

**LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT: INSIGHTS FROM  
PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

**Hajah Zurinah binti Haji Ya'akub**

*The Language Centre, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam*

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p><b>Article History:</b> Received 15.08.2025 Accepted 15.10.2025 Published 15.11.2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Malay, Thai, language acquisition, structural similarities, pedagogy</p>	<p><i>This study investigates the structural parallels between Malay and Thai languages and their pedagogical implications for teaching standard Malay to foreign students at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Originating from the researcher's personal experience learning Thai through English-medium resources, the research identifies a critical gap in leveraging L1 (Malay) knowledge for L2 (Thai) acquisition, despite evident linguistic similarities between the two languages. The study employs qualitative methods, including personal narrative analysis and comparative linguistic examination of bilingual textbooks and digital media, to systematically analyse structural affinities at lexical, phrasal, and syntactic levels. At the lexical level, cognates like Malay 'makan' and Thai 'mâa-kin' ('to eat') demonstrate phonetic and semantic overlap, facilitating vocabulary recognition. Phrasal structures in both languages consistently place adjectives post-nominally (e.g., Malay 'bandar besar' and Thai 'meung yay' for 'big city'), contrasting with English syntax. Syntactically, shared Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, negation patterns (e.g., Malay 'tidak makan' and Thai 'mâi kin' for 'do not eat'), and question formation (e.g., Malay 'Awak pergi mana?' and Thai 'Kun pai nai?' for 'Where are you going?') reveal foundational similarities that reduce cognitive load for learners. The study's findings align with Lado's (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis and Krashen's (1982) Input Hypothesis, emphasising how structural familiarity promotes positive transfer in second language acquisition. By examining Thai instructional approaches through media and textbooks, the research proposes adapting similar strategies—particularly bilingual or L1-informed methodologies—for teaching Malay. This research highlights the practical benefits of cross-linguistic pedagogy in promoting cultural identity and language retention in diverse classrooms.</i></p>

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**1. Introduction**

Language plays a crucial role in communication and identity formation in multicultural settings, such as Brunei. This study stems from the experiential learning of Thai by a Malay-

speaking learner. It examines how structural similarities between Malay and Thai facilitate second-language acquisition and inform teaching methodologies.

Key parallels manifest at various linguistic levels: cognate verbs like Malay 'makan' and Thai 'mâa-kin' (มากิน) denote 'to eat'; phrase structures in both languages place adjectives post-nominally—e.g., English 'big city' contrasts with Malay 'bandar besar' and Thai 'meung yay' (เมืองใหญ่); sentence structures predominantly follow Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, observed in Malay 'Saya makan nasi' and Thai 'Chan kin khǎo' (ฉันกินข้าว).

Recognising such linguistic parallels can underpin effective pedagogical frameworks, especially in teaching Malay to foreign students at Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

## **2. Background**

In Brunei, the standard Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) is a crucial component of the education system, serving as the medium of instruction and a subject of study. The emphasis on Bahasa Melayu reflects its role in fostering national identity and cultural heritage. As a language of instruction, students need to achieve proficiency in Malay to succeed academically and socially. The Malay language, while sharing some features with Thai, exhibits unique characteristics that are vital for learners in Brunei. The proximity of Brunei to Thailand has led to some linguistic influences, but the core structure of Malay remains distinct. Recognising these common features benefits language learners and educators by enabling positive language transfer. For instance, the Malay verb 'buat' (to do) and the Thai word 'thâo' (เท้า, meaning 'foot') differ lexically, but related action or concept words like 'makan' / 'mâa-kin' are phonologically and semantically close. Such closeness can reduce difficulties in vocabulary acquisition. Adjective placement exhibits a strong similarity, contrasting with English word order, and provides learners with cues for efficient learning. Structural features, such as the common SVO sentence order, similar negation patterns (where the negator precedes the verb), and comparable question formation patterns, improve learner confidence and accelerate language mastery.

## **3. Research Problems**

This research was motivated by difficulties encountered while learning Thai, where all secondary resources used English as the teaching language. This raised questions about the effectiveness of this method for Malay speakers. It became clear that Thai and Malay share similar language structures, suggesting that these similarities could be used to improve the teaching standard Malay to foreign students at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. The researcher's experience with online learning, bilingual textbooks, and YouTube resources shows promise for applying these ideas to Malay language teaching. This study does not aim to prove this idea definitively but focuses on exploring the benefits of using structural similarities in language instruction.

## **4. Research Objectives**

- Identify and analyse structural similarities between Malay and Thai at the lexical, phrasal, and syntactic levels.

- Demonstrate with examples how these parallels facilitate language acquisition.
- Explore how instructional insights from learning Thai can inform and improve Malay language teaching methodologies for foreign learners.

## **5. Literature Review**

Theories in second language acquisition (SLA) consistently highlight the influence of a learner's first language (L1) on second language (L2) learning. Lado's Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (1957) posits that structural similarities between L1 and L2 facilitate positive transfer and mitigate learning difficulties (Lado, 1957). Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) emphasises the importance of comprehensible input that is slightly beyond the learner's current level to facilitate natural acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Selinker's Interlanguage Theory (1972) explains how learners develop evolving linguistic systems shaped by L1, underscoring the pedagogical value of recognising cross-linguistic parallels (Selinker, 1972).

Recent SLA research has expanded these foundational models. VanPatten's Input Processing model (2017) refines Krashen's theory by emphasising how learners selectively attend to linguistic input based on processing constraints, suggesting instruction should guide attention to key features (VanPatten, 2017). Sociocultural approaches, such as those of Ortega (2009), highlight language learning as a socially mediated process involving collaboration and meaningful communication, thereby challenging purely cognitive views. Translanguaging frameworks, as proposed by García and Wei (2014) and supported by research from Cenoz (2013), emphasise the dynamic use of multiple languages, advocating for pedagogies that leverage learners' full linguistic repertoires rather than restricting them to a single language (Ortega, 2009; García & Wei, 2014).

Integrating classical and contemporary theories offers a comprehensive understanding of SLA. For instance, VanPatten's model complements Krashen's by explaining input processing, while Ortega's sociocultural perspective enriches Selinker's concept of interlanguage. Recognition of multilingualism and translanguaging further reflects the realities of diverse learning environments and supports the use of English as a scaffold in multicultural classrooms. Empirical studies on Malay and Thai language learning also support these insights. Wong (2015) found that cognate recognition and structural parallels reduce errors and boost motivation among Malay speakers learning Thai (Wong, 2015). Sompoch (2010) noted cross-linguistic influences but emphasised the need for systematic syntactic comparison for pedagogical purposes (Sompoch, 2010). Aligning with Ellis's (2015) view that learners benefit from input building on existing knowledge, this study addresses the gap by analysing structural parallels between Malay and Thai and exploring their instructional implications for foreign learners at Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

## **6. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on the researcher's personal experience and supported by secondary data from bilingual textbooks and YouTube videos. These sources were chosen carefully to ensure they are relevant and representative.

### Bilingual Textbooks:

Three popular bilingual textbooks were selected because they are widely used, recommended by schools, and well-received by learners and teachers in the Malay context.

### YouTube Media:

Three YouTube videos were selected from channels that offer bilingual language lessons with a large number of subscribers and high viewer engagement. The content aligns with the study's goals of enhancing language understanding and cultural knowledge.

## 6.1 Why Banana Thai Was Chosen

Banana Thai was selected as a case study because it is very popular, with over 84,000 subscribers and some videos viewed by up to half a million people. Its content follows standard Thai language closely and combines language teaching with cultural insights, making it a good example for studying bilingual instruction and learner engagement.

## 6.2 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic narrative analysis, focusing on how bilingual language features are shown and how learners respond. The analysis involved identifying common themes about language use, culture, and teaching methods.

**Table 1:** Details on data source

Data Source Type	Number of Items	Description/Notes
Bilingual Textbooks	2	Selected for popularity and pedagogical focus
YouTube Videos	2	Channels with high viewer counts and relevance
Case Study Channel	1 (Banana Thai)	Over 84 thousand subscribers; aligns with standard Thai

## 7. Data Analysis and Findings

### 7.1 Lexical Level

At the lexical level, the analysis revealed several cognates and semantically similar verbs facilitating language learning:

**Table 2:** The lexical level.

No.	Thai Word	Malay Word	Linguistic Explanation
1	โรตีสี [ro:.ti:]	roti	Loanword from Hindi and Sanskrit; used in both languages to refer to the same food item.
2	เด็ก [dèk]	budak/adik	In Malay dialects, “dek” is a common term for a child or younger sibling; shows phonological borrowing.
3	กาแฟ [ka:.fɛ:]	kopi	Borrowed from European languages (likely French or Portuguese <i>café</i> ); phonetic resemblance retained.
4	ประตู [pra.tu:]	pintu	From Sanskrit <i>pratol</i> ; consistent syllable structure and meaning across both languages.
5	สามี [sa:.mi:]	suami	Formal term in both languages; derived from Sanskrit <i>svāmī</i> , meaning “husband” or “lord of the house.”

The word "roti " means "bread" in both Thai and Malay, with nearly the same pronunciation. It was borrowed from Hindi and Sanskrit through South Asian trade and kept its form because food terms are culturally important. The Thai word "dek " means "child," and in Southern Malay dialects like Kelantan and Patani, "dek " is also used to address young siblings or children. This shows how languages borrow sounds and words through long contact in border areas. The Thai word "ka-fae " and the Malay word "kopi " both mean "coffee" and are derived from European languages, likely Portuguese or French "café". Although they sound different, they have the same meaning and show parallel borrowing. The words "pratu " (Thai) and "pintu " (Malay) both derive from the Sanskrit root "pratol," meaning "door" or "gate," indicating shared origins and meaning. Finally, sa-mi (Thai) and suami (Malay) originate from the Sanskrit svāmī, meaning "husband" or "lord of the house." Each language adapted the word to fit its sounds but retained its cultural meaning.

### 7.2 Phrasal Level

At the phrasal level, Malay and Thai exhibit similar noun phrase structures where adjectives follow nouns, contrasting with English:

**Table 3:** The phrasal level

English Phrase	Malay	Thai (Script + Transliteration)	Explanation	Source
Big city	bandar besar	เมืองใหญ่ ( <i>meung yài</i> ) [mu:əŋ jàj]	Adjective follows noun in both Malay and Thai	Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005)
Beautiful flower	bunga cantik	ดอกสวย ( <i>dok sŭay</i> ) [dò:k sŭaj]	Consistent adjective-noun structure across both languages	Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2008)
Fast car	kereta laju	รถเร็ว ( <i>rót rew</i> ) [rót rew]	Identical syntactic positioning despite different lexical items	Wong (2015)
House that is big and beautiful	rumah yang besar dan cantik	บ้านใหญ่และสวย ( <i>bâan yài láe sŭay</i> ) [bâ:n jàj lé sŭaj]	Coordination of adjectives and use of relative clause structures show notable cross-linguistic parallels	Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005)
Old and tall tree	pokok yang tua dan tinggi	ต้นไม้เก่าและสูง ( <i>tôn máai gào láe sŭung</i> ) [tôn má:j kàw lé sŭ:ŋ]	Coordinated adjectives linked by <i>dan / láe</i> , indicating shared syntactic patterns	Nik Safiah Karim et. al. (2008)

This comparative table highlights the syntactic congruence between English, Malay, and Thai when constructing noun phrases with adjectives. In examples like *big city* (*bandar besar / meung yài*) and *beautiful flower* (*bunga cantik / dok sŭay*), both Malay and Thai adopt a head-first structure, where the noun precedes the adjective. This reflects a typological feature shared across both languages, despite their different language families.

Further examples, such as *fast car* (*kereta laju / rót rew*), reinforce this parallel by showing that both languages preserve adjective positioning directly after the noun, even with

unrelated vocabulary origins. More complex phrases like a *house that is big and beautiful and old and a tall tree* show coordination using conjunctions (*dan* in Malay, *และ* / *lâe* in Thai), and both maintain a similar order for stacked adjectives. This shows a mutual preference for left-headed noun phrases with post-modifying adjectives, a feature reinforced in studies by Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005) and Nik Safiah Karim et. al. (2008). The alignment in structure—even when vocabulary differs—reveals an underlying syntactic compatibility valuable for contrastive linguistics and language pedagogy.

### 7.2.1 Adjective Phrases Relating to Good Personality in Thai and Malay: A Structural Comparison

This section draws on teaching material from the YouTube channel *Banana Thai*, presented by Kru Smuk (2023), which introduces learners to adjective phrases used to describe good personality traits in Thai. The video demonstrates that while Thai and Malay share similar phrase structures—particularly in adjective placement—both differ from English, despite all three languages generally employing the Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) sentence pattern.



**Image 1:** Screenshot from *Banana Thai* (2023) – Example of the Thai adjective phrase used in a personality context.

The comparison below examines three examples of positive personality descriptors based on direct translations from Thai into Malay and English. The analysis focuses not on metaphorical interpretation, but on literal translation and structural alignment.

**Table 4:** Comparison of Thai, Malay, and English Adjective Phrases (Literal Translation)

No.	Time Stamp	Thai Sentence	Literal English Translation	Malay Literal Translation	Structure Observation
1	1:13	ฉันเป็นคนดี ( <i>Chan bpen khon dii</i> ) [chǎn pen khon di:]	I am a good person	Saya seorang yang baik	Adjective follows nouns in Thai and Malay ( <i>kon dii, seorang yang baik</i> ); English places the adjective before the noun.
2	2:00	คุณน่ารักมาก ( <i>Khun naa rak mâak</i> )	You are a very lovely person	Awak seorang yang sangat manis	Thai and Malay use post-nominal adjective phrases; English uses pre-nominal adjective phrases ( <i>lovely person</i> ).

		[khun nâ: rak mâ:k]			
3	3:24	เธอเป็นคนใจกว้าง ( <i>Thəə bpen khon jai gwaang</i> ) [thə: pen khon jai kwâ:ŋ]	She is a big-hearted person	Dia seorang yang berhati besar	An adjective phrase follows a noun in Thai and Malay; English uses a pre-nominal adjective ( <i>big-hearted person</i> ).

The following examples are drawn from the YouTube video by *Banana Thai* titled “Learn words about Personality in Thai”. Key timestamps include:

- 1:13 – *Chan bpen khon dii* (I am a good person)
- 2:00 – *Khun naa rak mâak* (You are very lovely)
- 3:24 – *Thəə bpen khon jai gwaang* (She is a big-hearted person)

These examples were selected for their clear demonstration of adjective placement and cross-linguistic parallels with Malay.

### 7.2.2 Structural Explanation

Across all three Thai examples, the adjective phrases occur after the noun, forming a post-nominal structure. In *Chan bpen khon dii*, *khon* (person) is modified by *dii* (good). Likewise, in *Khun naa rak mâak*, *naa rak* (lovely/charming) functions as the adjective, with *mâak* (very) as an intensifier. In Malay, the equivalent construction—*Awak seorang yang sangat manis*—mirrors this pattern, where *sangat manis* follows the noun phrase *seorang yang*.

English, however, consistently applies pre-nominal adjectives, such as *a good person*, *a very lovely person*, and *a big-hearted person*. This head-modifier reversal requires explicit pedagogical attention, particularly for learners coming from Malay or Thai backgrounds. As Dixon (1982) notes, adjective positioning is a key typological feature in understanding how languages categorise and structure descriptive meaning.

### 7.2.3 Pedagogical Insight

Kru Smuk’s teaching, which relies on visual examples and simple English narration, can inform Malay language instruction for foreign learners by highlighting cross-linguistic patterns between Thai and Malay. Educators can explicitly teach adjective phrase structure using contrastive examples, reducing confusion for learners whose L1 also features post-nominal adjectives. This approach aligns with Lado’s (1957) Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, advocating for instructional methods that emphasise similarities to support positive transfer and reduce cognitive load.

## 7.3 Sentential Level

At the sentence level, Malay and Thai show strong alignment in basic sentence syntax (Refer to [Appendix 4](#)). Both languages primarily follow an SVO order and use similar strategies in negation, question formation, and tense-aspect expression:

**Table 5:** The sentence level

Language	Sentence	Structure	Meaning	Source
Malay	Saya minum air	SVO	I drink water	Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2008)
Thai	ฉัน ดื่มน้ำ ( <i>Chan dûem náam</i> ) [chǎn dù:m ná:m]	SVO	I drink water	Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005)
Malay	Saya tidak makan	Neg + Verb	I do not eat	Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2008)
Thai	ฉัน ไม่กิน ( <i>Chan mâi kin</i> ) [chǎn mâj kin]	Neg + Verb	I do not eat	Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005)
Malay	Kamu pergi mana?	Question word end	Where are you going?	Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2008)
Thai	คุณ ไปไหน? ( <i>Kun pai nai?</i> ) [khun paj nǎj]	Question word end	Where are you going?	Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005)
Malay	Dia sedang membaca buku	Subject–Verb–Object progressive	He is reading a book	Nik Safiah Karim et al. (2008)
Thai	เขา กำลัง อ่าน หนังสือ ( <i>Khao kam-lang aan nangsue</i> ) [kʰǎw kam.laŋ à:n nǎŋ.sǔ:]	Subject–Verb–Object progressive	He is reading a book	Iwasaki & Ingkaphirom (2005)

This comparison highlights significant grammatical similarities between Malay and Thai. Both languages use the Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) order, as in “Saya minum air” (Malay) and “ฉัน ดื่มน้ำ” (Chan dûem náam) in Thai, meaning “I drink water.” Despite coming from different language families, they share this basic sentence structure. For negation, both place the negative word before the verb, like “Saya tidak makan” and “ฉัน ไม่กิน” (Chan mâi kin), meaning “I do not eat.” This shows they use a similar way to form negative sentences. Question sentences also have similarities. Malay’s “Kamu pergi mana?” and Thai’s “คุณ ไปไหน?” (Kun pai nai?) both put the question word at the end, a pattern common in Southeast Asian languages but less so in European ones. Finally, both languages use words before the verb to show ongoing action: “sedang” in Malay and “กำลัง” (kam-lang) in Thai, as in “Dia sedang membaca buku” and “เขา กำลัง อ่าน หนังสือ” (Khao kam-lang aan nangsue), meaning “He is reading a book.” Both keep the SVO order while showing the progressive tense.

## 8. Discussion

This study meets its three research objectives:

- Objective 1: It identifies and analyses structural similarities between Malay and Thai at the lexical, phrasal, and syntactic levels. Examples of cognates, adjective-noun phrase patterns, and sentence structures show clear parallels.
- Objective 2: It demonstrates how these similarities help language learning by connecting them to SLA theories (Lado, 1957; Krashen, 1982). Shared sentence

patterns reduce complexity and support positive transfer, making it easier and faster for learners to understand and acquire the language.

- Objective 3: It explores how learning Thai through bilingual and media resources can inform Malay teaching at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. Although this study does not empirically test these methods, it discusses their potential benefits based on SLA theory and previous research (Wong, 2015).

The findings align with SLA research that emphasises the value of structural familiarity and positive transfer, but also highlight the limitations of English-only instruction for Malay speakers learning Thai. This supports the use of bilingual or L1-based teaching methods for both languages. However, it is important to note that this study is qualitative and exploratory, relying mainly on secondary sources such as bilingual textbooks and media, which may limit insights into spoken and dialectal variations. Additionally, the focus on lexical, phrasal, and syntactic parallels excludes phonological, semantic, and pragmatic aspects. The findings are also contextualised within the Brunei educational environment and may not be fully generalizable to other Malay-speaking communities or academic settings. Overall, the study demonstrates that understanding and utilising the similarities between Malay and Thai can significantly enhance language teaching for multilingual learners, particularly in diverse settings such as Brunei.

## **9. Pedagogical Implications**

This study suggests that language instruction can be enhanced by adopting multilingual strategies inspired by successful Thai language resources that utilise English as the medium. The researcher's experience learning Thai through English-based bilingual textbooks and platforms, such as Banana Thai, highlights the accessibility and pedagogical value of these approaches. Applying similar methods to teaching Malay—using contrastive examples, scaffolded explanations, and bilingual media—can enhance learner engagement, comprehension, and retention, especially for foreign learners in Brunei, where English serves as a common linguistic bridge. This approach supports inclusive, learner-centred pedagogy and reinforces Malay's role as a language of identity in Southeast Asia.

Key pedagogical recommendations include:

1. Developing bilingual Malay-English worksheets modelled on Thai resources that integrate vocabulary, sentence structures, and cultural notes to scaffold learning via learners' English proficiency (see [Appendix 1](#)).
2. Using contrastive tables (e.g., Tables 1–4) to explicitly teach syntactic features like adjective placement, negation, and question formation, aiding learners through visual side-by-side comparisons (see [Appendix 2](#)).
3. Incorporating YouTube-style mini-lessons into Malay courses at Universiti Brunei Darussalam, inspired by Banana Thai, to deliver grammar, pronunciation, and cultural content in engaging, bilingual formats (see [Appendix 3](#)).

4. These strategies align with inclusive pedagogy and contribute to strengthening Malay's cultural and linguistic significance in a multilingual context.

## 10. Conclusion

This study offers insights into the interplay between Brunei Malay and Standard Thai, yet its findings may not be fully generalisable to other Malay-speaking regions or Thai dialects. While certain lexical items like *roti* demonstrate cross-regional universality, others, such as *budak* or *dek*, reflect dialectal specificity, especially in Kelantanese and Patani Malay. Similarly, although syntactic patterns like SVO word order and post-nominal adjective placement are broadly consistent, variations in aspect marking and negation—such as the use of *sedang* in Indonesian—highlight regional nuances. The Thai data primarily represent Standard Thai, and dialects like Isan and Southern Thai, which share historical ties with Malay-speaking communities, may exhibit distinct bilingual practices not captured in this study. Future studies should explore how these multilingual methods affect learning and also investigate pronunciation and real-life language use to support inclusive education across the region<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Future research could examine: (a) comparative studies of Brunei Malay, Malaysian Malay, and Indonesian Bahasa to identify universal and regional linguistic features that influence learning; (b) cross-dialectal analysis with Southern Thai dialects (e.g., Isan) to explore pronunciation patterns and syntactic structures; and (c) sociolinguistic fieldwork in border regions (Narathiwat, Yala, Kelantan) to document real-life bilingual interactions and code-switching. These avenues would enrich inclusive education by grounding pedagogy in authentic multilingual practices.

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