

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 BACKGROUND

The English language was brought to the Malay peninsular in the mid-18th century with the colonisation of this region by the British. The introduction of the English medium schools in the late 19th century made English the language of the elite (Asmah, 2000). Upon independence in 1957, English was still the medium of instruction in schools. However, to encourage the growth of the national language Bahasa Malaysia and to promote national unity, the National Education Policy (1971) was introduced whereby the National Language gradually replaced English as the medium of instruction in schools in this country and English was relegated to a second language position (Asmah, 1993 and Abdullah, 2005).

1.1 THE CURRENT STATUS OF ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

In the current context in Malaysia, English can be considered a second language based on Quirk's (1985) tripartite taxonomy of English as a Native Language (ENL), English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This is parallel to Kachru's (1992) inner circle, outer circle and expanding circle where English in Malaysia is placed with other countries in the outer circle like Singapore, India and the Philippines. Countries in which the majority of the population consists of native speakers of English are placed in Kachru's inner-circle comprising The United States of America, Canada, Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand. The expanding circle consists of countries such as Japan and China where English has a foreign language status. The number of English learners in many of these countries is rapidly increasing and they are also starting to learn English at a younger age (Graddol, 2006).

However, although Malaysia is placed in the outer circle, to assume that English is a second language for all Malaysians is grossly inaccurate as it is used at different levels with different degrees of proficiency by different people. Many Malaysians in the rural and interior regions of this country seldom hear or use English apart from their English lessons in the classroom context. Many in these regions of the country are able to function without the use of English thus, relegating the language further to function as a foreign language (EFL) (Choong, 2003; Benson, 1990).

In contrast, approximately 2% of Malaysians use English as their first language (L1) (Crystal, 1997:58). These include expatriates from ENL countries who are working here or who have settled in Malaysia, the Eurasian community (typically those of Portuguese and Dutch descent) and those of mixed parentage (Pillai, 2006).

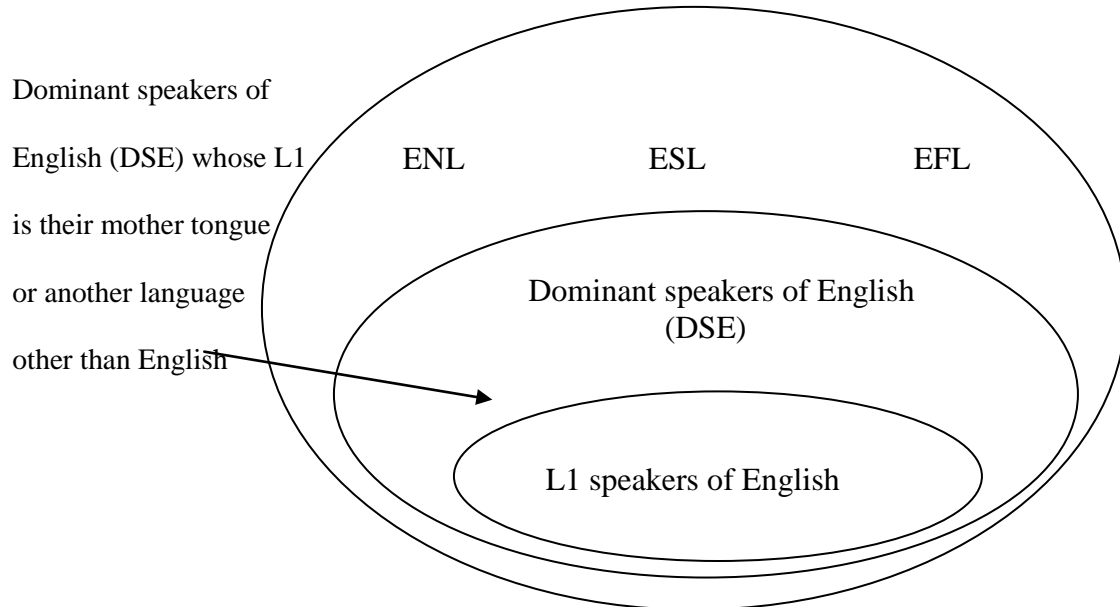
In general, most Malaysians are at least bilingual if not multilingual. In the urban areas of Malaysia there are families who are bilingual or trilingual with, for example English and Bahasa Melayu and their mother tongue (MT) in their repertoire (Gaudart, 1987). There also exists a small group of mostly Chinese and Indians and some Malays in the urban areas that use English at home (Asmah, 1991). For this group of people, English may be the first language they acquired when growing up, making English their L1. English may dominate in almost all of their daily aspects of communication. They speak English at home and at work with friends and family in formal and informal situations and are most comfortable and confident using English. Thus for them, English can be considered their L1 (Baskaran, 2005) based on the premise that it was the main language they were exposed to since birth or the language that has predominantly been used since they were young. This means that L1 speakers of English would consist of at least these two groups: the first group comprising those residing in Malaysia but have their origins in ENL countries such as expatriates, Eurasians and those of mixed parentage while the

second group would consist of Malaysian Malays, Chinese and Indians for whom English is the first language they acquired. Hence, the term second language for ME is also inappropriate as the English variety spoken here range from ENL to EFL. The term ESL is also ambiguous given that many Malaysians are multi-lingual, making it difficult to place English in a hierarchy of language repertoire.

In addition, there are also those who may have acquired their mother tongue first (MT) but subsequently began to increasingly use English making it their dominant language. Both the L1 speakers of English and those who use English more than their MT or any other language can be considered as Dominant Users of English (DSE) in this dissertation. A DSE is therefore one who uses English most of the time or in most situations and is most comfortable using English even if he is able to use other languages.

The multi-cultural background of this country further contributes to the strains of Malaysian English (ME) which is influenced by factors like the users' MT, the socio-economic and geographical background of the users (Kachru, 1992; Platt, Weber & Ho, 1984) best seen as a continuum with an exponential number of varieties (further explained in chapter 2). Figure 1.1 represents a summary of the status of the English in Malaysia.

Figure 1.1
Status of Speakers of English In Malaysia



1.2 LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

There is ambiguity between the terms ‘native speaker’ and ‘L1 speaker’ but in the present day context both terms rely less on ones’ ethnicity or geographical location or origin due to migration and education (McArthur, 2002; Pillai, 2006) . Traditionally, MT is defined as the language used in the country or region of origin which portrays people’s ethnicity. However today, there are areas where people may not be able to speak their MT. For example, in Pillai (2006) it was found that the child respondents of Tamil origin identified themselves as ‘Indians’ although they were unable to speak Tamil with their use of Tamil being limited to kinship terms or common expressions in their speech at home. This suggests that knowledge and ability to use one’s MT need not necessarily be a tool to identify one’s ethnicity. For such groups of people, that is for those who have ‘lost’ the use of their ancestral language, the use of English can “transcend” ethnicity (Gaudart,

1995: 26) and even the use of similar linguistic features creates a common sense of Malaysian identity through the use of ME (Philip, Pillai & Jeyam, 2007; Wade, 2007).

1.3 THE USE OF ENGLISH AMONG THE MALAYSIAN INDIAN COMMUNITY

Studies on language shift in Malaysia point towards a shift from the ancestral languages or MT to English. Research on language shift in different communities, such as David and Ibtisam (2002) on the Malaysian Tamil community, Govindasamy & Nambiar (2003) on the Malayalee community, David and Faridah (1999) on the Malaysians of Portuguese descent residing in the Portuguese settlement in Melaka and David (1996) on the Malaysian Sindhi community, all show a trend towards one's MT being substituted with English.

The home language of many of these L1 speakers can be expected to be more of the mesolectal variety to mirror the informality and intimacy of home discourse (Pillai, 2006). Thus, although English is their L1 or dominant language, the variety used at home may not be the standard variety which is consistent with what takes place in ENL contexts (Trudgill, 1999). This phenomenon, however, may depend on their socioeconomic and educational background.

1.4 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It was previously mentioned in 1.1 that there is a group for whom English may not be an L1 but is used more dominantly. This group that is the DSE possesses sub-varieties of ME and is able to move along the lectal cline of English be it to establish camaraderie and a sense of belonging or as appropriate to particular contexts. Among younger DSE the use of the more colloquial variety of ME (CME) may be dominant given that this is the

variety they probably use at home and among friends This does not in anyway suggest that Colloquial Malaysian English (CME) is inferior or deficient (Pillai, 2006). Instead it would be useful to raise their awareness of the differences in the linguistic features and appropriateness of use in different situations among different sub-varieties (Abdullah, 2005). They need to be made aware that certain structures are acceptable in the informal contexts but may be inappropriate in particular contexts. However, this assumes that speakers must be able to use Standard English (SE) as well. Only then can they move up and down the language cline upon deciding on the suitability of the sub-variety depending on the context in which it is being used.

1.5 THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Previous research on ME tended to focus on colloquial usage of ME, often from a deficient point of view. The overlapping use of colloquial and standard form has not been given much attention despite the fact that the latter can find its way into standard usage (Lee, 2006). From a sociolinguistic point of view, it is also pertinent to examine the use of different sub-varieties according to context of use. Thus, this research aims to provide empirical evidence for the use of standard and non-standard use of English by one group of speakers that is the DSEs. There is also the question of whether users are actually aware of that they may be using non-standard forms in their standard variety.

1.6 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In an attempt to examine the extent to which non-standard forms are used by DSEs, this study focuses on question forms used by teenage Malaysian DSE of South Indian origin in the informal domain to ascertain how systematic these patterns are in ME. Based on findings from previous studies (Baskaran, 2005; Kuang, 2002; Pillai, 2006), it is

assumed that the variety used by the DSEs will exhibit systematic patterns and show evidence of at least two sub-varieties of English at play, that is, the colloquial and standard varieties of ME. In order to examine this phenomenon, this study will focus on question forms as a preliminary study prior to the present study to indicate that DSEs formed questions using standard and non-standard structures. Thus, the objectives of this study are to examine the type of structures used to form questions and their patterns of use. This study also sets out to examine the extent to which the speakers are able to use standard and non-standard forms.

In particular, this study aims to answer the following research questions.

1. What types of structures are used to form questions by the speakers?
2. What patterns emerge in the use of the different structures by the speakers?
3. To what extent are the DSE able to use the standard forms when forming questions?

1.7 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The findings from this study will provide empirical evidence about how questions are formed in ME and more specifically, the extent to which non-standard forms are used, and whether speakers are aware of such usage. Such awareness is useful for speakers as even the non-native teachers tend to use non-standard forms when they are not using the textbook (Bamgbose, 1992). Also, teachers can highlight the common non-standard use and make the students aware of the differences and the appropriateness of its use. In view of this, it is hoped that the school syllabus and curriculum designers as well as text book writers will place some emphasis to help raise the awareness of students on these aspects when teaching and learning English.

1.8 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to students from a secondary school in Klang. As such, the age of the target group (TG) members was between 15 and 18 years of age. Sufficient number of respondents fulfilled the criteria as members of the TG. Thus, other DSE's from different urban areas or different schools were not used in this study. This was also not done due to time constraints.

Responses were elicited using a structured questionnaire (Appendix 2) and it is assumed that this will indicate the DSEs mesolectal variety. They will also take a test (Appendix 3) at the end of the research and this would show the DSE's highest variety. Thus, a comparison of both the responses in the questionnaire (mesolectal variety) and the test (highest variety) can indicate if the respondents are capable of moving along the lectal cline.

1.9 OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

In this Chapter, the term DSE who will be the target group for this study was explored. In Chapter 2, the role of English and the varieties of English around the world today (Cane, 1994; Mc Arthur, 2002; Sridhar, 1992; Wade, 2007) in comparison to ME (Baskaran, 2005; David, 2000; Pillai, 2006) will be discussed. Chapter 3 presents the methodology of the study while Chapters 4 and 5 will contain the analysis and discussion of the findings of the structured questionnaire and the test respectively. Chapter 6 will include the conclusion of this study and the prospects for future research.