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THE SUBSTITUTIONS OF VOICED AND VOICELESS DENTAL FRICATIVE SOUNDS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF MALAY SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the extent to which Malay speakers substitute the voiced /ð/ and voiceless dental /θ/ fricative sounds in the English language with /t/ and /d/ sounds and analyse how Malay speakers perceive the pronunciation of the voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds. In this study, observation analysis will be adopted, as proposed by Rahman and Hassan (2019). Through the observation analysis and a focus group interview, it was found that the participants mostly substituted the voiceless dental fricative sounds as /t/ and /d/ for voiced dental fricative sounds. With the absence of both voiced and voiceless and dental fricative sounds from the Malay language, the participants try to find the nearest sound that resembles their first language. They had also shared that learning the accurate pronunciation would be beneficial in increasing their knowledge in the English language. In supplementing students' knowledge in the standard pronunciation, more exposure should be given with authentic material to ensure they get the best resources for learning accurate pronunciation.

Keywords: dental fricative consonants, pronunciation, language transfer, ESL, Malay speakers

INTRODUCTION

The English language is significant for communication, not just in countries where it is the national language but also in those that incorporate it into their institutions. Due to Malaysia's colonial background, English is widely used in Malaysian society and education (Rahman & Singh, 2021). The language is spoken by multiple races with different first languages despite living in the same country. As Malaysia's second language, English is taught in schools from primary school to secondary school, preparing students

for higher education. Additionally, a movement known as Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI), which focuses on preserving the Malay language while strengthening the English language in the education system, was introduced in 2010 in response to the development of the national language policy, particularly in the education system (Rahman & Singh, 2021), followed by the implementation of DLP (Dual Language Program) in 2016 (Mahmood & Yamat, 2019). While putting importance on strengthening the English language in the education system, it is evident that early exposure to the English language does not ensure competent language acquisition in Malaysia (Azman, 2016). In a way, learners' pronunciation is affected due to their low proficiency in their second language. Specifically, changes are performed when a specific sound is absent or sporadically audible in the first language (Pudin et al., 2021). Additionally, several consonants in the Malay language are assimilated differently from Standard English, leading to variations in pronunciation when speaking in their second language, specifically in Malaysian English (Kamarudin & Ahmad Kamal, 2021). Through a study on L1 influence on stop consonant production by Ng (2024), it was found that the Malaysian English bilingual speakers have L1 influence in their initial stop production, despite varying degrees. When it comes to distribution, bilinguals who speak Mandarin and English lean more towards British English than those who speak Malay or Tamil.

According to Kachru & Smith (2008), concerns about intelligibility will persist as a result of the widespread use of English and the emergence of numerous dialects. In contrast to the inner circle variants, the English sounds that are pronounced in other ways in the outer and expanding circle varieties have distinct vowels and consonants. The differences between Malay and English can lead to confusion in sound perception, which can result in mispronunciation of certain phonemes. It has been discovered that Malaysian English bilingual speakers have an L1 effect in their initial stop production, certainly to differing degrees, through a study on L1 influence on stop consonant production by Ng (2024). On the other hand, bilinguals who speak Mandarin and English have a tendency to lean more towards British English than those who speak Tamil or Malay. Likewise, varieties like Chinese English, Singapore-Malaysian English, and Ghanaian English have the tendency to substitute /θ/ with /t/ sounds (p. 50).

Pronouncing English words as a second language is influenced by both the similarities and variations in the spoken sound systems of the two languages. The sounds of the target language may be difficult to pronounce due to the interference from one's first language (Maiza, 2020). As asserted by Rahman and Hassan in 2019, there are not many languages that contain the English phonemes, such as /θ/ and /ð/. In their findings, they present a significant challenge to second-language English learners. When L2 learners have unique L1 phonemes, they typically substitute the two sounds with alternative phonemes. Additionally, cross-linguistic influence is thought to arise from the similarities and differences between an L1 and an L2 regarding the acquisition of a certain L2 feature (Mahdun et al., 2021). With the negative language transfer on certain aspects, one would face difficulty in pronouncing similar pronunciations and, as a result, will substitute it with similar phonemes.

According to Maris (1980) on Malay consonants, there is a void due to the absence of dental as a place of articulation, compared to the English consonant that contains /f/, /v/, /θ/, and /ð/ on dental and labiodental as the places of articulation. This implies that there would be a negative language transfer when it comes to the phonemes mentioned. Pronunciation varies as speakers may adapt and replace English sounds with those in their first language (Kamarudin & Ahmad Kamal, 2021). According to a study by Cholisah et al. (2021), it was found that learners' English pronunciation is influenced by four main factors: their motivation, exposure, environment, and education. The researchers went on to say that learning English pronunciation well requires a lot of input. Besides that, the realisation that they cannot improve the quality of their pronunciation without grasping the principles of phonology has been shared by both students and

experts in the field (Asiyah & Maghfiroh, 2021). For instance, a study on Osmani ESL learners reported that learners want to take more pronunciation classes, but they are not given enough opportunities or guidance. While it appears that students can recognise their mistakes, more effort is necessary to increase awareness and strengthen this ability (Wouters & John, 2020). This recent study will look into the substitution of both voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds, as well as the perspectives of ESL Malaysian secondary students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Substitutions of Voiced and Voiceless Dental Fricative Sounds

Many studies have been done on the TH stopping difficulties among non-native speakers, and the results have shown the substitution of the voiceless dental fricative sounds as /t/ (Yamaguchi, 2014; Chan, 2023; Fauzi, 2021; Emmanuel et al., 2022; Rahman & Hassan, 2019; Pudin et al., 2021).

Initially, it is evident in the study of Tahniah et al. (2022) that the voiceless dental fricative consonants in the final position were found to have the highest percentage of pronunciation errors made by students. Moreover, Saavedra (2022) found that the participants in her study either mispronounced practically all English words with voiced dental fricative sounds or the set of terms with the voiced TH sound seven to nine times. Correspondingly, there are alternatives for the voiced dental fricative sound, which is also a foreign sound for non-native speakers. As a result, voiced dental fricatives like /ð/ are observed to be replaced by voiced alveolar stops /d/ (Rahim & Nasir, 2021; Khanh, 2020; Emmanuel et al., 2022; Rahman & Hassan, 2019; Pudin et al., 2021). Emmanuel et al. (2022), in their study, asserted that, since the majority of Ghanaians' original languages do not contain the sounds of voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds, learners of the English language may be inclined to substitute the alveolar plosive sounds, /t/ and /d/, for the said sounds, respectively.

In the case of a Malaysian study, it was found that it may be challenging for second language learners to produce a certain sound that is absent from their native language, or occasionally they may attempt to replace the absent sound with a similar one such as consonants like /θ/, /ĕ/, and /r/ (Rahman & Hassan, 2019). According to the Theory of Language Transfer, since neither of these languages has a /θ/ sound, negative transfer takes place, and a different sound from the speakers' original tongue is used in its place (Pudin et al., 2021). Since learners have difficulty hearing these sounds, they attempt to substitute the closest, similar characteristics for the unfamiliar sounds (Rahman & Hassan, 2019). Similarly, Malay speakers are found to substitute /θ/ with the /t/ sound since the nearest sound of /θ/ in Malay is /t/, which is also a voiceless sound (Pudin et al., 2021). Having known the findings of substitutions in previous studies, this recent study aimed to expand the findings by looking into the substitutions of Malay speakers that consist of secondary school students.

Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis

The process of learning a second language involves the learners creating a language system that allows them to comprehend and speak in the target language, either consciously or unconsciously (Song, 2012). According to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, the reason behind L2 pronunciations could be that learners of second languages have trouble producing target language patterns that deviate from their native language (Eckman, 2018). Yang and Fu (2022) asserted that students who speak languages that are comparable to one another can learn a second language in a shorter time and efficiently. This ability is referred to as second language proficiency, which is also referred to as a 'positive transfer.' A 'negative transfer,' on the other hand, occurs when the first language hinders the learning of the second language.

For instance, Tang (2020) found that due to their lack of experience with inflection in language, Chinese EFL learners might make incorrect assumptions about how inflections are used. The conclusion was that, while more studies comparing students from various language backgrounds are required, it is suggested that L1 transfer and other likely developmental issues are responsible for the inaccuracies. Likewise, considering that the Chinese language does not contain articles, the influence of L1 is apparent. The English writing article 'the' was omitted by many participants in the study by Eng and Luyue (2019). Moreover, research conducted on Malay ESL learners (Mahdun et al., 2022) demonstrated that for L1 Malay learners, the auxiliary "be" in English is, in fact, the most challenging component. In contrast to the English copula-be, the Malay words "adalah" and "ialah" are optional and do not impact the structure if left out, which leads to an omission error by the Malay ESL learners. The lack of a be-auxiliary in Malay suggests that the L1 effect may be stronger than the structure's grammatical complications. Another example is the L1 interference, which makes it particularly challenging for Arab ESL/EFL learners to use the third person singular -s (Alotaibi, 2023). The argument that the equivalent present-tense verbs in Arabic do not need such an inflectional morpheme in the suffix position helps explain the occurrence.

As asserted by Flege (1984), transfer could also occur because of any discrepancy between the first language (L1) and the second language (L2), such as the omission of L2 elements from L1. According to this theory, he found that a native Spanish speaker pronouncing the English "big" as /big/ would be committing a transfer error, as Spanish contains the /i/ phoneme but not an /I/ phoneme. This definition argues that a significant component of a person's phonological competency that may be translated into L2 production is the lack of particular learning in L1 acquisition. Transfer could also occur because of any discrepancy between L1 and L2, such as the omission of L2 elements from L1. This definition argues that a significant component of a person's phonological competency that may be translated into L2 production is the lack of particular learning in L1 acquisition. As Lado in 1975 shared, our complete native language system is typically transferred when learning a foreign language. According to a study on interlanguage learning by Thai learners, it was revealed that for some challenging sounds, they seem to generate different replacements, whereas the English fricatives were found to be the biggest struggle (Sridhanyarat, 2017). This data firmly indicates that L1 transfer is among the most remarkable and likely reasons for Thai learners' interlanguage acquisition of the unmarked fricatives /s/ and /f/. Besides that, Fu et al. (2020) discovered that, overall and across various levels, the average accuracy rates for L2 pronunciation were more than 75% for the Chinese university ESL students. They naturally use Pinyin as a helpful tool to comprehend English words and translate similar Pinyin rules into English through the transfer process once they have developed their L1 accent and grasped the Pinyin system. They could therefore learn Chinese English as a new dialect of English, whereas it may be difficult for them to alter their accent once it has been acquired. Moreover, Fan and Yongbing (2014) found that the more detrimental phonological transfer affects L2 word production, the more of an influence it has on L2 word identification. Given that the participants incorrectly generated the phonological representations for the sounds /θ/ and /ð/, it is expected that they would retrieve and encode the inaccurate representations during production. Evidently, Putra (2021) found that native speakers of Indonesia have the tendency to substitute /t/ and /d/ together for the /θ/ sound. When the phonological systems of the two languages were compared, it became evident that phonological transfer had a significant impact that fell within the parameters of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, as evident in the study of Alotaibi (2022) on the phonological constraints on the utterance of L2 clusters by Saudi ESL learners. The findings showed that the participants had trouble pronouncing a cluster that is uncommon or absent in L1 Arabic. It is observable that negative transfer between L1 and L2 results in a challenging learning process that could produce mistakes that require more explanation (Vâlcea, 2020). It was suggested that more research is required to determine how much input there is and how much cross-linguistic influence there is in simultaneous bilinguals (Leśniewska & Pichette, 2018).

Pronunciation of ESL Learners

According to students, Malaysia's exam-focused educational system forces teachers to give priority to the more important language skills that will be examined in the test, such as writing, literature, and grammar, which coincidentally indicates that pronunciation is not being taught adequately in the classroom (Hassan et al., 2021). On the other hand, teachers believe that pronunciation lessons are supposed to be given when mistakes are found, like in role-playing or reading aloud sessions. Acquiring a comprehensible pronunciation is a challenge for learners of English learning outside of classroom hours (Sarwat et al., 2021). It is evident that learners' lack of proficiency in the English language is largely caused by their disregard for pronunciation skills. Following that, one of the participants in the study of Shah et al. (2017) shared that one of the reasons pronunciation instruction and learning received less attention during her school years was the lack of emphasis placed on any one aspect of pronunciation. The study's findings indicate that participants gave grammar and writing some additional consideration. Similarly, Jayapalan and Pillai (2011) also found that pronunciation is reduced to extra time slots, as it is not a crucial component of the exam, and much of the teaching and learning time is devoted to exercises and assignments that can improve the students' scores on their English language exams, such as grammar and writing aspects (Shah & Nor, 2018). It is obvious how pronunciation skills are disregarded, as no explicit focus on them is implemented into the teaching and learning process. Zarzycki (2021) found that ESL students do not give pronunciation much of a priority. Interestingly, they do note that teaching pronunciation requires equal attention to both suprasegmental and segmental elements. It was shared that the students want to take more pronunciation classes, but they are not given enough opportunities or guidance. Similarly, a significant portion of the respondents from the study of Qader et al. (2023), which consists of both ESL instructors and learners, thought that the secondary ESL course ought to cover pronunciation along with early phonetic terminology.

Essentially, Priya and Kumar (2020) asserted that acquiring the necessary knowledge to accurately pronounce English using phonetics enabled them to become proficient in a few sounds. Their study found that the students' attitudes towards mastering pronunciation were generally positive. It demonstrated a desire to apply what was learned to something new. Some students were perplexed, and others were entirely detached from the classroom environment as the session began, but gradually they became interested and began to listen to the sounds and attempt to distinguish between identical sounds. Ahmad et al. (2022) proclaimed that these pronunciation problems are partly a result of insufficient training for teachers. Even at the college level, English teachers need to be taught the proper pronunciation to impart it to their pupils. In addition, a study of novice teachers on teaching pronunciation suggested that inexperienced educators are not aware of how much weight the Malaysian syllabus places on pronunciation (Asikin & Ibrahim, 2020). Due to each student's unique demands and variations, it was discovered that there were few resources and teaching materials available for pronunciation. This does not happen because pronunciation is unimportant, but rather because they know very little or nothing about it; many English teachers stay away from teaching it (Zuparova & Kayumoya, 2021). Priya and Kumar (2020) concluded that learners can achieve maximum communication power by putting into practice the appropriate procedures for teaching English pronunciation. Edwards et al. (2021) suggested the need for assessment in implementing the pronunciation teaching and learning process. After conducting a needs assessment, teachers can use the results to create customised L2 pronunciation assignments for each student, choose online resources that they can use inside and outside of the classroom, and assist in identifying L2 usage areas where students can improve, such as listening and reading implementation. Furthermore, a study by Nguyen and Newton (2020) proves that a workshop could close the knowledge gap by giving the teachers a chance to improve how they teach pronunciation. The research indicates that the educators effectively incorporated the communicative pronunciation teaching pedagogy they were given during the workshop into their actual pronunciation instruction in the classroom. According to a review conducted by Zuparova and Kayumova (2021), several topics have been covered in recent research and discussion on teaching and learning

pronunciation, including the differences between spoken and learned languages' sound systems, the significance of intonation, stress, accent, and rhythm in ESL speakers' plausible speech, the role that exposure and motivation play in facilitating the growth of native-like pronunciation, and the intelligibility of spoken language among speakers of various English dialects. Correspondingly, a study by Colish et al. (2021) discovered that learners' pronunciation of the English language is influenced by four major factors, which are environment, education, motivation, and exposure. Additionally, it was believed that increased motivation translates into improved language proficiency. Likewise, the research findings by Gilakjani et al. (2020) have shown that learners' pronunciation acquisition was significantly influenced by a number of elements, including motivation, pronunciation teaching, learners' social identity, rectification of errors exposure, native language, age, exposure, and attitude. For instance, one of the findings revealed that students hold the belief that if they pronounce words in a manner similar to that of a native speaker, the listeners would find them easier to understand. There is variation in the application of pronunciation traits within and between the L1 and L2 speech communities to which the learner belongs or wants to belong.

Moreover, Alghazo and Zidan (2019) found that students go so far as to idealise native speakers by characterising native English-speaking teachers as flawless individuals when it comes to their English language skills. It is possible that L2 learners focus on external stimuli in addition to the L2 pronunciation standards taught in the classroom and that their objectives for learning the language differ from those of the teachers and curriculum (Edwards et al., 2021). As such, teachers must have a better awareness of the reasons behind the pronunciation challenges that ESL students have in addition to a basic framework for comprehending the circumstances of second language learners (Nair & Mello, 2017).

Perceptions of Pronunciation

Two interrelated but largely independent constructs—comprehensibility, or ease of understanding, and accentedness, or phonological nativelikeness—have been widely used to measure global L2 English pronunciation competency; in most cases, listeners' intuitive assessments are used to operationalize these conceptions. (Saito, 2021). There could be different conceptions of various accents, as Yuwita and Ambarwati (2023) found that there are differing ideas about English accents. The results of their study showed that while some participants explicitly showed unfavourable sentiments towards their English accents, others showed positive attitudes towards them. Certain beliefs and preferences, educational background, exposure to other people's languages or familiarity, and contact with other languages and cultures all influenced these opinions. The standard accents, which some participants preferred, are probably the model when it comes to pronunciation (Tsang, 2024). Research suggests that consumers may prefer to hear accents from native English speakers in some situations, according to Tan et al. (2021). Given that they were able to understand non-native accents more easily than native ones, some ESL/EFL students prefer non-native speaker accents in an educational setting. In the workplace, native speaker accents are preferred over those from other educational backgrounds.

According to the findings by Lin et al. (2018), the attainment of a position comparable to that of a native was considered crucial in conjunction with opportunities concerning education, the economy, and elevating one's social status. However, the majority of respondents expressed support for maintaining their Malaysian accent, defying those who said otherwise. Likewise, a study on Thai university students' attitudes towards their own Thai-English accent (Annabelle & Boonsuk, 2021) found that despite not pronouncing words like natives, the majority of students expressed satisfaction with their unique Thai-English accent. Although some students found it difficult to give up their preference for standard English or native English accents, they nonetheless voiced differing views about the significance of communication strategies when using English, which go beyond one's accent when speaking. The differing opinions can also be seen in teachers' views, as found by Monfared and Khatib (2018), whereas compared to the Indian

instructors, who were more optimistic about the intelligibility of their accented English in terms of perceived intelligibility, Iranian teachers were more eager to strive for native-like pronunciation in their classes. The study's findings about India indicate that, while Indian teachers view British English as the ideal linguistic model and prefer it above other languages, they nevertheless have a favourable opinion of their own regional variation. Additionally, there are some suggestions for future studies, such as the survival and preservation of additional English varieties, as well as taking a more qualitative method to collect more detailed data for the attitudes towards it (Lin et al., 2018). There is also a need for additional research on students' attitudes towards English varieties as well as changes in the attitudes of Outer and Expanding Circle teachers towards the language (Monfared & Khatib, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, observation analysis will be adopted, as proposed by Rahman and Hassan (2019) in their study titled "A study of voiceless inter-dental fricative [θ], [ð] sounds and alveolar liquid [r] sound among Chinese learners of English at a higher educational institution in Malaysia." In addition, this study will also use a focus group interview to identify students' perspectives on the pronunciation of TH stops. According to Morgan (1996), participants in focus groups are more valuable because they question and clarify themselves to one another, compared to individual interviews. The purpose of this interview is to get perspectives and opinions from the participants through a limited number of open-ended, unstructured questions (Creswell, 2017).

Furthermore, purposive sample is used in this study. According to Creswell (2007), the researcher chooses subjects and study locations based on their ability to specifically contribute to understanding the study's main phenomenon and research challenge. They share a few similarities, as the participants are all seventeen-year-old secondary school students, two of whom are male and one female. All of them are Malay speakers with English as their second language. A survey was given beforehand to determine students' recent English scores as well as the language spoken at home. Additionally, researchers take handwritten notes, audio recordings, or video recordings of the material they acquire through interviews (Creswell, 2017); thus, the data for this study will be collected through the recordings for further analysis, with the participants' consent. A word list consisting of twenty-one words will be shown in slides to ease the process. The words that are used in this study include twenty-one words of voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds; other random words will be included in every round. They attended in turns for the first session, where they pronounced the word list, and the second session, where they all gathered for the focus group interview. As for this study, both of the sessions will be recorded. In the first session, the participants would be asked to read aloud the word list prepared that was adapted by Mahnunah (2020), with the inclusion of random words that do not contain both voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds. Following the similar methodology of a previous study in ensuring reliability, coding is adopted into the process of data analysis. As Juliardi and Bunau (2019) have stated in their study, data transformation into letter- or number-based symbols is known as coding. The data must be arranged so that analysis may be completed more quickly. The pronunciation of the students will be phonetically transcribed by the researcher. By repeatedly hearing the students' pronunciation from the recorded data, it is possible to identify their pronunciation. Moreover, in determining the variations and substitutions made by the participants, a comparison is done between the phonemic transcriptions from the observation and the phonetic transcription of the words from the Oxford Dictionary. In addition, one of the participants' transcriptions is peer-evaluated by an English major graduate who is familiar with the IPA system. To reduce bias in the data analysis procedure, the evaluator is required to transcribe the audio into phonemic transcription using the IPA system.

In addition, an interview will take place in a focused group setting for this study, which will be recorded and analysed later. The interview questions consist of five questions. However, since all of them are open-ended questions, further discussions may occur during the interview.

The recording was replayed several times before being transcribed using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) system. To determine the variations and substitutions made by the participants, a comparison is done between the phonemic transcriptions from the observation and the phonetic transcription of the words from the Oxford Dictionary. To ensure reliability, one of the participants' transcriptions is peer-evaluated by an English major graduate who is familiar with the IPA system. Through data analysis, the researcher creates 'naturalistic generalisations,' or generalities that people can apply to a population of cases or learn from a particular case (Creswell, 2007). In this study, such an approach can be seen in the tables that will be included in the findings section. Considering that this study is an adaptation of other previous studies on the substitutions of the voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds, the data may be generalised and compared to the previous studies. Since this study includes two methods, the second section of the data would be in voice recording from the interview. Converting the recordings into a text format is the first stage in the data analysis process (Dörnyei, 2007). The data will be transcribed thematically and arranged into themes; as Terry et al. (2017) noted, rather than serving as a starting point, themes are the result of the analytical process; thus, the points that are gathered will be categorized under similar responses.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study according to sections that include the demographic survey results, substitutions of /θ/ with /t/, /ð/ with /d/, and other substitutions found.

Demographic Survey

Table 1

Demographic Survey Result

Participants	Gender	Race	Birthplace	Recent English examination result	Languages spoken at home
A	Male	Malay	Kedah	A	Malay
B	Male	Malay	Kedah	B	Malay
C	Female	Malay	Wilayah Persekutuan	C	Mix of Malay and English

Table 1 shows the demographic survey that was sent to the participants ahead of the process. Before the procedures of the study, participants were asked to complete a mini-survey containing information on

gender, race, birthplace, recent English results, and language spoken at home. As stated in the research populations, the participants are Malay speakers, which include two males and one female. Two of them were born in Kedah, while the other one was from Wilayah Persekutuan. For their recent English results, two of the participants scored A in their recent examination while the other one scored B. The results from the language spoken at home show that two of them use the Malay language at home, while the other one has a mixture of two languages (English and Malay).

Substitutions by the Participants

Figure 1
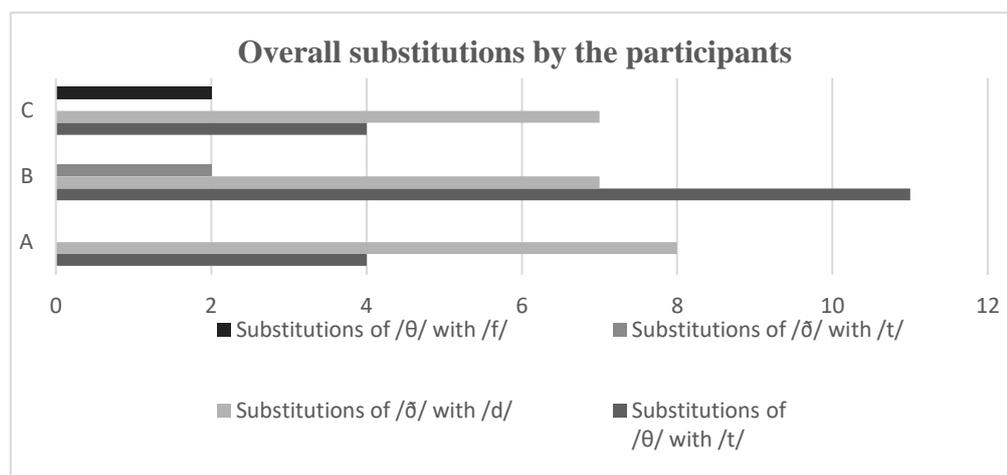
The Overall Substitutions by the Participants

Figure 1 shows the overall substitutions, including the substitutions of /θ/ with /t/, /ð/ with /d/, /ð/ with /t/, and /θ/ with /f/.

Total Accurate Pronunciation

Table 2

Total Accurate Pronunciation

Participants	Total accurate pronunciation
A	7/24
B	2/24
C	8/24

Given that participant A (male) had seven accurate pronunciations and participant C (female) had eight accurate pronunciations, gender does not seem to play a significant role in the pronunciation errors.

Substitutions of /θ/ with /t/

Table 4

Substitutions of /θ/ with /t/

Participants	Number of substitutions of /θ/ with /t/
A	4
B	11
C	4

Eleven substitutions of /θ/ with /t/ were discovered during the analysis, with four of them coming from participants A and C and eleven from B. All participants substituted /θ/ with /t/ for words like "theme," "third," "thing," and "nothing."

Substitutions of /ð/ with /d/. iv. Substitutions of /ð/ with /d/

Table 5

Substitutions of /ð/ with /d/

Participants	Number of substitutions of /ð/ with /d/
A	8
B	7
C	7

In the study, eight substitutions of /ð/ with /d/ were discovered, most of which came from each participant. Therefore, "than," "weather," "further," "them," "the," and "that" are among the listed words. Participant A had also substituted /ð/ in the word "bathe" as /d/ on his own.

Substitutions of /ð/ with /t/

Table 6

Substitutions of /ð/ with /t/.

Participants	Number of substitutions of /ð/ with /d/
A	0

B	2
C	0

In the study, two substitutions of /ð/ with /t/ were discovered, produced by participant B. The words involved are "bathe" and "clothe."

Substitutions of /θ/ with /f/

Table 7

Substitutions of /θ/ with /f/

Participants	Number of substitutions of /θ/ with /f/
A	0
B	0
C	2

Two substitutions of /θ/ with /f/ were discovered during the analysis, with two substitutions coming from participant C through the words "breath" and "truth."

Accurate Pronunciation in Each Position

(a) Initial

Table 8

Total Accuracy in the Front Position

Words	Total accuracy
Therefore	0/3
Than	0/3
Theme	0/3
Third	0/3
Thing	0/3

Them	0/3
Thick	0/3
The	0/3
That	0/3

In the analysis, it was found that none of the words that include the voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds in the initial positions are pronounced accurately by the participants.

b) Middle

Table 9

Total Accuracy in the Middle Position

Words	Total accuracy
Birthday	3/3
Weather	0/3
Further	0/3
Bathroom	2/3
Nothing	0/3

As for the middle position, some words are pronounced accurately. For example, the word "birthday" is the word that has full accuracy by the participants, followed by "bathroom," which is pronounced accurately by two participants, leaving one participant behind.

c) Final

Table 10

Total Accuracy in the Final Position

Words	Total accuracy
Truth	0/3
Path	2/3
Both	2/3

Clothe	0/3
Smooth	3/3
Breathe	1/3
Booth	2/3
Birth	2/3
Bathe	0/3

Lastly, the final positions contain a few words that are pronounced accurately, such as "smooth," that are done by all of the participants. Other words such as "path," "both," "booth," and "birth" were pronounced accurately by the two participants, which are A and C, respectively.

Interview Transcriptions

i. Difficulty in pronouncing the word "bath"

Two of the participants responded with "bath" as the difficult word that they have to pronounce.

> *"Difficulty…um I think "bath" because it feels like two words so it was confusing. For example, there are "bath" and "bathe.".. like, is the same or different pronunciation?" - Participant C*

Participant C responded with the confusion she had between the different pronunciations of "bath" and "bathe." Participant B then responded that they agreed with the statement shared by Participant C, as he had never tried pronouncing the words given.

ii. English language pronunciation differs from the Malay language

The majority of the participants agreed that the pronunciation differs due to the different languages.

> *"It's like they have different language, their accent…all of that." - Participant B*

All of them agreed that it sounds different when asked again by the coordinator for a confirmation. Participant A gave an example of how different it sounds:

> *"Like in Malaysia 'water' but in British 'wota.'"*

It indicates that they have the understanding of different kinds of pronunciation through the same words as shared by Participant A. Other than that, they have also shared that since they are a native speaker of the Malay language, they are not used to the pronunciation of a native speaker of English.

> *"As for me, it's quite difficult because as the native speakers of the Malay language, we are not used to the slangs." - Participant A*

> *"I agree with A because of the differences in native languages." - Participant B*

Generally, they believed that different pronunciation was due to speaker differences, especially among non-native speakers.

iii. The importance of pronouncing it like a native speaker

All of the participants believed that it is important to sound like a native speaker to communicate effectively and accurately.

> *"For me, even though I wouldn't apply it in my life, I still find it important. For example, if we talk with foreigners, they might not be able to understand if we use our own 'slang'. If we use the correct 'slang', they may understand us better when we interact." - Participant A*

> *"When we communicate in the English language, Malay language may be easy if we use it like that than talking to foreigners, like it would be a little difficult so if we use the right accent, they will understand it better." - Participant B*

> *"It's not just because of understanding, okay I got it that it's important but it can also be a first impression, so when a foreigner see that we can communicate well with the right accent and when it is right, they would be able to focus on what we are saying." - Participant C*

The participants believed that by putting importance on the correct pronunciation, it would offer them better comprehension as well as a good impression of the native speakers.

iv. Positive views on the native-like pronunciation

All of the participants responded with a positive view regarding the pronunciation, as they believe it is knowledgeable to know the usual pronunciation for a better learning process.

> *"I also want to take the positive side of course, it's a good thing to learn and how to pronounce it even though there is no right or wrong, it is not wrong as well for us to try and use the correct pronunciation." - Participant C*

The participants have also shared that knowing the pronunciation of the native speakers would allow them to apply it abroad.

> *"...it would be easier if we had to study abroad and it will be our advantage." - Participant B*

> *"...In learning, we can find more knowledge in languages that we can learn as we can use it abroad…." - Participant A*

DISCUSSION

From the findings, it is evident that the recent study has findings that are consistent with the previous studies (Yamaguchi, 2014; Chan, 2023; Fauzi, 2021; Emmanuel et al., 2022; Rahman & Hassan, 2019; Pudin et al., 2021) with the substitutions of /θ/ as /t/, which results in eleven similar substitutions. The results above demonstrated that the participants regularly substituted /t/ for /θ/, particularly in the initial positions. Since both /θ/ and /t/ share one thing in common, that is, both of them are voiceless (Putra, 2021), the participants substitute /θ/ for /t/ as the said sound exists in the Malay language. On the other hand, the findings also found substitutions of /ð/ with /d/, which is also consistent with the previous studies where the same findings were observed (Rahim & Nasir, 2021; Khanh, 2020; Emmanuel et al., 2022; Rahman & Hassan, 2019; Pudin et al., 2021). Moreover, there are also other substitutions of /θ/ with /f/ from the same

participant, which is the participant C, with words such as 'breath' and 'truth.' This finding aligns with the study of Tyler et al. (2019), which has found similar substitutions of /θ/ with /f/. Moreover, this study aligns well with the findings from the study of Kurniawan (2016), whereas /ð/ was substituted with /t/ at the coda position. Similarly, this recent study also found such substitutions from the B participant with two substitutions of /ð/ with /t/. Interestingly, all of the participants had difficulty pronouncing the words that contain voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds in the initial position, and it coordinates with the study by Putra (2021), which found the participants regularly substituting /t/ for /θ/, particularly in the beginning positions. Some words in the medial and final positions, however, contain phrases that are pronounced accurately by all of the participants, such as 'birthday' and 'smooth.' The two participants who had a high score in English were identical in their accuracies, leaving the other participant with a score of B in their recent examination scores behind. This finding may imply a correlation between learners' language proficiency and the accuracies in the pronunciation. When placed against their more proficient peers in the classroom and outside of it, learners with lower oral proficiency are frequently at a disadvantage. To assist them in improving not just their English language pronunciation but also their degree of confidence in using the language, a lot of emphasis should be paid to how to improve their overall pronunciation intelligibility (Shak, 2016).

These findings from the recent study supplemented the previous studies on the substitutions of voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds. As Rahman and Hassan (2019) asserted based on their findings, learners attempt to replace the closest approximations for the new sounds since they have difficulties in perceiving them. In 2020, Maiza stated that their first language may interfere with target language sounds, making them hard to pronounce. Having known that the voiced and voiceless fricative sounds do not exist in the Malay language, the participants may have difficulties in pronouncing the sound, which results in the substitutions to the closest sounds in their native language. According to Pudin et al. (2021), who based their study on the Theory of Language Transfer, negative transfer occurs since the participants of Sabah Bumiputera, Malays, and Chinese in the study lack the /θ/ sound. As a result, a sound from the speakers' own language is used in its place. As asserted by Lado (1975), our phonemes are typically transferred to that language when we learn a foreign language. Likewise, this study involves Malay speakers as participants, and as the findings have indicated, they have substituted the sounds with those that are close to their first language, resulting in the substitution of /θ/ as /t/, /ð/ as /d/, and others.

In the second session of this study, an interview including all of the participants was held and recorded. Major findings of the interview include the difficulty in pronouncing words that include the voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds at the final position, such as 'bath,' 'bathe,' and 'breath.' The participants agreed that the actual sounds are different from their expectations and can be found in the word, such as 'breath,' as shared by Participant B: "For me, 'breath' is a little difficult because the way of pronouncing it is not the same." When asked what sound they expected the final sound to be, the participants shared their thoughts, which resulted in an agreement that /h/ would be the final sound of the word, which made the pronunciation /breh/ when pronounced. Further research is needed, but it is likely that they replaced /θ/ with /h/ due to their similar articulation, which may simplify pronunciation. Fricatives are the sounds produced during the production of certain continuants due to the airflow that is so severely impeded that it creates friction (Fromkin et al., 2017). The distinction is that /θ/ is produced by the disparity where the tongue and teeth meet, whereas /h/ is a weaker sound produced by air travelling through the open pharynx and glottis. Given that the /h/ sound is present in their first language, they may identify the sound that is closest to them. Given that the participants incorrectly created the phonological representations for the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds, it is expected that they would retrieve and encode the inaccurate representations during production (Fan & Yongbing, 2014).

Other than that, the participants agreed that the English language differs from their first language, which is Malay, indicating the differences in the sounds produced. For instance, participant A shared that it is quite difficult to pronounce the words since they are the native speakers of Malay. Learning a second language at its inception is particularly prone to interference or interlingual transfer from the native language (Brown, 2007). Likewise, a study by Qader et al. (2023) found that in Bangladesh, the learning process of ESL pronunciation is disrupted by the pronunciation of Bengali words. This finding demonstrates how their perspective on the linguistic differences influences their perceptions of pronunciation. Lado (1957) also shared that users frequently transfer the entirety of their native language system when learning a foreign language. As shared by participant B, it seemed like a foreign language. In other words, the pronunciation sounds unfamiliar to them, as they are not used to the usual pronunciation of the native speakers of English. A dictation test in a study by Fan & Yongbing (2014) demonstrated that the subjects' difficulties distinguishing between /θ/ and /ð/ are not due to perceptual difficulties; rather, the inaccurate representation of the /θ/ and /ð/ sounds in their mental lexicon is the cause of the problem. Students attempt to replace the closest similarities for the new sounds since they are having difficulty perceiving them (Rahman & Hassan, 2019). Based on a study of Malaysian undergraduates, Pudin et al. (2021) asserted that, according to the theory of language transfer, negative transfer takes place since neither of these languages has the sound of the voiceless dental fricative /θ/. Instead, a sound from the speakers' own language is used in its place. Similarly, the sound of the voiced dental fricative sound /ð/ is substituted with /d/ due to the absence of the sound in the Malay language.

Additionally, the participants agreed that it is important to sound like native speakers, as it offers them a better understanding and impression. In a study of native speakerism and professional identity in L2 pronunciation learning by Alghazo and Zidan (2019), it was found that students went so far as to glorify native speakers by characterizing native English-speaking pronunciation teachers (NESPTs) as flawless individuals. It was further shown that the majority of students view NESPTs as role models that they aspire to follow and that the accents they use are their dreams. According to Holliday (as cited in Holliday, 2006), the widespread ideology known as 'native-speakerism' in English language teaching (ELT) is defined by the conviction that native-speaker teachers are representatives of a western culture, which is the source of the ideals of the English language and ELT methodology. The findings were further supported by Participant B's emphasis that speaking English with a Malay accent can make it challenging to communicate with a foreign person. All of the participants shared that using a similar accent will provide them better interaction in terms of intelligibility. Shibata (2021) found that respondents from Kazakhstan and Malaysia expressed satisfaction with their English dialects, despite wanting to sound more like native speakers. While stressing the importance of communicative skills for learners as human capital for global competition, the seven EFL countries examined in the study, including Malaysia, share the view that English proficiency is considered crucial. A study on students' perception towards Englishes in multilingual settings by Irham (2002) found that the participants also portray native speakerism that is firmly ingrained and has been moulded by the Inner Circle English variety's dominating discourse as an authority and standard, demeaning other Englishes. Participants believed that introducing these 'Englishes' into the classroom would be unfavourable since they are not standard.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to examine the substitutions of /θ/ as /t/ and /d/ as well as /ð/ as /d/ and /t/. The two research questions were answered with the twelve substitutions of /θ/ as /t/, as well as ten and two substitutions of /ð/ as /d/ and /t/, respectively. In general, this study is consistent with past studies' findings, containing the substitutions of voiced dental fricatives /ð/ that are replaced by the voiced alveolar stops /d/ (Rahim &

Nasir, 2021; Khanh, 2020; Emmanuel et al., 2022; Rahman & Hassan, 2019; Pudin et al., 2021), as well as the voiceless dental fricative sounds /θ/ that are substituted as /t/ (Yamaguchi, 2014; Chan, 2023; Fauzi, 2021; Emmanuel et al., 2022; Rahman & Hassan, 2019; Pudin et al., 2021). Interestingly, this study has also found another substitution of /θ/ as /f/ that aligns with the study of Tyler et al. (2019). It is evident that non-native speakers tend to transfer their first language to a foreign language during a learning process, as asserted by Lado (1975). In this study, however, English is their second language. With the absence of both voiced and voiceless and dental fricative sounds, the participants try to find the nearest sound that is similar to their first language. Furthermore, students' perceptions towards the standard pronunciation vary, but it can generally be concluded that they perceive it to be important, especially towards the impression and further education. The participants agreed that the word 'bath' is difficult to pronounce, as the English language pronunciation may differ from their native language, which is Malay. They had also shared that learning the accurate pronunciation would be beneficial in adding to their knowledge of the English language. In supplementing students' knowledge in the standard pronunciation, more exposure should be provided using authentic materials to ensure students access the best resources for learning accurate pronunciation. It was found in the interview that the participants perceived voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds as /h/; hence, further studies could be done in supplementing this field with other substitutions than /t/ and /d/. To sum up, this study has supported previous studies in the substitutions of both voiced and voiceless dental fricative sounds. It is ascertained that language transfer plays a role in the reasoning behind the substitutions. In the absence of these sounds in the participants' first language, they face difficulties in pronouncing the unfamiliar sounds, and as a result, substitutions occur. Moreover, ESL learners in this study believed in the importance of accurate pronunciation for a better learning process as well as for communication purposes. The implications that follow are for secondary school teachers to emphasise the pronunciation aspects in class to ensure learners' knowledge of phonetics and phonology is appropriate for their level of education.

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