Malaysian English or Grammatical Errors?

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have claimed that the English language in Malaysia has deeply progressed into a phase of Independent/Liberation and Expansion (Gill 1999) or Nativisation (Schneider, 2003b). In this phase, English in use acquires significant structural changes. In fact, many syntactic variants that can be attributed to this phase have been identified by Malaysian English ME scholars and researchers since the 1970s. The findings of earlier research (Tongue 1974, Platt & Weber, 1980) reveal that some usages have been nativised in the Malaysian linguistic repertoire, but those findings are mostly based on spoken data. In terms of the written language, the extent of nativisation has yet to be extensively researched. This study seeks to explore Malaysian teachers' perception of certain syntactic variants of English and their acceptance in written English. Teachers, especially English teachers, are regarded as gatekeepers when it comes to the use of English in Malaysia. With the perceived decline of the national standard of English in the country, it is crucial to investigate if the use of these syntactic variants by English teachers is a matter of choice or a manifestation of language proficiency. In this study, 150 English teachers from Malaysian secondary schools were recruited to respond to a questionnaire, exploring their perception of selected syntactic usages. The findings corroborate much that has been documented over decades about Malaysian English, showing essentially that changes in what is known as acceptable English usage is ongoing. However, the findings also indicate that the acceptance of these variants among a number of young Malaysian English teachers is not a matter of choice but a reflection of their language proficiency. The findings will have some pedagogical impacts on English language teaching (ELT) in Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Like many other countries where New Englishes (Platt & Weber, 1980) are spoken, Malaysia is experiencing a tension between the desire to compete abroad using Standard English and the process of localisation in the country. Schneider (2003b) claims that the English language in Malaysia has deeply progressed into nativisation, the middle of five phases of his dynamic model of the evolution of New Englishes. In this phase, English in use acquires significant structural changes in terms of syntax, and this sociolinguistic phenomenon has been noticed by Malaysian English (ME) scholars and researchers (e.g. Tongue, 1979; Platt & Weber, 1980; Wong, 1983; Baskaran, 1987; Khaw, 2008).

From an educational perspective, the prevalent use of these syntactic variants of Malaysian English has also been perceived to be caused by a change in the standard of English proficiency in Malaysia. Wong (1983, p. 103) expressed her concern about the competence of English teachers in Malaysian schools, which she saw would have considerable impact on the standard of English proficiency and English language teaching in the country.

> *…as more and more English-speaking Malaysians are themselves less and less sure about what the 'correct' forms should be, and because more and more of these 'aberrations' are being found in the language of those who can be considered to set the standard for English in the country. It is only in the English language classroom that such 'aberrations', especially in grammar, are subject to correction, but much of this loses its effectiveness as more often than not the teachers themselves are no models for the 'correct' English contained in the textbook or required by the syllabus.* (Wong, 1983, p. 103)

Benson (1990, p. 20) explained that more and more Malaysians learned English as a subject in school but did not use it extensively.

> *Since English is now taught as a compulsory second language in all Malaysian schools, it can be said that more Malaysians than ever before are familiar with English. But those whose experience of English is confined to the school system rarely go on to use it in their daily life.* (Benson, 1990, p. 20)

David (1990, 2000), however, attributed the decline in the national English standard to the change of English syllabus from the Structural Syllabus to Communicational Syllabus in the mid-seventies, which failed to enable students to achieve grammatical proficiency. The national standard of English has worried scholars and educators. Gill (2003) lamented that young Malaysians' generally low English proficiency was manifest in their mastery of only the mesolect (sub-variety for intra-national communication) and not the acrolect (sub-variety for international communication).

We have teachers and students, a whole generation, who are able to communicate only at a single point along the continuum. Most of them are able to communicate only with the mesolectal variety. This generation is described as the "language transition generation" ─ in transition because they have been educated in Bahasa Malaysia and are now switching over to English and are expected to perform and function effectively in Standard Malaysian English. (Gill, 2003, p. 22)

In brief, the perceived decline in the standard of English proficiency has been ascribed to the following factors: the change of medium of instruction in school from English to Bahasa Malaysia, the change of English school syllabus from a structural base to a commutative base and a wider social penetration that restricts the use of English to the school experience.

It is important to examine teachers' perception of some common usages of ME which may have social, cultural and pedagogical implications in the ME speech community. An essential question to further explore and address is this: Is the use of these common usages a matter of ignorance in English or a matter of choice?

Syntactic Features of Malaysian English

This section presents a list of variant syntactic features identified by previous ME scholars to be commonly and prevalently used by ME speakers. These syntactic features were sourced from key studies that deal with linguistic features of ME, either anecdotal or empirical in form. Cross-referencing has been carried out among the sources to ensure consensus on these ME syntactic features. Although prevalent in use, these are features that have not been endorsed by the education authority in Malaysia as a standard for pedagogical use.

Some common syntactic features found among various sources (Tongue, 1979; Platt & Weber, 1980; Platt, 1982; Wong, 1983; Baskaran, 1987) are listed below as points of reference for data analysis.

TABLE 1
Some Features of Malaysian English (Khaw, 2013)

Nouns and Noun Phrases	Examples
Pluralising or individualising uncountable nouns	*a chalk, a luggage, a mail, informations, equipments, knowledges, feedbacks*
No marking of plural-s	*"I have two sister."*
Pronoun-copying	*"My sister, she is a doctor."*
Omission of object pronoun-*it*	*"I would appreciate if you could complete the enclosed form."*
Verbs and Verb Phrases	
Ellipsis of copula	*"Why you leaving?" "Why you crying?"* *"My sister also not working."* *"My auntie in America."*

Table 1 (continue)

Progressive aspect used with stative meanings	*"They are owning two houses in KL."* *"I am doubting it.", etc.*
No marking of present tense singular verbs	*"My mother cook dinner every evening."*
No marking of past tense verbs	*"I start here last year."*
Prepositional Usages	
Use of different preposition in phrases and phrase verbs	*"He's good in writing scripts."*
Redundant preposition	*"They are seeking for an acceptable compromise."*
Omission of preposition	*"Please supply me ^ a description of…"*
Articles	
Absence of definite or indefinite articles	*"My sister is teacher."*
Word Order	
Lack of inversion with sentence started with negative adverbs.	*"Never I have seen such an ungrateful person."*
Object-subject-verb	*"Such people I despise."* *"TV I don't usually watch."*
The presence of inversion in an embedded interrogative	*"I wonder what have they been doing."*
Invariant Question Tags	
'…isn't it?' and '…is it?'	*"We've seen that film already, isn't it?"* *"She used to live here, isn't it?"* *"You want a lift, is it?"*
Aspect Markers	
'Already' as a completive aspect marker	*e.g. "I already do my work."*
'Used to' as a *habitual aspect marker*	*e.g. "My father used to go out very early." (Meaning: My father goes out very early.)*

In her study investigating Malaysian English teachers' and employers' perception of language usage, Khaw (2008) found that 'I look forward to hear from you' gained acceptance from the majority of the participants, and the researcher believed that 'no marking of gerund' might have become part of the linguistic repertoire of educated Malaysians.

Teachers' Perception of Malaysian English Syntactic Variants

Although there has never been an official effort to consolidate the use of the Malaysian syntactic variants in the pedagogical model in Malaysia, findings of previous studies have shown that there is a trend for some ME syntactic features to be accepted in the written mode (Suppiah, 1983; Baskaran, 1987; Soo, 1990; Khaw, 2008). Most studies found that teacher participants were generally positive towards the use of these usages in the spoken mode, and they had also accepted certain usages in the written mode. Soo (1990) even predicted that full acceptance of these syntactic features in the written mode was just a matter of time.

In addition, some of these features have also been found in the major English newspapers and public notices in Malaysia (Newbrook, 1997; Schneider 2003b). In her study comparing Australian and Malaysian teachers' perceptions of some syntactic features of Malaysian English, Khaw (2008) found that Malaysian teachers were in general more accepting than the Australian teachers of most syntactic features of Malaysian English such as *"use of different preposition in phrases and phrasal verbs"* and *"individualising or pluralising uncountable nouns."*

Substantial empirical examples of ME features found by researchers more than 30 years ago (Tongue, 1979; Platt & Weber, 1980) led them to argue that ME was in a state typical of nativisation. It can thus be expected that in today's ME, these features are commonly in use in the English language of Malaysians and may head toward consolidation (Gill, 1993; 1999).

Teachers are a key professional group in the evaluation of language use, and their attitudes toward language variation not only affect the acceptance of a language variety in a classroom, but also in a speech community. This study investigates how Malaysian secondary school English teachers perceive some common usages of Malaysian English and explore the key issue of whether their acceptance of these common usages of ME is a choice or an indication of the lack of English proficiency.

METHOD AND RESULTS

One hundred and fifty English teachers teaching in two types of Malaysian secondary school, namely national type and Chinese independent secondary schools, were recruited to participate in this study. The teachers were asked to evaluate 23 sentences containing 11 types of syntactic features of ME and to indicate if they accepted or rejected the sentences in formal written contexts. The teachers' responses to each example of usage were tallied and converted into percentage.

The 11 different types of syntactic features incorporated into the sentences are as follows.

1. Absence of definite or indefinite articles
2. Omission of object pronoun-'it'
3. Redundant preposition
4. Omission of preposition
5. Use of different preposition in phrases and phrasal verbs
6. Invariant Question Tags (e.g. Isn't it? Is it?)
7. Individualising or pluralising uncountable nouns
8. The presence of inversion in an embedded interrogative
9. No marking of present tense singular verb
10. No marking of gerund
11. No marking of plural-s

Teachers were divided into two groups according to their age and years of teaching experience. Among the participants, 71 teachers were above 35 years old and had

at least 10 years of teaching experience while 79 were below 35 years old, and 90% of them had less than 10 years of teaching experience. The responses of both groups to each question are tabulated below. The answers are divided into the following categories.

A = Acceptance
R = Rejection with a correct answer
RN = Rejection with a wrong answer or no answer

	Older Teachers (35 years old and above) N=71	**Younger Teachers (35 years old and below) N=79**
1. She came back with three luggages.	A: 16.9 R: 76.1 RN: 7.0	A: 46.8 R: 41.8 RN: 8.9
2. We can't provide the informations you need for the investigation.	A: 4.2 R: 94.4 RN:1.2	A:17.7 R:65.8 RN:13.9
3. She was very upset last night, isn't it?	A:0 R: 77.5 RN: 22.5	A:3.8 R:72.2 RN:22.8
4. We need to get some new softwares for my computer.	A: 25.4 R: 47.9 RN: 25.4	A: 48.1 R: 34.2 RN: 13.9
5. Motorist should observe traffic rules.	A: 31 R: 60.6 RN: 8.5	A: 49.4 R: 26.6 RN: 24.1
6. He is good in fixing faulty electronic appliances.	A: 21.1 R: 62 RN: 16.9	A: 59.5 R: 32.9 RN: 7.6
7. They did not want to get into such situation.	A: 40.8 R: 53.5 RN: 2.8	A: 68.9 R: 7.6 RN: 19.0
8. They were discussing about the issue of plagiarism in class.	A: 23.9 R: 64.8 RN: 8.5	A: 60.8 R: 22.8 RN: 13.9
9. They are seeking for a better life.	A: 39.4 R: 53.5 RN: 5.6	A: 74.7 R: 16.5 RN: 6.3
10. Such condition is unacceptable.	A: 45.1 R: 42.3 RN: 5.6	A: 77.2 R: 8.9 RN: 7.6
11. You are just kidding, is it?	A: 2.8 R: 73.2 RN: 22.5	A: 7.6 R: 62 RN: 27.8
12. Please supply me a description of the snatch thief.	A: 11.3 R: 31 RN: 54.9	A: 29.1 R: 21.5 RN: 44.3

13. This is most expensive meal I have ever had.	A: 7.0 R: 84.5 RN: 7.0	A: 25.3 R: 63.3 RN: 8.9
14. I would appreciate if you could complete the enclosed form.	A: 43.7 R: 36.6 RN: 16.9	A: 57.0 R: 24.1 RN: 13.9
15. I wonder what have they been doing.	A: 18.3 R: 73.2 RN: 8.5	A: 29.1 R: 54.4 RN: 15.2
16. We need to buy more equipments for this lab.	A: 12.7 R: 80.3 RN: 7.0	A: 41.8 R: 49.4 RN: 7.6
17. There was too much work for her to cope up with.	A: 28.2 R: 59.2 RN: 9.9	A: 48.1 R: 30.4 RN: 17.7
18. My husband works for a multinational company and he need to travel to foreign countries from time to time.	A: 4.2 R: 87.3 RN: 5.6	A: 25.3 R: 64.6 RN: 6.3
19. Life is not a bed of roses. We need to take challenges from time to time.	A: 43.7 R: 36.6 RN: 14.1	A: 74.7 R: 13.9 RN: 8.9
20. I don't know what is he trying to tell us.	A: 9.9 R: 78.9 RN: 9.9	A: 29.1 R:51.9 RN:17.7
21. They associate the increasing crime rate to the influx of illegal foreign workers.	A: 38.0 R: 35.2 RN: 19.7	A: 62.0 R: 10.1 RN: 21.5
22. All of you need to pass up the assignment by tomorrow.	A: 25.4 R: 57.7 RN: 14.1	A: 38.0 R: 43.0 RN: 16.5
23. I have enclosed my resume for your reference and I look forward to hear from you soon.	A: 16.9 R: 66.2 RN: 14.1	A: 45.6 R: 34.2 RN: 19.0

On average, the mean of the acceptance rate of all usages among the older teachers is 22.16% while the mean of the acceptance rate of all usages among the younger teachers is 44.33%. The difference in the acceptance rates between the two groups of teachers is statistically significant (22.17%, $p<0.05$).

DISCUSSION

Absence of Definite or Indefinite Articles

It can be seen from the results that the acceptance rates are fairly high for the two examples of 'absence of indefinite articles'. Among the younger teachers, the acceptance rates are 68% and 77%, respectively while the acceptance rates are 45% and 40% among the older teachers. However, when it comes to 'absence of definite articles', the rejection rate is fairly high among both groups. The results imply that the majority of teachers may not be aware of the need of an indefinite article following the word 'such'.

7. They did not want to get into such situation.	A: 40.8 R: 53.5 RN: 2.8	A: 68.9 R: 7.6 RN: 19.0
10. Such condition is unacceptable.	A: 45.1 R: 42.3 RN: 5.6	A: 77.2 R: 8.9 RN: 7.6
13. This is most expensive meal I have ever had.	A: 7.0 R: 84.5 RN: 7.0	A: 25.3 R: 63.3 RN: 8.9

Omission of Object Pronoun- 'it'

Tongue (1979) and other researchers have claimed that 'omission of pronoun object- it' is a typical feature in ME writing. In this study, it was found that 43.7% of the older teachers accepted the usage and 57% of the younger teachers accepted the usage. It is also interesting to note that among those who rejected the sentence nearly 15% of the teachers from both groups did not know what was wrong with the sentence. The results are in line with findings from previous studies. It should be noted that the participants of this study are English teachers, and if they think that this usage is acceptable, there will be considerable social and pedagogical impact in the relevant speech community.

14. I would appreciate if you could complete the enclosed form.	A: 43.7 R: 36.6 RN: 16.9	A: 57.0 R: 24.1 RN: 13.9

Redundant Preposition

'Redundant prepositions' such as 'discuss about' and 'seek for' are commonly found not only in ME but also in other New Englishes (Platt & Weber, 1984). In this study, the results show that there is a trend of accepting this usage among the younger teachers (about 61% for 'discuss about' and 75% for 'seek for'). A local standard may be formed if this usage is accepted by a wider teacher community in the near future.

8. They were discussing about the issue of plagiarism in class.	A: 23.9 R: 64.8 RN: 8.5	A: 60.8 R: 22.8 RN: 13.9
9. They are seeking for a better life.	A: 39.4 R: 53.5 RN: 5.6	A: 74.7 R: 16.5 RN: 6.3
17. There was too much work for her to cope up with.	A: 28.2 R: 59.2 RN: 9.9	A: 48.1 R: 30.4 RN: 17.7

Omission of Preposition

There is generally low rejection of features involving prepositions. This is not surprising as prepositions are typical language feature that allows for innovations in the nativisation phase (Schneider, 2003b). It can be seen from the results that the acceptance rates for two examples are fairly high. Even though the acceptance rate for sentence 12 is low in both groups, it can be seen that most of the teachers did not know what was wrong with the sentence.

12. Please supply me a description of the snatch thief.	A: 11.3 R: 31 RN: 54.9	A: 29.1 R: 21.5 RN: 44.3
19. Life is not a bed of roses. We need to take challenges from time to time.	A: 43.7 R: 36.6 RN: 14.1	A: 74.7 R: 13.9 RN: 8.9

Use of Different Preposition in Phrases and Phrasal Verbs

The results show that nearly 60% of the younger teachers accepted the use of 'good in' while only 21% of the older teachers accepted it. About 62% of the older teachers and 33% of the younger teachers insisted on using 'good at'. As for 'pass up', it can be seen that the rejection rate is fairly high. About 58% of the older teachers and 43% of the younger teachers insisted on using 'hand in' or 'submit'. As for sentence 21, instead of using the preposition 'with,' it can be seen that 'to' was also accepted by a fairly high number of teachers, especially in the younger teacher group (62%).

6. He is good in fixing faulty electronic appliances.	A: 21.1 R: 62 RN: 16.9	A: 59.5 R: 32.9 RN: 7.6
21. They associate the increasing crime rate to the influx of illegal foreign workers.	A: 38.0 R: 35.2 RN: 19.7	A: 62.0 R: 10.1 RN: 21.5
22. All of you need to pass up the assignment by tomorrow.	A: 25.4 R: 57.7 RN: 14.1	A: 38.0 R: 43.0 RN: 16.5

Invariant Question Tags (e.g. isn't it? Is it?)

The results show that the rejection rates are high for the examples of this syntactic feature among the two groups of teachers. It can be concluded that even though this feature is a typical usage of Malaysian English and can always be heard in verbal communication, the majority of teachers from both groups did not accept *Invariant Question Tags (e.g. isn't it? Is it?)* in formal written English.

3. She was very upset last night, isn't it?	A: 0 R: 77.5 RN: 22.5	A: 3.8 R: 72.2 RN: 22.8
11. You are just kidding, is it?	A: 2.8 R: 73.2 RN: 22.5	A: 7.6 R: 62 RN: 27.8

Individualising or Pluralising Uncountable Nouns

It can be seen from the results that as far as the older teachers are concerned, the rejection rates for the examples of the features are fairly high but among the younger teachers, nearly half of them accepted the use of 'luggages' and 'softwares'.

1. She came back with three luggages.	A: 16.9 R: 76.1 RN: 7.0	A: 46.8 R: 41.8 RN: 8.9
2. We can't provide the informations you need for the investigation.	A: 4.2 R: 94.4 RN: 1.2	A: 17.7 R: 65.8 RN: 13.9
4. We need to get some new softwares for my computer.	A: 25.4 R: 47.9 RN: 25.4	A: 48.1 R: 34.2 RN: 13.9
16. We need to buy more equipments for this lab.	A:12.7 R: 80.3 RN:7.0	A:41.8 R:49.4 RN: 7.6

The Presence of Inversion in an Embedded Interrogative

The rejection rates for the examples of this feature are higher than 70% among the older teachers and higher than 50% among the younger teachers. It can be concluded that although this syntactic feature is commonly used in spoken ME, it is not widely accepted in written English by the teachers.

15. I wonder what have they been doing.	A: 18.3 R: 73.2 RN: 8.5	A: 29.1 R: 54.4 RN: 15.2
20. I don't know what is he trying to tell us.	A: 9.9 R: 78.9 RN: 9.9	A: 29.1 R: 51.9 RN: 17.7

No Marking of Present Tense Singular Verb

'No marking of present tense singular verb' is a linguistic habit of most Malaysians especially in spoken communication. It can be seen from the results that this feature was widely rejected by both group of teachers in formal written English, especially among the older and more experienced teachers. It was treated as a grammatical error.

18. My husband works for a multinational company and he need to travel to foreign countries from time to time.	A: 4.2 R: 87.3 RN: 5.6	A: 25.3 R: 64.6 RN: 6.3

No Marking of Gerund

The results show that nearly 50% of the younger teachers accepted the usage. Even though 19% of them rejected the usage, they did not know what was wrong with the sentence. This results are in line with the findings of Khaw's study (2008), implying that 'no marking of gerund' (i.e. look forward to see) may gain popularity and acceptance as a syntactic feature of ME in the near future.

23. I have enclosed my resume for your reference and I look forward to hear from you soon.	A: 16.9 R: 66.2 RN: 14.1	A: 45.6 R: 34.2 RN: 19.0

No Marking of Plural-s

Nearly 50% of the younger teachers accepted the usage while only 31% of the older teachers accepted the usage. Even though 24% of the younger teachers rejected the usage, they did not know what was wrong with the sentence.

5. Motorist should observe traffic rules.	A: 31 R: 60.6 RN: 8.5	A: 49.4 R: 26.6 RN: 24.1

Overall, the younger and less experienced teachers rejected fewer features than the older and more experienced teachers did. Even when both groups of teachers rejected a feature, the rejection rate is much higher in the older and more experienced teacher group. In line with the findings of most previous studies, many syntactic features such as 'omission of object pronoun-it' and 'individualising and pluralising uncountable nouns' were widely accepted by younger Malaysian

teachers in this study, confirming that these features do have a place of significance in formal written contexts in Malaysia. The other features have also become acceptable in formal writing to a clear majority of younger Malaysian teachers in this study. The older teachers, by comparison, are much more negative toward these syntactic features and usages. More often than not, the judgment of the Malaysian teachers in this study testifies to a state of uncertainty over norms instead of stability, which is typical of the *nativisation* phase in the dynamic model of the evolution of New Englishes proposed by Schneider (2003).

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study are consistent with findings of previous studies that English in Malaysia is generally in the *nativisation* phase of Schneider's model (2003); however, there are also signs that *exonormative standards* are still often applied and an *endonormative standard* is not yet consolidated.

While this study has limitations, the findings shed some light on the acceptability of the syntactic variants by Malaysian English teachers, especially among those who are below 35 years old. They also provide evidence that several syntactic features are now widely accepted by Malaysian English teachers, the gatekeepers to progression in education. It is hoped that the findings of this study will serve as a reference and provide impetus for further research on the evolution and teaching of English in Malaysia.

The findings of this study have considerable implications for the teaching of formal writing. In Malaysia, because text books still adhere to the teaching of Standard English as far as syntax is concerned, the high acceptance of these syntactic features by the teachers shows that there is a gap between the pedagogical standard and what they believe to be correct in practice. It can also be seen from the findings that the use of Malaysian common usages more often than not is not a matter of choice, especially among the younger Malaysian teachers.

There are two things about this which deserve the attention of educational policy makers in Malaysia. First, it is imperative to decide the target norm, be it exonormative or endonormative. Second, it is necessary to formulate a pedagogical model that states the norm clearly so that it may be upheld by the speakers and users within the education system without confusion. If the national standard remains to be an exonormative standard, teachers should be trained to uphold the norm, especially in written English. Even if a local standard is adopted, Malaysians should be aware of the reality of local and international standards, so they will not be disadvantaged for communication in the international contexts.

RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

On the basis of the findings of this study, it is suggested that a study, larger in scope and based on a nationwide sampling, be conducted to ascertain the general range of Malaysian teachers' judgment of these syntactic variants taking various demographic and educational factors into consideration. This will provide more comprehensive, representative and consistent information about the *nativisation* of ME.

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