

**A DISCUSSION OF THE ACCENTS FOUND IN THE USE OF ENGLISH AMONG  
MALAY UNDERGRADUATES IN A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Past studies on listeners' attitudinal judgment on speakers' different degrees of accentedness in speech have been of interest to researchers in many disciplines (Sally, 2011; Frumkin, 2007; Nair, 2005; Dixon and Mahoney, 2004; Dixon, Mahoney, Cocks, 2002). However, less work has been done on accented English in the Malaysian context. Malaysians have a version of English that differ in terms of Received Pronunciation (RP) which is Malaysian English or Manglish. The use of Manglish differs depending on regional and cultural variety which comprises of different races. A standardized version of English still exists in Malaysia mostly used for official matters. However, some parts of Manglish uttered by Malaysians leave a more marked accent, taken from our mother tongue to the target language. This research investigates the accents found in the use of English among Malay undergraduates in a public university. Thirty final semester students from various Human Sciences undergraduate programmes were selected from three sections of English classes. Their readings of a simplified text were audio-taped to gather the different degrees of accentedness before being graded by five language experts based on an impressionistic assessment on a seven-point scale ranging from '7' being the most marked Malay accent and '1' being the least unmarked Malay accent. Rankings for the 30 speech sample were obtained from the five language experts. The findings of this research indicate that the students' years of exposure to learning and using English does not necessarily have an effect on students' accent, gender, hometown, and location.

*Keyword:* accent, accentedness, Malay undergraduates, public university, English

**Introduction**

Malaysians have their very own version of English that may differ in terms of the spoken form, for it is tied up mostly depending on regional variety and culture. These in return gave birth to Manglish, a form of English merged with Bahasa Melayu, a local language used in Malaysia. Yet, a standardized version of English still exists in our country other than the former colloquial form, to be used for official matters. There will always be a part of us in the language uttered, leaving a trail of otherwise a faint or marked accent from our mother tongue in the target language, which of course by far is not Received Pronunciation (RP).

The studies on listeners' attitudinal judgment on speakers' different degrees of accentedness in speech have been of interest to researchers in many disciplines (Sally, 2011; Frumkin, 2007; Nair, 2005; Dixon and Mahoney, 2004; Dixon, Mahoney, Cocks,

2002). Nevertheless, no work has been done on accented English in the Malaysian context.

‘Accent’ is a term associated directly in this study, making it essential for the research’s development. To define ‘accent’ according to the field of sociolinguistics is to see it as referring to speakers’ or speech community’s characteristics of speech. Other definitions of accent include the following:

A manner of pronunciation different from standard speech with the grammatical, syntactical, and lexical levels consistent with the standard (Brennan, 1977 as cited in Nguyen, 2010: 11).

Accented language is derived from phonological characteristics influenced by a person’s native origin, native language, or social status. The speech characteristics of this native language may overlap or carry on into the “standard” English language when spoken as a secondary language, resulting in accented English. (Carlson & McHenry, 2006:1).

The *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (2003) defines ‘accent’ as “the cumulative auditory effect of those phonological and phonetic features of a person’s pronunciation which identify where he is from, regionally or socially” (p.3).

‘Accentedness’ on the other hand, according to Collins’ *Cobuild English Language Dictionary*, is language or speech that is ‘accented’ spoken with a particular accent. Kashiwagi and Snyder (2010) further explain that ‘accentedness’ can be seen as the degree to which a speaker’s pronunciation is perceived to contradict from the native speaker’s version and can be measured impressionistically on a scale.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on the accent prestige theory (Fuertes, Potere, Ramirez, 2002) which suggests that listeners judge a speaker’s characteristics based on his accent. The theory further claims that a speaker will be positively evaluated if he were to speak in a standard accent, belonging to the dominant group in society since a build-up of negativity in the listeners’ attitude will be created if accents other than the standard one were to be used.

According to the accent prestige theory, people are capable in identifying the various dialects or accents besides having the tendency to pre-judge any individual based on their experience with accented speakers. The theory also suggests that a person who speaks with Received Pronunciation (R.P.) dialect is attached with more positive personal traits as compared to those who speak with a regional dialect (Giles, 1970). He further argues that the non-standard accent may invite a negative feedback from listeners.

Past studies using this theory (Fuertes, 2000; Foon, 2001) have shown how standard-accented speakers are more preferred than non-standard-accented speakers in the solidarity or status dimensions, or both. Even though after knowing the reasons behind accented speech (i.e. social class and educational background) the listeners may hold back their judgements, yet, if they failed to reach this relevant information, they will continue to judge speakers’ accent. The speakers believe that discrimination through identification of ethnicity by voice can lead to preconceived judgements on the part of the listeners (Fuertes, 2000; Foon, 2001).

The accent prestige theory suggests that speakers with accents coming from England and America, are highly rated and favoured by those who speak the majority and the minority accents mainly due to their access to the global community for economic development. A study conducted by Bayard (2001), carried out in Australia was done to measure the perceptions of British-, American-, Australian-, and New Zealand-English accented speakers. This study used Likert-scale questionnaires to evaluate twenty two personality and demographic traits of voices, selecting them to represent the average range of the accents. Results indicated that the subjects rated their own native accent beneath speakers of British-English and American-English, consistent with the accent prestige theory since England and American are both politically powerful nations.

This theory is again proven when Rupp (2009) claims that people prefer accents that are similar to theirs by giving higher ratings as opposed to the speakers with foreign accents, which in a sense may be portrayed as discrimination. Hence, leading those with accented speech to undergo an accent modification therapy due to alienation or to feel belong in a society that uses culturally dominant accent (Ayesha, 2011).

### **Significance of the study**

The outcome of this investigation would hopefully act as an eye-opener to those who can relate to the accentedness of speech, namely students, language instructors, as well as planners at the Ministry of Education in terms of their practices and policies. Thus, opening doors for them to identify the main problems in speech so as to create remedial treatments in reducing the Malay accent in the English spoken by the applicants; making the teaching of English to be more efficient, applicable and functional in accomplishing the needs of intellectual comprehensibility.

Furthermore, the findings may also serve to lessen the influence of accent in L1 mainly Manglish when conversing or reading in the target language, English (L2) and in formal contexts.

### **Research questions**

Specifically, the study tries to find answers to the following questions:

1. What is the range of accentedness among Malay students from various backgrounds of study in IIUM?
2. Does the exposure to the English language for a long period of time have an influence on students' accent?
3. Is there any significant relationship on the student's accent between students' hometown and location?

### **Literature Review**

Lamb (2011) unlike other studies, look at the learners coming from different backgrounds in the developing world. He focuses on the "Matthew Effect" in provincial Sumatra, Indonesia that helps learner of English with established family background (i.e. social, economic, and cultural capital) and early educative experiences to gain more from the schools' English language education. Unlike those coming from poor family background, this cream of the crop have an upper hand to strive learning the language outside the schools, resulting in a high English proficiency level as compared to the former. He claims that these differences may then lead to widening the economic and cultural class gap in a

long run; those with privileges will be able to exploit more opportunities in the future and people with lower socioeconomic background will be stuck in the growing inequality.

The researches done by Ratnawati and Ismail (2003), Gardiner (2008) and Nor, Norsimah and Kesumawati (2009), have also uncovered the effects of economy towards speech. Ratnawati and Ismail (2003) argue that even though students may come from a low income family, they can still overcome their proficiency problem through an extensive reading programme to understand English texts. Gardiner (2008) on the other hand, examined the various aspects that can affect those from a poor economic condition, such as education and early childhood development. The parents in this community are desperate in searching for jobs for their children after schooling. They want to make sure their offspring can avoid poverty. Hence, they see English as an opportunity for further education, employment and high status. Nevertheless, with the help of pro-poor funding policies all of that may become a reality.

Meanwhile, Nor, Norsimah and Kesumawati (2009) conducted a research in the southern part of Malaysia and 313 Form Two students were selected since they have undergone seven years of formal English education. They discovered that, the reason for their poor performances in English depends on the economic background of the respondents families. This then leads to the effects it has on their attitude, perception and environment. The environment such as where the students are staying and where the schools are located do not support the practicality of English, hence their hesitation to speak using the language. These learners claimed that English is important, yet it is also a hard subject to score and understand resulting in misinterpretation and boredom towards English and total isolation from the language.

### **The ‘Verbal Guise’ Technique**

The adapted version of ‘matched guise’ technique that has been selected to measure language attitudes is known as the ‘verbal guise’ technique (Cooper, 1975) which consists of tape recorded voices of a number of speakers reciting the similar factually-neutral passage of passage in a single accent owned by the speakers. Their levels of accentedness are then assessed based on a systematic accentedness judgement, where only relevant speech samples are chosen as stimulus to represent the whole. This method has been used by researchers in the field of sociolinguistics under language attitudes by those like Carranza and Ryan (1975), Brennan and Brennan (1981), Berk-Selingson (1984) and Edwards and Jacobsen (1987).

Even when this current technique is unable to take charge for paralinguistic differences in the speakers’ spoken form, it nevertheless owns an upper hand over the ‘matched guise’ technique since it precludes the probability of subjects’ awareness that the taped voices in all of the recordings are spoken by a single speaker. It can be seen as very risky as the differences in linguistics are the different degrees of accentedness and not language.

Earlier studies applying the verbal guise technique are those by Brennan and Brennan (1981), Berk-Selingson (1984) and Edward and Jacobsen (1987). Brennan and Brennan (1981) investigated listeners’ reactions towards Mexican-American English speech through the use of a standard passage which were then read aloud by nine Mexican-American males, chosen to demonstrated different degrees of accentedness. To fulfill this objective, the standard passage had been created to have several instances of 18 phonological variables.

Berk-Seligson (1984) also used a standard passage but this time, it was to record three Costa Ricans in assessing status of occupational based on phonological differences

## A DISCUSSION OF THE ACCENTS FOUND IN THE USE OF ENGLISH AMONG MALAY

in Spanish. The recorded passage readings differ from each other through the level of accentedness, based on phonological variants. The first speaker pronounced all the variables using the prestige form, the next speaker applied the distinct stigmatized fashion while the last speaker pronounced the passage using both stigmatized and prestige variants. This is done to ensure that overly distinct accented variables were spoken in speech which was mild in accent.

Edward and Jacobsen (1987) on the other hand, used ten speakers to read out loud a similar passage consisting of 160-words, once; where the speakers were given time to practice reading the passage before the tape recording begins so as to exclude any hesitations. After the recordings of all ten versions, they were re-recorded onto a stimulus tape but this time the voices were presented in a randomized order.

The reviews concerning 'matched guise' technique so far has laid out both advantages and disadvantages that can be considered and applied in the current study's methodology. The study has employed the latter technique, which is to adopt the 'verbal guise' technique but with some adaptations with particular reference to Brennan and Brennan's (1981), Berk-Seligson's (1984) and Edward and Jacobsen's (1987) studies.

### Limitation of Study

This study concerns particularly on the phonological element of the English language. It is focused likewise to emphasize the complete accuracy of observing the English-speaking Malay graduates' different degrees of accentedness. Nevertheless, other effects towards it e.g. IQ, although relevant towards the current issue that the researcher is investigating, is not the scope of the current study. The respondents are limited to 30 students from the Human Sciences field and could be extended to students from other departments e.g. Engineering, Architecture and Medicine to measure their level of accentedness with a bigger sample size.

### Methodology

In this study, the researcher analyzed the degree of accentedness by sending the audio speech recordings of the subjects to the language experts to be graded. The summary of the respective data collection methods for the study is shown in Table 1

Table 1 Tabulated Summary of the Research Question

	RQ	Data collection	Data Analysis
1	What is the range of accentedness among Malay students from various backgrounds of study in IIUM?	a) Students' taped-recorded dialogue.  Audiotape reading instrument is used where a standard dialogue is provided to control other aspects of language such as grammar and vocabulary.  b) Sample accentedness is	Descriptive analysis

		<p>graded.</p> <p>The judges listen to the passage.</p> <p>Indicate assessment using points representing 3 degrees of accentedness ranging from strongest to the mildest Malay accent respectively.</p>	
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In order to carry out the research, the speech samples from the subjects were obtained. The first step in collecting speech samples was to familiarize the subjects with the simplified text before asking them to read it out loud. They were required to attempt reading it a few times to produce the best readings, in order to exclude any errors or hesitations. Nevertheless, corrections in terms of pronunciation were not executed since the main objective of the study was to gather the different degrees of accentedness produced by the chosen subjects. The selected reading text was designed to be read in one minute, with a 5-second interval between readings. Each speaker's best reading was then selected to be graded for accentedness. Audiotaped samples of standard reading passage which were collected from the chosen subjects covered an ordered range of phonological features broad enough to express the features of speakers' phonological competence.

According to Singer and Eder (1989), the benefit of applying a standard reading passage compared to using memorization as the stimulus, is to lessen the problems affecting phonological deviations that construct the main issue in the present study. All other features of language (i.e. vocabulary and grammar) are controlled when a standard passage is implemented as the instrument for reading. Next, after the speech samples had been recorded, they were then graded by language experts based on the different degrees of accentedness demonstrated in the samples.

The subjective rating scale that was implemented in the study focused on three elements, namely stress, intonation, and acceptable articulation. The scale used a holistic or impressionistic method. In the holistic process, a one-minute excerpt of each of the 30 speech samples, arranged in random order, was presented to all five language experts. The entire speech sample was graded on the extent of its differences in pronunciation from the standard speech that is accepted by English speakers in Malaysia. Based on the assessment of the accent of the speech samples and following the 'verbal guise technique' developed by Cooper (1975), each language expert gave their impressionistic assessment of each sample on a seven-point scale, ranging from '7' (strongest Malay accent) to '1' (weakest Malay accent).

Next, five full-time lecturers specializing in Linguistics from the Department of English Language and Literature were then chosen as the language experts to grade the speech samples. Those lecturers are speakers of Standard Malaysian English with at least ten years of teaching experience in the chosen public university. These language experts were chosen based on their training in phonology and their familiarity with the contrastive analysis of the Malay and English segmental phonemes and the verification of the predicted problems in sounds.

To ease assessment, a seven-column scale helped in reducing the marking complicacy whereby the language experts' pencil can move over easily to the left or the right, helping them to decide and record their holistic decision quickly. The scale is shown in Figure 1:

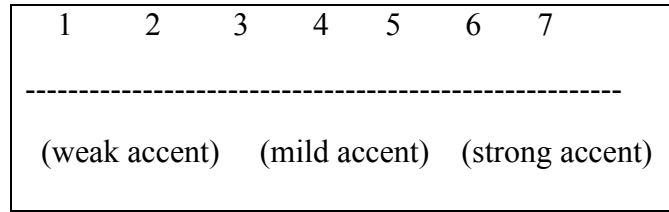


Figure 1 Seven-Column Scale

The instrument used in this process was adapted from Brennan and Brennan (1981), and Cunningham, Anderson and Engstrand (1989). Table 2 shows the seven-point scale that demonstrates the possible impressionistic judgment given by each of the five language experts selected to rate the accentedness of the 30 samples; ‘7’ being the most noticeable/marked Malay accent and ‘1’ being the least noticeable/unmarked Malay accent.

Table 2 Seven-Point Scale

Speech samples	Mild Malay accent		Average Malay accent			Strong Malay accent	
Sample 1	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Sample 2	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Source adapted from Brennan and Brennan, 1981; Cunningham, Anderson and Engstrand (1989).

Table 3 Data gathering procedures

Procedures	
1	Reading of texts by 30 subjects.
2	Linguists rate all 30 reading texts to represent the respective categories i.e. weak, mild, and strong accent

There are two steps involved in analyzing the accentedness in speech of the chosen undergraduates, as shown in Table 3. Firstly, all the selected readings were recorded from the subjects before they were being rated by the linguists or language experts based on the elements of stress, intonation and acceptability of the pronunciation. Next, the assessments of the accent by the language experts were made by using a seven-point scale, adapted from Cooper (1975). Some explanation is given to illustrate, the two stages that are involved in the Data Analysis:

- Stage 1: Recordings of speech samples
- Stage 2: Grading by the language experts

## A DISCUSSION OF THE ACCENTS FOUND IN THE USE OF ENGLISH AMONG MALAY

A ranking for each speech sample was obtained from the five language experts for each of the 30 reading samples. Each sample received scores based on their levels: Level 1 = 1 mark, Level 2 = 2 marks, Level 3 = 3 marks, and so on until Level 6 = 6 marks. A lower score indicated a less distinguishable Malay accent in the speaker while a higher score indicated a more distinguishable Malay accent in the speaker. The 30 samples were then ordered from the highest to the lowest scorers.

### Findings and discussion

The research question deals with the range of accentedness among Malay students from various backgrounds of study in the chosen public university. The total number of participants for the study was 30. The results show that majority of the participants in the study were rated as having a mild Malay accent in their spoken English. The summary of the result is illustrated in Table 4:

Table 4 Summary of Students' Accent Rating

Received Accent Score	Number of Students	Percentage
5 ≥	6	20
4 ≥	10	33
3 ≥	9	30
2 ≥	5	17
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100</b>

The table shows that about 47 % have an unmarked Malay accent and another 53 % have a marked Malay accent. Both male and female were equally rated as having marked and unmarked accent. In addition, the demographic information shows that the subjects' hometown and the states that they came from have no significant relationship on their accent rating.

It is also apparent from the demographic information that the number of years in using the target language is not a significant variable in students' accents. All the students have had more than eight years of experience speaking the language, despite their marked and unmarked accents. Besides that, the results also revealed that students majoring in Communication were mostly rated as having unmarked accents. The following table summarizes the students' accent rating per department.



Table 5 Summary of Students' Accent Rating According to Majors

Majors	Total Number of Students	Accent Rating	
		Marked	Unmarked
Communication	9	2	7
Sociology and Anthropology	4	2	2
Psychology	6	6	0
History and Civilization	6	3	3
Political Science	5	3	2
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>14</b>

As far as level of accentedness were concerned, most (47%) of the Malay students in the study had a mild (unmarked) Malay accent in their spoken English and another 53% with a marked Malay accent. The findings reveal those students' years of exposure to learning and using English does not necessarily have an effect on students' accent. This is evident from the fact that the students in the study have had 7 to 13 years of experience in speaking English. This finding contradicts that of Lamb (2011) who found that the more a person practice English, the greater his improvement in the language skills such as pronunciation and vocabulary knowledge compared to those who had less practice.

The findings also suggest that there is no significant relationship between students' hometown and location on accent; for example those living in the rural areas do not necessarily have strong accents while those in the urban areas do not necessarily have less of an accent. This discrepancy may be due to intrinsic motivation and attitudes of the students in learning the language itself. This is clearly shown in the study when the accent rating is not affected by this variable as there are students coming from rural areas or outside Kuala Lumpur, who had been categorized under unmarked Malay accents. Again, this also contradicts the earlier studies done by Nor, Norsimah, and Kesumawati, (2009) and Ratnawati and Ismail (2003) on subjects who come from rural schools. They claimed that the students from rural areas seem to lack proficiency in English and hence were not able to respond well when reading a given text compared to their urban counterparts. They found that the primary reasons for this problem are mainly because of the students' limited exposure to English and also due to their environment i.e. family, education and financial background, that fail to promote the use of the language. Moreover, the limited facilities that exist in rural schools also made capturing the substance of learning English difficult. The issue may even come from the students' embarrassment to use the English language which then commonly leads to their refusal in using it. This issue probably arises when the medium of communication of the students' remains their first language and not English.

The results of this study therefore need to be interpreted with caution because the subjects' unfamiliarity with the words that they read, for example, will make it even harder for them to guess the meanings of words in any given context, leading to the loss of interest to continue reading in English. This is especially clear when two of the subjects

(sample 2 and 5, refer to Appendix) even read the passage in a monotonous voice, showing either how little the words meant to them or how disinterested they were. The subjects read the passage as if they were tired, lazy and had totally lost interest to read. This perception is just a matter of judgement since the subjects' accent might be due to fossilization. This possibility is supported by Han (2004) who suggests that instead of being proud of one's accent, it could be due to inevitable fossilization that is permanent, incorporating both the correct and incorrect forms to be the final outcome of the subject's second language. He further explains that the causal variables to be, among others, the absence of instruction, lack of corrective feedback, false automatization and insensitivity to language data could be contributory factors to the judgmental perceptions of students such as on sample 2 and 5.

In addition, this study has incidentally found that there is no significant difference between gender and accent ratings. The study recorded that both genders were equally rated as having marked and unmarked accent. The findings of the current study also concur with Nguyen's (2010) who found that accented speakers' gender do not have any effect on the listeners' reactions.

Besides that, the study also found that the students who are majoring in Communication have the least Malay accent and the majority of those with a distinct Malay accent are Psychology students. This result may be coincidental but could also be attributed to the fact that the academic demands for Psychology majors revolve around clinical, statistical, and observational research that warrant them to work in isolation and hence limit opportunities for spoken interaction activities for them. The Mass Communication students' activities, on the other hand, could be more exposed to the real-world experience through field work, leading them to speak the target language, hence acquiring a more unmarked accent. Nevertheless, this suggestion is merely speculative as the sample size of the study does not allow for reliable generalization.

### **Conclusion & further research**

This study has investigated the different degrees of accentedness among English-speaking Malay students from different disciplines in a chosen public university. The study was conducted on 30 final year students from three sections of English classes. They represented each of the departments from the department of Human Sciences undergraduate programmes. Students' speech samples were collected to identify different degrees of accentedness while reading a simplified text that took one minute, with a 5-second interval between readings. 'Accentedness' can be defined by the degree to how a speaker's pronunciation is assumed to contradict the native speaker's version and can be measured impressionistically on a scale (Kashiwagi & Snyder, 2010). The audio-taped recordings of the readings were then presented to the language experts to be graded based on the differences in pronunciation from the standard speech that can be accepted by English speakers in Malaysia.

The present study has adopted methods suggested by Brennan and Brennan (1981) and Cunningham, Anderson and Engstrand (1989) to measure the accentedness of speech samples. Future studies could add other variables in discovering the effect of accents on employability, even if they were to adopt the same techniques as in the present research. This should be done to broaden the creative designs and range of different focus groups. The participants' sample could be made bigger and chosen to represent the different states in Malaysia to probe further the issue of accent in Malaysia.

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## APPENDIX

### Sample 2

This subject, like the first sample, was also a 24 year old female but she is from Selangor, a final year student majoring in Sociology and Anthropology. The following citations were drawn from the employers after comprehending the speech samples.

### Positive comments

- “**Good intonation**, but need to be more precise and articulate. I believe she would improve after some trainings and practices.” (E3)
- “**Acceptable verbal usage**. Still, the stress and tone must be clearly articulated.” (E4)

## A DISCUSSION OF THE ACCENTS FOUND IN THE USE OF ENGLISH AMONG MALAY

- “It is **clear and understandable**, her **intonation is okay**, although I detected error in the pronunciation of several words such as ‘moustache’, ‘Presley’, ‘ran’ and ‘lament’ and over pronounces the letter ‘T’. Accent is detected but it is not too thick and can be understood.” (E6)
- “Okay, even though her pronunciation is not perfect but she **took time to say it clearly**.” (E10)

### Negative comments

- “**Incomprehensible. Couldn’t pronounce words at times. Poor tone.**” (E2)
- “**Lack of intonation. Wrongly pronounced words.** Read too fast, no pauses. Important words unstressed.” (E5)
- “Not fluent.” (E7)
- “The subject has **so many difficulties in pronouncing the words, which makes the listener became confused over the message** that she meant to say.” (E8)
- “Subject did not read the article fluently and stuttering in most parts. **Bad pronunciation skills** even with a simple word. Showed a lack of confidence in reading an English article.” (E9)
- “I doubt hiring her. A few pauses and that have created a few distractions. **Monotonous tone.** Reads with occasional breaks in rhythm. The reader has difficulty with specific words and/or sentence structures.” (E11)
- “**A lot of mispronunciation of word** and her intonation is quite bad.” (E12)

### Sample 5

The subject in this sample was a female from Terengganu, 22 years of age. She was a final year student majoring in Political Science. The following citations expound feedbacks from the employers later on after perceiving the speech samples.

### Positive comments

- “Not so bad, but still need improvement. Some words are pronounced wrongly, e.g. ‘circling’. But enough to hire her.” (E3)
- “Some error (‘moustache’, ‘film’, ‘cheek’), intonation slightly off and the letter ‘T’ is too pronounced. Nevertheless, I would consider because I can still understand her.” (E6)

### Negative comments

- “**Had problems in pronouncing.**” (E2)
- “A flow of stress and tone disrupted due to the unfamiliarity of few vocabularies. (E4)

## A DISCUSSION OF THE ACCENTS FOUND IN THE USE OF ENGLISH AMONG MALAY

- “**Unclear** articulation, **pronunciation**. Hesitates a lot.” (E5)
- “Not fluent.” (E7)
- “Very bold local accent with a very deep voice which makes much confusion over words coming from the subject. Possessed **a very poor pronunciation of words.**” (E8)
- “Moderate reading skills. Stuttering throughout the reading. Lack of confidence and not comfortable in her reading. **She made a lot of mistakes in pronunciation.**” (E9)
- “In the beginning she was mumbling, making it difficult to understand her.” (E10)
- “Monotonous tone. **Pronunciation** and intonation **need improvement.**” (E11)
- “Hesitant in her reading.” (E12)