

The Use of English Among Sixth-Form Students In Malaysia

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In order to understand fully the use of English among sixth-formers, it is necessary to look briefly at the language situation in Malaysia. Official government policy designates it as a 'strong second language'.¹ However, at present, there is a lot of controversy regarding the definition of the term and its use as a label for the status of English in this country. Marckwardt (1978) sees the term 'English as a second language' as referring to a situation where 'English not only supplements the native language, but in a sense is virtually necessary to conduct the affairs of the country' (Marckwardt, 1978:12). Lim (1975) concurs with this view to some extent and adds that 'a second language is used for social intercourse within the country, and is often not only taught as a subject but is a medium of instruction as well' (Lim, 1975:111). Platt and Weber (1980), on the other hand, define a second language as one which is used in everyday communication, even if only in a limited number of sub-domains.

Looking at these definitions and the role of English in this country, it would be an oversimplification to label it as a second language. It is true that English is no longer a medium of instruction in schools, but it is still used to a large extent for communication within the country. It figures largely in commerce and entertainment, and this can be verified by the fact that many television and radio programmes are still in English. Code-switching from Bahasa Malaysia (BM) or some other local language to English is common in Malaysia and among the English educated, English is widely used in the course of daily activities.

In the Malaysian education system, English has a difficult role to play. It is taught as a subject in the school curriculum from Primary 1 to Secondary 5, but it is not necessary for students to obtain a pass in it. This means that even if students fail the English paper, they can still get through two major examinations held by the Ministry of Education, that is, The Lower Certificate of Education Examination (held in Secondary 3) and the Malaysian Certificate of Education Examination (held in Secondary 5). English Language does not feature as a subject in the sixth-form curriculum.

However, at tertiary level students need to be proficient in English in order to gain access to academic texts and research materials, the majority of which are in English. This is especially true of disciplines like Law and the Sciences. In the University of Malaya, English is a compulsory subject in a number of faculties, for instance, the Faculties of Law, Science and Engineering. It is an important examination subject, and a failure in the English paper can affect the overall examination results of the student. He may be asked to repeat his year of study, or even to leave the faculty.

At present, the majority of students entering tertiary institutions, both locally and overseas, exhibit a serious lack of proficiency in English. Because of this, many of them are unable to cope with their new study situations.² The blame

for this has been laid at many doors, such as bad teaching materials, over-worked teaching staff, and the education system in general.³ Wherever the blame lies, we should now turn our attention to solving the language problem at hand. As the former Director General of Education, Tan Sri Murad Md. Noor has said, 'We have achieved our target of making BM the national language. We have to turn our attention now to English, to bring it up to its status as a strong second language. . . This is important if Malaysia is to keep abreast of scientific and technological development in the world, and participate meaningfully in international trade and commerce'⁴

It was in an effort to contribute towards this objective that a study was undertaken to examine the use of English among students in the sixth-form.⁵ Questionnaires were administered to about 300 sixth-form students in two secondary schools in Selangor, the Anglo-Chinese School and the High School, both located in Kelang, Selangor. The sample comprised male and female students of the three major races in Malaysia (Malays, Chinese and Indians) from both the Arts and the Science streams. Socio-economic status (SES) based on the parents' occupation and income, was also considered as a variable.⁶ (See Appendix 1)

The questionnaires sought information on the following: the people to whom the students spoke English, the contexts in which it was spoken and their reasons for speaking in English. Six domains of language use were examined, viz. family, friendship, education, entertainment, mass media and transactions.⁷ The choice of domains was determined by the fact that most of the language-centred activities of the students were carried out in these areas.

In the family and friendship domains, research was aimed at examining the students' use of English with their parents, siblings, other relatives and friends when discussing social issues such as education, as well as their personal problems. In the domains of entertainment and mass media, the focus was on the students' use of English while watching television, listening to the radio, and reading written material. The use of English for educational activities such as reading text-books and reference books, and following lessons in the classroom were some of the sub-domains examined in the area of education. In the field of transactions, the use of English in three areas of interaction was studied: talking to bus-conductors and sales assistants, talking to officials, for example, in government offices and banks, and correspondence for business purposes. Below are some of the findings of the study.

The findings indicate that English is hardly used by the sixth-formers in their daily activities.⁸ For instance, more than 75% of the students use languages other than English when talking to their parents (the family domain). English is used to a greater extent when talking to siblings and friends but there again the majority (about 65%) use languages other than English. Thus it is obvious that even in peer communication other languages predominate. Socio-economic status is a significant variable in both domains, and students in the high SES tend to make greater use of English. For example, when talking to friends on social topics, 68% of the students in the high SES said they used English more than other languages, compared to 33.3% from the middle socio-economic group, and 13.5% from the low socio-economic group.

The distribution of responses was similar in the domains of transactions

and education. The majority of the students use languages other than English for most of the activities here. These include activities like talking to bus-conductors and sales assistants, where about 80% of the students use another language most of the time. In the second domain, education, about 75% of the students said they carried out most of their educational activities, such as reading text-books and reference books and taking notes, entirely or mainly in another language. This is not surprising since BM is the medium of instruction in most of the educational institutions, and the lingua franca of the nation. But what is noticeable in these two domains is that SES is not a very significant variable. Compared to the other four domains, the relationship between SES and the distribution of responses is less significant.

The limited use the students made of English occurred mainly in the domains of entertainment and mass media. For instance, more than 58% of the students indicated that they mainly watch English television programmes. Another 30% indicated that they watch English programmes as much as they watch programmes in other languages. This is probably because at the time the questionnaires were administered (September, 1983), more than 75% of the television programmes were in English. About 25 per cent of the students mentioned that they read mainly English newspapers, 16% said they read English magazines and another 25% indicated that they read English newspapers and magazines as frequently as they read them in other languages. These figures are probably explained by the fact that in September 1983, there were (and still are) three national dailies enjoying a wide circulation, namely, the *New Straits Times*, *The Malay Mail* and *The Star*. Many of the popular magazines, such as the *Reader's Digest*, *Time* and *Asiaweek*, are also published in English.

However, reading for entertainment and general knowledge is mainly carried out in other languages. Slightly more than 50% of the students in the sample (52%) use a language other than English for these purposes. This is probably because an increasing amount of reading material is published in the National Language. SES is not related to the distribution of responses for watching television and listening to the radio. This is probably because both these activities have become an essential part of the daily life of most Malaysians, regardless of their socio-economic standing. However, in the other sub-domains of entertainment and mass media, such as the reading of fiction and non-fiction, SES is significant; the students belonging to the high SES tend to make greater use of English than those in the middle and low SES.

The extent of use of the language varies according to the domain of use and the verbal and speech repertoire of the people the students communicated with. For instance, the students used more English when talking to their peers rather than to their parents, their headmasters rather than to their teachers, and to sales assistants in departmental stores and supermarkets rather than to those in markets and provision stores. The variables of sex and stream of education do not appear to affect the distribution of responses.

The questionnaire contained a section which required the students to give their opinion regarding the importance of the four language skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing. An interesting phenomenon was observed here. The importance the students ascribed to these skills was far greater than their actual use of them. For example, 8.4% of the students reported

that they followed lessons either entirely or mainly in English, compared to 71% who did so in other languages. For the vast majority the other language would be Bahasa Malaysia. Yet, 58% of the students thought that it was important to acquire the listening skill to enable them to follow lessons in the classroom.

This mismatch between students' opinion of the importance of the four language skills and their actual use could have several implications. One of these is that the relatively limited use of English by the students could be a result of their lack of proficiency in the language, rather than their dislike of the language. Another implication is that the students seem to be aware of the importance of the skills, but are not acting in a manner in keeping with this awareness as far as the use of the language is concerned. Is lack of proficiency the only reason for this, or are there other reasons? If the students lack proficiency, is it because of their apathy? If so, why are they apathetic, and if not, what are the other reasons? These questions are a logical outcome of the above findings, and further investigation in this area is required.

There was also a section in the questionnaire which sought to find out why students wanted to study English. Out of the the 30 categories listed, about 44% of the students indicated that the most important reason for their studying English is that "it is an international language" (See Appendix II). The other reasons that figured prominently were: (a) its importance in the educational field, especially its function in facilitating more research, (b) its function as a gateway to a wider store of knowledge; and (a) its function in providing access to more entertainment.

The students were also asked to indicate the kind of teaching approach they preferred. They were given three alternatives to choose from, namely; (a) a method which concentrates mainly on the reading and writing skills; (b) a method which concentrates mainly on the listening and speaking skills; and (c) a method which gives equal importance to all four language skills.

About 84% of the students chose alternative (c). In addition to these alternatives, the students were given a list of possible components which could go into the design of an English language course for sixth-form students (see Appendix III). They were asked to rank them on a five-point scale, that is, (1) Very important, (2) Important, (3) Quite important, (4) Not very important and (5) Not important at all. The most important component appeared to be 'Practice in speaking English which is appropriate to (the students') study and job situations' - 86% of the students described this as being 'Important/very important'. This was closely followed by 'Faster reading and understanding' (77%), 'Building control of grammar in spoken and written exercises' (76%). The least important was 'Practice in creative writing' (33.7%).

The students' responses in this section, together with their choice of teaching method referred to earlier, indicate that they are not interested in a highly specialized course in English. Moreover, most of the reasons they selected for wanting to study English are functional in nature. The majority of students indicated that they wanted to study English because it was an international language. Many also indicated that they were interested in learning the language because of its usefulness for further studies and research work, both locally and overseas. Their preference for a functional approach to the

language in all likelihood stems from the belief that such an approach would enable them to operate in a variety of environments.

Implications for Language Teaching

In order for an English language course to be effective, it is important for the learner and the teacher to know the needs of the learner, his aspirations, the place of English in his long-term plans, and his ideas on language teaching, to name a few. The findings of the study indicate that English is not used extensively in the domains of family, friendship, education, mass media, transactions and entertainment. English is, however, used in a few sub-domains like watching television and reading for entertainment. However, the majority of the students feel that most of the skills necessary for the proper and correct use of English in situations pertaining to their daily life are important, especially as regards their education and employment. When education is mentioned as being one of the reasons for studying English, students probably have in mind tertiary education, either within or outside the country, as there seems to be little academic need for English in the sixth-form.

The majority of the students have also indicated that they prefer an integrated-skills approach, where there is equal emphasis on listening, reading, speaking and writing, although there is relatively little use of the last-mentioned skill. They want emphasis on grammar, pronunciation, faster reading and understanding, and Spoken English which is appropriate for future job/study situations.

The information obtained from the questionnaires suggests the following:

- (i) Students appear to have the motivation to study English. This is attested to by the fact that they have accorded a high degree of importance to the various English language skills mentioned in the questionnaire.
- (ii) An English language course, if it is implemented, should be aimed not at catering for their current needs, but more for their future aspirations. As mentioned earlier, they do not seem to need English to cope with their daily activities. Therefore, a proper needs analysis has to be carried out and the courses tailored accordingly.
- (iii) The best approach would probably be one which is directed towards equipping the students with the basic skills that they would require in post-school situations. These can be divided into two broad categories, namely, job situations and tertiary education. No matter which category the student falls into, he would need to know and use the language skills necessary for special purposes, such as conducting business transactions, or using English for study purposes/situations. Specific skills to cope with these situations are already being taught by commercial and tertiary institutions. For instance, the University of Malaya has designed the University of Malaya English for Special Purposes Project (UMESPP) which is being used to help students acquire reading skills for academic purposes. Therefore, at the sixth-form level, it is important to acquaint the students with these skills at the introductory level. The emphasis should be on preparing them to enter an English for Special Purposes (ESP) course. This can be done by reinforcing their general proficiency in the English language. This will also help those sixth-formers who go directly

into the employment market and those who do not have the opportunity to follow an ESP course. It must be remembered that the vast majority of sixth-formers do not enter tertiary institutions, and many of them cannot afford the high cost of language courses offered by commercial institutions.

- (iv) An English language course in the sixth-form should also take into account the fact that students will have little opportunity to practise the skills that are learnt in the classroom outside this physical domain. As mentioned earlier, BM is the lingua franca of this country, and English is seldom used by the vast majority of Malaysians in their daily activities. Since there is no reason to think that this situation will change in the near future, educators will have to work on the assumption that students are not likely to get the opportunity to practise the language skills taught in the classroom in situations in the outside world.

The standard of English in the tertiary institutions indicates that students need to be taught English at pre-University level. This is necessary to ensure that students get as much benefit as possible from the courses currently being offered in the universities. The teaching of English in the sixth-form classes would ensure continuity of instruction, thus bridging the gap between school and the tertiary institutions. Even if students do not go on to pursue tertiary education, a general proficiency course in English would still be of practical use in the employment market, especially in the private sector.

This research into the use of English by sixth-form students does have many limitations, mainly in the areas of sampling and scope. Ideally, the administration of the questionnaires should have been followed up with interviews and observations of students' language activities in order to validate the findings, but time and finance did not permit this. Also, students following a private course of study were omitted from the sample, thus reducing the comprehensiveness of the study. The sample itself was rather small, as only 300 students were considered.

Despite these limitations, the study does reveal certain tendencies in the use of English by students in the sixth-form, and it can be used as a spring board for more comprehensive and in-depth studies. The findings indicate that the students are interested in an English language course, and that they do have certain ideas about the objectives and components of such a course. The study also indicates that there is a need to explore more extensively the case for establishing an English language course in the sixth-form.

¹The Third Malaysia Plan, 1976-1980.

²According to Dato' Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who was Minister of Education in Malaysia at the time of the report, there have been complaints from the Ministers of Education in Australia and New Zealand that most Malaysian students in these countries are unable to derive maximum value from their studies because of poor command of English (*New Straits Times*, 23 July 1985).

According to the *New Straits Times* education columnist, John Pillai, 'More than 56,000 Malaysian students are pursuing various courses overseas. Quite a number in English-speaking countries are having problems because they are not proficient in the language. In Malaysia, the standard of English in schools, colleges and universities leaves much to be desired' (*New Straits Times* 11 May 1985).

³'English Sid: There's Hope for Our Students,' *Star*, October 1985.

⁴'Why the Emphasis on English Again,' *Star*, 31 October 1985.

⁵Sargunan, Rajeswary (1984); *Language Use in English Among Sixth-form Students in Two Secondary Schools in Selangor*, Faculty of Education, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur (A practicum report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education).

⁶For purposes of this survey the criteria of placement adopted was that used by Dr (Mrs) Sarjit Singh (1973).

⁷For purposes of this survey Platt and Weber's definition of domain was used: 'a class of related speech situations in which a certain combination of speech varieties is used' (Platt and Weber 1980:116).

⁸All statistics mentioned in this article are from the practicum report mentioned above in Note 5

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APPENDIX I

Description of the sample

The sample consisted of all students in seven lower-sixth form classes in two schools in Kelang, that is, the Anglo-Chinese School, and the High School, Kelang. There were altogether 316 students in both schools, out of which only 306 students responded. Six of the questionnaires were not filled in correctly. Therefore, only 300 questionnaires were actually analysed.

Distribution of Sample According to Race, Sex, Course and SES

Sex, Course & SES	Race	Malays n = 83	Chinese n = 167	Indians n = 50	Total No. of students in sample = 300 (100%)
		Males n = 144 (100%)	37 (25.7%)	76 (52.8%)	31 (21.5%)
Sex	Females n = 156 (100%)	46 (29.5%)	91 (58.3%)	19 (12.2%)	156 (52.0%)
	Arts n = 178 (100%)	79 (44.4%)	75 (42.1%)	24 (13.5%)	178 (59.7%)
Course	Science n = 121 (100%)	4 (3.3%)	91 (75.2%)	26 (21.5%)	121 (40.0%)
	High n = 33 (100%)	7 (21.2%)	19 (57.6%)	7 (21.2%)	33 (11.0%)
SES	Middle n = 111 (100%)	21 (18.9%)	59 (53.2%)	31 (27.9%)	111 (37.0)
	Low n = 156 (100%)	55 (35.3%)	89 (57.0%)	12 (7.7%)	150 (52.0%)

Educational background of students

By the time the students reach the Lower Sixth they would have experienced at least 11 years of schooling under the Malaysian education system. They would also have sat for two major national examinations conducted by the Ministry of Education, that is, the Sijil Rendah Pelajaran (SRP) and the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), both of which seek to eliminate those who do not show potential for academic studies.

In 1970, BM was introduced as a medium of instruction in all primary schools which had formerly used English as a medium of instruction. The students in the sample, being in the Lower Sixth in 1983, would have been part of this new system of education. The statistics indicate that all Malay students underwent their primary education in BM. Only a very small percentage of Indians (10%) had their primary education in the vernacular. The Chinese, however, exhibit a dramatic difference — more than half the students in the sample (58.7%) had their primary education in the vernacular.

All the students in the sample were exposed to Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of instruction in the secondary school.

*Table 4. 1d: Language Used/Spoken Prior to Entering School
Distribution of Sample by Race*

Language Race	Malay	English	Tamil	Chinese	Others
Malays N = 83 (100%)	83 (100%)	5 (6.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Indians N = 50 (100%)	20 (40.0%)	31 (62.0%)	41 (82.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Chinese N = 167 (100%)	6 (3.6%)	16 (9.6%)	0 (0.0%)	163 (97.6%)	0 (0.0%)

APPENDIX II

The students' reasons for studying English, were organized into 30 categories as follows.

- 1 General communication with others.
- 2 Communication with people of other races in the country
- 3 Communication with people internationally
- 4 Travel anywhere, anytime.
- 5 Correspondence
- 6 Important for further studies.
- 7 Most reference books are in English
- 8 More maturity in education.
9. Talk/interact better in class.
10. Most teachers are still more fluent in English.
- 11 It is in the syllabus
12. To pass examinations.

13. To obtain a better job
14. To cope better at work.
15. Important for my future.
16. To read newspapers and magazines.
17. To widen my knowledge.
18. Important for Science and Technology
19. To keep up with developments in the world.
20. English is interesting.
21. I like to learn/improve my English.
22. To know another language.
23. It is easy to learn.
24. It is a familiar language
25. It is an international language.
26. It is a standard language.
27. It is a second language
28. Users reflect a higher status
29. Widely used language.
30. Facilitates entertainment

The above categorization has no precedent, and was arrived at after studying the responses of all the subjects.

APPENDIX III

The Degree of Importance Attached to Some Possible Components of an English Language Course: Frequency Distributions

Possible Components of an English Language Course	Degree of Importance					
	Very important	Important	Quite important	Not very important	Not important at all	No response
i Training in listening and understanding, for example, lectures/lessons	85 (28.3%)	113 (37.7%)	78 (26.0%)	21 (7.0%)	2 (0.7%)	1 (0.3%)
ii Training in note-taking, for example, lectures/lessons	31 (10.3%)	117 (39.0%)	105 (35.0%)	40 (13.3%)	7 (2.3%)	
iii Building your general non-technical English vocabulary (that is, the vocabulary that is useful in many situations outside the area you are specializing in)	74 (24.7%)	111 (37.0%)	82 (27.3%)	29 (9.7%)	3 (1.0%)	1 (0.3%)
iv Building your technical English vocabulary (for example, the special vocabulary of geography, economics, etc.)	5 (18.3%)	119 (39.7%)	82 (27.3%)	38 (12.7%)	4 (1.3%)	2 (0.7%)

Possible Components of an English Language Course	Degree of Importance					No response
	Very important	Important	Quite important	Not very important	Not important at all	
v. Building your control of English grammar in spoken and written exercises	108 (36.0%)	122 (40.7%)	52 (17.3%)	16 (5.3%)	2 (0.7%)	
vi. Practice in the pronunciation of English	106 (35.3%)	124 (41.3%)	60 (20.0%)	9 (3.0%)	1 (0.3%)	
vii. Practice in speaking English which is appropriate to your study and future job	136 (45.3%)	123 (41.0%)	36 (12.0%)	5 (1.7%)		
viii. Practice in speaking English in a social situation, for example, with family and friends	57 (19.0%)	114 (38.0%)	89 (29.7%)	36 (12.0%)	4 (1.3%)	
ix. Faster reading and understanding	115 (38.3%)	119 (39.7%)	52 (17.3%)	13 (4.3%)	1 (0.3%)	
x. Building your study in reading skills, that is, reading in different ways for different purposes, for example, finding information you need in your text-books or reference books	88 (29.3%)	116 (38.7%)	73 (24.3%)	21 (7.0%)	2 (0.7%)	
xi. Note-taking from your text-books or reference books	34 (11.3%)	125 (41.7%)	93 (31.0%)	43 (14.3%)	5 (1.7%)	
xii. Practice in following and understanding the relationships between ideas in connected sentences and paragraphs	69 (23.0%)	124 (41.3%)	77 (25.7%)	27 (9.0%)	21 (0.3%)	2 (0.7%)
xiii. Practice in formal writing, for example, reports and official correspondence	81 (27.0%)	102 (34.0%)	82 (27.3%)	31 (10.3%)	4 (1.3%)	
xiv. Practice in writing letters for personal and social needs	57 (19.0%)	109 (36.3%)	84 (28.0%)	44 (14.7%)	6 (2.0%)	
xv. Practice in creative writing, for example, short stories and poems	33 (11.0%)	68 (22.7%)	77 (25.7%)	75 (25.0%)	44 (14.7%)	3 (1.0%)