

Morphological Differences Between Bahasa Melayu And English: Constraints In Students' Understanding

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English language is a big challenge in Malaysia. Students are still unable to master or even comprehend the language even after eleven years learning the language at the primary and secondary levels. A study conducted on three hundred and fifteen Form Two students show that one of the most obvious weaknesses of the students lies in the morphological aspect of the language. Affixes, adverbs, adjectives, plural forms are some of the categories that students find problem with. Findings of the study show that over 60% of the mistakes detected can be categorized as morphological. This can be attributed to the different morphological structures between Bahasa Melayu and English, for example the *-ly* suffix for adverbs, superlative form for adjectives, *-s*, *-es* markers for plurality and reflexive pronoun, and these are some of the constraints the students face in learning the English language. This paper will present a comparative linguistic analysis on the morphological structures of the two languages.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia the teaching of English starts early, as early as kindergarten. Hence, Malaysian children would have been introduced to the English language as early as four or five years old. They would then continue to learn English until they reach form five (17 years old). Malaysia has accorded English as a second language status as stated in Article 152 and given due attention. Nevertheless, after 11 continuous years of learning English the result is less than satisfactory

Currently, a literature component has been added in the teaching of English with the aim to make the subject more interesting. In addition, various activities are held to promote the use of English for example, choral speaking, drama competition, debate and essay writing. With various activities conducted and teaching methodologies explored the level of proficiency of the students, especially those in the rural areas has yet to improve. The debate on students' inability to grasp the English language even after 11 years of formal continues to be a hot topic among educationists. Inability to use English has even been said to be the reason of the high level of unemployment among graduates. Drastic measures have been taken by the authority and among them is changing the medium of instruction from Bahasa Melayu to English in teaching science and mathematics. The question remains whether the change in policy will somehow help to improve the level of English among students (primary and secondary).

This paper is based on a research conducted in 3 schools in Johor. It aims to discover the reasons that could be attributed to the inability of students to grasp the English language. As a first step, English and Malay structures will be compared to ascertain whether structural differences between the two languages that leads to the poor command of the English language. This will be followed by an analysis of the data gathered.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

There are numerous studies on the state of English among students in Malaysia. Studies by Hamidah, Melor and Nor Zaini (2002), Noreiny Maarof et.al (2003) and Hazita Azman (2006) indicate that the students' weakness in English can be attributed to attitude, geographical location and ethnic. There have also been studies that focus on structural differences between the Malay and English language. It has been shown that the structural differences between the two languages interferes in the learning of English grammar and hence the acquisition of English as a second language. Marlyna, Khazriyati and Tan Kim Hua (2005) looked at the occurrence of mistakes in 'subject-verb agreement' (SVA) and copula 'be'. In subject-verb agreement, problems occurred when the verb has to be inflected in the present tense to agree with the subject. The findings of the research show that 46.83% are mistakes on subject-verb agreement. The researchers contend that this is due to the fact that subject-verb agreement is not required in the Malay language.

There have also been numerous researches on the problems faced in the teaching and learning of English in schools which offer solutions to the problem but the standard of English continues to decline. Environment and pressures from examination seem to make students lost their focus. This paper aims to identify and offer explanations in relation to the students' inability to acquire English by specifically focusing on the morphological aspect of English.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BAHASA MELAYU AND ENGLISH

A practical approach in dealing with the problem of students' inability to acquire English is to first look at the cause. This paper will begin by looking at the historical background of English and the Malay language.

Asmah (1985) says that we need to look at the people or speakers of the Malay language if we are to know the historical background of the language (Malay). There are various opinions as to the origin of the Malays.

The most prominent account is one that contends the Malays come from Central Asia. This is based on the artifacts found in caves in Perak. In addition there is also evidence of similarities in vocabularies from cognates that have similarities in Malay, Iban, Semambuk, Paittan languages. These similarities show that the Malays travel through sea and land and decided to reside in Peninsula Malaysia while other ethnic groups continue their journey to other places.

In terms of classification, Malay is under the umbrella of Austronesian languages. Austronesian languages are divided into four groups and they are Indonesian, Malanesian, Austronesian and Polynesian with Indonesian language forming the biggest group. Its speakers cover a wide area from Famosa in the north to Philippines islands and Maluku in the east, Timor Timor in the south and Madagascar in the west. Malay language is grouped in this category. The Indonesia family group has the most number of languages with Malay as the most prolific in terms of development. Malay is accorded national language status in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, the Malay language is the language of instruction in education even at tertiary level and this has directly become the catalyst to the development of the Malay language.

English, on the other hand, is classified in the Germanic language from the Indo-European group. The early history of Germanic languages is based on the reconstruction of Proto-Germanic which has evolved into Jerman, English, Dutch, Afrikaan, Yiddish and Scandinavian languages. English was influenced by two waves, first by Germanic language of the Scandinavian descent which occupied various parts of Britain in the 8th and 9th centuries. This was later followed by the Normans in the 11th century.

The Jermanic people occupied native speakers of Celt in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland. The language of the invaders helped form what is later known as Old English. English was also heavily influenced by Norse, language of the Vikings in the east.

The brief historical background clearly shows that the two languages, English and Malay, are not connected and do not come from the same cognate. Therefore, there are a lot of structural differences that have been identified, especially from morphological aspect. These structural differences have formed the main constraints in the inability of Malaysian students to acquire English. This paper will prove the claim based on the findings of aresearch conducted.

SOCIAL SURROUNDING AND THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH

This research was conducted in three schools in Johor. A total of 315 students from urban, sub-urban and rural schools were involved. The schools involved are Sekolah Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra (STARP) an urban school, Sekolah Menengah Senai (Senai) categorized as sub-urban school and Sekolah Sultan Alaudin (SSA) as rural school. All the students are in Form Two and hence they would have had seven years of learning English. The gender and race distribution are shown in the tables below:

Table 1: Gender

	Senai	STARP	SSA
Male	53.5	39.1	51.9
Female	46.5	60.9	48.1

There are more male students compared to female students in Senai and SSA while female students form the overwhelming majority in STARP. Meanwhile, in terms of race

distribution an interesting pattern emerged. In Senai, the total number of Malay and Chinese students are almost the same with 41.4% and 43.4% respectively and Indians make up the remaining 14.1%. In STARP, 60.9% are Malay, 30.0% are Chinese and 9.1% are Indians. In SSA, 100% of the students are Malays as SSA is situated in FELDA settlement area where almost 100% of its settlers are Malays. Below is the table on race composition of the respondents:

Table 2: Race composition

	Senai	STARP	SSA
Malay	41.4	60.9	100.0
Chinese	43.4	30.0	0
Indian	14.1	9.1	0
Others	1.0	0	0

In terms of family income, majority of the respondents come from families with family income less than RM1000.00. 83% of the students in SSA are categorized in the low-income families¹. This is followed by Senai with 63.3% and STARP 52.8%. If family income is said to be one of the contributing factors in providing a conducive learning environment then a glance at their UPSR results would indicate that. Based on their 2004 UPSR results, 66% students from Senai, 50% students from STARP and 70% students from SSA are considered weak in English. This is further strengthened from the fact that less than 25% attended tuition classes because of the unavailability of such services or their parents could not afford to send them to one. Combination of factors such as poverty, unavailability of tuition services, social environment, interest and attitude contribute to the students' inability to acquire English². To further determine the level of the students' weaknesses in English, two sets of Cloze Test were conducted with the 315 respondents. The aim of the test is to measure and determine whether structural differences between Malay and English contribute to the weaknesses and inability to acquire English.

MORPHOLOGY AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Every language has its own unique structures. Beginning with the sound system to meaning (semantics), they form the foundation of a language. Acquiring a language implies acquiring all those structures. This paper aims to prove the claim that languages from different family groups have different language structures and this in turn, influenced the acquisition of the other language.

MALAY AND ENGLISH MORPHOLOGY

Morphology is an area that studies structures, forms and categorizations of words. Discussions on Malay and English morphology will specifically touch on affixes, preposition, adverbs and superlatives. Both languages have their own affixes, preposition, adverbs and superlatives forms. We shall start with affixes. Malay has pre-fixes, suffixes, circumfixes and infixes while in English pre-fixes and suffixes are more prominent. The difference between Malay and English affixes is English affixes can indicate or produce

negative meanings, for example *im-*, *dis-*, *mal-* and *ir-*. These affixes transformed the positive meanings into negative. We have *possible* to *impossible* or *obedient* to *disobedient*. This phenomenon does not exist in Malay. Analysis of the test conducted will be given below to show the basis of the contention (different language structures influenced the acquisition of the other language).

Affixes

- C1. Q3. A. dispossible
 B. impossible
 C. unpossible
 D. possible

- C2.Q2. A. care
 B. careful
 C. carelessness
 D. careless

- C2.Q5. A. disobedient
 B. obedient
 C. unobedient
 D. inobedient

Cloze Test/ Question number	Wrong (W) / Right (R)	Senai%	STARP%	SSA%
C1/ Q3	W	47.0	45.9	40.0
	R	53.0	54.1	60.0
C2/ Q2	W	55.0	44.0	58.0
	R	45.0	56.0	42.0
C2/ Q5	W	62.0	61.5	70.6
	R	38.0	38.5	29.4

Three items to test affixes were included in Cloze Test 1 & 2 (question 3 in cloze test 1 and questions 2 & 5 in cloze test 2). All three items test students' understanding of the negative meanings in affixes, however, they were tested with different forms of negative affixes. The root word for question 3 is *possible*, root word for question 2 is *care* and root word for question 5 is *obedient*. Findings from the research show that the percentage for students who have given the right answer is between 53% to 60% for all three schools. For question 2, the percentage for getting the right answer is somewhat high too, between 42% to 56% for all three schools. However, for question 5 cloze test 2 the percentage for students getting the right answer is rather low, between 39.4% to 38.5%. The question is why are the percentage levels for getting the right answer are different for all three questions when they all tested the same aspect, namely the negative meanings in affixes? There are two possible explanations for these occurrences. Firstly, the words *impossible* and *careless* are words familiar to the students, words that they have read before and may be even have used in their writings compared to the word *disobedient*. The second

explanation is students may have only acquired one or two forms of affixes with negative meanings like *im-* and *-less*. There is also the possibility that students do not know the meaning of the word *obedient* and hence would not be able to process the meaning of *disobedient*.

Prepositions

Prepositions exist in both Malay and English. However, its usage may sometimes influence by culture. The different perceptions on preposition between Malay and English speakers are shown below:

- C1. Q1.
- A. at
 - B. in
 - C. on
 - D. of

Analysis of students' answers for all three schools:

Cloze/ Qs No	Wrong (W)/ Right (R)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
C1/Q1 (preposition)	W	68.0	71.0	73.5
	R	32.0	29.0	26.5

There is only one question on preposition in the cloze test. Prepositions might not be given a top priority in teaching with the assumption that prepositions are easy to understand. However, findings from our research indicate otherwise. The percentage of students who gave the right answer is only between 26.5% to 32%. This indicates that majority of students in all three schools do not understand and hence, are unable to identify its correct usage. The question on preposition is as follows:

*They can be long and thin **in** shape or heavy and stout looking.*

The preposition required in the above sentence is *in* but more than 70% of the students gave *of* as the answer. The students might have translated literally all the options given into Malay (for majority of the students their 1st language is Malay) and decided against *in*. The preposition *in* has two possible equivalents in Malay, namely, “dalam” or “di dalam”. According to Imran Ho (2000) preposition *dalam* is conceptualized in a 3-dimensional container whereas *in* can be conceptualized in 2-dimensional situation and 3-dimensional container as shown in examples below:

1. The shirt is in the cupboard.
2. Snakes in the desert.
3. They live in Pahang.

The above sentences indicate that the prepositions *in/dalam* are conceptualized differently in Malay and English. Previous understanding that *in* is the equivalent of

dalam in Malay has to be re-examined. Students have to be made aware of various usage and functions of English prepositions to make them better users of the language.

Plural inflections - ‘s’ and ‘es’

Inflections are affixes added to a root word to indicate a grammatical meaning. In English, *-s* is added to *book – books* to indicate plurality, *-ed* as in *walked* or *talked* to indicate past tense. Inflection, however, does not exist in Austronesian languages, including Malay. The absence of inflection clearly influenced students’ acquisition of English. Below are examples on inflection taken from the cloze test:

- C1. Q6. A. ostrich
 B. ostrichs
 C. ostriches
 D. ostrichies
- C2. Q1. A. accident
 B. accidents
 C. accidentes
 D. accidenties

Cloze/ Qs No	Wrong (W)/ Right (R)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
C1/Q6	W	74	73	75
	R	26	27	25
C2/Q1	W	34	42	36
	R	66	78	64

The percentage for wrong answer for question 6 is more than 70% which is rather high because this question involves the plural inflection *-es*. In English there are three markers to indicate plurality - *-s*, *-es* and *-ies*. Plural inflection becomes more complicated when it is influenced by phonological rules. For words ending with consonant /h/, its plural form is inflected with *-es*, for example *ostrich – ostriches*. However, this does not occur with words that end with /t/ as in *accident – accidents*. Therefore, students have to learn the phonological rules together with plural inflection and this will indirectly add to the difficulties that students face in learning English.

In question 1, cloze test 2, the percentage for right answer is higher because the plural marker tested is the conventional plural marker – ‘s’. Compared with bahasa Melayu, plurality is indicated by cardinal and ordinal words. Some examples of Malay cardinal words are *semua*, *sebahagian* and *tiap* while ordinal words are *kedua*, *ketiga*, *keempat* and many others (Asmah 1986). Plurality can also be indicated by the pre-fix *ber-* to words of measurement, which then undergo reduplication process, for example – *berjam-jam*, *berhari-hari*, *berbulan-bulan* and many others. It is therefore clear that Malay language and English have different forms to indicate plurality which may lead to problems in students’ understanding.

Adverbs

Adverbs are easily identified in English with the *-ly* marker as the clue. It is therefore assumed that students would not face any difficulty but that is not the case as illustrated below:

- C1. Q9. A. swift
 B. swifts
 C. swiftly
 D. swiftless

- C2. Q8. A. loudly
 B. louder
 C. loud
 D. loudest

Cloze Test/ Qs No	Wrong (W)/ Right (R)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
C1/Q9 (adverb)	W	56	47	61
	R	44	53	39
C 2 / Q8 (adverb)	W	62	46	61
	R	38	54	39

There are two questions (question 9 in Cloze Test 1 and question 8 in Cloze Test 2) on adverbs in the cloze tests. For both questions, the percentages for wrong answers are more than 55% except for STARP which scored 47% and 46% for questions 9 and 8 respectively. The low percentage for right answer could be attributed to the fact that there is no category for adverb. Another possible explanation is the level of English proficiency and understanding of the students. Majority of the students might not even know the meaning of the words *swift* and *loud*. It is therefore rather difficult for them to apply the *-ly* marker for adverbs if they do not know the meaning of those words.

Superlatives

There are two questions on superlatives in the cloze tests (question 10 in both Cloze Test 1 & 2). There are two forms of superlatives, namely *-est* and *the most* for adjectives with three syllables or more. The following are questions on superlatives:

- C1. Q10. A. slower
 B. slow
 C. slowly
 D. slowest

- C2. Q10. A. sad
 B. sadder
 C. sadly
 D. saddest

Cloze/ Qs No	Wrong (W)/ Right (R)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
C1/Q10 (superlative)	W	68	63	74
	R	32	34	26
C2/Q10 (superlative)	W	65	66	85
	R	35	34	15

The superlative form tested in both question is *-est*. However, the students' performance is less than satisfactory as the percentage for wrong answers (for both questions) exceeds 60%. The students have been taught the form and formula to indicate superlative but they have not acquired it. A possible explanation is the different forms of superlative between Malay language and English. In Malay, superlative is indicated by words to indicate strength like *amat*, *sangat* and *paling* while English superlatives as mentioned above are signaled by *-est* and *the most*. These different structural forms might be the basis for students' misunderstanding.

CONCLUSION

A detailed examination on structural differences between the Malay language and English has been shown to be one of the major factors in students' inability to grasp the English language as reflected in the results of the cloze tests conducted. Various efforts have been put into the plan to improve students' ability or command of the English language, which usually concentrate on pedagogy. Perhaps it is timely now to suggest that English teachers should be exposed to linguistic knowledge to better equip them in teaching the language. In addition, attention should also be given to conducive and comfortable learning environment to make learning English more fun and exciting, which in turn make learning more meaningful. All these factors beg the attention of all parties involved in the effort or drive to improve students' acquisition of the English language.

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¹Even though Malaysia has fixed income of RM500.00 as the demarcation line for hardcore poor, RM1000.00 is still considered poor for families with a few school-going children.

² Macro level factors will not be discussed in this paper. Please refer to full report of research project SK001/2006 English as a Second Language: Problems and Solutions.