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ASSESSING MALAY PROFICIENCY AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL: CRITERIA FEATURES IN LEARNER LANGUAGE

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Despite the variations in verbal interaction, the standard of evaluation for summative assessment is somewhat straightforward in foreign language education. The consensus on what is foreign language proficiency is typically based on first language (L1) proficiency. The introduction of criteria features indicative of learner proficiency based on second language learner English corpora, in a recent study from Cambridge, suggests that differentiating learner grammar from standard grammar may be an agenda in language evaluation. Criteria features are useful to ascertain if a foreign language learner has attained an expected proficiency unique to the learning environment and if the examinable learning outcome is distinguishable as an A or a B or a C, etc. in the standard gradation of language assessment. This discussion highlights certain positive features identifiable as basic characteristics of learner proficiency in Malay. Differing from current standard L1 grammars that are derived from contemporary discourses of mass media, the Malay criteria features presented in the discussion are based on learner language. The Malay criteria discussed may initiate a prototype towards the schemata befitting the assessment of Malay proficiency unique to beginners in foreign language education.

Keywords: applied linguistics, blogging Malay, criteria features, e-learning, language learning, Malay assessment, Malay as foreign language, small sampling, tertiary Malay

INTRODUCTION

All school-going Singapore students are required to study their respective mother tongues, which may either be Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi or Urdu (Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2010). These mother tongue languages are offered at Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), General Certificate of Education (GCE) N-level, O-level, A-level and Baccalaureate examinations. A recent expression of interest in changing the weighting of mother tongue subjects as part of the entrance requirement for secondary school has sparked much interest. A Malay commentary, for example, informs that

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Malay as a mother tongue may receive less emphasis in the PSLE (*Berita Harian*, 2010). It is further explained that such a policy change will better position students who are weak in their mother tongue to compete for a place at their favourite secondary schools.

The teaching and learning of mother tongues in Singapore received much attention in the history of education in the 1960s (1966 for primary school and in 1968 for secondary school, Shepherd, 2005). Currently a decade into the 21st century, the public discussion on mother tongues in Singapore is concerned with the positive and negative implications arising from lesser weighting of the mother tongue as an academic subject. The final decision announced on 11 May 2010 by the Prime Minister maintains that the status quo on the current weighting of mother tongue subjects shall prevail in the present education system. In addition, attempts to further enhance mother tongue education include implementing a smaller teacher-student ratio, differentiated teaching approaches according to the abilities of the students, and varied assessment on language proficiency at various levels rather than one final examination (*Channel NewsAsia*, 2010).

Arising from the quandary in the measurement of proficiency in mother tongue languages is the opportunity to examine the evaluation underlying Malay as a foreign language (see the discussion in Sew, 2013 for a macro perspective on the assessment of Malay as a foreign language). The assumption we hold is that native Malay proficiency is the common standard for measuring the foreign language proficiency of adult learners. Our discussion begins with the following question: is the advocacy of native proficiency in a prescribed mother tongue education relevant in an education system that uses English as the medium of instruction? If less favourable results in mother tongue assessment are partly due to applying a near-native standard in assessment, one may question the relevance of native-like proficiency despite the different heritage backgrounds of the learners. This discussion acknowledges that the relevance of language competence as a convenient prescriptive measure to facilitate the assessment of written examinations. An underlying generative enterprise embedded in language evaluation that expects adherence to axiomatic language patterns, at least in written examinations, is at work in current language assessment.

BEYOND THE STANDARD

At the tertiary level, a functional approach may be useful to assess Malay as a foreign language for non-native speakers (see the Review of Literature). A logical question would be could there be alternatives to the practice of assessing Malay proficiency in foreign and second language education based on the standard of Malay proficiency as L1? Encouraging outcomes were reported in several studies advocating pedagogical strategy that incorporates the first

language in the teaching of a second language or a foreign language (Sharimllah and Hajar, 2004; Siti Hamin and A. Hameed, 2011). First, there is a stylised variety to standard Malay grammar itself. In foreign language education, adult beginners handle a variety that is based on the grammar of contemporary Malay discourse (Asmah, 2009). To cite an example, Malex, a corpus database of 2.5 million words, contain excerpts from Malay novels, other printed materials and speeches by a Malay politician (Knowles and Zuraidah, 2008: 1–33). It may be argued that the standard variety is arbitrarily derived from a selected corpus of Malay utterances that are collectively agreed upon as the norms of standard Malay grammar in accordance with the research agenda of the gatekeepers (cf. Sew, 2012a, 2011; Zuraidah, 2013, in which the literature review highlights the problem of pre-setting a particular theory before the data in many of the existing studies on the morphophonemic rules in Malay).

A detailed analysis of the syntax of contemporary Malay discourse, however, may contain structures that are in conflict with the prescriptive standard grammar. Examples of current Malay illustrate the point (Mana Sikana, 2009: 142, English translation mine):

PAK ABU (mengeluarkan rokoknya [retrieving his cigarette]):

Rokok encik [Cigarette sir]. King Size.

ENCIK JAMAL: Apa namanya ini? [What is the name of this?]

The print data above indicates a flaunting of standard Malay grammar. In the second phrase *Apa namanya ini*, both the anaphoric *-nya* and the deictic demonstrative *ini* refer to the cigarette. The identifying strategies by means of two types of grammar words, namely, a Malay clitic and a proximal demonstrative in the utterance, are considered to be unacceptable according to the prescription of standard Malay grammar (e.g., see Nik Safiah et al., 2008: 295–296) or redundant in contemporary Malay grammar (e.g., see Asmah, 2009: 92).

Further complicating the communicative-interactive matter, there are two types of Malay data found in a separate analysis of blog posts. In the blog of a Malay medical student, one could find authentic Malay utterances spoken by a street Malay medicine seller as well as a hybrid variety containing a mesh of Malay and English phrases posted by educated fellow Malay bloggers in the comments section of the blog (Azni and Koo, 2009). This is a case of different levels of language competency in relation to the "native speaker" found in many linguistic studies that relied on judgments from speakers who had acquired the language in school (cf. Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky, 2013a).¹ In the scrutiny of blog-based syntactic variance online, the language features that emerge from utterances and comments may contain linguistic patterns that conform and digress from the standard grammatical features. If linguistic output is a creative-generative enterprise, each naturally produced Malay utterance is

related to a construction that is acquired based on a discriminating learning system or model that factored negative learning inputs as the perimeter (Ramscar, Dye and McCauley, 2013).

LITERATURE REVIEW

On the Malay front, the November 2009 issue of *Dewan Bahasa* contains academic discourse focusing on internationalisation of Malay. (*Dewan Bahasa* is a monthly Malay periodical chronicling the current development of Malay.) However, there is a glaring gap on Malay as a foreign language in the effort to internationalise Malay. Until quite recently, Malay language education was limited to the teaching of Malay as a first language. Practical resources equipped with audio material for Malay learning are uncommon, although Zaharah and Sutanto (2005) provide a shining example. The problems faced by language learners mastering Malay as a foreign language have received considerable academic attention. Several studies in Asia have discussed pedagogical issues in learning Malay as a foreign language. As the bastion of Malay language development, the official national language and literary institute *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* has published one study on the errors made by secondary school Chinese learners of Malay as a second language (Ong, 2009). The study compared learner errors in Malay sentences with common errors found in Malay print media, using three Malay dailies and a monthly periodical.

While teacher domination in classroom discourse is considered to be a weak teaching strategy in Malay language teaching (Idris and Rosniah, 2006), lecturer-led learning, however, is a preferred learning method in the acquisition of Malay as a foreign language (Vijayaletchumy, Che Ibrahim and Yong, 2013). Based on 114 questionnaires, it was observed that international students learning Malay at an institution of higher learning depended heavily on their lecturers to learn the language. Ironically, the researchers report that there was little opportunity for the foreign students to learn Malay beyond the formal learning environment.

These opportunities are really difficult to obtain outside of the classroom, particularly when the location or place of study is in the urban area...The younger generation in Malaysia that has already mastered this second language will automatically continue to communicate in the English language. Hence, the Malay language cannot be practised in the environment or the real world (Vijayaletchumy, Che Ibrahim and Yong, 2013: 179).

It is the case that it is difficult to come by opportunities to speak standard Malay strictly during informal face-to-face encounters (cf. Kärchner-Ober, 2012), especially after the contact time in the language classroom. A similar concern regarding the lack of Malay language exposure has been expressed by a French professor who teaches Malay in France in regard to selecting the country for a Malay language immersion programme (interpersonal communication with Professor Laurent Metzger at Lau Pa Sat, Singapore, 2011). In a different study that addresses the changing landscape of Malay language education, the need to realign the content of Malay lessons with the profiles of Malay learners in relation to the inclusion of current world events towards a progressive curriculum has been advocated as a strategy for sustainable Malay language education (Sew, 2012b).

The use of the Malay learner language as an object of investigation is less common at the tertiary level compared to the use of the language at the secondary school level. There are certain findings on how adult learners acquire Malay, but little has been reported on what type of Malay grammar is being produced and learned. Chun and Normaliza (2012) have observed the learning preferences in the acquisition of Malay among Korean students. Their study on 74 Korean students learning Malay at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies found that the Korean learners preferred the conventional ways of learning Malay, which included gap filling, Chinese whisper, bingo, word maze, big dice, truth & dare, blind man, simulation, give me a call and chain story. According to the report, these students disliked or strongly disliked technology-based language learning methods such as gap filling, music video, bingo, crossword puzzle, language songs, computer quiz, language games, e-short stories, blog and e-chatting.

However, despite the fact that 30 students (or 40% of the Korean students) agreed that blogging in Malay was an interesting activity for learning the language, the number was classified as minority in the study (Chun and Normaliza, 2012: 214). The remaining 44 students who claimed that blog was not a good tool offered the reason that they could not find the suitable words or sentences to blog, not that blogging was a difficult method of acquiring Malay. The lack of language proficiency due to the difficulty level of the language task was considered to be the fault of technology-based language learning in the study. There seems to be a risk of comparing apples with oranges in making broad base assumptions in the study. In addition to the discrepancy issue regarding comparisons, normalising language learners as a uniform entity propagates the problem of dehumanisation in learning (cf. Kalantzis and Cope, 2008). If language learning is a social experience overlapping with a uniquely individualised performance in foreign language education (cf. Lam, 2000; 2004; Sew, 2010), matching a learner's learning preference with the relevant teaching methodology becomes an important component in the learner-centred teaching environment (cf. Lazaar, 1999).

This paper represents an intervention, proposing that a functional approach to language measurement may be useful for assessing Malay as a foreign language for non-native speakers because language learning may not have the internalisation phase that occurs during natural acquisition. Recent studies on language learning and assessment show a developing interest in the learner's cognitive response to words and grammatical constructions as well as to the (morpho-)syntactic rules applied, whether correctly or incorrectly (Hawkins and Buttery, 2009; Mittelberg, Farmer and Waugh, 2006). The present discussion attempts to examine certain actual learning outputs noticeable in the Malay blog entries of adult learners in foreign language education at the tertiary level. The entries provide a sampling of syntactic patterns that are acquired in formal learning. Currently, some of the English features that are more conducive to language learning, identified in Hawkins and Buttery (2009), are frequency (vs. infrequency), structural simplicity (vs. structural complexity) and cross-linguistic influence. The introduction of *criteria features* based on second language learners' English corpora indicative of learner proficiency provides a window that allows us to observe the learner's authentic language experience.

An underlying assumption of basing language evaluation on a standard linguistic ideal in language examinations is that native speakers use language in a rule-governed fashion. Therefore, language learners are expected to maintain rule-based grammar competence. The linguistic features of actual language learning outcomes, however, might not correlate with the standard linguistic feature of L1 grammar. This investigation suggests that a reasonable alternative to assessing linguistic performance beyond the norms of native grammar may be used in applied linguistics. This study hopes to yield an enriched view of young adult bilingualism by exploiting the complementary strengths of more than one linguistic paradigm in language analyses (Yip and Matthews, 2007: 22–55). Despite the present exploration of a functional alternative in foreign language measurement, we concede that universal grammar remains the core language architecture at the abstract level, as explicated in Baker (2009), Maxwell (2010) and Tallerman (2009). Psycholinguistic experiments have captured the relevance of syntactic constituents based on universal grammar at the abstract level in an artificially constructed language for the learners to identify the grammar of the particular language (Lidz, 2010).

Adhering to standard grammar, many second language examiners have to date consistently imported the generative enterprise (un)knowingly to language assessments. The standpoint of such practice reflects the *modus operandi* of an ideal world containing a version of the internalised knowledge of the language (see the notion of I-language in Chomsky). A recent study has argued that the relationship between I-language and E-language (external language) is dialectic because I-language is traceable on the basis of its exposure to E-language (Taylor, 2010). While the inseparable dialectic relationship between I- and E-language is interesting, we need to acknowledge that the E-language exposed to a

native speaker or learner includes all manner of erroneous grammatical features uttered on the fly. The mechanism that prevents a native speaker from acquiring the inaccurate syntactic strings remains unaccounted for in the E- appropriating I-language model. How the native speaker recognises and memorises the limited sequences of his native syntax in a short period of time while blocking the irregular syntactic patterns from superseding the preferred and acceptable ones remains a question that requires psycholinguistic explanations based on a discriminating learning system that correlates the acquired version of grammar with the existing language architecture. The discriminating learning model, which currently shows promising findings, has a descriptive adequacy that precludes the practice of setting theory before data (Ramscar, Dye and McCauley, 2013; Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky, 2013b).

METHODOLOGY

In defence of small sampling in applied linguistics research, this discussion notes that there are many significant studies in applied linguistics that are based on very few subjects. Michael Halliday's seminal work on child language development (1975), which identified seven categories of language function, was a language development study based on one subject, a boy named Nigel. In the field of digital language identity, Eva Lam had conducted a study based on an immigrant Chinese teenager in the US named Almon. Her study outlined invisible second language (L2) practices from maintaining a personal website about a Japanese pop star (Lam, 2000). Lam's study has ramifications for the pivotal role played by online communities in L2 literacy, especially in the selection of voice and the construction of L2 identity on the Internet (Beavis, 2008). In speech and the construction of masculinity, however, Cameron (1997) traced the distortion of gender in the slurs of four male college students. Despite the limitation of the sample quantity, each of these studies has managed to unravel instructive outcomes.²

The linguistic features of learner language represent developing learner proficiency, which stems from a unique learning experience. Our discussion analyses the acceptable Malay grammar features that surface from the process of blogging Malay literacy with the intention of identifying a set of parameters to measure learner proficiency at the beginner level. Distinguishing everyday Malay usage from abstract grammar rules is the first step towards a battery of Malay proficiency as a foreign language. More importantly, the measuring of proficiency *a posteriori* is in alignment with the six levels of language proficiency of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for evaluating English. The CEFR levels of proficiency include A1 Breakthrough, A2 Waystage, B1 Threshold, B2 Vantage, C1 Effective Operational Proficiency and C2 Mastery (Hawkins and Buttery, 2009: 159; Fulcher, 2008: 164).

Learner corpora offer exemplary expressions in contrast to the examiner's linguistic intuitions. Judgments made by native speakers usually indicate inconsistencies with regard to morpho-syntactic patterns, not least because the language competency in each native speaker varies according to different speakers. In the study of Malay morpho-syntax, for example, different degrees of tolerance by educated native speakers based on *ad hoc* judging of Malay syntactic constructions embedded with reduplication were recorded (Sew, 2007). Furthermore, the linguistic data may be rare examples uncommon to the speakers (cf. Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky, 2013b). Language assessment based on the native speaker's judgment of syntactic constructions, thus, is an unreliable criterion.

Introducing the actual features of learner proficiency in foreign language education mitigates a one-sided subjective language evaluation on the examiner's part. An examination of learner language suggests that it is necessary to differentiate between standard grammar and learner grammar to arrive at a more realistic picture of foreign and second language assessment. It may be further argued that learner language is a form of negotiated syntactic patterns based on guided interaction and discriminative grammar input in language learning. The present discussion relates learner grammar to a type of continuing construction within the learning interaction similar to the aptitude development examined in Schwarz et al. (2008). The criteria features in the written Malay production of young adult learners supply a practical schema to measure language proficiency. The database consists of grammar patterns composed of acceptable Malay expressions derived from the Malay blog entries of four non-native learners.

The small sampling in this exploratory study may pave the way for random samplings of Malay learner corpora in the future. Following an inductive approach, the entries are scanned for patterns of basic grammatical structures. The findings represent the progression of grammar development among young adult learners towards Malay proficiency in foreign language education. The acquired Malay syntax of the undergraduates constructs a relevant matrix for feeding reliable evaluative data into the assessment rubrics in Malay-as-a-foreign-language classrooms. In contrast to morpho-semiotic concerns, such as capitalisation, spelling errors, abbreviation and a lack of interesting phrases in the Malay writing proficiency of upper secondary classes based on the judgments of so-called experienced teachers, as reported in Nadzrah, Norsimah and Nor Hashimah (2011), this study offers a dataset based on a gradation of syntactic patterns ranging from simple to complex constructions. This is an empirical attempt to formalise certain prototypical syntactic patterns based on the Malay language production of young adult learners of Malay as a foreign language in blogs at the tertiary level.³ In view of the fact that current studies, such as those surveyed in this discussion, point to different levels of language proficiency among heritage speakers, Malay as a foreign language is yet another dynamic variation in the syntactic spectrum of Malay linguistics.

Sampling of Learner Language

Blog entries containing diverse grammar outputs from four learners manifest a variation of Malay learning from each undergraduate. In the learner language data continuum, the digital written Malay data fall under the clinical solicited sample. These types of data are produced with some control over the choice of task, with the learners fully in control of message conveyance for a pragmatic purpose (the different types include natural, clinically solicited and experimentally solicited data as outlined in Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005). The background information of the undergraduate learners frames the linguistic data as variants of learner grammar in Malay. With each learner charting a different learning outcome, the varied learner profiles serve as a reminder to language instructors that the mind of each adult learner of a foreign language who comes to the classroom does not exist in a vacuum or as *tabula rasa* (see the different language learning outcomes in Sew, 2009; 2012c). Simply put, a homogeneous learning cohort simply does not exist in a (language) learning environment, as illustrated by the following profiles of the four Malay learners who comprise the sample of this study (Stengers et al., 2010).

Learner A is a female 20-year-old from the *Student Exchange Programme* at National University of Singapore. A law and psychology double-major, she shows progressive improvement in Malay, developing from a learner of borderline results on the midterm Malay test to an intelligent and responsive learner in the tutorial after the midterm break. Her interest in Malay is enriched as she travels to Johor Bahru and Kuala Lumpur with her housemates privately. Learner A's progress from a rudimentary grasp of Malay to advanced blog entries and a responsive classroom written exercise in week eight is additional psycholinguistic evidence that learning an entirely new language is possible long after the so-called critical period that is conducive for language acquisition (Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow, 2000, for warnings against the critical period in language acquisition). In the current literature on heritage language, acquiring a language during the critical period qualifies a person as a heritage speaker of the language, and acquiring the language after the critical period defines the person a second or foreign language speaker of the language. However, the heritage speakers exhibit a variety of proficiency levels in relation to the various grammar structures of the language in question (cf. Benmamoun, Montrul and Polinsky, 2013a).

Learner B is a male 24-year-old who is a psychology major in his honours' year. His commitment to the Malay language as an academic interest is encouraging. Being a hardworking and motivated adult learner, he attends all tutorials and lectures and participates whole-heartedly in learning interactivity by raising questions and making suggestions in the lessons. On the flip side of the coin, his extensive learning background as a final-year student stands as a reminder, if not a source of pedagogical stress to the language instructor, that

there is a certain pedagogical standard that the teacher must meet. A joy to teach, learner B is a model language student of Malay as a foreign language.

Learner C is a male 24-year-old who is a business studies major in his honours' year. He learns passively in the classroom by making observations and listening to discussions but becomes active online when posting blog entries and making digital enquiries online. With a keen interest in technology-assisted learning, the learner answers certain language questions based on a video clip to identify the Malay phrases in a Mandarin rendition of an original Malay song. The learning activity is conducted in the wee hours of the morning with queries on the meaning of selected expressions and vocabulary items posted to the class blog.

Learner D is a female 22-year-old. A graduating student in the arts and social sciences, she informs the instructor that she enjoys the Malay learning process and promises to continue mastering Malay after graduation (e-mail message, 14 May 2010). She is a diligent learner who uses an online dictionary from Web 2.0 as a means to compose digital Malay narratives. She is forthcoming with suggestions as to which video clip should be eliminated and which ones should be repeated in language pedagogy. Similar to B, this seasoned learner has certain expectations, in terms of Malay teaching. Indeed, she is a model learner of Malay as a foreign language.

Cognisant of the need to protect the identities of the digital end users, all the hypertext mark-up links of the blogs are removed (cf. Anderson and Kanuka, 2009). To further strengthen the privacy of these learners, race identification is withheld. The initial attempt to distribute grammar features according to each learner is replaced with a combined set of syntactic patterns that pre-empt the possibility of individual learner-grammar features association. In view of the concern that coercion may occur in applied language research (Tarone and Swierzbis, 2009: 91–103), the requests for informed consent to use the blogs are submitted after the completion of the Malay module in mid-2010.

FEATURES OF LEARNER GRAMMAR

Some of the grammar features of the learners of Malay include the following: (Source: <http://malayjournal1.wordpress.com/2010/03/06/blog-kumpulan-ta-lain/>)

An understanding of the basic noun conjunction *dengan* [with]:

- a. ...*saya sudah pergi ke Johor Bahru dengan empat orang kawan.*
I have been to Johor Bahru with four friends.

An accurate application of *ke* as a locative conjunction:

- b. *Kami pergi ke Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar...dan ke Galeri Mawar.*
We went to Masjid Sultan Abu Bakar...and to Mawar Gallery.

An accurate construction of the compound noun modifier feature:

- c. *Itu perjalanan saya...*
That's my journey...

An accurate basic subject-verb-object order:

- d. *Kami naik sebuah bus dari stesen MRT Kranji...*
We board a bus from the Kranji MRT station...

A complex construction with two complements interspersing the main clause:

- e. *Pada tengah hari, kami makan pisang goreng dan klepon di restoran dekat Selat Johor.*
In the afternoon, we ate fried fritters and klepon in a restaurant near the Straits of Johor.

The accurate use of the prefix *ber-* as an intransitive marker:

- f. *...saya berlari di dalam Marathon Singapura dengan dua teman saya.*
...I ran the Singapore Marathon with my two friends.

The application of approximation by means of simple complete reduplication:

- g. *Saya berlari kira-kira lima kilometer setiap kali.*
I run about five kilometres each time.

The ability to discriminate a query of time from a connector of time in Malay:

- h. *Badan saya lebih kendur apabila saya berlari.*
My body is more flexible when I run.

The use of direction as a descriptive extension:

- i. *...saya pergi ke Takungan Bedok di timur Singapura untuk berlari.*
...I went to Bedok Reservoir east of Singapore to run.

Resourceful vocabulary decoding:

- j. Sky-diving = *terjun udara*

The ability to construct a simple noun phrase serial structure:

- k. *Filem ini filem saya terjun udara...*
This film is the film of me skydiving

An understanding of basic plural meanings in noun reduplication:

- l. *Saya pergi terjun udara dengan kawan-kawan.*
I went skydiving with friends.

The accurate use of the prepositions *ke* and *di* as locative links in a main sentence:

- m. *Hari Khamis yang lalu, saya dengan ibu saya pergi ke muzium di Chinatown kerana ada masuk [sic] percuma pada harinya [sic].*
Last Thursday, I went to the museum in Chinatown with my mother because it was free entry on that day.

The ability to use the classifier *sebuah* accurately for common nouns in Malay:

- n. *Kemudian, kami pergi ke sebuah restoran Cina di Jurong Point...*
Later, we went to a Chinese restaurant at Jurong Point...

The ability to construct a complex sentence with the prefix *ber-* correctly:

- o. *Hari itu hari yang beruntung sebab abang saya tidak bekerja dan adik saya tidak ada pelajaran.*
That was a lucky day because my elder brother was not working and my younger sibling was not at school.

The ability to use reduplication to cluster information discriminately:

- p. *Adik-beradik saya sangat nakal kerana mereka menaruh cawan-cawan ais krim kosongnya di depan saya dan juga berkata saya pelahap.*
My siblings were quite mischievous because they placed the empty ice-cream cups in front of me to claim that I am gluttonous.

The ability to negate Malay adjectives:

- q. *Meskipun makanan tidak sedap, saya berasa gembira...dengan keluarga saya.*
Although the food was not delicious, I felt happy...with my family.

The gradation used in measuring Malay proficiency, based on the data above, is outlined below. The basic acronyms used in the following table include N = noun, NN = noun compound, N-N = noun reduplication, V = verb, V-V = verb reduplication, Comp = complement, NP = noun phrase, Det = determiner, and Conj = conjunction.

Table 1: Criteria features in the written assessment of beginner Malay

Gradation of proficiency	Malay criteria features
D	N + N [a] N + Conj- <i>ke</i> + N [b, m] N + V + N [d] N + Conj- <i>di</i> + N [m]
C	NN modification [c] N + Conj- <i>dengan</i> + N [f, m] Metaphorical use of verb reduplication V-V [g]
B	Accurate use of time conjunction in syntax [h] Use of direction as description in syntax [i] Accurate use of two different locative conjunctions [m] Accurate use of noun classifier in Malay [n] Use of noun reduplication N-N as plural [l]
A	Complex syntactic pattern: Comp + N + V + N + Conj- <i>dan</i> + N + Compl [e] Noun phrase serial structure [k] Accurate use of intransitive prefix <i>beR-</i> [f, o] Reduplicating to discriminate two types of meaning in syntax accurately [p] Negating Malay adjective accurately [q]

DISCUSSION

If all language assessments are based on a set of linguistic competences, grammatical features are often based on a prior assumption, independent of the learner's input, concerning the learner's language performance. In language assessment, a set of criteria developed for a certain level of proficiency becomes useful for evaluating actual language mastery. This type of language measurement supports a pedagogical framework that affirms and realises the human potential as a meaning-maker (Halliday, 1975; Koo, 2008; Sew, 2009; 2010). Thus, the grammar in learner language is a form of mediated knowledge development that arises from the academic interactivity of adult language learners imbued with diverse linguistic heritages in a multicultural environment. In the unique context of foreign language acquisition, understanding the learner's actual performance in relation to the standard linguistic norms as a form of learning-interactive variation is essential.

Learner language has begun to gain importance, with the collection of learner language as testing corpora beginning in the early 1990s in Belgium. A similar focus on learner language has developed in Cambridge and Michigan, not least the learner corpora "enable test writers to base their testing tasks more closely on authentic rather than contrived language and texts and target more readily those aspects of language use of direct relevance to the test-taking population" (Taylor and Barker, 2008: 246). This study of Malay learner language is an attempt to formulate the acquired language as the starting point of language learning among bilingual undergraduates. The identification of the acquired linguistic knowledge would have an impact on how a language teacher evaluates the target language learned in the effort to forge a closer relationship between actual learning (output) and teaching and learning (input). Syntactic patterns in learner language are actual representations of language acquisition that comprise a valid database for language assessment.

In terms of variation, this discussion on learner Malay is not dissimilar from the analyses of Englishes ranging from the Inner Circle varieties of English to the Outer Circle Englishes. All these variations are versions of English, in contrast to the abstract norms of L1 English. Native speech communities are inherently varied with diversified language features, including pronunciation, spelling, grammatical rules and cultural-specific norms of address between member speakers. The varieties of English in the linguascapes reflect the flows of "ideas and ideologies, people and goods, technologies and techniques" in the current world (Pennycook, 2003: 523). In the realm of applied linguistics, the discrepancy between standard grammar and learning output could be mediated by a grounded variety of learner languages.

In terms of cognitive psychology, learner grammar becomes relevant when language learning as a series of interdependent processes is advanced by imitating other cognitive processes with inherent generative capacity. The relevance of repetition in language acquisition is "recognizing a high level of skill at imitating, along with the ability to segment, categorize and recombine, gives us a better chance at explaining how language works" (Bybee, 2010: 16–17). An interesting parallel runs between imitating in language acquisition and mathematical calculation by way of repetitive hand gesturing. Imitating as a cognitive process imbued with generative capacity for language acquisition is similar to gesturing in the video analyses of learners solving logical problems, where the use of gesture is a mental construct for organising and calculating mathematical values (Goldin-Meadow, 2010). However, it should be emphasised that language learning is more complicated than mere gesturing, with lexical meaning transforming into metaphorical meaning at the discourse level. A study on language learning and use in Birmingham shows that the English comprehension problems faced by some Bangladeshi postgraduate students are two-fold, namely, the basic lexical meanings of morphemes, such as "pinnacle", and their metaphorical extension in English lectures, such as "race awareness

training really was the pinnacle moment of this whole process" (Littlemore, et al. 2010: 199).

The present analysis does not contain a frequency count for vocabulary items in learner language. This discussion maintains that word recognition should not to be mistaken for an independent itemisation process in language learning. Psycholinguistic experiments show that word recognition relies on the availability of the adjacent lexicon in accurate responses (Kroll and Sunderman, 2003) and the recognition of other related syntactic patterns (Gahl and Garnsey, 2004; 2006). That a token number of noun occurrences may be part of the complex items of information expressed in what Schmid (2010) calls shell-content construction has implications for understanding language decoding. Thus, word recognition is not merely a single-file cognitive operation of word itemisation that becomes familiar in learning via repeated occurrences. The language acquisition process involves an imitative complex of high-level ability with top-down constructions activated as the schemata for language production. Imitation as an internalisation process in language acquisition, with the behaviourist baggage removed and the functions of mirror neurons incorporated, is not uncommon in the language acquisition literature (Lantolf and Centeno-Cortes, 2007).

Lexicon and syntax are different indices representing grammar if we concede that word categories are defined in terms of their grammatical relationships with one another and that syntax is composed of word items befitting the thematic slots of a language system (cf. Taylor, 2010). The verb category, for example, is a grammatical unit embedded with phase structures (Marantz, 2007). In the learning of Malay verbs in the foreign language classroom, the acquisition of the basic Malay verb category requires the learning of either transitive or intransitive syntactic constructions. In psycholinguistics terms, the access point of a lexical item commences at the cluster level. Lexical clusters as the basis for word recognition make good sense if language is viewed as a system of idiomatic chunks (Ellis, 2003). A pedagogical consideration would be that phraseology could be the minimal unit of a foreign language for young adults to learn. Research on language chunks as teachable units based on phonological motivation has shown promising learning outcomes (Boers, Deconinck and Lindstromberg, 2010; Lindstromberg and Boers, 2008).

The data in Table 1 show a high-frequency use of the external causal conjunction. Similar findings are observed in the spoken discourse of non-native speakers of English, compared to that of native speakers, in explaining a scientific experiment (Slater and Mohan, 2010). The findings also noted that English metaphorical meaning in language use developed at a later stage and thus was not observed in primary school students. The use of Malay metaphorical meaning is ranked as a low criterion of Malay proficiency in this paper because the speakers are familiar with V-V or N-N constructions in their native tongues, such as Mandarin, Hokkien, Cantonese or Tamil. At the same time, they also

have proficiency in the local variety of English that recognises colloquial English phrases, such as "play-play", "long-long" and "big-big ones". This finding suggests that foreign language learning is a learning process renegotiated with other pre-existing linguistic interference because learning is a process built on accumulated schemata (cf. Goldblum, 2001). Renegotiation that underpins the process of foreign language learning may imply a discriminating process of identifying and blocking (inter-)language errors as negative learning in the transitional stage prior to acquiring the language successfully through the interactive means that matter to the learners (Ramscar, Dye and McCauley, 2013; Curzan, 2013).

While datum (j) indicates a learning attainment, the compound *terjun udara* or skydiving is not a good criterion feature of foreign language proficiency for two reasons. First, any learner could attempt the decoding of a proper name using either a digital or a conventional dictionary. In other words, *ad hoc* proper name decoding is not a good candidate for measuring proficiency. Malay proficiency develops naturally from using Malay syntactic constructions acquired from a Malay language classroom. Second, the term *terjun udara* is not a common item used on a regular basis. Thus, it is less common or appropriate for an irregular term to be used in the measurement of a learner's foreign language proficiency.

However, data (m) to (q) are quite advanced in terms of syntactic complexity. They could be mistaken by external readers or outsiders as evidence indicating some prior knowledge of Malay on the learner's part. This concern may be assuaged if one considers the learner's enthusiasm, diligence and comfort level with digital interactivity that includes the use of online dictionaries and the amount of interaction with the teacher via blog comments and email (cf. Sew, 2012c). The passé assumption that a beginner of Malay must be totally incoherent in the language fades with regular Malay broadcasts aired at MRT stations. The regular Malay announcements include "*Sila ambil perhatian. Demi keselamatan anda sila berdiri di belakang garisan kuning*" ("Your attention please. For your own safety please stand behind the yellow line") and "*Jika anda ternampak ada barang yang mencurigakan...*" ("If you see any suspicious items...") blaring regularly every seven minutes. Idiomatic Malay phrases such as "*Tak boleh tahan*" ("Can't bear with you"), "*Alamak*" ("Oh dear") and "*Bagus*" ("Great") have become trendy phrases in the popular Chinese drama serials that have aired since 2009, if not earlier. In short, it is impossible to be completely ignorant of the Malay language in Singapore, given the many Malay terms found in local varieties of Chinese and English.⁴

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The collected data represent the combined linguistic output of four learners learning Malay in the context of foreign language education at the tertiary level. The data contain formulated target linguistic features constructed for written communicative goals that are developed based on individual learner's cognitive constraints. This is by no means an exhaustive set of criteria features for assessing beginner Malay at the tertiary level. While the linguistic forms are examples of E-language in formal Malay learning, this discussion identifies the phases that underlie linguistic competence in the surface properties. The reasons for outlining the prototypical learner's grammar structure are twofold.

First, a neat set of criteria features is useful for developing Malay pedagogy appropriate for the learning practices of foreign language education. The learner grammar features provide a valid basis for assessing written work in foreign language education, offering an associative measuring foundation in language learning. Second, the scope of permutations between the underlying basic Malay syntax and the varying surface structures provides the teacher with valuable information on the initial syntactic patterns that are acquired accordingly in a Malay language classroom. Identifying these structural conversions on the basis of an examination of the learner language highlights the core areas of Malay grammar that are initially teachable to beginners to ensure that they are well taught during the limited contact time in the language classroom.

The small dataset delimits this study to an explorative investigation that may encourage the large-scale study of criteria features in learner language. The present study of learner language, however, should not be regarded as less convincing due to sample size, given that massive sample sizes with detailed statistical analyses in corpus studies may be equally suspect. Schmid (2010), for example, has shown that statistical analyses of corpus data have at least two flaws. The first problem is that the types of token occurrences remain unclear if the frequencies of data occurrence do not contain a differentiation between context-free and contextual occurrences. The second problem concerns the vagueness in the interplay between absolute and relative frequencies in the overall occurrence of data.

Notwithstanding, it is acknowledged that the medium of language production in the learning experience is a confluence of different modalities. The underlying assumption that the blog entries are identical to the representation of the written forms on paper may require further triangulation between the output of print and digital formats in language productivity among foreign language learners. Another area of concern for future research is to determine whether there is any gender bias in the production of Malay syntactic patterns among tertiary foreign language learners.

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NOTES

1. The html link shows that standard Malay may be spoken with different morpho-syntactic variations, including a mesh of English codes, due to the effect of bilingual education: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rUAMdnLF3nw>. Educated native speakers of Malay may not necessarily speak (standard) Malay fluently in formal occasions as they negotiate the competing proficiencies of the first and second languages and peer group influence.
2. According to the statistics in Google Scholar as of 1 March 2014, Halliday (1975) was cited 3060 times, Lam (2000) was cited 411 times, and Cameron (1997) was cited 542 times. These often-cited studies demonstrate that significant applied linguistic findings are not contingent on large sampling. After all, the epistemology of understanding is a function of qualitative difference.
3. While we incorporate an empirical methodology to triangulate findings in applied linguistics studies, we are cognisant that verbal interaction is an approximation of meaning between the speakers and listeners. Many times, references in interpersonal exchanges are based on a mutual bond, a confluence of semiotic trajectories, and the cultural grammar confined by the perimeters of communication, including modality of interaction, gender difference, and educational and religious backgrounds (cf. Halliday, 1975; Cameron, 1997; Lam, 2000; 2004; Sew, 2010; 2015).
4. The common wh-questions, e.g., *for what*, *do what* and *eat what* in Singlish, considered to be ungrammatical in standard English, may be associated with the patterns of typical Malay syntactic constructions, namely, *untuk apa*, *buat apa* and *makan apa*, respectively. Singlish also incorporates the typical Malay reduplication template in the doubling of verbs, such as *press-press*, *smile-smile*, *walk-walk*, etc.

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