

## Phonological Skills in Malaysian English Speaking Chinese Children

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### Abstract

Some of the phonological patterns that are normal for children learning Malaysian English (Baskaran, 2004; Phoon & Maclagan, 2009) are similar to developmental phonological patterns in Standard English children (Haelsig & Madison, 1986; Grunwell, 1997; James et al., 1999). Devoicing of final stops, de-aspiration of initial voiceless stops, vocalization of /l/, and stopping of fricatives /s/ and /ʃ/, for instance, are suppressed for children learning Standard English but are normal for adult speakers of Malaysian English. When these phonological patterns are regarded as dialectally normal, what are the actual developmental patterns of phonology in Malaysian English children? The present research aims to address this question by providing a description of the phonological development of Malaysian English speaking Chinese children through examination of the developmental phonological processes in Malaysian English consonants. A total of 264 typically developing English speaking Malaysian Chinese children between the ages of three and seven years were recruited from kindergartens and schools to participate in this cross-sectional study. A list of 195 words, which sampled 24 Malaysian English consonants in various syllable positions was illustrated and presented colourfully in composite pictures to elicit a large and well-controlled single word speech sample. All the speech data gained were transcribed phonetically and analyzed quantitatively. A list of predetermined dialectal phonological patterns exhibited by Chinese Malaysian English speaking adults (Phoon & Maclagan, 2009) was used to identify dialectal phonological patterns in the speech of the children prior to inspecting the developmental phonological patterns. To be regarded as an age appropriate developmental “phonological processes”, the phonological patterns had to be exhibited by at least 10% of the children (Dodd, 2003) in at least 10% of the occurrences. Ten major phonological processes were observed: deaffrication, final consonant deletion, stopping of fricatives, depalatalization, medial consonant devoicing, substitution of fricatives, alveolarization, cluster creation, fronting of fricatives and affrication. Most phonological processes were suppressed before four-years of age, with the exception of alveolarization, deaffrication, final consonant deletion, fronting of fricatives and affrication. The findings revealed that Malaysian English speaking children exhibited phonological processes that were both similar and different to Standard English. For example, deaffrication, final consonant deletion, stopping of fricatives, depalatalization and alveolarization are commonly reported in children’s Standard English phonology, whereas cluster creation, medial consonant devoicing and substitution of fricatives are exclusive to children’s Malaysian English phonology. The ages of suppression of the phonological processes were different in Malaysian English as compared to Standard English. For example, final consonant deletion, that is usually expected to be suppressed before three years old, persisted in Malaysian English until 7 years old or even older. The

discrepancy probably occurred because Malaysian Chinese children, growing up in a multilingual community that consists of different languages, might exhibit interference patterns from other languages during the acquisition process. The major clinical implication of the present study is the development of locally appropriate norms for phonological process occurrence for Malaysian English speaking Chinese children. Speech-language therapists in Malaysia will be able to use these norms as a guideline in assessing and treating clients with articulation and phonological disorders and making appropriate clinical decisions.

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