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Othering: When Malaysians are Mocked for ‘Speaking London’

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Abstract: Malaysia is a multicultural society. There are over 130 languages spoken by various ethnicities in the country. The official language is Malay, and it is emphasised as a medium of teaching and learning and a language of knowledge. English continues to be the dominant language in the country's trade and industrial sector. Both languages are taught at primary, secondary and tertiary levels to equip learners for future undertakings. To advance in proficiency, English language users are encouraged to practice the language in non-academic settings. However, studies show that using English openly poses a specific challenge to its users. Speakers report experiencing instances of 'othering' when they use English. 'Othering' happens when speakers of a different language feel ostracised by members of their ethnic group due to prejudiced mentality. It can hinder their progress in English language proficiency by building resentment and insinuating betrayal against their own cultural identity. However, language attitude is shifting. More Malaysians recognise the importance of English in academia and business. This study explores the effects of 'othering' on language learning and cultural identity and how a change in attitude toward English may help to minimise instances of othering. This paper presents findings from data collected and analysed through a semi-systematic review of published literature. The discussion focuses on how a shift in attitude about English might serve to eliminate cases of othering against English users in Malaysian.

Keywords: English, language, othering, cultural identity, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country. Approximately 130 languages are spoken by people of diverse ethnicities of this nation. Malay is the national language, and it is promoted as a medium of instruction and learning and the language of knowledge. English remains the dominant language in the country's commercial and industrial sectors (Angelino & Matronillo, 2020). Both languages are taught at the primary, secondary, and postsecondary levels to prepare learners for future endeavours.

The English language has long been regarded as a valuable tool for learning and personal growth (Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014). Learners are encouraged to practise the languages outside of the classroom to develop proficiency. However, research shows that speaking English outside of the classroom is more difficult for its users. When the speakers communicate in English, they claimed that they feel 'othered' by the people in their community (Lee et al., 2010).

2. Literature Review

Differentiation and diversity are often seen as a field of ideological conflicts centred on a group of people's social representations. In these representations, the "self" and the "other" are positioned as a contradiction that marginalises individuals' collective identities concerning what is viewed as normal or abnormal (Moncada Linares, 2016). Hence the term 'othering'.

Palfreyman (2005) defines othering as specific ways of thinking, speaking, or acting with a socially constructed 'Other'. In instances of othering, a group's discourse defines other groups as adversaries from the perspective of "us" versus "them". In addition, othering is sometimes linked to power dynamics. Examples of othering include maintaining social distance and making generally unfavourable value judgements based on stereotyped beliefs.

Brons (2015) describes two forms of othering: crude and sophisticated. Crude othering occurs when an unequal relationship has been established, i.e., a superior self/in-group in contrast to a subordinate other/out-group, although this

superior-inferior relationship is almost often kept implicit. In other words, othering is created solely via the separation of self and other, i.e., “I am me. You are you,” yet afflicted with a sense of self-superiority. On the other hand, sophisticated othering is implicit and generally unconscious modelling of the other as self, believing that what is true in self is true in the other person too, i.e., “I am me. You are supposed to be like me.” The self/other identification is evident in sophisticated othering. It follows from an argument that is primarily based on a self/other identifying premise. Although both types of othering derive some rhetorical power from their self-affirming conclusion, the rationality of sophisticated othering makes it extremely convincing, therefore, readily justified and accepted without much critical thought.

Studies show that the effects of othering can be damaging. Separating people as “us” and “them” is a colonial mentality that still exists today. Whether implicit or explicit, this segregation may result in injustice, discrimination, or in a worst-case scenario, violence (Velho & Thomas-Olalde, 2011). Othering also impacts one's learning process, especially when the subject matter is unfamiliar or perceived as a threat to one's cultural identity. Many learners who speak or write in a second or foreign language feel that they are becoming different persons in specific ways, such as thinking in the target language and mimicking the target language community's attire or eating habits (Huang, 2014). English language learners are not spared from this prejudiced mindset. Othering occurs when English learners believe they are marginalised by their community when they use the language openly (Preethi, 2020). Othering might impede their development in learning English when the community instils animosity and implies betrayal of their cultural identity.

Despite the adverse effects of othering, it also has positive outcomes. In a language classroom, strict English users and first language speakers commit othering against one another, notably over which language should be used in the class. Code-switching is utilised to achieve instructional goals while also resolving the tension in which first language use in English classrooms is beneficial to teaching and learning (Saxena, 2009).

Furthermore, studies reveal a shift in attitudes toward English, indicating that society's English acquisition is progressing. Attitude may be described as a person's predisposition to respond favourably or adversely to anything (concept, object, person, circumstance). Thus, language learning attitude relates to one's dispositions toward learning languages (Zulfikar et al., 2019).

Individuals learn English for the sake of future orientation, claiming that English was necessary for a successful future as English is utilised in a wide range of industries and vocations. However, it is crucial to remember that English is utilised not just at academic institutions but also in various other settings. As a result, it is understandable that the number of English learners is growing (Zulfikar et al., 2019).

A study by Dital (2012) supports this. He claimed that individuals' motivation was influenced by their objectives and purposes for learning English, represented in their motivational orientation. Individuals were both instrumentally and integratively driven, which means they wanted to learn English for future professions, to comprehend and speak English, and to be able to associate with people who could also speak the language. Many students think that language instruction at the college level should enhance their communication skills in preparation for career placements (Bhaskar & Soundiraraj, 2013).

This study explored the challenges and impact of ‘othering’ on Malaysian speakers of English. The following questions are posed within the context of this issue:

1. What are the effects of ‘othering’ on language learning and cultural identity?
2. How might a change in attitude toward English help to minimise instances of othering?

3. Methodology

A semi-systematic review was used as the research design for this study. A semi-systematic review can be beneficial for finding themes, theoretical views, or common difficulties within a given research field or approach or for identifying components of a theoretical idea (Ward et al., 2009). Among its achievements is synthesising information, creating an agenda for future research, and providing an overview or chronology of a specific issue (Snyder, 2019).

There were four steps in the review protocol.

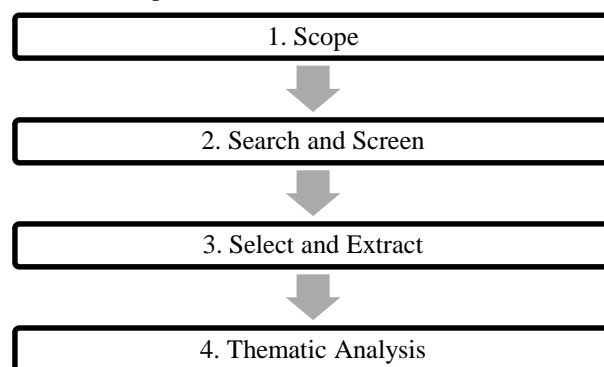


Fig. 1: The review protocol used in the study

3.1 Scope

Scoping reviews are early assessments of the quantity and scope of the existing research literature. The purpose of a scoping review is to determine the type and extent of the scientific evidence. It describes the quantity and quality of literature, maybe through research design and other essential aspects (Grant & Booth, 2009). The scoping assessment was conducted based on six guiding questions (Table 1).

Table 1: Scoping Guiding Questions (Boston College Libraries, 2020)

No.	Scoping Guiding Questions	Remarks
1.	What will be covered in the review?	Malaysian English learners' experiences with othering. Reports on how people's attitudes about the English language are changing.
2.	How extensive will it be?	Literature available on SCOPUS open access only.
3.	How specific? Will it be a comprehensive examination of all relevant literature, or will the scope be restricted to more current material, such as the previous five years?	Literature available on SCOPUS open access only. All relevant literature according to search query.
4.	Are you concentrating on methodological methods, theoretical concerns, qualitative or quantitative research, or all of the above?	All except quantitative research.
5.	Will you extend your search to include books from similar fields?	No.
6.	Will you limit your evaluated material to simply English or will you include research in other languages as well?	English only.

The inclusion criteria were original research publications with no methodology constraints, in the context of Malaysia, in English and open access on SCOPUS. Review articles, publications in languages other than English and the publication date were all excluded.

3.2 Search and Screen

The SCOPUS database was used to identify the study sample for the first stage in the search and screening process. Only open access journal articles were obtained. Keywords for the search query include TITLE-ABS-KEY (othering AND English AND cultural identity), TITLE-ABS-KEY (othering AND English AND Malaysia), TITLE-ABS-KEY (othering OR prejudice AND English OR language AND Malaysia), TITLE-ABS-KEY (other AND English AND Malaysia AND culture), TITLE-ABS-KEY (cultural identity AND English language AND Malaysia), TITLE-ABS-KEY (undergraduates AND Malaysian AND attitudes AND English), and TITLE-ABS-KEY (Malaysia AND English AND identity). The first search returned 141 publications, which were scaled back to 127 after duplicates were removed. Next, 111 papers were discarded based on title, abstract, publication type and accessibility. This shortlisting resulted in only 16 articles left.

3.3 Select and Extract

Purposive sampling was utilised to choose articles for further reading, which began with a review of the literature specifically on issues of othering in Malaysia. The evaluation's objective was to analyse and identify critical themes to the issue and steps to address the issue. As a result, the articles chosen were those that evaluated or used models or theories that addressed all or part of the effects of 'othering' on language learning and cultural identity and how a change in attitude toward English may help to minimise instances of othering. The papers were thoroughly reviewed for their purpose, significant findings or topics covered in the research, and relevance to the study. The selection was made until saturation was reached in all cases. This procedure shortlisted three publications that were both relevant and instructive to the research. Table 2 provides an overview of the publications.

3.4 Thematic Analysis

There are numerous approaches to thematic analysis. In this study, a six-step process (Braun & Clarke, n.d.; Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted – familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up.

Table 2: Overview of Selected Papers

Study	Aim and Key Results	RQ 1: What are the effects of 'othering' on language learning and cultural identity?	RQ 2: How might a change in attitude toward English help to minimise instances of othering?
Lee et al. (2010) <i>The English language and its impact on identities of multilingual Malaysian undergraduates</i> GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies	To investigate the impact of English on the identities of young Malaysian students at various Malaysian private and public institutions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multilingualism with English emerging as the dominant language. • English is viewed as a pragmatic language and a language of empowerment. • Varying degrees of 'Othering.' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Othering was experienced by the respondents, although in a moderate manner. For example, English users were sneered at and given hurtful labels. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respondents did not appear to feel resentful or conflicted because of the unfavourable comments. • There is a shift in attitudes toward English, progressing towards greater acceptance. • Malaysian students are adopting English as their own.
Ting & Sussex (2002) <i>Language choice among the Foochows in Sarawak, Malaysia</i> Multilingua	To examine the variables influencing the language choices of Sarawak's Chinese Foochows, with a specific emphasis on how the use of the Foochow dialect in comparison to English and other languages may result in a shift in linguistic allegiance away from Foochow. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The languages and dialects spoken. • Self-perception of English and Malay proficiency • Frequency of following the interlocutor's language choices • Languages used in various domains and with various people in the family domain • Language choice with colleagues and members of the public 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The participants' language choices with colleagues were based on ethnicity and hierarchical status in their language choices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a shift from the use of dialects in the local sub-transactional domain to the use of standard languages such as English in broader contexts. • English maintains its role as the language of business communication. • English is valued for facilitating access to tertiary education and employment opportunities.
Wong et al. (2012) <i>English use as an identity marker among Malaysian undergraduates</i> 3L: Language, Linguistics, Literature®	To examine the influence of English on young Malaysian adults' sociocultural identity formation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of English as a social and cultural capital • Linguistic hybridity • Being othered because of English use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affected respondents considered as being less Malay • Othered by being unfriendly or giving the cold shoulder, as well as identifying as having lost roots or un-Malay • Members of their community singled them out for not knowing the ethnic language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They recognise the cultural significance of understanding English and the necessity of retaining Bahasa Malaysia and learning their ethnic tongue. • Code-switching between the languages is simple, and they have a strong feeling of belonging to Malaysia, regardless of English,

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seen as an outsider who embraced another culture while abandoning their own culture 	Bahasa Malaysia or ethnic tongue proficiency level.
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4. Findings

The investigation yielded two themes and descriptions of people's changing attitudes towards English.

4.1 Theme 1: Othering is Followed by Mocking

One of the negative behaviours of othering is mocking one's cultural identity or lack thereof. The study by Wong et al. (2012) lists unkind remarks made against English users, such as *“less Malay,” “lupa diri,” “bukan Melayu,”* and *“mat salleh celup”* (p. 152). Descriptions of other taunting remarks are *“There is like a stigma attached to it, if you're Indian and you don't speak Tamil, it's kind of prejudice actually, they start thinking you're perasan...,”* (p. 152) and *“When they see Chinese they expect us to speak in Mandarin as well, so when we don't, there's immediately a sort of boundary there...a barrier there. And also, I tend to notice that they don't see us as Chinese as they are just because we don't speak their Mandarin”* (p. 152). Furthermore, those who speak English are seen as outsiders who have embraced another culture while abandoning their own (Wong et al., 2012).

Another way of insulting English speakers is to portray them as arrogant. For example, participants in the Lee et al. (2010) study said, *“When you speak English, and stuff, people will condemn you, saying that uh, you are like, show off”* and *“very sombong”* (p. 96).

4.2 Theme 2: Both Sides are Guilty of Othering

The impact of othering on English language users is described in Theme 1. Interestingly, the published research also indicated that English users engage in othering toward people who marginalise them. Some English speakers think or act in ways that make them feel superior to people who do not speak the language. For example, some English users believe that their English fluency offers them an advantage over their peers who do not speak the language, *“I feel I'm one step ahead of them as... they really can't speak that fluently so I feel that's an advantage that I know little more than them”* (Lee et al., 2010: 95).

In addition, being fluent in English was seen to show intellectual superiority, *“People started like, looking up to you and they – they value your opinion especially the guys. They stopped fighting with me... they stopped arguing with me because they were afraid they going to lose”* (Lee et al., 2010: 95). A former teacher unintentionally admitted to othering low-proficiency students by saying, *“First class...all Chinese, Indian, Malay can speak English, but...last class cannot speak English at all. You know, they don't understand, they cannot speak. Um...so it shows how their level of education...can show their social class”* (Wong et al., 2012: 150-151).

However, not all instances of othering committed by English speakers are damaging. Ting and Sussex (2002) found that participants prioritised their hierarchical status among co-workers to establish a professional identity. English remained the most used language for business communication regardless of the interlocutors' cultural identities or English proficiency levels. Statements such as, *“English is more to executive style, the top. . . . At executive level, English breaks down barriers. We don't have to consider whether the other person is an Indian or a Chinese. Don't have to think whether they know the language”* (p. 9) reveal that when speaking in a business context, English is the preferred language. However, when interacting with co-workers who are less fluent in English, English speakers are prepared to engage in code-switching for the purpose of communication. *“He often started off speaking English, the official language of his workplace, but adapted to his colleagues' language preferences.”* (p. 10).

4.3 Change in Attitudes Toward English

There is a shift in attitudes toward English, progressing towards greater acceptance. The selected literature unveiled that the shift in attitudes toward English is influenced by an underlying recognition of the importance of learning English. According to Wong et al. (2012), individuals who can communicate well in English are considered to be in a better social position, well-educated, and well-respected. Wong's research respondent stated unequivocally that *“It doesn't matter what you learn in university, when you get to the job, then, then, all you need is English”* (p. 151). In addition, they believed that knowing just Malay limited their worldview, but understanding English broadened it. This perception shows that communicating in the language has provided privileged access to information and knowledge.

In the home domain, the stronghold of dialect usage, there is a generational change in linguistic allegiance away from Foochow and toward Mandarin Chinese and English. Ting & Sussex (2002) wrote, *“An advanced case of language shift was shown by Lee, who was reported speaking only English to her siblings. Lee's language behaviour was not surprising because she had listed English as the only important language”* (p. 11). In addition, English was preferred over Foochow for communicating with children. Foochow families today value English and Chinese Mandarin above

Foochow in terms of utility as they believed that the ability to communicate in English was essential for gaining access to higher education and job possibilities (Ting & Sussex, 2002).

Society is not the only one who is experiencing a mindset evolution. Lee et al. (2010) stated that those who do not have the same degree of spoken English as multilingual speakers are the ones who are othering the English users. Despite being at the receiving end of othering, English users do not appear to feel animosity or conflict due to the unfavourable comments. Moreover, the acceptance rate of English among Malaysian students is rising. This development is due to their recognition of the language as an indispensable global language that they may embrace and adopt as their own. They also use English as a tool to help them make sense of the world (Lee et al., 2010).

5. Discussion

“Us” versus “Them”, a socially constructed separation, can lead to alienation and perpetuate stereotypes, prejudice, and unfairness among groups of any social identity, as well as discrimination and prejudice in the workplace and throughout society (Moncada Linares, 2016). Therefore, the goal of this study was to address two issues.

Firstly, the selected published literature identified the effects of ‘othering’ on language learning and cultural identity. Othering causes people to engage in undesirable behaviours, such as using derogatory language to alienate English speakers who are usually members of the same ethnic group as the mockers. The primary goal of the mocking was to dissuade English speakers from speaking the language in the company of people who saw it as anti-cultural. Attacks on the English users' cultural identities are intended to demonstrate that when they talk in English, they have given up their cultural identity and have become an outsider to their ethnic group. This behaviour is an example of sophisticated othering, as described by Brons (2015), in which the person committing othering expects the othered to communicate in their own language. This unusual approach of discouraging people from speaking English may be due to the mockers' lack of proficiency in the language. As a result, when they come across someone who speaks English well or dares to use it at all, they feel small (Ibrahim et al., 2018). Furthermore, when the mockers outnumber the English user who is being ridiculed, taunting is more likely to occur. This situation demonstrates that the mockers engage in othering when they believe the group will encourage their negative behaviour (Schwalbe et al., 2000).

Interestingly, both parties have engaged in othering against each other. While the primary purpose of othering was to discourage English speakers from using the language, English speakers, in contrast, commits othering to display their superiority in social status and intellectual standing against those who do not use the language. English speakers recognise English as a worldwide language that benefits them in many aspects of their lives. They are pleased to have learned the language and to be able to utilise it freely in academic and professional contexts. As a result, they perceive themselves as having more chances and more intelligent than individuals who do not speak English fluently.

However, othering is not always an unpleasant experience. When attentive language users are aware of the dichotomy in their environment, they will effortlessly code-switch to the proper language for the scenario. This thoughtfulness may inspire a shift in views about the English language, which is the second part of the discussion.

The articles indicate that there has been a positive shift in attitude toward English. This change is obviously in favour of reducing instances of othering of English users. Society is becoming more open and accepting of English as necessary for academic and professional purposes. Families, students, and employees recognise English as a language that promotes communication and creates a positive outlook among peers at school and work. Another positive shift is that English learners learn to disregard the ridicule and focus entirely on developing their language skills. This shift demonstrates that English speakers are experiencing personal growth in their responses to instances of othering.

6. Conclusion

The findings show that othering has a detrimental influence on English users in Malaysia. Being the targeted "other" has an impact on one's sense of self and cultural identity. However, a change in attitude toward English is shifting the situation in Malaysia in favour of English language growth. To break down walls of othering, thoughtfulness and openness are crucial. Being thoughtful and open means being cautious about what we say, refusing to accept stereotypes about others, and getting to know individuals and facts before forming conclusions (Knight, 2009). Moreover, learners should be given opportunities to negotiate meanings with people from other cultures, as well as critically examine their points of view, behaviours, and products, as well as reflect on self in order to improve their knowledge, understanding, and collaboration with others (Moncada Linares, 2016).

More study is needed in this area due to the scarcity of data, particularly on the collective concerns of othering and cultural identity among Malaysians who use English as a second language. A future study might include first-language users as samples. Future findings from the study will be used to advise or support long-term changes in how Malaysian society acts in an English-speaking environment to encourage thoughtfulness, openness and personal growth.

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