

## The Level of Malay Language Proficiency of Non-native Students and its Relationship with a Second Language Learning Motivation

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### ABSTRACT

The proficiency of the Malay language should be the main platform of developing a nation in Malaysia. Previous studies found that non-Malay students in Malaysia were less proficient in listening, speaking, reading, and less skillful in writing in Malay. Thus, this study was conducted to identify the level of proficiency of Malay language of non-Malay speakers and their relationships with learning motivation. A total of 414 samples from five national primary schools, Chinese vernacular primary schools and Indian vernacular primary schools were selected. The analysis was done using the UPBM\_SR Test set and questionnaire. Data is processed using IBM SPSS version 23 with the cross-sectional design. The findings show that the majority of the respondents achieved Level 4 for all the skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and the relationship between UPBM\_SR Overall Min Score with learning motivation (instrumental and integrative) was found to have significant minor relevance. It is apparent that non-Malay students need to improve their self motivation in learning the second language and all parties need to cooperate to ensure that every student in Malaysia is proficient in using the national language.

**Keywords:** Proficiency, non-Malay speakers, Chinese vernacular primary schools, Indian vernacular primary schools, listening skills, reading skills, writing skills and speaking skills

### INTRODUCTION

Language is a part of culture or way of life. Juriah Long (2012) believes that the need to learn a language either as a first, second or national language exists for historical or political demands. The proficiency of the Malay language is an aspect that clearly illustrates the difference between native speaker and non-native speaker. Knowledge of the Malay language aspects is mastered by non-Malay students through procurement procedures, informally in the family environment, and is part of the educational system. For these non-Malay speakers, the language proficiency aspect is also mastered through formal learning at school (Zulkifley Hamid, 2014).

The language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing take place simultaneously as the skills are integrated (Mahzan Arshad, 2016). In her study, Juriah Long (2012) found that non-Malay speakers are less motivated to learn Malay as they have to choose whether or not they want to master the language other than their first language. The mastery of second language is not a must, but is often determined by various causes and consequences. For non-Malay students, learning Malay language as the second language is a process of learning new skills and having to learn a new language culture (Chew Fong Peng, 2016).

#### *Background*

Second language learning is the development of students' ability to use all of the language skills. Listening and reading skills are categorized into receptive skills while speaking and writing skills are categorized into proficient skills (Cheadar, 2011). Good listening skills allow one to obtain and process information accurately in addition to expressing their feelings and thoughts effectively. A good listener and speaker also has the potential to master reading and writing skills well. The ability to listen and speak well will help the process of reading and writing because the four skills take place simultaneously (Mahzan Arshad, 2016).

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Based on the Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document (KPM, 2013), the four skills available in Malay language are the most important skills as a foundation that every student needs to master them from year one of primary school to form five of secondary school in Malaysia. The aim of Malay language education is also to produce individuals who are knowledgeable, noble, responsible and capable in speaking. To realize this aspiration, students must have self-knowledge, positive attitudes and high motivation towards learning Malay language. Learning Malay language becomes important to students after the Ministry of Education Malaysia standardizes the implementation of the Language Education Policy. Through this policy, the language of instruction for public examinations is only the Malay language. Therefore, students in Malaysia must master the Malay language well.

Usually, the second language is learned after someone is proficient in his first language (Abdullah Hassan, 1987). One's age is important because the features associated with the process of growth, such as emotional growth and cognitive development, are expected to affect the learning of the second language. As such, the second language is only able to develop through training and discipline. Strategies and attitudes (i.e., motivation) are needed to bring about effective learning processes because the second language is still acquired and learned after the mother tongue, and both are learned on the basis of several objectives. The motivation of learning a second language among non-Malay students should be intensified in line with Malaysia's Second Education Blueprint (2013-2025). Every student in Malaysia is required to be proficient in Malay language to respect the role of Malay as the national language, official language, national unity language, the language of knowledge and the main language in the field of education. Therefore, the competency of the Malay as a second language should be examined to figure the level of language proficiency among non-Malay speakers.

Fadzilah Abd Rahman and Norazlina Kiram (2015) also noted the importance of implementing the Malay Language Proficiency Test (UKBM) in Malaysia, in which its purpose is to analyze the competency of Malaysians using Malay language in their daily lives. Through a thorough and systematic test of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills, it is hoped that Malaysians will work harder to master the Malay language to be integrated as an identity and to become a true Malaysian. Particularly, a person who is proficient in oral language will be able to master the ability to read and write effectively in the target language because oral skills demonstrate one's language skills (Abdullah Hassan, 1987).

#### *Problem Statement*

The Ministry of Education Malaysia (2000) found that students in Chinese and Indian vernacular primary schools in Malaysia are very weak in Malay language subjects. Another study, conducted by Norshimah Mat Awal et al., (2012) focusing on 1600 samples of her study on writing skills for Form Four students comprising of Chinese, Indian, Iban and Kadazan in five states (i.e., Kedah, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Sabah and Sarawak) involving 15 schools in Malaysia, also found Chinese students and Indian students from national secondary school students and mostly from urban areas use many native languages (Mandarin and Tamil) and English while communicating. She found that academic achievement for students' writing skills was largely moderate and more than 20% were weak in their mastery of the Malay language.

The study by Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin (2010) for the level of mastery of the speaking skills of Chinese students in Malaysia also found that the Chinese student's speaking accuracy was 40.6%. Chew (2016) found that non-Malay students from Chinese vernacular primary schools faced problems in terms of being less likely to be exposed to and not have the opportunity to use Malay language in their daily lives. Jeyagobi (2011) also found that Indian students who had early education in Indian vernacular primary schools were less motivated to speak Malay and rarely had Malay or Chinese friends because their Malay language knowledge did not meet the need to communicate. Abdul Rahman, (2009) found that 84.5% of students in secondary schools lack lexical knowledge which was the main obstacle that makes it difficult for them to communicate in second language, and 79.7% say they often do not remember Malay vocabulary during communication.

According to the National Institute of Teaching Service (NUTP) secretary-general, N. Siva Subramaniam in Utusan Malaysia (October 9, 2006), the number of students that are weak in reading and writing in Malay language had reached more than 500,000 and mostly comprises of Year 6 students. The amount represents 25% from 2 million of primary school students in Malaysia. Based on these numbers, students in elementary schools are still unable to phonate the words correctly and accurately, cannot pronounce spelled words correctly and often leave words that they do not know the meaning or fail to phonate them. This creates a slow reading pattern and will make the students unaware of the information and meaning of the reading material. In addition, students are also weak and are not interested in finding the information recorded in the exercises given by the teacher resulting in the unsatisfactory achievement of the Malay language. The situation is exacerbated by environmental factors, such as lack of social interaction with native speaker and lack of practice of regional language use, and constant use of informal language in students' daily lives (Abdul Rasid Jamian, 2011).

Students also often misread the sequence of words, sentences, intonations and styles. The students' inability to master the reading skills would result in problems in mastering speaking, listening and writing skills in the Malay language.

When a student does not master Malay reading proficiency, consequently they do not master the basic proficiency, particularly oral proficiency (Listening and Speaking). Non-Malay speakers often incorrectly phonate letter as if they were the same, or only phonate certain characters. This would cause the student to mistakenly pronounce the Malay words, sentences, intonation. The students' inability to master these two proficiencies would have given them a problem to convey expression through writing. As a result, students cannot produce meaning in written essays and compose weak sentences and thoughts in their minds and leave certain words during writing (Abdul Rasid Jamian, 2011).

As a result, the students will lose interest to focus on mastering reading and writing skills. Teoh's (2005) study on motivational relationships with achievement in Malay language shows that integrative motivation does not show a high correlation as instrumental motivation and its relationship with the achievement of the Malay language is weak. Saniah et al. (2012) focused on the influence of instrumental and integrative motivation in the selection of Malay language learning strategies among foreign speakers, and they found that most students learn Malay language only to pass the test. Therefore, studies have to be conducted to identify the relationship between the level of proficiency in Malay language among non-Malay students with the motivation of learning the Malay language as a second language.

Evidently, the studies on second-language proficiency have been widely practiced in Malaysia and abroad. However, the findings are still unclear to give an overview of non-Malay speakers in Malaysia. A more focused study needs to be carried out to identify the real problems faced by students studying in vernacular primary schools in Malaysia. This phenomenon should be taken seriously as cultivation of love to learn Malay language will have to begin in the early stages of the children's lives. If this is not taken seriously, it is likely that the number of non-Malay speakers who fail to master the Malay language continue to increase. Hence, a systematic and integrated study needs to be carried out (Fadzilah & Norazlina, 2015).

### *Research Objectives*

Based on the research problems presented, this study was conducted to:

1. Identify the level of proficiency of Malay language (listening, speaking, reading and writing skills) among the non-Malay speakers in vernacular primary schools in Kuantan District.
2. Determine the relationship between the level of proficiency of Malay language (overall mean score of UPBM\_SR) with learning motivation (instrumental and integrative)

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a quantitative data collection method using cross-sectional survey design. Questionnaire and the academic achievement of the Mid-Year Intermediate Exam was also used to obtain information and demographics of students at the SJK in Kuantan District. The data is only collected once from the sample at a time. A total of 414 respondents have sat for the UPBM\_SR Test. Cross-sectional survey design was chosen to ensure data is collected directly from respondents (Creswell, 2008). The data was processed using IBM SPSS version 23. The first research objective's findings are presented using descriptive statistics. For the relationship between learning motivation with the Overall Score of UPBM\_SR in the second objective, Pearson's moment product correlation inference statistics was used.

### *Sample*

The respondents in this study were from the population of non-Malay students level 2 (Years 4, 5 and 6) in Kuantan District, Pahang. The total number of samples was 414. Samples were obtained by selecting strata from the population based on systematic random sampling. Samples represent each class by consensus from Chinese vernacular primary schools and Indian vernacular primary schools in Kuantan Pahang. Sample selection was done based on the categories of schools (urban and rural areas), gender (male and female), and school year (Year 6). Sample selection based on ethnic and gender distribution represents the population. Non-Malay speakers from Chinese vernacular primary schools are 268 (64.7%) and Indian vernacular primary schools are 146 (35.3%) representing urban and rural categories. A total of 219 (52.9%) female students and 195 (47.1%) male students were chosen. A total of 414 (100%) Year 6 students were selected. The rationale for choosing Year 6 students is to determine the level of mastery of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in Malay

language after completing six years of elementary school. Additionally, Year 6 students were selected to fill their time after completing the national primary school examination (UPSR examination) during data collection.

### *Instrument*

In the context of this study, to measure the level of proficiency of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of non-Malay speakers in Kuantan District SJK, a systematic and thorough set of instruments were used to obtain comprehensive data. The instruments used in this study are the Primary School Malay Language Proficiency Test (UPBM\_SR) which consists of UPBM\_SR Listening Test, UPBM\_SR Speaking Test, UPBM\_SR Reading Test and UPBM\_SR Writing Test, UPBM\_SR Score Level, and student learning motivation questionnaire.

### *Listening Test UPBM\_SR*

The component of Listening Test UPBM\_SR comprises of two passages. Passages will be read once. Each passage contains 10 multiple choice questions. Questions 1-5 comprises multiple choice answer option; meanwhile questions 6-8 comprise of complete the table questions, and questions 9-10 comprise of fill in the blank with the correct answer questions. Answers should be outlined on the answer sheets provided. The duration of Listening Test is 30 minutes, and 80 marks are given for this test. For the procedures of Listening tests, the students are grouped in the classroom for the listening tests. The teacher then tests the student's aural skills by instructing the student to perform activities, such as standing, looking to the right, looking to the left, lifting hands, and sitting. Teachers later distribute question papers and students are permitted to read the question paper in silence within two minutes. The teacher then reads the passage directly to the student during the Listening Test. Students then answer 20 questions based on two passages in 30 minutes. Teachers will then evaluate student answer scripts and grade their scores based on UPBM\_SR Listening Test Score Level.

### *Speaking Test UPBM\_SR*

The UPBM\_SR Speaking Test Component consists of three rounds, namely round 1 (self introduction session), round 2 (individual opinion), and round 3 (group discussion). Speaking tests are conducted within 10 to 15 minutes. The score provided for this test is 136 marks based on the answer scheme and scoring rules. The UPBM\_SR Speaking Test is conducted by two sets of testers (i.e., researchers and research assistants). Students are put together in a special room for Speaking Test. Speaking test are conducted in groups of four students. Testers would assign turns for each group before the beginning of the Speaking Test. Students would fill in their personal details on Speaking Test scoring forms. Testers then assign task (themes or discussion topics) based on picture cards to each group. Members of the group are given five minutes to discuss as preparation before the Speaking Test is held. In this test, every member in the group needs to demonstrate the ability to speak.

### *Reading Test UPBM\_SR*

The component of Reading Test UPBM\_SR consists of four multi-theme passage. The comprehension questions for these passages were developed using the Bloom Learning Taxonomy of the revised version of Anderson and Krathwol (2001) and the Lamberg and Lamb Reading Understanding Taxonomy (1980). The development of items were based on the elements of remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating. A total of 40 questions need to be answered. For each passage, 10 questions in the form of four options A, B, C, and D were provided. The time given to answer is 45 minutes and 80 marks were allocated. Constructs tested include: (i) the knowledge and understanding of the language system, and (ii) information application skills (reading and understanding).

For the testing Procedures, students are put together in a classroom. This is where the tables and chairs arrangement is based on the Written Test Center Management Guide document. Teachers would distribute question papers and students are permitted to read the question paper quietly within five minutes. Students then need to read all the passages and blacken the answer choices on the provided answer sheets. Teachers later evaluate students' answers and ranks all scores obtained based on the UPBM\_SR Reading Skills Test Level to determine the level of mastery of student reading comprehension. The highest level is the Level 8 (Most Fluent) score between 71 and 80. Scoring criteria includes students' ability to read, understand various reading materials fluently and able to understand difficult and complex words.

### *Writing Test UPBM\_SR*

The Component of Writing Test UPBM\_SR consists of two sections: Section A - construct sentences based on the five pictures provided, and Section B - construct the essays (between 80 to 120 words). The Writing Test is

held within 60 minutes, which is 20 minutes for Section A and 40 minutes for Section B. The scoring for Section A is 40 marks and the scoring for Section B is 64 marks. For the writing Test Procedure, the students are put together in the examination hall. Teachers then distribute question papers and students would answer on the provided answer sheets. The answer scripts were reviewed by the appointed UPSR paper examiner teacher based on the UPBM\_SR Writing Test Score Level. The validity and reliability of the UPBM\_SR (Listening, Speaking, Writing and Writing) test instruments have been tested to ensure that the level of achievement, competence and skills are equally scored (verification of test results level) with the actual capabilities of respondents who are in the test (Fadzilah, Zuraini and Norazlina, 2016).

#### *UPBM\_SR Score Level*

The UPBM\_SR Reading Test Score Level is adapted from a source with integrity from the Examination Board, Ministry of Education, Malaysia (2015), Standard Curriculum and Assessment Document (DSKP) Malay Language for vernacular primary schools (2013), Rubric UKBM © (2015), IELTS and TOEFL Junior ®, Level 2 Malay textbooks, relevant reference books and websites tailored to the sample level of the study.

#### *Questionnaire*

A set of questionnaire was used in this study to obtain students' information and academic achievement of study sample. The questionnaire was used because the data obtained from respondents were faster and more effective. Closed questions are easier to deal with as respondents' responses are uniform and easier to analyze. In addition, the data collected using a questionnaire can provide the descriptive information needed to carry out generalization. The information can be analyzed and interpreted because questionnaire act as a logical, scientific and specialized research tool.

### **FINDINGS**

The results of the study shows that the majority of respondents with a percentage of 29.0% (120 students) achieved Level 4 (Moderate Proficient) for all Malay language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), followed by 24.4% of the students obtained Level 3 (Highly Restricted), , 23.4% of the students obtained Level 2 (Limited), (97 students), 15.0% (62 students) of the students obtained Level 5 (Almost Proficient), 6.0% (25 students) of the students obtained Level 7 and Level 1 (More Proficient and Very Limited) respectively and 2.2% (9 students) of the students obtained Level 6 (Very Proficient),. No respondent achieves Level 8 (Most Proficient).

The results of the study also shows that there is a correlation between the mean score of motivational learning (integrative and instrumental) with the overall score of UPBM\_SR non-Malay students in Kuantan District, Pahang.

Table 1 below shows the correlation between the mean score of motivational learning (integrative and instrumental) with the overall score of UPBM\_SR non-Malay students at the vernacular primary schools in the District of Kuantan, Pahang (N = 414).

TABLE 1

<b>Variables</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>
1 Overall Score UPBM_SR	1		
2 Integrative motivational min score	.18**	1	
3 Instrumental motivational min score	.22**	.88**	1

\*\* Significant correlation,  $p < .01$ .

Pearson's moment correlation analysis was carried out to determine the relationship between mean score of learning motivation (integrative) and overall score of UPBM\_SR of non-Malay students at SJK in Kuantan District, Pahang. All assumptions related to the implementation of Pearson's moment correlation analysis were revised and no violations were detected. The analysis found that the relationship between the variables was significant,  $r(412) = 0.18$ ,  $p < .001$ . This shows that there is a relationship between the score of the motivational learning (integrative) and the overall score of UPBM\_SR of non-Malay pupils in the vernacular primary schools in Kuantan, Pahang, and the relevance of the two variables is small based on the interpretation of Cohen's relevance (1988).

Pearson's moment correlation analysis was also carried out to determine the relevance of mean score of learning motivation (instrumental) with the overall score of UPBM\_SR in non-Malay students in the vernacular primary schools in Kuantan, Pahang. All assumptions related to the implementation of Pearson's momentary correlation analysis were revised, and no violations were detected. The analysis found that the relationship between the variables was significant,  $r(412) = 0.22$ ,  $p < .001$ . This shows that there is a correlation between mean score of learning motivation (instrumental) and overall score of UPBM\_SR in non-Malay students in the Chinese vernacular primary schools in Kuantan, Pahang, and the relevance of the two variables is small based on the interpretation of Cohen's relevance (1988). Evidently, non-Malay students in vernacular primary schools in Kuantan District are more instrumentally motivated than integrative.

## DISCUSSION

### *Malay Language Proficiency Level of Non-Malay Students*

In the context of this study, respondents have mastered the four Malay language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) with adequate levels. This can be explained as students are non-Malay speakers learning Malay language after mastering their mother tongue. They are found to be confused with Malay as the second language because their articulation tools are already familiar with listening and speaking in native languages. They have also mastered reading and writing skills in their first language. These Chinese and Indian students are confused with the Malay language due to the use of different characters and there are certain phonemes that are not available in their mother tongues. This causes students to often make mistakes in pronunciation and writing. The findings of this study are in line with the study of Jeyagobi (2011) and Chew (2016) in that they also prefer to use native language or English as a language to communicate in everyday life.

It is found that the students memorized the first paragraph or theme before taking the UPBM\_SR Speaking Test or Writing Test. This situation causes the student to show only limited and restricted speaking fluency. They can only express common words in a non-fluent manners. The sentence used does not have a sufficient coherence with the theme or the title of the conversation. This finding is supported by Krashen (1981) in the Monitor Hypothesis. The subconscious working *Organizer* will gradually build a new language regulatory system in a special way. This is where students use the rules to determine sentences they did not learn through memorization. The monitor on the other hand serves to process the information consciously. In the UPBM\_SR Test conducted, the majority of respondents answered questions using memorized sentences when sitting for UPSR exams either in Speaking Test or Writing Test. The results of the study were similar to the study of (Punitha et al., 2017) on adult foreign students who tend to memorize the vocabulary and practice the direct translation of their own language to strike a conversation in the second language.

It is apparent that the inability of non-Malay students in mastering the standard Malay language is due to the influence of the native language dialect. Additionally, it is also due to lack of opportunity to listen, and to speak Malay in everyday life. This phenomenon is supplemented by students' perceptions that the mastery of reading skills and writing skills is solely for the purpose of passing the examination. Therefore, the Malay language is considered to be unimportant and only as the language of communication used leisurely. The first objective finding of the study shows that the process of learning a second language requires a strong support, unlike the first language acquisition process. The importance of motivation was emphasized by Krashen (1981) in the Affective Screening Hypothesis that children with high secondary language learning motivation and low levels of anxiety have the opportunity to master the second language.

### *Learning Motivation as a Catalyst of Proficiency Level*

Motivation is a determining factor of the second language proficiency as a stimulus from the brain (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Non-Malay speakers are less motivated to learn Malay language because second language learning is highly dependent on student's attitude. The Malay language learning at vernacular primary schools as second language was negatively affected because they had to master the Malay language other than their first language. The mastery of second language is not a must, but is determined by historical demand (Juriah Long, 2012). The findings of the second problem using the Pearson moment correlation result showed a significant correlation between the mean score of motivational learning (integrative and instrumental) with the overall score of the Proficiency Test of Malay (UPBM\_SR).

The findings clearly show that non-Malay students are more instrumentally motivated. The action of learning Malay language is merely wanting to get good test scores in the examination and to gain social recognition. This is proven from the highest mean score for questionnaire items, for example, "I learned Malay language to succeed in the UPSR examination" which is 4.39, with a standard deviation of 0.96. The second item, "I study Malay language for the future" with a mean score of 3.87 and standard deviation of 1.11. The third item selected

by the respondent was "I learned Malay language because Malay language subject is mandatory" with a mean score of 3.77 and standard deviation of 1.21. The findings can be summarized that the mastery of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in Malay language is to only meet graduation requirements (Siti Baidura & Nurul Jamilah, 2011).

For integrative motivation, the findings show that the highest mean value of integrative motivation items is 3.83 and standard deviation of 1.24, which is "I learn BM to communicate with all races in Malaysia." The second item is the same as "I like BM class at school" and the third is "I ask the teacher if I do not understand" with a mean score of 3.61" integrative motivation influenced by target culture, Zahra Vaezi (2008). This shows that the importance of mastering the four skills in Malay language to non-Malay speakers is to interact with races in Malaysia, such as school workers, neighbours and friends.

In sum, although the relevance of the overall mean score of UPBM\_SR with the mean motivation (instrumental and integrative) scores is small, but due to historical demand (Juriah Long, 2012), cause and effect (Chew, 2016) requires non-Malay students had to master Malay language in addition to their first languages. They are forced to learn new behaviors and experience congenital disorders from the first language to form a habit. The findings confirm that the higher results obtained in the Mid-Year Exam, the higher the motivation of learning the Malay language shown. When students master the four basic Malay language skills they are automatically motivated to learn. Students who are not native speakers must master Malay language even though at the level of daily communication (Awang Sariyan, 2011).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, the issue of Malay language proficiency among non-Malay students is very alarming. Every citizen residing in Malaysia should at least have a basic level of mastery to achieve the harmonious and united Malaysian life. UPBM\_SR tests are seen as preparatory to primary school students to face global competition today as the success of a country depends on the knowledge, skills and competencies owned by its people. As a Malaysian citizen born and raised in this country, it is necessary to have an inner consciousness to speak Malay language in their daily lives. The proficiency in mastering the Malay language while communicating reflects the identity and personality of a sovereign Malaysian citizen.

The success of a student learning a second language is greatly influenced by the students themselves, the parents, the school and the Ministry of Education. Positive second language learning attitudes and motivation need to be established, since students are not native speakers in primary schools so that it becomes common place when they are in high school and apply the official language of the country in life. This study is opening the path for further study on the level of mastery of Malay as a second language. However the method of testing in this study can be improved because the data obtained empirically does not reflect the thorough study of the actual population. Nevertheless, the findings of this study can illustrate the phenomenon found in this country and can be used to increase knowledge to parents, educators, schools and Ministry of Education in future planning.

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