

“*Sebutan Baku* Sounds Nicer but the Other Pronunciation Sounds More Natural”

Secondary Three Malay Language Students’ Relationship with *Sebutan Baku*

Mukhlis Abu Bakar

KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Secondary Three Malay Language students are caught between the official school instructional discourse that valorise *Sebutan Baku* (Standard Pronunciation) and the more interactive discourse of the Malay community that practices *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (Johor-Riau Pronunciation); this tension, centred on two systems of pronunciation, disrupts students’ learning of the Malay language in the classroom.
- Malay Language teachers find a practical solution to the dilemma of having to meet an official requirement on pronunciation on the one hand, and having to foster an environment that is conducive to learning on the other; *Sebutan Baku* ends up being enforced loosely during class interaction and only targeted for oral examinations.
- The attainment of a sub-standard *Sebutan Baku* by both students and teachers runs the risk of failing the intended aims of *Sebutan Baku*; at the same time, it pulls students away from their culturo-linguistic roots that are anchored to *Sebutan Johor-Riau*.

BACKGROUND

The pronunciation patterns of Colloquial Malay and Standard Malay are characterised by *Sebutan Johor-Riau* (Johor-Riau Pronunciation or *SJR*), a naturalised standard pronunciation

based on 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.

Singapore introduced *SB* in 1993, replacing *SJR* as the standard pronunciation for Standard Malay despite anxieties from Malay Singaporeans who do not see it as authentically indexing their Malay identity. Proponents of *SB*, on the other hand, perceive it to be more “systematic and consistent” and easier to learn and teach than *SJR* (see Mukhlis & Wee [2021] for a critique). To date, there are limited studies which explore the extent *SB* is accepted, acquired and used by Malay Singaporeans. The school is one setting in which such concerns can be investigated.

FOCUS OF STUDY

The study aimed to understand Secondary Three Malay Language students’ attitude towards *SB* and their identification with this system of pronunciation vis-à-vis *SJR*, the extent they use *SB* during Malay Language lessons, and how proficient they are in using this pronunciation. The findings should provide curriculum reviewers with the data to decide on how best to move forward with the teaching and learning of the Malay language.

KEY FINDINGS

- The implementation of *SB* as the standard pronunciation for Standard Malay has imbued in students a sense of pride for the language but has not developed in them the habitual use of *SB* in their learning of the Malay language in class. *SJR* is still their preferred pronunciation for use with Standard Malay, as they do with Colloquial Malay.
- Only 21% of student talk time is in *SB* and this is usually during activities that are performative in nature such as reading texts aloud, classroom presentation and oral practice. Left to work in groups or when students talk during whole class discussion, there is a tendency to speak in Malay using *SJR* or codemixed with English. In comparison, teachers' talk time in *SB* is higher but only slightly at 39%.
- Students' *SB* pronunciation is sub-standard, a hybrid between *SB* and *SJR*. Only "a" in open final syllable is more consistently pronounced in *SB* (87%) compared with "i" and "u" in closed final syllable (19% and 30% respectively). Additionally, students' *SB* proficiency across the syllable types is lowest in spontaneous speech compared to when they read aloud. Taken together, not only are students' *SB* sub-standard in reading activities, their *SB* pronunciation becomes even more diluted (and more audibly *SJR*) in spontaneous person-to-person communication.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Implications for policy and research

Students acknowledge the usefulness of *SB* in helping them learn to read and spell but little else beyond that, particularly in oral communication. Keeping an ear on their pronunciation while expressing their thoughts and ideas slows them down and impedes fluency. 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. It should be noted that the sub-standard *SB* is not peculiar to the students and teachers; it merely mirrors the inability of the wider community to fully acquire *SB* (Mukhlis & Wee, 2021). A follow-up study in the early school years, the period during which *SB* is first introduced to students, might also be helpful to understand how *SB* is taught and acquired in Singapore schools.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 290 Singaporean students taking Malay Language at Secondary Three in five schools were enrolled as participants along with their Malay Language teachers (n=22).

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study employed a mixed-method research where quantitative data was first collected via a questionnaire survey (student participants only). This was followed by the collection of qualitative data that involved observation of 42 Malay Language lessons, and separate interviews of 52 students (in pairs per class) and 22 teachers (in a group per school). In addition, student and teacher talk time in *SB* and their pronunciation accuracy were derived from the audio recordings of the lessons. The students interviewed were also asked to respond in *SB* and read aloud a passage and wordlist in *SB*, which formed an additional set of oral data for the phonetic analysis of students' pronunciation.

REFERENCES

Mukhlis, A. B. & Wee, L. (2021). *Pronouncing the Malay Identity: Sebutan Johor-Riau and Sebutan Baku*. In Ritu Jain (Ed.), *Multilingual Singapore: Language Policies and Linguistic Realities* (pp.142-158). London: Routledge.

About the author

MUKHLIS Abu Bakar is with the National Institute of Education, Singapore.

Contact A/P Mukhlis Abu Bakar at mukhlis.abubakar@nie.edu.sg for more information about the project.

This brief was based on the project OER 29/17 MM: The Place of Sebutan Baku in Students' Spoken Malay.

How to cite this publication

Mukhlis, A. B. (2021). "*Sebutan Baku Sounds Nicer but the Other Pronunciation Sounds More Natural*": Secondary Three Malay Language Students' Relationship with Sebutan Baku (NIE Research Briefs No. 21-020). Singapore: National Institute of Education.

Request for more details

Please approach the Office of Education Research, National Institute of Education, Singapore to obtain a copy of the final report.

>> More information about our research centres and publications can be found at: <http://www.nie.edu.sg>