

Issues and Difficulties in Essay Writing When Learning Malay as a Second Language

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the difficulties encountered by non-native Malay speakers when writing Malay essays in primary school. Eight primary school teachers who taught Malay Language subjects were chosen to participate in the study. Participants must have led the Malay Language to level two students for at least five years. To this end, all study participants were randomly recruited from eight primary schools in the Semporna area of Sabah. The schools chosen as research locations have most kids who are not native Malay speakers (Bajau ethnic). The interview instruments are semi-structured, and the results are processed using the Atlas.ti 8.24 software (Mac version). The findings indicate that the most challenging Malay language skill for non-native speakers to learn is essay writing. Non-native speakers face difficulties with concept production, technical parts of essay writing, and limited vocabulary proficiency. Several critical points should be addressed. First, to address the issue of non-native speakers writing essays. Increasing students' language proficiency encourages students to think and produce ideas and improves students' command of the essay style and varieties of student essays. The data from this study are critical for students who are not native speakers of Malay to enhance their teaching and learning writing of Malay essays.

Keywords

Essay Writing, Non-Native Speakers, Primary School, Malay Language

1. Introduction

Malay language is a compulsory subject in the standard elementary school curriculum. The elementary school Malay language curriculum emphasizes four language skills: Listening and Speaking, Reading, and Writing (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2018). However, learning writing skills is problematic for stu-

dents because they need to use their cognitive skills, such as the ability to think, to formulate ideas and record them in writing. Moreover, students need to have adequate knowledge to write intriguing texts and they need to make sure that the language is correct (Che Hassan & Abd Rahman, 2011).

Consequently, one of the issues that teachers need to emphasize in essay writing is how students create a complete essay. However, teachers cannot only focus on the outcome of their students' papers. The writing process also involves using tactics, techniques, approaches, and procedures that are appropriate for students. In other words, the teacher must acquire the necessary skills and pedagogical knowledge to teach them to students.

Moreover, elementary students should be exposed to essay writing from the very beginning, not only during their school years from level 2, year 4 to year six. After six years of writing instruction in elementary school, students make numerous errors when writing essays (Abdullah et al., 2016). This is related to children's cognitive processes because students are already able to write once they master the art of organizing systematic and coherent thoughts into paragraphs (Rafiei & Modirkhamene, 2012; Alireza, 2010).

1.1. Problem Statement

Researchers around Malaysia study the teaching and acquisition of Malay as a second language to non-native students. For students who have their native language, the second language is Malay (Hamid, 2006). For instance, Peng's (2016) study focused on Chinese students' difficulties learning Malay as a second language, while Perumal et al. (2017) study examined the challenges faced by Indian students learning Malay as a second language. Both studies discovered that Chinese and Indian students struggle to learn Malay for various reasons, including their home language. Malay is taught as a second language to Chinese and Indian students and is adopted as a second language by students of many ethnic groups in Sabah and Sarawak. Learning Malay is challenging, much more so for students who do not speak Malay daily (Singi & Mahamod, 2019; Nahar & Abd Rahman, 2018).

Among the most prominent challenges teachers have when teaching essay writing in elementary schools, primarily to level 2 students, is that students cannot correctly digest the essay's contents. Students cannot write thoughts in grammatical phrases, have a restricted vocabulary, employ inappropriate sentence structure, and have various other language-related issues. Due to learners' inability to develop a strong vocabulary, phrases become challenging to comprehend correctly (MOE, 2018). Additionally, the inability of students to correctly digest the essay's contents arises from a lack of vocabulary mastery. Students' vocabulary is limited when writing essays, resulting in overly succinct and easy sentence processing (MOE, 2018).

The disadvantage of students in writing, as Yusop & Mahamod (2015) explain in their study, is that students cannot generate strong ideas, which makes the es-

say's thesis less appealing. So Said, Mohd Sharif, & Abd Rahman (2017), Jamian et al. (2016), and Mohamed (2016) also addressed similar concerns in their studies on essay writing, particularly in primary schools. Their findings indicate that students' mastery of essay writing remains limited and that they cannot create successfully despite extensive study of many aspects of essay writing.

Sure, students struggle to acquire fundamental writing abilities, rendering them incapable of completing a writing activity. As a result of this predicament, students could not compose an essay that met the requirements of the following question. Moreover, according to Ismail & Hamzah (2018) studies, non-native students frequently make grammatical errors, particularly in their usage of remuneration when writing essays.

In addition, students lack cohesion (connection) skills when writing essays. According to Ismail (2006), many weak students have submitted opening sentences that are not consistent with the topic or content of the essay. Aloysius & Othman (2017) found that students could not construct an effective essay opening or justify the topic of the essay. Students cannot relate the introduction to the topic of the essay, so the content of the essay does not match the intent of the question. Therefore, given the difficulties encountered by non-native speakers in learning Malay as a second language and the related weaknesses in essay writing, it is crucial that the competence of non-native speakers in essay writing can be improved.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the difficulties encountered by non-native Malay speakers when writing essays and to identify strategies for overcoming such difficulties.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design of Study

The researchers collected data using a qualitative approach. The qualitative technique is seen to describe the information that will be gathered holistically from a reliable source without the researchers manipulating it (Merriam, 2009).

2.2. Instrument of Study

The data collection instrument was semi-structured interviews, which were analyzed using the ATLAS.ti 8.24 software (Mac version). The interview questions in this study have been evaluated and confirmed by specialists with experience doing qualitative research with non-native students learning Malay as a second language.

2.3. Sampling

In this study, purposive sampling was used, that is, samples were drawn from all population groups that met the requirements for selection as study participants.

The selection of sampling methods allows the researchers to collect data about the subjects in an accurate, holistic, and valuable manner (Merriam, 2009). Eight teachers of Malay language were selected as study participants based on previously established criteria. These included having taught Malay language at Level 2 for at least five years. I was selected to teach in eight rural national schools in Semporna district in Sabah. In addition, these schools predominantly teach children from the Bajau ethnic group who speak their native language. The study participants were selected from different backgrounds to ensure diversity and to fit into the study setting. **Table 1** gives an overview of the background of the study participants.

2.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis is used to analyze qualitative data in this study, and data from semi-structured interviews were analyzed inductively and deductively. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), theme analysis is a technique for detecting, interpreting, and reporting themes in data.

3. Findings

Based on interviews conducted with participants, several significant themes will be discussed based on teachers' perspectives and ideas. The analysis of interview transcription data revealed the following themes:

3.1. Influence of the Mother Tongue in Malay Subjects

According to the teacher's study of the interview transcripts, the native language of Bajau has a significant impact on students' learning of Malay. As a result, students were not able to adequately master the Malay language. Students communicate in their native language and incorporate some of their native vocabulary into their work. According to the teachers, the influence of the Bajau language begins at home when the students' parents communicate in Bajau. An excerpt from Teacher 1's interview transcript shows the written use of Bajau language terms:

Table 1. Participant background.

Teacher	Age	Gender	Ethnic	Experience in teaching	School Location	Education level	Speciality
1	53	Female	Bajau	22	Rural areas	Bachelor	Malay Language
2	37	Female	Bugis	7	Island	Bachelor	Malay Language
3	50	Female	Sungai	28	Island	Bachelor	Malay Language
4	50	Male	Bajau	18	Island	Bachelor	Malay Language
5	52	Female	Bajau	31	Island	Bachelor	Malay Language
6	38	Female	Brunei	11	Island	Bachelor	Malay Language
7	52	Male	Bajau	20	Island	Bachelor	Malay Language
8	35	Male	Bajau	7	Island	Bachelor	Malay Language

Numerous students spoke in their native language. Yes, they communicate in Bajau. Most of them use Bajau to illustrate concepts they do not understand. (Teacher 1)

The influence of Bajau language can also cause problems for teachers, especially for those who are not Bajau, as Teacher 3 stated:

Besides, it is available in the indigenous languages. When we teach, we are not Bajau, and therefore we are complicated. We will not be able to incorporate Bajau into Malay. (Teacher 3)

3.2. Malay Language Skills That Are Difficult for Non-Native Speakers to Master

The Malay language curriculum for primary school children generally includes a critical skill that all students must learn and master. The four skills are listening and speaking, reading, and writing. Most teachers believe that writing skills are very complex for their students because they are Malay language skills. The writing skills examined in this study are essay writing. Teachers claims:

Writing this essay miserably is a waste of time. It is serious. (Teacher 2)

Writing is difficult. It is serious. Writing an essay is difficult. (Teacher 3)

All teachers indicate that non-native speakers in their classes have significant difficulties with writing essays. However, Teacher 5 and Teacher 7 believe that the most challenging part for their students is reading, but both teachers admit that their students also have difficulties in writing essays. They state:

Reading and writing are required. If the wording is acceptable, it's like he forgot what he read. This affects essay writing, and it is like that. (Teacher 5)

3.3. Problems of Students in Writing Essays

One of the main difficulties raised by teachers during the interview was the difficulty that non-native speakers have in writing essays. Examination of the interview transcripts revealed that the difficulties encountered by non-native speakers in writing essays can be classified into five main categories, as indicated in **Table 2**.

Table 2 shows that all teachers think that their students have problems with limited vocabulary. According to some teacher experts, the problem of limited vocabulary is due to students' lack of enthusiasm in reading and the influence of the native language used in writing essays. Here is an example of a transcript from a teacher interview about students' poor use of language in writing essays:

There is a language barrier. It's like he cannot read because of his vocabulary. As a result, his vocabulary is limited. (Teacher 2)

In addition, non-native speakers have difficulty forming grammatical poems

Table 2. Student problems essay writing.

Teachers	Problems				
	Vocabulary usage is limited	Unsatisfactory verse building	Idea generation	Punctuation	Mastery of the essay format
1	/	/	/	/	
2	/	/	/	/	
3	/		/		
4	/	/	/		/
5	/	/	/	/	
6	/	/	/		/
7	/	/	/		/
8	/		/	/	

when writing essays. The inability to construct grammatical texts in essays indirectly affects students' production of essays. Many students can only write a single verse and have difficulty turning a single sentence into a plural or adequately conveying the content of a paragraph. Below are some examples of transcripts from interviews with teachers:

Making a sentence sometimes seems challenging. This grammatical sense will not work for him. It reminds me of a simple verse. Then there are cases where their verses seem to be mixed with their native language. They are what I call "poor verses". (Teacher 4)

The teacher further reveals in **Table 2** that students have difficulty creating ideas when writing essays. However, as teachers indicate, students' problems should not be addressed because they limit their ability to write better essays. Teachers further claim that a lack of general knowledge and a lack of reading interest are two factors that contribute to students' inability to generate ideas. The following interview transcripts demonstrate this:

Yes, they should conceive and develop their ideas. The fundamental notion may be that they can offer but expanding on that is a challenge. (Teacher 8)

Additionally, the results of the interview transcription show that students have issues with punctuation in essay writing. Teachers claim that students are still guilty of incorrect punctuation, such as not knowing where periods, commas, and capital letters should be placed. The following is a transcript of the teacher's interview:

Writing is an issue for one of my students. In terms of writing, he still has a lot of work to do. For instance, if I wish to write the first sentence and teach you on certain days, I must first write the first sentence. (Teacher 2)

Another critical point to note is that students struggle to understand the essay format. Typically, elementary school writings are separated into two categories:

structured essays and unformatted essays. According to teachers, many students still do not understand the format of essays, which directly impacts their ability to write better essays. Here's an excerpt from the interview that demonstrates the student's difficulty with the essay format:

Their ability to write essays in a formatted manner. Some kids can compose essays but struggle with formatting. Their structure is incorrect. (Teacher 7)

Overall, based on participant responses, it can be determined that students confront five issues when writing essays. Limited vocabulary, problems with grammatical sentence building, elements of idea production while writing essays, aspects of punctuation marks, and parts of mastery of the format of essays written by students are all examples of these issues. These students' difficulties have an impact on the quality of their compositions.

3.4. Mastery of the Type of Essay

In general, students must study and master two sorts of essays in Malay essay writing: unformatted and unformatted essays. Official letters, unofficial submissions, notes, reports, documents, greetings, interviews, and news are all examples of formatted writings. Stories, autobiographies, opinions, facts, and conversations are all examples of unformatted essays. All the teachers claim that their students have difficulty mastering essays in a specific structure. The proof is as follows from an interview transcript:

The format-shaped essays are the most difficult. Official letters and non-official letters, for example, are difficult for students to comprehend. Similarly, writing an essay of similar nature is difficult for students. (Teacher 8)

However, teachers also mentioned that some students had difficulty producing unformatted essays. According to teachers, some essays are challenging due to various issues, including reading and general knowledge. The following are some examples of interview transcriptions:

Perhaps they've arrived because of a lack of reading. Another sample of a biographical essay can be found here. The issue is that unless we give it to me like my mother, it will be a problem. (Teacher 3)

4. Discussion

As the people closest to students in school, teachers need to recognize the problems students have in writing essays. For example, the main concerns of students whose native language is not English in writing essays are prepared writings such as lectures, speeches, official writing, informal writing, and debates. Focusing on a concise and accurate essay format is crucial to ensure that the essays written by students follow the basic pattern set by the Malaysian Examination Board. A new strategy or approach is needed to help students whose first language is not Malaysian to effectively master the essay structure.

Aloysius & Othman (2017) found that students were not able to write progressively. As a result, students are unable to relate the previous paragraphs to the essay and consequently write an essay that matches the title of the essay. The content of the essay also fails to meet the requirements of the question. From the results of this study, the challenge of writing this essay is not limited to the children of non-native speakers, but also affects students from other ethnic groups. Therefore, teachers should enable the children of non-native speakers to write essays so that they can meet the requirements for a comprehensive essay with progress, real content, and title pages (Sariyan, 2004). Moreover, the content of the essay must be aligned with the given title of the essay (Mohamed, 2016).

However, according to the teachers, the students who are non-native speakers had difficulties in understanding the content of the essays and expanding the content of the essays using real language. This is because essay writing is one of the most challenging and complex skills that students need to master in Malay language (Jamian et al., 2016; Che Hassan & Abd Rahman, 2011; Arshad, 2008; Baki, 2003). In addition, essay writing requires students to convey their ideas in an engaging language with high aesthetic value (Baki, 2003), which is challenging for students whose first language is not Malay.

Since the impact of their local language is hindered and reading interest does not strongly influence the way they think and express their opinions, it is challenging for students who are non-native speakers to develop their ideas into a captivating essay. For example, the teacher had to describe the meaning of a term in Bajau for the student to understand what the teacher was trying to say. According to the findings of a study conducted by Subramaniam, Abdul Muthalib, & Zainal (2014), this scenario is also found among ethnic Iban students in Sarawak.

The findings open new opportunities for Malay language teachers to help non-native students develop better ideas when writing essays. Teachers can think of new ideas or develop strategies to encourage students whose first language is not Malay to think and write interesting articles. Graphic approaches, such as those used by Amin and Wan Muhammad (2018), can be used by teachers. It is also believed that the use of cartoons can help students improve their writing skills (Singi & Mahamod, 2019).

As noted, Jamian et al. (2016), teachers should develop strategies, approaches, or pedagogical activities that are tailored to students' needs. Promising teaching approaches can improve the effectiveness of a teacher's learning process in the classroom. Teachers of Malay can use the findings of this study to determine the best strategy for teaching essay writing to students whose first language is not German. This is crucial because only the teacher knows the student's performance and ability to sustain a lesson. It has been found that the teacher's element has a significant impact on the ability of non-native students to master essay writing. According to Wan Omar (2019), Peng (2016), and Mahamod & Nor

(2012), the mastery of essay writing in Malay depends not only on students' talents and abilities, but also on the influence of the teachers who teach in the classroom.

5. Conclusion

Finally, the findings of this study show that proper teaching and learning activities are needed to help non-native speakers students grasp essay writing. The teaching and learning writing essay activities must be based on the challenges that the non-native speakers' students confront. Teaching and learning activities that are enjoyable and capable of motivating non-native students' kids to follow the learning activities by submitting essays are solutions to teachers' difficulties. Finally, teaching Malay essay writing to non-native speakers' students learning Malay as a second language is difficult. On the other hand, the findings can guide Malay Language teachers in constructing teaching and producing the finest essays for non-native students.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding the publications of this paper.

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