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Title	The place of sebutan baku in students' spoken Malay
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## EDUCATION RESEARCH FUNDING PROGRAMME

# PROJECT CLOSURE REPORT



## The Place of Sebutan Baku in Students' Spoken Malay

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# The Place of Sebutan Baku in Students' Spoken Malay

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## INTRODUCTION

The Malay language (ML) in Singapore is largely identified with the Johor-Riau dialect which constitutes the basis for two main social dialects in Singapore – Colloquial Malay (CM) and Standard Malay (SM). CM is used in what might be described as 'naturalistic', 'informal' or 'ordinary' settings while SM is used in formal settings such as the school and the media. Whether one speaks CM or SM, the pronunciation patterns of both social dialects has traditionally been associated with *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (Johor-Riau Pronunciation or *SJR*), a standard accent that evolved from the Johor-Riau dialect. In contrast, *Sebutan Baku* (Standard Pronunciation or *SB*) is an artificially created system of pronunciation, built on the principle 'pronounce as it is spelled' with each letter of the alphabet assumed to have only one phonetic value. It is officially prescribed as the preferred or more appropriate way of speaking SM.

Singapore introduced *SB* in 1993 as part of the state's support for the standardisation of the ML in the region. This geopolitical initiative has since fallen through with Malaysia returning to *SJR* in 2000 while Indonesia continued with its own model of pronunciation. Singapore retained *SB* despite anxieties among Malay Singaporeans who generally do not see it as authentically indexing their Malay identity (Berita Harian, 2011a; Osman, 2013). Proponents of *SB*, on the other hand, perceive it to be more "systematic and consistent" and that *SJR* presents difficulties to young children learning to read in Malay. In 2012, almost two decades after *SB* was introduced, Mr Masagos Zulkifli Mohamed, then Chairman of the Malay Language Council of Singapore and Minister for Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs, asked whether this accent has been fully acquired by the Malay community in Singapore, and if not, how it can be perfected (Nur Isyana, 2012). To date, there are limited studies that explore the extent *SB* is accepted, acquired and used by Malay Singaporeans. The school is one setting in which such concerns can be investigated.

## BACKGROUND TO THE MALAY LANGUAGE

Malay (or *Bahasa Melayu*) is an indigenous language of Singapore and the surrounding region which includes Peninsular Malaysia and southern Thailand to the north, the central eastern parts of Sumatra to the west and south, and the western coasts of Borneo to the east (Asmah, 1992). Malay is also a second language for other indigenous communities living beyond its native shores – from Sumatra to West Papua – a region known as *Nusantara* or the Malay Archipelago. In this

vast maritime area, Malay was once the formal written language of palaces and creeds, at the same time the lingua franca in markets and harbours (Collins, 1998). This was attributed to the power and influence of successive Malay kingdoms then. The collapse of Melaka to the Portuguese in 1511 gave rise to smaller sultanates in the Malay indigenous areas including the Johor-Riau-Lingga sultanate (17th – 19th centuries) (Collins, 1998). The local Johor-Riau dialect became the de facto Malay dialect in the territories held by this sultanate, what are now the Malaysian states of Melaka, Pahang and Johor and the central eastern Indonesian provinces of Sumatra including the Riau Islands (Asmah, 1992). The Malay variety spoken in Singapore belongs to this widely distributed Johor-Riau dialect group.

In 1824, the Malay-speaking world was divided politically with the signing of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty under which the British controlled the Malay peninsula and the northern third of Borneo while the Dutch the rest of the archipelago. The language of the colonial masters (English and Dutch) began to inflict an influence on Malay in their respective areas of control (Alisjahbana, 1976; Asmah, 1993). In places under Dutch rule, native Malay speakers were outnumbered by non-Malay indigenous speakers (Javanese, Bugis, etc.), adding another layer of influence to the ML there. These sowed the seeds for the emergence of a variety of Malay in Indonesia centred in Jakarta which grew increasingly different from that used in the peninsula. That variety was later declared the national language of Indonesia and renamed Bahasa Indonesia.

### **Johor-Riau dialect in the formation of Standard Malay**

A shared colonial past and a similar dialect group have kept the ML in Singapore on a common path with its cousin in Malaysia for much of its development. Sociolinguistically, the Johor-Riau dialect was the basis for the evolution of a standard variety of Malay, reflecting the rich literary past of the Johor-Riau sultanate (Asmah, 1988; Winstedt, 1992). Singapore, together with the nearby islands in what is now Indonesia, was the centre for literary, political and socioeconomic activities before and during the colonial period. Through Singapore, Malaya welcomed its first Malay press in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Roff, 1967) as well as the radio service half a century later. With the establishment of printing, the local Johor-Riau dialect which was already then the model of written language became the language of printed materials. Its grammar and vocabulary were developed, codified and expanded to become what is known as *Bahasa Melayu Standard* (Standard Malay or SM), a supralocal Malay dialect (Asmah, 1988).

Similarly, with the establishment of *Radio Malaya* in 1946 in Singapore, the Johor-Riau accent, the accent of the radio announcers and newsreaders native to the area, became the natural choice to accompany SM (Asmah, 1992). This accent spread to Kuala Lumpur when *Radio Malaya* moved to the city and further north when Penang established her own radio station (Asmah, 1992). Over time, this Johor-Riau-based accent evolved to become the standard Malay pronunciation which this study refers to as *Sebutan Johor-Riau (SJR)*; Asmah (1992) names this accent *kelainan /ə/* (or /ə/ variety). The printing and broadcasting media thus played an important role in the

formation of SM and its accompanying accent, *SJR*, establishing for them an influence that was far beyond the reach of their parent dialect, the Johor-Riau dialect.

Note that standard Malay pronunciation is dual centred in that there are two living standard Malay accents. Other than *SJR* (the /ə/ variety), there is also the *kelainan* /a/ (or /ɑ/ variety) spoken in northern Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. Between the two, *SJR* is more widespread as it is the variety adopted by the media and schools. It is quite normal for speakers of the /a/ variety to switch between the two standard accents. In contrast, native speakers of *SJR* are familiar with the /a/ variety in songs and in poetry recitals (Asmah, 1992). This /a/ variety has often been confused with *SB*.

### Malay social dialects

When Singapore separated from Malaysia in 1965, it inherited the standard variety of Malay, both in print and spoken form. SM was, and is, one of four social dialects of Malay spoken in Singapore; the other three being *Bahasa Melayu Basahan* (Colloquial Malay or CM), *Bahasa Melayu Pasar* (Bazaar Malay), and Baba Malay. Of the four dialects, SM and CM are the more widely spoken and are a diglossic complement of each other. SM has evolved into a primarily educated/formal variant and is used in formal occasions (e.g., classroom settings, parliamentary sittings, news broadcasts) while CM is a largely unwritten form of Malay, an everyday variety used in a wide range of situations, particularly informal ones (e.g., conversations with family, friends, or colleagues).

SM is characterised by a complex system of affixation (the addition of prefixes and suffixes to a root word – *menolak* - *tolak* ('to push'), *aduan* - *adu* ('complaint), a feature that is largely absent in CM (Koh, 1990). Discourse markers and some lexical items also differ between the dialects. For instance, frequently used function words in CM appear in a shortened form – *tidak*, (/tida?/, 'no') becomes *tak* (/ta?/); and the glottal stop is added to words ending in 'i' and 'a' – *nasi* (/nasi/, 'rice') becomes *nasik* (/nasi?/). Both SM and CM in Singapore, however, share the same pronunciation features, namely *SJR*. For instance, whether one uses the truncated *tak cukup* ('not enough'), as in the colloquial variety, or *tidak cukup*, in the standard variety, *cukup* is pronounced the same way, i.e., /tʃukup/. Therefore, the distinction between the two dialects is largely neutralized at the level of pronunciation. This means that whether a Malay Singaporean speaks SM or CM, he or she speaks with the natural *SJR* accent.

### Efforts at standardisation

The increasing non-uniformity of SM within the Malay Archipelago, namely between Indonesia and the rest of the Malay-speaking countries (Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore) prompted a move by ML activists in the 1950s to unify the language across the region (Mohamed Pitchay Gani, 2004). Starting with reforms in spelling, these were followed by reforms in terminology, grammar, and

lastly pronunciation (Asmah, 1992). Success, however, has been elusive, as is expected of any move towards language standardisation across political boundaries (Milroy & Milroy, 2012).

The attempt at standardising pronunciation since the late 1980s was controversial. *SB* was proposed as the accent to unify the ML speakers in the region. *SB* requires its speakers to pronounce words as they are spelled, that each letter has only one phonetic value, and that all the letters that appear in a word must be pronounced (Ismail, 1994). By this principle, *SB* differs from *SJR* in the pronunciation of specific letters in the syllable unit (called letter types) as described below and summarised in Table 1.

- 1) In *SJR*, the letter ‘a’ is pronounced /ə/ in open final syllable, and /a/ elsewhere; in *SB*, ‘a’ is pronounced /a/ in all positions, e.g., ‘apa’ (*what*) is pronounced /apə/ in *SJR* but /apa/ in *SB*;
- 2) In *SJR*, the letters ‘i’ and ‘u’ are pronounced /e/ and /o/ respectively in closed final syllable, and /i/ and /u/ elsewhere; in *SB*, the two letters are pronounced /i/ and /u/ respectively in all positions, e.g., ‘pilih’ (*choose*) is pronounced /pileh/ in *SJR* but /pilih/ in *SB*, and ‘putus’ (*cut off*) is pronounced /putos/ in *SJR* but /putus/ in *SB*;
- 3) Syllable final ‘r’ is silent in *SJR* but is pronounced in *SB*, e.g., ‘bakar’ (*burn*) is pronounced /baka/ in *SJR* but /bakar/ in *SB*.

Table 1 *Features that distinguish standard accents in Malay*

Pronunciation system	<i>SJR</i> (/ə/ variety)	<i>SB</i>	Bahasa Indonesia	Northern (/a/ variety)
<b>Letter types</b>				
1 ‘a’ in open final syllable	/ə/	/a/	/a/	/a/
2 & 3 ‘i’ & ‘u’, both in closed final syllable:				
a. before ‘n’, ‘ng’;	/e/ & /o/	/i/ & /u/	/i/ & /u/	/i/ & /u/
b. before other consonants	/e/ & /o/	/i/ & /u/	/i/ & /u/	/e/ & /o/
4 Syllable-final ‘r’	silent	/ r /	/r/	/r/

Table 1 compares four major accents in the ML, i.e., *SJR* (/ə/ variety), *SB*, Bahasa Indonesia and Northern (/a/ variety). Based on the four letter types (‘a’ in open final syllable, ‘i’ and ‘u’ in closed final syllable, and syllable final ‘r’), *SB* is identical to Bahasa Indonesia while *SJR* is different from both of them.<sup>1</sup> Adopting *SB* as the standard requires a bigger shift in pronunciation for Malay speakers in Malaysia and Singapore than for speakers in Indonesia. This potentially conflicts with issues of identity which, in terms of language, is indexed by accent (Lippi-Green, 1997). It is worth

<sup>1</sup> There are pronunciation features of Bahasa Indonesia that are distinguishable from both *SJR* and *SB* but not relevant here.

noting that *SJR*, Bahasa Indonesia and the /a/ variety are natural accents and have their own native speakers while *SB* is not and has no native speakers. *SB* has the word *baku* (translated as 'standard' or 'accepted') in its name but that does not automatically qualify it to be 'baku' (cf., Pairah, 2007; Awang, 2000). Sociolinguistically, it has not stood the test of time as the standard unlike *SJR* in Malaysia and Singapore and Bahasa Indonesia accent in Indonesia.

Malaysia introduced *SB* in 1988 as the standard pronunciation for SM in support of the standardisation efforts in the region. Singapore followed suit five years later. In Singapore, the standardisation efforts were spearheaded by the Malay Language Council, Singapore (*Majlis Bahasa Melayu Singapura* or MBMS). Through the then Ministry of Communications, Information and the Arts, MBMS proposed to the Ministry of Education (MOE) the use of *SB* in the formal education system. MOE approved the proposal which was subsequently approved by the cabinet for implementation in schools and the media (Pairah, 2007).

The geopolitical initiative to unify the pronunciation across the archipelago did not last long. Malaysia switched back to *SJR* in 2000 on the basis that *SB* 'is different from the pronunciation commonly used by the people of this country' (Utusan Online, 2000). Giving up *SJR* also meant giving up Malaysia's Malay identity anchored to *SJR* while Bahasa Indonesia continued to develop into a variety (and accords its speakers a linguistic identity) of its own. Unlike Malaysia, Singapore did not retract its *SB* policy despite the idea of a pan-Malay standard pronunciation being a lost cause. It instead provided a fresh justification for continuing with the *SB* policy citing *SB*, a non-natural accent, as more systematic and easier to learn than *SJR*.

### Opposing stands on *SB*

*SJR* is a cherished index of Malay Singaporean identity as evidenced by the many calls for a review of the *SB* policy over the years (Mohd Zulkifli, 2003; Awalludin, 2007). They questioned the need for creating a new way of speaking and were anxious about their children sounding less like their elders fearing that their vocal heritage would be jeopardised. They perceived the *SB* policy as an attempt to 'sanitise' a complex heritage for convenient teaching purposes (Berita Harian, 2011; Osman, 2013, cited in Yurni Irwati, 2015).

Supporters of *SB* perceive it to be more 'systematic and consistent' than *SJR* (Berita Harian, 2004) citing in the latter the many exceptions to the rule (Asraf, 1984). For instance, while the phonological rule that governs the realization of word-final /a/ as /ə/ applies to words like *suka* (/sukə/, 'like'), it does not to words like *bola* (/bola/, 'ball'). Similarly, the phonological rule that lowers high vowels /i/ and /u/ in closed word-final syllable to /e/ and /o/ respectively applies to *bukit* (/buket/, 'hill') and *lanun* (/lanon/, 'pirate') but not to *aiskrim* (/aiskrim/, 'ice cream') and *kasus* (/kasus/, 'case'). *SB*'s prescriptive rule of 'pronounce as it is spelled' was meant to 'put right' these 'inconsistent' pronunciations (see Mukhlis & Wee (2021) for a critique).

There has also been concern that the 'inconsistencies' in *SJR* present difficulties to young children learning to read in Malay (Pairah, 2007; Suratman, 1989). The common practice of

teaching reading in Malay is through phonics – decoding sounds of printed words by syllables. Students are taught that each letter has one sound, e.g., ‘t’, ‘w’ and ‘a’ are pronounced /t/, /w/ and /a/ respectively. Combining each consonant with the vowel produces /ta/ and /wa/ and stringing the two syllables together yields /tawa/ (*tawa* or ‘laugh’). This does not work if *tawa* is to be read as /tawə/ as in *SJR*. However, instead of reviewing the teaching method and developing an alternative pedagogy that would help students read *tawa* as /tawə/, the authorities resolved the issue by changing the pronunciation to *SB*, i.e., changing the pronunciation of *tawa* from /tawə/ to /tawa/ (see Mukhlis & Wee (2021) for a detailed critique).

## RESEARCH ON PRONUNCIATION

The present study can be considered as part of socio-phonetics. It sits within the broad fields of pronunciation studies with interests ranging from learner opinions, beliefs and attitudes on language including stereotypes of particular languages and their native speakers, to characteristics of participants’ pronunciation across age and gender, to accuracy/errors in speech production. The methodologies too vary, from questionnaire-based studies, to task-based including reading of a wordlist, describing pictures, reading of texts and interview talk.

Nowacka (2012) studied the nature of pronunciation preferences of Italian, Spanish and Polish learners of English. She found that almost all the students have positive beliefs about the importance of speaking English with good pronunciation and that they all aim for native English pronunciation. Chan (2006) examined Cantonese ESL learners’ pronunciation of English final singleton consonants who have difficulties with the voicing contrasts of final obstruents. Kho (2011) investigated the common characteristics of pronunciation errors made by Malaysian Chinese students and the influence of Malay on their English pronunciation.

Studies on the ML in the context of Malaysia include that of Mardian et al. (2016) who examined the frequency values of glottal stops in Malay. They found that the formant frequency values of female respondents are more even and systematic than male respondents. Idris and Shahidi (2001) found that Malaysian secondary students successfully pronounced the letter types ‘a’ and ‘r’ in *SB* only in two text types – reading a wordlist and reading a passage – but not in spontaneous speech where the letter types are pronounced in *SB* and *SJR* interchangeably. Letter types ‘i’ and ‘u’ were not at all pronounced in *SB* in all text types.

A pertinent observation on speech production is described here. When speakers read aloud a list of isolated words, their pronunciation may be influenced by the orthographic representation of the words, a phenomenon known as spelling pronunciation. When reading a passage, people have the tendency to speak more formally and to articulate more carefully than when they are involved in free conversation (Gibbon, et al., 1997). In a study of accuracy in the production of velar targets, Hewlett et al. (1998) found that accuracy increases over four conditions, from spontaneous speech to confrontation naming to real word repetition to non-word repetition. The

least accuracy of the spontaneous speech forms was explained in terms of greater processing demands, arising from semantic and syntactic processing. It would be interesting to see if pronunciation accuracy in *SB* similarly increases from spontaneous speech to reading a passage to reading isolated words.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

### Fishman's diglossia

Diglossia is a term coined by Ferguson (1959) and expanded by Fishman (1972) to describe a sociolinguistic situation where speakers use two 'tongues'. The term 'tongue' can mean 'language', 'dialect', 'register' or 'style'. In present day understanding, this refers to the use of two or more languages or varieties within distinct domains (e.g., school and home). In characterising the ways in which English language is used in Singapore, Pakir (1991) and Alsagoff (2007) drew on the diglossia framework to study the standard as well as the non-standard ways of using English. This framework views Singlish as a colloquial variety ('Low' variety) that co-exists with Standard English ('High' variety). In the context of the ML, SM is typically regarded as a 'High' variety while CM and Bazaar Malay a 'Medium' and 'Low' variety respectively (Asmah, 1986). *SJR* is thus both 'High' and 'Medium' given its association with both SM and CM. With the introduction of *SB*, *SJR*'s association with SM is severed and it is reduced to a 'Medium' status only. From the point of view of the state, *SB* is to be used with SM in formal or 'High' situations while *SJR* with CM in informal or 'Medium' situations. This forced decoupling of *SJR* from SM adds further distance between the two dialects, the ramifications of which may not be apparent.

### Bakhtin's heteroglossia

The multiple, contradicting voices discussed earlier reflects what Bakhtin (1981) calls heteroglossia. Each language variety or accent, whether *SB* or *SJR*, can be viewed to involve a dynamic tension between the official school instructional discourse with its fixed curriculum goals and knowledge, and the more interactive, provisional and contemporaneous discourse of the community – in Bakhtin's (1981) term, a struggle between centrifugal and centripetal forces within language and within socio-political and cultural processes. Centripetal forces produce authoritative discourse which is relatively fixed and inflexible in meaning, and is spoken by those with public authority such as political leaders, teachers, and so on. It is associated with political centralization and a unified cultural 'canon'. These forces, however, are always interpenetrated by centrifugal forces leading to the diversification of language, and of cultural and political institutions. School students are caught in this tension. Their lived experiences and identity are shaped by their families and the larger community. At the same time, they are subjected to the ideology and discipline of the state through the school. Heteroglossia provides the lens with which to make sense of Malay students' behaviour as they negotiate between the two 'forces' manifested by *SB* and *SJR*.

## Chamber's second dialect acquisition

Acquiring *SB* by *SJR* speakers is akin to acquiring a second dialect or accent. Chambers' (1992) work on the acquisition of a second dialect among people who migrate from one language area to another provides a framework with which to understand the extent a second accent can be successfully acquired. His study showed that there are complex features of a new dialect that are more difficult to acquire than other features. There is also a 'critical period' (typically age 7 or under) during which a person will almost certainly acquire a new accent perfectly in contrast to those older (typically above 14 years old) who almost certainly will not. Late learners may never master complex rules of the new accent. In the case of the acquisition of *SB* among *SJR* speakers, the letters 'i' and 'u' in closed final syllable appear to be the harder letter types to acquire as shown by earlier studies (Sakinah, 2019; Maisarah, 2019). Chambers' framework could potentially provide the lens with which to make sense of age as a factor in the acquisition of *SB*.

## STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

To date, there are limited studies which explore the extent *SB* is accepted, acquired and used by Malay Singaporeans. One study surveyed 300 Secondary 3 students and 76 secondary school Malay teachers (Pairah, 2007). The findings show that 77.6 per cent of the student respondents reported that *SB* is important in ML learning, and 88.3 per cent reported that *SB* helps them in reading and spelling. In addition, 92.1 per cent of the teacher respondents reported that *SB* has successfully facilitated students' reading and spelling.

A more recent study surveyed 100 Malay undergraduates (18-25-year-olds) spread across six local universities (Sakinah, 2019). Results show that 94 per cent of respondents reported that *SJR* represents Malay Singaporeans, 91 per cent thought that *SJR* accurately describes how they themselves speak Malay, and 86 per cent prefer to use *SJR* when communicating in Malay. Sakinah (2019) also undertook a phonetic analysis of the spontaneous speech of 10 respondents and their reading of a wordlist and passage. The findings reveal less than perfect *SB* despite overt instruction for them to speak and read using *SB*. The respondents practise a hybrid pronunciation – *SB* pronunciation of letter types 'a' and 'r' mixed with *SJR* pronunciation of letter types 'i' and 'u'.

Similar findings were obtained by Maisarah (2019) who analysed the read speech of political leaders and television and radio newsreaders, and the conversation of radio deejays. All could only afford a hybrid pronunciation, but television newsreaders produce (read) speech that is more identifiably *SB* compared to that of political leaders, radio newsreaders and deejays. In another study, Mohamad Ali Hanifah (2002) carried out a phonetic analysis of the speech of radio newsreaders using *SB*. He identified phonetic features in their speech but only one has a direct bearing on the *SB-SJR* distinction, the silent /r/. In *SB*, where /r/ is to be heard in all word positions, in the speech of the newsreaders, syllable-final /r/ is silent, mirroring *SJR*.

The studies reviewed above reveal gaps which the present study aimed to fill. Sakinah's (2019) study focussed on undergraduates while Maisarah's (2019) respondents belonged to an older group, the Malay professionals. While Pairah's (2007) study focussed on the same age group of students as the present study, her survey questions centred on learning to read and write which excluded questions on students' perception of *SB*. She also did not undertake classroom observation or examine students' pronunciation. The present study focussed on Secondary Three students for their eight-year exposure to the learning of the ML in school. They would have acquired some 'normality' in the use of spoken SM and developed a stance towards *SB*, about which this study could investigate.

## PURPOSE OF STUDY

The study aimed to investigate the extent to which *SB* has become part of the students' linguistic identity, competency and practice. The research questions are as follows:

- What is the students' attitude towards *SB* and how do they identify with this accent?
- To what extent is *SB* used during Malay Language lessons?
- How proficient are students in using *SB*?

## METHODOLOGY/DESIGN

The study employed a mixed-method research where quantitative data was first collected via a questionnaire survey. This was followed by the collection of qualitative and phonetic data that involved observation and recording of ML lessons and separate interviews of selected students and their teachers. In addition, the students interviewed were asked to respond and read aloud a wordlist and text in *SB*. Table 3 summarises the data collection instruments used, on whom, and which RQ they aim to provide an answer for:

Table 3. *Types of data collection instruments, participants and phonetic analysis*

		Student	Teacher	RQ
1.	Questionnaire survey	✓		1 & 2
2.	Non-participant classroom observation	✓	✓	1 & 2
3.	Semi-structured interviews	✓	✓	1 & 2
4.	Speech and read aloud tests following interview	✓		3
5.	Phonetic analysis of:			
	a) spontaneous speech in the classroom b) spontaneous speech, reading of wordlist and passage following interview	✓ ✓	✓	2 & 3

The questionnaire survey comprised 33 questions grouped into seven sections and covered: A) personal details; B) language preference; C) distinction between *SB* and *SJR*; D) pronunciation practices; E) pronunciation practices in the classroom; F) perceived benefits of *SB* and *SJR*; and G) attitude towards *SB* and *SJR*. The last five sections made reference to two sets of audio recordings (news reporting and news interview) each spoken in *SB* and *SJR*. The audio recordings were simply labelled Audio A for *SB* and Audio B for *SJR* in anticipation of students who might not know the label for the two types of pronunciations, especially *SJR*, thus hindering their attempt to respond. For each question, the participants were instructed to listen to one set of Audio A and B and choose between the two as their response. The survey responses formed a students' perspective of themselves, individuals and groups in relation to *SB* and *SJR*. The 33 questions were finalised from an original set of questions that were piloted with 9 respondents not involved in the main study.

For classroom observation, the ML teachers were instructed to choose lessons that offer potentially rich oral interactions. The items noted during the observation include types of lesson activities, discourse types, and switches between *SB* and *SJR* by students and teachers. All lessons were audio recorded and field notes taken, transcribed and thematically coded. The plan was to observe 44 ML lessons (twice each class) but this was reduced to 42 (two classes were observed once) when the Circuit Breaker (due to Covid-19) and the subsequent safety measures took effect. When the researchers returned to the schools, there was a small window of time left for observation before the teachers began to prepare students for their year-end examination.

From the audio recording, the audible talk time (ATT), a period in which what was spoken by the students and their teacher could be heard, was calculated. Talk made indiscernible by background noises and pauses not considered as part of any meaningful utterance such as when students do their own quiet work, were not included in ATT. ATT was made up of student talk time (STT) and teacher talk time (TTT). When both students and teacher were heard speaking at the same time, this was recorded as part of STT and part of TTT respectively. Within STT and TTT, the periods during which the speakers spoke with *SB* were calculated.

*SB* talk time was calculated by utterance, defined as a sentence (*cf.* Crookes, 1990). In an interactive oral discourse, a sentence can be as long as a full sentence or as short as a word as the interlocutors engage in talk. Every utterance was checked for the occurrence of any of the four letter types in Table 1. If at least one of the letter types in the sentence is pronounced in *SB*, that utterance is considered as an *SB* utterance and its duration is noted. *SB* talk time is thus the total duration of such utterances. It should be noted that since the focus of the study was on students' *SB*, whenever there is overlap between students' and teacher's speech, only students' talk time in *SB* (*SB* STT) is counted and added to the total *SB* STT. As such, *SB* student talk time (*SB* STT) expressed as a percentage of STT is a full duration while *SB* teacher talk time (*SB* TTT) as a percentage of TTT is partial (does not include *SB* TTT that overlapped with *SB* STT). The four letter types in the *SB* utterances were phonetically analysed.

Phonetic consistency in the pronunciation in *SB* of the four letter types (see Table 1) by students and teachers was established as follows: Every occurrence of the letter 'a' in an open final syllable is totalled up. The number of times it is correctly pronounced is counted. Phonetic consistency is determined by the number of instances the vowel is correctly pronounced over the total occurrences of that vowel. The same procedure was applied to the other three letter types: 'i' and 'u' in closed final syllables, and syllable-final 'r'. The first 20% of ATT data were separately analysed by ear by two Research Assistants (RA) who were trained to listen to the four letter types. Their scores were mediated by the PI or Co-PI when the RAs could not come to a consensus. Once inter-rater reliability of more than 80% was confirmed, the rest of the ATT data were divided among the RAs for their individual analysis and thereafter collated into one.

For student interviews, the students were interviewed in pairs and were queried on issues that emerged from the findings in the questionnaire survey. They were encouraged to respond in *SB*, if they were not already doing so, at least to one question that asked them to share what they did in the past weekend. Their spontaneous speech formed one text type. At the end of the interview, they were tested on their reading in *SB* a wordlist and a two-paragraph passage which had been carefully crafted to contain ample number of the four letter types that could be pronounced in either *SB* or *SJR*. The students' reading of the wordlist and passage formed another two text types. All three text types were phonetically analysed. For teacher interviews, the teachers were asked for their insights into their students' language use and identification with *SB*. Their responses, as were the students, were transcribed and thematically coded.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Five schools from three clusters participated in the study. They offer ML at the Express (Exp), Normal Academic (NA) and Normal Technical (NT) levels. One school also offers Higher Malay Language (HML), and another, Malay Language Syllabus B (MLB). All 301 Secondary Three (S3) students taking ML at the five schools (grouped in 22 classes) were enrolled as participants. In responding to Section A (personal details) of the questionnaire, 11 participants reported to being non-Singaporeans and were excluded from further analysis, leaving 290 Singaporean students as the focus of the study. 52 of them were chosen by their teachers (at least two per class of average to high oral proficiency) to participate in a semi-structured interview and a reading test. 22 S3 ML teachers from the five schools were also enrolled as participants in classroom observation and interview. The distribution of participants is shown in Table 2.

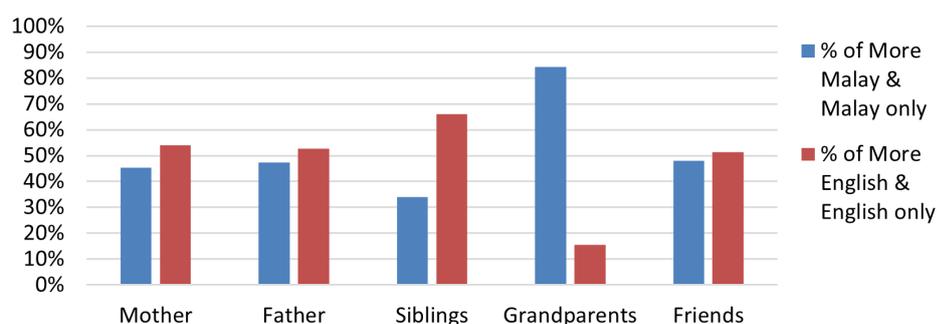
Table 2. *Number of Secondary Three Malay Language participants*

School & cluster	Exp	NA	NT	HML	MLB / blank	Students surveyed	Students interviewed	Teachers interviewed
<b>School A</b>	14	10	13	0	2 / 0	<b>39</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>School B</b>	63	25	3	0	0 / 0	<b>91</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>School C</b>	10	6	10	0	0 / 1	<b>27</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>School D</b>	21	15	4	10	0 / 0	<b>50</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>School E</b>	47	27	9	0	0 / 0	<b>83</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Total</b>	155 (53%)	83 (29%)	39 (13%)	10 (4%)	3 (1%)	<b>290</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>22</b>

## FINDINGS / RESULTS

Section A of the questionnaire analyses the responses of the 301 student participants, 97% (290) are Singaporeans. Almost all are age appropriate (14-15 years old) with 5% already reaching 16 years old. 29% live in 3-room HDB flats or smaller. Another 64% live in bigger HDB flats, the rest in private housing. They are also almost equally distributed by gender. The language the participants frequently use at home and with friends is shown in Chart 1.

Chart 1: *Language frequently used with family members and friends*



The majority of the student participants come from bilingual homes but English is the more frequently used language when the participants speak to their parents (53% as opposed to 46% Malay). The gap widens (English 60%; Malay 32%) when they communicate with their siblings. The situation is reversed, however, when students talk to their grandparents, with a high percentage of the participants (76%) frequently using Malay only or more Malay than English. Beyond the home, about an equal number of participants uses English and Malay with friends.

From here on, the findings make a reference to only the 290 Singaporean participants.

### RQ1 Students' attitude towards SB and the extent they identify with SB

The participants were aware of the existence of different accents in the ML. However, their knowledge about the two accents and the vocabulary to describe them appear to be limited. Only 116 of the 290 participants attempted to give a label to Audio A and B. Of these, 74 named Audio A correctly as *SB*. Another 9 provided only its type, i.e., that it is a formal accent. In contrast, and as expected, not a single participant gave a name for Audio B (*SJR*) although 13 participants provided the context for its use, i.e., in informal/casual settings. Among the 129 participants who attempted to guess the characteristics of *SB* and *SJR*, only 12 gave a correct answer and even then, not a full one. They made a reference to the pronunciation of only the word-final 'a' but not the other three letter types. This reflects their limited knowledge of what distinguishes *SB* from *SJR* but more importantly how this translates into their practice of *SB* as evident in the classroom observations. Their lack of descriptive ability notwithstanding, the participants knew which of the two accents they, their family members, and their friends usually use when speaking in Malay. 71% of the respondents use *SJR* when speaking in Malay (Chart 2). They also reported their family members and friends (averaging 72%) to be practising the same. It is likely that the respondents interact with them (or hear them speaking) in informal situations which are not the domains for *SM* and thus not *SB* either.

Chart 2: The pronunciation usually used by respondents, family members and friends

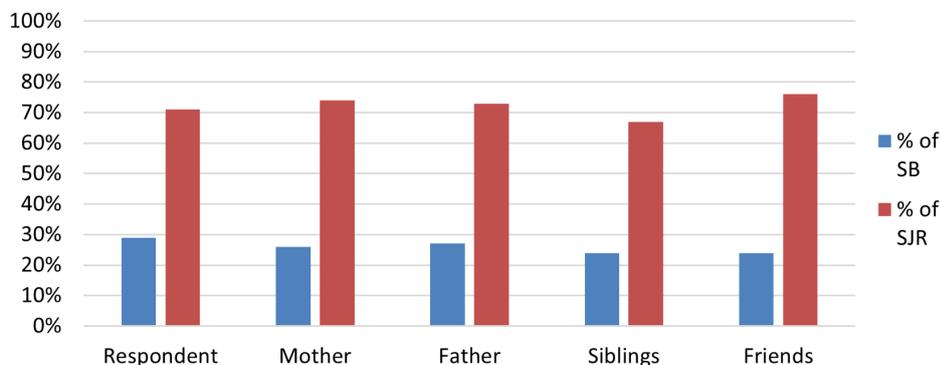


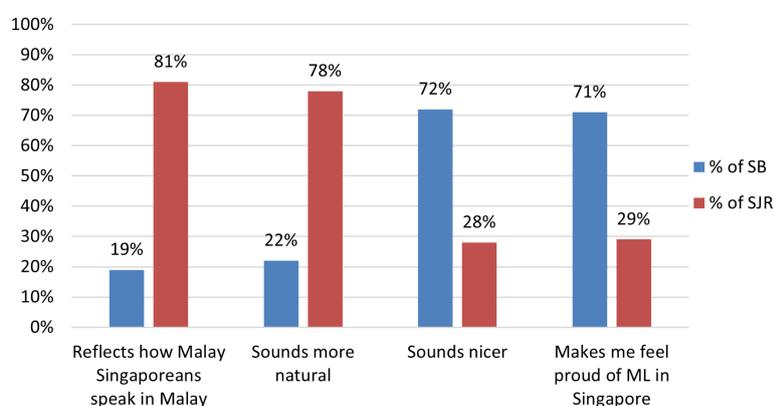
Table 4 provides more information on the contexts in which the participants use *SB* and/or *SJR*. More students reported using *SJR* than those reported using *SB* when buying food, when they are in the company of friends, and when they are with their family members. However, that there were participants who use *SB* in these informal contexts warrant some attention. Either they do not know any other dialect in using Malay other than *SM* (with *SB*), or they are not aware that the latter is to be used only in formal contexts. The participants' choice switched in favour of *SB* when it came to oral examinations. 38 participants singled out *SB* (as opposed to no one for *SJR*) as a pronunciation they use in oral examinations, which is to be expected as the use of *SB* in that context is a requirement, not a choice.

Table 4: *Choice of pronunciation when engaging in specific activities*

Setting	SB		SJR	
	Count	%	Count	%
When buying food	92	39	144	<b>61</b>
When I'm with friends	57	22.6	195	<b>77.4</b>
When I'm with my family	40	17.6	187	<b>82.4</b>
During oral examination	38	<b>100</b>	0	0

A set of findings from the questionnaire presents a challenge for the researchers (Chart 3). A significant majority of the participants named *SJR* as the pronunciation that reflects how Malay Singaporeans speak in Malay. A majority of the participants also reported that *SJR* sounds more natural. However, when the participants were asked which pronunciation sounds nicer and which makes them feel more proud of the ML, a majority chose *SB* over *SJR*. On the surface, this appears to be a contradiction. However, it is possible that the participants were caught between their natural disposition towards *SJR*, and the ideas circulated by the teachers and in official discourse which valorise *SB* over *SJR* (Bakhtin, 1981).

Chart 3: *Perception of SB and SJR*

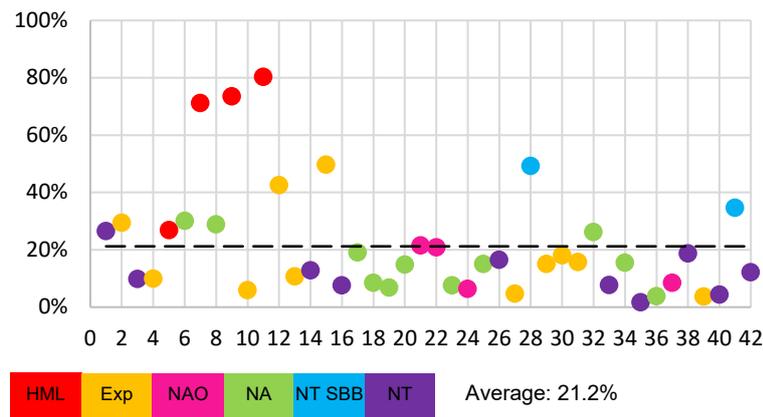


Interviews with teachers suggest that students associate *SB* with power, status and influence. After years of being taught the idea that *SB* is the right way of using Malay in formal situations, this accent has become, to them, the yardstick to measure ‘proper’ Malay. They also observe *SB* being spoken in public, in official and formal events by people of high standing such as political leaders, newsreaders, and their own teachers. Over time they develop a positive attitude towards *SB*, being proud of it, even appreciating how it sounds, even though *SB* is not the pronunciation they would naturally use even inside the classroom, as the following section will show. It should be noted that some teachers cautioned against ignoring the possibility that students might have found it awkward to say anything negative about *SB* in a survey.

## RQ2 Usage of SB by students and teachers during ML lessons

A total of 34 hours and 33 minutes of lessons were recorded of which 85.6% are audible talk time (ATT). Student talk time (STT) in turn takes up 56% of ATT. This means that more than half of talk time in class are taken up by students, an indication that they are orally participative in class. SB student talk time (SB STT), however, is 21.2% of STT while SB teacher talk time (SB TTT) is 38.6% of TTT.

Graph 1: Student SB talk time across ML lessons



SB STT of 21.2% means that less than a quarter of student talk is carried out in SB (see Graph 1). In terms of minutes, for every 30 minutes of STT, SB STT is just over 6 minutes. It is quite clear that the students do not use a lot of SB in class. The highest SB STT comes from the HML level (62.5%) and the lowest from NT level (11%). Classroom observation shows that class activities that usually invite a response in SB from students are those that are performative in nature such as reading texts aloud and classroom presentation, or activities that involve interactions with the teacher such as oral practice and responding directly to teacher's queries and questions. Left to work in groups or when they talk during whole class discussion, there is a tendency for them to speak in Malay using *SJR* or codemixed with English.

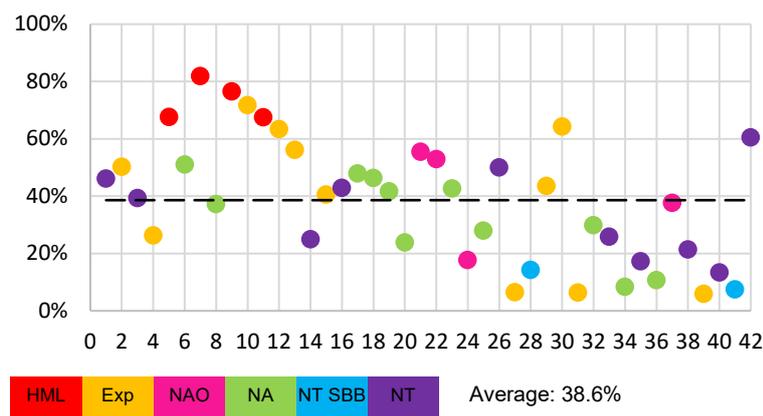
Findings from the survey corroborate this low SB STT in the classroom. 83% of the participants reported that they usually speak Malay with *SJR* during ML lessons, and 88% reported that their classmates also do the same. *SJR* is the pronunciation which the participants find easier to speak Malay with (88%) and to express themselves in (71%). The survey findings also show that just over half the participants (56%) reported that they were expected to speak Malay with SB in class; 32% thought that they were not expected to speak Malay with any particular pronunciation in class; and 12% in fact reported that they were expected to speak Malay with *SJR*, rather than SB, in class.

A question from the survey could shed further light on the low student SB talk time. When asked if they had been in a situation where they would rather not speak in Malay because they were asked to speak with a pronunciation that they do not like or have least preference for, 61%

of the participants responded 'yes'. Even though the question did not ask the students to specify the pronunciation, it can be deduced from the foregoing discussion that the pronunciation the respondents least prefer is *SB*. The situation most frequently cited by the participants in which they would rather not speak in Malay if they have to speak in *SB* is Malay Language lessons (54%). However, as discussed in the preceding paragraphs, students do speak Malay in class but they do so using *SJR* most of the time. However, despite avoiding *SB* in communication, students see some uses for *SB*. About two thirds of the participants say that *SB* provides better help with reading printed materials (66%) and with listening to audio materials (59%). 66% of them also reported that *SB* helps them better with spelling Malay words.

Data from teacher interviews provide additional insights into students' communication practice during ML lessons. In one school, students who have difficulty using *SB* are usually hesitant to speak or less engaging. If they speak, they will speak SM with *SJR*, or codemixed with English. In another school, teachers observe that some students can reply immediately to teachers' questions. But when they realise that they should have spoken in *SB* and so switch pronunciation, they take longer to express their ideas. For this reason, teachers are careful about correcting students' pronunciation as they do not want to disrupt their students' thoughts. Teachers from one school also shared that their students mostly come from English dominant homes. As such, when students are slow to express themselves in Malay, it is as much to do with them having to translate ideas from English into Malay as it is to frame their responses in *SB*. For these reasons, teachers are flexible and satisfied if students speak SM without necessarily with *SB*.

Graph 2: Teacher *SB* talk time across ML lessons



ML teachers' *SB* TTT of 38.6%, if translated into minutes, means that for every 30 mins of TTT, *SB* TTT takes up 12 mins. These numbers give a perspective to the findings in the survey when 88% of the participants reported that their ML teachers use *SB* in the classroom. Taken together, the survey and classroom data suggest that while a high majority of ML teachers use *SB* in the classroom, they use it for just over a third of the time. It is worthy to note that just like *SB* STT, *SB* TTT is highest in HML lessons at 74% (see Graph 2).

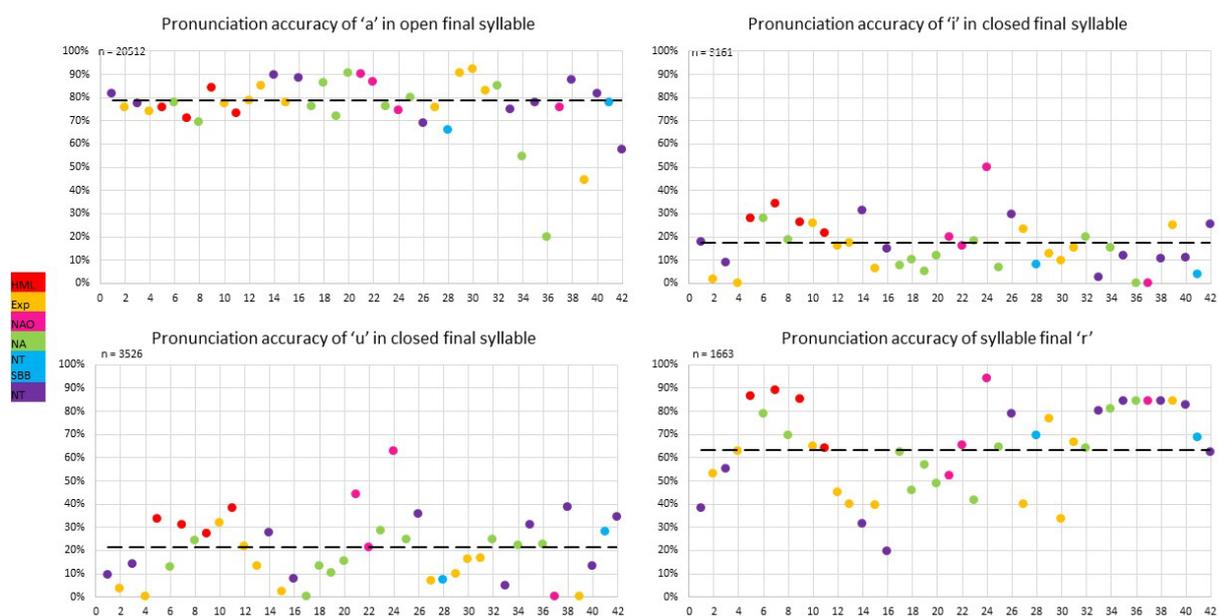
Data from teacher interviews reveal that generally, teachers' give priority to students' classroom engagement and to helping them to express themselves in Malay. They consider building a rapport with students as more important than speaking in *SB* which could put a distance between them and their students. As such, there are occasions when they speak *SM* with *SJR*, even switching to *CM* (with *SJR*) when students have difficulty understanding them. The students' and teachers' practice of switching between *SB* and *SJR*, which contributed to the low *SB* talk time in the classroom, makes the decoupling of *SJR* from *SM* difficult to achieve.

### RQ3 Students' proficiency in *SB*

This section presents the results of the phonetic analysis of student and teacher participants' spontaneous speech in *SB* during lesson time and the results of the phonetic analysis of student participants' spontaneous speech and read speech (reading of a wordlist and a text) in *SB* during the interview. Spontaneous speech (in the classroom and during the interview), read speech (wordlist) and read speech (passage) make up the three text types.

Graph 3 plots the combined consistency of student and teacher participants' pronunciation in *SB* across the 42 ML classes. Of the four letter types that distinguish between *SB* and *SJR*, the letter 'a' in open final syllable is most consistently pronounced in *SB* (i.e., as /a/ – 79%). The syllable-final 'r' is not as consistently pronounced in *SB* at 64%. The letters 'i' and 'u' in closed final syllables are the least consistently pronounced in *SB* – a low 18% and 22% respectively. The student and teacher participants thus display a mixed proficiency in the pronunciation of the different letter types. Their *SB* can be described as sub-standard or, at best, a hybrid *SB* (Mukhlis

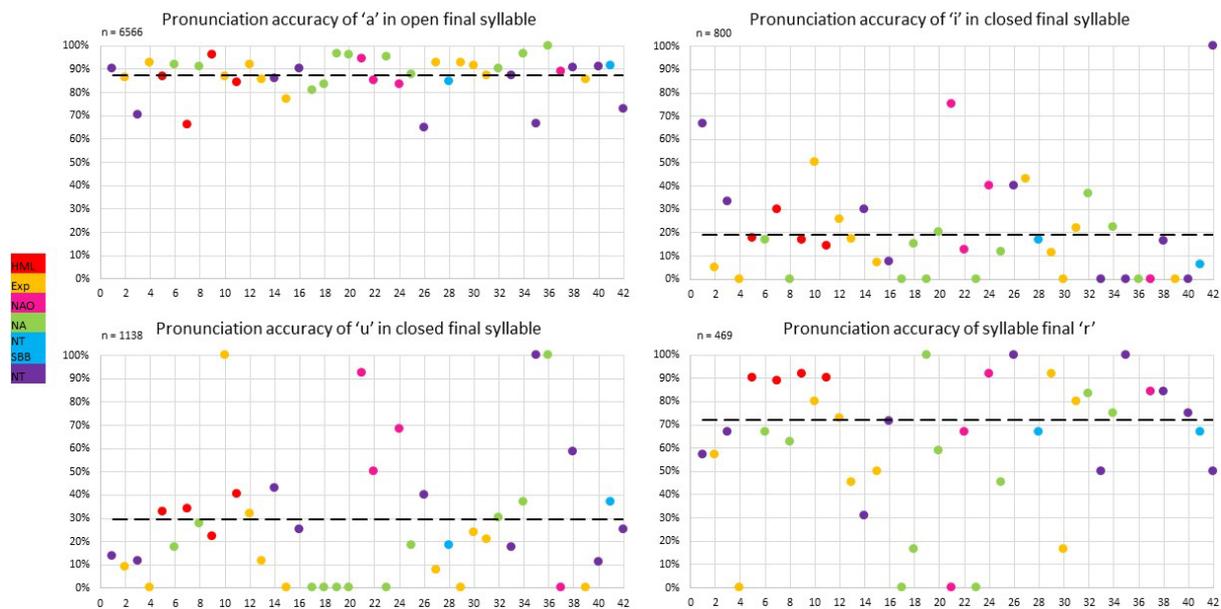
Graph 3: Student and teacher participants' pronunciation consistency across 42 ML classes



and Wee, 2021). The pronunciation of the open final syllable ‘a’ and final syllable ‘r’ follow more closely with how they are pronounced in *SB* while the pronunciation of the closed final syllable ‘i’ and ‘u’ are closer to how they are pronounced in *SJR*.

Graph 4 plots the consistency of just the student participants’ pronunciation of the four letter types across the 42 classes. Their pronunciation accuracy is relatively higher than when combined with the teacher participants’ pronunciation – for ‘a’: student 87%, combined 79%; for ‘i’: student 19%, combined 18%; for ‘u’: student 30%, combined 22%; for ‘r’: student 72%, combined 64%. This suggests that students are relatively more consistent in their use of *SB* than their teachers. Still, overall, the student participants’ pronunciation of the four letter types is also best described as a hybrid *SB*. It is worth noting that the low dispersion in the consistency plots for ‘a’ (compared with the more widely dispersed plots for ‘r’, ‘i’ and ‘u’) suggests that the pronunciation of ‘a’ in open final syllable is relatively more stable.

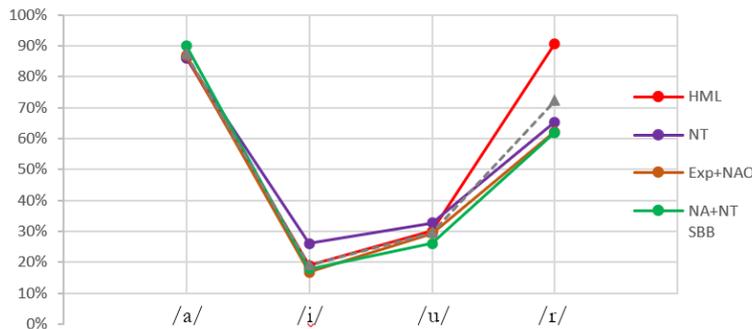
Graph 4: Student participants’ pronunciation consistency across 42 ML classes



Graph 5 captures the same data as in Graph 4 but by subject levels. Interestingly, despite HML classes recording the highest *SB* STT (see Graph 1) and *SB* TTT (see Graph 2), their phonetic consistency in *SB* is no different from that of the other classes except in the pronunciation of the syllable-final ‘r’. This suggests that higher exposure to, and practice of, *SB* in the classroom does not guarantee proficiency in *SB*. Other factors could be at play such as the model of *SB* they follow in the classroom which, invariably, is their teachers’ *SB*.

A point to consider is that when *SB* was first introduced in 1993, the first batches of teachers learned *SB* as adult learners. It is highly plausible that they did not acquire the accent fully going by what studies elsewhere suggest, that adult learners are not capable of acquiring the

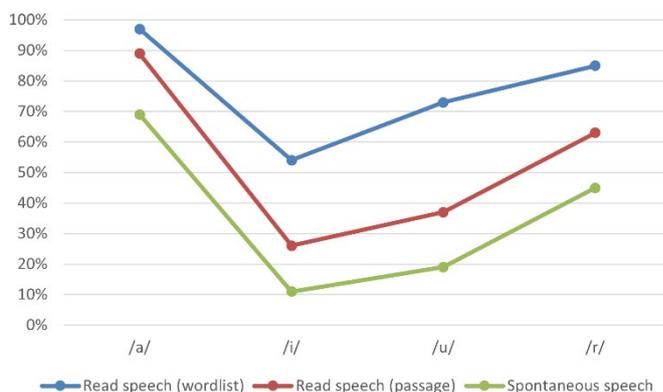
Graph 5: Student participants' pronunciation accuracy during lessons by ML levels



pronunciation features of a new accent perfectly (Chambers, 1992). In the case of *SB*, this was compounded by there being no native speakers for teachers to model after. Successive batches of teachers ended up acquiring a less than perfect *SB* and it is this model of *SB* that has circulated over the years and which students are now familiar with. Being explicitly taught the proper *SB* (pronounce each letter the same way each time) appears to be less powerful than being exposed to the imperfect *SB*.

Graph 6 shows the different consistency levels of students' pronunciation in *SB* across the three text types during the interview sessions. While the dip-rise pattern of the students' *SB* consistency – from the open final syllable 'a' through to syllable final /r/ – remains the same across text types, there is a fall in consistency as the text types change from reading of a wordlist to reading of a passage to spontaneous speech. It can be argued that in reading a wordlist, readers can afford to pay attention to how the sounds of each letter are pronounced. In reading a passage, part of that attention goes towards making sense of the passage. In spontaneous speech, a chunk of students' cognitive processes is diverted to what they want to say, leaving an even lesser time to monitor how they pronounce the letters (Gibbon, et al., 1997; Hewlett et al., 1998). As a result, pronunciation consistency drops

Graph 6: Students' *SB* consistency by text types during interview



In summary, both student and teacher participants exhibit what Mukhlis and Wee (2021) describe as a 'hybrid pronunciation', a sub-standard *SB*. The teachers are confident users of *SB* without possibly realising that their *SB* is a hybrid. The students might not even have a clue that their *SB* is sub-standard attested by the very simple description of *SB* which they provided in the questionnaire (that *SB* is just about the letter 'a' being pronounced /a/). In addition, students' *SB* proficiency is worst in spontaneous speech, a finding of some importance because the intended skill area for *SB* is this spontaneous person-to-person communication.

## LIMITATIONS

This study measures proficiency on the basis of four letter types and does not include letter types that are word-specific and less regular such as 'i' in closed and open non-final syllables some of which are pronounced /e/ in *SJR* (e.g., *tingkat*, 'level'; *sihat*, 'healthy'). As the primary focus of the study was on students, data on teachers in relation to *SB* were confined to their enactment of lessons in the classroom and their feedback on students' practice and attitude towards *SB*. The full duration of *SB* TTT was left unestablished and teachers' *SB* proficiency not fully analysed. The teachers' own attitude towards *SB*, which might have an impact on students' attitude towards, and practice of, *SB*, was not studied.

## CONTRIBUTIONS/IMPLICATIONS OF STUDY

This study provides data on *SB* as practised by Secondary Three students in Singapore who have been learning the ML for much of their schooling life. The findings give a good indication of how *SB* is perceived by the student participants and the extent they practise it. It also measures the student participants' proficiency in *SB* and, in the context of the classroom, teacher participants' *SB* proficiency as well. These have implications on the ML curriculum, instructional resources and programme development.

First, Secondary Three ML students are caught between the official school instructional discourse with its fixed curriculum goals that valorise *SB* and the more interactive and contemporaneous discourse of the community that practices *SJR* (Bakhtin, 1981). This tension appears to disrupt students' learning of the ML in the classroom. Second, teachers find a practical solution to the dilemma of meeting an official requirement on pronunciation and fostering an environment that is conducive to learning. *SB* ends up being enforced loosely during class interaction and targeted primarily for the oral examination. With SM still spoken with *SJR*, the deliberate widening of the diglossic distinction (Fishman, 1972) between CM and SM through the institution of *SB* appears to have not materialised. Third, both students and teachers could only manage a hybrid version of *SB*, an indication that acquiring a second accent is hard (Chambers, 1992), made more difficult by the absence of native speakers of the accent. With the likelihood that

the hybrid *SB* has fossilised over the years, the chances of producing proficient *SB* speakers in the future are slim.

The student participants in this study do not use much *SB* in oral communication in class, and if they do, their *SB* is sub-standard. Keeping an eye on their pronunciation while expressing their thoughts and ideas slows them down and affects their fluency. It should be noted that the sub-standard *SB* is not peculiar to students and teachers; it merely reflects the inability of the wider users of *SB* to fully acquire the accent (Maisarah, 2019; Sakinah, 2019). It might be helpful to review the use of *SB* in the curriculum, specifically its usefulness in classroom oral communication and, by implication, the oral examination. A follow-up study in the early school years, the period during which *SB* is first introduced to students, might be useful in understanding the extent the hybrid *SB* permeates other levels of schooling.

The *SB* policy has engendered a perception that is seemingly positive about *SB* despite the student participants naturally gravitating towards *SJR* in their everyday use of Malay except during oral examinations where they are likely to speak the hybrid version of *SB*. *SB* is a pronunciation that is placed on a high pedestal in terms of perceived stature but has little practical value in the lives of the students. It is not clear how much curriculum time is currently spent and should be further invested on training students (and teachers) to be proficient users of *SB*.

## CONCLUSION

The majority of the student participants come from English-dominant homes but they still speak Malay or exposed to the language. The dialect at home, however, is CM spoken with *SJR*. This means that they are used to *SJR* and would have developed an affinity for the accent. The criticism against *SJR*, that it is not systematic and would pose a problem to students, is nullified by the fact that these students acquire *SJR* at home without any explicit teaching. Constant exposure to the language is what helped them to unconsciously acquire the phonology of the language (e.g., that the letter 'a' is pronounced /ə/ in one phonological context and /a/ in other contexts). Forcing a change to the phonology to suit a new accent (i.e., removing the phonological alternations between e.g., /a/ and /ə/ for the letter 'a') and expecting students to switch between accents when entering different speaking domains (e.g., home and school) can be linguistically disastrous, the inadvertent creation of the hybrid *SB* being a case in point.

For the older generation, going to school meant learning another dialect (SM) without having to learn another system of pronunciation; they could focus on acquiring competency in the grammar of the standard dialect. The President and the Mufti of Singapore are living examples of fluent speakers of SM with *SJR*. In contrast, for students in this study, not only do they have to learn a new dialect (SM), they have to also learn a new accent (*SB*) that makes them sound foreign. It is not a pedagogical innovation when students' difficulty with reading and spelling in Malay is addressed not by improving instructions but by meddling with the pronunciation features of the

language. The continued enforcement of *SB* could one day result in the hybrid *SB* being the only pronunciation students know and practise. This would cut them off eventually from their cultural-linguistic heritage anchored to *SJR*, a prospect that should concern anyone involved in the promotion and development of the Malay language.

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Consent from participants of this research were obtained based on ethics approval by NTU/NIE IRB ref: IRB-2019-07-037.

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