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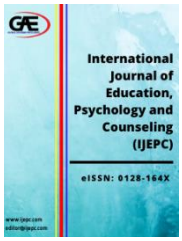

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EXPLORING ENGLISH MONOPHTHONGS PERCEPTION AND PRODUCTION IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract:

This abstract presents a comprehensive overview of the challenges and considerations surrounding the effective communication of English as a second language (ESL) among Malaysian learners. While verbal and written communication forms are essential in daily interactions, language proficiency and accurate pronunciation are integral to successful message transmission. The Malaysian context, where English is a secondary language frequently employed for formal communication and international discourse, underscores the significance of proficient language use. Despite the prevalence of English instruction, students often excel academically but struggle to apply the language practically, especially in pronunciation. The prevailing emphasis on examination performance over practical language skills contributes to this disparity. Research indicates that ESL learners face difficulties accurately articulating sounds, leading to misunderstandings and inhibiting practical discourse. These challenges are further exacerbated by socio-cultural perceptions that tie accurate pronunciation to professionalism and social status. Efforts to address this issue include the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR), which aims to cultivate well-rounded language skills among students. However, the practical application of English, particularly pronunciation, remains an area of concern. By exploring the complex interplay between language acquisition, educational strategies, and cultural perceptions, this abstract highlights the need for a holistic approach to ESL communication. By recognising the multifaceted nature of language proficiency and prioritising practical language skills alongside theoretical knowledge, Malaysia can better equip learners to engage confidently and effectively in English discourse. Ultimately, the abstract emphasises the importance of nurturing a generation of English language users who can navigate the demands of global communication and contribute to the challenges of the modern world.

Keywords:

English Vowel, Malay Vowel, Production, Perception, SLA

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Introduction

Effective communication is a crucial skill that involves verbal and written communication. Verbal communication is prevalent in daily life, both in formal and informal contexts. Communication success depends on the receiver's understanding of the message from the transmitter, and language plays a pivotal role in achieving this (Hadijah & Azlan, 2020). Language proficiency, particularly in English, is a requirement for Malaysians due to the country's adoption of English as its official second language during the colonial era. However, practical language skills, such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, are vital for effective language acquisition. However, they are often overshadowed by the focus on academic performance typical of many Asian communities (Lee, 2017).

Pronunciation is often overlooked, despite its crucial role in effective communication. Incorrect pronunciation can lead to misunderstandings and discomfort, reducing confidence and discouraging English communication (Deterding, 2015). To address these challenges, the Second Shift of the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 highlights the importance of language proficiency, especially in Malay and English. However, Malaysian students often struggle to apply the language practically, emphasising examination success tending to sideline less prioritised aspects of language education, such as speaking skills, including pronunciation (Lee, 2017). Intelligibility, the extent to which speech can be understood, is crucial for effective communication. However, the lack of a standardised method for teaching pronunciation poses a challenge for English teachers in Malaysia. Pronunciation is often regarded as a less favoured topic in classrooms, leading to the inadequate practical application of English, particularly in pronunciation (Deterding, 2015). The Ministry introduced the Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) in 2011 to address education quality, but the practical application of English, particularly in terms of pronunciation, remains a concern.

Given this context, the research aims to investigate how Malay speaking English as a second language produces and distinguishes English short and long vowel sounds. By delving into this domain, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential interventions necessary to enhance pronunciation skills among Malaysian English learners.

Malay and English Vowel System

Malay and English are often considered similar due to their comparable Romanic writing systems. However, when examining the vowel system, it becomes apparent that the sounds of each language differ. Malay has six monophthongs: /i/, /e/, /a/, /ə/, /o/, and /u/ (Nik Safiah et al., 2008; Ramli et al., 2020), while English has 11 monophthongs: six short vowels (/ɪ/, /ʊ/, /ʌ/, /ɒ/, /ə/, /e/) and five long vowels (/iː/, /uː/, /ɑː/, /ɔː/, /ɜː/) (Davenport & Hannahs, 2020; Gurnam & Suthagar, 2010; Roach, 2010). Figures 1 and 2 visually represent the vowel sounds' positions on their respective language vowel charts.

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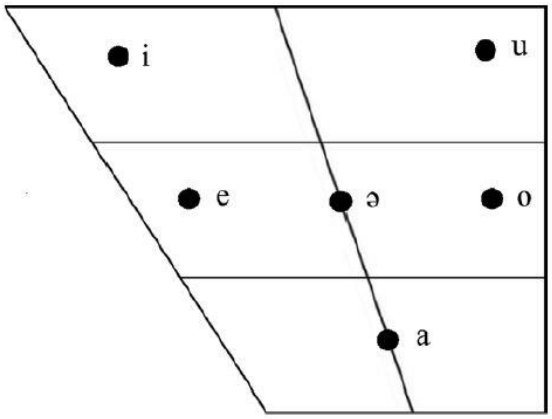

Figure 1: Malay Vowel Chart

The position of Malay vowel sounds is demonstrated in Figure 1. According to the chart, Malay does not have long vowels like English. The vowel sound /i/ is located at the front and high, similar to /u/, except that /u/ is at the back. Additionally, the vowel sound /ə/ is positioned in the middle of the chart, while /a/ is located at the front and low. Lastly, the vowel sound /o/ is located at the middle back, while /e/ is at the middle front.

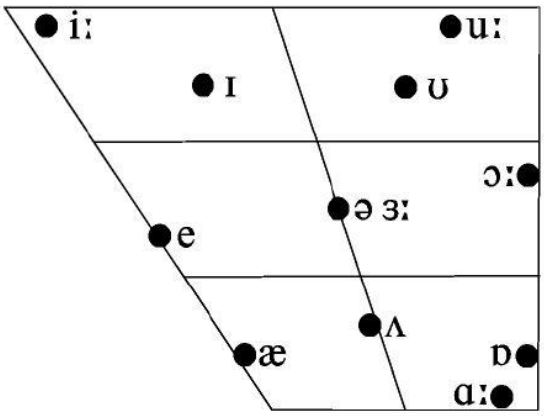

Figure 2 English Vowel Cardinal Chart

Let us take a look at the positions of monophthongs on Figure 2. Starting from the top-right corner, we have the location of /iː/. Moving down a bit towards the centre, we have /ɪ/. /uː/ is aligned with /iː/ but towards the back of the chart. The short version of /uː/, /ʊ/, is aligned with /ɪ/ but towards the left side of the chart. /ɔː/ is located in the middle back and is higher than its counterpart, /ɒ/ (low-back). Moving on, we have /Λ/positioned at the centre of the chart and towards the lower area. It is higher than its counterpart, /ɑː/, towards the back. The unique schwa, /ə/, is located in the middle of the chart, and /ɜː/ is slightly towards the back. Lastly, /e/ is positioned in the middle and towards the front of the chart, while /æ/ is at the low-front position. Generally, the long monophthongs are placed outer than the short monophthongs.

Despite evidence to the contrary, some people assume that Malay vowels and English short vowels are similar. This assumption may be due to the tendency of Malay speakers to pronounce English vowel pairs as a single vowel, as noted by Zuraidah (1997) (as cited in Anuar & Jaafar, 2020; Pillai et al. (2010)). Table 1 illustrates examples of English vowel pairs pronounced as a single vowel by Malay speakers.

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Table 1 English Vowel Pairs Realisation as Single Vowel by Malay speakers

English Vowel	Realised as a Single Vowel by Malay speakers
/ɪ/ and /iː/	/i/
/ʊ/ and /uː/	/u/
/e/ and /æ/	/e/
/ɒ/ and /ɔ/	/o/
/ʌ/ and /ɑː/	/a/
/ə/ and /ɜ/	/ə/

Malaysian Malays receive 11 years of primary and secondary education, during which they learn English as a second language. This creates a diverse, multilingual environment with cultural and linguistic variations. While these individuals often possess strong reading and writing skills in English, they may face challenges in listening and speaking due to the complexity of accurately producing and perceiving specific phonetic elements. This proficiency is crucial for successful communication, as mispronunciation can lead to misunderstandings and communication breakdowns. Additionally, differences between the structural attributes of the second language (L2) and the learners' native language (L1) can make comprehension and expression more complicated. Research by Norsimah et al. (2007) underscores the potential obstacles that arise from the lack of contrast in vowel quality and the inability to distinguish between vowel lengths. Together, these factors can hinder effective communication. The inability to distinguish differences in vowel quality and accurately determine vowel length can make it challenging to convey intended meanings efficiently and accurately.

Production and Perception of English Vowel among Second Language Speakers

The intricacies of English vowel acquisition among non-native speakers reveal an array of challenges stemming from the absence of certain English vowels in their native languages, influencing vowel conflation and duration perception (Arum Perwitasari et al., 2016; Pillai et al., 2010; Tan & Low, 2010). For instance, Persian speakers often conflate the /ʌ/ and /ɒ/ vowels due to their non-existence in Persian phonology while simultaneously producing longer durations for long vowels (Pillai & Delavari, 2012). Similarly, Javanese speakers, lacking a phonemic vowel length contrast, exhibit shorter durations for both short and long vowels (Arum Perwitasari et al., 2015). Malay speakers also experience comparable challenges, as highlighted by Wan Aslynn (2005).

As studied by Yap et al. (2010), Malay bilingual speakers grapple with discriminating between English short and long vowels. Their investigation of English monophthongs (/iː/, /ɪ/, /eɪ/, /ɛ/, /æ/) in the context of Malay-English bilingual undergraduates demonstrated a tendency to assimilate unfamiliar sounds into more familiar ones, often mapping non-Malay sounds onto similar Malay counterparts.

In identifying English vowel pairs, non-native speakers frequently rely on duration discrimination, although these distinctions might not be as pronounced in their production (Arum Perwitasari et al., 2015; Casillas, 2015; Kondaurova & Francis, 2008). Positive discrimination in duration is a recurring observation across studies (Akaba, 2008; Casillas, 2015; Pillai & Delavari, 2012), where longer sounds are typically produced with longer durations and vice versa. Kondaurova and Francis (2008), exploring English /iː/ and /ɪ/ vowels,

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discovered that L2 speakers primarily utilise duration cues for vowel perception rather than spectral cues.

Recent attention has turned towards unravelling the intricate relationship between perception and production. Berti et al. (2020) conducted a study on children with Speech Sound Disorder (SSD), unveiling a positive correlation between speech production and perception. Concurrently, research by Baese-Berk (2019), Cheng et al. (2021), and Nagle (2018) underscored the strong connection between perception and production abilities. This relationship is notably intricate, with implications beyond current understanding. While existing research has predominantly focused on young adults and adult speakers, examining young learners is limited. Notably, scarce attention has been given to the production and perception of English vowels, particularly among young learners within the Malaysian context.

English Education in Malaysia: Primary School

Malaysian education has changed with implementing KSSR for primary school in 2011. The examination system in Malaysia is widely known to be result-oriented, which leads to students and parents putting much emphasis on marks and grades. This has led to discrimination against spoken language as less emphasis was given. According to Jayapalan and Pillai (2011), pronunciation was always neglected in teaching, particularly among English teachers who are not native speakers of English. A new curriculum was introduced to address this issue, and the learning standards focused on pronunciation throughout the schooling years. The teaching of phonics was introduced to pupils as early as Year 1, as outlined in the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013 - 2025 (2013). The content standard and learning standard of KSSR, which highlights teaching pronunciation, is shown in Table 2. The curriculum covers pronunciation teaching in three modules: listening and speaking, reading, and language arts. This syllabus allows students to experience language learning as a whole, where their perception of English sounds is trained early on, and the production of sounds continues throughout their study years. The table shows that the perception of language is introduced first in Year 1 and Year 2 before working on the production of sounds, which starts in Year 3. After two years of implementation, this curriculum was revised with the introduction of CEFR.

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Table 2 KSSR Content Standard and Learning Standard (before CEFR) focusing on pronunciation

Content Standard	Learning Standard Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Listening and Speaking Skills						
1.1 By the end of the 6-year primary schooling, pupils can pronounce words and speak confidently with the correct stress, rhythm and intonation.	1.1.1 Able to listen and respond to stimulus given with guidance: a) environmental sounds b) instrumental sounds c) body percussion d) rhythm and rhyme e) alliteration f) voice sounds g) oral blending and segmenting	1.1.1 Able to listen and respond to stimulus given with guidance: a) environmental sounds b) instrumental sounds c) body percussion d) rhythm and rhyme e) alliteration f) voice sounds g) oral blending and segmenting	1.1.1 Able to speak with correct word stress.	1.1.1 Able to speak with correct word stress.	1.1.1 Able to speak with correct pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation.	1.1.1 Able to speak with correct pronunciation, stress and intonation
			1.1.3 Able to listen to, say aloud and recite rhymes, tongue twisters and sing songs paying attention to pronunciation, rhythm and intonation.	1.1.3 Able to listen to and recite poems, tongue twisters, and sing songs, paying attention to pronunciation.	1.1.3 Able to listen to and respond to a given stimulus by using appropriate words, phrases and expressions with the correct stress, rhythm and intonation	1.1.2 Able to listen to and respond confidently to a given stimulus by using appropriate words, phrases and expressions with the correct stress and intonation

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Language Art						
4.1 By the end of the 6-year primary schooling, pupils will be able to enjoy and appreciate rhymes, poems and songs through performance.	4.1.2 Able to recite nursery rhymes, jazz chants and sing action songs with correct pronunciation and rhythm.	4.1.2 Able to sing action songs and recite jazz chants with correct pronunciation, rhythm and intonation.	4.1.2 Able to sing action songs recite jazz chants and poems with correct pronunciation, rhythm and intonation.	4.1.2 Able to sing songs and recite jazz chants and poems with the correct stress, pronunciation, rhythm and intonation.	4.1.2 Able to listen to, sing songs, recite jazz chants and poems with the correct stress, pronunciation, rhythm and intonation	4.1.2 Able to sing songs and recite jazz chants and poems with the correct stress, pronunciation, rhythm and intonation

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR, was introduced to the syllabus in 2013. The framework was established in alignment with the English Language Standards and Quality Councils (ELSQC). However, the curriculum was only fully implemented in 2017. According to the CEFR, Figure 3 shows the target for each stage of education. In primary school, pupils are expected to achieve at least A2. At this level, students can communicate in simple and routine tasks. The target enables teachers to plan their lessons accordingly and challenge their students. Ultimately, students are prepared to use the language in their daily lives. Implementing the CEFR has provided a standardised approach to language learning across Europe. It has allowed for greater consistency in language education and assessment, thus making it easier for students to transfer their language skills from one country to another. Furthermore, the CEFR has also provided a clear pathway for students to follow, enabling them to track their progress and take ownership of their learning. Overall, introducing the CEFR has been a positive step towards promoting multilingualism and enhancing language education across Europe.

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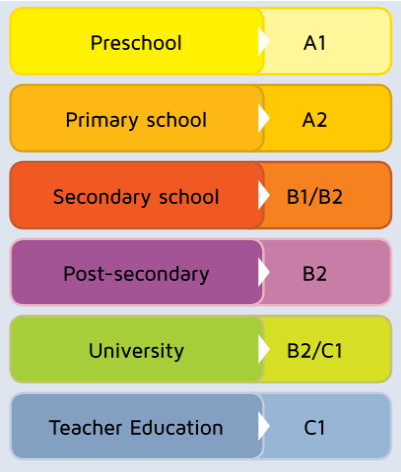

Figure 3 CEFR Target for Each Stage of Education

Teaching phonemic and phonological awareness is essential to language learning for young learners. This approach was introduced in 2011 as teaching phonetics and phonology to beginner learners is impractical. The ELSQC (2015) emphasises the importance of improving language perception as the first step in this process. Beginner learners should be taught the concept of phonemes or phonics rules, which gradually leads to the production of words in both written and spoken form. Correct pronunciation and communication skills are taught as early as Year 1 to lay a strong foundation for language learning. To ensure effective teaching, Table 3 shows the syllabus for primary school, including the content standard, focus, and learning standard that emphasises language production and perception. The syllabus also includes an additional focus to help teachers plan their teaching better. Listening and speaking are now separate modules, and all language modules, including Language Arts, highlight and teach students phonemic and phonological awareness besides the writing module.

By focusing on phonemic and phonological awareness, young learners can better understand the sounds of the English language and improve their communication ability. This approach is crucial to building a solid foundation for language learning and can benefit students throughout their academic careers and beyond.

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Table 3 KSSR Content Standard, Focus and Learning Standard (after CEFR) focusing on pronunciation

	Learning Standard					
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6
Listening Skills						
Content Standard	1.1 Recognise and reproduce target language sounds					
Focus	Recognise and reproduce target language phonemes intelligibly.					
	1.1.1 Recognise and reproduce with support a limited range of high-frequency target language phonemes	1.1.1 Recognise and reproduce with support a range of high-frequency target language phonemes	1.1.1 Recognise and reproduce with support a range of target language phonemes	1.1.1 Recognise and reproduce with support a wide range of target language phonemes	1.1.1 Recognise and reproduce with little or no support a wide range of target language phonemes	1.1.1 Recognise and reproduce a wide range of target language phonemes independently
Speaking Skills						
Content Standard	2.1 Communicate simple information intelligibly					
Focus	Communicate simple information about themselves clearly.					
	2.1.1 Give very basic personal information using fixed phrases	2.1.1 Give simple personal information using basic statements	2.1.1 Ask about and express basic opinions	2.1.1 Explain and give reasons for basic opinions	2.1.1 Give detailed information about themselves	2.1.1 Give detailed information about themselves and others
Focus	Find out simple information from others					
	2.1.2 Find out about very basic personal information using fixed phrases	2.1.2 Find out about personal information by asking basic questions	2.1.2 Find out about and describe basic everyday routines	2.1.2 Find out about and describe experiences in the past	2.1.2 Find out about and describe experiences up to now	2.1.2 Ask about and express rules and obligations
Focus	Communicate simple information clearly					

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	2.1.3 Express basic likes and dislikes	2.1.3 Give a short sequence of basic instructions	2.1.3 Give a short sequence of basic directions	2.1.3 Give a longer sequence of basic instructions or directions	2.1.3 Ask for, give and respond to simple advice	2.1.3 Explain and give reasons for simple advice
	2.1.4 Greet, say goodbye, and express thanks using suitable fixed phrases	2.1.4 Ask about and express your ability	2.1.4 Ask about, make and respond to simple predictions	2.1.4 Give reasons for simple predictions	2.1.4 Ask about and describe future plans	2.1.4 Ask about and describe future plans or events
Focus	Describe people and things clearly					
	2.1.5 Name or describe objects using suitable words from word sets	2.1.5 Describe objects using suitable words and phrases	2.1.5 Describe people and objects using suitable words and phrases	2.1.5 Describe people, and objects using suitable statements	2.1.5 Describe people, places and objects using suitable statements	2.1.5 Ask about and describe personality
Reading Skills						
Content Standard	3.1 Recognise words in linear and non-linear texts by using knowledge of the sounds of letters					
Focus	Distinguish and articulate beginning, medial and final sound words					
	3.1.2 Recognise and sound out with support beginning, medial and final sounds in a word	3.1.2 Recognise and sound out with some support beginning, medial and final sounds in a word				
Focus	Blend phonemes to recognise words					
	3.1.3 Blend phonemes (CVC, CCVC)	3.1.3 Blend phonemes (CVC, CCVC, CVCV, CCV				

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Focus	Segment words into phonemes to spell		
	3.1.4 Segment phonemes (CVC, CCVC)	3.1.4 Segment phonemes (CVC, CCVC, CVCV, CCV	
Language Art Content Standard	5.1 Enjoy and appreciate rhymes, poems and songs		
Focus	Say the words in simple texts, and sing simple songs with intelligible pronunciation, rhythm and intonation		
	5.1.2 i) simple chants and raps ii) simple rhymes iii) simple action songs	5.1.2 In addition to Year 1 text types: simple songs	5.1.2 In addition to Year 2 text types: simple poems

Upon comparing the new syllabus with its previous version, it is evident that more detailed information has been provided for each learning standard. One notable change is the separation of the listening and speaking modules, allowing for greater clarity and structure. The perception and production teachings are now more clearly defined and planned, which is expected to enhance the learning experience for students. Additionally, the teaching now emphasises the importance of phonemes, including blending them to create words and segmenting words to identify phonemes. The speaking module has also been improved, providing students with various situations and concepts to use the language and get comfortable practising them. This approach is expected to help students develop their speaking skills more effectively, providing diverse opportunities to use the language practically. Overall, these improvements are expected to enhance the learning experience for students and provide them with a strong foundation in speaking and listening skills.

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Second Language Acquisition: Theories and Models

As Isbell (2016) defined, perception involves recognising and categorising sounds, while production entails emitting linguistically encoded messages using the oral-articulatory system. This study uses the Perceptual Assimilation Model (PAM) and the Speech Learning Model (SLM) to explore language acquisition. The PAM explains how learners incorporate new sounds into existing phonological categories, influencing subsequent production. Similarly, the SLM highlights the reciprocal relationship between perception and production in mastering phonological features. The research acknowledges the crucial perception-production link, emphasising that accurately perceiving a sound is integral to effectively producing it. By employing PAM and SLM, this study aims to uncover the complexities of English monophthong acquisition among young Malay speakers in Malaysia, bridging theoretical concepts with practical language learning experiences.

The Perception and Production Link in SLA

The intricate relationship between the production and perception of speech sounds has been a subject of interest for researchers, encompassing a phenomenon known as the perception-production link. Although the origin of this term is not definitively attributed, its conceptual origins can be traced back to as early as 1934 (Isbell, 2016). Notable theories and models substantiating this notion include Best's Perceptual Assimilation Model (PAM) and Flege's Speech Learning Model (SLM), both of which underscore the pivotal role of perception in shaping subsequent production. In this context, perception is positioned as a foundational precursor, exerting a considerable influence on the production process.

The interplay between perception and production is underscored by research conducted by Bradlow et al. (1999). Their work delved into Japanese learners' speech acquisition, explicitly focusing on English's/l/ and /r/ sounds. Interestingly, they exclusively provided participants with perception training over three months. The evaluation of participant-produced /l/ and /r/ sounds by native speakers revealed marked improvements across general quality, identifiability, and overall intelligibility. Similarly, Saito and Poeteren (2018) conducted a study that revisited Japanese speakers' perception of English /l/ and /r/ sounds and production abilities. They elucidated that proficient perception ability can facilitate enhanced English /ɹ/ sound production by facilitating adjustments in existing articulatory parameters. Participants who demonstrated superior perception skills exhibited more accurate production of target sounds, thus exemplifying the nexus between perceptual acuity and production competence.

Elvin et al. (2016) contributed to this discourse by uncovering a connection between perception and production within second language (L2) acquisition. They underscored that those learners initially assimilate the sound of the L2 language according to their perception of sounds in their native language (L1). Consequently, this perceptual orientation often shapes how L2 sounds are produced, aligning with the tenets of the Second Language Linguistics Perception Model. Supporting this perspective, Kendall and Fridland (2012) and Kleber et al. (2011) conducted studies that corroborated a discernible link between perception and production, reinforcing that perception mirrors production as a dynamic and intertwined process.

It is worth noting that some L2 speakers use their production capabilities to process auditory input. The subsequent sections elucidate the intricate dynamics underpinning the perception-production relationship, using two models pertinent to the perception and production of speech sounds.

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The Perceptual Assimilation Model (PAM) in SLA

The Perceptual Assimilation Model, initially introduced by Best (Best & Tyler, 2007), posits that the learning of second language (L2) sound systems is facilitated by the first language (L1) sound system (Best et al., 2016; Millet et al., 2021; Tyler et al., 2014). PAM proposes that target L2 sounds are assimilated into existing L1 sound categories based on their similarities and differences. Proficient learners can discern the acoustic or articulatory properties that define the discrepancies and similarities between native and non-native phonemes. If non-native phonemes are perceived as highly similar to their native counterparts, discrepancies might go unnoticed, leading to the assimilation of the non-native phonemes into the native category. Conversely, when pronounced differences exist, discrepancies are detected, resulting in non-assimilation of the non-native phonemes into the native phoneme category.

The model categorises the assimilation process into four distinct categories: Single Category (SC), Two Category (TC), Category Goodness (CG), and Non-Assimilable (NA) (Afshar & van Heuven, 2022; Best, 1994). In the SC category, two L2 phones are assimilated into a single native phoneme, where both L2 phones are perceived as identical. In TC, the L2 contrast phoneme assimilates into two distinct native phonemes. Category Goodness involves the assimilation of each L2 sound into the exact native category, with one member deviating more from the native sound. Lastly, Non-Assimilable encompasses cases where L2 phonemes are too distinct to assimilate into any native category.

Table 4 Perceptual Assimilation Model (PAM) Categories

Category	Description	Example
Single Category (SC)	Two L2 phones assimilate into one phone in the native category; both are equal to the native sound.	English /æ:/ and /ɑ:/ (L2) assimilate to Japanese /a:/ (L1).
Two Category (TC)	The phone of L2 contrast assimilates to two different native phones.	English alveolar /s/ and /t/ (L2) assimilate to Persian dental /s/ and /t/ (L1).
Category Goodness (CG)	Each sound of the L2 contrast is assimilated to the same native category, with one member being more deviant from the native sound than the other.	English /ɪ/ and /i:/ (L2) assimilate to Spanish /i/, but /i:/ is perceived as a better example.
Non-Assimilable (NA)	The L2 phones are too dissimilar to any L1 phone and cannot be assimilated into any category.	English phones (L2) to Zulu clicks (L1).

Illustrating the application of PAM, Komurcu and Yildiz (2011) conducted research involving young participants aged six and four to assess the effectiveness of PAM in analysing L1 transfer. Their findings indicated that PAM's TC and CG categories elucidated the assimilation of English sounds into Turkish, enhancing young participants' perception of the target language. Zahariah (2005) also explored Malay speakers' perception of English word-final obstruent. Her study revealed that /s/ - /z/ fell under the SC category, being the most challenging to distinguish. /t/ - /d/ were classified as TC, being the easiest to differentiate. However, the /f/ - /v/ distinction posed unique challenges, with results resembling TC for discrimination but exhibiting difficulties during identification. This anomaly warrants further investigation for potential subcategories under TC.

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Speech Learning Model (SLM) in SLA

The Speech Learning Model (SLM), which was introduced by Flege (1995, 2007), suggests that being able to perceive phonetic differences between languages is crucial in determining success when trying to produce sounds in a second language (L2) (Baker et al., 2008). According to this model, if an L2 sound is similar to a sound in the learner's native language (L1), it will be included in the existing L1 category (similar to the concept of PAM's Single Category). As a result, the L2 sound will be produced similarly to the corresponding L1 sound. On the other hand, when an L2 sound is different from any L1 sound, a new category is created (similar to PAM's Two-category), leading to distinct L2 sound production. A distinctive aspect of the SLM, as opposed to PAM, is its focus on the production and perception of non-native sounds by L1 speakers and how they are interconnected. As mentioned earlier, the greater the similarity between L2 and L1 sounds, the more challenging it becomes for learners to acquire the L2 language. This is because the L2 sound becomes integrated into the existing L1 phonetic system, causing learners to perceive the L2 sound as if it were an L1 sound. Consequently, their awareness of the distinctions between the two languages diminishes.

In contrast, a new category emerges when an L2 sound differs markedly from its L1 counterpart. This phenomenon is especially evident in cases where the L1 has a smaller phonemic inventory than the L2, such as Spanish (with its five-vowel system) compared to English (with its 15-vowel system) (Flege, 1995a). Learners perceive these unfamiliar sounds as distinct from their L1 sounds, creating a new category. This enhanced perception subsequently translates to improved production accuracy, as the learners can more precisely replicate the specific phonetic characteristics of each category.

Illustrating the application of the SLM, Ammar et al. (2016) conducted a study investigating the impact of L1 and proficiency level on Iraqi speakers' perception of English vowels. This research encompassed twelve English monophthongs, which were compared against the participants' native L1, Iraqi Arabic. The outcomes aligned with SLM, as they revealed that L1 influence significantly affected the acquisition of English vowels. Vowels shared between L1 and L2, such as the long vowels /i:/ and /u:/, were more easily produced due to their presence in both languages. Similarly, vowels absent in the L1, like /ʌ/, /ə/, and /ɜ:/ (central vowels), posed fewer challenges since new categories were formed for their perception. Conversely, L2 vowels resembling L1 vowels, such as /ɔ:/, /ɑ:/, and /ɛ/, presented significant visual difficulties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, effective communication, whether verbal or written, is a cornerstone of human interaction. This study provides insight into how learners communicate, especially in foreign languages. English and Malay language properties may look similar, and this could pose problems. The PAM and SLM explain how second language learners acquire a foreign language, giving us a better understanding of how the language is perceived. The perception towards the language may influence the production of that language. While verbal communication takes precedence in our daily lives, the proficiency and accuracy of language use play pivotal roles in ensuring the successful transmission of messages. For Malaysians, communicating in English—given its status as the country's second language—is a common requirement, both in formal and international contexts. However, the complexities of language acquisition extend beyond rote knowledge, encompassing practical language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Despite this, prevailing education systems often prioritise academic performance over the cultivation of genuine language competence.

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Malaysia's education landscape further underscores this challenge. Although English is learned extensively, students tend to excel academically while struggling to apply the language practically. The prominence of examination-oriented education, coupled with a lack of emphasis on pronunciation, results in proficient test-takers who might find themselves grappling with real-world communication. Efforts to address these issues include educational initiatives like the KSSR and CEFR, which seek to foster a balanced development of students and prepare them for contemporary challenges. Teachers and educators must take active action to execute these plans, allowing learners to have better experience and ability in perceiving and producing proper English sounds.

As highlighted through diverse research studies, pronunciation is intrinsically linked to intelligibility, with accurate articulation pivotal for effective message conveyance. Nevertheless, a standardised approach to teaching pronunciation remains elusive, causing dilemmas for educators and learners alike. The journey towards effective English language communication is complex, encompassing socio-cultural perceptions, pedagogical strategies, and individual efforts. It is clear that a comprehensive approach is needed—one that transcends theoretical understanding and actively cultivates practical language skills, particularly in terms of pronunciation. By acknowledging the complexities, investing in appropriate methodologies, and re-evaluating educational priorities, Malaysia can foster a generation of English language users who excel in examinations and thrive in real-world communication scenarios. Ultimately, the pursuit of effective communication in English should be guided by the goal of empowering individuals to confidently engage in global discourse and navigate the challenges of the 21st century.

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