

Conception of Personal Pronouns in a Multi-Racial Society

CONCEPTION DES PRONOMS PERSONNELS DANS UNE SOCIÉTÉ MULTI-ÉTHNIQUE

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Abstract: Learning grammar for most people especially ESL learners is a daunting and difficult task. It is especially true in Malaysia where students find English grammar difficult to comprehend. Interference from major ethnic groups' mother tongues play a great influence in shaping the students' attitudes and understandings of the English grammar including personal pronouns. This study tried to ascertain which aspects of personal pronouns that multi- ethnic students find most difficult and it hypothesized that different ethnic groups will produce different results. Even though all groups had the basic knowledge in using personal pronouns, they got confused when it came to having object pronouns taking the role of what they thought as an acceptable and common everyday usage of subject pronouns. One problematic area faced by the students in the use of personal pronouns was deciding on the correct pronoun to refer to plural third person (neuter) antecedents. There was a significant difference in the performance of a pronouns elicitation task between ethnic groups of students.

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Résumé: Pour la plupart des gens, notamment pour ceux qui apprennent l'anglais en tant que la deuxième langue, la grammaire est une tâche épuisante et difficile. C'est particulièrement vrai en Malaisie, où les étudiants trouvent que la grammaire anglaise est difficile à comprendre. L'ingérence de la langue maternelle des principaux groupes ethniques a une grande influence sur le façonnement des attitudes des élèves et leur compréhension de la grammaire anglaise, y compris les pronoms personnels. Cette étude a tenté de déterminer les aspects des pronoms personnels les plus difficiles pour les élèves multi-ethniques et il est censé que chez les différents groupes ethniques, on obtiendra des résultats différents. Même si tous les groupes avaient les connaissances de base dans l'utilisation des pronoms personnels, ils deviendront troublés quand les pronoms objets jouent le rôle de ce qu'ils ont pensé comme l'usage acceptable, quotidien et commun des pronoms sujets. L'un des problèmes rencontrés par les étudiants dans l'utilisation des pronoms personnels a été de choisir le pronom correct pour se référer à la troisième personne au pluriel (neutre) antécédents. Il y avait une différence significative entre les groupes ethniques des élèves.

Mots-Clés: pronoms personnels; groupes ethniques; Malaysia; mother tongue; ESL learners

1. INTRODUCTION

Generally, grammar is not known as the most likeable subject because of many reasons. This is especially common in the Malaysian scenario where many students apparently do not find this area of the English language as "interesting" and "straightforward". In addition, interference from the internalized grammar of the mother tongues of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia (Bahasa Melayu, Tamil, Mandarin, Cantonese, Hakka etc) plays a very important role in shaping the student's attitudes and understandings of the English language and its perceived grammar complexity. An aspect of English grammar that Malaysian students are often struggling on is "pronoun".

This study focused on the subject and object personal pronouns as each of them had several forms which could cause confusions especially if the usage was different from personal pronouns utilized in Malaysian students' mother tongues. The purposes of the study were to identify which aspect of personal pronouns that ESL learners in Malaysia had problems with and whether there was a significant difference in the performance of a pronoun elicitation task between different ethnic groups.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study was not an in-depth study of subject and object personal pronouns and their usage among all Malaysian students. It was nevertheless a selection of subject and object pronouns usage by a very small sample. It is also important to note that this study was restricted as due to inequality number of distributions of students according to their ethnic groups (Malay, Indian and Chinese) in class. The data gathered in this research was of primary resource. Test papers consisting questions on subject and object personal pronouns were distributed to 25 Malaysian undergraduates. The data gathered was analyzed on

the basis of frequency and percentage.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Question 1 tested students on their knowledge underlining the basic use of the subject pronouns.

3.1 Basic usage of subject pronouns

In the subject pronoun test, the Chinese scored the highest mark (65%); Indians (58%) and Malays got the lowest score (58%). For the Chinese, nearly all questions were answered correctly. Evidently, the Indian students performed badly for the question “they are from a friend” which none of them got it right. Most of them answered the questions with “its”. The Malays faced the same problem for questions “they are from a friend” and “it sails for London tomorrow”. For the question “they are fierce”, only one student answered it correctly. As for others, the answers given for that question were similar to the Indians ranging from “its” or “it’ s”.

These students tended to apply similar rules to singular –plural nouns to the rules for singular –plural personal pronouns. One of the general rules for singular-plural nouns is that in order to change a singular noun to a plural one, we only need to add an -s to the noun. For example “a boy “becomes “boys”. Hitherto, they applied the same rule in changing a singular personal pronoun to a plural one by adding an -s. Thus “it” conveniently became “its”.

3.2 More advanced use of subject personal pronouns

Chinese students did not perform well in this section of the test. For question b2 which was “What did you say to **she/her** to make **she/ her** change the mind?”, only 20% of the Chinese students managed to get the answer correct. It seemed like they were confused over the usage of the subject (She) and object (*her*) pronoun. This was apparently due to their mother tongue-interference and a common usage was like: “*Did she change her mind?*”

So, they might think subject pronoun was more appropriate in: “... to make her change her mind?”

As for question e (why can’t they/them be quiet?), 50% of the Chinese students got it wrong and another 50% got it correct. Again, it gave a similar pattern of confusion over the usage of subject and object pronoun.

Apparently, the Indian students did not seem to have major problems in dealing with personal pronouns. They managed to get all answers correct except for question b (ii), g and h, which were in this order (what did you say to she/her to make she/ her change the mind; come and see we/us soon; When will we see you/he/she again?)

Question b2 is the most problematic question as only 20% of them got it right. This was similar in pattern with the Malay and Chinese respondents. As for g and h, 60% of them got it correct. This was quite surprising as the Malay and Chinese groups did not seem to have problems with those two questions.

Overall, we could conclude that though all groups had the basic knowledge in using personal pronouns, they still would get confused when it came to having object pronouns taking the role of what they thought as an acceptable and common everyday usage of subject pronouns as in:

I can’t let them be quite. (/) vs. Can’t them be quiet? (x)

Will she change her mind? (/) vs. ...to make she change her mind? (x)

It was clear that Indian students performed better in terms of the usage of subject personal pronouns. They managed to answer all questions on subject personal pronouns correctly (100%). The Malays also performed better compared to the Chinese in the use of subject personal pronouns.

However, when it came to object personal pronouns, all ethnic groups seemed to have problems dealing with them. The Indians still showed better grasp of understandings as they managed to get all object pronouns correct except for question h (60% correct), g (60% correct) and b2, in which they performed the worst (only 20% correct).

All types of pronouns for first and third persons in their subject and object positions were included. The pronoun type for second person (you) was left out on purpose since it was assumed that the students have no problem in using it. It was also due to the difficulty in setting a contextually meaningful sentence that required the sole use of that particular pronoun.

4. CONCLUSION

From the findings, it can be concluded that:

First, problematic aspects in the usage of personal pronouns:

One problematic area faced by the students in the use of personal pronouns was deciding on the correct pronoun to refer to plural third person (neuter) antecedents e.g. *lions, pictures*, etc. for both subject and object positions. Other than that, students seemed to be coping well in the use of personal pronouns.

Second, Difference in performance between ethnic groups:

There seemed to be a significant difference in the performance of a pronouns elicitation task between ethnic groups. Malay students seemed to be quite weak in the task compared to their Chinese and Indian friends. This was obvious from the percentage of their average correct answers for both types of pronouns which was only 53.6%. Chinese and Indian students seemed to be performing much better than the Malay students by getting 77.1% and 74.3% correct answer respectively. From the figures, it also indicated that there seemed to be not much difference in the performance between the Chinese and Indian students.

Generally the Indian respondents performed the best amongst the three ethnic groups. It showed that they have understood the basic concepts underlining the use of relative pronoun for the subject and object forms. However, the Malay students did not perform as well as their Chinese and Indian friends. The identified problem areas for both the Chinese and Malay groups were with the usage of *we, they, and them*.

All the Malay subjects made the same mistake in the wrong use of "I" and "we" in the function of object pronouns that were "me" and "us" respectively in their essays. The possible reason for the error was that the interference of the subjects' mother tongue as they could not find the equivalent usage of "me" and "us" in their language. Thus, their solution to the matter was by resorting to "I" and "we".

However, when it came to essay writings, the pattern changed. This time, the Malay students performed better in the usage of subject and object pronouns, followed by the Indians and Chinese, respectively.

Hypothesis 1: ESL learners of English have problems in the usage of personal (subject and object) pronouns.

From the analysis of five questions given in the test, it was found that ESL learners of English did have problems in the use of personal pronouns (subject and object). This was proved by their scores in all questions. Not all questions (though simple) were answered correctly and some of the scores were

even below 50%. Majority of the subjects failed to fully differentiate the functions of subject and object pronouns. A few also failed to identify the use of subject and object pronouns for non human singular or plural which were “it”, “they” and “them”.

Hypothesis 2: There is a significant difference in the performance of pronouns elicitation task between ethnic groups of students.

There was a significant difference in the performance of a pronouns elicitation task between ethnic groups of students. The Indians had the highest scores for questions on Object Pronouns, Simple Mixed Usage of Subject and Object Pronouns, and More Advanced Mixed Usage of Subject and Object Pronouns. For questions on Simple Subject Pronouns, they came second after the Chinese by 7% ; while for questions on the essay writing, they were after the Malay students by 1%. The Malays, on the other hand, scored the lowest marks for the first four questions but scored in the last question.

This study was interesting as it proved that different ethnic groups in Malaysia perceived and conceptualized the usage of English personal pronouns differently and were influenced by their mother tongue languages in doing so. This interference took place even though they learned ESL together in the same class, consequently getting the same input of personal pronouns.

This study should be further explored by looking at a wider population in Malaysia such as the whole population of primary, secondary schools as well as tertiary levels.

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Student’s Demographic Data

Table 1a: Malay students: Number of respondents= 10

Age	From 19 – 25 years old
Sex	50% male, 50% female
Mother Tongue	100% spoke Malay
Second Language	40% spoke English, 20% English (40% did not answer this particular question)
Language use to communicate with friends	100% used Malay
Language use to communicate with lecturers	80% used Malay, 20% used both Malay and English
English Grade in SPM	60% obtained P7, 10% each for F9, C6 and C4 (1 respondent left the question unanswered)

Table 1b: Chinese students: Number of respondents= 10

Age	From 21– 22 years old
Sex	40% male, 60% female
Mother Tongue	90% spoke Mandarin, 10% spoke Hakka
Second Language	50% spoke Malay, 20% Cantonese, 10% used both Mandarin and Malay
Language use to communicate with friends	80% used Mandarin, 10% used both Mandarin and English and another 10% used Mandarin and Malay
Language use to communicate with lecturers	60% used English, 30% used both Malay and English , 10% used only Malay
English Grade in SPM	70% obtained P7, 20% C6 and 10% A2

Table 1c: Indian students: Number of respondents= 5

Age	From 21– 24 years old
Sex	40% male, 60% female
Mother Tongue	100% spoke Tamil
Second Language	60% spoke Malay, 40% English
Language use to communicate with friends	80% used Tamil, 10% used both Tamil and English
Language use to communicate with lecturers	80% used English, 20% used both Malay and English
English Grade in SPM	80% obtained P7, 20% C6

Table 2(a): Pronouns Tested in Question 1

Person		Subject Pronoun	Frequency
First	Singular	I	-
	Plural	We	-
Second	Singular	You	-
	plural	you	-
Third	<u>Singular</u>		
	Masculine	He	1
	Feminine	She	1
	Neuter	It	4
	<u>Plural</u>		
	Masculine	They	1
	Feminine		
Neuter	They	3	

Table 3: Percentage of correct answers according to questions and races

	Malay	Chinese	Indian
a) He knows how to drive car	80	70	50
b) It is peaceful	10	60	50
c) They are leaving for Kuching	80	90	50
d) They are from a friend	0	50	0
e) It sails for London tomorrow	10	50	50
f) It was fierce	30	70	30
g) It is very useful	20	60	30
h) She is my sister	80	100	30
i) They away in the breeze	0	40	0
j) They are fierce	10	60	0
Average	32	65	58

Table 4 : percentage of student's responses

Questions	Malay			Chinese			Indian		
		x	-		x	-		x	-
a) He/ Him is hiding under the house	100%			100%			100%		
b) what did you say to she/her to make she/her change the mind	70% 50%	10% 30%	20% 20%	90% 20%	10% 80%		100%		
c) I/me cannot remember meeting he/him before	100% 70%	30%		100% 80%	20%		20%	80%	
d) They/ them are starting to make we/us angry	90% 50%	40%	10% 10%	100% 70%	20%	10%	100%		
e) why can't they/them be quiet?	50%	50%		50%	50%		100%		
f) if you want I / me to help you, all you have to do is ask	80%	10%	10%	100%			100%		
g) come and see we/us soon	100%			100%			60%	40%	
h) When will we see you/he/she again?	90%	10%		90%	10%		60%	40%	
i) He/him told I/me that he/ him was not going to the party.	100% 80% 90%	10% 10%	10%	100% 100% 80%	20%		100% 100% 100%		
j) They/them are angry with we/us did not meet they/them	100% 90% 100%	10%	10%	100% 100% 90%	10%		100% 100% 100%		
Average	83.3%			87.2%			91.1%		

Table 5: Percentage of Correct Answer According to Question and Ethnic Group

Question	Malay	Chinese	Indian
a) Rosnah has a book. <u>She</u> bought it last week.	90 60	90 100	100 100
b) I know the new student. But Rahim doesn't know <u>them</u> yet.	10	80	100
c) Rajkumar is in Kanada. He is studying at a university	100	100	100
d) Ah Chong is in town. I saw <u>him</u> at the bookstore yesterday.	80	100	100
e) I have cat. It has white fur	80	90	100
f) Lions are mammals. <u>They</u> are warm blooded animals.	20	80	40
g) Devi and I have a dinner invitation. Pak Ali and Mak Munah want <u>us</u> to come to dinner at their house.	0	90	100
h) Yuen Fatt and I are be friend. <u>We</u> go to the library together.	90	100	100
i) Mai Lin is my neighbour. I talk to <u>her</u> every day.	20 20	10 30	0 0
j) "I love you Fendi. Please don't leave me," begged Mona	80	100	100
k) Nathan and Siva are twins. <u>They</u> like to do things together.	100	100	100
i) I have two pictures on my wall. I like <u>them</u> very much.	0	10	60

Table 6: Percentage of correct answer to Question and Ethnic Groups

Question	Malay (%)		Chinese (%)		Indian (%)	
1) <u>He</u> has two brothers	80	-	100	-	100	-
2) <u>it</u> is a beautiful city, as you know	60	10	70	-	100	-
3) I met <u>them</u> (the two brothers) when 4. <u>they</u> were all working at the mall that 5. I liked to go after school.	80 50 40	10 10 10	90 30 30	-	100 100 0	-
6) <u>He</u> is a swinging single with two girlfriends.	80	10	100	-	100	-
7) one of his girlfriends as a singer, and <u>she</u> sings every night with her twin sister	60	10	100	-	80	-
-8) <u>It</u> is a huge German Shepherd	30	10	60	-	80 80	-
9) The dog likes to go camping with <u>them</u> , so 10. <u>They</u> take 11. <u>it</u> with them every chance 12. <u>they</u> get.	40 10 30 0	10 10 10 40	60 40 80 80	-	80 80 100 80	-
13) In fact it will sleep between 14. <u>them</u>	20 20	40 40	40 40	-	80 80	-
14) it is pretty much a people dog	20	40	80	-	80	-
15) by that, I mean <u>it</u> doesn't like to be left alone	10	40	90	-	80	-
16) Now that <u>we</u> know a little bit about john, two brothers, and 18. <u>it</u> , read on to find out more about 19. <u>them</u> as 20. <u>they</u> share a lot of common interests.	0 0 10 10	40 40 40 40	20 10 50 30	- - - -	0 0 0 0	- - - -

(-) denotes unanswered questions

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