

A Narrative Essay on Personal Linguistic Experience with Malaysian English

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Having been born in the United States, I learned to speak English from a very young age. I have always considered myself eloquent in English because I have never experienced any problem when communicating with people. It has always been my dream to travel to Asia for my studies and possibly for work as well. My country of choice in Asia was Malaysia, and I travelled there originally to pursue my education. When I first moved there, I was very confident that my proficiency in English would be sufficient for me to communicate with the people I would interact with on a daily basis. I was even more confident because I understood that people in Malaysia learn English and therefore it would not be a challenge to communicate with them. However, I failed to consider the fact that English is studied as a second language in Malaysia given that there are not many English teachers available as discussed by Ahmad Mahir, Jarjis and Kibtiyah (2007). For this reason, I encountered various challenges when communicating with native people. In this essay, I narrate my experience of learning and communicating with people in Malaysia. The essay especially focuses on discussing how Malaysian English is different from American English as well as how the two Englishes relate with each other.

The main difference between Malaysian and American English is that people have different cultural and social backgrounds, and these have serious influences on their English. For instance, I got to understand that English is not the official language spoken in Malaysia. At the same time, teachers often adopt code-switching when teaching students thereby creating a version of English that is different from what is used in books as discussed by Samida and Takahashi (2013). This makes spoken English harder to understand as compared to reading from a book. One of the most common native languages that is often code switched with English is *Rojak*. The use of words from this language by locals made it hard for me to understand what they were saying even though they believed that they were speaking in English. This phenomenon also made me reflect on the

English language that I spoke, and I realized that there were certain words that were not found in the dictionary, but were acceptable and understandable by the people that I grew up within the United States.

In my experience, I was able to understand that Malaysian English is divided into three categories which include the acrolect, mesolect, and basilect, as explained by Thirusanku and Yunus (2012). Acrolect is the easiest version of Malaysian English for foreigners to understand because it is quite similar to British English. However, this version is mostly used in very formal meetings and also the locals might still code-switch in the processes. I, therefore, found this version easier to understand but it was used on very rare occasions. The second version is the Mesolect, and it is the most popular version of Malaysian English. For this reason, the majority of people who consider themselves fluent in English communicate using this category. In my experience, I found it a bit hard to understand because native people would use more words from their native languages thereby making it complicated for a foreigner to understand fully. Even so, I would comfortably keep up with the conversations by relating the native words to the context of the discussion. The last category is the basilect, and it is the richest category of Malaysian English since it contains a lot of words from native languages and local slang. This category is considered informal English because there are local people who do not understand it as well. In my experience, I was also dumbfounded to realize that there can be so many versions of English even within the same cultural and social boundaries.

My experience made me realize that there is no specific version of English that can be considered correct or flawed without first putting into consideration cultural and social factors, as explained by Kirkpatrick (2012). For instance, I always believed that I am eloquent in English because, for the best part of my life, I was communicating with people that I have known for a

long time, and whom we share more than language. I, therefore, used to view foreigners are the ones who were not fluent in English because they had different accents from what I was used to. As such, I believed that such people would only consider themselves fluent in English if they learned and mastered my version of English. However, when I went to Malaysia, I was shocked to be on the other side of the conversation. My version of English was viewed as the flawed one because it was not aligned with the local culture and social beliefs. At this point, I was seen as the outsider who needed to learn and master the Malaysian English to communicate effectively with the locals. Often, I found myself trying to translate things literally and forgot that sometimes the meaning of words could be deeper than their direct translation thereby losing their true meaning as discussed by Liang (2016).

In conclusion, traveling to Malaysia opened my eyes about culture and the role it plays in defining the language that a group of people speaks. While English may be considered a universal language, it is also a native language to different people in the world who have created their variations of the language to enhance communication amongst themselves. As such, it is clear that the accuracy of a language depends on factors such as culture and native languages spoken by a specific group of people. It is therefore important to respect the version of English spoken by a group of people even if it sounds different from what a person is used to.

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