

Chapter 1

Understanding Cultural Disparities in Communication: Lessons Learned from Teaching Malay as a Foreign Language

Junaini Kasdan and Anis Shahira Shamsuri

1. Introduction

In today's globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively in a second language or a foreign language has become increasingly important. However, there are various challenges faced by users who are considered as non-native speakers when gaining mastery of a second language or a foreign language. According to McConachy (2018), foreign language teaching raises some concerns about preparing learners to interact with people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, including but not limited to native speakers of the language. Therefore, it requires a reflective and analytical engagement to understand how culture shapes the meaning-making process in interaction (Anzhelika Solodka et al. 2021). Hu Song (2014) mentions that there are three main problems in foreign language teaching and learning: first, to regard simply learning language and vocabulary as the whole of foreign language learning; second, to use a learning method that is outdated and incomplete; and third, to have a strong language comprehension ability, but poor cross-cultural comprehension. Normally, people do not appreciate the importance of cross-cultural understanding. Most people consider the ability to communicate to be just a matter of learning a foreign language.

Cultural contexts are the means of intercommunication. They represent the content of the interaction, disclose the mechanism of learners' development and insight across cultures and languages. The concept of a cultural context brings clarity to the understanding of the implementation of cross-cultural interaction. It allows learners to determine the impact of cross-cultural interaction on the process and result of gaining new cultural experiences.

Culture as a social process deals with the use of language and communication experienced by people in specific circumstances. The process of learning a foreign language, such as the Malay language, not only requires an individual to practice linguistic forms but also necessitates becoming familiar with the culture of target language in order to achieve inter-cultural communication. Therefore, in the process of learning the Malay language as a foreign language, it is crucial to incorporate a cultural approach. This approach acknowledges that language is not only a structural system but also includes communicative and social aspects. This approach is also intended to reduce cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Cross-cultural communication refers to the exchange of information between individuals who differ in terms of age, gender, race, nationality, ethnicity, and working habits. Cross-cultural communication can also refer to the use of words, gestures, and body language to exchange, negotiate, and mediate cultural differences. It is the means by which people from different cultures connect with one another. If both speakers know how to make the best use of a conversation, communication between their respective cultures will be easier and simpler. The process of second language learning involves the development of the ability to meaningfully interpret and use features of the target language (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013). Cross-cultural communication fosters trust and facilitates collaboration. The emphasis is on providing the appropriate

Chapter 1

Understanding Cultural Disparities in Communication: Lessons Learned from Teaching Malay as a Foreign Language

response rather than the appropriate message. However, cross-cultural misunderstandings can occur when a person from one culture acts according to their norms and values, but the other does not understand the message the way it was conveyed and might interpret it differently due to the cultural differences.

Interpretation is based on a wide range of assumptions about different cultures. One effective way of incorporating a cultural approach to learning a foreign language such as the Malay language is to domesticate the language and relate it to its particular habitat. This is achieved by selecting cultural components. This can help teachers to better embed cultural awareness into teaching and learning activities, creating a richer and more engaging learning experience. By doing so, learners will not only learn the language itself, but also gain insight into the customs, traditions, and values of the Malay-speaking communities, allowing for a more holistic and meaningful language learning experience. They will not only be able to communicate effectively in Malay but also have developed a deeper appreciation and respect for the culture and its people. Using the cultural approach in learning Malay as a second language allows learners to understand the language in its social and cultural context. This approach helps learners navigate and understand the nuances of the language, such as the appropriate language to use in different situations and how to interpret cultural references. Furthermore, incorporating cultural aspects into language learning fosters cross-cultural understanding and empathy. By learning about the culture of Malay-speaking communities, learners can develop a sense of empathy and respect for different ways of life. They can also develop the ability to adapt their language use and behavior in cross-cultural interaction, which is crucial in today's globalized world.

2. Malay Language

The Malay language originates from the Austronesian region and has a long history of development and adaptation. By the 16th century, it had emerged as a prominent language of knowledge, religion, law, diplomacy, and trade (Gani and Talib 2009; Ostler 2005). Historically, it was one of the most politically influential languages in the Malay Archipelago. Its written forms have evolved from early Pallava/Kawi scripts to the Jawi script, widely used in classical literature, religious texts, and official documents, and eventually to the Rumi script (Latin alphabet), which is standard in modern usage. Standardized varieties of Malay are now the official languages of Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia, while in Singapore, Malay is recognized as one of the four official languages.

In Malaysia, Malay has held national and official language status since 1957, underpinning the social contract between the Malays and other ethnic groups as formalized in the National Language Act 1963/1967 (Article 152), which mandates its use for official purposes (Watson 1980). Meanwhile, Indonesia adopted a form of Malay as its official language upon independence, naming it Bahasa Indonesia, which has recently become the 10th language recognized as an official language of the UNESCO General Conference, alongside the six official languages of the United Nations. Malay encompasses several regional dialects, including those of Peninsular Malaysia, Brunei, Sumatra, and Indonesia, differing slightly in pronunciation, vocabulary, and syntax. The language has absorbed influences from Sanskrit, Arabic, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and Chinese, enriching its lexicon. Today, Malay is widely taught as a foreign language to international students, supported by digitalization efforts and language corpora development, reflecting its ongoing relevance in education, research, and global

communication.

Those who have studied or are acquainted with Indonesian frequently ask what sets Malay apart from Indonesian. Essentially, Malay and Indonesian are mutually intelligible, yet they display differences in their phonologies, lexicons, and, to some extent, their grammar. These divergences arise more from different linguistic choices than from the presence of entirely distinct systems. The primary phonological differences are observed in the pronunciation of particular sounds as well as in intonation. Notably, the letters *a* and *r* in word-final position demonstrate clear divergence. In Indonesian, the final *a* is pronounced as a low front vowel [a], and the final *r* is distinctly rolled. In Malay, however, the final *a* is realized as a schwa [ə], while the final *r* ranges from a light flap to complete elision. These differences contribute to the distinct auditory identities of both languages despite their shared structural foundation.

Lexical differences are among the most immediately noticeable to learners. Although both languages share a substantial common vocabulary due to their shared historical roots, they have developed distinct lexical preferences shaped by different colonial and sociocultural influences. Indonesian has absorbed a large number of loanwords from Dutch, while Malay spoken in Malaysia has incorporated more English-derived terms. As a result, everyday vocabulary often differs even when referring to the same concept, for example, *kereta* (car) in Malay corresponds to *mobil* in Indonesia, *kereta api* (train) in Malay to *kereta* in Indonesia, and *cuti* (holiday) in Malay corresponds to *libur* in Indonesia. Nevertheless, such variations seldom hinder mutual comprehension, as contextual cues usually allow meaning to be inferred easily.

Grammatical differences, while less extensive, are still observable. Malay tends to preserve forms more closely aligned with classical

Malay structures, whereas Indonesian exhibits a somewhat wider degree of morphological and syntactic flexibility. Indonesian frequently employs a broader range of affixation patterns, as seen in forms such as *memperhatikan*, which corresponds to *memerhati* or *memberi perhatian* in Malay. Prefixes such as *pe-* and *per-* also appear more productively in Indonesian than in Malay. Despite these distinctions, the core grammatical systems remain fundamentally parallel, allowing speakers of one language to understand the other with minimal difficulty. Taken together, the phonological, lexical, and grammatical divergences illustrate how Malay and Indonesian have evolved into distinct standard varieties shaped by historical, political, and cultural developments. Yet, they continue to remain mutually intelligible and interconnected, reflecting their shared linguistic heritage.

Today, Malay continues to expand its role globally, taught widely as a foreign language to international learners. For foreign students in Malaysia, learning Malay is compulsory, not only to fulfil academic requirements but also to foster good relations with the local community. To support this goal, students can enroll in KIKBM — the Intensive Malay Language Proficiency Course.

3. Intensive Malay Language Proficiency Course (KIKBM)

KIKBM was established in 1999 through the Consortium of Teaching Indonesia–Malaysia (COTIM) and offered by the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Conducted by native instructors, KIKBM is a six-level non-degree program designed for international learners, offering an intensive four-to-five-week instructional structure that can be tailored to learners' needs. It is also available online to accommodate diverse educational

Chapter 1

Understanding Cultural Disparities in Communication: Lessons Learned from Teaching Malay as a Foreign Language

contexts, with Level 1 and Level 2 being the most frequently selected by participants.

The program aims to cultivate comprehensive linguistic competence among non-native speakers through a structured yet immersive learning framework. Each level consists of 100 hours of instruction focusing on grammar, cultural knowledge, and communication skills. The syllabus is sequenced in a cumulative manner, allowing linguistic input to be gradually expanded as learning progresses. It incorporates fundamental principles of behaviorism, cognitivism, and humanism to ensure that language learning is an active, meaningful, and non-threatening process supported by stimulus, response, and reinforcement. In line with Krashen's (1981) distinction between language learning and language acquisition, the course is designed to integrate both processes so that formal instruction and natural acquisition complement one another.

Through this integrated approach, learners develop linguistic abilities from foundational to advanced levels, enabling them to construct accurate sentences, comprehend increasingly complex texts, and produce coherent written discourse for both formal and informal contexts. Oral communication skills are also strengthened, particularly in terms of spoken fluency, pronunciation, and pragmatic awareness. Politeness strategies and pragmatic competence are emphasized in accordance with communicative purposes and social settings.

A distinctive feature of KIKBM is its strong sociocultural orientation. The program incorporates extensive exposure to cultural norms, communicative conventions, and everyday practices that shape language use in Malaysia. Through authentic interactions embedded in classroom activities and experiential components, including field visits, community engagement sessions, and cultural programs, learners gain opportunities to apply their linguistic knowledge in real communicative environments. This experiential dimension not only enhances

communicative confidence but also fosters intercultural awareness, enabling learners to navigate social interactions more effectively and respectfully.

The development of functional and survival language skills further equips learners to handle essential communicative tasks, such as asking for information, conducting transactions, interpreting public messages, and managing routine interpersonal exchanges. Typical thematic coverage includes the Malay sound system, greetings, numbers, time, money, self-introduction, classifiers, family vocabulary, daily activities, directions, modes of transport, and descriptions of food, weather, and countries.

For learners pursuing academic or professional pathways in Malaysia, the program provides a foundation in academic Malay, including exposure to formal registers, discipline-specific terminology, and conventions of academic discourse. This preparation supports smoother integration into academic institutions or organizational settings that utilize Malay as a medium of communication.

4. Problem Statement

Effective communication is a vital skill in any language, but it is particularly challenging when cultural disparities are involved. Language does not exist in a vacuum; it is shaped by the cultural, historical, and social contexts in which it is used. In the case of Malay, a language deeply intertwined with cultural values and traditions of the Malay people, communication involves not just words, but also gestures, body language, and social norms that may be unfamiliar or even unintelligible to foreign learners (Hall 1976).

Cultural disparities in communication refer to the differences in communication styles, practices, and social behavior that exist between

people from different cultural backgrounds (Gudykunst and Kim 2003). These differences can range from the ways in which people express politeness to the role of body language and non-verbal cues to the manner in which individuals address one another. In a cross-cultural context, these disparities often lead to misunderstandings or discomfort, especially when one is unfamiliar with the social codes that govern communication (Piller 2011). For example, in many Western cultures, communication is often direct and to the point (Gudykunst and Kim 2003). In contrast, Malay communication tends to be more indirect and nuanced, with a greater emphasis on politeness, respect and preserving harmony in social interactions (Mat Hassan et al. 2020). These differences are often rooted in broader cultural values, such as collectivism, respect for authority, and the importance of maintaining face (i.e., avoiding situations where a person might feel embarrassed or lose their dignity) (Brown and Levinson 1987).

5. Objectives

Through teaching a learning process during conducting KIKBM, the goal of this paper is to show the nature of the interpretative engagement of learners with aspects of cross-cultural pragmatics. This article aims to explore the role that cultural disparities play in communication, particularly in the context of teaching Malay as a foreign language. By drawing from personal experiences and scholarly research, this article will discuss the challenges and insights gained from teaching Malay to non-native speakers. Cultural differences, such as varying communication styles, non-verbal cues, and social hierarchies, often pose significant hurdles for learners of Malay, yet they also provide valuable learning opportunities for both learners and teachers alike.

6. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to examine the experiences, perceptions, and linguistic observations of foreign learners participating in a Malay language immersion program. This approach was selected as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds engage with Malay language structures, phonological features, and cultural contexts in an authentic learning environment. The study involved 25 participants from a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Nine undergraduate students from Russia (aged 19–22) formed the largest group, followed by two students from Japan (aged 20–24), two students from Australia (aged 25–26), and five participants from China (aged 22–23). The sample also included two professors from the United Kingdom (aged 45–55) who joined the program for academic and cultural familiarization, as well as two participants from the United States (aged 23) enrolled for a short-term study. In addition, one learner each from South Korea (aged 25), Taiwan (aged 23), and Turkey (aged 27) participated in the classes as part of their cultural immersion and language acquisition goals. The data for this study were collected over a two-year period, from 2023 to 2024.

Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and cultural immersion activities, such as homestay (*inap desa*) programs, and an educational visit to Masjid Putra in Putrajaya. These activities provided opportunities to observe learners' spontaneous language use, interactional patterns, and cultural interpretations in naturalistic contexts. Participants were observed both during structured lessons and during the off-class cultural activities mentioned. Interviews were conducted at two stages: mid-program and at completion. The study was situated within the Intensive Malay Language Proficiency Program (KIKBM) at the Institute of the Malay

World and Civilization (ATMA), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. By combining linguistic instruction with rich cultural exposure, including homestay engagement and mosque visits, the program offered an ideal setting for observing how foreign learners interact with and internalize the Malay language in both formal and informal contexts.

7. Findings and Discussion

In the Malay-speaking world, communication is strongly influenced by values such as *adat* (custom), respect for hierarchy, and a deep connection to religious practices (Abdullah 2008). These values shape not only the words spoken but also the tone, body language, and even the choice of greeting. It is undeniable that language and culture are closely interconnected. The process of learning a language involves more than just vocabulary and grammar; it involves an understanding of the cultural norms that govern how people communicate. Language is used to reflect social dynamics, such as respect for elders, authority, and community. The relationship between language and culture is evident in various ways, such as naming conventions, the use of pronouns, and traditional greetings.

Observations show that some learners face difficulties in comprehending Malaysian culture. Foreign learners, as well as participants in the KIKBM program, often struggle with cultural disparities in communication when learning Malay. These challenges can create barriers to effective communication, with one of the most common being understanding the role of honorifics and politeness.

(1) Hierarchy and Address

One key aspect of teaching Malay as a foreign language is

greetings, which begins with addressing people by name. Malay society places great importance on social hierarchy and respect for elders and superiors. The use of the first pronouns in Malay, *aku* (me, I), is intended to be informal and used with peers. For example, *anda* (you) is used in polite contexts, while *kau*, *kamu*, and *awak* (you) are used in informal or close relationships. This study found that participants generally understood how to use both formal and informal forms of address. However, they sometimes used informal terms such as *kamu* or *awak* when speaking with lecturers or older individuals. For example:

Lecturer: *Hai Kent, apa khabar?* (Kent, how are you?)

Kent: *Khabar baik. Awak apa khabar?* (I am good. How are you?)

In the other situation, Sarah met a stranger and had a conversation:

Stranger: *Hai, awak pelajar KIKBM?* (Hi, are you KIKBM student?)

Sarah: *Hai. Ya saya pelajar baru. Bagaimana kamu tahu?* (Hi. Yes, I'm new student. How do you know?)

From the conversation, it is clear that Kent uses the word *awak* (you) to address his lecturer, while Sarah uses *kamu* (you) when speaking to someone she has just met. This can be understood because, for foreign learners, it is often difficult to distinguish the appropriate greetings to use. Some foreign speakers tend to use *awak* or *kamu* as the translation for “you” and *aku* for “I” with anyone they meet. This is because they understand that *aku* and *awak* or *engkau* are used for individuals who are very close to them. Therefore, in an effort to feel close to someone, they use the words *aku* and *awak*.

In terms of practicing the language, although in English there are

terms such as “sir” and “madam,” which can be appropriately translated as *tuan* and *puan* in Malay, some students feel more comfortable using the pronoun “you,” which in Malay is translated as *awak* or *kamu*. The use of *awak* and *kamu* can be considered polite when addressing peers or younger individuals. However, when addressing older individuals of higher status or in formal settings, these terms are considered less polite or inappropriate.

(2) Naming and Honorific Title

Another fundamental aspect of teaching Malay as a foreign language is helping learners understand the intricacies of naming conventions. In Malay culture, names carry deep cultural significance and reflect social hierarchies and familial relationships. Politeness is embedded in the language, with specific honorifics and formalities used based on age, social status, and relationships. In Western traditions, family names are commonly used. Thus, in the first session or class, students typically address me as “Kasdan.” As an academic staff member, I understand and accept this. However, I must then teach them that the structure of Malay naming conventions can be a little tricky. For example:

- (a) Junaini binti Kasdan (female)
- (b) Shamsuri bin Daud (male)

These naming conventions can lead to confusion among non-Malay speakers, especially English-speaking students who might mistake *bin* and *binti* for a middle name. It is important to clarify that the structure of Malay names typically follows the order: [Given name(s)] [Patronymic noun] [Father’s given name]. Thus, using a person’s last name alone is seen as disrespectful in Malay culture, as it refers to the

father's personal name. It can be more difficult when the given name consists of multiple words, as in the following examples:

- (c) Nur Anis Natasya Amirah binti Abdul Karim (female)
- (d) Muhammad Nur Arfan bin Mohd Sallehuddin (male)

Referring to examples (c) and (d), it is essential for students to understand that the given name is the first name(s) before the patronymic noun (e.g., *Nur Anis Natasya Amirah* or *Muhammad Nur Arfan*). While it is common for individuals to shorten their names (e.g., *Anis*, *Natasya* or *Amirah*), students must avoid confusion and learn the proper structure.

In Malaysia's multicultural society, the use of terms like *anak lelaki* (son of) and *anak perempuan* (daughter of) is also common. For example:

- (a) *Ramachandran anak lelaki (a/l) Ramasamy*
- (b) *Letchumy anak perempuan (a/p) Mutusamy*

These terms are primarily used by the Indian and other non-Muslim communities. It is essential to note that *bin* and *binti* are used only for Muslims, and the system is often recorded on identity cards, although patronymic nouns are being gradually abandoned in daily conversation.

In addition to naming conventions, understanding the appropriate use of pronouns and greetings is crucial in teaching Malay. In Malay culture, respect is often communicated through the use of titles and pronouns, reflecting social status, age, and relationship. According to Amat Juhari (2001), language use needs to be suited to different audiences and levels as well as the context and tone. Respect for others is often associated with the use of titles and pronouns. For example, in

Chapter 1

Understanding Cultural Disparities in Communication: Lessons Learned from Teaching Malay as a Foreign Language

a formal setting, using titles such as *Professor*, *Datuk Seri*, or *tuan* is customary, reflecting the individual's social standing. To illustrate this, a prominent individual might be addressed as:

*Professor Emeritus Datuk Seri Ts. Ar. Dr. Tengku Syarifah Aminah
Ibni Tengku Omar.*

While in other languages, titles like “Sir” in English or *Bapak* in Indonesian might suffice, Malay culture places great importance on using the highest title available, such as *Professor Datuk Seri*. Failing to do so can be seen as disrespectful or unethical. For foreign students, this can create confusion and discomfort, as they may feel hesitant or unsure about how to properly address someone. Observations have shown that foreign students tend to avoid engaging with individuals who hold high status because they are uncertain about the correct form of address.

Apart from honorific titles, there are also forms of respectful address without titles, such as *mak cik* (aunt) and *pak cik* (uncle). In Malay, *mak cik* and *pak cik* are terms of address used to refer to middle-aged or older adults, typically those who are not very close to the speaker or are acquaintances. Both *mak cik* and *pak cik* are informal, yet respectful, terms. They are not reserved only for family members but are used in everyday situations to refer to older individuals with warmth and respect. Do note that *mak cik* and *pak cik* are often used in informal contexts. In formal situations, or when addressing someone with a higher status, we might use titles such as *puan* (Mrs.), *tuan* (Mr.), *encik* (Mr.), or *cik* (Miss) instead. For example,

Sakura: *Terima kasih mak cik. Jumpa lagi.* (Thank you, Aunt.
See you again.)

Mak cik: *Sama-sama. Selamat jalan.* (You are welcome. Goodbye.)

In this conversation, Sakura (a student) uses the term *mak cik* (aunt) to address the homestay owner during a cultural activity. The student understands that the term *mak cik* (aunt) is exclusively used in informal circumstances in Malaysian society and is typically reserved for elderly women. However, when she arrives at the campus and meets another lady, Sakura also greets her as *mak cik*. But the lady she addressed as *mak cik* might be a lecturer or a professor. This is surprising, as the lady should not be referred to as *mak cik*. In formal situations or environments, Sakura should have addressed the lady as *puan* (Mrs.).

(3) Indirectness and Politeness

Another area where foreign students often struggle is with the use of an indirect style of communication. Malay speakers frequently employ a highly indirect form of communication. As a result, learners often find it difficult to interpret the subtle and indirect nature of Malay communication. It is uncommon for speakers to say “no.” For instance, during cultural activities, one participant heard someone ask her friend whether she wanted to join her jogging:

A: *Awak nak ikut saya jogging?* (Do you want to join me for a jog?)

B: *Mungkin lain kali.* (May be next time.)

In this situation, this study found that participants were unable to understand why the answer is “*Mungkin lain kali.*” (Maybe next time). Hence, it has to be explained that she might be busy or have other plans. To reply to the question, she just says “*Mungkin lain kali.*” (May be next time.) or “*Nanti saya cuba.*” (I will try.). Sometimes the answer

can be “*saya tak pasti*.” (I am not sure.). In this case, the Malay speaker hasn’t said “no” outright, but has signaled that they are unlikely to join, without causing discomfort or a feeling of rejection for the invitation. This directness is designed to avoid confrontation and maintain harmony in relationships, or it can be seen as rude, instead. For Malay learners, this can be confusing, especially if they come from cultures where directness is valued. Learners often find it hard to interpret the indirect and subtle nature of Malay communication. Learners might misinterpret the phrase “ *mungkin lain kali*.” or “*Saya tidak pasti*.” as a definite answer, not realizing that it is a polite way of saying “no” or avoiding a direct refusal.

Whilst the phrase “*Nanti saya cuba*,” implies that the person may not be able to fulfil the request, but they are open to trying. It is a way of keeping the door open while not committing to anything definitive. It also softens the potential negative response, as it suggests willingness, even if some doubt remains. The phrase implies that the speaker is not saying “no” but simply deferring the decision. In contrast, a few of them were able to understand, most likely because they had lived in Malaysia and adapted to the local community.

Malays generally prefer a more subtle approach to navigating social dynamics, ensuring that no one feels embarrassed, disrespected, or openly criticized. This helps maintain positive relationships and a sense of collective harmony.

(4) Religion and Cultural Sensitivity

Religion plays a central role in the daily lives of many Malaysians, shaping spiritual practices, social interactions, cultural expressions, and language. For foreign students learning Malay, understanding the influence of religion is crucial for fully immersing themselves in the

language's cultural context. One key example of this intersection is the mosque, which functions not only as a place of worship but also as a community hub. Within the Malay community, mosques serve multiple roles: sites for prayer, social events, education, community outreach, and conflict resolution. For non-Muslim students, visiting a mosque offers an opportunity to observe Islamic rituals and practices firsthand and also to gain insight into their broader social and cultural significance. These visits often challenge misconceptions, revealing that mosques are inclusive spaces where diverse community members gather for worship, lectures, charity, and other activities.

Experiential visits allow students to engage in discussions about Islamic beliefs, rituals, and values, and to compare them with their own religious traditions. Such exchanges highlight common themes such as charity, community support, and ritual significance, fostering mutual understanding and respect among people of different faiths. Through these experiences, students develop cultural competence and a deeper appreciation of Malaysia's diversity, enhancing both their language learning and their ability to navigate cross-cultural interactions.

A visit to the Putrajaya Mosque, which is located in Malaysia's administrative capital, exemplifies this approach. Chosen for its architectural and cultural significance, the mosque features pink domes reflecting Malay, Persian, and Middle Eastern influences. The program includes orientation on mosque etiquette, guided tours, and informal interactions led by mosque guides. Firstly, participants are briefed on mosque etiquette, dress code, and the objectives of the visit. Visitors, regardless of their background, are required to wear robes provided by the mosque as part of the standard modesty guidelines observed in Islamic sacred spaces. Because visitors may arrive in clothing that does not meet the expected level of modesty, the robes serve as a practical way to maintain decorum and sensitivity toward worshippers. This

Chapter 1

Understanding Cultural Disparities in Communication: Lessons Learned from Teaching Malay as a Foreign Language

practice reflects cultural etiquette and respect for the sanctity of the mosque, rather than any expectation of religious conformity.

This session also provided a brief overview of Islamic worship and cultural practices. Then, participants were led through the main prayer hall, courtyard, and ancillary facilities. The explanations focused on the functions of different spaces, the symbolism of the architectural features, and the role of mosques as centers for education and community service. Participants engaged in informal dialogue with mosque volunteers and staff, clarifying their misconceptions and fostering intercultural empathy.

Post-visit reflections revealed that students gained new perspectives on Islamic practices and values, often replacing misconceptions shaped by media narratives. For example, the reflections of Russian participants illustrated this transformation:

“Mula-mula saya takut nak masuk masjid. Sebab saya non-muslim. Tapi bila datang sini, rasa seronok. Saya tau orang pergi masjid bukan hanya untuk sembahyang, tapi untuk belajar juga.” (I used to feel afraid to enter a mosque because I am not a Muslim. But when I came here, I felt happy. I realized that people come to the mosque not only for prayer, but also to learn.)

A participant from Taiwan said:

“Saya fikir masjid hanya untuk orang Islam, rupanya semua orang boleh... dan banyak yang saya boleh belajar.” (I thought the mosque was only for Muslims, but it turns out that everyone is welcome... and there is so much I can learn.)

Reflections of a participant from Australia:

“Saya nampak kanak-kanak melukis... kaligrafi... bagus. I thought... masjid is only for pray [sic].” (I saw many children drawing calligraphy... it was nice. I thought the mosque was only for praying.)

Another remarked on the explanation of gender separation in prayer, understanding it as a matter of focus and respect rather than inequality. Such visits demonstrate the potential of integrating cultural and religious learning into language education. By combining observation, dialogue, and reflection, foreign students develop not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural sensitivity, a nuanced understanding of Malaysian society, and an appreciation of the ways religion shapes communication, behavior, and social norms.

8. Conclusion

Teaching Malay as a foreign language offers a unique opportunity not only to impart linguistic knowledge but also to immerse students in the rich cultural landscape of Malaysia. Over the years, instructors have gained valuable insights from their teaching experiences, highlighting both the successes and challenges encountered in helping students learn the language. These experiences often go beyond vocabulary and grammar, extending to the nuanced cultural aspects that shape communication in the Malay-speaking world. This chapter has reflected on some key insights from teaching Malay as a foreign language, with a focus on the role of culturally specific materials, cultural immersion, and the impact of language learning on students’ understanding of Malay culture and communication.

Language acquisition extends beyond the classroom; exposure to

real-life situations, interactions with native speakers, and participation in cultural activities significantly enhance the learning experience. Through the use of culturally specific materials, cultural immersion, and an emphasis on understanding communication styles, students of Malay language gain a deeper appreciation for Malay culture and its influence on social interactions. Moreover, the lessons learned in the classroom extend far beyond language acquisition, shaping students' ability to communicate effectively in real-world, cross-cultural environments. As the demand for intercultural communication continues to grow, the ability to navigate these complexities will be an essential skill for future global citizens.

References

- Abdullah Hassan. 2008. *Pedagogi Bahasa Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: PTS Sdn. Bhd.
- Ahmad Fuad Mat Hassan, Khairul Faiz Alimi, Hishamudin Isam, and Mashetoh Abd Mutalib. 2020. Amalan Kesantunan Berbahasa dalam Komunikasi Formal dan Tidak Formal dalam Kalangan Pelajar Universiti, Universiti Utara Malaysia. *Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 36(4), 410–427
- Amat Juhari Moain. 2001. Nilai rasa dalam bahasa Melayu. *Monograf bahasa, sastera dan budaya Melayu*, 6, 11–18.
- Anzhelika Solodka, Svitlana Zaskaleta, Tetiana Moroz, and Olha Demianenko. 2021. Sheltered Instructional Observational Protocol Model in Digital Teaching EFL Students in Ukraine. *Arab World English Journal*, Special Issue on Covid 19 Challenges April 2021, 21–36. <<https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/covid.2>>
- Awang Sariyan. 2007. *Santun Berbahasa*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

- Brown, P. and C. S. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gani, M. P. and M. J. A. Talib. 2009. *Evolution of the Malay Language*. Singapore: Asas '50 Press.
- Gudykunst, W. B. and Y. Y. Kim. 2003. *Communicating with Strangers: An Approach to Intercultural Communication*. 4th Edition, Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Gustavsson, I. 2008. *The Benefits of Second Language Teaching Methods in Secondary School: A Gendered Perspective*. Sweden: Mid Sweden University.
- Hall, Edward T. 1976. *Beyond Culture*. <<https://slredglobalhealth.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/beyond-culture.pdf>> (accessed on October 15, 2024).
- Hu, Song. 2014. Cross-cultural Communication and Foreign Language Teaching. *Proceedings of the 2014 International Conference on Education Technology and Social Science, January 2014*. <10.2991/icetss-14.2014.54>.
- Krashen, S. D. 1981. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon Press Inc.
- Liddicoat, Anthony J. and Angela Scarino. 2013. *Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lightbown, P. M. and N. Spada. 2006. *How Languages are Learned* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McConachy, Troy. 2018. *Developing Intercultural Perspectives on Language Use: Exploring Pragmatics and Culture in Foreign Language Learning*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Morgan, C. and P. Neil. 2001. *Teaching Modern Foreign Languages: A Handbook for Teachers*. London: Kogan Page Ltd.
- Ostler, N. 2005. *Empires of the Word: A Language History of the World*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Chapter 1

Understanding Cultural Disparities in Communication: Lessons Learned from Teaching Malay as a Foreign Language

- Piller, I. 2011. *Intercultural Communication: A Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd.
- Richards, J. C. and T. S. Rodgers. 2001. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watson, J. K. P. 1980. Cultural Pluralism, Nation-Building and Educational Policies in Peninsular Malaysia. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 1(2), 155–174.

Contributors

1. Dr. Junaini Kasdan and Ms. Anis Shahira Shamsuri



Chapter 1. Understanding Cultural Disparities in Communication: Lessons Learned from Teaching Malay as a Foreign Language

Dr. Junaini Kasdan is Deputy Director at the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA) at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Adjunct Professor at the Faculty of Humanities (FIB) at Universitas Airlangga (UNAIR), Surabaya, Indonesia. Her research interests include applied linguistics, semantics, terminology, lexicology, teaching Malay as a foreign language, and philology.



Anis Shahira Shamsuri is a postgraduate student at the Center for Research in Language and Linguistics, UKM. Her research interests include applied linguistics and teaching Malay as a foreign language.