

Learning English in a Third Space? Malay Students in an English-Speaking University in Malaysia

Ridwan Wahid* and Zahariah Pilus

¹Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that the use of English among Malays is constrained by the intertwining of ethnic identity, religion and native language. This study investigated the possibility of a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) for a group of Malay-speaking English majors in an English-medium university in Malaysia. Using Norton's (2013) identity approach to second language acquisition, it found that the participants' identities as ethnic Malays and Malay-English speaking bilingual were often conflicted as the broader community was disinclined to use English. Despite high motivation levels, dominance of the Malay language curtailed the participants' investment in English to a great extent. The third space, when available, was confined to sites that were associated with their formal learning of English.

Keywords: Bilinguals, third space, learners' identity, use of English

INTRODUCTION

As an Outer Circle country (Kachru, 1990), the use of English in Malaysia is widespread (e.g. Nair-Venugopal, 2003; Hashim &

Tan, 2012). This, however, does not mean that English is used frequently by all Malaysians or that all speakers are equally proficient. Malays, who constitute more than half of the country's population, have been described as the least receptive to the use of English (Abdullah & Wong, 2006) and the use of this language is especially low among themselves (Ting & Mahadhir, 2011). Given the persistent calls for improvement of English proficiency among the country's younger population (e.g. Civinini, 2016; Naidu, 2015), their

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 13 May 2016

Accepted: 30 May 2017

E-mail addresses:

ridwan@iiium.edu.my;

ridwanwahid188@gmail.com (Ridwan Wahid),

zahariahp@iiium.edu (Zahariah Pilus)

* Corresponding author

continuing disengagement from English can lead to a number of problems. Primary among these are the obstacles faced by learners from this ethnic group who wish to use English but have little or no access to willing speakers in their immediate community.

Several studies have documented the difficulty with which highly motivated Malay learners try to speak English in non-classroom contexts (Lee, 2003; Adnan, 2010; Rajadurai, 2010a; 2010b; 2011). These studies clearly show that many members of this group resist the attempts to use English by fellow Malays, preferring their native language, Malay (or Bahasa Malaysia), as the only acceptable language. The reason that is often cited for their rejection of English is the fusion of ethnicity, religion and language in the idea of 'Malayness' as held by many Malays and the Malaysian constitution (Lee, 2003; Adnan, 2010; Rajadurai, 2010a; 2010b; 2011). This suggests that the sense of being Malay manifests itself clearly when members of this ethnicity communicate with one another and a dominant use of a language other than Malay may be seen as a threat their shared ethos.¹

¹Shamsul (1994) suggests that modernisation and its resulting secularisation have prompted non-Western communities such as the Malays to intensify efforts to protect their identity. Although he focuses on the Malays use of religion (i.e. Islamisation) to do this, the fusion of ethnicity, religion and language can explain why the use of the Malay language is correspondingly favoured as the medium of communication among them.

Given the pervasive use of their native language, one way to provide more natural opportunities to use English among the Malays is to create a place where the use of English is not seen as a threat to their identity. Can such a 'third space' (Bhabha, 1994) alleviate the difficulties faced by motivated Malay learners of English? A 'third space' in this case would be a context in which common expectations to use their native language by some Malays on all other Malays are temporarily lifted. Referring to the use of English in its place, this is defined by Rajadurai as "a form of ... in-between space in which negotiation and transformation can take place" (2010a, p. 104). Available evidence, however, points to a scarcity of such contexts. In her study, Rajadurai (2010a; 2010b) discovered that it is only the participants' classrooms and on-campus sites associated with their formal learning of English that genuinely offered the reassuring support of a third space. In terms of spoken English particularly, this finding also suggests that it is difficult for Malay language learners to practise English language skills beyond the normally safe scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1997) afforded by their teachers and more proficient peers.

Building on Rajadurai's (2010a) finding, this paper aims to explore the extent to which an English-medium university in Malaysia, given its size and organisation as a community, can provide the much-needed third space to Malay learners who want to improve on their English. In order to do this, the study asks two related questions:

- (1) what kinds of investment do the participants make in learning English over a period of one year at the university?
- (2) how does the university environment influence the above outcome?

The main theory that informs the research questions is described next.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Due to the obvious connection of this study to the Malay identity and in order to understand the dynamic nature of the participants' struggles in learning English over a period of time, this research draws on the notion of 'identity', defined by Norton as "how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future" (2000, p. 5).

Subscribing to a poststructuralist view of language (Norton & Mckinney, 2011), the 'identity' approach to second language acquisition eschews the primacy of structure (cf. Saussure, 1966) and is also critical of binary opposition in language learning (e.g. motivated vs. unmotivated). Importantly, it places considerable emphasis on a larger socio-historical understanding of language units such as words, sentences or discourses (e.g. Bakhtin, 1981) and strives to consider power relations (Bourdieu, 1984) among language users. In addition to poststructuralism, the 'identity' approach is underpinned by Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this regard,

Norton and Mckinney (2011) explain that the 'identity' approach views the learner as a member of a community and this contrasts it with the cognitivist view of the learner as an individual.

Two theoretical constructs are central to the 'identity' approach: 'investment' and 'imagined community'. These relate to the ebb and flow of learners' effort to learn a second language (Norton Pearce, 1995; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). 'Investment' refers to the engagement that learners make with the language in lieu of the psychologically oriented and ahistorical notion of 'motivation'. Thus, learners 'invest' in the L2 both because they believe that it will pay off in terms of cultural capital (Norton & Toohey, 2011) and because the value of this payoff can vary with societal changes, the intensity of the engagement can fluctuate across temporal and spatial contexts.²

The social nature of the act of learning gives rise to the notion of 'imagined communities'. As learning is seen as an experience of 'becoming', learners may assume multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities during the process. Thus, they identify with groups of people who may

²Motivation', referring to one's "energization (i.e., instigation) and direction of behavior" (Elliott & Covington, 2001:73), is often regarded as a fixed or minimally variable trait of a learner's personality. On the other hand, 'investment' captures the shifting nature and intensity of learning efforts made over a period of time, in response to various elements in the learner's social context.

or may not be present around them due to shared values, lifestyles or aspirations. In order to understand the kinds of investment that are made by them, Pavlenko and Norton (2007, p. 675) argue for a need to “examine their multiple communities and understand who can and cannot be imagined as a legitimate speaker of a particular language variety in a specific context”. This understanding can then be used to make sense of the learning strategies they adopt at any given time (Lee, 2014).

While Norton and many other scholars have used the ‘identity’ approach to investigate cases of individual learners, the present study is interested in the participants’ commonalities given its aim to understand their thoughts and feelings as a collective (see also Cervatiuc, 2009).

METHODS

Participants and Data Collection

The study is part of a larger project that aimed to chart the development of English

proficiency by English majors over a period of one year. Selected from different cohorts, the participants were 20 ethnic Malay undergraduate students from an English Language and Literature programme. The selection of these students ensured that they fulfilled a major criterion of the study, that is, they intended to learn English. Table 1 summarises the composition of the groups with regard to the cohort and number of participants. They were interviewed in groups twice in a semester. The interviews were carried out by a research assistant who was a postgraduate student in the department. They were conducted in English but the participants were free to use Malay if needed. As the semester progressed, several of them dropped out of the project and by the time the second round of interviews was over, only nine participants remained.

The interview questions were designed to explore student experiences in learning and/or using English. They were asked to describe their perceptions, problems, future

Table 1
Composition of groups and interview intervals

Group	Interview 1	Interview 2
Group 1 (Years 3 & 2)	Nov 2014 (5 participants)	Apr 2015 (2 participants)
Group 2 (Years 3 & 2)	Nov 2014 (5 participants)	Mar 2015 (3 participants)
Group 3 (Year 3)	Nov 2014 (5 participants)	Jan 2015 (2 participants)
Group 4 (Years 1 & 2)	Dec 2014 (5 participants)	Jan 2015 (2 participants)
Total	20 participants	9 participants

plans and other issues that were related to the use of English on campus and beyond. Although it would be more common to interview participants individually, the number of participants in this study and the time allocated for data collection (10 weeks) made it difficult to adopt this format, especially in the first round. Being interviewed in a group, however, helped to put the participants at ease and make their responses more spontaneous. In the second round, during which there were fewer participants, seven of them were interviewed individually.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analysed using Nvivo. The nodes in the analysis were created independently by the two researchers based on the research questions posed. Later, the two sets were compared. Shared themes were identified and explored with repeated reading. Themes unique to one researcher made up only two percent of the total and were resolved by subsuming them under existing ones.

Context of the Study

The medium of instruction in public universities in Malaysia is Malay as a result of the language policies adopted after Malaysia gained independence from Britain in 1957. The university in which this study took place, IU,³ is a public university incorporated under the Malaysian

Companies Act (1965). This allows it to use English as its official language and the medium of instruction as well as enrol a slightly higher number of international students than otherwise allowed. The presence of international staff and students has made English its lingua franca. Although other languages may be spoken too (e.g. Arabic and French), English is the most common language after Malay (whose frequency of use by the Malay students forms the backdrop of the study). IU was set up as an Islamic university and thus, the local students are mostly Malays. It is largely funded by the Malaysian government and like other public universities in the country, it abides by the Universities and University Colleges Act (1995).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to explore the extent to which IU served as a third space to the Malay-speaking participants intending to learn English, the discussion is organised around two broad themes that address the research questions – ‘motivation and investment’ and ‘impact of the campus environment on language learning’.

Motivation and investment

As students majoring in English, the participants’ motivation to learn English was unsurprisingly high. In both interviews, the participants (18 out of 20 in Interview 1 and five out of nine in Interview 2) variously mentioned the need to learn English and how motivated they were to do so. In both interviews, the above 50% rate

³A pseudonym.

of participants indicating their high level of motivation suggests that this was a group determined to improve their proficiency in English. The question remains as to how far they can go in their learning of the language with this kind of motivation. As can be seen below, some of them wanted to do it for their studies and some for their professional future.⁴ This would equate with what is called instrumental motivation in cognitive psychology (Dörnyei, 2005).

Participant 19: *I think I'm positive because yeah, learning English is... learning English prepares you for the future because... because I think because I think this is only the place where I can speak in English and so, it... it encourages me to use more English because I sometimes, I feel inferior because my friends can speak better than me. And so, I need to improve my English.* (Group 4, Int. 1)

Participant 1: *Yes, I am motivated to learn English because as an English major, I need to practise daily to improve my English so that I can be more fluent, and also in terms of writing and performing better in my chosen major.* (Group 1, Int. 1)-

Participant 6: *In...in my opinion, yes, I am looking forward to enhance my*

English because in order for me to be in the real world later in...I mean, in my career, people nowadays tend to choose those who are very fluent in English, so there will be a lot of competitions when getting in the job markets. So, I think it is compulsory for us to always improve our English daily. (Group 2, Int. 1)

Participant 18: *Em.. I'm not saying that I don't have any other choice, it's just that this is what I. I will be doing and what I am doing it currently and in the future. Yea, I'm pretty much motivated. I tried, try and I'm still trying to..* (Group 4, Int. 2)

As an English-speaking institution, the supposed prevalence of English in the university was seen as useful in providing an ideal environment to the students. In this regard, 11 out of 20 participants (55%) in the first interviews even mentioned the fact that IU being an English-medium university was motivating:

Participant 2: *I think of course, it... it... of course, it influences us to use English more because already in IU the... the... the medium for conversation, right, in IU is English. IU is an English-speaking campus and plus, what we are studying is English language. So, it's more for motivation for us to speak English actually.* (Group 1, Int. 1)

However, when we explored this possibility through questions on their investment, a different story emerged. In the first

⁴All quotations are verbatim from the transcripts of the recordings. Personal names are concealed for privacy reasons. IU-specific terms, if present, are glossed.

interviews, only two out of 20 participants (10%) brought up the difficulty of finding opportunities to speak English. In the second interviews, however, this figure dramatically increased to 90% (eight out of nine).

Participant 2: *Well, I have mixed feelings actually about committing-communicating in English here in IU. Basically, if in class, I feel comfortable speaking in English in the classroom context. But if with my Malay friends, mostly, I speak Malay because if I were to speak English, it would look like I'm a show-off or something like that. So, I refrain myself from communicating in English with Malay friends.* (Group 1, Int. 1)

Participant 3: *I seldom use English daily. Just same like [personal name], we use English when in class, when you have presentation or something like that and when at mahallah [hostel], we use our mother tongue. So, it would be easy for us to communicate with others. So, not, not so much English to use.* (Group 1, Int. 1)

Participant 11: *I just use English mostly in formal environment, whether to attend classes or anything like that. But I don't... I don't really use English in my daily conversation unless I were to explain something that is related to English subjects, then only I speak English. Yeah, basically I use Malay in daily conversation.* (Group 3, Int. 2)

As can be seen in the excerpts above, the opportunities to use English only presented themselves during classes or interactions that had to do with their learning.

Others, like Participant 4 below, also mentioned using English with the non-Malaysians. However, in the next section it will be shown that this type of interaction is limited.

Participant 4: *For communicating in English in IU I feel all restricted to classroom sort of environment and also with foreign, international students.* (Group 1, Int. 2)

With their levels of motivation remaining high despite what they saw as a lack of opportunities to use English, did they remain invested and if they did, what did they do in order to learn the language? In the face of the obstacles they described, many participants channelled their energies towards activities that required little or no involvement from members of their community at large. 12 out of 20 participants (60%) in the first interviews and eight out of nine participants (90%) in the second reported that they watched English movies with or without subtitles, listened to English songs, read books or other materials in English and used online social media (mostly with English speakers outside IU).

Participant 16: *And I think movies... and movies do help a lot. I... I love movies and so, I think everyone love movies. So, you... I love the... I, I... even though*

the movies doesn't have the subtitle, I downloaded the subtitles in order for me to learn the languages, the... the words that they use, the synonyms, the vocabulary and how the native speakers use English because sometimes, they... they do not use the standard English language. They may use varieties and shut- and such. So, I learn English, I learn a lot from movies. (Group 4, Int. 1)

Participant 18: *I think it's the same for all of us that watching movie is the most effective way to improve our English because through movies, we can learn their language, learn their dialects, learn their accents. And in terms of enhancing our vocabulary, I think by reading novels, we can improve our vocabulary because for me, when I read novels, I will find... I will find like, like for example a word that I can't understand. So, I will search in the dictionary and like, write in my... my own dictionary book, the new words. Then, when I... when I encounter the word, I already know the meaning of the word like... so, we can improve the vocabulary through reading novels. (Group 4, Int. 1)*

Participant 11: *Yeah, nowadays I post in social networking, I use more English for the caption, and I check it from the Internet also if there is something wrong in my sentence and during my studies here I think my English has improved*

and also my grammar, because before this I just write it and not, not really pay attention to this grammatical rule, but now I know this mean what, and what should we do, past tense, present tense, I know more compared to before. (Group 3, Int. 2)

It is apparent from their narratives that the otherwise common pursuits by many other university students were often followed up with more formal learning activities such as checking meaning of unfamiliar words, determining accuracy of grammar and noting down new vocabulary items. This means that these activities have gained an extra dimension in terms of their significance to the students. We will return to this point in the next section.

Given these findings, for the majority of them the status of IU as an English-medium university did not transform the institution into an enlarged 'third space'. The third space, where negotiation may be possible, turns out to be their classrooms and other sites related to their programme, not unlike Rajadurai's (2010a, 2010b) study. In the excerpt below, the participant describes an incident in which her pronunciation was corrected by a classmate and how she views this moment, and others like it, as a learning experience.

Participant 6: *oh, em.. for presentation, it do helps me a lot..er.. and I also remembered one of my classmate.. er.. correct me in my pronunciation, a lot. But it happens, er.. during my CFS*

[Centre for Foundational Studies] because here I rarely got complains. I rarely got myself being corrected because.. you know, when it comes to presentation you need to practice a lot before that, right? Em.. Yeah, presentation is good for me. For me, it's... it is good because you know...you can practise speak in front of people and you feel good, you will feel good after the presentation. When you have the chance to talk about what.. about what you're presenting. Yeah. (Group 2, Int. 2)

Some participants (four out of 20 or 20% in the first interviews and three out of nine or 33% in the second) expressed disappointment over the state of affairs in the predominance of Malays and Malay language but for many more (seven out of 20 or 35% in the first interviews and three out of nine or 33% in the second), see it as result of their own insufficient proficiency and the resulting lack of confidence:

Participant 19: I think the biggest obstacle for me is from myself. I don't have confidence to speak in English because I think I don't have... beca- a choice. I don't... I don't have much... much vocabulary and my grammar... and my grammar is also does not... does not... does not... grammar, grammar... does not...

Interviewer: *Good enough?*

Participant 19: Ahh, yeah. Not good enough and because... because my friends, everyone speak in Malay. So, I think... I think I also need to speak in Malay to them. (Group 4, Int. 1)

In the next section, we will explore the impact of the campus environment on the students' investments. We will examine how the identities that they adopted and the imagined communities which they aligned themselves with are implicated in the outcome above.

Impact of the campus environment on language learning

How did IU not manage to be that in-between place, a third space that allows a language other than the students' native tongue to be used as a tool for communication? First of all, despite English being touted as the official language of the university, the predominance of Malays on campus led to the overriding use of the Malay language and this was seen as a constraint on investment by many participants. As the excerpt below shows, the need to use this language with other Malay speakers may well have stemmed from their shared ethnic identity.

Participant 13: For me, I think in IU, yes, I learn English but then, because of the environment I can't... I can't speak English frequently because of this people, you know, Malays and if we speak English with them, it's like, I don't

know, it's not very good for, for them. They... they prefer we speak in Malay compared to English. (Group 3, Int. 2)

For the participants, the conflict arose when they saw themselves as English speakers who were actively bilingual and had no issue with being Malay at the same time. In the excerpt below, the participant can be seen trying to highlight her deeply embedded Malay identity via the use of a regional dialect with her family and adherence to a Malay eating custom at home despite her increased use of the English language as an English major:

Participant 16: *Yeah, I think lots of us, I mean, the BENL [English major] student, we learn English, we use English, we live with English but when I come home, I do speak in dialect, in Perak-ian dialect. So, it's... it's really... it's different you know. I'm not really using Bahasa Malaysia, the pure... or the standard Bahasa Malaysia but I don't- I use dialect and you know, I eat with my- using my hands. It's not using fork and spoon at all. So, I think it's depends on the situation and depends on the person if he really wants to be westerner. I... maybe he, he does- maybe he or she doesn't like her first language. I think that's her problem. But I think in most cases, no. If you learn English, if you use English; it doesn't make you... it does not make you western. (Group 4, Int. 1)*

Consistent with previous studies, it is obvious that in a dominant Malay community the Malay language is used as a marker of shared ethnic identity. While it is easy to think of this decision to use Malay along with the others as willingness on the participants' part, it is important to remember that any effort to deviate from this expectation would be inconsistent with the Malay identity that also formed a part of them. This was their response to the unequal power relations which existed between these aspiring bilinguals and the rest of the university's Malay-speaking population, and thus following Norton (2013), it would be more useful to view this as two conflicting identities that were simultaneously adopted by the participants.

Interviewer: *What do you think that make you to speak in English? What drives you to speak in English?*

Participant 17: *What drives me to speak in English?*

Interviewer: *Like, should it come from you yourself or your surrounding?*

Participant 17: *Surrounding. I think surrounding. When I speak- when... when my friends speak English, so... that is when I can... I... I speak English with... with them. But if they only use Bahasa, so, I just use Bahasa with them. (Group 4, Int. 1)*

In talking about their future, however, this conflict was either played down or did not

seem to be an obstacle for their plans. For example, the same participant's articulation of his self as an English major and future English-speaking professional suggests that other than being Malay (and a Malay speaker), his identity also includes that of a competent bilingual:

Participant 17: *In 10 years' time, I... I can envision myself in terms, I involved in business and English play a major role for me.*

Interviewer: *How?*

Participant 17: *How? Because for me to grow in business area, I need to meet with people, I need to tend to speak with... to speak with people a lot, in terms of meetings, in terms of... of dealing business. So, English will play a major role for me to get the contract, something like that. That's... that's how I visualise myself and for me to be... to be noticed by the public through my business. (Group 4, Int. 1)*

In a community in which such aspirations are shared, using English among themselves as part of an extensive practice of bilingualism is not likely to be a problem but this does not appear to be the case in IU. This can explain why their classrooms and other sites of learning were almost the only places they used English consistently on campus.

Based on the findings, it is likely that due to the lack of opportunities to use English,

coupled with the inclination to use Malay with other Malays, the participants aligned themselves with communities of English speakers outside the campus. Given the prevalence of Malay-speaking domains for ethnic Malays in Malaysia (see above), these communities seem to exist outside the university, some possibly even outside their country. These are their imagined communities, which in turn, usually let them to participate in activities that did not involve other Malay members of IU:

Participant 7: *I also watch English movies that has the English subtitles, and I also read novels, English novels. Usually I'll start with children English novel, I start with the easy one first, and then I improve to the next level of English novel okay. And then, sometimes I do feel confident, sometimes I don't. If I...I want to be confident, I will make some preparation first. So, I'll be thinking in my head what to say to that English speakers and construct my sentence in my head. Then, only then, I would speak to him or her. (Group 2, Int. 2)*

It is interesting to note that the participants did not see the international students in their midst as a group of people who they could use English with. In the interviews, although such interactions were mentioned, they were few and sporadic. Elsewhere in the data, it was hard to find the clues as to why this was the case. Previous studies investigating socialisation patterns of

local and international students in English-speaking countries (e.g. Yates & Wahid, 2013; Sawir, 2013) have identified various social and psychological factors affecting the social distance between the two groups. Whether or not the same factors are at play in the Malaysian context such as this is an issue to be addressed in future research.

CONCLUSION

What can then be learned about learning a second language from the findings? This study suggests that an English-medium university with a large population of individuals sharing the same first language is not likely to be a successful 'third space'. Factors may vary across contexts, but from the perspective of the participants, Malay non-English majors were disinclined to use English and expect their native language to be used in informal interactions. Literature suggests that a possible factor is the confluence of Malay ethnicity, Islam and Malay language as Malayness. This issue lies outside the scope of the study and is thus, not confirmed in this investigation. Nevertheless, the study has revealed that many highly motivated learners are not likely to challenge the status quo due to factors such a lack of confidence and more importantly, the fluidity of their own identity.

As in Rajadurai (2010a; 2010b; 2011), the bilinguals in the learners' imagined community do not find English and Malayness conflicted, rather they complement each other. Given their motivation levels, these learners may

continue to invest in the target language although their strategies tend to be less socially involved. There are unequal power relations between such learners of English and the broader Malay community of which they are part of and clearly there exists a dominance of the social over the individual in this study in that the former can frequently constrain the latter's access to the target language.

It appears that a successful third space can only occur when the group's goals regarding the target language are aligned. A policy may be instituted to require widespread use of the language in a confined physical area but in less formal situations where its observance may be relaxed, continuing use of this non-native language usually gives way to ethnic identity allegiance. Possibly due to a complex set of values associated with the Malay language in the configuration of the Malay identity, the kind of goal alignment mentioned above is not easy to achieve and this is usually at the expense of the minority group who want to improve their proficiency in the target language. The findings suggest that, given Malaysia's socio-cultural dynamics, a smaller-scale site such as the classroom or an out-of-classroom task-based discussion are more likely to succeed as a third space than a whole university, at least for the Malays.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was funded by a grant from International Islamic University Malaysia. We would like to thank Joanne Rajadurai

(Heriot-Watt) and Aziz Jaafar (Bangor) for making available some of the reference materials used in this study.

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