Range of Use, Nativisation and Acceptability in Malaysian English[1]

Ridwan Wahid[2]
International Islamic University Malaysia

Abstract

Malaysian English grammar is claimed to contain localised, non-standard features that exist alongside exonormative counterparts. Taking diffusion of such features as an indicator of nativisation, this study argues that this process is influenced not by proficiency and language use alone, but also by the uses to which the language is put, i.e. range of use. One way to prove this is to measure diffusion of features among proficient speakers whose ranges of use vary considerably. In this paper, I present findings from a survey of acceptability of 11 deviant grammatical features adapted from Bautista (2004) and 28 divided usages adapted from Lee and Collins (2006). Comparing two groups of proficient speakers – one of *wide range users*, and the other of *non-wide range* ones – the study found that the wide range users tended to have more liberal attitudes towards non-standard grammatical features than their non-wide range counterparts. Given the high acceptability levels shown by these acrolectal speakers in formal contexts, the findings suggest that such speakers bear some influence on the nativisation of these features as well as their pathways to standardisation.

Keywords

Malaysian English, nativisation, acceptability, range of use, would, standard

Introduction

As in many other varieties outside the Inner Circle, Malaysian English (MalE) grammar has been found to contain non-standard, mostly local features that exist alongside exonormative counterparts (Baskaran, 2005; Hashim and Tan, 2012). These include, among others, distinctive morphosyntactic features such as omission of articles from its noun phrases, variable use of copula in its verb phrases, variable use of verb concord and variable marking of tense and aspect (Baskaran, 2005; Platt, Weber and Ho, 1984; Wong, 1983). Some of these are

novel innovations while others may be features that are used more frequently in this variety than others (see Mukherjee and Gries, 2009). Along with some other phonological and lexical features, these linguistic variations are sometimes explained through a diglossic continuum on which three sociolects – acrolect, mesolect and basilect – can be identified (Omar, 1982; Gill, 1993; Baskaran, 2005). The highest sociolect, the acrolect, is generally thought to be the site of standard usages while the non-standard ones are more progressively found across the mesolect and basilect (Baskaran, 2005).

Against the backdrop of a nation that sometimes struggles to make sense of the special place occupied by English in its society (Mohd Don, 2014), it is important to try to understand how nativisation takes place in MalE and what relation it holds with standardisation. The tension between what can or cannot be regarded as "standard" underlies the insecurity felt by some speakers of this variety and feeds into the Complaint Tradition (Milroy, 2001) which regularly surfaces in the country (e.g. Teo, 2009; Yuen, 2015; Mail, 2016).

One indicator of nativisation is how diffused a feature is among speakers of various proficiency levels (Svalberg, 1998). This can also mean that the feature is used by considerable numbers of acrolectal, mesolectal and basilectal speakers. This study seeks to refine this view by focusing on acrolectal speakers and explore how high proficiency interacts with range of use to affect diffusion and in turn, nativisation.

The next section of this paper explores the relationship between proficiency and range of use. It is followed by a review of studies on nativisation and acceptability. The methodology is described next. This is followed by a discussion of the findings and the study concludes in the final section.

Proficiency and Range of Use

The relationship between language use and proficiency appears to be straightforward as the amount of language use is claimed to correlate with the level of proficiency (Jarvis and Pavlenko, 2008; Luk and Bialystok, 2013; De Carli, Dessi, Mariani and Girtler, 2014). This is explained by Athanasopoulos in the following words:

> The degree to which the multilingual individual will use one of the particular languages at their disposal is undoubtedly dependent on the interactional context and the degree of immersion in a specific community or country. Increasing the opportunity to use the language due to these factors will, in turn, lead to increases in expertise in the particular language and will potentially provide the individual with target-like examples of specific linguistic features. (37)

However, there is evidence from language acquisition studies in a diverse array of contexts to suggest that amount of use alone, as indicated above, does not equate to increased proficiency. Investigating the effects of study abroad on proficiency in Spanish using multiple measures, Savicki (2011) found that the amount of contact with native speakers did not correlate with proficiency. He concluded that, "This lack of relationship reflects only the quantity, not the quality of the contacts" (76). In another study involving proficiency in Spanish by migrants in the USA, Please-Alvarez, Hakuta and Bailey (1996) discovered that parents' use of the language in the home significantly contributed to their children's proficiency regardless of whether the latter used English or Spanish when they were outside. Yeh, Chan and Cheng (2004) investigated language shift in Taiwan and concluded that it is the patterns of language choice with particular interlocutors that determined whether a native language of a minority group would lose out to Mandarin. In other words, use of Mandarin alone would not by default lead to the loss of a native language and by implication, decline in proficiency. Findings such as these suggest that proficiency and language use are related but it is strongly conditioned by the uses to which the language is put. In this regard, the idea behind Fishman's (1968, 1972) domain analysis from nearly 50 years ago seems to be pertinent: "Proper usage indicates that only one of the theoretically co-available languages or varieties will be chosen by particular classes or interlocutors on particular kinds of occasions to discuss particular kinds of topics" (Fishman, *Readings in the Sociology of Language* 15). Recognising that there are specific languages for specific settings, there is a need to consider, in addition to how much, when and where English is used, in order to evaluate how proficient a speaker is. More recently, in distinguishing "functional nativeness" from "genetic nativeness," Kachru argued that acceptability of English in relation to functional nativeness is measured in terms of *range* and *depth* (92). Range refers to "the domains of function" and depth refers to "the degree of social penetration of the language" (*English is an Asian Language*, 92). The concern of the present study is mainly with range. Following Svalberg (1998), if acceptability of a non-standard feature is regarded as an index of diffusion, a question that can be asked in regard to nativisation is, "Is a non-standard feature more acceptable to proficient speakers who use English more widely than others?" In other words, if proficiency is controlled, can range be shown to affect nativisation?

Nativisation and Acceptability
Based on Kachru (1981), Lowenberg defines nativisation as "systematic changes in [a variety's] formal features at all linguistic levels, which result from the use of English in new sociocultural settings, in contact with other languages, and in the absence of native speakers of English" (1). In this study, nativisation can involve what is known as non-native, non-standard or localised features (Bamgbose, 1998; Hickey, 2003; Buchsfield, 2014). There are a number of characteristics of a

standard language that can be applied to identify such features (e.g. Finnegan, 2008) but for the purposes of this study, they are defined by the fact that each of them is not regarded as acceptable by a significant number of speakers in the community which, in turn, manifests in the minimal occurrence or total absence of these features in public-domain texts or discourses.

Nativisation is often attributed to first language (L1) transfer due to the obvious interaction between the two languages within a speaker or speakers. However in cases where such a non-standard usage is observed in speakers from different and/or unrelated L1 backgrounds, researchers sometimes explain it from a *universalist* perspective, referring to the existence of linguistic properties that can be found across several languages. Gut (2011) explains that when L1 transfer, language universals or their combination cannot explain the use of a non-standard pattern; some extralinguistic factors such as language policies, psychological variables, historical events and so on may be at play and they may well be the more influential factors in its propagation.

In several studies of Outer Circle varieties, a few speaker characteristics have been shown to correlate positively with the acceptability of some non-standard features. In a study of Brunei English, for example, Svalberg (1998) found that high proficiency speakers tended to accept the use of *would* as a futurity marker. The study was replicated for Philippine English by Bautista (2004) who found that more or less the same level of acceptability of the futurity-marking *would* was demonstrated by her proficient participants. These findings led both researchers to conclude that *would* is now nativised in both varieties.

Among proficient speakers, however, use of non-standard features is found to be more amenable to extralinguistic factors such as those suggested by Gut (2011) above. Previous studies have indeed shown that other than proficiency, there are a variety of factors that contribute to acceptability. Lee and Collins (2006), for example, found that formality of context, familiarity with prescriptive rules and speaker age also influenced the acceptability of what they called debatable usages. Their study demonstrates that formality and age are inversely correlated with the acceptability of such usages. More importantly they also show that younger speakers do not uniformly accept some non-standard usages. Their findings suggest that young speakers who are more proficient tend be more accepting in this regard.

In another study, Ladegaard (2000) found that adolescent, male speakers, rather than their female counterparts, demonstrated a higher predilection for vernacular features in Danish. This was found to be related to the male participants' more positive attitudes to such features. In an overview of variationist sociolinguistic research, Tagliamonte (2012) lists many similar social variables such as social class, age, social networks and ethnicity as primary agents of language change with respect to use of non-standard usages. Other than that,

there is evidence of the influence of psychological variables as well. For instance, Dewaele (2004) found that the psychological construct of extraversion can better predict the tendency to use colloquial vocabulary among native speakers and learners of French than proficiency alone. In other words, he found that proficiency, although necessary, needs to be coupled with extraversion for it to have a significant effect.

The present study was conducted to investigate how range of use can influence acceptability of non-standard features. If proficient speakers who use MalE show a higher level of acceptance of these features, it is possible that they are paving the way for other speakers to follow suit, reinforcing nativisation as they go along. Although at present it would be difficult to find these features described in dictionaries, reference grammars or other means of codification (Bamgbose, 1998), their level of acceptability by speakers in general will increase and the distinction between what is non-standard and what is standard will gradually be blurred (Groves, 2009). In the interim, the present description may offer a direct perspective of the third stage of Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model of Postcolonial Englishes, nativisation, which is claimed to be the most vibrant of all its five stages.[3]

Methodology
Grammaticality Judgement Test

The study used a grammaticality judgement test which contained two sets of sentences. The first set (A) has 28 sentences, adapted from Lee and Collins (2006). Each sentence contains a debatable usage, defined by Collins as an item for which there can be "not only variation in the community but also, typically, a tradition of debate as to the propriety or correctness of one or the other variant" (*Divided and Debatable Usage in Australian English* 140).[4] The second set (B) consists of 20 sentences adapted from Bautista (2004). Eleven of these contain verbs of various faulty tenses and are thus ungrammatical. From these two sets, three types of usages can be identified: (i) debatable – 20 sentences (ii) correct – nine sentences and (iii) incorrect - 11 sentences (see Appendix). These sets of sentences were not modified except for names of people, places and a few everyday artefacts to create a Malaysian context because the errors and disputable usages incorporated in these sentences are also found in MalE (Maros, Tan and

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[3] Schneider's Dynamic Model is a framework that attempts to describe the development of Postcolonial Englishes. He argues that "evolving World Englishes typically proceed through five characteristic stages" (*Developmental Patterns of English* 381) which are *foundation* (arrival of English in a new territory), *exonormative stabilisation* (orientation of norms towards the mother country), *nativisation* (forging of a new variety through interaction between superstrate and substrate elements), *endonormative stabilisation* (wider acceptance of the new variety) and *differentiation* (full acceptance of the variety due to its association with identity).

[4] This definition, though different in some ways to my own, emphasises the non-acceptability of a usage by a large number of speakers and this justifies the adoption of the test in this study.

Salehuddin, 2007; Ting, Mahadhir and Chang, 2010; Ang, Abdul Rahim, Tan and Salehuddin, 2011) or addressed in some usage guidebooks available in the country.

Given that some acrolectal and mesolectal speakers fluidly exploit particular features of the sociolect(s) below their own (Hashim and Tan, 2012) so as to index social meanings (see Eckert, 2012), the participants were required to indicate their acceptance of each sentence in two contexts – formal and informal. They were instructed to do so by entering a tick for "acceptable" and a cross for "unacceptable." Percentages for these two types of responses were then calculated. Statistical significance was determined by the chi-square test.

Participants
The participants for the study were selected from an initial pool of 170 Malaysian university students. All these students took a test modelled on the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). The MUET measures post-secondary students' English proficiency and skills for university admission purposes (see webmpm1.mpm.edu.my/muet). The overall scores obtained from its listening, speaking, reading and writing components are graded into one of six bands, with Band 6 being the highest and Band 1 the lowest. The participants who were chosen for the study are only those who obtained Band 5. The proficiency of a test-taker who obtains this band is described as "Good command of the language; expressive, fluent, accurate and appropriate language but with minor inaccuracies; good understanding of language and contexts; functions well in the language" (webmpm1.mpm.edu.my/muet). A total of 67 students did not achieve Band 5 – four students achieved Band 6, 41 students were awarded Band 4 and 22 students obtained Band 3. These students were excluded from the study. Based on the MUET results, a total of 103 students were selected for the study.

These participants subsequently answered a questionnaire which investigated when and where they used English typically. The domains that they had to consider were adapted from Fishman (1972): family, education, friendship, co-curriculum (referring to university learning activities not involving education and friendship) and university administration.[5] Another domain was added to make it more relevant to the participants: entertainment (referring to entertainment-oriented activities conducted on one's own). For each domain, they were asked to quantify, in terms of percentage, how much English was used in comparison to their other language(s). To be considered as a "wide range user," a participant must demonstrate at least sixty percent of English use in at least five

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[5] Fishman's (1972) original domains are family, education, friendship, and government and administration.

of the domains.[6] A total of 65 participants were found to be wide range users and 38 participants were classified as non-wide range users. Not totally unexpectedly, this turned out to be a remarkably neat division between a group of English majors and a group of non-English majors.

At the final stage, the selected participants can be identified as 65 first-year students majoring in English from a public university in Kuala Lumpur, 22 first-year students majoring in business studies from a public university in Shah Alam and 16 first-year students majoring in engineering from a branch campus of the same university on the east coast of Peninsula Malaysia.

Findings

Table 1 below shows the statistically significant differences in the percentages of acceptability by the two groups. These include debatable usages in the formal context, correct usages in the formal context and correct usages in the informal context. The fourth statistically significant percentage difference is found in the use of *would* in the formal context. Following Bautista (2004) and Svalberg (1998) in which acceptability of this modal in non-past and non-hypothetical uses was high, I took out the three sentences containing *would* in the "incorrect" subset and separately calculated the acceptability percentages for them.

Table 1: Statistically significant acceptability differences according to range and context
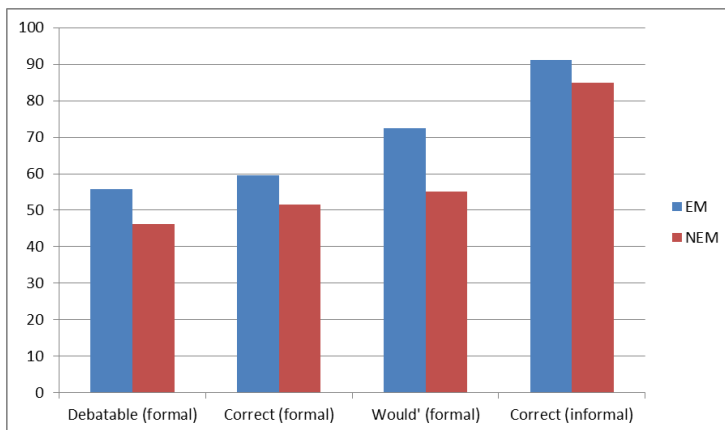
Note: EM = English majors / Wide range users; NEM = Non-English majors / Non-wide range users

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[6] The idea behind this criterion is, if a speaker uses English for more than 60% of all the interactions that he or she makes in at least five of the six identified domains, he or she is considered as an English user in a significant number of qualitatively different contexts.

Table 1 shows that the non-wide range users are more conservative in their acceptability level of debatable usages and *would* as a so-called futurity marker (Bautista, 2004). As for the wide range users, although they (unsurprisingly) tend to accept the correct usages in formal and informal contexts more than their counterparts do, they are found to be similarly more willing to accept the debatable usages which contain grammatical features that are not usually approved by prescriptivists.

This liberal attitude demonstrated by the wide range users can perhaps be associated with their wider use of MalE either with their peers, lecturers or other members of their community. There are two possibilities here. One, the debatable usages are more frequently encountered by this group in their interactions given the wider range of functions that are expressed in English by them. Two, the lexical and/or structural features contained in those usages actually help them to express their intended meanings better. These will be discussed again with reference to *would* below. The debatable sentences for which acceptability was significantly higher in the wide range group in the formal context are:

1. Will anyone bring <u>their</u> own food? (50.8% vs. 27.8%, x2 = 4.926, p<0.05)
2. <u>Due to illness</u>, I cancelled the talk. (79.7% vs. 50%, x2 = 9.493, p<0.05)
3. None of his books <u>interest</u> me. (63.5% vs. 33.3%, x2 = 8.56, p<0.05)
4. <u>Who</u> should I talk to? (73% vs. 52.8%, x2 = 4.161, p<0.05)
5. One can do what <u>he</u> likes. (62.5% vs. 30.6%, x2 =, p<0.05)

In the above results, the most striking observation is the high acceptability of both sentences (1) and (5) where the more democratic possessive form of the singular *they* (i.e. *their*) stands in stark contrast to the male-biased *he*. While there appears to be no easy resolution to this contradiction, recent research suggests that a linguistic behaviour such as usage of a particular word or grammatical structure is influenced to a considerable extent by its frequency in the language environment (Ellis, 2002; Bybee, 2007). To consider this possibility, I scanned 27 official emails from the participants' university for the word *he* and found 23 tokens in this very small corpus of 1,568 words. Nine of these tokens were used as a supposedly gender-neutral third person pronoun. This amounts to six occurrences of such a usage in every 1,000 words of similar emails. On the other hand, in a collection of business letters totalling 30,000 words excerpted from ICE-GB, the British component of the International Corpus of English, only 20 tokens of *he* were found and each of them had a clear male antecedent. This shows that there is a high frequency of the usage of *he* as a gender-neutral pronoun in the English that is used in the participants' university. The seemingly contradictory preferences for *he* and *they/their* thus suggest that, for some features,

the wide range users are more sensitive to the frequency of use in their community than the discourse-pragmatic reasons that may motivate the different variants in the first place.

The high acceptability of (2), (3) and (4) suggests that some proscriptive rules, such as not to start a sentence with the conjunction *due to*, not to use plural verbs with *none*, and not to use *who* to refer to the object of a verb or preposition, are regularly flouted by the wide range users. It is possible that their wider range of use, especially through speaking, has led them to perceive these usages as acceptable. Spoken language is known to influence written language (Biber et al., 1999; Collins, 2009) and this process of *colloquialisation* is one reason why so many of these debatable usages, once more common in speech (informal) than writing (formal), are turning up in the formal language of these speakers. The above explanation relating to frequency of use can also be used to throw some light on their choices. It is possible that in some domains, e.g. entertainment, there is a higher occurrence of some of these usages in the input that they receive, e.g. from television, films, books and the Internet, hence the higher level of acceptability.

What the results have shown is that proficiency in English and wider use of this variety in their environment can lead the speakers to hold more liberal attitudes towards usages that are usually disapproved by prescriptivists. In some other contexts, especially formal ones, such usages are entirely avoided and may constitute errors. Thus it is remarkable that it is precisely in those contexts that the wide range users view them to be acceptable. It is likely that for these speakers, these constructions simply express the meaning they want to convey better. This means that any issues related to prestige, which Nelson (2000) identifies as a contributing factor to prescriptivism as well as a common component of language standardisation, are irrelevant to them. This claim will be illustrated further with a grammatical feature that is said to be characteristic of – even nativised in – some Outer Circle Englishes (Bautista, 2004; Deterding, 2003; Collins, 2009; Svalberg, 1998). This is the use of non-past and non-hypothetical *would*.

Would

A number of studies have put forward the claim that non-past, non-hypothetical *would*, as in "I hope you *would* come," is a nativised feature of a number of Southeast Asian varieties based on its frequency (Deterding, 2003), distribution across proficiency levels (Bautista, 2004; Svalberg, 1998) and occurrence in spoken and written registers (Collins, 2009). Collins (2009) argues that the various non-past and non-hypothetical meanings expressed in such usages are in fact derived from the notion of tentativeness which itself is an extension of the hypothetical use of *would*. The three sentences containing *would* in the

questionnaire (see Appendix) are "Please pray that I *would* pass my SPM,"[7] "Students are invited to the talk which *would* be held in the Main Hall" and "We have to get sponsors from rich companies so they *would* support us when we go on tour." In Table 1 it can be seen that firstly, the use of extended *would* is more acceptable to the wide range users than the non-wide range users; secondly, and more interestingly, the high acceptability level shown by them is for the formal context. These findings emphasise the necessity of extended *would* to the speakers' intended meaning. At the same time, given the nature of the domains of use that are usually associated with formality, e.g. administration and education, they suggest that for these speakers such use is either impervious to prestige or is already associated with prestige and thus, standard (see Nelson, 2000). There are then some grounds for suggesting that proficient speakers who use English in a wider range of domains can affect the nativisation of a non-standard feature and its trajectory to standardisation. Other than that, the fact that the wide range users were also students majoring in English and were likely to have more familiarity with prescriptive rules serves to illustrate that nativisation may at times be a greater force than prescriptivism (although until codification takes place, this claim remains to be confirmed).

Conclusion

To summarise, the study has shown that proficiency and range of use can work in tandem to enhance the diffusion of non-standard features and their nativisation. Using two sets of questions investigating the acceptability of three types of usages (i.e. debatable, correct and incorrect), it has been demonstrated that proficient and wide range users of MalE tend to be less sensitive to prescriptivism and are likely to participate actively in the nativisation of grammatical features that are highly relevant to their expressive needs. These claims were substantiated using extended *would* and the findings also suggest that proficient, wide range users may also provide a pathway for a non-standard feature to be standardised by infiltrating registers of formal domains with its use.

This study is limited by its sole reliance on a grammaticality judgement test for data. As it is known that the reliability of this type of tests is at times contestable (Davies and Kaplan, 1997; Cowan and Hatasa, 1994), future research should also consider analysing data obtained through other means, e.g. corpora and verbal elicitation. It should also include grammatical features that have not been considered here such as the invariant tags of *is it* and *isn't it.*

Finally, this study shows that Kachru's (1998) notion of "functional nativeness'" can indeed be (partly) supported by the construct of *range*. It is through speakers' incremental use of English for a variety of topics and functions

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[7] Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) is a national school examination for Form Five students.

sampled from a wide range of domains that grammatical features, non-standard ones included, are put to use and "tested out" for expressive needs.

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APPENDIX

Instructions: Think of two situations in which you have to use English: (1) a *formal* situation, such as an interview, and (2) an *informal* situation, such as a conversation with a friend. Then read each of the sentences below and think whether you find the grammar acceptable or unacceptable for it to be used in each of the two imagined situations. Show that a sentence is "acceptable" with a tick ( ) or "unacceptable" with a cross (X) in the relevant box. (Remember there are no right or wrong answers, just what is acceptable or unacceptable to you.)

Example	Sentence	Formal	Informal
i	I was reading a newspaper when he came.		
ii	There's too many people in the building.	X	
iii	He been thinking what to do.	X	X

Set A

No.	Sentence	Formal	Informal
1	The data has to be considered.		
2	I only had one ringgit.		
3	Study hard like your brother does.		
4	Will anyone bring their own food?		
5	Due to illness, I cancelled the talk.		
6	Do you mind him coming late?		

7	The four people argued with each other.		
8	That is the place I used to live in.		
9	Anna is shorter than me.		
10	This pen is very different to that one.		
11	It was me who received it.		
12	None of his books interest me.		
13	Who should I talk to?		
14	Would she love him if he was rich?		
15	A plan will be made between you and I.		
16	The reason he didn't come was because he was sick.		
17	We should use less plastic bags.		
18	The three boys fought between themselves.		
19	He neither eats apples nor oranges.		
20	We used to annually have a medical check-up.		
21	Riding my bicycle, a fierce dog chased me.		
22	Anna is in KL but her family are in Kota Kinabalu.		
23	These sort of toys are expensive.		
24	One can do what he likes.		
25	I visit my grandmother Sundays.		
26	The road is slippery. Drive slow.		
27	This pen is very different than that one.		
28	I'm silly, ain't I?		

Set B

No.	Sentence	Formal	Informal
1	When I was a child, I used to put tomato sauce on my rice.		
2	Please pray that I would pass my SPM.		
3	I wasn't surprised when it happened.		
4	I was shocked when I hear this.		
5	How old are you when it happened?		
6	I haven't really thought about what I want to do after graduation.		
7	Actually, after I graduate I'm thinking of going to India.		
8	I'm glad I'll be able to finish my term paper next week.		
9	Aren't we supposed to have History now?		
10	What I enjoyed most about my childhood was that I can take my toys to school.		
11	I've visited Sarawak three years ago.		
12	My parents didn't told me about the legend of Mahsuri.		
13	I'm sure the teacher hasn't finished checking the papers yet.		

14	I've went back to the town many times since finishing school.		
15	Students are invited to the talk which would be held in the Main Hall.		
16	I've never seen snow and I've never been to New Zealand.		
17	We have to meet with the organizers and then we can go around KL to get sponsors.		
18	Class is cancelled today because Mr. Azman had broken his arm.		
19	We have to get sponsors from rich companies so they would support us when we go on tour.		
20	I can't even answer my phone at home because I was afraid it might be my stalker.		