



International Journal of Advanced Research in Future Ready Learning and Education

<https://www.akademiabaru.com/submit/index.php/frle/index>

ISSN: 2462 - 1951



The Perception of Malaysian Undergraduates Towards Bilingualism and Multilingualism in Language Learning

Nabila Abdul Malek^{1,*}

¹ Department of English Language, Centre for Modern Languages, Universiti Malaysia Pahang Al-Sultan Abdullah, 26600, Pekan, Pahang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Language is essential to human communication and identity. Individuals may have different language abilities in one or more languages. Bilingualism refers to the ability to use two languages proficiently, whereas multilingualism is characterised by the ability to use more than two languages. Cultural background, societal views, and personal experiences can significantly impact perceptions. Bilingualism and multilingualism may be viewed positively by some students while negatively by others. In today's globalised society, language diversity is growing, yet there is little research on students' perceptions of bilingualism and multilingualism in higher education in the Malaysian context. The study seeks to identify Malaysian undergraduates' perceptions towards bilingualism and multilingualism in language learning. Conducted among 51 undergraduate students at an engineering university in Malaysia, this quantitative study employed a survey-based approach. The result revealed positive perceptions of bilingualism and multilingualism in language learning influenced by the bilingual education system in Malaysia and globalisation. The present research has proved that students favour bilingualism and multilingualism, enhancing their motivation to acquire additional languages. This inclination stems from the belief that having proficiency in more than two languages confers a more excellent knowledge upon individuals.

Keywords:

Bilingualism; multilingualism; language learning; cross-cultural

Received: 1 Jan 2024

Revised: 10 Feb 2024

Accepted: 14 Mar 2024

Published: 22 Mar 2023

1. Introduction

Language is crucial in facilitating human communication and shaping individual and collective identities. Diverse language profiles may be seen among individuals, including their proficiency in one or several languages and the languages they identify as vital to their cultural and linguistic repertoire. Malaysia, a country with a diverse linguistic landscape, offers a conducive environment for learning many languages. According to Duka and Abdul Aziz [4], Bahasa Malaysia is designated as the official language of Malaysia, but English and other languages are secondary and tertiary, respectively. Bilingualism and multilingualism may arise due to various factors, including cultural heritage, family context, and educational exposure. Within the framework of the Malaysian school system, a range of language instructional programmes have been implemented. An exemplary illustration may be seen in adopting a bilingual education system, as delineated in the Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013 - 2025). According to the Ministry of Education [10], pupils in Malaysian schools must have a practical level of competence in Malay and English. Perceptions may be significantly influenced by

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: nabilaam@umpsa.edu.my

factors such as cultural background, social attitudes, and personal experiences. The perception of bilingualism and multilingualism may vary among pupils, with some expressing good attitudes and others expressing negative attitudes.

Malaysia is internationally recognised for its remarkable language variety and is home to one of the most significant numbers of multilingual individuals worldwide, as stated by Mohamed Salleh *et al.*, [11]. Bilingualism and multilingualism are significant within Malaysia's education system. L1 denotes the primary language a person is first exposed to at birth or throughout their initial stages of language acquisition. It is essential to remember that unless an individual has been exposed to their native language from infancy, their native language cannot be automatically considered their first language (L1). The term L2 denotes the language to which an individual is exposed or the language they study and acquire after their primary language, known as L1, according to Schmid & Karayayla [17].

Bilingualism and multilingualism are paramount in promoting language cohesion and enhancing global cooperation within an international context. Various factors contribute to the acquisition of bilingualism among people, including immigration, education, extended family, and temporary residence. The observed variations can be ascribed to a range of factors, encompassing contextual influences, distinctions in social class, disparities in educational opportunities and expectations, the presence of support networks, opportunities for experiential learning, and the linguistic milieu in which individuals are immersed as stated by Kayadibi [8]. Additionally, promoting bilingual and multilingual education is prevalent globally owing to its efficacy in enhancing students' language proficiency and cognitive abilities Haukås *et al.*, [6]. Furthermore, it aids in preserving indigenous languages and contributes to the protection of linguistic heritage.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Perceptions of Bilingualism/Multilingualism

Bilingualism and multilingualism are integral aspects of the established education system within the Malaysian environment. The topic of acquiring English as a second language and the process of learning a third language has gained significant attention in the field of education. Therefore, Malaysia exhibits favourable attitudes towards the practice of bilingualism and multilingualism. According to Albury [1], the adoption of multilingualism has the potential to safeguard ethnic identities and foster diversity, hence playing a role in the pursuit of equality among the Malaysian populace.

Pakrudin *et al.*, [13] did a recent study investigating pupils' experience at Maahad School acquiring and using several languages, including Malay, English, and Arabic. The research outcomes indicated that the respondents' main incentive for acquiring proficiency in these three languages was strongly linked to the linguistic status ascribed to each language. Malay was commonly recognised as the indigenous and official language; on the other hand, English had considerable importance due to its worldwide and international relevance. Additionally, Arabic was esteemed for its association with religious texts such as the Quran and its connection to the notion of paradise. Additionally, a study by Rupiwin and Shah [16] examined the relationship between linguistic attitudes and academic language proficiency in English language learning in a primary school in Beluran, Sabah's rural area. It was found that many participants had positive attitudes and a high level of preparedness to acquire proficiency in a second language.

Moreover, the study by Küçükler and Tosuncuoglu [9] revealed that learners have diverse perspectives regarding multilingual education. This concerns the merits and drawbacks associated with achieving proficiency in many languages. However, it is often believed that the advantages of

this phenomenon exceed its disadvantages. The acquisition of many languages, whether in a bilingual or multilingual capacity, can enrich an individual's personal growth and facilitate the establishment of intergenerational and international connections. Furthermore, it provides enhanced accessibility to job prospects, as Zhou [20] stated. This assertion is further corroborated by the findings of Haidar *et al.*, [5], which demonstrate that Pakistani individuals have favourable attitudes towards the English language. The research suggests that English has evolved beyond its utilitarian function as a communication medium and has acquired the status of a valuable commodity and a marker of social prestige.

3. Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Instrument

This quantitative study employed a non-experimental design, utilising a survey as the primary data collection method. The questionnaire used in the survey was adapted from Küçükler and Tosuncuoglu [9], focusing on attitudes toward second language learning. The questionnaire was designed to assess participants' perceptions towards bilingualism and multilingualism.

2.2 Participants

The study centred on a sample of 51 undergraduate students now enrolled in an engineering institution in the eastern coastal area of Malaysia. The use of convenience sampling was deemed appropriate due to the logical restrictions and the researcher's association with the university, as it facilitated a more efficient and viable approach for data gathering. It is crucial to recognise that while this methodology enabled the gathering of data within the limitations of the research, the results should be understood within the confines of this cohort of students and may not necessarily apply to a broader population.

The present study included a heterogeneous sample of participants, mainly those enrolled in undergraduate programmes. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the participants. The study had a sample size of 51 students, all 19 to 22 years old, making up the whole participant pool. The data on gender distribution revealed a marginal male majority, with 32 participants accounting for 62.7 % of the overall sample. In contrast, female students represented 19 participants, representing 37.3 % of the sample. The study's participants exhibited a notable range of linguistic variety, with a majority (78.4 %) reporting Malay as their first language. The participants included individuals who spoke Mandarin, Tamil, and English, accounting for 7.8 %, 9.8 %, and 3.9 % of the sample. Including a heterogeneous group of students provided valuable views and perspectives in the research, enhancing the study's comprehensiveness and depth.

Table 1
Demographic information of the participants

	Students Undergraduate	Numbers	Percentage
Gender	Male	32	62.7
	Female	19	37.3
Age	19-22	51	100.0
	23-26	0	0
First Language	Malay	40	78.4
	Mandarin	4	7.8
	Tamil	5	9.8
	English	2	3.9

3. Results

3.1 Perceptions of Bilingualism and Multilingualism

This section will discuss and analyse the results and perspectives on bilingualism and multilingualism derived from the data collected in the present study. This section will be partitioned into six tables, each corresponding to the six questions posed in the survey.

3.1.1 It is important to be able to speak two/more languages

Table 2 shows that respondents strongly agreed on the significance of speaking two or more languages. Some (11.8 %) agreed, but most (84.3 %) strongly agreed. This shows that the survey participants appreciate multilingualism. Only 3.9 % picked "Neutral". This shows that these people are neutral on the relevance of multilingualism. Their position may be ambiguous or context-dependent.

Table 2

It is important to be able to speak two/more languages

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	2	3.9	3.9	3.9
	Agree	6	11.8	11.8	15.7
	Strongly Agree	43	84.3	84.3	100.0
Total		51	100.0	100.0	

In a multilingual country such as Malaysia, proficiency in several languages is a highly advantageous skill that offers extensive advantages. Malaysia, being a country characterised by its multilingualism, serves as a conducive environment for the learning of several languages. According to Duka and Aziz [4], Bahasa Malaysia is designated as the official language of Malaysia, but English and other languages are secondary and tertiary, respectively. Bilingualism and multilingualism serve purposes beyond communication within the context of Malaysia, a nation characterised by its multicultural composition. They play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion and promoting mutual comprehension. To facilitate proficient communication inside Malaysia, it is essential to have a comprehensive command of Bahasa Malaysia, the designated official language. The English language has a prominent position as a worldwide lingua franca; hence, acquiring proficiency in it may provide individuals with a wide array of international prospects.

The linguistic aptitude of individuals educated in vernacular languages contributes to preserving cultural heritage and enhancing intergenerational communication. Several nationalities and races in Malaysia foster a bilingual and multilingual environment and a framework that embraces multiculturalism. According to Razak *et al.*, [15], individuals in Malaysia who have received education via the vernacular system often exhibit a high level of competence in both the Malay and English languages. The phenomenon of multilingual communication in Malaysia extends beyond mere linguistic adjustment. The act of bridging cultural divides, enhancing employment prospects, and cultivating an appreciation for a nation's distinct culture are facilitated by this phenomenon. The acquisition of this talent is crucial for fostering social cohesiveness, embracing diversity, and facilitating personal progress within our dynamic and evolving society.

3.1.2 Knowing two/more languages makes people more knowledgeable

Table 3 shows that a significant proportion of participants (60.8 %) strongly agree that proficiency in two or more languages enhances one's knowledge. A considerable proportion of individuals (25.5%) agree with this notion, whilst a small minority (2.0 %) has a dissenting viewpoint. The group labelled as "Neutral" include those who exhibit uncertainty or have ambivalent perspectives towards the subject issue. In general, the evidence indicates a robust endorsement of the proposition that multilingualism enhances knowledge among the individuals surveyed.

Table 3
Knowing two/more languages makes people more knowledgeable

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
	Neutral	6	11.8	11.8	13.7
	Agree	13	25.5	25.5	39.2
	Strongly Agree	31	60.8	60.8	100.0
Total		51	100.0	100.0	

The acquisition of many languages enhances knowledge in various aspects. Individuals who possess the ability to speak many languages have the opportunity to engage with a broader range of information, ideas, and cultural perspectives that extend beyond their native language. Exposure to many cultures and belief systems broadens one's viewpoint and enhances understanding of diverse civilisations. In some circumstances, children may exhibit the phenomenon of multilingualism, whereby they use their mother tongue inside the confines of their home, utilise the local or national language in educational environments, and attain competence in a foreign language. According to Duka and Aziz [4], there may be variations in language competency between our first and second or third languages. However, in a globalised world, proficiency in many languages may enhance employment opportunities and foster a competitive edge.

Furthermore, acquiring many languages enriches leisure activities and personal growth outside formal education and professional occupations. This phenomenon enables individuals to enhance their cultural experience by allowing them to engage with foreign literature, films, music, and art in their native languages. Furthermore, it fosters a sense of curiosity and adaptability, both of which are necessary for pursuing lifelong education. Students' acquisition of several languages serves as a means to expand their intellectual capacity, refine their aptitude for effective communication, and derive advantages in many domains of existence, including academia, professional pursuits, and recreational activities, according to Pakrudin *et al.*, [13].

3.1.3 Being able to write in two/more languages is important

Table 4 shows that a significant proportion of participants (49.0 %) express high agreement with the assertion that having the ability to write in many languages is important. A considerable proportion of respondents (39.2 %) agree with this notion, while a small minority (2.0%) have a dissenting viewpoint. The category labelled as "Neutral" includes those who exhibit uncertainty or possess a combination of viewpoints about the subject issue. The data suggests strong support for the survey participants' belief that multilingual writing skills are valuable.

Table 4
 Being able to write in two/more languages is important

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	1	2.0	2.0	2.0
	Neutral	5	9.8	9.8	11.8
	Agree	20	39.2	39.2	51.0
	Strongly Agree	25	49.0	49.0	100.0
Total		51	100.0	100.0	

In the multilingual context of Malaysia, where many languages are spoken, each with its writing system, the ability to write in two or more languages is of utmost importance. Acquiring proficiency in numerous writing systems may provide a significant challenge, especially for young learners. According to Winskel [19], the languages commonly spoken in Malaysia exhibit diverse writing systems, which might elicit distinct reading processes and constrain the transferability of reading skills. Various writing systems pose challenges for young readers. According to Haukås *et al.*, [6], enhancing cognitive talents and linguistic skills increases learning and communication adaptability. Acquiring multilingual writing skills enhances communication, fosters cross-cultural comprehension, and facilitates access to local and global information and opportunities. Hence, the ability to write in many languages is advantageous and essential for effectively navigating the linguistic diversity of Malaysia and other contexts.

3.1.4 All schools in Malaysia should teach pupils to speak in two/more languages

Table 5 shows that the majority of respondents (66.7 %) firmly concur with the statement that all institutions in Malaysia should teach students to speak at least two languages. A sizeable majority (27.5%) concur with this notion, while a smaller minority (5.9 %) is neutral. According to the survey respondents, the data indicates significant support for the notion that multilingual education should be a priority in Malaysian institutions.

Table 5
 All schools in Malaysia should teach pupils to speak in two/more languages

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	3	5.9	5.9	5.9
	Agree	14	27.5	27.5	33.3
	Strongly Agree	34	66.7	66.7	100.0
Total		51	100.0	100.0	

Considering Malaysia's broad linguistic and cultural variety, it is deemed suitable to educate children in many languages inside the educational institutions. The population of Malaysia exhibits linguistic diversity, with individuals proficient in languages such as Malay, Tamil, Chinese, and English. Advocate for multilingual education inside educational institutions to maintain and acknowledge a nation's linguistic heterogeneity while equipping students with the necessary skills to navigate an increasingly interconnected and globalised society. Acquiring many languages equips students with the ability to communicate effectively and fosters their knowledge of other cultures. Jabeen [7] asserts that the most effective method for cultivating a multicultural atmosphere in language education is ensuring equal opportunities for learners to participate actively in the instructional process. By thoroughly recognising cultural legacy and embracing opportunities for diversity, people might comprehend various civilisations more comprehensively. Therefore, implementing bilingual or multilingual education in all educational institutions in Malaysia serves to preserve the country's

diverse cultural heritage and equips students with essential competencies for individual growth and achievement in an ever more linked global society.

3.1.5 Individuals who speak two/more languages can have more friends than those who speak one language

Table 6 shows that most respondents (52.9 %) strongly agree that people who speak two or more languages have more friends. A sizable proportion (27.5 %) agrees, while a smaller proportion (3.9%) disagrees. Those in the "Neutral" group are unsure or consider numerous variables impacting friendships. Overall, the data indicates that multilingualism is a good characteristic contributing to the number of friends one may have.

Table 6

Individuals who speak two/more languages can have more friends than those who speak one language

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Disagree	2	3.9	3.9	3.9
	Neutral	8	15.7	15.7	19.6
	Agree	14	27.5	27.5	47.1
	Strongly Agree	27	52.9	52.9	100.0
Total		51	100.0	100.0	

The statistical data indicating a minority of participants expressing disagreement with the notion that bilingual or multilingual individuals tend to have a larger social circle is of particular significance, especially when considering Malaysia's diverse linguistic environment. The students are reluctant to communicate verbally in the language spoken at school due to fear of being subjected to mockery for their attempts to adopt a 'Mat Salleh' accent. There is a prevalent belief that those who do not possess proficiency in the Malay language are not accorded the same level of esteem as those who do regarding their Malaysian identity. As a reaction, individuals disengage and abstain from using the English language, according to Aziz and Kashinathan [3].

Contrarily, proponents of multilingualism perceive it as a valuable resource for fostering diverse and inclusive social networks. They argue that multilingual individuals can adjust their language usage to different social settings, allowing them to connect with a broader array of individuals. This perspective aligns with the research conducted by Rahman *et al.*, [14], which suggests that bilingual or multilingual individuals purposefully choose languages from their linguistic repertoire based on specific requirements within different domains.

3.1.6 Individuals know more if they speak two/more languages

Table 7 shows that most respondents (56.9 %) strongly concur with the statement that those who speak two or more languages are likely to be more knowledgeable. A sizeable proportion (31.4 %) concurs with this notion, while a lesser proportion (11.8 %) is neutral. According to the survey respondents, multilingualism is perceived as a valuable factor contributing to an individual's knowledge. The data provides significant support for this notion.

Table 7
Individuals know more if they speak two/more languages

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Neutral	6	11.8	11.8	11.8
	Agree	16	31.4	31.4	43.1
	Strongly Agree	29	56.9	56.9	100.0
Total		51	100.0	100.0	

Acquiring various languages can enhance an individual's language comprehension and bolster cognitive capacities. This phenomenon contributes to a broader comprehension of the global landscape. According to Haukås *et al.*, [6], many students believe that acquiring proficiency in many languages may augment their comprehension of the languages they are currently familiar with. In addition, proficiency in different languages enables individuals to get diverse viewpoints, suggesting that multilingualism supports the ability of students to modify their opinions. This particular item is correlated with an improvement in cognitive flexibility.

In brief, a notable segment of the student demographic in the present investigation has favourable attitudes towards bilingualism and multilingualism, which may be attributed to the language policy in place and the influence of globalisation. The attitudes of individuals might potentially be shaped by the bilingual education system and the communication patterns seen in multilingual contexts within Malaysian society. Individuals in this community probably possess knowledge and proficiency in many languages Muthusamy *et al.*, [12]. Likewise, within the global environment, people choose to develop fluency in English in addition to their mother tongues, facilitating efficient cross-cultural contact with individuals worldwide, assisted by the phenomena of globalisation Posavec [18].

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, although Malay is designated as the official language of Malaysia, some groups of the Malaysian populace primarily use English, Tamil, and Mandarin as their primary languages. Moreover, due to the education system in Malaysia, it is evident that students prefer bilingualism and multilingualism, which augment their drive to attain proficiency in many languages. Learning multiple languages is essential if one desires to acquire vast knowledge. It is well-known that individuals who exhibit skill in numerous languages have a distinct advantage over others. Therefore, individuals must strive to learn more languages to enhance their understanding of the world.

The present study investigates the perceptions of undergraduate students on bilingualism and multilingualism. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognise the need for further investigation to understand better the specific elements that impact students' perceptions. Longitudinal studies play a pivotal role in comprehending the intricate dynamics linked to language learning, language preferences, and cultural viewpoints as they undergo temporal transformations. This study has the potential to provide valuable information on the enduring impacts of multilingualism on cognitive development, cultural integration, and educational achievements. In order to sustain the effective development of multilingualism and fully harness its advantages for people and society, it is imperative to maintain a dedication to continuous study and its practical implementation.

Acknowledgement

This research was not funded by any grant.

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