

Language as a Bridge: A Case Study of a Malay Language Class Programme for Yemeni Women Refugee in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Language is central to refugee integration and empowerment, yet many displaced populations face significant barriers in acquiring the host country's language. This paper presents a case study of a community-based Malay Language Class Program designed for Yemeni women refugees in Malaysia. Coordinated by the Azman Hashim International Business School (AHIBS), University Technology Malaysia (UTM), the program sought to address communication barriers that hinder refugee women's participation in society and access to essential services. Over a four-week period, participants engaged in structured lessons using Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Learning (TBL), and Total Physical Response (TPR). Activities included conversational drills, role plays, and market simulations. The initiative exemplifies how higher education institutions can contribute to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through community engagement and inclusive education. Lessons from this case highlight the importance of context-specific pedagogy, partnerships with volunteers, and sustainability planning.

Keywords: Refugee education, case study, community-based learning, Yemeni refugees, higher education, social integration

INTRODUCTION

Refugees worldwide encounter multiple barriers to integration in host countries, with language proficiency emerging as one of the most significant challenges. Without an adequate command of the host language, refugees are often excluded from education, healthcare, employment, and social participation (Lunina & Jurgilè, 2024). Since the escalation of conflict in Yemen in 2015, Malaysia has become home to a growing Yemeni refugee community (Hoffstaedter & Jalil, 2024). Women refugees, in particular face compounded challenges, including limited access to education and heavy domestic responsibilities. Some of them lose their families and do not have relatives. This situation needs them to be independent. Thus, the inability to communicate in Malay restricts their independence, forcing them to rely on community intermediaries for even basic tasks. Universities have a civic responsibility to contribute to social transformation. In Malaysia, UTM has positioned itself as a driver of community impact through research and action-oriented projects. The Malay Language Class for Yemeni women refugees reflects this commitment, aligning with Sustainability Impact Ratings; SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 17 (Partnership for the Goals). The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) Malaysia has embedded sustainability as a guiding principle in its blueprint (Malaysia, 2015). Thus, this project, The Malay Language Class for Yemeni Refugees, complies with the requirement to support MOHE's blueprint.

LITERATURE BACKGROUND

Scholars highlight the transformative role of education in refugee integration, particularly in contexts where formal schooling is inaccessible. Language learning is often the gateway to accessing rights and opportunities. Approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Learning (TBL), and Total Physical Response (TPR) have proven effective for rapid and functional language acquisition. Community-driven initiatives are particularly effective for women refugees who may be unable to access formal classes.

A. Refugee Education and the Role of Language

The centrality of language in refugee education is widely recognized across disciplines, from applied linguistics to migration studies. Refugees often arrive in host countries with limited or no proficiency in the local language, creating barriers not only to employment and education but also to healthcare, legal support, and community belonging (Burke & Field, 2023; Hammoud, 2025). Scholars argue that language is not merely a communicative tool but a gateway to social capital, agency, and identity formation (Isa, Adam, & Usman, 2020). Studies in European contexts have shown that access to host-country language education significantly improves refugees' chances of entering the labor market and reduces dependence on social welfare (Aflred, 2024). Similarly, in Australia and Canada, targeted language programs have been linked to greater civic engagement and enhanced well-being among women refugees (Albrecht & Smerdon, 2022; Coleman, 2025).

The absence of language proficiency can intensify vulnerability, leading to isolation and disempowerment. For women refugees, who often bear caregiving responsibilities, the inability to interact in the local language directly affects their capacity to care for their children, access healthcare, and manage household responsibilities independently. This underscores the urgent need for accessible and context-sensitive language learning opportunities tailored to refugee populations.

B. Gendered Dimensions of Refugee Learning

While refugee education in general has received increasing scholarly attention, research consistently shows that refugee women face unique barriers. According to Callamard and Agnes (Callamard, 2002), women are less likely than men to attend formal language programs due to domestic responsibilities, cultural restrictions, and limited mobility. Even when programs are available, women may prioritize their children's education over their own (Hunt, Aleghfeli, McIntyre, & Stone, 2023). This creates an intergenerational impact in which mothers with limited proficiency in the host language may struggle to support their children's schooling or engage with teachers.

Innovative community-based interventions have proven particularly beneficial for refugee women, as they provide safe, culturally sensitive, and flexible learning environments. A study by (Choi & Najar, 2017) found that refugee women in non-formal community classes not only acquired language skills but also formed peer networks, reducing social isolation. The social dimension of learning is therefore as significant as the linguistic one, suggesting that refugee language programs must be designed to foster both communication and community bonding.

C. Pedagogical Approaches in Refugee Language Programs

There are lot approaches in delivering language programs. However, Scholars have debated the most effective pedagogical methods for refugee learners, who often have diverse literacy backgrounds. The following approaches are widely cited; CLT, TBL and TPR. CLT emphasizes authentic communication rather than rote memorization of grammar rules (Perez Peguero, 2024). Learners are encouraged to use language in practical contexts, engaging in dialogues, role plays, and group discussions. For refugees, this method is highly relevant, as their immediate need is to interact in real-life situations such as visiting clinics, navigating transport, or speaking with neighbors. This is one of the best and suitable approach for refugees learning class. As it prioritized speaking and listening over grammar drills and learners may work in pairs activities to simulate real conversations (Eg: Hospital dialogues, direction, situation in a clinic and more).

TBL situates learning around meaningful tasks, such as shopping at a market or attending a parent-teacher meeting. Scholars argues that tasks mirror real-world challenges, making them cognitively engaging and pragmatically useful (García, Apaolaza-Llorente, Saez, & Mondragón, 2024). Refugees benefit from this approach as it bridges classroom learning with daily survival needs.

TPR combines language input with physical action, reinforcing memory through movement. This kinesthetic method is particularly effective for learners with limited literacy, as it reduces reliance on written text and enhances retention through experiential learning (Oladele, 2024). It use gestures, actions, and commands to teach

vocabulary. In refugee settings, TPR can help learners quickly acquire basic commands and instructions crucial for safety and everyday functioning.

These three approaches provide a holistic framework for refugee language learning: CLT for interaction, TBL for contextual application, and TPR for memory and inclusivity. Fig. 1 shows the synergy in language education methodologies as per conceptual framework for Malay Language Class for Yemeni Women Refugees.

Synergy in Language Education Methodologies



Fig. 1 Synergy in Language Education Methodologies

D. Refugee Education in Southeast Asia

Unlike Europe or North America, where host states often provide structured integration programs, Southeast Asian countries operate under different legal and policy contexts. Malaysia, in particular, is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, and refugees are legally considered “illegal migrants” (Ahmad, Rahman, & Mohamed, 2017). As a result, access to formal education is limited, with most refugee children and adults relying on community learning centers or NGO-led initiatives (Yunus, 2023).

This policy gap creates both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, the absence of state-led programs restricts systemic integration. On the other hand, it opens space for universities, civil society organizations, and religious groups to innovate. Studies in Malaysia and Indonesia show that refugee communities rely heavily on voluntary and grassroots education projects (Ab.Wahab, 2021). These initiatives often lack resources but succeed in tailoring programs to the lived realities of learners.

The involvement of universities in refugee education within Southeast Asia remains relatively limited but is growing. By leveraging academic expertise, student volunteers, and institutional networks, universities can serve as catalysts for sustainable refugee education models. In this sense, the Malay Language Program at UTM aligns with a growing recognition of higher education institutions as “anchor institutions” that contribute to both knowledge production and community development.

E. Higher Education, Civic Engagement, and the SDGs

The role of higher education in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has gained prominence in recent years. According to UNESCO (2020), universities are uniquely positioned to integrate research, teaching, and community service in ways that promote inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG 4).

Refugee education initiatives within universities not only benefit learners but also enhance students' civic learning, providing them with opportunities to apply knowledge in real-world contexts.

In the Malaysian context, universities such as UTM have embraced community-based projects under the umbrella of transformative learning. The Malay Language Class Program contributes to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by empowering women, and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) by fostering collaborations among academia, volunteers, and donors. By situating refugee education within the SDG framework, the program transcends local impact and connects to global development agendas.

F. Gaps in the Literature

Despite growing research on refugee education, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature focuses on formal integration policies in Western countries, with relatively little attention paid to Southeast Asian contexts. Second, women refugee's learning experiences are underrepresented, despite evidence that they face distinct barriers. Finally, while pedagogical frameworks such as CLT, TBL, and TPR are theoretically robust, there is a need for more practice-oriented documentation of how these methods are adapted to community-based and short-term programs.

The current case study seeks to contribute to filling these gaps by providing a detailed account of how a Malaysian university engaged with Yemeni women refugees through a short-term, non-formal language program. By documenting program design, pedagogy, and anticipated impacts, this paper adds to the emerging scholarship on refugee education in non-traditional host countries and highlights the role of higher education in advancing social inclusion.

Program Description

The Malay Language Class Program was conducted over a four-week period at AHIBS, UTM. Each week included interactive sessions lasting two to three hours. Learners were Yemeni women refugees, primarily homemakers and mothers. Facilitators included a project coordinator, two language instructors, five moderators and 3 student's volunteers. The primary objective was to equip Yemeni women refugees with basic conversational Malay for everyday interactions, enabling greater independence and community participation. Activities integrated CLT, TBL, and TPR, including role play, market simulation, and conversational drills. Fig 2 shows the variance of the learner's age in this Malay language class program.

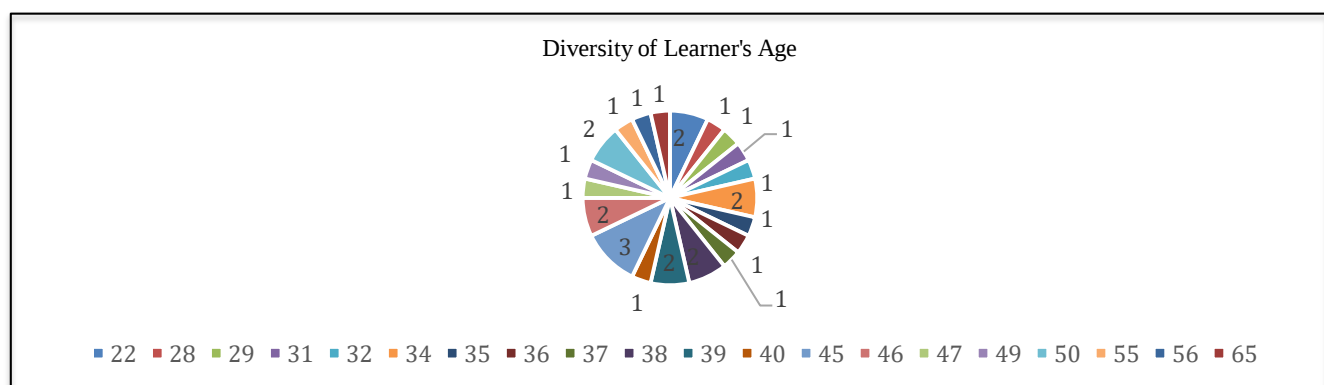


Fig. 2 Diversity of Learner's Age

Based on Fig. 2, it can be seen that 14% of the learners are aged 20-29, 39% of the learners are aged 30 – 39 years old, 29% of the learners are aged 40-49 years old, 14% of the learners are aged 50-59 years old, and 1% of the learners are aged 60-69 years old. It shows the diversity of learner's age. Thus, the appropriate method should be considered to ensure all of the learners can cope and follow the class.

Anticipated Outcomes and Reflections

Based on the observation by the instructors, moderators and volunteers, it can be seen that the learners enjoyed the class and the topics taught in class helps them navigate public services and communicate for the daily lives.

Instructors and volunteers observed notable motivation and progress, with many learners actively engaging in role play and simulations. One participant reflected that learning Malay allowed her to communicate better with her child, showing the ripple effects of language acquisition within families. The learners also show their interest towards learning more about Malay Language and would like this Malay language to be continued. Table I are some of the feedback received from the learners:

Table I Feedback for the Learners

Learners	Feedback
1	"I would like to learn more about airport also basic sentence in Malay until can speak with people everywhere."
2	"I do want to learn more in next class"
6	"Kami ingin mempelajari lebih lanjut perbualan di Lapangan Terbang"
7	"connect the sentences"
10	"Yes, I want to learn more in next class"
13	"more Malay classes"
19	"All thing. I want to learn everything in Melayu to talk like a local people"
22	"I want to learn more things. I feel happy to learn more about Malay Language"
25	"saya mahu mempertingkatkan Bahasa Malaysia saya"
26	"Airport and expand more"

Based on the Table I, it can be concluded that, Yemeni Women Refugees actually love Malay Language Class and would like to learn more to improve their communication. Using CLT, TBL, and TPR proved effective for rapid learning in short-term programs. Universities can play a crucial role in bridging gaps for marginalized groups by mobilizing faculty, students, and resources. With the right teaching's method applied in this class, the learners may improve their Malay language communication skill and built up their confidence. The program's reliance on volunteers and short-term funding highlights the need for sustainable models supported by NGOs, donors, and government bodies. From the case study, we hope that there will be emerging scholarship on refugee education in non-traditional host countries for their social inclusion.

CONCLUSION

This case study highlights how a simple, community-based Malay Language Program empowered Yemeni women refugees in Malaysia to overcome linguistic barriers and engage more fully in daily life. While small in scale, the initiative demonstrates the transformative role of language in promoting independence, integration, and dignity. It illustrates the civic responsibility of higher education institutions in supporting refugee inclusion and advancing the SDGs. Future programs should explore blended learning models, longitudinal engagement, and structured partnerships to ensure greater reach and sustainability.

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