

The Language of Pandemic and its Significance in Effective Communication

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication is vital in delivering information to the public, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, to prevent misinformation that would trigger negative emotions. Pandemic-related terms often offer both positive and negative connotations. Therefore, word choice is crucial in ensuring that the information is understandable and relevant. These two significant criteria are two of the six principles for effective communication outlined by the World Health Organisation (WHO). The present study examines the significance of the language used during the pandemic in influencing current communication effectiveness. Therefore, an online questionnaire was designed and then distributed to Malay students at Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University to know their perceptions of pandemic-related information in Malay and English. The respondents felt that the available information is clearly explained, concise, and relevant to the current situation based on the findings. Regardless of their English language proficiency, most of them are well-aware of the English terms. However, they prefer the information is available in their first language.

1. Introduction

1.1 The language of pandemic and neologisms

The first outbreak of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) occurred in Wuhan City, Hubei Province in China. As the infection rate escalated uncontrollably, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Since then, the pandemic has had a profound impact on human life. It drastically changed the way people think, behave, and communicate as it poses risks and challenges to global health and the economy. Lockdown and movement restrictions have forced companies to shut down as many lives have been lost due to the pandemic.

Severe conditions in most countries have also changed the way people communicate as most people stay at home. The use of digital technologies has significantly increased as people work from home, and educational institutions offer online learning. On a positive note, it has positively impacted the technology sector. Many communications technology companies, such as Zoom and Microsoft, provide various communication platforms for online learning, meetings, and conferences.

As the ways of communication change, the pandemic has also had an impact on society and language. The language of the pandemic is not a new language. In fact, it refers to the terms used and evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many existing terms, such as coronavirus, quarantine, and vaccine, have re-emerged and are commonly used in all digital media platforms. The term 'coronavirus,' for example, is not relatively new as it was first used during the 1968 H3N2 pandemic, in which the initial outbreak was recorded in Hong Kong (Chang, 1969). Even though previously used, terms, such as isolation and quarantine, are still misused. According to Wilder-Smith and Freedman (2020), the former means "the separation of ill persons with contagious diseases from non-infected persons to protect non-infected persons." On the other hand, the term 'quarantine' means "the movement restriction of persons who are presumed to have been exposed to a contagious disease but are not ill, either because they did not become infected or because they are still in the incubation period."

Newly coined words, or typically known as neologisms, have been widely used, particularly during the pandemic. Sayadi (2011) stated that neologisms are not only newly coined words. However, they also include word combinations and fixed phrases, mainly due to science, social and cultural changes. For example, the phrase 'social distancing' was initially used to describe the happiness of getting close to people of an outgroup (Thorne, 2020). However, the phrase is not new. It was first used during the epidemic of SARS in 1957 (Asif et al., 2020). During the current pandemic, this phrase has currently been interpreted as an act of ensuring a physical distance of 1.5 to 2 meters between people to prevent the virus from spreading.

Another example is the terms used to describe social groups during the pandemic, such as '*coronababies*', '*coronials*', and '*quaranteens*'. These terms are used to describe the generation who were "born after December 2020 and who will become teenagers in 2033-2034" (Alyeksyeyeva et al., 2020). The neologism also extends to acronyms, such as BC, which originally stands for before Christ. However, during the pandemic, it is coined for the phrase 'before coronavirus' (Al-Salman & Haider, 2021).

1.2 Effective communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

As the ways of communication change, its effectiveness remains in question. Even though digital technologies have increased and positively affected the technology sectors, it also poses threats and challenges to society because people can easily access any information available on the internet without knowing the validity and reliability of the sources. Misinformation and fake news cause panic and anxiety among people, and subsequently, pose a threat to a country's stability.

WHO (2020) outlined six crucial principles for effective communication during this pandemic: accessibility, actionability, credibility, relevance, promptness, and understandability. Governments are advised to make any pandemic-related information timely accessible and use plain language. Therefore, people can understand the situation and follow the guidelines to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. People are also advised to follow reliable sources, such as official government statements and journal articles, to avoid extreme circumstances, such as fear, stress, and panic.

Brunei Darussalam, for instance, is one of the few countries that have handled the pandemic well. Even though the first series of reported cases were terrifying, the Government ensured preventive measures and effectively communicated so that people can listen and follow the guidelines and remain calm. According to the latest official statement released by the Ministry of Health of Brunei Darussalam (2021a), Brunei reported 215 cases (15 active cases, 3 deaths, and 198 recoveries) since the first case in March 2020. Even so, 74 out of 215 cases were imported. There has been no local case since the last case was reported on 6 May 2020.

Since the situation has been slowly under control, the ministry also implemented a four-level de-escalation plan to ease movement restrictions. As of 6 March 2021, Brunei completed the de-escalation plan, and the situation is now in the 'new normal' phase (Ministry of Health of Brunei Darussalam, 2020). However, people are still advised to practice social distancing and maintain hygiene regularly to avoid unexpected circumstances. As of 3 April 2021, the National Vaccination Program for COVID-19 was launched (Ministry of Health of Brunei Darussalam, 2021b). Distributed in three phases, the vaccines are free for all Brunei residents. However, the first phase began with the front liners, the elderly (over 60), and students bound for studying abroad.

1.3 Medium of communication: English or First language?

English has always functioned as "a global lingua franca" (Seidlhofer, 2005, p.339) in disseminating information across the globe (Guillén, 2009). Even though English is commonly used as a medium of communication, the question remains whether it is enough to prevent misinformation and fake news from spreading, particularly among the non-English speaking population. For instance, in an interview, van Liempt and Kox (2020) reported that most asylum seekers and refugees in the Netherlands came from countries such as Syria and Afghanistan. However, the pandemic information was initially only available in English, Dutch, and sign language, which they do not speak or comprehend. The language barrier and lack of access to credible information led to misinformation, which caused stress and somewhat triggered some emotions.

Whether or not English is effective as an international language, the bigger question is whether or not the information they received is understandable. The simplicity and concision of the language play significant roles in ensuring effective communication. However, due to the abundance of technical and medical terms, pandemic language can be tricky to translate to other languages. Medical terms, such as symptomatic and asymptomatic, are loaned when translated into Malay as *simptomatik* and *asimptomatik*, which may sound vague to Malay native speakers if not further explained.

1.4 Research problem

The present study investigates the significance of the language of the pandemic in influencing the effectiveness of communication. Therefore, this study examines two of the six principles for effective communication outlined by WHO: relevance and understandability, due to its relatedness to this study's scope. Despite an abundance of information from reliable sources, the effectiveness of the delivery of the information may remain in question. Therefore, the present study will answer the following research questions:

RQ1: Is the available information on the pandemic clear and concise?

RQ2: In the case of non-native speakers of English, is the information more understandable and relevant in their first language than it is in English?

RQ3: Is the information more understandable and relevant in visual form than it is in written texts?

2. Methodology

2.1 Data collection

An online questionnaire was designed using Google Form, consisting of 14 items, mostly in Malay. The link to the questionnaire was made available to the target participants from 12-15 November 2020. 6 demographic questions were based on standard categories, such as age, gender, academic qualification, first language, and proficiency in both Malay and English. 5-point Likert Scale questions were also designed to validate the following statements:

1. I can understand the terms used during the pandemic.
2. The information on the pandemic is clearly explained and understandable.
3. I understand the pandemic-related information in English.
4. I understand the pandemic-related information more in Malay or in my first language (for non-native speakers of Malay) than in English.
5. I understand the pandemic-related information in visual form (videos and infographics) rather than written texts (articles and statements).
6. Information that I received influenced my perception of the pandemic and how I take care of myself, loved ones, and the community from getting infected.

In addition to the 5-Likert Scale questions, the questionnaire consists of 2 subjective questions to inquire further the respondents' familiarity with the terms commonly used during the pandemic as follows:

1. I understand the following English terms and expressions: social distancing, infodemic, self-isolation, quarantine, vaccine, face mask, disinfection, flatten the curve, ventilator, panic buying, cluster, personal protective equipment, contact tracing, symptomatic, asymptomatic, antibody, front liners, and community spread.
2. I understand the following Malay terms and expressions: *penjarakan sosial, infodemik, pengasingan diri, kuarantin, vaksin, pelitup muka, sungkup muka, nyahjangkitan, meratakan/melandaikan lekungan, bantuan pernafasan, pembelian panik, kluster, peralatan perlindungan peribadi, pengesanan kontak, simptomatik, asimptomatik, antibodi, petugas barisan hadapan, and penularan dalam komuniti.*

2.2 Target Participants

The population is based on the students at Sultan Sharif Ali Islamic University (also locally known as Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali or UNISSA). Most local students are native speakers of Malay, and the online questionnaire was designed for non-native speakers of English. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine their perceptions of the relevance and understandability of the information in both English and Malay. A total of 53 undergraduate students participated in the survey. Most of them were 24-year-old and below, while the proportion of female respondents is approximately two-thirds of the study population.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Demographics

A total of 53 individuals responded to the online questionnaire. **Error! Reference source not found.** represents the demographics of the respondents. The majority of the respondents (90.6%) aged 24 years and below, and the remaining five respondents (9.4%) were 25 years of age and above. There is a relatively higher proportion of female respondents, accounting for 71.7% of the responses. All of them are undergraduate students who are native speakers of Malay. When asked to rate their Malay proficiency, the results indicated that 56.6% of the respondents rated their Malay proficiency as excellent, 41.5% rated as good, and only one respondent was weak at Malay. In terms of English language proficiency, 9.4% rated as excellent, 49.1% rated as good, 37.7% rated as average, and 3.8% rated as poor.

Table 1: Demographics of Online Questionnaire Respondents (n=53)

Category	Answers	Frequency (n)	Proportion (%)
Age (Years)	24 years and below	48	90.6
	25 and above	5	9.4
Gender	Male	15	28.3
	Female	38	71.7
Education level	Undergraduate	53	100
	Masters	-	-
	PhD	-	-
First language	Malay	53	100
	Other languages	-	-
Malay language proficiency	Poor	-	-
	Average	1	1.9
	Good	22	41.5
	Excellent	30	56.6
English language proficiency	Poor	2	3.8
	Average	20	37.7
	Good	26	49.1
	Excellent	5	9.4

3.2 Relevance and understandability

The students were then asked 5-point Likert Scale questions on the relevance and understandability of the information made available to them during the pandemic. The results in Table 2 indicate that most of them (83%) agreed to Statement 1 that they understand the terms used during the pandemic, showing that they are well-aware of the technical terms. When asked whether the information they received is understandable and clearly explained (Statement 2), most of them (88.7%) also agreed, 7.5% remained neutral, and 3.8% disagreed. The higher proportion of respondents who agreed indicates that the information was easy to understand and clearly explained to the public. Most of them (79.2%) also agreed that they know the information on the pandemic in English; 13.2% remained neutral, while 7.5% disagreed. This result correlates with their English language proficiency. Some respondents may find it challenging to understand some information due to their average or poor English proficiency.

Table 2: Overall responses of the 5-point Likert Scale questions on relevance and understandability (n=53)

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	9	35	9	-	-
2	9	38	4	2	-
3	11	31	7	3	1
4	21	19	6	7	-
5	9	33	9	2	-
6	15	31	4	3	-

Regarding Statement 4, 40 out of 53 respondents (75.5%) preferred Malay over English to understand any information related to the pandemic, 11.3% remained neutral, and 13.2% chosen otherwise. This result indicates that the first language plays a vital role in ensuring the communication's effectiveness, resulting in following the social distancing guidelines outlined by WHO and the Ministry of Health of Brunei Darussalam. In response to Statement 5, most of them (79.2%) preferred visual information rather than written texts, indicating that expressing the language or delivering information also plays an important role in ensuring communication effectiveness. In response to Statement 6, most of them (86.8%) also agreed that the available information could influence their perception of the pandemic, and how they take care of themselves, loved ones, and the community from getting infected, suggesting that people should be responsible and aware of the terms they use to deliver any statement or information to the public. When using unfamiliar technical terms, they should be clearly explained to avoid any misinformation.

Furthermore, the pandemic's language must also be as positive as possible (Larson and Rubel, 2020) to encourage positive behaviors. Using terms that have negative connotations would cause stress, fear, and panic. For example, the expressions 'stuck at home' and 'stay at home' offer different connotations. The former means being forced to remain at home, and the latter means having a choice to stay at home. Even so, negative terms, such as quarantine and isolation, are inevitable. In this situation, people should make it sound less negative by using these terms as less frequently as possible.

3.3 Familiarity with the language of pandemic

A set of commonly used terms was listed to examine the respondents' familiarity with the terms in both English and Malay. Table 3 shows the overall responses regarding the respondents' familiarity with commonly used English terms. Many respondents were noticeably unfamiliar with five technical terms: infodemic, flatten the curve, ventilator, symptomatic, and asymptomatic. The term 'infodemic' is a good example of neologism, and it is frequently used to describe the spread of misinformation on the disease (Cinelli et al., 2020). It is a combination of two words: 'information' and 'epidemic.' It is not a newly coined word used during the SARS epidemic in 2003 (Asif et al., 2020). The term reemerged as a combination of 'information' and 'pandemic' to describe the spread of misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Medical terms, such as symptomatic and asymptomatic, are unfamiliar to many respondents, indicating that these terms should be clearly explained to the public to be aware of their meaning. They need to know the danger of asymptomatic COVID-19 carriers. The virus could be easily transmitted to others without knowing it.

Table 3: Overall responses regarding familiarity with commonly used English terms (n=53)

Term	Yes (n)	Proportion (%)	No (n)	Proportion (%)
Social distancing	53	100	-	-
Infodemic	16	30.2	37	69.8
Self-isolation	53	100	-	-
Quarantine	53	100	-	-
Vaccine	51	96.2	2	3.8
Face mask	53	100	-	-
Disinfection	41	77.4	12	22.6
Flatten the curve	25	47.2	28	52.8
Ventilator	27	50.9	26	49.1
Panic buying	47	88.7	6	11.3
Cluster	42	79.2	11	20.8
Personal protective equipment	40	75.5	13	24.5
Contact tracing	47	88.7	6	11.3
Symptomatic	26	49.1	27	50.9
Asymptomatic	12	22.6	41	77.4
Antibody	50	94.3	3	5.7
Front liner	50	94.3	3	5.7
Community spread	44	83	9	17

The results in Table 4 reveal that many respondents are unfamiliar with the Malay terms of the previously mentioned English terms, indicating that they do not know these terms. Therefore, these terms should be clearly explained in plain language to understand the terms easily. Again, the terms 'simptomatik' and 'asimptomatik' are unfamiliar words as they were also borrowed when translated into Malay. As a result, these terms remain ambiguous. Therefore, even though they are standard medical terms, they should be accompanied by explaining their meaning when used.

The Malay phrase '*meredakan lengkungan*' (flatten the curve) is also unfamiliar to the respondents. A possible explanation for this is that its Malay equivalence may sound alien to the native speakers as it may be new to them. In fact, 'flatten the curve' is a newly coined phrase to describe "isolation measures taken by a community, region, or country to keep the daily number of disease cases at a manageable level" (Asif et.al., 2020). Unexpectedly, half of the respondents do not know the meaning of the term '*nyahjangkitan*.' In contrast with the results in Table 3, most of them (77.4%) seemed to know its English equivalence, 'disinfection', suggesting that the English term is more commonly used than the Malay term.

It is also interesting to see a difference in the number of respondents familiar with the two terms, which have the same equivalent term in English: the face mask. The responses show that the former may have been used more frequently than the latter. Also, compared to the previous table results, the respondents seemed to know the Malay phrase '*bantuan pernafasan*'

than its English term, 'ventilator,' suggesting that some terms are better explained in plain language. The first language plays a vital role in ensuring the effectiveness of the communication.

Table 4: Overall responses regarding familiarity with commonly used Malay terms (n=53)

Term	Yes (n)	Proportion (%)	No (n)	Proportion (%)
<i>Penjarakan sosial</i>	53	100	-	-
<i>Infodemik</i>	21	39.6	32	60.4
<i>Pengasingan diri</i>	53	100	-	-
<i>Kuarantin</i>	53	100	-	-
<i>Vaksin</i>	53	100	-	-
<i>Sungkup muka</i>	46	86.8	7	13.2
<i>Pelitup muka</i>	52	98.1	1	1.9
<i>Nyahjangkitan</i>	27	50.9	26	49.1
<i>Meredakan/Melandaikan lengkungan</i>	27	50.9	26	49.1
<i>Bantuan pernafasan</i>	51	96.2	2	3.8
<i>Pembelian panik</i>	49	92.5	4	7.5
<i>Kluster</i>	46	86.8	7	13.2
<i>Peralatan perlindungan peribadi</i>	44	83	9	17
<i>Pengesanan kontak</i>	48	90.6	5	9.4
<i>Simptomatik</i>	28	52.8	25	47.2
<i>Asimptomatik</i>	13	24.5	40	75.5
<i>Antibodi</i>	48	90.6	5	9.4
<i>Petugas barisan hadapan</i>	51	96.2	2	3.8
<i>Penularan dalam komuniti</i>	47	88.7	6	11.3

4. Conclusion

Overall, the available information on the COVID-19 pandemic is understandable, as most respondents found the information to be clear and concise. Even though some respondents' English language proficiency is average and below, they are still aware of and, most importantly, understand most of the English terms listed in the survey. Even so, most respondents felt that they prefer the information to be available and clearly explained in their first language. Regarding delivering the information, most respondents found that visual information enhances their understanding of the current situation instead of merely using written texts. This approach is more relevant to the globalisation era in which all information should be easily accessible and understandable. Word choice also influences the respondents' perception and the way they take care of themselves and others. Therefore, positive language is essential when delivering any information related to the COVID-19 pandemic to promote positive behaviours, which is in line with one of the six principles for effective communication outlined by WHO: relevance. In general, the pandemic's language must be understandable and relevant when communicating with the public to avoid misinformation on the COVID-19 pandemic.

The present study was a pilot test, which only received responses from 53 undergraduate students. All respondents were native speakers of Malay, while English is their second language. It would be interesting to extend this study to the public in Brunei to see more valuable findings using different variables, such as age, ethnicity, education, and others. The present study is also limited to two languages: English and Malay. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine different perceptions worldwide towards the relevance and understandability of pandemic-related information across other languages. Ultimately, these findings could be of use to any country when communicating with their people so that the pandemic could remain under control without causing any panic and misinformation.

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