Malay Language Interference among Higher Education Students: The Influence of Linguistic Factors, Social Media, and Language Attitudes

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Abstract

Language interference in Malay among higher education students has become an increasingly prominent linguistic and pedagogical issue, particularly within bilingual societies and digitally mediated environments. This article aims to identify the level of Malay language interference among students at UNITAR International University and to analyse the influence of linguistic factors, social media usage, and students' attitudes toward the language. The study employed a descriptive mixed-methods approach, involving a questionnaire administered to 30 students and semi-structured interviews with six selected participants. Descriptive statistical analysis revealed that the level of language interference was moderate to high (mean = 3.82), with social media factors recording the highest mean score. Qualitative findings further confirmed the dominance of digital language practices and code-mixing in students' communication. This study contributes to the local higher education sociolinguistic literature and proposes targeted institutional-level interventions to strengthen the use of standard Malay as a language of knowledge.

Keywords: Malay Language Interference, Social Media, Language Attitudes, Linguistic Factors, Higher Education

Introduction

Malay is the national and official language of Malaysia, functioning as the primary medium of communication, national unity, and knowledge dissemination. Within the context of higher education, Malay serves not only as a medium of teaching and learning but also as a symbol of national identity and indigenous scholarship, reflecting linguistic sovereignty. However, socio-cultural changes, the influence of globalisation, and rapid developments in communication technology have introduced new challenges to the preservation and elevation of Malay, particularly among younger generations in higher education institutions.

One increasingly evident challenge is the phenomenon of language interference, which refers to mixed language use that deviates from standard grammatical norms and involves code-mixing between Malay and other languages, particularly English. This phenomenon is clearly observable in students' daily interactions, especially on social media platforms, informal communication, and even in academic writing that lacks strict linguistic regulation. If left unaddressed, language interference may undermine the clarity of academic communication, weaken scholarly writing skills, and threaten the position of Malay as a language of knowledge in higher education institutions.

Language plays a crucial role in civilisation building and national identity, particularly in a multicultural society such as Malaysia. Malay is not only recognised as the national and official language but also functions as a unifying symbol of a pluralistic society (Sivaraj, 2023). This recognition is enshrined in Article 152 of the Federal Constitution and reinforced through the National Language Act 1963/67. Within the education system, Malay functions as a cross-disciplinary language of knowledge, forming the foundation of local academic discourse across social, cultural, and intellectual domains.

This article empirically examines the factors contributing to Malay language interference among students at UNITAR International University, specifically focusing on linguistic factors, social media influence, and students' attitudes toward Malay. It offers a methodologically clear and theory-driven discussion, with findings intended to assist educators and policymakers. Ultimately, the research seeks to foster a deeper understanding of language interference's causes and inform the development of effective interventions to strengthen standard Malay usage as a language of knowledge in higher education

Problem Statement

Current realities reveal that Malay language interference is a prominent linguistic and pedagogical issue among university students, particularly within bilingual societies and digitally mediated environments. This phenomenon, which this study found to be widespread with a moderate to high level of occurrence, is characterized by language use that deviates from standard grammatical norms, excessively incorporates foreign linguistic elements especially code-mixing between Malay and English and is influenced by informal language varieties. The pervasive use of social media platforms such as TikTok, WhatsApp, and Instagram has profoundly shaped students' communication styles toward brevity, slang, and structural informality, with this research identifying social media influence as the most dominant contributing factor. Recent studies corroborate that social media introduces a culture of brevity, informality, and abbreviation, impacting academic writing (Harith et al., 2025), and that digital media influences Malay language use among youth, leading to linguistic changes and the erosion of standard Malay through borrowing from English and Indonesian slang (Rohmah et al., 2025). Additionally, casual attitudes toward standard language use and the influence of regional dialects further contribute to the erosion of standard Malay usage. This not only threatens Malay's function as a language of knowledge but may also undermine students' credibility in academic and professional communication contexts.

Language interference, defined as the application of linguistic features from one language to another by a bilingual or multilingual speaker (Nangle et al., 2024), manifests as inconsistent or mixed language use in terms of spelling, structure, and grammar. This phenomenon

involves deviations from standard grammatical norms and often includes code-mixing between languages (Andari, 2020; Gashimov, 2023). In the Malaysian context, particularly among bilingual communities, studies by Kihob and Mahali highlight that code-mixing between Malay and English is a common practice, leading students to normalize hybrid language practices that subsequently extend into academic contexts. This is further supported by observations that bilingual speakers frequently incorporate lexical items and grammatical features from two languages within a single sentence, a prevalent phenomenon in multilingual Malaysia (Majid, 2022).

Beyond social influences, limited reading habits and insufficient exposure to academic materials significantly contribute to weak language proficiency among students (Ali & Mis, 2021). Inadequate engagement with formal reading texts restricts vocabulary development and limits syntactic awareness, resulting in the frequent use of ungrammatical sentence structures. These weaknesses reinforce language interference in both everyday communication and academic writing. Furthermore, Kamarozzaman et al. (2023) argue that technology-based instructional media that prioritise visual and animated elements tend to emphasise entertainment-oriented learning, thereby reducing students' linguistic discipline and sustained engagement with standard language forms.

Linguistic factors also play a crucial role in shaping individual language use. Mee (2020) identifies deficiencies in syntax and morphology as primary sources of errors in standard Malay usage among university students. Similarly, Bukhari and Kechik (2022) report that Indian students frequently exhibit structural errors influenced by Tamil, particularly in determiner–modifier word order. These findings highlight the impact of first language interference on the acquisition and use of standard Malay, especially in formal written contexts (Derioh et al., 2024).

In addition, social media has emerged as the dominant mode of communication among young adults, substantially influencing language practices. Hashim and Razali (2019) observed widespread use of slang, abbreviations, and code-mixing across platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. Suhaimi and Shamsull (2022) further note that social media influencers' frequent use of informal expressions contributes to the normalisation of non-standard language forms. Consequently, colloquial terms such as *koyak* and *cringe* have become embedded in students' daily interactions, which may negatively affect their ability to produce accurate and standardised language in academic writing.

Students' attitudes toward the Malay language constitute another critical factor influencing language proficiency. Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2023) found that although students acknowledge Malay as the national language, many prefer mixed-language usage in daily communication. Similarly, Hedzir et al. (2022) report that students from T20 socioeconomic backgrounds often perceive Malay language subjects as uninteresting, resulting in reduced motivation to master the language. Such attitudes contribute to declining language quality and further reinforce language interference practices. Moreover, the continued preference for English as a language associated with career advancement exacerbates the marginalisation of standard Malay in academic and professional contexts (Ghazali et al., 2025).

Research Objectives
This study was conducted to achieve the following objectives:
1. To identify the level of Malay language interference among students at UNITAR International University.
2. To analyse the influence of linguistic factors on Malay language interference among UNITAR International University students.
3. To evaluate the influence of social media usage on Malay language interference among UNITAR International University students.
4. To examine students' attitudes toward Malay and their relationship with language interference in higher education contexts.

Research Methodology
This study adopted a mixed-methods approach using a Sequential Explanatory Design, as outlined by Creswell and Plano Clark (2023). This design was selected to allow quantitative findings to be elaborated and contextualised through qualitative inquiry, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of Malay language interference among university students.

The first phase employed a descriptive quantitative method involving a structured questionnaire administered to 30 undergraduate students from the Faculty of Education and Humanities at UNITAR International University. The questionnaire was designed to measure the extent of language interference and to examine the influence of linguistic factors, social media usage, and students' attitudes toward the Malay language. Responses were recorded using a Likert-scale format to facilitate statistical analysis.

The second phase utilised a descriptive qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected participants from the same population. Participants were selected based on their questionnaire responses to ensure representation of varying levels of language interference. The interviews aimed to obtain in-depth insights into students' language practices, experiences with digital communication, and perceptions of standard Malay usage in academic and social contexts.

Quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to generate descriptive statistics, including mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations, which were used to identify patterns and overall trends. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, involving systematic coding, categorisation, and theme development to identify recurring patterns and relationships among the key variables investigated.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during the interpretation stage, enabling data triangulation and enhancing the credibility, validity, and reliability of the research outcomes. By combining numerical trends with participants' narratives, the study achieved a more nuanced understanding of language interference and its contributing factors, in line with best practices in mixed-methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2023).

Research Sample
The study sample comprised 30 students from UNITAR International University, selected through purposive sampling to ensure alignment with the research focus on language use in

higher education contexts. Participants were chosen based on the relevance of their academic background and their active use of Malay in both academic and social communication. From this group, six respondents were further selected for semi-structured interviews to obtain in-depth qualitative insights into language practices, patterns of interference, and attitudes toward the Malay language.

Two primary research instruments were employed: a five-point Likert-scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol. The questionnaire was developed with reference to established literature on language interference, linguistic factors, social media influence, and language attitudes, and subsequently adapted to suit the objectives and context of the present study. The instrument was designed to capture respondents' perceptions and self-reported language practices in both formal and informal settings. The semi-structured interview protocol was constructed to elicit detailed narratives regarding students' language choices, experiences, and underlying rationales for their use of Malay and mixed language forms in academic and non-academic contexts.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including the computation of mean scores, percentages, and standard deviations, to identify overall trends and levels of language interference. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, which involved systematic coding, theme categorisation, and interpretative analysis to uncover recurring patterns and relationships among linguistic factors, social media practices, and language attitudes.

To enhance the validity and trustworthiness of the findings, data triangulation was conducted by comparing results from the questionnaire, interview responses, and content analysis of participants' social media posts. This multi-source approach strengthened the credibility of the interpretations and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the factors contributing to Malay language interference among university students.

Research Findings
This section presents research findings based on descriptive statistical analysis and thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews.

Respondent Demographic Profile
Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the 30 respondents. The majority were female students from the Education and Social Sciences field. Although most respondents used Malay as their primary home language, the findings indicate a bilingual environment that may influence language practices in both academic and social contexts.

Table 1
Respondent DemographicProfile (n=30)

Item	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	12	40.0
	Female	18	60.0
Field of Study	Education & Social Sciences	20	66.7
	Management & Business	10	33.3
Primary Language Spoken at Home	Malay	22	73.3
	English / Others	8	26.7

Level of Malay Language Interference
The level of Malay language interference was measured using a five-point Likert scale encompassing code-mixing, grammatical errors, and informal language use. The overall mean score of 3.82 indicates a moderate to high level of language interference, suggesting that the phenomenon is widespread rather than incidental.

Table 2
Mean Score and Standard Deviation of the Level of Malay Language Interference

Construct	Mean	Standard Deviation
Level of Malay Language Interference	3.82	0.61

Influence of Linguistic Factors, Social Media, and Attitudes
Social media influence recorded the highest mean score (mean = 4.05), indicating it as the most dominant contributing factor. The relatively low standard deviation suggests consistent agreement among respondents regarding the impact of digital communication on language practices.

Table 3
Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Factors Contributing to Malay Language Interference

Factor	Mean	Standard Deviation
Linguistic Factors	3.56	0.58
Social Media Influence	4.05	0.49
Students' Attitudes toward the Malay Language	3.42	0.64

Qualitative Findings
Thematic analysis identified three main themes: dominance of digital language, English as a prestige language, and weak mastery of standard grammar. Most participants regarded informal language use and code-mixing as normative practices, particularly in social media and bilingual academic environments.

Discussion
The findings indicate that linguistic factors play a significant role in shaping language interference among students. Continuous exposure to regional dialects, combined with sustained interaction with English in academic and social domains, contributes to the frequent occurrence of code-mixing in both spoken and written communication. This pattern aligns with previous research suggesting that code-mixing emerges from sustained social

interaction within multilingual communities and is often motivated by social affiliation and identity construction (Gajayana et al., 2023).

Among the variables examined, social media emerged as the most dominant influence on students' language practices. The pervasive use of digital platforms encourages informal communication styles, where the desire to appear modern, relatable, and socially relevant promotes the imitation of language used by online influencers. This finding supports Nurkhairunnisha Amani et al. (2022), who highlight the normalisation of mixed language practices among young users in digital spaces. The repeated exposure to non-standard forms in online environments contributes to their transfer into academic and semi-formal contexts. Students' attitudes toward the Malay language further reveal a discrepancy between ideological recognition and practical usage. While Malay continues to be formally acknowledged as the national language, students' daily communication practices indicate a preference for English or mixed language forms. The prioritisation of English as a language associated with employability and career advancement diminishes the perceived relevance of Malay in academic contexts, thereby reinforcing patterns of language interference. This attitudinal shift suggests that language choice among students is increasingly shaped by instrumental rather than cultural considerations.

Conclusion and Recommendations
Overall, this study concludes that Malay language interference among students at UNITAR International University arises from a complex interaction of linguistic background, social media influence, and language attitudes. Among these factors, social media was identified as the most dominant influence, promoting informal language use and pervasive code-mixing practices. Linguistic factors and students' attitudes toward the Malay language further reinforce these patterns across both academic and social contexts.

In response to these findings, the study recommends the implementation of holistic and institution-level interventions, including the strengthening of academic Malay language proficiency courses at the university level, stricter enforcement of standard language use in academic writing and assessment tasks, and the introduction of innovative, high-impact language awareness initiatives. Such measures may enhance students' linguistic discipline and reinforce the role of standard Malay as a language of knowledge.

Future research should extend this investigation by involving larger and more diverse samples across multiple institutions and academic disciplines, thereby enabling broader generalisation and deeper insight into patterns of Malay language interference within Malaysian higher education.

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