

INTERNATIONALIZATION AGENDA: LANGUAGE AS A BARRIER

Rawdhah Paiz

Kulliyyah of Languages and Management
International Islamic University Malaysia
rawdhaip@gmail.com

Abstract

Internationalization is an important feature of a reputable university. In their mission to internationalize the campus population, universities often admit students from other countries into their programmes. This does not come without challenges especially in situation where students are different in their language backgrounds. The situation is more challenging when the language of instruction is also a foreign language to the local students. This study was conducted to find the reasons for the difficulties faced when communicating with each other between the local and international students at a public university in Malaysia. The students were observed and interviewed for the study. The difficulties in communicating were attributed to many reasons, which include native language interference, use of local variety of the language and students' lack of confidence in using the language.

Keywords: communication, interaction, internationalization

Introduction

Internationalization is an important agenda of many universities in the world. Internationalization normally refers to having students from other countries studying at the university. Internationalization also includes staff and student mobility and collaboration in curriculum development, programme recognition, and international level collaborative research (Urbanovic & Wilkins, 2013). The presence of international students and staff, and the collaborative works among them promote greater understanding of other cultures. This move can also strengthen their knowledge production and encourage international cooperation and solidarity (Marmolejo, 2010).

The presence of international students on campus gives a colourful picture of student life. However, the attempts to internationalize are not without challenges. Religious, cultural and language differences can be a dividing force among them. Where language is concerned, students may face difficulties in understanding each other not just because of the different language that they speak, but because with language comes the beliefs and culture of its speakers. This study will focus on the language barriers between international and local students who study together at the same university.

Background of the Study

This study was conducted at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) where about 20% out of around 25,000 of its student population consists of international students. The students come from about 100 countries. Every student of IIUM is required to fulfill the English and Arabic language requirements before they

can join their programme. These languages are the two languages of instruction at the university. Those who failed to fulfill the language requirements can take courses offered by the Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD). Though English is the main medium of instruction and students have fulfilled the language requirements, communication continues to be a problem among the students.

Problem Statement

There are many studies done on internationalization. However, one that is written from a student's perspective by a student is hardly found. This study will focus on the interaction between local and international students who share the same religion but different language backgrounds. This study analyses the causes of the language barriers among them.

Research Objectives

This study comes out of concerns for the possible failure in the mission to go for internationalization particularly when there is a lack of interaction between local and international students. Hence, the aim of this study was to find the reasons for the lack of interaction between them.

Methodology

Data from this research came mainly from an observation of students' interaction. A mini survey was also conducted on 30 Arab students to find the sounds that they found difficult to pronounce. Apart from that, 20 students were also interviewed to find what they felt was the problems where interaction between the local and international students was concerned. They consisted of two Malaysians who used to live overseas, three Egyptians, four Singaporeans, one Maldivian, two Palestinians, two Indonesians, five Chinese and one Sri Lankan.

Analysis of Results

It was observed that the relationship between the local and the international students was not that close except in situations where the local students attended an international school, had studied overseas or were used to interacting with other races or nationalities. The lack of confidence in using English seemed to be the main reason for this.

Communication Problems that Relate to the Sound System in the Language

Pronunciation was also found to be one of the reasons for the lack of interaction. The different sound systems of the languages spoken by the students made their pronunciation of the English words unclear. For example, a survey conducted on 30 Arab students revealed that the majority of them had problems in pronouncing the letters /p/ and /v/ especially in the early stages of their life. The Arabic language has 28 letters while English has 26. Though there are more letters in the Arabic language, some English sounds do not exist in their language (Javed, 2013, p.10). Thus, the absence of these sounds makes pronouncing English words with these sounds difficult to the Arabs. The same applies to speakers of other languages. The mismatch in the sound system between their native language and English makes it difficult for them to pronounce certain sounds, and this contributes to the difficulty in understanding their utterance.

In English language, the voiceless stops are aspirated when in initial position, example, *pin* [p^hm] and *cap* [k^hap]. However, this does not apply to languages such as

Malay. Hence, these words are pronounced as [pɪn] and [kɑp] respectively. Some speakers also tend to make no distinction with certain sounds in the final position. For instance, the words *significance* and *significant* and *confidence* and *confident* are usually pronounced in the same way by a Malay speaker.

The different accent also contributed to the problems. Some accents are difficult to understand compared to others. For example, Malay is a syllable-timed language whereas English is stress-timed. Hence, when a Malay speaks in English with his/her accent, it can be difficult to understand.

Length is phonemic in English. Yet, this is not differentiated in many of the languages. Thus, it is difficult to distinguish words such as ‘ship’ and ‘sheep’ and ‘dip’ and ‘deep’ when a Malay speaker pronounced them since they are pronounced in the same way. Length is not phonemic in Malay.

Some languages have their own pattern of ‘tones’ such as Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese languages. These also make it difficult for others to understand them. The learners tend to use their own ‘tone’ when speaking in English.

Communication Problems Due to Native Language Structure of the Students

The different syntactical structure of the various languages also contributed to the problem in understanding students from other language backgrounds. The Malaysians tend to use Malaysian English with Malaysian syntactical structure. For example, “*What say you?, shy shy cat and Where got?*”.

The English tense system is difficult to the Malays. Mistakes are often made in using the various tenses. This also means the timing of a certain event is not clear when the wrong tense marking is used. This makes people from countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore difficult to understand.

Where the Arabic speakers are concerned, tenses are also a major problem although the syntactical structure of their language is elaborate. The different syntactical rules contributed to the difficulties in learning English.

Sociolinguistics Reasons for the Lack of Communication

The lack of confidence in using English seemed to be the main reason for the lack of interaction. Apart from that, the Malaysians tend to use Malaysian English (Manglish) when speaking (Ramli & Wong, 2009) and the Singaporean, Singapore English. Among the features of Malaysian English are:

- a) The use of *lah* at the end of the sentence. For example, “No *lah*.”
- b) The use of particle *kan* at the end of the sentence. For instance, “It is hard *kan?*”
- c) The use of direct translation from Malay language. For instance, “Got question?”

They also tend to code-switch (Ramli & Wong, 2009), that is, using a mixture of English and Malay when they speak. For instance,

- a) The food here is nice. Jom makan di sini.
- b) I like this chocolate. Rasanya sangat sedap.
- c) Buku ini sangat berat. I want to put this book here.

Code-mixing is also commonly used by bilingual speakers in different situations. For example,

- a) I love eating nasi lemak.

- b) Saya mahu pergi ke your office.
- c) Mari kita pergi ke beach esok.

Body language is another problem that may cause miscommunication between students of the different cultures. For example, the *peace* sign that we often used actually has a negative connotation to the Syrians. One said it means *war*, and another said it means *half-dead, half alive*. In the Malay culture, it is rude to use the index finger when pointing to an object. The thumb is used instead. However, in many other cultures this is considered as normal.

Semantic Reasons for the Lack of Communication

Some of the meanings of words used are also different from their meaning in the English language. It is noticed that there is a confusion in the use of *come* and *go*, and *take* and *bring* among the Malay speakers. The direction is not the same between English and Malay. It is observed that the Arabs make the same mistake with regards to these words.

Conclusion

Many students experienced difficulties in getting themselves understood by others. Some are afraid to make mistakes, and hence they might not try to communicate in English. However, the international students had less choice where communication is concerned. English is the language that unites them. This could be the reason why their rate of learning the language is faster because English is needed for them to communicate with other students, both local and international.

References

- Javed, F. (2013). Arabic and English Phonetics: A Comparative Study, *The Criterion: An International Journal in English*, 4: 1-13.
- Marmolejo, F. (2010, October 22). Internationalization of Higher Education: the Good, the Bad, and the Unexpected. Retrieved January 15, 2017, from <http://www.chronicle.com/blogs/worldwise/internationalization-of-higher-education-the-good-the-bad-and-the-unexpected/27512>
- Ramli, M. & Wong S.M.L. (2009). The Dynamics of English Language Use Among Malaysian Bloggers: Perceptions of TESL Students at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Retrieved 15 January, 2017 from: [http://journalarticle.ukm.my/4709/1/3-Ramlee Mustapha et al.pdf](http://journalarticle.ukm.my/4709/1/3-Ramlee%20Mustapha%20et%20al.pdf)
- Urbanovic, J., & Wilkins, S. (2013). Internationalisation as a strategy to improve the quality of higher education in small states: Stakeholder perspectives in lithuania. *Higher Education Policy*, 26(3), 373-396. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/hep.2013.6