

## Mastery of Malay Language Fruit Nouns among SJK (T) Students

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### Abstract

This study focuses on Malay language mastery among pre-schooling children in SJK(T) schools. In this study, the researcher has utilized the Monitor Model (1985) of second-language acquisition coined by Stephen Krashen. The study scope is limited to the mastery of vocabulary that focuses on fruit nouns. A total of ten students enrolled in the preschool Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan (Tamil) Serdang, Selangor were selected randomly as respondents to complete this study. The study involves pre- and post-assessment questionnaires that are used as research instruments. Pre-assessments are the assessments that were conducted before the stated topic was taught in class, whereas post-assessments are the assessments conducted after the stated topic was taught. The purpose of these two assessments are to compare the level of vocabulary mastery among the children. The data obtained from the pre- and post-assessment questionnaires will be transcribed manually into tables, graphs and pie charts for data visualization. The raw data will then be analyzed descriptively. The results of this study have shown that Malay language mastery among preschool children in SJK(T) were good, apart from one child. This was due to a range of factors including parenting, teaching and learning style, and the child's emotional state. Although the students showed poor mastery in vocabulary in the pre-assessment, they demonstrated an improvement after the topic was taught.

**Keywords:** Malay Language Mastery, Vocabulary, Preschool Children, Pre- And Post-Assessment Questionnaires

### Introduction

The Malay language is a secondary language learned by Indian students in school. In light of this, Indian SJK(T) (Malaysian Tamil Vernacular Primary Schools) students need to learn the Malay language from an early stage of their education. The method of mastery used for primary and secondary languages contrast greatly. Primary language mastery is acquired through continuous exposure, and the process occurs unintentionally without planning. Under subconscious conditions, this method of mastery involves mental processes that are organic in nature. Contrastingly, secondary language mastery is typically acquired through

formal education in schooling. An individual does not require a formal tutor to converse fluently in their primary language. Raminah & Rahim (1985) describe mastery as the ability to interpret symbols and knowledge systems whether in oral or textual forms. However, an individual may not exhibit a similar mastery even after learning a secondary language formally for several years (Zulkifley, 2005).

According to Zamri (2008), the aspect of learning a second language plays an important role in the process of learning the Malay language, especially among Indian students in SJK(T) schools. This aspect ensures Indian students that learn Malay as a secondary language achieve a level of mastery that is satisfactory. This is because primary and secondary language speakers represent two different groups of speakers. The differences arise from variation in methodology and style of mastery in teaching grammatical aspects of a language.

Malaysian children can converse in the Malay language, but children that are not native speakers of the Malay language need to strengthen their linguistic skills through language acquisition. A good mastery of the language allows them to interact with the Malay-speaking society in a proper, accurate and effective manner. According to Valdes & Figueroa (1994), an individual with a good mastery of a language can put forth questions, understand messages clearly, read materials, test ideas and identify challenges in specific situations using the target language. At this time, it was found that children do not possess a strong foundation in the mastery of the Malay language. This weak foundation will impede the progress towards proficiency and mastery of the Malay language in early, intermediate and later stages of education. This issue has been raised by Abdul (2003), who highlighted the use of the Malay language as the official language across all subjects and curriculums, be it in primary, secondary, college or university levels. Children need to be skilled in listening, speaking, reading, and writing the Malay language. If they are not skilled in the language, there is a high chance that the lack of proficiency in the language will negatively influence the child's performance in other subjects. Accordingly, every year there are several cases of intelligent children who fail to achieve a high grade in the Malay language. According to the statement by Abdul Aziz Talib, a lack of Malay language mastery will lead to negative implications to the child's performance. The stages of mastering the Malay language are crucial, yet there is a paucity of studies conducted on the mastery of Malay vocabulary among pre-schooling students of SJK(T) schools, which represents the first contact point of these students with the Malay language. Previous studies towards preschooling children mostly focused on the process of language acquisition, the age of language acquisition, children's ability in mastering a specific language and aspects of syntax. For example, a study by Abdul (2002) focused on language acquisition and the use of syntax in children, especially in preschools. Another study by Aisyah & Abdul (2013) has explored the problems associated with oral proficiency in SJK(T) preschools. These issues present gaps for researchers to conduct studies to evaluate the vocabulary strength of preschooling children in SJK(T) schools.

The researcher has also previously conducted a study on language acquisition among Malay children. The study focused on the development of language among Malay children. In the study, the sample size involved 32 Malay children covering four categories of mastery that include aspects of language acquisition and proficiency among children. The study's results indicated that the children approaching a stage of maturity in grammar have a complete and sufficient mastery of phonology, morphology, and syntax. It was found that children in the

early stages of language acquisition aged 0:5 months up to 5:0 years were able to describe Malay language rules with ease. The study's results also revealed that the proficiency of nouns in children was linked to the words often used in their households. Children will only use simple words that contrast their observations. In this process of acquisition, children always use a strategy of simplification to visualize the meanings of words that they have acquired. In an corresponding study, problems associated with mastering the Malay language among preschooling children was studied. The sample size of this study involved children studying in three preschool institutions in Serdang, Selangor. This study linked the problems associated with mastering the Malay language with the field of psycholinguistics. The results of this study proved that a child's proficiency with nouns is based on words that are often used in their households. Children will only use simple words that contrast their observations. In the process of acquisition, children always use a strategy of simplification to visualize the meanings of words that they have acquired.

### **The Position of the Malay Language as a Secondary Language among Indian Students**

The difficulty faced by students of SJK(T) schools in learning Malay as a second language cannot be denied. Beginning from preschool to primary school, it can be observed that mastering the Malay language fully is difficult. Although the time spent on teaching this secondary language is more than the time allocated for other subjects, the level of mastery is not satisfactory. The Bahasa Melayu subject in SJK (T) taught in school for the lower level is set at a minimum of 160 hours per year compared to the higher level at 128 hours a year. When compared to mainstream government listed schools, an average of 192 hours a year is recorded.

Batik (2011) commented that the unsatisfactory results from the Malay language subject can also bring negative repercussions to the entire result of the student. According to him, if a student is given the choice to decide on their favorite style of learning in Malay language education, the process of education will be more enjoyable, as the style of education is a factor that determines the mastery of the language, and hence, the examination results for the subject.

One of the possible problems is that the Malay language is taught too formally without any similarity to the use of students' primary language, which is used orally in their daily activities. Additionally, others comment that secondary languages taught in classrooms do not take into considerations cultural and social factors. It cannot be denied that the Malay language represents an important spoken language in the Malaysian society.

In accordance with its' position in the country, students are required to pass the Malay language subject in order to obtain a certificate, especially for the Malaysian School of Certificate (SPM) examination so that they are able to continue their studies to a higher level or to enter a good field of work. Unfortunately, this proves as a challenge to most students studying at Tamil vernacular schools. Since the second language is only taught in school for bare minimum hours, these students are less exposed to the spoken language and therefore, risk having poor command of the Malay language.

### Study Objective

1. To determine level of vocabulary mastery among preschooling children in SJK(T) schools
2. To analyze the level of vocabulary mastery among preschooling children in SJK(T) schools

### Literature Review

A study conducted by Abdul (2002) provides information on the acquisition and proficiency of syntaxes in children, especially those in preschools. As many as 48 children were selected as samples for this study; 25 urban children and 23 rural children in the district of Ampang, Selangor. The type of sentences studied were paragraph statements, questions, exclamations and commands. Therefore, assessments of conversations and transcripts of the preschooling children were used in this study to obtain data in the form of speech sentences. Overall, the children were able to construct a variety of Malay sentences. Specifically, paragraph statements, questions and exclamations were easier compared to commands. To conclude, Abdul (2002) discovered that the living locations, family socioeconomic status, and exposure and stimulus represented agents that influence the acquisition and proficiency of syntaxes in preschooling children.

Aisyah & Abdul (2013) conducted a study on the obstacles to oral proficiency in SJK(T) preschools. The objective of the study was to identify obstacles to oral proficiency of the Malay language among preschool students in Tamil schools according to the School Oral Assessment (PLBS), which covers aspects of grammar, intonation and tone, fluency and meaning as well as mannerism. This study also set out to identify the factors that influence the oral proficiency of preschool students in SJK(T) schools. Five students from SJK(T) Saraswathy, Sungai Buloh, Selangor were chosen as the study's respondents. The study was carried out using case studies. The results were obtained using the instruments of observation and interviews, which were then analyzed descriptively and visualized using tables and percentages. The findings of Aisyah & Abdul (2013) show that students face a challenge with simple sentence patterns like noun phrase + noun phrase. Respondents translated sentences from Tamil to Malay, which caused the sentence structure to be inversed. To summarize, the sample students did not possess sufficient reading ability, especially from the angles of pronunciation, intonation and tone. This problem arises as a result of students not having a foundation in the Malay language, and a negative attitude towards the pattern of Malay language education.

The results of Boh (2011) study titled '*Assessing book knowledge through independent reading in the earliest years: practical strategies and implications for teachers*' show that children between the age of 26 and 38 months have already acquired knowledge in literacy in accordance to their observations of the appearance of literacy during early stages of contact with books (Stage 1). However, the researcher believed that children should require at least five years before being evaluated properly on the development of their literacy. This study also suggested that teachers, parents, and tutors need to understand the appropriate age for exposure to books, to ensure that children build an emerging habit of reading.

Additionally, a psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic study by Lay & Che (2012) focused on the problems of language use and proficiency of the Malay language among ethnic Chinese

students in national schools. This study emphasized the types of problems faced by the students in using the Malay language, and the recovery steps that should be taken. A review was conducted on the reasons why ethnic Chinese parents sent their children to national schools. This study involved a questionnaire form, interviews, and observations in schools to obtain the relevant data and information. As many as 91 students from three schools in the state of Selangor, Malaysia were involved in this study. The results of this study show that ethnic Chinese students faced obstacles from the aspect of comprehension, speech, and writing. The level of proficiency of the Malay language of these students were average overall. Subsequently, Chew (2016) studied studying Malay language learning as a second language among Chinese students. The sample of the study consisted of 400 Chinese SJKC and SK pupils in the areas of Kuala Lumpur, Johor and Selangor. The research instruments consists of a questionnaire developed through Language Acquisition Theory and reading materials. The findings showed that Chinese students make mistakes in Malay language due to environmental factors, namely family, friends and teachers. The findings also suggest that the teaching and learning of Malay language in primary schools should be improved so that pupils learn Malay well and play an important role in the cultivation of reading interest among pupils, as well as correcting the mistakes made by Chinese students who learn Malay as a second language.

Parents also play an important role in adapting a second language at home. A study conducted by Dayang & Wan (2017) focused on the Malay language proficiency of Iban students and found that the environment also affected the learning of Iban students. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Chee (2016) on the motivational level of SJKC Chinese students in learning Malay using the Interaction theory by Halliday suggests that social interactions improves mastery of the second language. This proves that the environment plays an important role in the learning process.

Additionally, there are foreign studies that relate to the research area in question. For example, the studies by Lado & Fries (1957). The two researchers have conducted research on the process of learning a secondary language (L2). The influence of an individual's mother tongue causes a student to commit errors in language. A student will tend to apply aspects of their primary language (L1) to L2 while learning L2 (Lado, 1957). The author also stated that learning a language will occur easily if there is a structural pole that involves function, shape, and delivery that is similar across L1 and L2, easing the transition of languages. However, this condition will not be met if L1 and L2 if they possess functions, shapes and deliveries that are different. This situation will complicate the student's progress and lead to them committing language errors.

Besides this, Clay (1985) subsequently conducted a study in 1985 titled '*The reading behavior of five-year-old children: A research report*'. The researcher chose to conduct a long-term study to observe the development of literacy in children from the period of 12 months, that is, at the end of preschool, to their first year of primary school. The results of this study characterized the learning of reading methods by 100 5-year-old children involved in this study, who had attempted to relate visual symbols in the text to their life experiences. As a result, Clay suggested that children should be continuously exposed to a variety of texts to avoid the foundation of their knowledge from being insufficient.

## Methodology

The researcher has applied a theory coined by Stephen Krashen, that is the Monitor Model (1985). Karim & Hussin (2011) have claimed that this theory is upheld by five hypotheses. According to Barash & James (1994), the hypotheses are as follows:

- a. The Acquisition-Learning Distinction
- b. The Natural Order Hypothesis
- c. The Monitor Hypothesis
- d. The Input Hypothesis
- e. The Affective Filter Hypothesis

The Monitor Model rests on five hypotheses related to the use of secondary languages. However, the researcher is only applying the fourth hypothesis, that is, the Input Hypothesis. This is because the fourth hypothesis is more suitable for this study in assessing the mastery of pre-assessment vocabulary, that is, before the tutor teaches a theme, and post-assessment after the teaching of a theme. Additionally, this hypothesis states that input occurs during the acquisition process, not the learning process. The **Input** hypothesis demonstrates how a learner acquires a second language. According to this hypothesis, the learner improves naturally when input is given. Only then can a second-language learner improve his/her language competence.

In short, studies described that the Input Hypothesis states that a student masters a secondary language with early steps such as understanding sentential structure based on their understanding of the meanings of words. The post-assessment was done after ensuring the student is able to comprehend what was being taught in said topics. Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil Serdang was the site of this study, with a total population size of 25 students consisting of 14 female children and 11 male children. The students were ethnic Indians aged 6 years old. From the total number of students, a total of 10 students were chosen as the sample for this study. This number was deemed suitable as it reflected past studies and it was capable of reaching saturation. The materials utilized in this study were pictures of fruits. Overall, the researcher showed 10 pictures to the respondents to gauge their proficiency of their vocabulary in the Malay language. The researcher then conducted pre-assessments and post-assessments to assess their mastery. Pre-assessments are the assessments that were conducted before the stated topic was taught in class, whereas post-assessments are the assessments conducted after the stated topic was taught. The purpose of these two assessments are to compare the level of vocabulary mastery among the children. The pictures shown to the children included images of papayas, mangoes, bananas, durians, pineapples, mangosteens, starfruits, watermelons, guavas and rambutans. The data acquired from the results of the pre- and post-assessments were transcribed manually into tables, graphs and pie charts to ease the analysis. The transcribed data was then analyzed in a descriptive manner. The researcher divided the analysis into two parts; Part I describes the results of the assessments based on vocabulary while Part II describes the results of the assessments on an individual basis. In order to triangulate the data which was collected, the researcher also carried out observations on what participants went through during the assessments and treatment period.

## Findings and Discussion

### Part I: Pre-Assessment Results Based on Vocabulary

#### Pre-Assessment Results Based on Vocabulary

Diagram 1 depicts the pre-assessment results based on vocabulary. Overall, the results indicate that only one fruit noun (durian) was answered correctly by all respondents, followed by 'rambutan'. Conversely, vocabulary words that were answered most incorrectly by respondents were 'manggis', 'belimbing' and 'betik'.

#### Post-Assessment Results Based on Vocabulary

Diagram 2 illustrates the post-assessment results based on vocabulary. Overall, the fruit nouns that gained the most mastery by respondents are 'nanas', 'pisang', 'rambutan' and 'durian'. Compared to the pre-assessment, only one fruit noun was identifiable by all respondents. This indicates that the respondents were able to master vocabulary words with success.

#### Comparison Between Pre- and Post-Assessment Results Based on Vocabulary

Diagram 3 depicts the comparison between the pre- and post-assessment results based on the respondents' vocabulary mastery. According to this diagram, the level of mastery of Malay vocabulary has achieved an overall satisfactory result. The number of respondents who answered correctly for the word 'betik' increased from 2 to 6, indicating an increase of 40%. Furthermore, the word 'manggis' in the pre-assessment was only answered correctly by 4 respondents. However, in the post-assessment, 7 respondents were able to answer it correctly, reflecting a 30% improvement. The improvement in correctly answering the word 'pisang' rose from 5 to 9 respondents, showing a 40% increase in mastery. However, the number of respondents who answered correctly for the word 'durian' showed a decrease from 10 to 9 respondents, reflecting a decrease of 10% in mastery. The researcher inferred that this decrease may be due to an error caused by carelessness when answering, as the pre-assessment results peaked to 100%. Additionally, the word 'nanas' showed a 30% increase in correct responses. The word that received the most drastic increase in correct responses was 'manggis', rising 70% from 1 respondent to 8 respondents. Upon observation, it was revealed that this is due to the respondents liking the fruit, recognizing it by its English name in the pre-assessment. The word 'belimbing' showed a 40% increase in correct responses, followed by 'tembikai' showing the least increase in correct responses, that is a 10% increase from 4 to 5 respondents. The researcher observed that most of the respondents mispronounced 'tembikai' as 'tembu', showing a lack of mastery and possible interference of phonetic comprehension due to their primary language. The word 'jambu' portrayed a 30% increase in correct responses, while 'rambutan' showed the least increase in correct responses, increasing only 10% from 8 to 9 respondents. Though the increase in correct responses is similar for 'rambutan' and 'tembikai', 'rambutan' had more correct respondents because it may be deemed as iconic, hence recognizable to the participants.

### Part II: Individual Assessment Results

#### Individual Pre-Assessment Results

Diagram 4 highlights the individual results of the pre-assessment. Overall, the results were not satisfactory because respondents were unable to respond correctly to most items. According to the diagram, only one respondent, R2 could identify 9 out of 10 fruit nouns. The respondents that were less able to identify the fruit nouns accurately were R5 and R10, who

correctly responded to 2 out of 10 fruit nouns. Furthermore, R6 and R7 could identify the same number of fruit nouns, which were 6 out of 10. Meanwhile, R1, R3 and R4 could correctly identify 4 out of 10 fruit nouns. The results of the pre-assessment indicate that the mastery of Malay language has not reached a satisfactory standard.

### **Individual Post-Assessment Results**

Diagram 5 indicates the individual post-assessment results. Overall, the results reveal that respondents have achieved a level of language mastery that is satisfactory. According to the diagram, 4 respondents (R2, R3, R6 and R10) were able to correctly identify all the fruit nouns presented. Conversely, one respondent, R5, was unable to identify a single fruit noun. Insights from the observation suggested that the respondent was confused with all the pictures shown and was not able to remember all the nouns taught by the teacher. Furthermore, R8 and R9 correctly identified 6 out of 10 fruit nouns, followed by R1, R7 and R4 who were able to correctly identify 7, 6, and 5 fruit nouns respectively.

### **Individual Comparison Between Pre- and Post-Assessment Results**

Diagram 6 shows the individual comparison between pre- and post-assessment results. Overall, the post-assessment results fared better compared to the pre-assessment results. This result suggests that the respondents were able to achieve a greater mastery of fruit nouns. R2 was among the best respondents, as the respondent was able to correctly identify 9 fruit nouns in the pre-assessment, and 10 fruit nouns in the post-assessment. Conversely, R5 represented the weakest respondent, being able to correctly identify only 2 fruit nouns in the pre-assessment and 0 in the post-assessment. The observation indicated that this was due to confusion and a lack of memory in mastering new terms within the duration of the treatment period. On the other hand, R10 demonstrated the largest improvement in vocabulary between the pre- and post-assessment results, correctly identifying 2 fruit nouns in the pre-assessment and 10 in the post-assessment. Similarly, R3 was able to correctly identify all 10 of the fruit nouns in the post-assessment compared to 4 in the pre-assessment. Furthermore, R4 demonstrated a vocabulary increase of only 10% in the post-assessment compared to the pre-assessment. R7 was not able to show any improvement between the two assessments. The observation suggests that R7 did not gain any improvements in vocabulary mastery.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the level of proficiency of fruit nouns in the vocabulary of preschooling students is satisfactory with the exception of one student. The results of this study are supported by Noraniza (2006). Even though the students did not demonstrate any mastery in vocabulary in the pre-assessment, they were able to demonstrate some level of mastery after exposure in the form of teaching. In the pre-assessment, the students were unable to correctly identify the images of fruits shown due to a lack of Malay vocabulary. This occurrence was linked to the tendency for some of the students to identify the fruits by their English nouns like 'Mangosteen' and 'Papaya'. There were also students who were unable to pronounce the nouns accurately. For example, 'tembikai' was pronounced as 'tembu' and 'mangga' was pronounced as 'maangga', which is similar to how it is pronounced in Tamil. Additionally, most students were able to identify popular local fruits such as 'durian' and 'rambutan'. However, some of the students could not identify any fruits besides the durian and rambutan. Observational enquiries by the researcher indicated that their parents did not cultivate



regular purchasing of other fruits for the students, especially starfruits, guavas and papayas. As a result, these students have not been introduced and become familiarized with these fruits and thus do not have the proper exposure to the nouns of those fruits. Through the lack of exposure, the students become disadvantaged in their mastery of Malay vocabulary. Conversely, when the students were given sufficient exposure through the use of images, they were able to understand and learn the relevant nouns during the post-assessment. However, there were still some students who could not correctly identify fruit nouns in the post-assessment. Based on the observations carried out, the unstable emotional state of the students, the noisy surroundings, and the boredom and fatigue of the students caused difficulty for the students to pay attention to the teachers. The style of teaching that was not well suited to the students also weakened their mastery of vocabulary. The results of this study is supported by a study by Jamian (2002), which indicated that living environment, socioeconomic status and exposure and stimulus are important agents that influence the vocabulary mastery among preschooling students. Additionally, the results of this study are in line with the Monitor Model. The theory states that the process of input occurs during acquisition, not learning. According to Bachari (2009:83), structured activities are taught once, followed by communication activities in teaching a language. This means that students master a secondary language at the early stages involving understanding meaning before understanding structure. This theory is supported by Peng & Othman (2008) who have stated that language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing are able to be divided into two types of communication skills. According to them, the skills of learning and reading are considered as 'receiving' communication skills, while the skills of speaking and writing are categorized under 'delivering' communication skills. Therefore, to master a secondary language, students need to understand concepts first through skills such as listening and speaking before developing skills of reading and writing. Only with this mastery can they apply the concepts they have learned.

### **Contribution**

Based on the results obtained, this study is able to educate teachers on delivering suitable teaching techniques for second language learners. It is proven that second language learners need to be taught more fundamentally. This is so that they are able to understand and grasp the language in a holistic manner.

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