



# Level of Mastery of Malay Vocabulary among Non-Native Students in Form One

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## Abstract

*Vocabulary plays an important role in language learning because it is the basis for mastering the language, especially for non-native speakers. Students face challenges in mastering vocabulary in Malay. This study aims to determine the level of vocabulary mastery in learning Malay among non-native speakers. This study involved a total of 254 students from 10 secondary schools in the Pudu and Bangsar areas of Kuala Lumpur through purposive sampling. Research findings were analyzed using SPSS software version 27.0. The findings of the study show that overall, the level of vocabulary mastery is moderate except that the verb group is high and the adjective group is low among non-native speakers. This study suggests that the aspect of vocabulary teaching should be given attention in Teaching and Learning activities starting from primary school.*

**Keywords:** Level of Mastery, Malay Vocabulary, Non-Native Students, Form One Students

## Introduction

Malay is the national language of Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei. In Malaysia and Brunei, it is also the only official language, while it is one of the four official languages of Singapore. This aligns with the government’s intention to develop Malay as a language that serves as the foundation for nation-building and the culture of society in Malaysia. This aspiration is revealed in the language policy by referring to Article 152 of the Constitution of the Federation of Malaya. Among students, despite Malay being used as the medium of instruction in schools for many years and even being a compulsory subject, an increasing number of students are failing to master Malay proficiently.

Language mastery is a formal language acquisition process. Proficiency in a new language, also known as a second language, typically occurs within a formal education system ([Ramli](#)). When learning any language, whether it’s one’s mother tongue or a foreign language, speakers need to master vocabulary as the core of that language ([Zumrah et al.](#)). If speakers are not proficient in the vocabulary of a language, will not receive information effectively ([Alharthi](#)). Furthermore, from a globalization perspective, students’ mastery of a second language adds value to their future career development ([Yusoff et al.](#)).

## Literature Review

Bukari and Kechik suggests that students should learn as many new words as possible. However, this is a long-term process that requires a significant amount of time to master vocabulary for an individual student. Children may face difficulties in mastering many words because each child has different levels of understanding and pace of learning (Bukari and Kechik). Between 12,000 and 20,000 words are needed to learn a new language fluently (Razak and Samah). This is based on the number of words present in a person's first language. Basic vocabulary requires high frequency, while new vocabulary words require low frequency. High-frequency words are considered to have a strong impact on the level of vocabulary, and they are very useful for expanding an individual's knowledge (Lirong).

(Zaini and Rahman) also conducted a study related to the size of Arabic vocabulary and its relationship with speaking proficiency, especially for students specializing in Islamic studies and Arabic language at KUIS. The Simulated Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) instrument was used to measure the level of students' speaking skills. Meanwhile, the Vocabulary Level Test for Arabic (VLT), adapted from the Vocabulary Level Test (Nation: Learning Vocabulary in Another Language), was used to measure the level of mastery of vocabulary size acquired by students. The size of the Arabic vocabulary at KUIS is below the minimum level of 1231 words compared to the minimum recommended vocabulary mastery level by Nation and Laufer, which is 2000 words. The speaking proficiency level of students specializing in Islamic studies and Arabic language at KUIS is at a moderate level, and overall, there is a significant correlation between vocabulary size and students' speaking proficiency.

(Zaini) also suggests that three main aspects that need attention are sufficiency, the level of relevance of words, and the ability to use mastered words. (Maskor and Baharudin) conducted a literature review related to productive vocabulary knowledge in writing skills. They stated that a person's language proficiency is dominated by vocabulary knowledge, especially in terms of knowing the number of words, understanding meanings, and using words in the correct sentence context.

## Research Problems

Malay serves as the medium of instruction and a compulsory subject for all students throughout Malaysia according to the Education Act of 1961. To improve the vocabulary mastery of Malay among non-native speakers in first-year students, there is a significant issue that needs attention, namely, the weakness of students in mastering Malay vocabulary. A study by Ambikapathi, Tay, Shanthi (2015) found that students face difficulties in mastering Malay. Consequently, students who only have a limited vocabulary will spend a considerable amount of time guessing the meanings of challenging words. This situation will adversely affect higher-order thinking skills among students.

(Jazuli et al.) state that a limited vocabulary has caused students to face difficulties in listening and speaking with the right words, reading, understanding, and analysing excerpts, as well as producing solid writing. Additionally, according to (Peng), the level of student mastery in the Malay language subject is at an unsatisfactory level, especially for non-native Malay speakers. Therefore, the lack of vocabulary is a major factor that hinders students' fluency in the development of writing, reading, listening, and speaking skills, leading to students' failure to master the language excellently. In other words, a lack of vocabulary will impede the mastery of the Malay language. Hence, this study will examine the level of vocabulary mastery in the Malay language among non-native speaker students in the first year.

## Research Methodology

The research design used for this study is the quantitative method (Creswell). This method is employed to measure the level of vocabulary mastery in the Malay language among non-native speaker students at the secondary level, specifically in the first year. After discussions with the National Language and Literature Agency, it was found that the Malay language corpus has not been explored and identified, especially for non-native speakers. Therefore, the researcher created a new corpus by collecting vocabulary from textbooks from year one to year six of Tamil National Type Schools (SJKT) and Chinese National Type Schools (SJKC).

All vocabulary collected from textbooks has been categorized into four groups of words: Nouns, Verbs, Function Words, and Adjectives ([Nik Abdullah and Wahab](#)).

The level of vocabulary mastery is determined through a set of test questions. This test is designed using the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT) format by Nation and Beglar. VLT was chosen as the instrument in this study because it has been proven to be a primary and effective tool used to determine an individual's vocabulary level, especially for non-native speakers, and is the instrument closest to the standard for measuring vocabulary levels ([Meara](#)).

The researcher compiled 8000 vocabulary items for the respondents, and all vocabulary items were selected from Malay language textbooks for grades 1 to 6 of SJKT and SKTC schools (KSSR). The selection of test items was based on four categories of words: Nouns (KN), Verbs (KK), Adjectives (KA), and Function Words (KT), following the Grammar of the Language Council ([Nik Abdullah and Wahab](#)). According to Nik Abdullah and Wahab, words were categorized based on syntactic and semantic criteria because such categorization was found to be more consistent with the status of words as free forms that constitute syntactic constructions such as phrases, clauses, and sentences. Therefore, the 8000 vocabulary items were divided into four sections. After this process, the researcher obtained 800 vocabulary items in a specific category. From this data, the researcher took 10%, resulting in a total of 80 vocabulary items to prepare the test items as suggested by Nation and Beglar.

The study test comprises 80 questions related to Malay vocabulary. These questions are categorized into four groups of words. Each word group includes 20 objective questions where the answer choices consist of four different options (A, B, C, D). For each question, respondents are required to choose the correct answer for a word or phrase that has a similar meaning to the bolded word, aiming to assess the students' vocabulary level.

The researcher selected 10 schools in the Pudu and Bangsar areas of Kuala Lumpur. Among the chosen schools are SMK A, SMK B, SMK C, SMK D, SMK E, SMK F, SMK Seri G, SMK H, SMK I, and SMK J. High schools were chosen as the gathering

place for students from various school backgrounds. The selection of first-year students, consisting of non-native Malay speakers from the Chinese and Indian communities, was made from those aged 13. The total population of non-native Malay speaker students in the 10 schools is 750 students (Refer to Table 1). Based on the table by Krejcie and Morgan, for a population of 750 people, the required sample size for the study is 254.

The total number of students in each school is listed in the table below:

### Result

The overall findings of the study indicate that the level of mastery of Malay vocabulary among non-native speaker students is at a moderate level. This is based on the VLT test.

**Table 2 Vocabulary Scores According to Word Categories**

No	Vocabulary	Word Group	Right (%)	Wrong (%)
1	Kesihatan	KN	44.56	55.44
2	Kewangan	KN	53.34	46.66
3	Keusahawanan	KN	59.44	40.56
4	Pendapatan	KN	30.57	69.43
5	Kelestarian	KN	35.20	64.80
6	Pertahanan	KN	60.67	39.33
7	Keperihatian	KN	47.89	52.11
8	Pejalan	KN	55.00	45.00
9	Kebanggaan	KN	58.09	41.91
10	Penyelamat	KN	49.67	50.33
11	Kesedaran	KN	53.78	46.22
12	Pelupusan	KN	51.47	48.54
13	Penghargaan	KN	45.67	54.33
14	Pembangunan	KN	63.29	36.71
15	Peraturan	KN	61.98	38.02
16	Kecantikan	KN	54.45	45.55
17	Kepercayaan	KN	55.67	44.33
18	Pentadbiran	KN	48.34	51.66
19	Peningkatan	KN	60.89	39.11
20	Hartawan	KN	43.21	56.79
21	Menulis	KK	73.65	26.35
22	Membantu	KK	69.78	30.22
23	Menganalisis	KK	59.21	40.79

24	Menilai	KK	67.00	33.00
25	Mendengar	KK	76.38	23.62
26	Mengambil	KK	71.11	28.89
27	Meminta	KK	57.90	42.10
28	Menyampaikan	Kk	75.00	25.00
29	Meningkatkan	KK	81.89	18.11
30	Memasak	KK	91.21	8.79
31	Mengeluarkan	KK	65.06	34.94
32	Mengubah	KK	58.78	41.22
33	Menguasai	KK	51.00	49.00
34	Mengeratkan	KK	87.00	13.00
35	Memeriksa	KK	78.33	21.67
36	Memulangkan	KK	69.96	30.04
37	Menolong	KK	83.57	16.43
38	Mendidik	KK	76.98	23.02
39	Terputus	KK	82.58	17.42
40	Teringat	KK	74.33	25.67
41	Terbaik	KA	57.89	42.11
42	Terpanjang	KA	43.90	56.1
43	Keindahan	KA	30.50	69.50
44	Sepandai	KA	40.00	60.00
45	Keberanian	KA	27.80	72.20
46	Setinggi	KA	34.56	65.44
47	Berkualiti	KA	28.88	71.12
48	Terkenal	KA	31.40	68.60
49	Tercemar	KA	43.10	56.90
50	Berfaedah	KA	18.20	82
51	Secerdik	KA	22.45	77.55
52	Terkecil	KA	51.35	48.65
53	Termashur	KA	21.00	79.00
54	Termuda	KA	24.45	75.44
55	Kesayangan	KA	41.00	59.00
56	Sejelita	KA	13.00	87.00
57	Serabut	KA	27.89	72.11
58	Seburuk	KA	33.15	66.85
59	Kelebihan	KA	49.89	50.11
60	Berkesan	KA	36.78	63.22
61	Di	KT	43.67	56.33
62	Ke	KT	67.45	32.55
63	Semasa	KT	54.23	45.77
64	Pada	KT	64.33	35.67
65	Sambil	KT	49.23	50.77

66	Supaya	KT	61.34	38.66
67	Jangan	KT	63.45	36.55
68	Benar	KT	42.78	57.22
69	Hingga	KT	68.97	31.03
70	Selalu	KT	65.76	34.24
71	Dari	KT	63.45	36.55
72	Kepada	KT	63.45	36.55
73	Bilakah	KT	45.67	54.33
74	Kecuali	KT	62.56	37.44
75	Terlalu	KT	56.98	43.02
76	Sebelum	KT	55.78	44.22
77	Oleh	KT	49.30	50.7
78	Untuk	KT	58.34	41.66
79	Bagaimana	KT	48.56	51.44
80	Hadapan	KT	60.37	39.63

**Table 3 Academic Achievement Scores and Grades in PPSR**

Score	Score
80 – 100	A
60 – 79	B
40 – 59	C
20 – 39	D
1 – 19	E
0	TH

(KPM - 2020)

**Table 4 Average Percentage and Grades According to Word Categories**

No.	Category Item	Total Vocabulary	Average Percentage (%) and Grade
1	Nouns (KN)	20	51.66 (C)
2	Verbs (KK)	20	72.54 (B)
3	Adjectives (KA)	20	33.86 (D)
4	Function Words (KT)	20	57.38 (C)

**Table 5 Minimum Score Interpretation of Vocabulary Mastery Level**

Min Score	Interpretation Level
1 – 5	Low
6 – 10	Moderately Low
11 – 15	Moderate
16 – 20	High

Source: (Jamieson)

**Table 6 Level of Mastery of Malay Vocabulary**

No.	Category Item	Mean (M)	Level
1	Nouns (KN)	12.67	Moderate
2	Verbs (KK)	17.03	High
3	Adjectives (KA)	5.0	Low
4	Function Words (KT)	11.59	Moderate
Average		11.57	Moderate

Table 1 shows a list of vocabulary used to test first-year non-native Malay speakers. These 80 vocabulary items were selected from a total of 8000 words taken from textbooks for grades 1 to 6. The 80 vocabulary items were categorized into four main word groups, namely, Nouns (KN), Verbs (KK), Adjectives (KA), and Function Words (KT), with 20 words in each category. According to Table 6, the analysis conducted on these 20 words revealed that Nouns (M=12.67) and Function Words (M=11.59) obtained moderate minimum interpretation scores with an average grade of C. Adjectives (M=5.0), on the other hand, fell into the low level with a grade of D. Among the listed word groups, Verbs (KK) had a high minimum score (M=17.03).

This depicts that non-native Malay speakers face difficulties in understanding adjectives because concepts involving deep comprehension are challenging for students who do not have a strong foundation. On the contrary, they show high potential in mastering action verbs. According to Abdullah and Mosin, word formation refers to the process or method of how a word is created and shaped. This means that the creation of words can be illustrated through the micro-system of derivative word formation. Verbs themselves combine with related morphemes to produce derived action verbs (KKT). Illustrating the formation of prefixed action verbs through the micro-system is not only a tool for easily understanding the process of affixation and its function but can also be used in the language teaching and learning process.

### Discussion

Based on the study findings, non-native Malay speaker students face difficulties in mastering adjectives (KA), while they excel in mastering verbs (KK) compared to other word categories. The study results show the highest minimum score for KK.

The native language of non-native Malay speaker students has a grammatical structure different from their second language, Malay. This includes word arrangement, conjugation rules, and the specific usage of certain words. This complicates the correct use of adjectives in context for non-native speakers. Non-native speaker students do not have sufficient exposure to Malay in their daily lives. Insufficient reading practice in Malay with adjectives hinders their comprehension and proper usage.

Non-native Malay speaker students can master the category of verbs (KK) better. This is because students are exposed to the frequent use of verbs in daily Malay conversations. Regular exposure to verbs facilitates students in understanding and mastering them. Non-native speaker students use verbs in communication contexts. This is because verbs are a crucial element in discussing actions, feelings, and situations, and thus, they are commonly used in everyday conversations. Therefore, non-native speaker students can excel in mastering verbs more than adjectives (KA) in this VLT test.

**Table 7 Example VLT Test Questions**

Example VLT Test Questions	Answer
18. Kerajaan akan merasmikan program pelupusan kenderaan mulai tahun 2024.  JAWAPAN: A. Penghapusan B. Pembuatan C. kitar Semula D. Pembakaran	JAWAPAN BETUL : C. Kitar Semula  JAWAPAN DIPILIH: A. Penghapusan
36. Ravi memulangkan kereta sewa kepada tuannya.  A. mebubarkan B. Mengembalikan C. Menolak D. Menghalau	JAWAPAN BETUL : B. Mengembalikan  JAWAPAN DIPILIH: C. Menolak

The given questions are examples from the Vocabulary Level Test (VLT). Most respondents make mistakes in the VLT as shown above. The findings of this study are consistent with the opinion of (Isa et al.), who state that the level of mastery in using verbs (KK) is high. Therefore,

the level of verb usage has great potential and serves as a measure of grammar teaching and learning mastery. Additionally, (Sivaneswary) notes that the mastery of word categories among students in Tamil National Type Schools (SJKT) is less stable, especially the mastery of adjectives (KA) is low. This results in an ineffective understanding of learning based on word categories.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been proven that vocabulary mastery plays a crucial role in language proficiency, especially in terms of the level of vocabulary mastery among students. First-year students were found to be at a moderate level, thereby limiting their language skills, particularly in communication. This study also demonstrates that students learning Malay as a second language still face serious challenges in mastering Malay vocabulary. Therefore, vocabulary learning needs to be explicitly exposed to students, forming a positive perception of the importance of this aspect in the learning and mastery of a second language.

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