

Article

Factors Influencing Malays as a Second Language Learning in Essay Writing: A case study of Iban Ethnic Students in Sarawak, Malaysia

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Abstract: Second language learners, such as Iban students studying Malay, often face significant challenges in essay writing due to the proficiency gap between their first language and Malay. The lack of daily use of Malay further complicates their ability to grasp complex sentence structures and vocabulary, making essay writing a particularly difficult task for non-native speakers. This study aims to identify the factors influencing the learning of Malay as a second language in essay writing among Iban ethnic students. The study employed a qualitative research approach, involving semi-structured interviews with eight primary school Malay language teachers in the Kapit district of Sarawak. The data were analysed thematically using *Nvivo 12* software. The findings identified three main factors: (i) mother tongue factors influence, (ii) linguistic environment factors influence, and (iii) psychological factors influence. As a result, the process of second language acquisition in educational settings requires deliberate and structured approaches, rather than relying on the natural language development seen with a first language. This study offers useful perspectives for both researchers and educators to refine teaching methods, focusing on more targeted strategies that can better support Iban students in improving their proficiency in Malay as a second language.

Keywords: Second language learning; essay writing; non-native speakers; Iban ethnic students; primary school

Introduction

In Malaysia, the diversity of ethnic groups presents a significant challenge in second language learning, particularly for students who have limited exposure to the Malay language outside the classroom (Said et al., 2019). Sarawak, home to over 40 sub-ethnic groups, including the Iban, highlights the complexity of this issue. Each group uses its own indigenous language, making the acquisition of Malay as a second language more complex for these communities. Within Malaysia's education system, the Malay language is a compulsory subject under the *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah* (KSSR) and *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah* (KSSM) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2018). This curriculum emphasizes four essential skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these, writing skills are particularly challenging, especially for non-native speakers like Iban students, whose primary language is distinct from Malay.

Mastering essay writing is especially difficult for Iban ethnic students due to limited daily exposure to Malay, compounded by the linguistic and psychological barriers posed by their indigenous language and cultural environment (Ali et al., 2022; Singi & Mahamod, 2019; Nahar, 2020). Existing studies have highlighted the difficulties faced by non-native speakers in general but have not sufficiently addressed the unique intersection of mother tongue influence, linguistic environment, and psychological factors that impact Iban students specifically. This study seeks to fill this gap by examining how these combined factors influence the learning of Malay as a second language in essay writing for Iban students. This research aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges these students face and offer insights for improving Malay language education for minority ethnic groups in Malaysia. Therefore, the objective of this research is to identify the factors influencing the learning of Malay essay writing as a second language among Iban ethnic students, addressing the research question: What are the factors influencing the learning of Malay essay writing as a second language among Iban ethnic students?

Literature Review

1. Influence of Mother Tongue

Learning Malay as a second language presents considerable challenges for non-native students, particularly due to the differences in linguistic structure and usage between their native languages and Malay. Second language acquisition begins after individuals have already developed their first language (Krashen, 1981; Ellis 1994). In Malaysia, this distinction is crucial; while native Malay speakers enrich their first language, non-native learners, such as Iban students, must develop habits to acquire a new set of linguistic skills (Ali et al., 2022). Research into Tamil students learning English as a second language by (Thanjappan et al., 2023) highlights how first language (L1) interference impacts second language (L2) writing. The study found that Tamil-speaking students in Perak often transferred linguistic features from Tamil to English, leading to errors in punctuation, verb usage, and pronoun reference. These issues, similar to those experienced by Malay language learners, suggest that the linguistic interference from native languages like Iban may affect Malay essay writing in comparable ways. However, studies specifically addressing the influence of mother tongue on Malay essay writing among non-native ethnic groups such as the Iban remain sparse, leaving a gap in understanding how linguistic interference from native languages affects second language acquisition.

2. Psycholinguistic Factors

Psycholinguistic factors, including motivation, interest, and attitude, significantly influence second language acquisition. Studies on Indian students in primary schools by (Bakthaselvan et al., 2022; Shamugam, & Mohamad Nasri, 2021) revealed that positive attitudes and high motivation are crucial in overcoming the difficulties of learning Malay. However, despite their valuable insights, these studies on Indian students, leaving out other significant non-native groups such as the Iban and Bidayuh. Similarly, (Guo et al., 2021) research on Hong Kong students learning English highlighted how psycholinguistic factors like self-regulation correlate with language proficiency. Similarly, (Ahmed, 2019) discusses how affective barriers such as anxiety and lack of confidence further worsen these linguistic challenges for non-native learners, as seen in Iban students facing difficulties in Malay essay writing. Although this research is relevant, it primarily discusses English learners, and its applicability to Malay as a second language, particularly for ethnic minorities in Malaysia, remains unexplored. These gaps underscore the need for further investigation into how similar factors influence Iban students learning Malay.

3. Linguistic Environment Factors

The linguistic environment plays an integral role in second language acquisition. In Sarawak, where over 40 languages are spoken, Malay competes with a wide variety of indigenous languages (Mis, 2022). This environment presents unique challenges for Iban students, as they navigate between their native languages and Malay. Prior studies on Chinese students, such as those by (Hasanah & Rozita, 2021; Khoo & Shaid, 2021) found that linguistic interference from their native languages impedes their morphological proficiency

in Malay. While these findings offer valuable insights, they focus predominantly on Chinese students, leaving a gap in research on how the multilingual environment in Sarawak affects Iban students' learning of Malay. Furthermore, studies like those by (Muhammadin et al., 2023; Ismail & Zakaria, 2019) indicate that extralinguistic factors, such as exposure to the target language, also significantly influence proficiency, yet they do not specifically address the Sarawak context or its indigenous communities. Studies by (Cingile et al., 2024) emphasize that rural settings with limited exposure to the target language contribute significantly to the slow development of second language skills

4. Methodological Gaps and Need for Further Research

Most of the research on second language learning in Malaysia has focused on non-native students from Indian and Chinese backgrounds, as highlighted by studies from (Ganesan & Wan Mohammad, 2021; Shamugam, & Mohamad Nasri, 2021). While these studies provide useful data on psycholinguistic and extralinguistic factors, they often lack qualitative depth in examining the unique cultural and linguistic challenges faced by other ethnic groups, such as the Iban. Moreover, research on Iban students, such as those by (Ahoi & Mohammad Nasri, 2021; Robin et al., 2020), though valuable, has not extensively analyzed the combined impact of mother tongue, psycholinguistic aspects, and linguistic environment on essay writing proficiency. These gaps indicate a need for a more comprehensive approach to studying how these factors interact and influence second language acquisition among Iban students, particularly in essay writing. In conclusion, the literature reveals substantial research on Malay as a second language among non-native students, but gaps remain, especially concerning ethnic minorities such as the Iban in Sarawak. While studies have explored psycholinguistic and extralinguistic factors, most focus on Indian and Chinese students and lack a detailed analysis of the multilingual environment's effects on learning Malay. This study aims to fill these gaps by examining how the mother tongue, linguistic environment, and psychological factors collectively influence Malay essay writing proficiency among Iban students, offering a more holistic understanding of second language acquisition.

Methodology

1. Study Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is deemed the most suitable for exploring the experiences and perspectives of Malay language teachers. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing Malay as a second language learning in essay writing among Iban ethnic students in Sarawak. Given that qualitative research is centred around capturing detailed insights from participants (deMarrais et al., 2024), this approach provides the flexibility needed to interpret the complex dynamics of linguistic, psychological, and mother tongue influence factors affecting Iban students' essay writing skills. The semi-structured interview method supports this exploration by providing a structured yet open-ended platform for teachers to share their perspectives on these influencing factors, which would be difficult to quantify using a quantitative approach.

2. Research Instrument

The primary instrument employed in this study is a semi-structured interview protocol, designed specifically to gather nuanced information from eight Malay language teachers. Semi-structured interviews allow the flexibility to explore unanticipated insights while ensuring the core topics are covered. To enhance the validity and reliability of the instrument, the interview questions were validated by three experts in qualitative research. The complete interview protocol is available in the appendix to ensure transparency and credibility.

3. Study Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants for this study. This method ensures that participants are specifically chosen based on their ability to provide rich, relevant information. The inclusion criteria for this study required participants to have a minimum of five years of teaching experience in the Malay language

and currently be teaching second-grade classes. The five-year experience threshold was selected to ensure that teachers had adequate professional exposure to the curriculum and challenges in teaching Malay as a second language, thus providing more informed perspectives. Eight Malay language teachers from the Kapit district were selected based on these criteria. For confidentiality purposes, participants are referred to as *Peserta Kajian Guru* (PKG).

4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was employed to analyze the data, supported by Nvivo 12 software to systematically code and categorize responses. The analysis followed several key steps: initial coding of interview transcripts, identifying recurring themes, and organizing codes into coherent categories. Examples of themes that emerged include "mother tongue influence," "psychological factors," and "linguistic factors." To ensure the reliability of the coding process, peer review was conducted, and Cohen's Kappa analysis was employed to measure agreement between coders, achieving consensus on the identified themes.

Findings

These findings are based on the analysis of interview transcripts conducted with eight PKG. Analysing the interview transcript data with PKG has yielded several key findings that encapsulate the true essence of this study's findings. The analysis of interview transcript data has identified three main factors influencing the learning of Malay essay writing among Iban ethnic students. These factors encompass the influence of the mother tongue, linguistic environment, and psychological factors.

1. Influence of the Mother Tongue

The mother tongue is the first language informally learned by an individual compared to the second language learned informally through interactions in a community using the second language or formally in the classroom. Based on the interview findings, the influence of the mother tongue is the most dominant factor affecting the learning of Malay essay writing among Iban ethnic students. The influence of the mother tongue is observed when there is a mixing of vocabulary from the mother tongue, leading students to struggle generating ideas effectively in their essays. Additionally, students are often seen using their mother tongue more frequently than Malay when interacting in the classroom. This situation negatively impacts the learning of Malay essay writing among Iban ethnic students. These findings are elucidated through the interview transcript of study participants PKG1, PKG2, PKG3, PKG4, PKG5, PKG6, PKG7, and PKG8 as follows:

"Sometimes, their language usage is mixed when they communicate in BM class, which also affects their writing. For example, the word "jalan" becomes "jalai", and "gelap" becomes "petang." (PKG1)

"Due to their frequent use of Iban language in conversation, there are instances where Iban words appear in their writing, causing vocabulary mixing." (PKG2)

"They often incorporate Iban language into their writing, which complicates matters, especially for weaker students." (PKG3)

"Their vocabulary and spelling skills are notably weak. They tend to spell using Iban whenever there's a word they struggle with in Malay." (PKG4)

"In class, when teachers speak Malay, some students respond in Iban, leading to poor writing skills due to their lack of mastery in spoken Malay. This significantly impacts their writing." (PKG5)

"Some students face challenges with vocabulary because they prefer using Iban in their Malay writing." (PKG6)

"Yes, there are occasional language mixing issues that disturb their writing process." (PKG7)

"Most of them are of Iban descent, and the majority in the class are Iban students. Since Iban is their primary language, and with subjects like Iban language in school, it affects their proficiency in Malay." (PKG8).

2. Linguistic Environment Factors

The linguistic environment plays a crucial role in the acquisition of a second language, especially among non-native speakers. However, among Iban ethnic students, these linguistic environment factors also influence the learning of Malay essay writing. This situation arises from the students' language background and their residential environment, which limits their exposure to the use of Malay language and affects their learning in school. Additionally, students are exposed to influences from external languages such as Indonesian, encountered through platforms like *YouTUBE* and *TikTok*. This finding is supported by interview transcripts of study participants PKG1, PKG2, PKG4, PKG 5, PKG7, and PKG8 such as the following:

"They communicate in the classroom using the Iban language... so their environment, which frequently uses the Iban language, significantly contributes to issues in learning the Malay language." (PKG1)

"I believe it affects them because their living environment is mostly in longhouse areas... so there is little interaction with the Malay community." (PKG2)

"Now they are heavily influenced by external languages... I see them using Indonesian language a lot... especially since they are exposed to current trends on TikTok and YouTube." (PKG4)

"For rural students, especially among the Iban ethnic group... almost all skills are not fully mastered due to the home environment which does not encourage the use of Malay language." (PKG5)

"Sometimes they use Iban language in their writing... there is also some use of Indonesian language." (PKG6)

"Sometimes they also use Bahasa Indonesia and many students from longhouses listen to Indonesian songs." (PKG7)

"I see that their environment indeed affects their mastery of the Malay language because when there is native language learning in school... even Kenyah students speak Iban, and the Sihan and Beketan students do the same." (PKG8)

3. Psychological Factors

Psychological factors such as interest and motivation also play a role in influencing the mastery of essay writing among Iban ethnic students. The influence of interest is a significant factor in determining a student's proficiency in mastering skills in the Malay language. From the interview findings, several aspects have been identified that impact students' interest, thereby contributing to the limited mastery of essay writing among Iban students. These include the perceived complexity of Malay language writing rules, students limited critical thinking skills, and incomplete mastery of reading skills. This finding is supported by interview transcripts as follows:

Student Interest in Learning Malay Language

The influence of interest is a significant factor affecting a student's mastery of a particular skill in the Malay language. Through interview findings, several aspects have been identified that impact student interest, contributing to the challenge faced by Iban ethnic students in mastering Malay essay writing. These include the complexity of Malay language rules in writing, students' limited proficiency in critical thinking, and incomplete mastery of reading skills. This conclusion is supported by interview transcripts of study participant PKG1, PKG2, PKG5, PKG6, and PKG8 as follows:

"Writing essays poses a significant challenge for them... so even constructing sentences remains somewhat difficult. This makes them less interested in writing." (PKG1)

"If students fall into the category of weak readers... they tend to be less interested in Malay Language Education, especially in writing, because they find it difficult and this reduces their interest." (PKG2)

"When it comes to essay writing, I observe that they seem less interested because they avoid writing and are reluctant to think." (PKG5)

"Some are also disinterested because they have a weak mastery level... especially those who cannot read." (PKG6)

"It can be said they lack interest because they do not fully grasp the language, like in speaking and reading, they have not mastered... so when it comes to writing, they face difficulties." (PKG8)

Student Motivation in Learning

The mastery of essay writing among Iban ethnic students is also influenced by their motivation in learning Malay language. Findings from interviews indicate several aspects affecting students' motivation in learning Malay essay writing. Among the identified aspects are the lack of emphasis on learning convenience by parents and students' perception that they can succeed in life without mastering Malay language. This finding is supported by interview transcripts of study participant PKG3, PKG4, PKG5, PKG6, and PKG 8 such as the following:

"In terms of preparing their school needs such as stationery, books, and learning materials used... some cannot afford to buy them, and this situation leads to a lack of motivation for learning." (PKG3)

"One of my students once told me 'Teacher, we don't need to study Malay language diligently because even Chinese people can find jobs among Ibans and succeed in business' (in Iban language) ... their perception is that they can succeed without learning Malay language. That's what they believe." (PKG4)

"When it comes to their school facilities, I see that many necessities like stationery and books are not provided. It seems like parents do not prioritize their children's education, and this is one reason their children are left behind, affecting their motivation in learning." (PKG5)

"They go to school just to stay in the hostel, and if you ask them, they don't want to come to school, but they are forced to. This situation affects their motivation in learning, not only in BM but also in other subjects." (PKG6)

"The provision of learning materials is quite lacking due to economic factors, and this somewhat affects their motivation in learning as well." (PKG8)

In summary, the findings of this study indicate that there are three primary factors influencing the learning of Malay essay writing among Iban ethnic students: the influence of their native language, linguistic environment, and psychological factors. The influence of the native language emerged as the most dominant factor, with students often mixing Iban vocabulary in their writing. The linguistic environment factor highlighted a lack of exposure to Malay outside the classroom. Additionally, psychological factors such as interest and motivation also play a crucial role, as students with low interest and motivation tend to struggle with learning essay writing. Therefore, intervention measures and strategies focusing on enhancing students' interest and motivation, as well as increasing exposure to Malay language, are necessary to address these challenges.

Discussion

The analysis of findings clearly indicates that factors such as the influence of the mother tongue, linguistic environment, and psychological factors significantly impact the learning of Malay essay writing as a second language, particularly among Iban ethnic students. The proficiency challenges in essay writing among Iban students stem largely from their reliance on their mother tongue, which restricts their vocabulary mastery in

Malay. This limitation hampers their ability to generate and develop ideas effectively, resulting in lower-quality essays. To address this issue, teachers need to adapt their instructional strategies by implementing approaches that emphasize building students' Malay vocabulary and enhancing their idea generation skills. As Ali et al. (2022) suggest, teaching practices should be engaging and specifically tailored to meet the needs of non-native speakers to improve their essay writing capabilities.

Based on the findings of mother tongue interference, teachers should focus on enhancing vocabulary acquisition through engaging and innovative methods. One effective approach is project-based learning (PBL), as demonstrated by Tholibon et al. (2022), which promotes active learning by immersing students in real-life tasks that encourage the application of new vocabulary. Similarly, technology can play a pivotal role in enhancing learning. The use of digital technology in writing education, as explored by Kee et al. (2021), highlights that integrating technology into the classroom significantly improves student engagement and writing proficiency. Teachers can leverage tools such as social media platforms and online collaborative tools like *Google Docs* to facilitate vocabulary practice in a more interactive and engaging manner. Furthermore, (Fälth & Selenius, 2024) found that teachers' positive perceptions of digital technology enhance its effectiveness in supporting learning, especially in inclusive settings. By using such technology, teachers can offer students interactive opportunities to expand their vocabulary and improve their essay writing skills.

The linguistic environment plays a crucial role in second language acquisition, particularly for students from linguistically isolated communities. The study findings reveal that Iban students from longhouse areas have less exposure to Malay compared to their peers who live closer to Malay-speaking communities. To counter this, teachers should design instructional strategies that promote language learning within social contexts, creating opportunities for students to use Malay in more authentic settings. One promising approach is the flipped classroom model, as suggested by (Anusia & Munnisvaran, 2023; Masri & Mahamod, 2021; Kaviza, 2020; Emparan et al., 2019). This method shifts some of the learning responsibility to students' homes, encouraging them to practice Malay at home, which supplements their school-based learning. Teachers can use flipped classroom strategies to assign Malay language tasks or videos as homework, which students complete before class, allowing for more interactive, language-rich activities during school hours.

Psychological factors such as low interest and motivation pose additional challenges for Iban students in learning Malay. These students perceive the language as difficult due to its grammatical rules and cognitive demands, and some feel that mastering Malay is not essential for future success. To address these motivational barriers, teachers need to create a more engaging and supportive learning environment. This can be achieved by incorporating learner-centred teaching methods that are designed to spark interest in Malay language learning. Teachers might introduce interactive and culturally relevant materials that connect the Malay language to the students' own experiences and backgrounds, helping them see the value of mastering the language. Moreover, a lack of basic learning facilities contributes to low motivation, as noted in the study findings. Teachers should work closely with schools and communities to ensure that adequate resources, such as textbooks and technology, are available to support students' learning. According to recommendations by (Marzni & Jamil, 2020; Chew & Sulong, 2019), teachers must align their teaching methods with the specific needs and contexts of their students to foster a deeper interest in Malay. This could involve differentiated instruction, where teachers provide different levels of support and tasks depending on students' skill levels, helping to build confidence and competence in essay writing.

This discussion highlights the multifaceted factors that affect Iban students in learning Malay essay writing as a second language, underscoring the need for tailored pedagogical strategies. To improve educational outcomes, teachers must adapt their instructional practices to focus on vocabulary development, language exposure, and motivation enhancement. By employing innovative approaches such as project-based learning, flipped classrooms, and learner-centred methods, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that caters to the unique needs of Iban students. These strategies not only improve language proficiency but also contribute to their overall academic achievements and future success.

Conclusion

This study findings offer practical insights for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders in improving the learning experience for Iban students in mastering Malay as a second language, particularly in essay writing. To foster better learning outcomes, teachers are encouraged to transition from traditional teaching methods to more interactive, student-centred approaches that actively engage students. Specific strategies include incorporating language games, collaborative group activities, and the use of digital tools to enhance student participation and interest in the learning process. Teachers should also consider integrating flipped classroom models or blended learning techniques that allow students to engage with Malay language materials outside of class, providing additional exposure and practice. Additionally, the classroom environment should be designed to be linguistically rich, encouraging regular use of Malay in both formal and informal settings. For example, teachers can create language zones or Malay-only conversation areas in the classroom and collaborate with parents to support Malay language use at home. This is especially crucial for Iban students, who may have limited exposure to Malay outside the school. By ensuring a supportive linguistic environment, both inside and outside of the classroom, students will have more opportunities to practice and develop fluency.

Policymakers should focus on developing programs and resources that cater specifically to non-native Malay speakers, such as Iban students. This could involve funding for teacher training programs that equip educators with the skills to use technology effectively in language instruction and to design culturally relevant materials. Furthermore, policies that promote community involvement in supporting second language learning could greatly benefit students. This might include initiatives that involve parents and local leaders in encouraging the use of Malay in everyday interactions or creating local language immersion programs. Beyond the specific context of Iban students, the findings of this study have implications for second language acquisition in Malaysia and internationally. The strategies highlighted, such as integrating technology and creating a linguistically supportive environment, are applicable to other non-native language learners globally. The need for culturally sensitive and student-centred approaches is relevant across diverse learning contexts, emphasizing the importance of tailoring language instruction to meet the needs of specific linguistic groups. Finally, this study underscores the importance of developing teaching materials and modules that are not only academically rigorous but also culturally and linguistically appropriate for non-native speakers. Future research should focus on creating detailed instructional models that incorporate interactive modules and structured exercises, providing teachers with clear guidelines for enhancing language proficiency. By addressing these factors, there can be a significant improvement in the overall quality of Malay language teaching, benefiting both educators and students and potentially contributing to broader educational outcomes in multilingual environments.

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