

# To ‘Hay’ or Not to ‘Hay’? Bridging the Gap Between the English ‘Have’ and the Malay ‘Ada’ with the Spanish ‘Hay’ & ‘Tener’

Chaizani Mohd Shamsudin \*

*Universiti Malaysia Terengganu  
chaizani@umt.edu.my*

## ABSTRACT

One of the most difficult English verbs to teach native Malay speakers is the verb ‘have’. It is not equivalent to the Malay verb ‘ada’. In fact, English does not possess such a verb. However, there is an equivalent in Spanish: ‘hay’. An interesting point to ponder is whether it is as difficult for Spanish speakers to learn the verb ‘have’ as it is for native Malay speakers. Therefore, a simple experiment was conducted to see how easily a native Malay speaker could learn the verb ‘hay’ compared to the verb ‘have’, and also whether a native Spanish speaker could easily learn how to use the verb ‘ada’. The result found that it was as simple as literally translating the verbs ‘hay’ and ‘ada’ in Malay and Spanish sentences. Teaching the verb ‘have’ to a native Malay speaker still faces its challenges. Spanish does possess a verb that has an equivalent meaning to ‘have’ in English: the verb ‘tener’. So, the Spanish language has both the equivalent of the Malay ‘ada’ and the English ‘have’. The existence of the verb’s ‘hay’ and ‘tener’ might make it easier for Spanish speakers to learn how to use the verb ‘have’ more easily than Malay speakers. It might be possible to create a new hybrid code for Malay speakers so that they can more easily grasp the meaning of the verb ‘have’.

**Keywords:** *auxiliary verb ‘have’, verb of being ‘ada’, native language interference, Spanish, Bahasa Malaysia, English grammar*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Among the most difficult things for new learners of the English language is getting accustomed to using the different types of verbs. The verb ‘to have’ is arguably one of the more difficult verbs for native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia to learn, next to the verb ‘to be’. This is perhaps due to the fact that there can be more than one translation of the verb into Bahasa Malaysia [1]-[6]. Many approaches have been used, but the most commonly found method of teaching this verb in Malaysian schools is perhaps by using grammar drills such as shown below.

I	have	a pen.
She/He/It	has	a class.
You/We/They	have	two books.

Which can be confusing if the below is also true.

I	have	to go home.
She/He/It	has	gone home.
You/We/They	have	jogged 5 km today.

When translated into Bahasa Malaysia, the English sentences above become

Saya	ada	pen.
Dia/Ita	ada	kelas.
Anda/Mereka/Kita	ada	dua naskhah buku.

and

Saya	perlu	pulang ke rumah.
Dia/Ia	/	pulang ke rumah.
Anda/Mereka/Kita	telah	berlari 5 km hari ini.

As we can see, the translations are different, and it can be difficult for a new learner to differentiate which translation holds true. In helping a student to navigate the grammar in this instance, it may be useful for an instructor to illustrate the usage of the verb ‘to have’ by underlining the different ways it can be translated into Bahasa Malaysia, rather than trying to explain it using a monolinguist approach (where all explanations are given only in English).

An interesting note is the fact that English does not have a word that is directly equivalent to the Malay word ‘ada’. However, the Spanish language does have a word that corresponds directly with ‘ada’, which is ‘hay’. And another point of interest is that it also has a word that can be used to mean ‘have’, which is the verb ‘tener’. Therefore, Spanish is not only geographically in between the birthplaces of the English and Malay language but is also in the middle ground linguistically [7]-[8].

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The difficulties faced by Malaysian students in learning how to use the verb ‘to have’ has been discussed before at great length. It has been the subject of countless research papers, many of which describe the trials of teaching this verb. Wee et al. [9] observed that even after 11 to 13 years at school where English is taught in formal classes and to a specific syllabus, students still made verb-form errors in writing.

Native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia also face the same problem in trying to learn the use of the verb ‘tener’ due to the fact that there is more than one way to translate it

into Bahasa Malaysia. In fact, there are three different ways to translate ‘tener’ into Bahasa Malaysia [10]-[11]. Students face difficulties in trying to decide which to use. The same dilemma is faced when learning the use of the verb ‘to have’.

Budiharto [12] discovered that interference from the native language of his students, that language being Indonesian, was the main reason why they committed errors in writing essays. One of the main problems that he identified was the fact that English verbs will change depending on when the action described was done, and the chief culprit was the verb ‘be’.

This native language interference is seen by many as an obstacle but then again, if something cannot be cured, then it should be made full use of.

While an argument can be made for the teaching of a new language using the principle of monolingualism, where other languages are completely banished from the classroom, there is also a case to be made for using the students’ mother tongue in teaching. German language instructor Dr. Wolfgang Butzkamm says that using the students’ mother tongue sparingly is of value. He argues that mastery of the grammar of one’s mother tongue is the gateway to mastering the grammar of other languages. So instead of banning it and seeing it as a hindrance, it should instead be a tool in teaching certain aspects of grammar [13]-[15].

## 3. METHODOLOGY

A short explanation was given to Spanish-speaking students and Bahasa Malaysia speakers in the form of a ditto sheet. They were then asked if they could see the similarities between the Bahasa Malaysia ‘ada’ and Spanish ‘hay’.



Figure 1 School supplies

The native Spanish students were all former master's degree students at UMT, from countries where Spanish is spoken as a first language. Two students came from Spain (one from Madrid and one from Andalucía), one from

Bolivia, one from Colombia, and one from Mexico. The Bahasa Malaysia speakers were full-time undergraduate students of UMT.

Sample sentences:

TENER	HAVE	ADA (PO)
¿Qué tienes en tu mochila?	What do you have in your backpack?	Ada apa di dalam beg sandang anda?
En mi mochila tengo lápices.	In my backpack, I have pencils.	Di dalam beg sandang saya ada pensel.
En mi mochila tengo una regla.	In my backpack, I have a ruler.	Di dalam beg sandang saya ada pembaris.
En mi mochila tengo un teléfono.	In my backpack, I have a telephone.	Di dalam beg sandang saya ada telefon.
En mi mochila tengo una libreta de mates.	In my backpack, I have a maths notebook.	Di dalam beg sandang saya ada buku nota matematik.
En mi mochila tengo hojas.	In my backpack, I have leaves.	Di dalam beg sandang saya ada daun-daun.

HAY	BE	ADA (BE)
¿Qué hay en tu mochila?	What is in your bag?	Ada apa di dalam beg sandang anda?
Hay lápices.	There are pencils.	Ada pensel.
Hay regla.	There is a ruler.	Ada pembaris.
Hay teléfono.	There is a phone.	Ada telefon.
Hay libreta de mates.	There is a mathematics notebook.	Ada buku nota matematik.
Hay hojas.	There are leaves.	Ada daun-daun.

The tables above were shown to 5 native Spanish speakers and 5 native Bahasa Malaysia speakers. They were asked if they could see any similarities. The Bahasa Malaysia speakers were asked to see if they could differentiate between the 2 types of 'ada': **PO** for possessive and **BE** to show that something is there (verb to-be).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Results

The Spanish speaking students were all at least bilingual, speaking both Spanish and English. As students of UMT, they had also taken several classes learning Bahasa Malaysia, although they were not proficient. They did, however, understand how to use the word 'ada' quite quickly, especially in relation to ordering food at shops.

For example, how to order beverages: 'Ada teh tarik?'

As opposed to 'Saya ada pensel' = 'Tengo un lapiz'.

It is of note that the Spanish verb for 'be' takes two forms (**ser** and **estar**). It was therefore not much of a stretch for them the grasp the concept of 'ada' being used for both 'hay' and 'tener'.

In contrast, students who spoke Bahasa Malaysia as a first language found it very confusing to be learning yet another foreign language. But as a whole, they were able to easily substitute the word 'ada' for 'hay' in a sentence.

For example: Ada pensel di atas meja = Hay un lápiz en la mesa.

Even without the necessary vocabulary to build a sensible Spanish language, all the native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia were able to understand how to use the word 'hay'.

The more proficient of the students did find it useful to know that the Malay 'ada' actually has more than one translation. They were able to see that simply substituting 'ada' for 'got' or 'have' was not the best thing to do in many situations.

### 4.2. Discussion

Among the most difficult things for a learner of a new language is wrapping their heads around a new concept. Different languages very often have different ways of expressing ideas, not least due to cultural differences.

Therefore, what more often than not happens is that the learner will transfer their first language onto the language that they are learning – a phenomenon known as native language interference. The problem with doing this, in regard to native speakers of Bahasa Malaysia when learning the English language, is that there are certain concepts or ways of saying things that can be found in one language but is absent in the other.

One such case is the word 'ada' in Bahasa Malaysia. Difficulties in trying to pin down how this word is used has been recognised before. In fact, the word was the

subject of a paper written in 1974 called ‘The “Ada” Verb of Being in Bahasa Malaysia’, where the author looked at its syntactic and semantic functions [16]. ‘Ada’ does not readily translate to ‘have’, although it is one of the possible translations. For example:

Bahasa Malaysia	Saya <b>ada</b> kelas esok.
English	I <b>have</b> a class tomorrow.
Spanish	<b>Tengo</b> una clase mañana.

In this example, ‘ada’ can be translated as ‘have’: **Saya ada kelas = I have** a class.

The Spanish verb is a little different, where ‘**I have**’ = ‘**Tengo**’. This is a conjugation of the verb ‘tener’, meaning to have. If the subject changes, then the verb changes as well. This can be seen in the next example:

Bahasa Malaysia	Dia <b>ada</b> dua orang adik-beradik lelaki.
English	She <b>has</b> two brothers.
Spanish	Ella <b>tiene</b> dos hermanos.

The word ‘ada’ is unchanged in form. However, the English verb ‘has’ must be used when the subject is singular, as is the case here with ‘she’. And the Spanish ‘tengo’ which means ‘I have’ is now changed to ‘tiene’, which is the third-person singular form of the verb ‘tener’.

I	Yo	Tengo
You	Tu	Tienes
She/He/You (formal)	Él/Ella/Usted	Tiene
We	Nosotros	Tenemos
You	Vosotros	Tenéis
They	Ellos/Ellas/Ustedes	Tienen

It can be confusing to someone whose L1 is Bahasa Malaysia when confronted with the many forms of the verb ‘have’ and ‘tener’. But even more confusing is when a sentence in Bahasa Malaysia uses the word ‘ada’ but the English translation does not contain the word ‘has’ or ‘have’. To illustrate:

Bahasa Malaysia	Di mana <b>ada</b> polis?
English	Where <b>are</b> the police? (Where can I find a policeman?)
Spanish	¿Dónde <b>hay</b> un policía?

Here, the sentence in Bahasa Malaysia is asking, ‘where can the police be found?’ using the word ‘ada’. The English translation uses the verb ‘be’ rather than ‘have’. And the Spanish translation uses the word ‘hay’. ‘Hay’ is actually the equivalent of ‘ada’ when referring to location or existence of something. It does not change

form according to the number of objects being referred to. This is very different from the verb ‘tener’ which means ‘to have’, and changes form depending on the subject.

However, there can be differences in translation.

The next problem we are going to look at is the English verb ‘be’ in the previous sentence. When the subject is plural, we use the verb ‘are’: Where are...?

When the subject is singular, we use ‘is’, such as in the example given below.

Bahasa Malaysia	Di <b>manakah</b> rumah Alicia?
English	Where <b>is</b> Alicia’s house?
Spanish	¿Dónde <b>está</b> la casa de Alicia?

Instead of using the verb ‘hay’ here (ada), the Spanish translation uses a conjugation of the verb *estar* (the verb to be). So now it is more similar to the English translation rather than the one in Bahasa Malaysia.

We can see then that Spanish verbs have similarities with both Bahasa Malaysia and English.

Due to the existence of the verb ‘tener’ in Spanish, it is possible to translate English sentences that use ‘has/have’ by using a conjugation of ‘tener’. But because Spanish also has the word ‘hay’, it is possible to directly translate sentences containing the word ‘ada’ without the complication of trying to find a way to make ‘has/have’ fit into the sentence.

Unfortunately, the same is not possible for speakers of Bahasa Malaysia. This is why many Malaysian learners will substitute the word ‘have’ with ‘got’ when trying to translate ‘ada’ into ‘have’. And they end up with sentences such as in the example below.

1	English L1	Do you have a pen? I have a pen.
	Bahasa Malaysia L1	You got pen? Got! (Ada)
2	English L1	There is a tiger behind that tree. There is not!
	Bahasa Malaysia L1	Got tiger behind that tree. Where got! (Mana ada)

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is not always possible to use a students’ mother tongue while teaching in a class, particularly when the class is diverse and not everyone speaks their classmates’ native language. However, in cases where the use of one mother tongue is possible, it should not be discounted as a tool for

teaching. It can, in fact, be a valuable bridging instrument in the delivery of a grammatical concept.

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