

Perceptions of Students in the Malay Language Program at Feng Chia University

Persepsi Pelajar terhadap Program Bahasa Melayu di Universiti Feng Chia

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ABSTRACT

Identifiable motives and strong perseverance are crucial factors for Effective Foreign Language Acquisition. There is no doubt that motivation for learning English for instrumental reasons is strong since English as a lingua franca is globally required of education advancement and career development. Likewise, learning Japanese and Spanish is also considered as important for Taiwanese students to enhance competitiveness in the global job market as Taiwanese corporates are reaching out to all continents of the world. But the exact reasons why an increasing number of Taiwanese students are learning Malay language still remain unclear. The fact that Malay language is the most used language in ASEAN and thus possesses the strongest demand by global industries investing in the Malay world. Reasonably, it should play a determining role in attracting more Taiwanese learners of Malay language. However, whether Taiwanese students identify the growing global demand of Malay language and whether they recognize the potential importance of understanding Malay language and culture in their future endeavors still need to be explored. Program planners and educators would not be able to deliver lessons that meet the needs of students without a solid understanding of students' expectations of the efficacy of Malay language courses. Therefore, this study aims to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of studying the Malay language of Taiwanese students at Feng Chia University. This study, in particular, is conducted to unveil reasons and outcomes of learning Malay language and trends.

Keywords: Malay language as a foreign language; students' perceptions; motivation; learning outcomes

ABSTRAK

Motif yang jelas dan kesungguhan yang kuat adalah faktor penting untuk Pemerolehan Bahasa asing yang berkesan. Tidak dinafikan bahawa motivasi untuk belajar bahasa Inggeris merupakan alasan instrumental yang kuat kerana kedudukan bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa lingua franca dan diperlukan secara global untuk kemajuan pendidikan dan pembangunan kerjaya. Dalam masa yang sama belajar bahasa Jepun dan Sepanyol juga dianggap penting bagi pelajar Taiwan untuk meningkatkan daya saing di pasaran pekerjaan global kerana syarikat Taiwan telah menjangkau ke seluruh dunia. Tetapi alasan sebenar mengapa semakin ramai pelajar Taiwan belajar bahasa Melayu masih kekal tidak jelas. Jelas bahawa bahasa Melayu adalah bahasa yang paling banyak digunakan di ASEAN dan dengan itu mempunyai permintaan paling kuat oleh industri global yang melabur di dunia Melayu. Secara wajar, ia harus memainkan peranan penting dalam menarik lebih ramai pelajar bahasa Melayu dari Taiwan. Namun, sama ada pelajar Taiwan mengenal pasti permintaan global bahasa Melayu yang semakin meningkat dan adakah mereka menyedari betapa pentingnya memahami bahasa dan budaya Melayu dalam usaha masa depan mereka masih perlu diterokai. Tanpa pemahaman yang kuat mengenai persepsi pelajar terhadap keberkesanan kursus bahasa Melayu, perancang program dan pendidik tidak akan dapat menawarkan program pelajaran yang memenuhi keperluan pelajar. Oleh itu, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mendapatkan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai persepsi pelajar Taiwan terhadap pembelajaran Bahasa Melayu di Universiti Feng Chia. Tentunya, kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkap sebab dan hasil pembelajaran bahasa dan budaya Melayu.

Kata kunci: Bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa asing; persepsi pelajar; motivasi; hasil pembelajaran

INTRODUCTION

TAIWAN'S NEW SOUTHBOUND POLICY

As one of the top 20 outward foreign direct investment (OFDI) countries, Taiwan has been

employing a New Southbound Policy to encourage investment and trade, tourism, educational ties, and cultural interactions with Southeast Asian countries including Malaysia (The New Southbound Policy n.d.). Historically, Taiwan-Malaysia relations were established in the 1960's with the opening of the

Republic of China's Consulate in Kuala Lumpur. Today, even after the end of diplomatic relations in 1974 between the two countries, bilateral relations of economics, education, and cultures are still closely maintained.

Moreover, in addition to economics and politics, Malaysia Chinese share much the same culture with Taiwanese. Therefore, there's no surprising to note that out of a total of 117,970 international students who studied in Taiwan in 2017, 37,999 were from countries that are part of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy including 10 ASEAN countries (35,460), six South Asian countries (1,839) and Australia and New Zealand (700), according to Taiwan's Ministry of Education (2018). Moreover, among the ASEAN students studying in Taiwan, there were 17,079 Malaysians, making Malaysia the largest source of overseas students in Taiwan. It is also worth noting that among more than 160,000 alumni of Feng Chia University, 5,000 are from Malaysia.

As a prestigious private university in Taiwan, FCU has been playing as the bellwether in strengthening international educational relations, especially between Taiwan and Malaysia. As a recognizable example of its active involvement in collaborating with universities in Malaysia, FCU co-organized with Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Universiti Sains Malaysia, and Taiwan Education Center, Malaysia, and successfully hosted the *2014 Malaysia-Taiwan Higher Education Forum*, the first of its kind. Following the successful 2014 experience, FCU continued to co-organize the *2016 Malaysia-Taiwan Higher Education Forum* held in Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. Themes of the two collaborative forums, which were focused on student global mobility and human capital development, clearly indicate the present and future trends and goals for international collaboration of higher education institutes. Results of these two forums by FCU and partner universities in Malaysia were fruitful. According to an MOE report (2016), an increased number of cooperative agreements were signed and a greater number of Malaysian students were enrolled in Taiwan's higher education in 2017.

In light of Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, cultivation of personnel with expertise in languages for New Southbound Policy is critical to avoid any developmental bottleneck (Guideline for the New Southbound Policy, n.d.). Unfortunately, according to related reports, Taiwan is currently in a serious shortage of Southeast Asian language talents and proficient speakers (Yang 2017). In order to resolve such a change, Taiwan government has allocated

a substantive amount of funding for universities and colleges to cultivate proficient speakers and language experts of Southeast Asian languages (Yeoh, Chang & Zhang 2018).

MOTIVATION FOR LEARNING MALAY LANGUAGE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

It is widely known that Malaysia's manufacturing firms are predominantly owned by ethnic Chinese. Since employers tend to hire employees sharing ethnic and cultural similarity, it is anticipated that Taiwanese companies in Malaysia are more willing to employ either Malaysian students who have received higher education in Taiwan or Taiwanese students who possess communication skills in Malay language. Hence, it may create attractive incentives for Taiwanese students to learn Malay language in order to broaden their career possibilities and increase competitive advantage in Malaysia and the Malay world.

THE MALAY LANGUAGE COURSES AT FCU

The Foreign Language Center of Feng Chia University (FCU) offers ten foreign languages with the purpose of training basic foreign language skills for enhancing students' global mobility. Each foreign language is divided into four levels. Levels (1) and (2) are offered every semester; Levels (3) and (4) are offered when over 20 students are enrolled.

Given the background described in the previous sections, FCU's Malay Language program was launched in Fall Semester, 2018. Since then, six classes of Malay Language, four classes of Malay (1) and two classes of Malay (2), have been offered to a total of over 300 students. The course aims to train basic Malay pronunciation with elementary vocabulary and grammatical structures, which is strongly focused on speaking and listening skills. Necessary vocabulary is provided for all topics to help learners converse in Malay with Malay speakers. In addition to language training, socio-cultural factors are also introduced through class activities in order to enhance learning motivation and cultural understanding. Specifically, the unified course objectives are:

1. Students will be able to introduce oneself in basic Malay.
2. Students will be able to understand authentic materials and express themselves in a satisfactory manner in basic Malay.
3. Students will gain awareness of cultural differences between Taiwan and Malaysia.

As for the course instructors, in addition to an instructor who is a Chinese Malaysian and who had been living and teaching in Taiwan for years, a visiting professor from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) joined the faculty in 2018. Following the scholar exchange and academic collaboration of a signed MoU by UKM and FCU in December 2017, Dr. Junaini Kasdan of Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA), UKM visited FCU in Fall Semester

of 2018 to not only offer classes of Malay language, seminars and micro-credits on Malay Studies, but also to build academic links schools and colleges of the two universities. Most importantly, Prof. Kasdan made an invaluable contribution to help FCU develop an international and muslim-friendly campus. During her visit at FCU, Taiwanese students were able to gain be exposed to Malay language through hands-on cultural activities (Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. Cultural Activities of Malay Language

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

Students of Malay Language (1) and (2) with a total number of 42, participated in this survey in the final week of Fall Semester, 2019. There were 30 females and 12 males. Twenty-seven (64.3%) of them are from Taiwan, 12 (28.6%) from Malaysia, and 3 (7.1%) from other countries. Over half of the students, 26 (61.9%) were in their senior year, 12 (28.6%) junior year, 2 (4.8%) sophomores, and 2 (4.8%) freshmen. As for majors, a majority of the students, 25 (59.6%), were in business and finance, 15 (35.8%) students were in engineering and computing, only 2 (4.8%) were in humanities. Three (7.1%) students use Malay language at home, but prior to taking the Malay language classes, 24

(57.1%) of them were able to understand spoken Malay language, 7 (16.7%) were able to speak, and 6 (14.3%) could write in Malay language. Prior to taking the classes, 18 (42.9%) students had been to Malay speaking countries and 23 (54.8%) had been in Malay culture.

MEASURE AND PROCEDURE

To gain an in-depth understanding of student perspectives on the effectiveness of Malay Language (1) and (2) courses, a survey instrument was developed by the author with a primary aim to measure quantitatively and qualitatively learning motivation, goals, and outcomes. It is a Likert scale instrument with response options between 1 to 5 with 1 being strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 neutrals, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. As for data

analysis, a description design was used to examine student' perceptions of the impacts of the courses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the final week of Fall semester, 2019, two classes of Malay (1) and (2) with a total number of 42 students participated in the survey. At a first glance, overall responses to the survey questions about the course are relatively high ($M = 4.28$), which may show that the students were relatively positive and satisfied with the instruction and learning outcomes. The highest mean score of the categories of learning outcomes and impacts of the courses are 4.5 and 4.52, respectively. The results illustrate that the students were most satisfied with the increased level of understanding Malay culture and that they were interested in travelling to the Malay world. Means, standard deviations, and frequencies and percentages of affirmative responses (i.e., strongly agree and agree) are reported in the tables below.

LEARNING MOTIVATION AND GOALS

Motivation for learning second/foreign languages can be divided into two basic types: instrumental and integrative (Brown 2007). Instrumental motivation refers to learning as a means for attaining instrumental goals. Integrative motivation, on the other hand, describes learners' desires to integrate themselves into the culture and people who speak the target language. It had been anticipated before conducting this survey that the students were enrolled in Malay language for instrumental purposes. Not surprisingly, about one third of the students, 14 (33.3%), expressed that their purpose was to gain academic credits, 5 (11.9%) for travels, 2 (4.8%) for job opportunities, and 1 for short-term oversea learning. Nevertheless, a greater number of students, 20 (47.6%), registered for the classes for integrative reasons. That is, they took the classes

primarily out of interests in Malay language and culture.

As for goals for learning Malay language, over two thirds of the students (28, 64.3%) aimed to develop spoken Malay language skills including speaking (21, 50%) and pronunciation (6, 14.3%). Eight students (19%) were interested in cultural awareness and understanding. The rest of the students intended to learn listening (4, 9.5%), grammar (1, 2.4%), and writing (1, 2.4%). The fact that more students were interested in developing oral skills shows that developing communication skills is the students' first priority.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Overall, a great majority of the students (39, 92.9%) agreed that they successfully achieved their intended goals of learning Malay language. Among them, 22 students strongly agreed, and 17 students agreed that they had learned the language skills that they set to learn. The students perceived successful development of speaking, reading and writing skills with mean scores of 4.38, 4.31, and 4.33, respectively. Along with the language skills, cultural understanding and interests were also simultaneously enhanced in the class. Positive effects of incorporating cultural awareness in language classrooms have been suggested by language educators and scholars (Brown, 2007). Therefore, culture should be embedded in language learning activities not only to make the learning more fun, but also to gain both the language and the culture effectively. In the Malay Language classes, a considerable amount of time was allocated for experiential activities, cooking and handcrafting for example. The students' high appraisal of the learning outcomes in this study confirms the effectiveness of incorporating cultural elements in the language class for cultivating cultural awareness and indirectly reinforcing language skills.

TABLE 1. Learning Outcomes ($N = 42$)

Item	Mean	SD	Freq.	%
Understanding Malay culture	4.50	.63	39	92.9
Higher interests in Malay culture	4.29	.77	34	81%
Ability for introducing Malay culture	4.10	.79	36	85.7
Speaking basic Malay	4.38	.73	36	85.7
Reading basic Malay	4.31	.81	35	83.3
Writing basic Malay	4.33	.75	33	78.6
Higher interests in learning Malay	4.26	.80	37	88.1
Higher confidence in learning Malay	4.33	.69	35	83.4

Note: Frequencies and percentages are of affirmative responses: strongly agree and agree.

IMPACTS OF THE COURSES

The students expressed a strong interest in continuation of learning Malay language ($M = 4.05$). The enduring interest may serve as an indicator of heightened learning motivation and confidence through the classroom instruction. In addition, the interest in continuing learning Malay language may also help attract the students to travel ($M = 4.52$) and to study ($M = 3.93$) in the Malay world. It is worth noting here that, although not as many students (28, 64.3%) expressed interests in seeking job opportunities in the Malay world, 11 others (26.2%) felt uncertain and only 4 were did not consider it,

the uncertainty about future career may imply that the students seemed to have started considering the possibility of broadening their career prospect. What they may still need to be more certain is with additional information about benefits about working in the Malay world. Consistent interactions with the people and the culture of the Malay world to form more integrative interests may also help. Two additional questions about whether they would recommend friends to learning Malay language ($M = 4.55$) and culture ($M = 4.55$) also received relatively high responses from the students, which may serve as an indirect indicator for students' high level of course satisfaction.

TABLE 2. Impacts of the Courses ($N = 42$)

Item	Mean	SD	Freq.	%
Will continue learning Malay	4.05	1.01	32	76.2
Became interested in travelling to the Malay world	4.52	.59	40	95.2
Would consider job opportunities in the Malay world	3.88	1.31	28	64.3
Would consider studying in the Malay world	3.93	.97	28	64.3
Will recommend friends to learn Malay language	4.55	.63	39	92.9
Will recommend friends to learn Malay culture	4.55	.59	40	95.2
Higher interests in learning Malay	4.26	.80	37	88.1
Higher confidence in learning Malay	4.33	.69	35	83.4

Note: Frequencies and percentages are of affirmative responses: strongly agree and agree.

QUALITATIVE RESPONSES

Two open-end questions were provided in the last part of the survey to elicit more feedback about the courses. The two questions are: (a) What impressed you most of the class? and (b) What cultural items and foods as introduced in the class impressed you most? In responding to the former question, the students considered songs, foods, culture, the instructors, teaching activities and the relaxing classroom environment impressed them most. There is no doubt that the instructors play the most important in facilitating learning and fostering interests. In addition, the most impressive food items introduced in class were pakai topi kipas (扇子帽), daun pandan (香蘭葉), and nasi lemak (辣死你媽, 椰漿飯). Interestingly, the students were most fascinated by the paper-based parking coupons used in Malaysia. A student's brief response about his/her overall appraisal of the class can be used here to illuminate the effectiveness of the Malay language instruction: "cute teacher, fun class, easy learning, simply happy".

As found in these student responses, foods, culture, and class activities experienced in the Malay

Language classes were highly rated. Not only that they received the knowledge of Malay language, they also experienced cultural activities to gain understanding about and appreciation for Malay and Islamic cultures in the non-threatening learning environment. Obviously, the students agreed that the friendly instructors, hands-on activities, and fun atmosphere all worked to their benefits and were keys to the enhancement of learning motivation and confidence. Such a finding is in line with that of Bahaudin and Ikhsan (2016): "If learning the foreign or second language was not inserted or implemented the values of culture the students would [be] hard to understand the meaning of language being learned" (p. 12).

CONCLUSION

According to Taiwan's New Southbound Policy, cultivation of proficiency language speakers and language experts of Southeast Asian languages especially Malay language are in an urgent demand for growth and exchanges in the areas of economic and trade relations, investment, tourism, culture, and

talent. Bearing in mind both the national's foreign policy and students' international competitiveness, Feng Chia University launched a Malay Language program in 2018 to provide training of basic Malay language and cultivation of cultural understanding.

This paper reports effectiveness of the Malay Language program from student perspectives. Students' perceptions about the program can be concluded in three aspects: affective outcomes, language skills, and impacts on the future. As for affective outcomes, the students were generally positive about the enhancement in motivation, confidence, and interests in language Malay language. The heightened motivation can be seen from their willingness to continue learning the language even after completing the course. Moreover, the students' interests are shown in learning both Malay language and culture. That is, student's motivation for learning the language had moved towards integrativeness, which has been suggested by language researchers to be closely correlated with successful language learning (Brown 2007). In terms of students' perceptions about language skills, the students observed their growths in speaking, reading, and writing skills of Malay language. In particular, they praised the instructors, class activities, and non-threatening atmosphere for being motivating, beneficial, and fun. With such language growths, the students became more willing to go beyond the classroom. Their thoughts for the future were impacted by the learning experience and outcomes of the course. Last, the students' perceptions about the course impact includes impacts on job seeking, travelling,

and further studying in the Malay world. Based on the students' perceptions about the Malay language program of Feng Chia University, it is suggested that effectiveness of a language course should not be determined solely by the language factor, what is more important should be to take students' affective gains and impacts on the future into considerations.

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