

Assessing the Impact of Malay Language Class for Yemeni Women Refugee: A Case Study from Project Zahrah

Siti Nur'asyiqin Ismael, Haliyana Khalid, Sathiswaran Uthamaputhran

Azman Hashim International Business Schools, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Language acquisition is a crucial factor in facilitating the integration and empowerment of refugee communities. In Malaysia, where Bahasa Melayu serves as the national language, proficiency is essential for social participation, access to education, and livelihood opportunities. This study evaluates the significance of a Malay Language Program designed for Yemeni Women Refugee (YWR), focusing on learners' feedback and the program's role in promoting integration. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Findings from 28 participants indicate that the program enhanced learners' confidence in daily communication, improved their ability to engage with local communities, and fostered a stronger sense of belonging. Qualitative data further revealed that language learning contributed to personal empowerment, build up their confidence and create opportunities for broader civic engagement. The study highlights the impact of Malay Language Class to YWR and underscores the need for inclusive, community-based language initiatives in refugee education policy and practice.

Keywords: Malay Language, Integration, Refugee, Class, Education

INTRODUCTION

Project Zahrah is a community project organized by Azman Hashim International Business School (AHIBS), University Technology Malaysia (UTM) in conjunction with Yemeni Refugee Women Organisation (YRWO) and Al-Khair Foundation with the aims to equip Yemeni Women Refugee (YWR) in Malaysia with basic conversational skills for interacting with the local community. Education access is crucial for everyone. Several studies have revealed that schools in countries such as Australia, South Africa, UK, and the US, are often unable to provide adequate academic support to students from refugee backgrounds as teachers struggle to meet their unique needs (Amina, Barnes, & Saito, 2024). Language plays a pivotal role in enabling social participation, educational advancement, and cultural integration for marginalized communities, particularly refugees. In Malaysia, where Bahasa Melayu (the Malay language) serves as the national and official language, proficiency in the language is not only essential for daily communication but also functions as a gateway to accessing education, employment, healthcare, and broader civic participation. For refugee populations, language learning is often the first and most significant step toward rebuilding their lives in host (Andries & Savadova, 2021; Burke & Field, 2023; Lunina & Jurgilè, 2024). Globally, research on second-language acquisition highlights its importance in supporting refugee integration, enhancing social cohesion, and reducing barriers to participation in host societies (Hammoud, 2025).

Language learning extends beyond linguistic competence; it is closely tied to identity formation and empowerment among vulnerable groups. In the context of Malaysia, where refugee communities face systemic limitations in accessing formal education and employment, community-based language programs provide an alternative pathway to inclusion and resilience-building (Amina et al., 2024; Jamal Al-deen, 2025; Molla, 2024). The YWR community in Malaysia has grown steadily due to ongoing conflict in Yemen. Women within this group are particularly vulnerable, facing compounded challenges linked to displacement, gender roles, and restricted access to formal institutions.

Despite the increasing recognition of the role of language education in refugee integration worldwide, limited

scholarly attention has been directed toward the Malaysian context, particularly with regard to women refugees. Existing studies in Malaysia have largely focused on refugee children's access to informal education or the socio-economic struggles of refugee households, while the specific educational experiences of adult women remain underexplored. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical work examining the impact of Malay language acquisition on social integration, empowerment, and community participation among refugee women (Aleghfeli, McIntyre, Hunt, & Stone, 2025).

This study addresses this gap by analyzing feedback and perceived outcomes from a Malay Language Class designed for YWR. By examining learners' perspectives and assessing the significance of the program, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Malay language education may benefit YWR in term of the communication skills, confidence, engaging with the local communities and the demands of learning Malay language among YWR in Malaysia. The findings are expected to provide insights for educators, policymakers, and humanitarian organizations in designing inclusive, contextually relevant educational interventions for refugee populations in Malaysia and beyond.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative techniques to capture both measurable outcomes and nuanced learners' experiences. A survey instrument was used to gather structured feedback from learners and a paired samples t-test assessment was conducted to check the significance based on pre and post assessment of the program (Rietveld & van Hout, 2017). Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions provided deeper insights into their perceptions of the program's significance. This design was chosen to ensure triangulation of data, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings (Uusitalo, 2014).

RESULTS & DISCUSSIONS

The learners were YWR residing in Malaysia who enrolled in the Malay Language Class organized by UTM. A total of 28 learners took part in the program, with ages ranging from insert age range from 21–65 years old. All learners were voluntary attendees and represented diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from limited formal schooling to tertiary education. Ethical clearance was obtained, and learners provided informed consent. Table I shows the pre and post value of Malay language understanding among YWR.

The questionnaires were given to the learners on the first and last class to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. A Paired T-Test assessment was conducted to examine the significant improvement. Table I shows the results of the T-Test assessment.

Table 1 Pre And Post Value Of Malay Language Understanding

Learners	Q1 Did u know any Malay before attending this class?	Q2 After the class, how would you rate your understanding of the Malay Language
Learner 1	0	2
Learner 2	0	1
Learner 3	0	2
Learner 4	1	2
Learner 5	0	2
Learner 6	1	2
Learner 7	0	2
Learner 8	0	1
Learner 9	0	2

Learner 10	1	2
Learner 11	0	1
Learner 12	0	2
Learner 13	1	2
Learner 14	1	2
Learner 15	0	1
Learner 16	1	3
Learner 17	1	2
Learner 18	0	2
Learner 19	0	3
Learner 20	0	3
Learner 21	0	1
Learner 22	0	2
Learner 23	0	1
Learner 24	1	3
Learner 25	1	3
Learner 26	0	2
Learner 27	0	1
Learner 28	0	1

Table I shows improvement on Malay language understanding among YWR during the program. To determine whether or not the Malay language program actually had an effect on YWR, we calculate mean and standard deviation of differences for further understanding as shown in Table II.

Table II Mean & Standard Deviation Differences

Learners	Q1 Did u know any Malay before attending this class?	Q2 After the class, how would you rate your understanding of the Malay Language	Differences
Learner 1	0	2	-2
Learner 2	0	1	-1
Learner 3	0	2	-2
Learner 4	1	2	-1
Learner 5	0	2	-2
Learner 6	1	2	-1
Learner 7	0	2	-2
Learner 8	0	1	-1
Learner 9	0	2	-2
Learner 10	1	2	-1
Learner 11	0	1	-1
Learner 12	0	2	-2

Learner 13	1	2	-1
Learner 14	1	2	-1
Learner 15	0	1	-1
Learner 16	1	3	-2
Learner 17	1	2	-1
Learner 18	0	2	-2
Learner 19	0	3	-3
Learner 20	0	3	-3
Learner 21	0	1	-1
Learner 22	0	2	-2
Learner 23	0	1	-1
Learner 24	1	3	-2
Learner 25	1	3	-2
Learner 26	0	2	-2
Learner 27	0	1	-1
Learner 28	0	1	-1
		Mean of differences	1.57
		Std. dev. of differences	0.38

Based on Table 2, Mean of Differences is equal to 1.57. It means that on average, participants improved by 1.57 points. Meanwhile, standard deviation differences = 0.38 shows that most participants improved by roughly the same amount. The improvement were consistent across participants. Full results of a paired samples t-test shown as in Table III.

Table Iii Results Of T-Test Assessment

Item	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	t(df)	p-value	Results
Q1 - Did u know any Malay before attending this class?	0.32 (0.47)		4.51(27)	< .001	Significant improvement
Q2- After the class, how would you rate your understanding of the Malay Language		1.89 (1.78)			

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to evaluate the effect of the intervention on learners' scores. Based on Table 3, Descriptive statistics indicated that the mean pretest score was 0.32 (SD = 0.47), while the mean post-test score increased to 1.89 (SD = 1.78).

The results of the t-test showed a statistically significant increase in scores from pre to post-test, $t(27) = 4.51$, $p < .001$. This indicates that the intervention had a positive and significant impact on learners' outcomes. The increase in mean scores suggests that learners demonstrated a marked improvement following the intervention. The very low p-value ($p < .001$) provides strong evidence that this improvement is unlikely due to chance. When the mean difference is large compared to its standard deviation, the t-test produce a large T-value and hence it shows very strong statistical significance. According to Cohen's effect size, the impact is very large with the point 4.13 (Rau & Shih, 2021;Cohen, 2023). Therefore, the intervention appears to have been effective in enhancing the measured outcome.

Then, there is a question whether the learners know how to introduce themselves in Malay. The feedback received as shown in the Fig. 1 as below:-

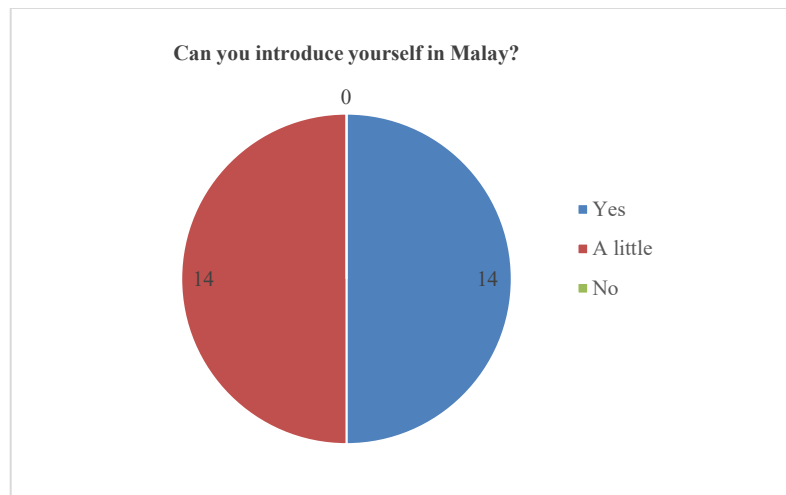


Fig. 1 Introduce yourself in Malay

Based on the Fig. 1, most learners reported being able to introduce themselves using basic Malay phrases. The data shown 14 learners out of 28 which is 50% confidently know how to introduce themselves in Malay while another 50% of the learners managed to know the structure but due to lacking of vocabulary, it might prevent them from confidently introduce themselves in Malay. After the intervention, none of the learners are unable to introduce themselves in Malay.

Responses suggest that nearly all learners are able to construct and use basic Malay sentences in daily situations. Fig. 2 shows the number of learners that able to construct and say basic sentences in Malay.

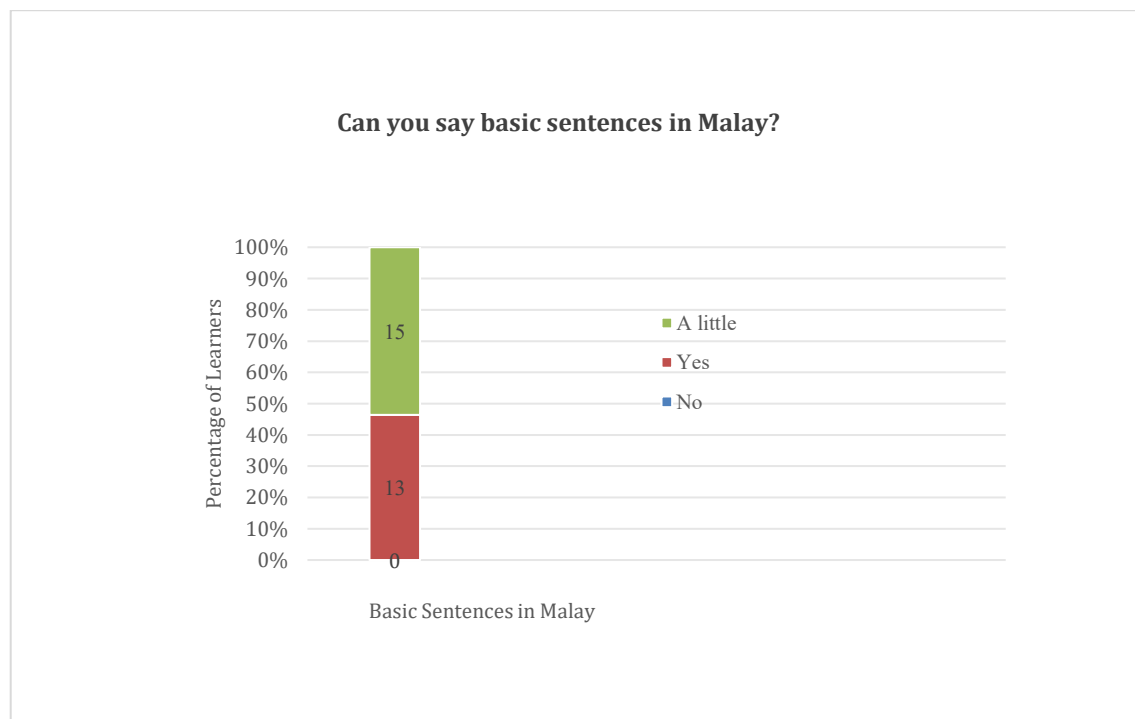


Fig 2 Basic sentences in Malay

From the Figure 2, we can conclude that all the learners can say basic sentences in Malay where 13 learners knows how to say and construct basic sentences and 15 learners know a little bit on how to say and constructs. Examples of the sentences that the learners know as below:-

“Saya suka makan nasi lemak”

“Di mana tandas?”

“Saya suka belajar bahasa Melayu.”

This indicates that the learners can apply their learning in practical contexts, especially when it comes to food, places, and simple questions.

Since joining the class, 27/28 learners have tried speaking Malay either with their friends, families or Community. Some learners mentioned hesitation due to fear of making mistakes, showing a need for more real-life speaking practice. As for confidence level, it is varied. It can be seen from the Fig. 3 below:-

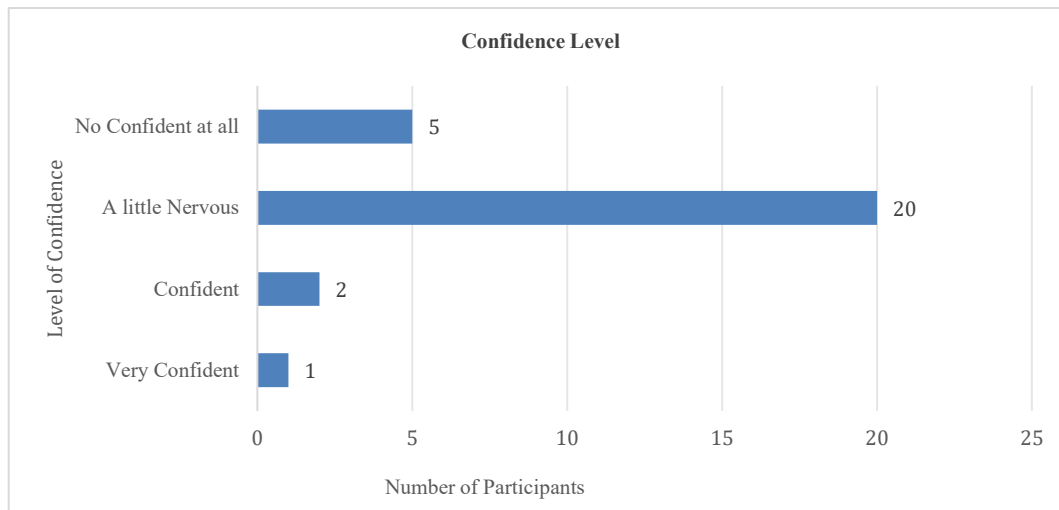


Fig. 3 Level of Confidence

Based on Fig. 3, there are 20 learners mentioned that they feel a little nervous whenever speaks in Malay Language. It is common for a new learners as the more vocabulary they know, they will feel more comfortable and confident in speaking Malay. As depicted in the Figure 3, there are about 5 learners who has no confidence at all and hesitant to speak unless necessary. This suggests that the learners need more low-pressure speaking opportunities with native speakers to build fluency and confidence.

The learners also been asked about the most useful thing they learned in the class. Table II shows some of the feedback received from the learners.

Table Iv Feedback From Learners

Learners	Feedback
1	<i>"I learn a lot benefited in English and Malay. I can go to mall and ask them about the price in Malay and also in Hospital. I can count to 999."</i>
2	<i>"The Basics"</i>
7	<i>"The most useful thing is the number and introduce myself, asking about helping when I feel sick and positions for things"</i>
19	<i>"Everything I take in this class"</i>
22	<i>"I learned more things in this class such as numbers, parts of body and speak about myself"</i>
25	<i>"Direction, part of body, numbers"</i>
28	<i>"Numbers, Direction, feeling, some verbs"</i>

The learners also show their interest towards learning more about Malay Language and would like this Malay language to be continued. Below are some of the feedback received from 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"

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, learners have shown clear progress in learning and applying basic Malay. After the intervention, most of them can now introduce themselves, use simple sentences, and attempt conversation with locals. However, speaking confidence remains a key challenge and need to practice regularly.

It is recommended for this Malay Language class to be continued and the topics suggested by the learners are considered as part of the syllabus. Encouragement and support to speak with the local also should be included to ensure the learners' level of confidence is increasing. With continued practice and exposure, learners are likely to become more confident and competent in using Malay in every day.

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