educational backgrounds. According to Kow (2003), the medium of instruction has a significant effect on one's language choice. This means that an individual is more likely to feel comfortable in using the particular medium of instruction even after ending his or her education. A participant in Kow's study was noted to prefer the language used as the medium of instruction in his education days in conversations and this has caused the loss of the ability to speak his mother tongue. In a study by Siah, Ong, Tan, and Sim (2015), Mandarin was noted to be the most preferred language and was used more frequently among students who attended Chinese independent secondary schools. Lee and Ting (2016) also found that the Chinese educated students are more comfortable conversing in Mandarin with their fellow Chinese friends as well as the non-Chinese who are able to speak in Mandarin. In the same study, it was found that Malaysian Chinese students who are English or Malay educated preferred to use Malay in

conversations with their non-Chinese friends. Ting (2013) reported that students who attended national primary and secondary schools preferred Malay and English over the Mandarin language. Interestingly, 44% of the students in the study stated that their second-best spoken language is Malay. Ting also found that Chinese who had their primary education in Mandarin-medium schools and their secondary education in Malay-medium schools have similar proficiency in Malay compared to those from both Malay-medium primary and secondary schools. It was also noted that Mandarin was more preferred among this group of students who had different languages as their medium of instruction in their primary and secondary education.

The effect of the medium of education can also be seen in other aspects. Mohamad Jafre Zainol Abidin, Majid Pour-Mohammadi, and Ooi (2011) found that students from Chinese vernacular schools prefer to communicate and read materials in Mandarin. In a study by Gill (2007) that focusses on the Chinese community discussed that students from private and public universities have a huge contrast in terms of employment. Private sectors prefer students from private universities where English is the medium of education. This is very unfortunate as students from public universities, where Malay is the medium of instruction, have a low command of English and this has caused difficulties for them in job hunting.

2.2 Mispronunciation

2.2.1 Pronunciation issues of English among Malaysians

English is acquired as a second language by most of the Malaysians and the variety of English used in this country is known as Malaysian English (MalE). Surprisingly, Malaysians of various ethnicities have different difficulties in pronunciation while speaking in English. Ahmed states that undergraduates from different ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia possess difficulty in pronouncing English words (as cited in Nur Syahida Mohd Yazid & Zairil Azmir