

# The Malay Writing Ability of Chinese Secondary School Students in Klang Malaysia

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## Abstract

This concept paper explores the Malay writing ability of Chinese secondary school students in Klang Malaysia, focusing on the linguistic, pedagogical, and sociocultural factors that influence their proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia as a second language. While Chinese vernacular schools (Chinese Secondary School) provide instruction primarily in Mandarin, Bahasa Malaysia is taught as a compulsory subject. However, despite formal instruction beginning in early education, many Chinese school students continue to face significant challenges in mastering written Malay, particularly in areas such as grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and coherence. The paper aims to investigate the current state of Malay writing proficiency among students in Chinese vernacular schools, identify common writing difficulties, and analyze the role of teaching methods, educational resources, and language exposure. Drawing on second language acquisition theories and existing literature on bilingual education, the study examines how factors such as limited Malay usage at home, lack of immersive language environments, and teacher preparedness impact students' writing outcomes. This paper proposes a mixed methods approach involving writing assessments, classroom observations, and interviews with teachers and students to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights into improving the teaching and learning of Malay writing, with implications for curriculum development, teacher training, and language policy reform. Ultimately, the paper contributes to efforts aimed at promoting linguistic equity and national integration through enhanced proficiency in the national language among non-Malay students.

**Keywords:** Malay Writing, Chinese Vernacular Schools, Bahasa Malaysia, Second Language Acquisition, Language Education, Malaysia

## Introduction

### *Background and Context*

Malaysia is a linguistically and culturally diverse nation, characterized by its multiethnic population primarily comprising Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Bahasa Melayu, officially known as Bahasa Malaysia, is the national and official language of the country. As stipulated in the Malaysian Constitution and further reinforced by national education policies, Bahasa Malaysia plays a central role in unifying the nation and ensuring effective communication among citizens of diverse backgrounds.

In this multilingual setting, vernacular education has long been a distinguishing feature. Among the various types of schools in Malaysia, Chinese vernacular schools play a critical role in providing education to the Chinese Malaysian community. These schools use Mandarin as the medium of instruction for most subjects, but Malay is taught as a compulsory subject. Despite this inclusion, many Chinese secondary schools continue to face difficulties in mastering Malay, particularly in writing a skill that requires a higher level of language proficiency compared to speaking or listening.

The disparity in writing proficiency among students from different ethnic and educational backgrounds has raised concerns among educators, parents, and policymakers alike. Numerous reports and assessments have shown that while Chinese secondary schools may perform adequately in oral and receptive aspects of the Malay language, they often struggle in written expression, which is crucial for academic success, especially in national examinations such as UEC and SPM.

### *Importance of the Malay Language in Malaysia*

Bahasa Malaysia is more than just a medium of communication; it is a symbol of national identity and unity. Mastery of the national language is seen as a marker of national integration, and fluency in written Malay is a requirement for university entrance, civil service positions, and public life.

Furthermore, writing in Malay is essential for participating in the national discourse, engaging in policy debates, publishing creative works, and accessing a broad range of professional opportunities. For Chinese Malaysian students, therefore, proficiency in Malay writing is not only an educational goal but also a vital life skill.

### *Chinese Vernacular Schools and Malay Writing Instruction*

Chinese vernacular schools were established as part of the country's colonial legacy and continue to exist within the national education system under the purview of the Ministry of Education. These schools follow the National Primary School Curriculum (KSSR) but use Mandarin for instruction, with Bahasa Malaysia taught as a subject from Year One.

However, several challenges arise:

- Limited exposure to Malay outside the classroom
- Lack of immersive environments
- Differences in syntactic structure between Mandarin and Malay
- Teaching materials that may not align well with students' proficiency levels

These factors may contribute to the generally lower levels of written competence in Malay among Chinese school students compared to their peers in national schools (SMK).

### **Problem Statement**

Despite years of formal instruction in Bahasa Malayu, a significant proportion of students in Chinese secondary schools continue to demonstrate limited proficiency in Malay writing. Their essays often reveal recurring weaknesses such as poor grammar, limited vocabulary, lack of cohesion, and weak organizational skills. This issue becomes more pronounced as students progress into secondary education, where writing tasks become increasingly

complex, requiring higher levels of critical thinking, argumentation, and linguistic sophistication.

The phenomenon of interest here lies in the persistent gap between instructional exposure and actual writing ability among these students. While they receive structured language education from the early years of schooling, their performance in writing tasks suggests that current approaches may not be effectively supporting their development. Writing, unlike receptive skills such as listening and reading, requires a high degree of linguistic competence, creativity, and the ability to express abstract ideas. The persistent struggle of Chinese school students with Malay writing highlights deeper issues that go beyond surface-level grammar mistakes, pointing to possible systemic, cultural, and pedagogical challenges.

Several factors may contribute to this phenomenon. At the classroom level, the teaching methods used may focus heavily on rote learning and examination techniques rather than meaningful writing practice, limiting students' opportunities to develop fluency and confidence. At the sociocultural level, the dominance of Mandarin or other Chinese dialects at home means that Malay is often relegated to the role of an academic subject rather than a living language of daily communication. Additionally, cultural attitudes toward Bahasa Melayu as a second or even third language may affect students' motivation and engagement. At the policy level, while the national curriculum emphasizes mastery of Malay, the resources and teacher training provided in vernacular schools may not fully address the unique challenges faced by these learners.

This raises several key questions:

- Why do Chinese school students struggle with writing in Malay despite early and continuous instruction?
- Are the teaching methods employed in these schools sufficient and effective for developing advanced writing skills?
- How do factors such as home language, cultural attitudes, and educational policies influence the writing development of Chinese school students?

Exploring these questions is crucial, as proficiency in Malay writing is not only a matter of academic success but also a key factor in ensuring students' ability to participate fully in Malaysia's multilingual society.

### *Objectives*

This concept paper aims to explore the factors influencing the Malay writing ability of Chinese secondary school students in Klang Malaysia. The specific objectives are:

1. To examine the current level of Malay writing proficiency among Chinese vernacular school students.
2. To identify common challenges faced by these students in mastering written Malay.
3. To investigate the pedagogical practices used in teaching Malay writing in Chinese vernacular schools.
4. To propose strategies for improving Malay writing instruction for non Malay students.

### *Research Questions*

The study will address the following key questions:

1. What is the current state of Malay writing proficiency among Chinese school students?
2. What are the most common linguistic and cognitive difficulties faced by these students in writing?
3. How does the educational environment, including teaching methods and materials, affect writing development?
4. What strategies and interventions can be implemented to improve outcomes in Malay writing?

### **Significance of the Study**

This paper holds significance for several stakeholders. For educators and school administrators, it offers insights into current practices and challenges in the teaching of Malay as a second language. For policymakers, it provides evidence-based considerations for curriculum reform and teacher training. For researchers, it contributes to the growing body of literature on second language writing in multilingual contexts.

In a broader sense, the study aligns with Malaysia's national aspirations to foster greater unity through language. Ensuring that all students, regardless of ethnic background or school type, can write proficiently in the national language is a critical step toward achieving equity, integration, and educational excellence.

### **Literature**

#### *Introduction*

The Malay writing proficiency of Chinese secondary school students in Klang has become an increasingly significant topic in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), sociolinguistics, and education. While Bahasa Malaysia serves as the national language and a unifying medium in the multicultural Malaysian society, its mastery especially in written form remains a challenge for students in Chinese vernacular schools. This literature review synthesizes existing research on language policy in Malaysia, Malay language acquisition among non-native speakers, pedagogical practices in vernacular schools, and the cognitive and sociocultural factors influencing second-language writing development.

#### *Language Policy and the Role of Malay in National Integration*

Since Malaysia's independence, Bahasa Malaysia has been positioned as the language of national unity, education, and governance (Gill, 2005). According to the National Education Policy, all students in public and vernacular schools are required to learn the Malay language. While the curriculum for Bahasa Malaysia is standardized across school types, the linguistic environment in which students learn and use the language varies significantly.

Chinese vernacular schools (Chinese secondary schools) use Mandarin as the medium of instruction, with Bahasa Malaysia taught as a subject. The difference in exposure and language immersion compared to national schools (Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan, SMK), where Malay is the primary medium, places students in Chinese schools at a relative disadvantage, particularly in writing, which requires more complex language processing and proficiency (Asmah, 1992; David & Govindasamy, 2005).

### *Second Language Writing and Cognitive Linguistic Challenges*

Writing in a second language (L2) is widely recognized as one of the most demanding skills, as it involves the integration of vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and discourse organization (Silva, 1993). Studies have shown that Chinese school students often struggle with the morphological and syntactic features of Malay, which differ significantly from Mandarin.

For example:

- Malay uses an affixation system to denote verb tense and passive/active voice, while Mandarin lacks such morphology.
- Sentence construction in Malay follows a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) structure, similar to English, whereas Mandarin allows more flexibility and ellipsis in syntax.

According to studies by Nambiar & Hashim (2004), many Chinese students demonstrate limited vocabulary range, frequent grammatical errors (especially with affixes like "meN-", "di-", and "ber-"), and problems in maintaining logical flow in longer texts. These issues are further compounded by negative transfer from L1 (Mandarin or dialects such as Hokkien), leading to non-standard sentence structures in Malay writing.

### *Pedagogical Practices in Teaching Malay Writing*

The way Malay is taught in Chinese secondary school plays a crucial role in shaping writing outcomes. Several studies have identified rote learning, textbook reliance, and examination-focused instruction as dominant pedagogical approaches in these settings (Tan, 2011; Lee & Krishnan, 2018). Writing tasks are often mechanical, such as sentence construction or completing cloze passages, with limited emphasis on creative or expressive writing.

A study by Chuang (2015) found that writing is often taught through formulaic structures, where students are encouraged to memorize essay templates (e.g., formal letters, narrative compositions). While this may help students pass exams, it often inhibits authentic language use and critical thinking, leading to poor performance when faced with unfamiliar or open ended prompts.

Moreover, teachers in vernacular schools may themselves face challenges in teaching Malay writing effectively. Many are non-native speakers, and some lack specialized training in second-language writing pedagogy. This contributes to an environment where writing is under-emphasized or inconsistently assessed.

### *Sociocultural and Environmental Factors*

A growing body of literature highlights the importance of sociocultural factors in second-language acquisition. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory posits that language development occurs through interaction and social engagement. However, for many Chinese students in Malaysia, Malay is not spoken at home or in their communities, limiting their exposure and practice outside the classroom (Yong & Mustaffa, 2010).

Attitudes toward the Malay language also play a significant role. Some Chinese families may prioritize English or Mandarin for perceived economic or cultural reasons. This

can lead to a lack of motivation or low language investment among students, particularly in written expression, which requires extended engagement and cognitive effort.

In a study by Lim & Rafik-Galea (2015), students reported feeling that Malay was important only for exams or government forms, not for daily communication. Such instrumental attitudes, while pragmatic, do not promote deep engagement with the language, especially in its written form.

#### *Comparative Performance: Vernacular vs. National School Students*

Several national assessments and comparative studies have revealed a performance gap between Chinese secondary schools and SMK students in Bahasa Malaysia, particularly in writing. According to data from UEC and SPM examinations, students in Chinese schools consistently score lower in written components compared to their peers in national schools. For example, a study by Mohamad and Zainuddin (2017) analyzing examination scripts found that Chinese school students produced shorter essays with less cohesive devices, fewer descriptive adjectives, and more frequent grammatical errors. These students often relied on repetitive sentence structures and struggled with narrative sequencing. Such disparities raise concerns about linguistic equity in education, as writing proficiency is essential not only for passing exams but also for higher education and professional success.

#### *Intervention Studies and Improvement Strategies*

There have been some promising intervention studies aimed at improving Malay writing among non-Malay students. For example, Rahim et al. (2019) conducted a classroom based intervention using genre based pedagogy, where students were taught different text types (e.g., narrative, expository, descriptive) explicitly, with attention to structure and language features. Results showed significant improvement in students' writing cohesion and fluency.

Another approach involves integrating digital tools and visual aids into writing instruction. Lee (2020) explored the use of storytelling apps and mind-mapping software to help students plan and organize their essays. These tools were particularly helpful for students with weaker vocabulary or limited grammatical control.

However, such innovations remain limited in scope, and large-scale adoption is hindered by curriculum constraints, lack of teacher training, and institutional inertia.

#### *Gaps in Existing Research*

Despite a growing body of literature on language education in Malaysia, relatively few studies focus specifically on writing proficiency among Chinese school students in Malay. Much of the existing work either generalizes second-language learners or focuses on English rather than Bahasa Malaysia. There is also a lack of longitudinal studies that track writing development over time or explore the cumulative effects of early language exposure, teaching practices, and student attitudes.

Furthermore, research is needed on:

- How writing anxiety and confidence affect performance
- The role of peer feedback and classroom interaction in writing improvement
- Effective assessment strategies for Malay writing in Chinese secondary schools contexts.

## Theoretical Framework

The study of Malay writing proficiency among Chinese secondary school students in Malaysia can be effectively grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory, Interlanguage Theory, and Sociocultural Theory. These frameworks help explain how students acquire, process, and express the Malay language in written form within a unique multilingual and multicultural context.

### *Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory*

SLA theory explores how learners acquire a language other than their mother tongue. A key model within this theory is Krashen's Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of receiving comprehensible input that is slightly above the learner's current level. In Chinese vernacular schools, students often experience limited exposure to Malay outside the classroom, restricting their input and hindering their progress in writing.

Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis also highlights emotional and motivational factors. Chinese school students may learn Malay primarily for exam purposes rather than communication, which reduces intrinsic motivation. Anxiety or fear of making errors in writing further limits their willingness to engage with the language deeply, thereby increasing the affective filter and decreasing acquisition effectiveness.

### *Interlanguage Theory*

Introduced by Selinker (1972), Interlanguage Theory describes the evolving linguistic system that second-language learners construct. This system is influenced by the learner's first language (L1), the target language (L2), and individual innovation. Chinese students often transfer structures from Mandarin into their Malay writing, resulting in syntax and grammar errors. Common issues include incorrect use of Malay affixes, awkward sentence constructions, and limited vocabulary.

Interlanguage theory recognizes these errors as developmental rather than random, highlighting the need for targeted instruction and consistent feedback. This perspective is essential for analyzing writing samples and identifying which errors stem from interlanguage processes rather than carelessness or lack of effort.

### *Sociocultural Theory*

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory adds a vital social and cultural dimension to language learning. According to this theory, language development is mediated through interaction, tools, and cultural practices. Writing, therefore, is not just a cognitive act but a socially situated activity. In classrooms, teachers serve as mediators, providing scaffolding to help students progress from their current abilities to higher levels of competence within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

In Chinese vernacular schools, writing instruction is often exam-oriented and teacher-centered, with limited opportunities for dialogic learning, peer feedback, or creative expression. Sociocultural theory suggests that students benefit from collaborative writing activities, visual tools, and authentic communicative tasks, which foster meaningful engagement and long-term writing development.

## **Methodology**

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a mixed methods research design that combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the Malay writing ability of Chinese secondary school students in Klang. The quantitative component will assess students' writing proficiency using structured evaluations, while the qualitative component will explore the factors influencing their writing performance through classroom observations and interviews. This dual approach allows for both measurable data and in depth insights.

### *Sample and Participants*

This study is based on students from one of the Chinese secondary schools in Klang, where the researcher is currently teaching. Purposive sampling was used and the target participants included:

173 Form 3 students who are at an intermediate stage of Malay language learning and preparing for the UEC level examination.

This sample size ensures a diversity of students' writing abilities and teaching experiences, thus increasing the reliability of the findings.

## **Data Collection Methods**

### *Writing Assessment*

Students will complete a standardized writing task that is aligned with the National Curriculum Standards (KSSR). These essays will be assessed using a rubric-based scoring system that focuses on:

Grammar and syntax

Vocabulary use

Sentence structure

Coherence and organization

Content relevance

This will provide quantitative data on student proficiency and error patterns.

### *Classroom Observation*

In the Malay language classroom, non-participant observations will be conducted to record teaching strategies, student engagement, feedback methods, and writing activities. Researcher will use a structured observation checklist to ensure consistency in observations.

### *Semi structured Interviews*

Researcher will conduct the following interviews:

Students will explore their attitudes, challenges and strategies in writing in Malay.

Teachers will gain insights into classroom teaching methods, perceived difficulties and support mechanisms.

### *Data Analysis*

\* Quantitative data from writing assessments will be analysed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, error frequency) to identify overall performance trends.

\* Qualitative data from observations and interviews will be analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, teaching practices and learner experiences.

### *Ethical Considerations*

Before data collection, researcher will obtain ethical approval from the school management. Researcher will obtain informed consent from principal, vice-principa and students. Researcher will ensure confidentiality of participants' information and pseudonyms will be used in all reports to protect their identities.

### **Discussion**

The Malay writing ability of Chinese secondary school students in Klang is influenced by a complex interplay of linguistic, educational, and sociocultural factors. While these students are required to learn Bahasa Malaysia as a second language (L2) within the national curriculum, several key issues continue to affect their writing development and overall language proficiency.

#### *Limited Language Exposure and Usage*

One of the main challenges is the limited exposure to Malay outside the classroom. Chinese vernacular schools use Mandarin as the primary medium of instruction, and students often communicate in Mandarin or dialects at home and within their communities. As a result, students may lack the opportunity to practice Malay in authentic, real life contexts, which inhibits their language development, particularly in productive skills like writing. Without meaningful exposure and usage, their vocabulary range and familiarity with Malay writing conventions remain underdeveloped.

#### *Writing as a Memorization Based Activity*

In many Chinese secondary schools, the teaching of Malay writing tends to be exam oriented and formulaic, focusing heavily on memorizing model essays or set phrases rather than developing creative or critical thinking skills. Students are often trained to reproduce pre-learned sentence structures, limiting their ability to write independently or express original ideas. This rote learning approach restricts the development of higher-order writing skills such as coherence, argumentation, and organization.

#### *Influence of First Language (L1) Interference*

Another critical issue is the influence of L1 interference, particularly from Mandarin, on Malay writing. Structural differences between the two languages such as word order, the absence of affixation in Mandarin, and differences in sentence construction lead to common grammatical errors in Malay writing. Students often make mistakes in subject-verb agreement, use of tenses, and the application of Malay affixes, which are essential components of accurate written expression. These errors indicate an underdeveloped interlanguage system that has not yet stabilized toward target-language norms.

#### *Teacher Centered Pedagogy and Limited Feedback*

The dominant teacher centered pedagogy in many classrooms further contributes to the issue. Writing instruction is frequently delivered through lecture-style lessons with limited student interaction or feedback. Students may not receive individualized, formative feedback on their written work, making it difficult for them to understand and correct their mistakes.

Without opportunities for revision or reflection, students struggle to improve and internalize effective writing practices.

#### *Low Motivation and Writing Anxiety*

Students' attitudes toward learning Malay also affect their performance. Many Chinese students view Malay as a subject that must be passed rather than as a useful communication tool. This instrumental motivation, coupled with a fear of making mistakes, contributes to low confidence and writing anxiety. As a result, students may be hesitant to experiment with language, take risks in expression, or engage deeply with writing tasks.

#### **Recommendations**

Improving the Malay writing ability of Chinese secondary school students in Klang requires strategic, inclusive, and culturally responsive interventions. While many students possess basic proficiency in Bahasa Malaysia, challenges remain in grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and idea development. The following recommendations aim to support students' writing development through curriculum improvements, teacher training, and community support.

#### *Increase Malay Language Exposure Across Contexts*

Language acquisition is heavily influenced by exposure and usage. Chinese school students often use Mandarin or dialects at home and in school environments. Therefore, creating more opportunities to use Malay outside the formal classroom is essential. Schools can organize Malay-speaking events such as debates, storytelling competitions, and drama performances. Encouraging students to write blogs, diaries, or social media posts in Malay can make writing more relevant and engaging.

#### *Contextualize Writing Tasks*

Malay writing tasks should be made more meaningful by connecting them to students' real-life experiences. Writing assignments could include reflections on festivals, personal stories, or community issues. This not only motivates students but also helps them see Malay as a tool for self-expression. Assignments should gradually increase in complexity, moving from simple descriptive writing to argumentative and narrative essays.

#### *Focus on Process Oriented Writing Instruction*

Instead of treating writing as a one-off task, teachers should adopt a process-oriented approach. This involves pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Peer and teacher feedback at various stages can help students refine their ideas and correct errors. Schools should also encourage portfolio assessments that track students' writing progress over time.

#### *Strengthen Teacher Training and Resources*

Teachers play a crucial role in developing writing skills. Continuous professional development in teaching Malay as a second language should be prioritized. Training programs can include techniques for scaffolding writing instruction, error analysis, and differentiated teaching for students with varying levels of proficiency. In addition, updated teaching materials, such as bilingual glossaries and writing guides, can support instruction.

### *Encourage Reading to Support Writing*

Reading and writing are interdependent skills. Students who read more in Malay tend to write better. Schools should promote extensive reading programs with age-appropriate and culturally relevant Malay texts. Classroom libraries stocked with short stories, comics, news articles, and essays can build vocabulary and expose students to various writing styles and structures.

### *Promote Parental and Community Involvement*

Parents and community members can play a significant role in promoting the use of Malay. Schools can organize workshops for parents to guide them in supporting their children's language development at home. Collaborations with local Malay-speaking communities for cultural exchanges and joint projects can offer authentic writing opportunities for students.

### *Utilize Technology and Multimedia Tools*

Digital tools can make writing instruction more interactive. Platforms like blogs, language learning apps, and collaborative writing software (e.g., Google Docs) allow for creative and cooperative learning. Incorporating multimedia (videos, images, podcasts) in writing tasks can also support students with different learning styles.

In conclusion, a comprehensive approach that involves students, teachers, parents, and the community is essential to enhance the Malay writing ability of Chinese school students. By providing sustained, meaningful, and supportive language experiences, students can grow into confident and competent Malay writers.

## **Conclusion**

The Malay writing ability of Chinese secondary school students in Klang Malaysia remains a crucial aspect of national language education, reflecting broader issues of linguistic integration, educational equity, and national unity. While many Chinese vernacular school students demonstrate basic comprehension and conversational skills in Bahasa Malaysia, their writing abilities often lag behind due to limited exposure, insufficient practice, and a learning environment that prioritizes Mandarin. These challenges are evident in areas such as grammar, vocabulary, coherence, and overall expression in written Malay.

Several contributing factors have been identified, including limited use of Malay in daily life, the academic emphasis on exam-oriented learning, and a lack of contextualized writing tasks. Furthermore, disparities in teacher training and resource availability can also impact the quality of Malay language instruction in Chinese schools.

Despite these challenges, the potential for improvement is significant. Students in Chinese schools generally exhibit strong discipline and academic motivation, which can be leveraged to enhance their Malay writing skills. With targeted interventions—such as more meaningful writing activities, improved teaching strategies, greater exposure to Malay literature, and increased use of the language in authentic contexts—students can gradually develop greater fluency and confidence in writing.

In conclusion, the development of Malay writing proficiency among Chinese school students is not only an educational goal but also a step toward fostering greater national cohesion. By adopting a more holistic, inclusive, and student-centered approach to teaching Malay, educators and policymakers can ensure that all Malaysian students, regardless of their linguistic background, are equipped to communicate effectively in the national language. This will contribute to a more united, multilingual Malaysia where every student has the opportunity to thrive both academically and socially.

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