

STRATEGIC EFFORTS TO STRENGTHEN THE USE OF STANDARD MALAY IN
HIGHER EDUCATION: PROACTIVE MEASURES AT UNIVERSITI BRUNEI
DARUSSALAM

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received 15.08.2025 Accepted 15.10.2025 Published 15.11.2025 Keywords: <i>standard Malay, language policy, higher education, bilingualism, cultural identity</i>	<i>In multilingual societies such as Brunei Darussalam, higher education institutions face the dual challenge of promoting academic excellence while preserving and strengthening cultural and linguistic identity. Bahasa Melayu Standard (BMS), enshrined as the national language under the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy, serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a cornerstone of Bruneian identity, social cohesion, and cultural continuity. Despite its national significance, the practical use of BMS in higher education is increasingly overshadowed by English and local dialects, particularly in science, technology, and business disciplines. This study examines the perceptions and practices of Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) students regarding the academic use of BMS. A structured survey involving 26 students from multiple faculties was conducted using stratified random sampling, providing exploratory insights into language use patterns, confidence, and perceived institutional support. The findings reveal limited student confidence in academic writing in BMS, frequent code-switching between languages, and perceived gaps in academic vocabulary. As an exploratory study, these findings highlight barriers to effective BMS engagement, offer hypotheses for future research, and underscore the need for complementary qualitative approaches to capture the nuanced reasons behind student behaviors. The study contributes to language policy and higher education scholarship by emphasizing the importance of embedding BMS within academic practices to support both cultural identity and bilingual competence.</i>

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1. Introduction

In multilingual societies such as Brunei Darussalam, higher education institutions are tasked with the complex challenge of balancing the pursuit of academic excellence with the preservation and promotion of cultural and linguistic identity. Bahasa Melayu Standard (BMS), enshrined as the national language under the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy, functions

not merely as a medium of communication but as a pivotal marker of Bruneian identity, social cohesion, and cultural continuity. Despite its symbolic and functional significance, the practical use of BMS within academic settings has been increasingly overshadowed by English and local dialects, particularly Dialek Melayu Brunei (DMB), which dominate domains such as science, business, and international programs. This study contributes to the field by demonstrating that even with direct instruction through courses such as LB-1406 Bahasa Melayu Standard, students struggle to transition BMS from a “learned subject” to an active academic tool. This insight highlights an urgent need for strategies that extend beyond the language classroom to embed BMS within broader academic and institutional practices. This linguistic shift reflects broader trends associated with globalization, economic competitiveness, and internationalization of higher education, where English often assumes the role of lingua franca, shaping both curriculum design and student discourse (Jones, 2015; Haji-Othman, 2019).

In recognition of these challenges, Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) has implemented a range of strategic initiatives aimed at revitalizing the academic presence and functional utility of BMS. These measures include the LB-1406 Bahasa Melayu Standard breadth module, integration of BMS across the GenNEXT curriculum, adoption of dual-medium instructional strategies, and deliberate efforts to enhance BMS visibility in academic and campus contexts. By doing so, UBD not only promotes linguistic competence but also reinforces the symbolic value of BMS as a vehicle for national identity, intellectual engagement, and cultural literacy. These initiatives are aligned with the objectives of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which emphasizes inclusive and equitable quality education, and SDG 10, which advocates the reduction of social and educational inequalities, highlighting the broader societal and policy relevance of proactive language planning in higher education (Fettes, 2023; UNESCO, 2025).

While institutional policies and curriculum innovations are critical, the lived experiences of students ultimately determine the success of such interventions. Understanding how students navigate multilingual academic environments, negotiate language preferences, and engage with BMS provides crucial insights into the efficacy of these measures. This study, therefore, critically evaluates the impact of UBD’s initiatives through the lens of student experience, focusing on how institutional strategies influence learner confidence, active usage, and engagement with BMS. By exploring both the affordances and constraints experienced by students, the research seeks to identify persistent gaps in practice and generate evidence-based recommendations for more targeted and sustainable interventions. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing scholarly discourse on multilingual higher education, language maintenance, and the role of national languages in cultivating culturally and academically competent graduates in increasingly globalized contexts.

2. Research Objectives

The following objectives guide this study:

1. To examine the strategic initiatives implemented by UBD to promote Standard Malay within academic contexts.
2. To evaluate student responses to language usage patterns and confidence in using Standard Malay.

3. To identify challenges that hinder the effectiveness in fostering a sustainable bilingual academic environment.

3. Significance of Study

This study holds both national and institutional significance. At the national level, it contributes to Brunei Darussalam's ongoing efforts to preserve and strengthen the role of Bahasa Melayu Standard (BMS) as a cornerstone of cultural identity under the Melayu Islam Beraja (MIB) philosophy. As globalisation and the dominance of English continue to influence academic and professional domains, understanding how students engage with BMS in higher education becomes critical to sustaining linguistic heritage and national unity.

At the institutional level, the study provides timely insights into the effectiveness of Universiti Brunei Darussalam's proactive measures to promote BMS, including curriculum interventions, lecturer modeling, and campus-wide language visibility. By foregrounding student perspectives, the research offers evidence-based recommendations that can inform future policy enhancements, curriculum design, and faculty development. Furthermore, the study aligns with Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 4 and 10 by addressing language equity and inclusive education. It contributes to the broader discourse on language policy implementation in multilingual societies and offers a model for other ASEAN institutions seeking to balance global competencies with local linguistic preservation.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Bilingualism and Language Practice in Asia

Across Asia, bilingual education often emerges at the intersection of globalization and cultural preservation. Countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Brunei have adopted bilingualism not only as a pragmatic tool for international engagement but also as a means of safeguarding linguistic heritage (Zen, 2017). However, implementation of bilingual policies is rarely straightforward. Sociolinguistic hierarchies and perceptions of language prestige frequently shape which languages are prioritized in practice. In Brunei, students routinely navigate between three linguistic codes, Dialek Melayu Brunei (DMB), English, and Bahasa Melayu Standard (BMS) depending on the context. This fluid multilingualism, while reflective of Brunei's cultural richness, presents challenges for institutional efforts to normalize BMS in academic settings. As Haji-Othman (2019) observes, English continues to dominate academic and professional domains, often at the expense of BMS, which is perceived as formal but less functional in everyday university life.

4.2 Institutional Language Strategy and Planning

Effective language policy in higher education requires more than curriculum design; it demands systemic integration across departments, teaching practices, and institutional culture. Drawing on Kaplan and Baldauf's framework for language-in-education planning, successful implementation involves alignment across curriculum development, pedagogy, resource allocation, staff training, and ongoing evaluation (Pakir, 2023). At UBD, the LB-1406 Bahasa Melayu Standard module represents a proactive curricular intervention aimed at strengthening

BMS proficiency. However, without consistent reinforcement across faculties and disciplines, such efforts risk becoming isolated. Research suggests that language promotion must extend beyond compliance-based models and instead foster authentic opportunities for students to engage with BMS in diverse academic contexts (Lee et al., 2024).

4.3 ASEAN Perspectives on Language Equity

Within the ASEAN region, multilingualism is both a cultural reality and a policy aspiration. While ASEAN frameworks advocate for linguistic inclusivity, English remains the dominant medium in regional cooperation, education, and commerce. Zhang, Zhao, and Huang (2025) argue that this duality creates tension between national identity and regional integration. In Brunei, this is reflected in the continued privileging of English in STEM and international programs, despite policy commitments to BMS. Pugong et al. (2024) highlight that many ASEAN countries struggle with implementation gaps, where language policies exist in principle but lack institutional depth. Addressing this requires a whole-of-institution approach that embeds local languages into administrative systems, teaching practices, and assessment frameworks.

4.4 Threshold Hypothesis and Academic Outcomes

Cummins' Threshold Hypothesis (1976) remains a foundational theory in bilingual education, positing that the cognitive and academic benefits of bilingualism are only realized when both languages reach a threshold of proficiency, specifically, Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Students who operate at the Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) level in one language may struggle with academic tasks that require abstract reasoning and formal expression (Marian & Hayakawa, 2021). In the Bruneian context, students often achieve CALP in English due to its dominance in academic instruction, while BMS proficiency remains limited to BICS. This imbalance restricts their ability to engage in academic writing, critical analysis, and scholarly discourse with BMS, thereby limiting the full potential of bilingual education.

4.5 Language Sustainability and the SDGs

Language equity is central to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (quality education) and Goal 10 (reduced inequalities). Multilingual education has been shown to enhance cognitive development, promote cultural inclusion, and improve access to academic resources—particularly for students from linguistically marginalized backgrounds (Ezeh & Obiageli, 2020). In European contexts, language equity initiatives have evolved from symbolic gestures to systemic reforms that include teacher training, curriculum development, and institutional accountability. Fettes (2023) emphasizes the importance of embedding linguistic diversity into institutional governance, while Kennett (2023) stresses that without structural integration, language policies risk remaining rhetorical. For Brunei, aligning BMS promotion with the SDGs not only supports national identity but also contributes to global efforts toward inclusive and sustainable education.

5. Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to examine student perceptions of institutional strategies promoting the use of Bahasa Melayu Standard (BMS) at Universiti Brunei Darussalam. A total of 26 undergraduates were selected from four faculties: The Faculty of Science (FoS), Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS), Faculty of Integrated Technologies (FiT), and the School of Business and Economics (SBE). All participants were enrolled in the LB-1406 Bahasa Melayu Standard breadth module at the time of data collection, ensuring that they had direct exposure to institutional language initiatives.

The research instrument was a five-part, close-ended questionnaire designed to capture student responses across several domains: demographic background, language use patterns, self-assessed confidence in BMS, motivational factors, and perceived institutional support. Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale to allow for nuanced interpretation. Data were coded and analyzed using IBM SPSS to generate descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and to explore relationships between variables using Pearson's correlation coefficient. This approach enabled a structured evaluation of student attitudes and the effectiveness of institutional strategies.

5. Findings

Key findings from the survey include:

- Students reported low confidence in academic writing in BMS, particularly with specialized vocabulary (Mean = 4.1).
- Code-switching was common, especially in oral discussions, reflecting both habit and lack of academic vocabulary.
- Students perceived BMS as more relevant to cultural than academic functions, highlighting a tension between identity and academic utility.

5.1 Language Use Patterns

The majority of students reported using DMB as their primary language in daily communication (69%), followed by English (23%) and BMS (8%). Figure 1 suggests that students feel more comfortable communicating in their local dialect than in Bahasa Melayu Standard (BMS) or English. According to Liu (2018), students often develop stronger attachment and more positive attitudes toward their local dialects compared to the standard or national language. Only 8% of respondents identified BMS as their primary language in everyday interactions, while 23% primarily used English. These results indicate that BMS has a relatively limited presence in students' daily lives, highlighting the challenge of promoting its use beyond formal or academic contexts.

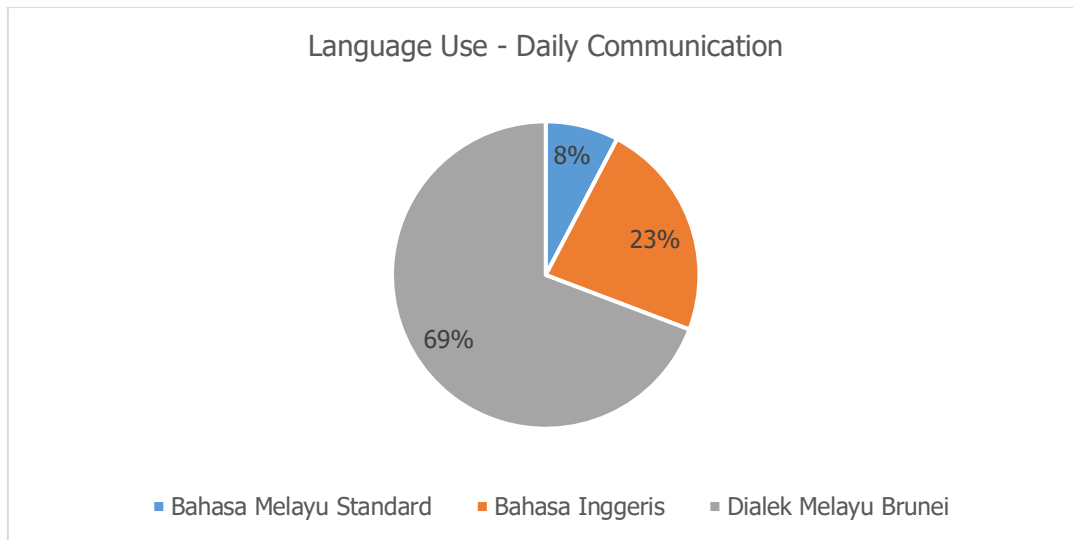


Figure 1: Language Use – Daily Communication

In academic interactions, approximately half of the respondents used a mix of DMB and English, while only 11.5% reported using BMS exclusively. In writing tasks, 26.9% acknowledged frequent code-switching from BMS to English. The average self-reported code-switching frequency was 3.42 out of 5, indicating moderate to high alternation between languages.

5.2 Perceived Institutional Support

Institutional Effort	Students Reporting High Impact
LB-1406 module	76.9%
Lecturer modeling of BMS	73.1%
Campus-wide BMS visibility	46.2%

The data indicate that institutional efforts to strengthen the role of BMS are perceived unevenly across different strategies. A substantial majority of students (76.9%) reported that the LB-1406 module, which directly integrates academic Malay into the curriculum, had a strong impact on their language use. Similarly, lecturer modeling of BMS in classroom settings was recognized by 73.1% of respondents as highly influential, underscoring the importance of consistent and authoritative role models in reinforcing language practice. In contrast, only 46.2% of students perceived the campus-wide visibility of BMS, such as its presence in signage, official documents, or digital platforms, as impactful. This gap suggests that while classroom-based initiatives are relatively effective, the broader institutional environment may not yet provide a strong enough linguistic presence to normalize BMS across non-academic contexts. Without reinforcement in everyday campus life, students may continue to compartmentalize BMS as a classroom-bound language rather than a practical tool for wider communication.

5.3 Barriers to BMS Engagement

Reported Barrier	Mean Likert Score (1–5)
Lack of academic vocabulary	4.1
Peer preference for other codes	3.8
Inconsistent lecturer use	3.5

Students reported several barriers that limited their engagement with BMS in academic contexts. The most significant obstacle was lack of academic vocabulary, with a mean Likert score of 4.1, indicating that many students struggle to express complex ideas in BMS. Peer preference for other languages or dialects was the next notable barrier (mean = 3.8), reflecting the social pressures to use English or DMB in daily interactions. Finally, inconsistent use of BMS by lecturers (mean = 3.5) further weakened students' opportunities to practice and internalize the language.

These findings suggest that while institutional initiatives such as LB-1406 and lecturer modeling provide valuable exposure, additional measures are needed to address linguistic gaps and social norms. For instance, targeted vocabulary-building exercises, peer-led writing groups, and consistent faculty reinforcement could directly mitigate these barriers. By linking each barrier to specific, actionable strategies, UBD can foster a more supportive and integrated academic environment for BMS, transforming it from a theoretical subject into a practical, usable language across both classroom and campus context significant barrier, followed by peer norms and inconsistent reinforcement by faculty.

5.4 Confidence and Motivation

Only 38.5% of students rated themselves as highly confident (score 4–5) in using BMS academically. Over 60% cited vocabulary gaps as a key inhibitor, and half reported that using BMS felt unnatural in peer settings, undermining motivation and self-efficacy.

6. Discussions

The findings suggest that while UBD has taken proactive steps to promote BMS, particularly through LB-1406 Bahasa Melayu Standard and lecturer modeling, student engagement remains limited. These measures, though well-intentioned, have yet to achieve the systemic integration necessary to shift language behaviour across the academic ecosystem. This reflects a broader pattern observed in ASEAN institutions, where language policies often exist in principle but lack deep institutional embedding (Zhang et al., 2025).

Students perceive BMS as formal and disconnected from their academic and social realities. This perception, combined with peer norms and inconsistent faculty use, reinforces the dominance of English and DMB. Without consistent modeling and reinforcement, BMS struggles to gain traction as a viable academic language.

The limited uptake of BMS also restricts the cognitive benefits of bilingualism. According to Cummins' Threshold Hypothesis, students must achieve CALP in both languages to experience academic advantages (Marian & Hayakawa, 2021). In this study, students

demonstrated CALP in English but remained at the BICS level in BMS, limiting their ability to engage with academic content in the national language.

7. Recommendations

The findings suggest a pressing need for interventions that align with the barriers identified:

1. Addressing lack of academic vocabulary (Mean = 4.1): UBD should integrate BMS academic vocabulary into non-language courses (e.g., education, social sciences), establish peer-led writing labs, and encourage lecturers to model BMS use in academic contexts.
2. Enhancing student confidence in academic writing: Structured writing workshops and scaffolded assignments in BMS should be implemented, supported by feedback mechanisms, to counter students' self-reported low confidence.
3. Reducing reliance on code-switching: Faculty can encourage more consistent BMS usage in discussions by adopting bilingual teaching strategies that gradually increase BMS use in academic tasks.
4. Future research design: This study identifies patterns but does not explain the nuanced "why" behind them. Qualitative follow-up research using interviews or open-ended surveys is recommended to capture students' deeper attitudes and challenges.

8. Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on evaluating the proactive institutional measures implemented by Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) to promote the academic use of Bahasa Melayu Standard (BMS). It specifically examines student perceptions of these efforts, including the LB-1406 module, lecturer modeling, and campus-wide language visibility. The scope is intentionally limited to undergraduates enrolled in the LB-1406 module across four faculties, providing a focused lens on students who have direct exposure to formal BMS instruction. By using a structured quantitative survey, the study captures patterns of language use, confidence, and perceived institutional support, contributing to the broader discourse on language policy implementation in higher education. This aligns with the sociolinguistic tradition of language policy and planning (LPP), which emphasizes the role of institutions in shaping language behaviour through deliberate interventions (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Al-Zoubi & Abunawas, 2025).

While the study provides valuable exploratory insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. The small sample size of 26 students, although stratified across faculties, limits the generalizability of the findings. This study should therefore be interpreted as hypothesis-generating rather than conclusive. Furthermore, the reliance on quantitative surveys identifies what is happening but not why. The absence of qualitative data restricts the ability to capture nuanced perspectives and motivations underlying students' language choices. These limitations highlight directions for future research, including larger samples and mixed-method designs. Moreover, the study does not account for longitudinal changes in language behaviour or the influence of external sociopolitical factors, such as national language policy shifts or global linguistic trends. As Trinick, May, and Lemon (2020) argue, successful language planning

requires not only institutional commitment but also structural alignment, community engagement, and sustained policy coherence. Future research should therefore adopt a mixed-methods approach, include multiple stakeholder perspectives, and explore the long-term impact of proactive language strategies within and beyond the university context.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of UBD's strategies to promote BMS in higher education. While institutional commitment is evident, student engagement remains limited due to sociolinguistic preferences, vocabulary challenges, and inconsistent reinforcement. BMS is often perceived as formal and peripheral, rather than a lived academic language. This study provides exploratory evidence of the challenges faced by UBD students in adopting BMS as an academic language. Despite receiving direct instruction through LB-1406 Bahasa Melayu Standard, students continue to perceive BMS as a subject of study rather than a tool of academic engagement. This underscores the need for institutional strategies that extend beyond the classroom, embedding BMS into wider academic practices, curricular design, and student support. While limited in scope, the study opens pathways for future work that combines larger-scale quantitative analysis with qualitative inquiry to capture the complexities of bilingual practice in Brunei higher.

To address these challenges, UBD must move beyond symbolic interventions and foster a campus culture where BMS is actively used, valued, and supported. By embedding BMS across disciplines and reinforcing its academic legitimacy through proactive institutional strategies, the university can contribute meaningfully to both national language preservation and international standards of inclusive, equitable education.

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