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LANGUAGE CHOICES DURING TRANSACTIONAL ENCOUNTERS AT A PHOTO SHOP

Dr Su-Hie Ting
Kimberley Yih-Long Lau

[1,2]*Centre for Language Studies, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, 94300 Kota Samarahan*
Tel: +60-82-581 748, Fax: +60-82-581 781
[1]*ylkimlau@yahoo.com*
[2]*shting@cls.unimas.my, suhieting@yahoo.com.au*

This study investigated language use between shop attendants and customers at a photo shop. The objectives were to identify languages commonly used for interaction in a smaller provision shop and to examine the responses to the uncommon language choice including how inappropriate language choices are repaired. The case study was carried out at a photo shop in Sibu. The techniques used for data collection were participant observation, video recording and semi-structured interview. The participants involved were the shop attendants and customers. A total of 150 transactions were recorded. The results showed that Bahasa Melayu, Bazaar Malay, Foochow, Mandarin, Hokkien and English were the common languages used in the transactions. The two instances of inappropriate language choices by the shop attendants were due to a misjudgment of the customers' ethnicity. The responses were non-verbal expressions followed by utterances in a language of wider communication. The findings have implications on cross-cultural communication and English for Specific Purposes courses and are applicable to the transactions in the Asian context.

INTRODUCTION

In a multilingual speech community, many languages are used and each language uniquely fulfills certain roles and represents distinct identities; and all of them complement one another to serve "the complex communicative demands of a pluralistic society" (Sridhar, 1996, p. 53). Within that community, a speaker needs to learn to master the linguistic system that the community uses and develops strategies of language use by adjusting to their language choice and to each other in several ways. They need to possess the sociolinguistic competence, which is to use and interpret the language in ways appropriate to the context and purpose - not only to understand what is said literally but also to understand the meanings intended by the words and know how to respond appropriately (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998). Furthermore, speakers tend to speak differently in different domains and use certain languages in certain domains. The different language used in each domain is due to differing social contexts, which includes participants (status, affect, and frequency of contact), setting (private or public such as home, work and school) and the purpose of interaction (informative or social).

Research on language used in various domains provides an idea of what is considered appropriate in a particular multilingual setting. In Malaysia, Platt and Weber (1980) found that

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