

## The Interference of Mother Tongue/Native Language in One's English Language Speech Production

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**Abstract:** English language is the second most important language in Malaysia, after Bahasa Malaysia as the country's national language. As Malaysia is a multicultural country with diverse cultures, speaking like those native speakers does not seem to be crucial. Speaking in English can prove to be a challenging task to the English language learners, especially if they do not have a good command of the language. This study is meant to seek the mother tongue/ native language influence on one's speech production. Apart from investigating whether translation is employed in speech production, it also studies whether competency in the language helps in speech production. To execute the study, 16 Form 4 students from 2 rural areas of Sarawak are chosen as the respondents. Observation on speech production serves as the research instrument, which is then validated by the interview session. From the findings, it is found out that mother tongue interferes in students' speech production. In addition, they employ translation method although they denote the importance of English language. Moreover, they regard speaking skill as the most difficult skill in English language. To conclude, more actions should be taken in order to promote fluency in speech production of the second language.

**Keywords:** mother tongue, second language, interference, translation, ESL

### Introduction

Malaysian students are made up of many ethnic groups, and the three biggest are the Malays, Chinese and Indians (Manan & Shamsudin, 2012). Due to its diversity of cultures, Malaysia owns variety of languages used and spoken in daily communication. Since each ethnicity has their own mother tongue or native language, there is a need for one language to be the medium of communication, which could ease the interaction among the society members. Post-independence Malaysia saw a need to develop Bahasa Melayu as the national language as it was the language of the largest ethnic group and also the language of unity among the diverse races (Chan & Abdullah, 2007). Thus, Bahasa Melayu is the national language of the country while English becomes the second language in Malaysia. And it is essential to note that language is critical for cognitive development because it provides a way to express ideas and ask questions, the categories and concepts for thinking, and the links between the past and the future (Woolfolk, 2010).

English language has become the second most important language in Malaysia, after Bahasa Malaysia as the country's national language (Yunus, Sulaiman & Embi, 2013b). This implies that English language is regarded as a second language or sometimes referred to the foreign language. Earlier, Vethamani (2003) denotes that English language is generally taught as a second language in countries in the South East Asian region. This illustrates the role played by English language in Malaysia and neighbouring countries. The spread of English language in Malaysia has started ever since the colonization period. During that period, English plays a dominant role in the administration, government and commerce where the status and position of English during the colonial period was a language of government, administration and commerce (Subramaniam, 2003).

The main objective of learning English is not to acquire native speakers' competency but rather to be intelligible among international English speakers and those within their 'community' (Muniandy, Nair, Krishnan, Ahmad & Noor, 2010). As Malaysia is a multicultural country with diverse cultures, speaking like those native speakers does not seem to be crucial. The essential part here is that the message gets across and the communication is understood. In fact, in order to compete in the World of globalization, English works as the key factor. This is parallel to Subramaniam (2007) who claimed that English remains important as a language of business (in private sector), social interaction (mainly among non-Malays and Malay elite intellectuals and socialites) and an international language in the country. In fact, knowing English is seen essential especially in the industry world as denoted by Jamaluddin (2007), English is no longer seen as a competitive advantage but a basic requirement for jobseekers, especially in the private sector. Further, Chan and Abdullah (2007) quoted Tun Dr Mahathir that Malaysians must be competent in the English language if they were to compete in the international market.

Speaking in English can prove to be a challenging task to the English language learners, especially if they do not have a good command of the language (Tom, Johari, Rozaimi & Huzaimah, 2013). Speaking is an important linguistic skill that helps the individual to communicate and socialize within his circle or discourse community. In order to belong to a particular discourse community, the speaker has to conform to the cultural norms, such as the values, customs, beliefs and superstitions of that discourse community (Shanmuganathan, 2003). In the English syllabus of Malaysian Education System itself, speaking is among the main components taught in schools, apart from listening, reading, writing and grammar.

In a community where Bahasa Melayu does not function as their first language, English will somehow or rather turns to be third or perhaps foreign language to the students. In Sarawak itself, diverse races and ethnicities might affect English role in becoming the second language of the students. Their own mother tongue will function as first language while Bahasa Melayu is commonly used in schools and interaction with other people in the community, will become the second language. If the students know how to speak other languages, English will be less

prioritised in the students' linguistics repertoire. Therefore, this study proposes on investigating the influence of mother tongue/native language in students' speech production in second language, focusing on the students in the rural area of Sarawak.

There are three research objectives in this study. Firstly, the study is meant to see the influence of mother tongue/native language in students' speech production. Then, it is intended to determine whether students' competency level affects students' speech production. Finally, the study intends to investigate if translation method is employed in speech production.

## Literature Review

### What is Mother Tongue?

Mother tongue can enable students' understanding of the concepts, lexical or grammatical or academic terms (Nguyen, 2012). This implies that mother tongue is the language in which the individual is most familiar with and has the contact for the longest period of time. The use of mother tongue and translation can serve as a tool for improving language skills (Mohan, 2013). This indicates that in learning or acquiring second language, mother tongue plays an essential role as well. As the individual has acquired the mother tongue, it becomes the yardstick in helping the individual to learn the second language. This can be done via translation. The translation is useful for L2 acquisition because, firstly, it uses authentic materials, secondly, it is interactive, thirdly, it is learner-centred, and finally it promotes learner autonomy (Mohan, 2013).

Native language is helpful in explaining complex idea and grammar rules and helps students learning new vocabulary more effectively, and preventing the waste of time in explanations and instructions (Spahiu, 2013). In concurrence to previous claim, it is crucial to note that mother tongue will be helpful for an individual in understand certain concepts in the second language. Whenever faced with complex terminologies and rules, mother tongue helps in making the individual understand the concept by comprehending their pre-requisite knowledge in mother tongue. Thus, embedding native language use in second language learning is seen as an alternative in getting the learners familiar with the second language.

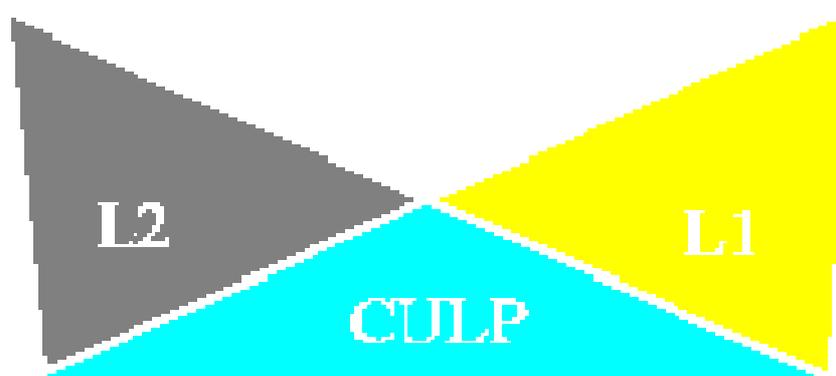
Cummins (2001) explains why mother tongue-based bilingual education helps children learn the second language better. Based on his claim, children's knowledge and skills transfer between languages, therefore if they have a solid foundation in their mother tongue, it reflects on their second language. This means that both languages are "interdependent" and "nurture" each other whenever the individual's mother tongues are permitted in the educational environment. This is particularly a problem for minority children in developed countries since losing their mother tongue causes detachment from their family who may only speak the mother tongue.

Indeed, the use of mother tongue is very prominent in daily life communication. However, it should be remembered that students should be made to feel that learning to speak English could be fun (Nair, 2000).

### Common Underlying Proficiency

This theory derives from Cummins (2000) which is centred on cognitive competence where the primary language (L1) provides a base for competency in the second language (L2). This theory explains the relationship between L1 and L2 and the interaction taking place between these two languages. He further claimed that once skills, content and linguistic knowledge are learned in the L1, they will become beneficial while a student is learning the L2. This also works the other way round, in which what is learnt in L2 by means is automatically transferred into L1.

In the course of learning one language, a child acquires a set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that can be drawn upon when working in another language. CUP provides the base for the development of both the first language (L1) and the second language (L2). As Cummins (2000) states conceptual knowledge developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible. If a child already understands the concepts of 'justice' or 'honesty' in her own language, all she has to do is acquire the label for these terms in English. The term CUP has also been used to refer to the cognitive/academic proficiency that underlies academic performance in both languages. The theory is illustrated via the model below.



Common Underlying Proficiency

### Speaking Skill in English as Second Language

Spoken English is the most important among the four language skills in an increasingly globalised world today (Manan & Shamsudin, 2012). It should be noted that there are four language skills commonly taught in the English Language Syllabus in Malaysian Education

System; speaking, writing, reading and listening. On top of that, grammar component is also inevitable in English Language Syllabus. Nair (2000) argued that the goal of speaking skill is to develop communicative competence essential in enabling learners to use language in the multiple functions it serves in real life. Adding to this, Ting, Mahadhir and Chang (2011) denoted that in a non-native English-speaking environment, it is difficult for non-native speakers of the target language to be able to speak as accurately and fluently as native speakers. This is prevalent in Malaysia, where students who come from diverse cultures and backgrounds might not be able to acquire English native-like accents since they are not innate with it.

One of the advantages of spoken language is that the process of thinking as you speak allows you to manifest a certain number of performance hesitations, pauses, backtracking and corrections (Brown, 2001). This implies that learners can correct their speech spontaneously which also enables them to learn on how to pause and hesitate. The existence of fillers such as *uh, um, well, you know, I mean, like* are among the common ones used in spoken language. This makes spoken language different from other language skills. This somehow can be associated with fluency. As described by Brown (2001), fluency is probably best achieved by allowing the stream of speech to flow. This is inevitable as learners who speak English needs to acquire an acceptable speed along with other attributes of fluency as claimed by Ting et al. (2011) that in spoken language, linguistic competence is associated with both accuracy and fluency.

Dissatisfaction with the level of spoken English in Malaysia has come to a boil, and every day a newspaper headline spotlights another aspect of the problem (The Sun, July 2012). This is indeed a serious matter to ponder. It should be noted that speaking is an important linguistic skill that helps the individual to communicate and socialize within his circle or discourse community (Shanmuganathan, 2003). Therefore, this is where the study is based on, to investigate students' speech production and its relation to mother tongue interference.

### **The Case of Students in Rural Area**

The learning of English in rural schools in Malaysia has always been a major problem for educators as they struggle to pull proficiency levels up against a backdrop where the language is almost non-existent other than the few periods of English per week for learners where English is viewed as a foreign language (Thiyagarajah, 2003). The learning of English language can be seen as difficult especially when it involves the students in the rural area. Kozue (2013) asserted that many children in rural areas begin school in a language that they are not familiar with and/or do not fully understand. This is indeed true in Malaysian context, whereby those children in the rural area have difficulties in learning English. This might be due to the surrounding that does not support the exposure of English language as supported by Ting et al. (2011) that for some quarters of the Malaysian population, learning English may be like learning a foreign language

and they have limited need for the language in daily life. Therefore, they face difficulties in learning English language in schools.

Despite the fact that English is a second language in Malaysia, many students from rural areas in Sarawak view English as a foreign language which is spoken only during language lessons (Tom et al., 2013). This is prevalent as they usually come from non-English speaking community and Hiew (2012) stated that students usually experience moderate anxiety and are reluctant to speak in English for fear of being judge negatively. They might feel shy to speak English within their community apart from having fear to be criticised. Rural students, however, are in an environment where English is a foreign language and they have practically zero opportunity to practise it as their peers are also facing the same predicament, their parents are not educated enough to give them the necessary educational support and their families' socioeconomic status do not allow them easy access to books, CD's, and even television in some cases (Gobel, Thang, Sidhu, Oon & Chan, 2013). Due to that, students' mother tongue will be used more often and this will develop their linguistic repertoire to a greater extend. As argued by Cummins (2000), in rural areas, the children's native language would be used in the home and for the development of literacy skills in lower elementary classes.

## Methodology

The design of this study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research does not involve counting and dealing with numbers but it is based more on information expressed in words – descriptions, accounts, opinions, feelings, etc (Walliman, 2006). This study employs purposive sampling, where the researcher deliberately selects subjects who belong to a specific group (Holmes, Dahan & Ashari, 2008). There were 16 Form 4 students involved in this study from two rural area secondary schools, whom English is considered as their third language. The study employs observation on students' speech production, which was delivered in three minutes and it was audio-taped. This serves as the primary data while semi structured face-to-face interview will function as the secondary data, supporting the information obtained from the observation. The questions were based on the research questions derived earlier. The responses from the interview would support the findings gathered from the observation.

## Findings

### Observation on Students' Speech Production

The table below illustrates on what the researcher has observed from the students' speech production. The interference of the mother tongue is identified and some example of excerpts are indicated in the table.

Respondent	Mother	Second	Interference of	Remark
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	Tongue	Language	Mother Tongue	
1	Melanau	Malay	Yes	<i>"Go to my grandfather kebun lah", "At my grandfather village also have a many apa many perkara baru lah"</i>
2	Melanau	Malay	Yes	<i>"Many activity we play at Sunway Lagoon",</i>
3	Malay	Melanau	Yes	<i>"The time with my family is my happiness day in my life"</i>
4	Melanau	Malay	No	Fluent speaker
5	Melanau	Malay	No	Respondent commit some grammatical errors.
6	Melanau	Malay	Yes	<i>"When we go KFC, my father bring the cake and we celebrate together at there", "My brother ermm give some present with me and also with my mother give some present"</i>
7	Melanau	Malay	Yes	<i>"When it is holiday, I'm from when I was tahun 2", "Kami pergi ermmm we find kami lihat animal at the Tumbina and I'm so happy cause that is my first holiday when we go far far away"</i>
8	Malay	Melanau	Yes	<i>"When I go to school because I always absent and I want to see my friends they are not macam yang sik sama tempat, sidak tok berbeza kawasan"</i>
9	Iban	Malay	Yes	<i>"I so happy go picnic with my friends", "I can menambah mengeratkan hubungan with my friends",</i>
10	Iban	Malay	Yes	<i>"I got 4A", - respondent could not produce proper sentences</i>
11	Iban	Malay	No	Respondent could produce the speech with minor grammatical errors.
12	Iban	Malay	No	Respondent were unable to produce sentence spontaneously.
13	Iban	Malay	No	Respondent were producing sentences with some grammatical errors.
14	Iban	Malay	Yes	<i>"We can talk about errr and share our pendapat",</i>
15	Iban	Malay	Yes	<i>"Im very happy la dapat bersama keluarga", "Saya seorang saja because my family semua dekat Johor"</i>
16	Iban	Malay	Yes	<i>"After arrive at Miri, we go the the place tempat pertandingan diadakan", "from the activity especially about the undang-undang jalanraya"</i>

Table 1: Students' Speech Production

### Responses from Interview Session

The interview session revealed that majority of them believed speaking is the most difficult skill in English language. Some of the reasons given by the students who claimed spoken English is the most difficult component are *"I often mispronounce words and not*

*confident in speaking*”, “*Speaking is difficult because I do not know many words*”, “*I am not used to speaking in English*” and “*Because it is hard to pronounce it and difficult to identify which word should be used*”. The students were also asked on what problems they face in speaking English. Among the responses were “*To translate from Bahasa Melayu to English*”, “*Less on vocab and don’t know to describe something*”, “*I not good in looking words in English. This makes me difficult to speak in English*”, “*I not know things in English*”, “*Hard to pronounce the difficult words and cannot speak well*” and “*Arranging words when speaking English*”.

Towards the end of the interview session, each respondent was asked on which language is more important between English and Bahasa Melayu. Out of 16 students, 8 of them claimed that English is important as compared to Bahasa Melayu. This indicates that the division of their preference is equal and even. However, the disappointing part is the students who chose English as the important language clarified their choice using Bahasa Melayu, except for two students. The reasons of their preference were “*English is the worldwide that is used nowadays*” and “*English always be used when we go out from our own country and also important in Science subject*”. The other 6 students denoted the reasons like “*Kerana dengan menguasai Bahasa Inggeris, kita dapat memudahkan urusan untuk berkomunikasi dengan negara luar*”, and “*Sebab English penting semasa bercakap dengan orang dari negara lain dan penting untuk sistem pembelajaran*”. On the other hand, those who preferred Bahasa Melayu to be more important than English claimed that “*Bahasa Melayu digunakan dalam kehidupan seharian dan mudah difahami berbanding Bahasa Inggeris*”, “*Bahasa Melayu ialah bahasa yang mudah difahami oleh masyarakat di negara kita*”, and “*Bahasa Melayu subjek wajib lulus SPM*”.

During the interview, it was noted that the students had difficulties in giving their responses in English. Most of them responded in Bahasa Melayu before translating their responses in English. It was also noted that most of them gave short response. This might be due to the incompetency they have in English language, apart from being uncomfortable giving response in English language. Some of the students requested for the questions to be translated in Bahasa Melayu for them to understand what was asked. In fact, some had difficulties before giving their speeches as they did not understand the instruction given. Therefore, the researcher had to translate the questions in Bahasa Melayu for the students to understand them. This reflects that the student employ translation method in their language skill as the result of lacking in the English competency level.

## Discussions

From the findings, it is obvious that the students involved in this study employ their knowledge on mother tongue in producing speech of the second language. Although Bahasa Melayu is not their mother tongue, it is the language where the students are more familiar with as

compared to English. This supports Musa, Koo and Azman (2012) asserting that Malay language as the national language of Malaysia and also as a language of medium instruction in Malaysian schools has a strong influence over the learning of English. In fact, some grammatical errors were committed in the speech production. This supports Yunus, Sulaiman, Kamarulzaman and Ishak (2013a) who claimed that interference of mother tongue language system in some ways contributes to wrong use of English grammatical rules, morphology and syntax.

It was also found that competent English language users did not face problem in delivering the speech. Despite few grammatical errors committed, they were still considered fluent and have the basic knowledge of the language. This may seem parallel to Nair (2000) who argued that a learner can be successful in acquiring a field language if he gets himself into a situation where he can hear a vast amount of the language without being under pressure to speak. On the other hand, those who are incompetent seem to employ code switching in their speech production.

To note, most of the respondents seem to have a very minimal grasp of language as they had difficulties in understanding the instruction and questions given. This led to them translating what they need to know into their mother tongue. Translation relates the language to be learnt to the linguistic experience that people have already had, and help the learner to appropriate the new language (Nguyen, 2012). Some requested for the instruction or question to be translated into Bahasa Melayu. As denoted by Nair (2000), avoid the habit of constant translations of structures into the native language as this will affect the thinking processes of the learners. It is assumed that the most of the students rely so much on translation method to understand what is uttered. This is concurrent to Nair (2000) who asserted that a learner should try to understand enough words in his vocational field so that he will better understand the message with only the rudiments of grammar.

During the interview session, majority of the respondents agreed that speaking skill is the most difficult language skill. This supports Yunus et al. (2013a) where their study revealed that the common difficulties in English language learning faced by gifted students were related to speaking in English, grammar and lack of vocabulary and speaking skill is the hardest to learn. Some of the responses claiming speaking as the most difficult skill include problems in pronunciation, translating the utterances from mother tongue, lacking in the confidence as well as feeling shy to speak English. This relates to the claim by Hiew (2012) that students usually experience moderate anxiety and are reluctant to speak in English for fear of being judge negatively. Students should be made to feel that learning to speak English could be fun (Nair, 2000). This will then boost their confidence in speaking English.

Last but not least, half of the respondents agreed that English places an important role in current situation. Even though they responded in Bahasa Melayu, they had the idea that English is important as a means of communication. This reflects on Brown (2001) stating that English is

increasingly being used as a tool for interaction among non-native speakers. In addition, this infers that the main objective of learning English is not to acquire native speakers' competency but rather to be intelligible among international English speakers and those within their 'community' (Muniandy et al., 2010).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that students still rely on mother tongue in their speech production. It is undeniable that the interference of the students' mother tongue still exists as the students are found to be incompetent in the English language as well as few other contributing factors. In addition, it was also revealed that students rely on translation method from the mother tongue in comprehending certain instructions apart from producing utterances. Finally, it is also denoted in this study that speaking skill appears as the most difficult skill among the respondents and they agree that English is indeed crucial especially as the means of communication.

This study has also revealed that exposure towards the English language for a long period (in this case, 10 years) does not guarantee and entitle the students to be a competent and fluent language user. Environment factor is seen as one of the factors contributing towards students' lacking of competency as they come from the non-speaking English community. Reformation is needed to ensure that Malaysian students' competency in English language, especially those in the rural area can be developed. Then only, the aim to be intelligible among the international English speakers can be achieved.

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