

# **The Mastery of English Language among Lower Secondary School Students in Malaysia: A Linguistic Analysis**

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## **Abstract**

Teaching English language is a big challenge in this country. Students are still unable to acquire or even comprehend the language even after eleven years of learning the language at the primary and secondary levels. A study conducted on 315 Form Two students' shows that the most obvious weaknesses of the students lay in the area of grammar, particularly in the aspects of morphology and syntax. Some of the problematic grammatical categories are affixes, adverbs, adjectives, plural forms, copula, subject-verb agreement. This contributes 60% of the total mistakes committed by the students. It is apparent that the attributing factor is the different grammatical structures between Malay and English. For example, Malay does not have morphological markers for adverbs (i.e. *-ly*) plurality (i.e. *-s, -es*), superlative form for adjectives (i.e. *-er, -est*) and these are some of the constraints the students face in learning the English language. Meanwhile, the different structure in syntax can be seen in relative pronouns, subject-verb agreement, copula and determiners, thus make the subject even more difficult to learn. Apart from the linguistics obstacles, the social surroundings such as attitude towards the language and the environment that do not encourage them to use the language have worsened the effort of acquiring the language.

**Keywords:** Morphology, syntax, Malay language, linguistics.

## **1.0. Introduction**

In Malaysia the teaching of English starts early, as early as kindergarten. Hence, Malaysian children would have been introduced to the English language as early as four or five years old. They would then continue to learn English until they reach form five (17 years old). Malaysia has accorded English as a second language status as stated in Article 152 and given due attention. Nevertheless, after 11 continuous years of learning English the result is less than satisfactory.

Currently, a literature component has been added in the teaching of English with the aim to make the subject more interesting. In addition, various activities are held to promote the use of English for example, choral speaking, drama competition, debate and essay writing. With various activities

conducted and teaching methodologies explored the level of proficiency of the students, especially those in the rural areas has yet to improve. The debate on students' inability to grasp the English language even after 11 years of formal teaching continues to be a hot topic among educationists. Inability to use English has even been said to be the reason of the high level of unemployment among graduates. Drastic measures have been taken by the authority and among them is changing the medium of instruction from Malay language to English in teaching science and mathematics. The question remains whether the change in policy will somehow help to improve the level of English among students (primary and secondary).

This paper is based on a research conducted in 3 schools in Johor, the southern state in Malaysia. It aims to discover the reasons for the inability of the students to be proficient in the English language even after 11 years of learning the language. As a first step, English and Malay structures will be compared to ascertain whether structural differences between the two languages that leads to the poor command of the English language. This will be followed by an analysis of the data gathered.

## **2.0. Statement of the Problem**

There are numerous studies on the state of English among students in Malaysia. Studies by Hamidah, Melor and Nor Zaini (2002), Noreiny Maarof et.al (2003) and Hazita Azman (2006) indicate that the students' weakness in English can be attributed to attitude, geographical location and ethnic. There have also been studies that focus on structural differences between the Malay and English language. It has been shown that the structural differences between the two languages interferes in the learning of English grammar and hence the acquisition of English as a second language. Marlyna, Khazriyati and Tan Kim Hua (2005) observed the occurrence of mistakes in 'subject-verb agreement' (SVA) and copula 'be'. In subject-verb agreement, problems occurred when the verb has to be inflected in the present tense to agree with the subject. The findings of the research show that 46.83% are mistakes on subject-verb agreement. The researchers contend that this is due to the fact that subject-verb agreement is not required in the Malay language.

There have also been numerous researches on the problems faced in the teaching and learning of English in schools which offer solutions to the problem but the standard of English continues to decline. Environment and pressures from examination seem to make students lost their focus. This paper aims to identify and offer explanations in relation to the students' inability to acquire English by specifically focusing on the morphological and syntactical aspects of English.

## **3.0. Historical Background of Malay Language and English**

A practical approach in dealing with the problem of students' inability to acquire English is to first look at the cause. This paper will begin by looking at the historical background of English and the Malay language.

Asmah (1985) says that we need to look at the people or speakers of the Malay language if we are to know the historical background of the language (Malay). There are various opinions as to the origin of the Malays.

The most prominent account is one that contends the Malays come from Central Asia. This is based on the artifacts found in caves in Perak. In addition there is also evidence of similarities in vocabularies from cognates that have similarities in Malay, Iban, Semambuk, Paittan languages. These similarities show that the Malays travel through sea and land and decided to reside in Peninsula Malaysia while other ethnic groups continue their journey to other places.

In terms of classification, Malay is under the umbrella of Austronesian languages. Austronesian languages are divided into four groups and they are Indonesian, Malanesian, Austronesian and Polynesian with Indonesian language forming the biggest group. Its speakers cover a wide area from Famosa in the north to Philippines islands and Maluku in the east, Timor Timor in the south and

Madagascar in the west. Malay language is grouped in this category. The Indonesia family group has the most number of languages with Malay as the most prolific in terms of development. Malay is accorded national language status in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. In Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei, the Malay language is the language of instruction in education even at tertiary level and this has directly become the catalyst to the development of the Malay language.

English, on the other hand, is classified in the Germanic language from the Indo-European group. The early history of Germanic languages is based on the reconstruction of Proto-Germanic which has evolved into German, English, Dutch, African, Yiddish and Scandinavian languages. English was influenced by two waves, first by Germanic language of the Scandinavian descent which occupied various parts of Britain in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. This was later followed by the Normans in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Germanic people occupied native speakers of Celt in Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland. The language of the invaders helped form what is later known as Old English. English was also heavily influenced by Norse, language of the Vikings in the east.

The brief historical background clearly shows that the two languages, English and Malay, are not connected and do not come from the same cognate. Therefore, there are a lot of structural differences that have been identified, especially from morphological and syntactical aspects. These differences have formed the main constraints in the inability of Malaysian students to acquire English. This paper will prove the claim based on the findings of the research conducted.

#### **4.0. Social Surrounding and the Acquisition of English**

This research was conducted in three schools in Johor, the southern state in Malaysia. A total of 315 students from urban, sub-urban and rural schools were involved. The schools involved are Sekolah Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra (STARP) an urban school, Sekolah Menengah Senai (Senai) categorized as sub-urban school and Sekolah Sultan Alaudin (SSA) as rural school. All the students are in Form Two and hence they would have had seven years of learning English. The gender and race distribution are shown in the tables below:

**Table 1:** Gender

	<b>Senai</b>	<b>STARP</b>	<b>SSA</b>
<b>Male</b>	53.5	39.1	51.9
<b>Female</b>	46.5	60.9	48.1

There are more male students compared to female students in Senai and SSA while female students form the overwhelming majority in STARP. Meanwhile, in terms of race distribution an interesting pattern emerged. In Senai, the total number of Malay and Chinese students are almost the same with 41.4% and 43.4% respectively and Indians make up the remaining 14.1%. In STARP, 60.9% are Malay, 30.0% are Chinese and 9.1% are Indians. In SSA, 100% of the students are Malays as SSA is situated in FELDA<sup>9</sup> settlement area where almost 100% of its settlers are Malays. Below is the table on race composition of the respondents:

**Table 2:** Race composition

	<b>Senai</b>	<b>STARP</b>	<b>SSA</b>
<b>Malay</b>	41.4	60.9	100.0
<b>Chinese</b>	43.4	30.0	0
<b>Indian</b>	14.1	9.1	0
<b>Others</b>	1.0	0	0

<sup>9</sup> FELDA – Felda Land Development Authority. This is a government agency that manages a palm oil plantation throughout the country. The settlers are mostly poor and almost all the settlers are Malay.

In terms of family income, majority of the respondents come from families with family income less than RM1000.00. 83% of the students in SSA are categorized in the low-income families. This is followed by Senai with 63.3% and STARP 52.8%. If family income is said to be one of the contributing factors in providing a conducive learning environment then a look at their Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah (UPSR)<sup>10</sup> results would indicate that. Based on their 2004 UPSR results, 66% students from Senai, 50% students from STARP and 70% students from SSA are considered weak in English. This is further strengthened from the fact that less than 25% attended tuition classes because of the unavailability of such services or their parents could not afford to send them to one. Combination of factors such as poverty, unavailability of tuition services, social environment, interest and attitude contribute to the students' inability to acquire English. To further determine the level of the students' weaknesses in English, two sets of Cloze Test were conducted with the 315 respondents. The aim of the test is to measure and determine whether morphological and syntactical differences between Malay and English contribute to the weaknesses and inability to acquire English.

## 5.0. Morphology, Syntax and Language Acquisition

Every language has its own unique structures. Beginning with the sound system to meaning (semantics), they form the foundation of a language. Acquiring a language implies acquiring all those structures. This paper aims to prove the claim that languages from different family groups have different language structures and this in turn, would influence the acquisition of the second/other language.

### 5.1. Malay and English morphology

Morphology is an area that studies structures, forms and categorizations of words. Discussions on Malay and English morphology will specifically touch on affixes, preposition, adverbs and superlatives. Both languages have their own affixes, preposition, adverbs and superlatives forms. We shall start with affixes. Malay has pre-fixes, suffixes, circumfixes and infixes while in English pre-fixes and suffixes are more prominent. The difference between Malay and English affixes is English affixes can indicate or produce negative meanings, for example *im-*, *dis-*, *mal-* and *ir-*. These affixes transformed the positive meanings into negative. We have *possible* to *impossible* or *obedient* to *disobedient*. This phenomenon does not exist in Malay. Analysis of the test conducted will be given below to show the basis of the contention (different language structures influenced the acquisition of the other language).

#### 5.1.1. Affixes

- |         |                 |
|---------|-----------------|
| C1. Q3. | A. dispossible  |
|         | B. impossible   |
|         | C. unpossible   |
|         | D. possible     |
| C2.Q2.  | A. care         |
|         | B. careful      |
|         | C. carelessness |
|         | D. careless     |
| C2.Q5.  | A. disobedient  |
|         | B. obedient     |
|         | C. unobedient   |
|         | D. inobedient   |

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<sup>10</sup> This is an exam which is compulsory to standard 6 pupils before they can proceed to the lower secondary school. The examination comprises of the core subjects such as Malay Language, English, Mathematics and Science.

Cloze Test / Question number	Wrong (W) / Right (R)	Senai%	STARP%	SSA%
C1/ Q3	W	47.0	45.9	40.0
	R	53.0	54.1	60.0
C2/ Q2	W	55.0	44.0	58.0
	R	45.0	56.0	42.0
C2/ Q5	W	62.0	61.5	70.6
	R	38.0	38.5	29.4

Three items to test affixes were included in Cloze Test 1 & 2 (question 3 in cloze test 1 and questions 2 & 5 in Cloze Test 2). All three items test students' understanding of the negative meanings in affixes, however, they were tested with different forms of negative affixes. The root word for question 3 is *possible*, root word for question 2 is *care* and root word for question 5 is *obedient*. Findings from the research show that the percentage for students who have given the right answer is between 53% to 60% for all three schools. For question 2, the percentage for getting the right answer is somewhat high too, between 42% to 56% for all three schools. However, for question 5 Cloze Test 2 the percentage for students getting the right answer is rather low, between 29.4% to 38.5%. The question is why are the percentage levels for getting the right answer are different for all three questions when they all tested the same aspect, namely the negative meanings in affixes? There are two possible explanations for these occurrences. Firstly, the words *impossible* and *careless* are words familiar to the students, words that they have read before and may be even have used in their writings compared to the word *disobedient*. The second explanation is students may have only acquired one or two forms of affixes with negative meanings like *im-* and *-less*. There is also the possibility that students do not know the meaning of the word *obedient* and hence would not be able to process the meaning of *disobedient*.

### 5.1.2. Prepositions

Prepositions exist in both Malay and English. However, its usage may sometimes influence by culture. The different perceptions on preposition between Malay and English speakers are shown below:

- C1. Q1.     A. at  
               B. in  
               C. on  
               D. of

Analysis of students' answers for all three schools:

Cloze/ Qs No	Wrong (W)/ Right (R)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
C1/Q1 (preposition)	W	68.0	71.0	73.5
	R	32.0	29.0	26.5

There is only one question on preposition in the cloze test. Prepositions might not be given a top priority in teaching with the assumption that prepositions are easy to understand. However, findings from our research indicate otherwise. The percentage of students who gave the right answer is only between 26.5% to 32%. This indicates that majority of students in all three schools do not understand and hence, are unable to identify its correct usage. The question on preposition is as follows:

*They can be long and thin in shape or heavy and stout looking.*

The preposition required in the above sentence is *in* but more than 70% of the students gave *of* as the answer. The students might have translated literally all the options given into Malay (for majority of the students their 1<sup>st</sup> language is Malay) and decided against *in*. The preposition *in* has two possible equivalents in Malay, namely, *dalam* or *di dalam*. Imran Ho (2000) proposes that the preposition *dalam* is conceptualized in a 3-dimensional container whereas *in* can be conceptualized in 2-dimensional situation and 3-dimensional container as shown in examples below:

1. The shirt is in the cupboard.
2. Snakes in the desert.
3. They live in Pahang.

The above sentences indicate that the prepositions *in/dalam* are conceptualized differently in Malay and English. Previous understanding that *in* is the equivalent of *dalam* in Malay has to be re-examined. Students have to be made aware of various usage and functions of English prepositions to make them better users of the language.

### 5.1.3. Plural inflections – ‘s’ and ‘es’

Inflections are affixes added to a root word to indicate a grammatical meaning. In English, *-s* is added to *book* – *books* to indicate plurality, *-ed* as in *walked* or *talked* to indicate past tense. Inflection, however, does not exist in Austronesian languages, including Malay. The absence of inflection clearly influenced students’ acquisition of English. Below are examples on inflection taken from the cloze test:

- C1. Q6.     A. ostrich  
               B. ostrichs  
               C. ostriches  
               D. ostrichies
- C2. Q1.     A. accident  
               B. accidents  
               C. accidentes  
               D. accidenties

Cloze/ Qs No	Wrong (W)/ Right (R)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
C1/Q6	W	74	73	75
	R	26	27	25
C2/Q1	W	34	42	36
	R	66	78	64

The percentage for wrong answer for question 6 is more than 70% which is rather high because this question involves the plural inflection *-es*. In English there are three markers to indicate plurality – *-s*, *-es* and *-ies*. Plural inflection becomes more complicated when it is influenced by phonological rules. For words ending with consonant /h/, its plural form is inflected with *-es*, for example *ostrich* – *ostriches*. However, this does not occur with words that end with /t/ as in *accident* – *accidents*. Therefore, students have to learn the phonological rules together with plural inflection and this will indirectly add to the difficulties that students face in learning English.

In question 1, Cloze Test 2, the percentage for right answer is higher because the plural marker tested is the conventional plural marker – ‘s’. Compared with Malay language, plurality is indicated by cardinal and ordinal words. Some examples of Malay cardinal words are *semua* (all), *sebahagian* (some) and *tiap* (every) while ordinal words are *kedua* (second), *ketiga* (third), *keempat* (fourth) and many others (Asmah 1986). Plurality can also be indicated by the pre-fix *ber-* to words of measurement, which then undergo reduplication process, for example – *berjam-jam* (hours), *berhari-hari* (days after days), *berbulan-bulan* (month after month) and many others. It is therefore clear that Malay language and English have different forms to indicate plurality which may lead to problems in students’ understanding.

### 5.1.4. Adverbs

Adverbs are easily identified in English with the *-ly* marker as the clue. It is therefore assumed that students would not face any difficulty but that is not the case as illustrated below:

- C1. Q9.     A. swift  
               B. swifts  
               C. swiftly

- C2. Q8. D. swiftless  
 A. loudly  
 B. louder  
 C. loud  
 D. loudest

Cloze Test/ Qs No	Wrong (W)/Right (R)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
C1/Q9 (adverb)	W	56	47	61
	R	44	53	39
C2/ Q8 (adverb)	W	62	46	61
	R	38	54	39

There are two questions (question 9 in Cloze Test 1 and question 8 in Cloze Test 2) on adverbs in the cloze tests. For both questions, the percentages for wrong answers are more than 55% except for STARP (urban school) which scored 47% and 46% for questions 9/C1 and 8/C2 respectively. The low percentage for right answer could be attributed to the fact that there is no category for adverb. Another possible explanation is the level of English proficiency and understanding of the students. Majority of the students might not even know the meaning of the words *swift* and *loud*. It is therefore rather difficult for them to apply the *-ly* marker for adverbs if they do not know the meaning of those words.

### 5.1.5. Superlatives

There are two questions on superlatives in the cloze tests (question 10 in both Cloze Test 1 & 2). There are two forms of superlatives, namely *-est* and *the most* for adjectives with three syllables or more. The following are questions on superlatives:

- C1. Q10. A. slower  
 B. slow  
 C. slowly  
 D. slowest  
 C2. Q10. A. sad  
 B. sadder  
 C. sadly  
 D. saddest

Cloze/ Qs No	Wrong (W)/Right (R)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
C1/Q10 (superlative)	W	68	63	74
	R	32	34	26
C2/Q10 (superlative)	W	65	66	85
	R	35	34	15

The superlative form tested in both question is *-est*. However, the students' performance is less than satisfactory as the percentage for wrong answers (for both questions) exceeds 60%. The students have been taught the form and formula to indicate superlative but they have not acquired it. A possible explanation is the different forms of superlative between Malay language and English. In Malay, superlative is indicated by words to indicate strength like *amat*, *sangat* and *paling* while English superlatives as mentioned above are signaled by *-est* and *the most*. These different structural forms might be the basis for students' misunderstanding.

### 5.2. Malay and English syntax

Apart from morphology, the other main constraint of English acquisition among Malaysian students is the differences of syntactical structures between the Malay and English language. Syntax is one of the main areas of linguistics in which sentence structures and patterns are analyzed. Although Malay and English share the same basic structure, that is 'subject-verb-object' (SVO), there are numerous other

differences between the two languages such as the usage of copula ‘be’, subject-verb agreement, articles, determiner and relative pronouns.

### 5.2.1. Copula ‘be’

In the English grammatical system, the form of copula ‘be’ is crucial in a sentence to connect the subject of a sentence with a predicate. There are three forms of copula ‘be’ for the present tense namely ‘am’, ‘is’ for the third person singular subjects and ‘are’ for plural ones as well as ‘you’. As for the past tense form ‘was’ is used for singular subjects (I, he, she, it) while ‘were’ is for plural subjects (you, we, they) including ‘you’ in the form of second person singular. This phenomenon, which does not exist in the Malay language and the complexity of the grammatical rules leads to the students’ failure to acquire the target language. There are two items in the cloze test which have been used to assess the respondents’ understanding on the usage of ‘be’ copula; question 2 in cloze 1 and question 7 in cloze 2. The first question is testing on the present tense while the second one is on the past tense form.

C1 2. Some \_\_\_\_\_ (2) huge, like the giraffe or the whale .....

- A. is
- B. are
- C. was
- D. were

C2 7. One night, when his parents \_\_\_\_\_ (7) out, he took the opportunity to play with the fire-crackers.

- A. are
- B. were
- C. is
- D. was

Cloze, Qs No	Wrong(W) / Right (R)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
1,2 (copula ‘be’)	W	65.0	56.9	80.0
	R	35.0	43.1	20.0
2, 7 (copula ‘be’)	W	63.0	50.0	54.3
	R	37.0	50.0	45.7

The findings show that the percentage of respondents who have given the right answer for question 2 Cloze Test 1 is very low, that is between 20% to 43% for all three schools. As for question 7 in cloze 2 the percentage for students getting the right answer is also considerably low, between 37% to 50%. The overall percentage indicates that more than half of the students in all three schools have failed to understand the usage of English ‘be’ copula and therefore unable to use the form correctly. The students’ failure to understand and acquire this grammatical form is due to the fact that there is no such form in the Malay language. According to Nik Safiah et.al (1997), there are two forms of copula in Malay language, that is *ialah* and *adalah*, which is similar in use to the English copula. However, the form *ialah* and *adalah* is predetermined and not essential in Malay. The various forms of the English copula which vary according to the subject and tenses have greatly contributed to the students’ failure in acquiring this grammatical rule. In a research conducted by Marlyna, Khazriyati and Tan Kim Hua (2005) it has been shown that students committed 30.8% mistakes out of 305 forms of copula ‘be’. The findings prove that copula ‘be’ is an important grammatical form and should be given serious attention.

### 5.2.2. Subject-verb-agreement

Rosniah Mustafa and Norizah Md. Noor (2003) have listed several types of common grammatical errors of English among Malaysian students and subject-verb agreement is one of those. Very often, students use the wrong form of verb in a sentence which does not agree with the subject as well as the tense such as in



\*Naim and Zaireen *cycles* to school everyday

\*The child *wash* his father’s car.

Two items are included in the cloze test to test students’ understanding on the form of subject-verb agreement. Below are examples of questions taken from the cloze tests:

C1 5. Different species \_\_\_\_\_ (5) different habits and eat different kinds of food.

- A adopt
- B adopted
- C adopts
- D is adopting

C2 4. ...that no one was \_\_\_\_\_ (4) to play with fire-crackers.

- A allow
- B allowed
- C allows
- D allowing

Cloze, Qs No	Wrong(W) / Right (R)	Senai %	STARP %	SSA %
1,5 (SVA)	S	72.0	75.2	79.6
	B	28.0	24.8	20.4
2, 4 (SVA)	S	50.0	44.5	40.0
	B	50.0	55.5	60.0

Interestingly, the findings show that the percentage of students obtaining the correct answer in Cloze Test 1 is slightly different than that in Cloze Test 2. While the percentage of correct answer is relatively low in question 5 Cloze Test 1 for all schools, between 20% to 28% only, the percentage is rather high in question 4 Cloze Test 2, between 50% to 60% students have answered correctly. The difference of achievement for this grammatical form could be attributed to the indicator ‘was’ provided in question 4 Cloze Test 2, which might have helped students to choose the correct answer ‘allowed’. Although there is an indicator in the first question indicating that the structure is the simple present tense form, students have failed to give the correct answer. The failure of acquiring subject-verb agreement form among most students is rather predictable. The absence of this structure in Malay language has significantly deterred the students from acquiring it.

### 5.2.3. Determiners

In the grammatical system of English language, indefinite and definite articles a, an, the are two of the different types of determiner that are used to premodify a head noun in a noun phrase. A research carried out by Khazriyati, Tan Kim Hua and Marlyna (2006) revealed several common errors in the use of English determiners. Among them are the failure to place the article ‘the’ before a particular place or location such as garden and department, musical instrument and computer, academic subjects such as science and a name of a country that functions as an adjective in a noun phrase. The complexity of the rules in the usage and placement of English determiners does contribute to confusion in application among learners of this target language. The cloze questions testing students’ understanding of determiners are as follows:

- C1 7. You can also find animals such as \_\_\_\_\_ (7) whale and the dolphin  
 A the  
 B a  
 C an  
 D -
- C2 3. the police issued \_\_\_\_\_ (3) warning that no one  
 A the  
 B an  
 C a  
 D -

Cloze, Qs No	Wrong(W) / Right (R)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
1,7	S	48	44	49
	B	52	56	51

Cloze, Qs No	Wrong(W) / Right (R)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
2,3	S	69	60	62
	B	31	40	38

The findings revealed a high percentage of correct answer for question 7 Cloze Test 1 ie 51% to 56%, as compared to only 31% to 40% for question 3 Cloze Test 2. The difference may be due to the nature of the subject or the head noun that follows. The subject that determines the use of determiner ‘a’ is an abstract noun i.e ‘warning’ as opposed to a concrete noun. Students may have learnt that ‘a’ is normally used for concrete countable nouns such as ‘a cat’ and ‘a flower’ as well as the failure to realize that when a noun is introduced for the first time in a text ie the presentation of new information, then the suitable determiner for it is the indefinite article ‘a’. The error comitted in the use of ‘the’ for question 7 Cloze Test 1 could have been a failure to recognize ‘the whale and the dolphin’ as belonging to two specifically different species of animal.

#### 5.2.4. Relative pronouns

In English, relative pronouns are used as conjunctions to connect one clause to another. Relative pronouns refer to nouns that have been mentioned earlier in the clause or sentence. There are 5 types of relative pronouns in English language: **that, which, who, whom, and whose.**

Who, Whose dan Whom – are used to refer to people

Which – is used to refer to things, place or idea

That – can be used to refer to people or things

This different variations of relative pronouns do not exist in bahasa Melayu. Relative sentence in bahasa Melayu is marked by the word ‘yang’, which can refer to both animate and inanimate nouns. The absence of parallel structure certainly pose a problem for the students which makes it difficult for them to correctly match a relative pronoun that corresponds with specific noun. Therefore, the different usage and application of each and every relative pronoun needs memorisation and a clear understanding of their functions. Based on the high percentage of incorrect answer, this aspect of the English syntax may be one which students have yet to master, as demonstrated by the examples below:

- C1.8. You can also find animals such as \_\_\_\_\_ (7) whale and the dolphin \_\_\_\_\_ (8) live in the water, swimming \_\_\_\_\_ (9) just like fish, yet they do not belong to the fish family.  
 A what  
 B who  
 C whose  
 D which
- C2.9. He was such in great pain (9) \_\_\_\_\_ he could not even sleep properly.  
 A this  
 B whose  
 C that  
 D who

Cloze, Qs No	Wrong(W)/Right(R)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
1,8	W	79	83	85
	R	22	17	15

Cloze, Qs No	Wrong(W)/Right(R)	Senai %	Starp %	SSA %
2,9	W	36	33	61
	R	64	67	39

Both questions were used to test students' understanding of *relative pronouns*. The percentage of answers differ for both questions in all three schools. The number of those who answered incorrectly are higher in the three schools for question 8 Cloze Test 1, ie 79-85%, whereas for question 9 Cloze Test 2 the percentages of those giving the correct answer are higher in two schools ie 67% for STARP and 64% for Senai except for SSA, ie 39%. There are two possibilities for the disparity. First, the use of 'that' is more common in sentences and its function in question 9 Cloze Test 2 marked a clear cause and effect structure between the two clauses. The second possibility is the absence of relative pronoun in the first language which created difficulty in processing and understanding the appropriate usage of pronoun that correctly corresponds to the specific noun used in the sentence in question 8 Cloze Test 1.

## 6.0. Conclusion

A thorough examination of morphological and syntactical differences between the Malay language and English has been shown to be one of the major factors in students' inability to successfully acquire the English language; to successfully understand and apply their existing knowledge of English grammatical structure, as reflected in the results of the cloze tests conducted. Various efforts, on both national and individual levels, have been poured into the strategies to improve students' ability or command of English language. However this usually focuses on pedagogy or the teaching of the target language. Perhaps it is timely now to suggest that English teachers should be exposed to linguistic knowledge to better equip them in teaching the language. Comparative analysis of the two languages i.e Malay and English language may be one of the ways in understanding and solving this persistent problem of acquiring the target language, despite going through 11 years of formal learning. In addition, attention should also be given to conducive and comfortable learning environment to make learning English more fun and exciting, which in turn makes learning more meaningful. All these factors beg the attention of all parties involved in the effort or drive to improve students' acquisition of the English language.

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## Appendix

### Cloze Test 1

Read the following passage and choose the best answer. Then circle A, B, C or D.

There are all kinds of animals. They can be long and thin

- (1) \_\_\_\_\_ shape or heavy and stout looking. Some
- (2) \_\_\_\_\_ huge like the giraffe or the whale, yet others are so tiny that they are almost
- (3) \_\_\_\_\_ to see.
- (4) \_\_\_\_\_ way of life is very different too. Different species
- (5) \_\_\_\_\_ different habits and eat different kinds of food. Although kiwis and
- (6) \_\_\_\_\_ belong to the bird family, they cannot fly at all. You can also find animals such as
- (7) \_\_\_\_\_ whale and the dolphin
- (8) \_\_\_\_\_ live in the water, swimming
- (9) \_\_\_\_\_ just like fish, yet they do not belong to the fish family. On land, some animals run so fast that the only way to compete with them is to get into a car! However, sloths, the
- (10) \_\_\_\_\_ animal, do not seem to move much. There are, in fact, many such slow-moving creatures on earth.

- |    |   |             |     |   |            |
|----|---|-------------|-----|---|------------|
| 1. | A | at          | 6.  | A | ostrich    |
|    | B | in          |     | B | ostrichs   |
|    | C | on          |     | C | ostriches  |
|    | D | of          |     | D | ostrichies |
| 2. | A | is          | 7.  | A | the        |
|    | B | are         |     | B | a          |
|    | C | was         |     | C | an         |
|    | D | were        |     | D | -          |
| 3. | A | dispossible | 8.  | A | what       |
|    | B | impossible  |     | B | who        |
|    | C | unpossible  |     | C | whose      |
|    | D | possible    |     | D | which      |
| 4. | A | They        | 9.  | A | swift      |
|    | B | Them        |     | B | swifts     |
|    | C | Their       |     | C | swiftly    |
|    | D | Theirs      |     | D | swiftless  |
| 5. | A | adopt       | 10. | A | slower     |
|    | B | adopted     |     | B | slow       |
|    | C | adopts      |     | C | slowly     |
|    | D | is adopting |     | D | slowest    |

## Cloze Test 2

Read the following passage and choose the best answer. Then circle A, B, C or D.

Every year, during the festive season, many

- (1) \_\_\_\_\_ occur because people are
- (2) \_\_\_\_\_ when they play with fire-crackers. Therefore, just before Hari Raya, the police issued
- (3) \_\_\_\_\_ warning that no one was
- (4) \_\_\_\_\_ to play with fire-crackers.

Adam, however, was a very

- (5) \_\_\_\_\_ boy. He ignored the warning. Even though
- (6) \_\_\_\_\_ parents forbade him, he decided to play with fire-crackers. He bought some without his parent's knowledge. One night, when his parents
- (7) \_\_\_\_\_ out, he took the opportunity to play with the fire-crackers. He had a lot of fun playing with them. Suddenly, one of the fire-crackers exploded in his hands. Adam screamed
- (8) \_\_\_\_\_ in pain. Two of his fingers were badly burnt. Just then his parents returned. They were shocked to see him screaming and rolling around in pain.

Adam's parents rushed him to the hospital where he was treated in the emergency room. As the burns were very severe, Adam was warded in the hospital for six days. He was such in great pain

- (9) \_\_\_\_\_ he could not even sleep properly. He really regretted playing with the fire-crackers. It was the
- (10) \_\_\_\_\_ day in his life.

1. A accident  
B accidents  
C accidentes  
D accidenties
2. A care  
B careful  
C carelessness  
D careless
3. A the  
B an  
C a  
D -
4. A allow  
B allowed  
C allows  
D allowing
5. A disobedient  
B obedient  
C unobedient  
D inobedient

6. A her  
B his  
C him  
D he
7. A are  
B were  
C is  
D was
8. A loudly  
B louder  
C loud  
D loudest
9. A this  
B whose  
C that  
D who
10. A sad  
B sadder  
C sadly  
D saddest

The large numbers of students makes it impossible for an individual needs analysis. 1. . Traditionally, university language classes have had a set advanced syllabus for incoming students and we have followed the 'sink or swim' principle. table 1. OPT Scores for students enrolled in English Language courses at the University of Alicante<sup>4</sup>. The Oxford Placement Test, much like most other system-referenced tests, will determine the students overall mastery of linguistic elements. However, there is always a certain degree of error which must be taken into account. Testing conditions are not always ideal. If I had chosen a lower percentage such as 60% as an indicator of mastery for the listening the figures would be as follows: A Linguistic Needs Analysis for EFL. 123. Non-autonomy and low-English proficiency among Malaysian students: Insights from multiple perspectives. In K. Arrifin, M. R. Ismail, Ngo Kea Leng, & R. A. Aziz (Eds.), *English in the Malaysian context* (pp. 21-34). Shah Alam: University Publication Centre (UPENA) UiTM. Google Scholar. Nambiar, R. M. K. (2007). Enhancing academic literacy among tertiary learners: A Malaysian experience. *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 13, 77-94. Google Scholar. (2008). The mastery of English among lower secondary school students of Malaysia: A linguistic analysis. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 7(2), 106-119. Google Scholar. Omar, A. H. (1985). The language policy of Malaysia: A formula for balanced pluralism. In this regard, the teaching of English language students pursues a comprehensive implementation of practical, educational, general educational and developmental goals. Thus, a foreign language contributes to the formation of a fully developed personality which is the main task of the school at the present stage of the formation of our society. As practice shows, early instruction in a foreign language is important because the success in mastering the subject at the next steps depends on how the training is going on at the initial stage. Thus, the English methodologist H.E. Palmer (1923) attached great importance to the beginning of the study of a foreign language: «Take care of the first two stages, and the rest will take care of itself».