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Rooting Malay Language Fluency in Cultural and Islamic Heritage: A Qualitative Exploration of Student Perspectives

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Abstract. The Malay language is more than a national medium of communication; it embodies cultural traditions and Islamic heritage that have shaped the identity of the Malay world. Fluency in Malay therefore extends beyond grammar and vocabulary, requiring an appreciation of the cultural and religious elements that give depth and meaning to expression. This study explores how culture and Islamic values nurture fluency, focusing on students' lived experiences through qualitative interviews. Using semi-structured interviews, the research captures how exposure to pantun, proverbs, traditional performances, and Islamic-infused customs enriches vocabulary, improves intonation, and strengthens stylistic expression. Findings suggest that a culture- and faith-based approach not only enhances fluency but also reinforces identity, equipping students to navigate the challenges of globalization while remaining rooted in heritage. By situating Malay language learning within its cultural and religious foundations, this study contributes to ongoing academic discussions on holistic and contextually relevant strategies for language teaching in multicultural societies.

Keywords: culture-based pedagogy; identity; Islamic values; language fluency; Malay language; pantun.

INTRODUCTION

Bahasa Melayu (the Malay language) occupies a distinctive position among the world's languages: it is simultaneously a national language, a lingua franca of maritime Southeast Asia, and a repository of centuries of cultural and religious history. Spoken across Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, and parts of southern Thailand, the Malay language carries within its lexicon, idiom, and rhetorical conventions the imprint of adat (customary practice) and Islam, the two forces that have shaped the worldview of the Alam Melayu, or Malay world, for centuries. Consequently, to speak Malay well is not simply to master its phonology, morphology, and syntax; it is to participate in a set of cultural and religious meanings that give the language its texture and depth.

Conventional approaches to language instruction, however, tend to isolate fluency from the cultural and religious matrix in which it is embedded. Vocabulary lists, grammar drills, and standardized assessments dominate many classrooms, leaving little room for the proverbs, oral poetry, traditional performances, and religiously inflected customs that historically transmitted linguistic competence alongside cultural wisdom. This narrowing of focus risks producing learners who are grammatically accurate but who lack the stylistic range, intonational nuance, and pragmatic sensitivity that mark genuinely fluent speech. It also risks weakening the transmission of heritage values at a moment when globalization, digital media, and the dominance of English as a language of prestige and mobility are reshaping how young Malay speakers relate to their mother tongue.

Language, Culture, and Identity: Theoretical Foundations

The premise that language cannot be meaningfully separated from culture is well established in applied linguistics. Kramsch [1] argues that language is the primary means by which culture is enacted and transmitted, so that learning a language inevitably involves learning to interpret and produce culturally embedded meanings rather than merely acquiring an abstract linguistic code. From a developmental perspective, Vygotsky's [2] sociocultural theory similarly holds that higher cognitive functions, including language, develop through socially and culturally mediated interaction, with cultural tools such as stories, songs, and rituals serving as the scaffolding through which competence is internalized. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that fluency is not solely a matter of individual cognitive mastery but is co-constructed through participation in a community's cultural and symbolic practices.

The Malay Language as a Cultural and Islamic Vessel

In the Malay world, the cultural embeddedness of language is inseparable from the historical influence of Islam. Since the spread of Islam through the Malay Archipelago from around the thirteenth century, the language absorbed a substantial repertoire of Arabic-derived vocabulary, religious formulae, and rhetorical

conventions, while the Jawi script long served as the vehicle for both religious and literary texts. This fusion is perhaps most explicitly institutionalized in Brunei Darussalam's national philosophy of Melayu Islam Beraja (Malay Islamic Monarchy), which formally unites Malay language and custom, Islamic teaching, and monarchical governance as interdependent pillars of national identity. Minnis [3] observes that Malay-Islamic values permeate expectations of appropriate conduct, speech, and pedagogy in Bruneian education, illustrating how deeply intertwined linguistic and religious norms can become within a Malay-Muslim society. Beyond Brunei, Adnan [4] shows that Malay university students actively draw on language use as a resource for constructing and negotiating identity within their communities, underscoring that competence in Malay is bound up with questions of belonging, not merely communicative accuracy.

Pantun, Oral Tradition, and the Cultivation of Fluency

Among the cultural resources most frequently associated with Malay linguistic artistry is the pantun, a traditional quatrain form built on an a-b-a-b rhyme scheme, in which an opening pair of lines (the *pembayang* or *sampiran*) evokes an image from nature before the closing pair (the *maksud*) delivers the poem's substantive message. The pantun was inscribed by UNESCO on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in recognition of its centrality to Malay social and moral life, its function as a vehicle for indirect and polite self-expression, and its continuing transmission through both formal schooling and informal community practice [5]. Aveling's [6] structural and functional analysis of the Malay pantun demonstrates how its tight formal constraints, rhyme, parallelism, and semantic linkage between imagery and meaning cultivate a heightened sensitivity to sound, rhythm, and figurative language in those who compose and recite it.

Empirical studies reinforce the pedagogical value of pantun. Ahmadi and Juwati [7] find that traditional Malay pantun encode structured moral and character values that can be explicitly taught alongside linguistic form, while Tarwiyani et al. [8] argue that pantun, together with related oral genres such as *tunjuk ajar* (didactic guidance) and *gurindam* (didactic couplets), preserve a distinctly Malay philosophy of education that curricula anchored solely in Western pedagogical models risk eroding. Ramli Muasmara et al. [9] similarly report that structured exposure to pantun composition among Malay youth strengthens their grasp of correct linguistic form even as it reinforces communal identity. Importantly, Nur et al. [10] demonstrate that pantun has not remained static: as an oral tradition it has adapted into digital content and new modes of transmission, suggesting that culturally rooted language practices can evolve alongside, rather than being displaced by, globalization and digital media. Wong [11] further documents the contemporary pedagogical use of pantun in educational settings, noting its capacity to make language learning more engaging and memorable than decontextualized drilling.

Proverbs (Peribahasa) and Vocabulary Development

Malay proverbs, or *peribahasa*, constitute a second major resource through which cultural wisdom and linguistic competence are jointly transmitted. Mohd Ridzuan and Mary Fatimah Subet [12] apply an inquisitive semantics approach to *peribahasa* found in Malaysian secondary school textbooks, showing that a proverb's surface meaning, its contextual meaning within a sentence, and the underlying philosophy and communal common sense (*akal budi*) it encodes together constitute layers of meaning that enrich learners' vocabulary and interpretive sophistication far beyond rote memorization. Their analysis further suggests that treating *peribahasa* merely as items to be memorized for examinations, rather than as windows into cultural reasoning, diminishes their pedagogical potential and contributes to declining engagement with this dimension of the language among younger speakers.

Islamic-Infused Customs and Stylistic and Pragmatic Expression

Beyond oral literature, everyday Islamic-infused customs, ranging from greeting formulae and expressions of gratitude and supplication, to the vocabulary and etiquette surrounding religious festivals such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri and Maulidur Rasul, furnish speakers with a register of formal, polite, and religiously resonant language that complements the more informal registers acquired through daily conversation. Such customs cultivate pragmatic competence: knowing not only what to say but when, to whom, and in what manner, in accordance with Islamic notions of *adab* (proper conduct) and *hormat* (respect). Minnis's [3] observations on the integration of Malay-Islamic values into Bruneian teacher education similarly point to the way religiously grounded norms of conduct shape expectations of appropriate linguistic behaviour in educational and social settings, reinforcing the view that stylistic range in Malay is cultivated as much through participation in religiously inflected social practice as through explicit language instruction.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and the Challenge of Globalization

The pedagogical implications of these cultural and religious resources align with the broader literature on culturally responsive teaching. Gay [13] contends that instruction anchored in students' cultural frames of reference is more effective in developing academic competence than culturally neutral or decontextualized

approaches, because it validates learners' identities while making new content more accessible and meaningful. Applied to Malay language education, this perspective suggests that pantun, peribahasa, traditional performance, and Islamic customs should be treated not as peripheral cultural enrichment but as core pedagogical resources for developing fluency. At the same time, globalization, the growing prestige of English, and the pervasiveness of digital media present real challenges to the intergenerational transmission of culturally embedded language practices. Yet the evidence reviewed above suggests that these practices are not simply disappearing; rather, as Nur et al. [10] show in the case of pantun's migration into digital platforms, they are being reconfigured to remain relevant to younger generations.

This suggests a need for research that captures, from students' own perspectives, how they experience and interpret the relationship between cultural and religious resources and their own fluency. Accordingly, this study aims to examine how culture and Islamic values contribute to the development of Malay language fluency, as understood through the lived experiences of secondary school and university students, using semi-structured interviews to foreground students' own accounts of how pantun, peribahasa, traditional performance, and Islamic-infused customs and rituals have shaped their command of the language and their sense of identity.

METHODS

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design, appropriate for capturing the subjective meanings students attach to their experiences of learning and using Malay within culturally and religiously embedded contexts. A phenomenologically informed approach was used, in which the research aims not to test predefined hypotheses but to understand, in depth, how participants make sense of the role that culture and Islamic values play in their linguistic development.

Participants and Sampling

Participants were secondary school and university students of Malay ethnicity and Muslim faith, selected through purposive sampling to ensure meaningful exposure to Malay cultural practices (such as pantun recitation, traditional performance, or community events) and Islamic-infused customs in their upbringing or schooling. A total of fifteen participants took part in the study, a sample size consistent with the aim of achieving depth and thematic saturation rather than statistical generalizability in qualitative interview research. Participants varied in gender, age, and educational background to capture a range of experiences across different learning environments, including national schools, religious schools, and community-based cultural programmes. Pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to protect participants' identities; their demographic profile is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Demographic Profile of Informants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Cultural / Religious Exposure Background
Aisyah	Female	17	Secondary, Form 5 (national school)	Family pantun-recitation tradition; community cultural group
Hafiz	Male	16	Secondary, Form 4 (religious school, SMKA)	Qur'anic recitation training; mosque youth programme
Nur Ain	Female	20	Undergraduate, Year 2, Malay Language & Literature	Formal study of pantun and peribahasa; village storytelling exposure
Faris	Male	21	Undergraduate, Year 3, Islamic Studies	Religious school upbringing; regular attendance at Maulidur Rasul events
Siti Maryam	Female	15	Secondary, Form 3 (national school)	Family Hari Raya customs; school co-curricular pantun club
Amir	Male	19	Undergraduate, Year 1, Communication Studies	Grew up in a kampung with active adat and Islamic customs
Zulaikha	Female	22	Undergraduate, Year 4, Malay Language Education	Trained performer in traditional dikir barat and zapin
Rahim	Male	18	Secondary, Form 5 (religious school)	Peribahasa memorization competitions; mosque-based schooling
Farah	Female	20	Undergraduate, Year 2, Islamic Studies	Islamic boarding school (pondok) background
Danial	Male	17	Secondary, Form 5	Member of school

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Cultural / Religious Exposure Background
			(national school)	traditional arts / cultural performance club
Nadia	Female	19	Undergraduate, Year 1, Malay Language & Literature	Active on social media sharing pantun and cultural content
Yusuf	Male	23	Undergraduate, Year 4, Education	Balanced exposure to English-medium schooling and Malay heritage practices
Aina	Female	16	Secondary, Form 4 (national school)	Family-based proverb and adat exposure; limited formal cultural instruction
Haziq	Male	20	Undergraduate, Year 2, Communication Studies	Grew up abroad; reconnected with Malay heritage through university community
Puteri	Female	18	Secondary, Form 5 (religious school)	Community cultural programme; regular participation in religious festivals

Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, an approach that combines a consistent set of guiding questions with the flexibility to probe emergent themes as they arose in conversation. The interview guide addressed participants' early exposure to pantun and proverbs, their experiences with traditional performances such as *dikir barat*, *zapin*, or *wayang kulit*, their engagement with Islamic-infused customs and religious festivals, and their own reflections on how these experiences shaped their vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation, stylistic range, and sense of identity as Malay-Muslim speakers. Interviews were conducted in Malay to allow participants to express themselves naturally and were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's [14] thematic analysis framework, which involves iterative familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, collation of codes into candidate themes, review and refinement of themes against the full data set, and final naming and definition of themes. This approach was chosen for its flexibility and its suitability for identifying patterned meaning across a qualitative data set while remaining grounded in participants' own language and framing.

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was pursued through methodological triangulation (comparing interview data against relevant literature and, where available, supplementary field observations), peer debriefing among the research team, and member checking, in which selected participants reviewed summaries of the emerging themes to confirm that these accurately reflected their experiences. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, provided informed consent, and were assured of anonymity and the right to withdraw at any stage; pseudonyms are used throughout the findings section to protect participants' identities. Ethical approval and, for participants below the age of 18, parental/guardian consent were obtained prior to data collection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the interview data generated four interrelated themes: (1) pantun and proverbs as a source of vocabulary enrichment; (2) traditional performance as a vehicle for developing intonation and oral delivery; (3) Islamic-infused customs as a foundation for stylistic and pragmatic expression; and (4) the reinforcement of identity as a resource for navigating globalization.

Theme 1: Pantun and Proverbs as Vocabulary Enrichment

Participants consistently described early and repeated exposure to pantun and peribahasa, whether through family gatherings, wedding ceremonies, or classroom recitation, as a significant source of vocabulary that extended well beyond everyday conversational Malay. Several participants noted that composing pantun required searching for words that fit both the meaning and the rhyme scheme, a process that pushed them toward unfamiliar or more elevated vocabulary:

“When I try to make a pantun, I cannot just use the words I use every day. I have to think of words that rhyme but still make sense, so I end up opening the dictionary and learning new words I would never use in normal conversation.”

— Aisyah, 17

Others described how proverbs in particular introduced them to archaic or regionally specific vocabulary along with the layered figurative meanings these expressions carry, echoing Mohd Ridzuan and Mary Fatimah Subet's [12] observation that peribahasa function as a repository of both lexical range and cultural reasoning:

“My grandmother used a lot of old peribahasa that I did not understand at first. When she explained the meaning behind them, I realized each proverb was like a small lesson. Now I know many old words that are not taught in school, and I use them to make my Malay sound deeper and more sophisticated.”

— Nur Ain, 20

For some participants, competitive memorization of proverbs functioned as a structured, almost game-like method of vocabulary acquisition:

“In our peribahasa competitions we had to memorize hundreds of proverbs and their meanings. It was difficult, but after a while I noticed my vocabulary in Malay became much richer than my friends who did not join.”

— Rahim, 18

Theme 2: Traditional Performance and the Development of Intonation

A second theme concerned the role of traditional performing arts, including oral storytelling, communal pantun exchanges, and religious chanting, in shaping participants' command of rhythm, stress, and intonation. Several participants described how reciting pantun aloud in competitive or ceremonial settings required careful attention to pacing and vocal modulation to convey meaning and emotion effectively, consistent with Aveling's [6] characterization of pantun as a form whose aesthetic and communicative force depends heavily on oral delivery:

“During pantun-berbalas, if your tone is flat, the audience will not feel anything. You have to know when to slow down, when to raise your voice a little, when to pause before the last line so the meaning lands properly. I did not learn this in the classroom; I learned it by performing again and again.”

— Hafiz, 16

Participants trained in traditional performance arts such as dikir barat and zapin reported that this training sharpened their awareness of stress, pacing, and vocal projection in ways that carried over into everyday speech:

“Being trained in dikir barat changed how I speak generally, not just when performing. I became more conscious of my breathing, my pauses, and where I put emphasis in a sentence. My teachers used to say my ordinary spoken Malay became clearer and more expressive after years of practice.”

— Zulaikha, 22

Others linked religious recitation practices, particularly Qur'anic recitation with its precise rules of tajwid, to a heightened sensitivity toward vocal modulation that also shaped their delivery of Malay:

“Learning tajwid taught me to really listen to sound, to lengthen certain syllables and shorten others. Even when I am just speaking Malay normally, I think I carry that same attentiveness to rhythm from my Qur'an classes.”

— Danial, 17

Theme 3: Islamic-Infused Customs and Stylistic and Pragmatic Expression

A third theme centred on the role of Islamic-infused customs, from daily greetings and expressions of gratitude to the specialized vocabulary surrounding religious festivals and ceremonies, in cultivating a distinct register of formal and polite speech. Participants described learning, often through direct correction by parents or teachers, when to use more elevated or religiously coloured language, and when informal registers were appropriate, a pattern that echoes Minnis's [3] account of how Malay-Islamic values shape expectations of appropriate conduct and speech:

“My mother always corrected me if I greeted an ustaz or an elder too casually. She taught me the proper words to use, when to add certain respectful phrases, and when I could speak normally with friends. Over time this became automatic, and now I can shift my style depending on who I am speaking to.”

— Farah, 20

Festive occasions in particular were described as sites where a specialized, religiously inflected vocabulary was actively practised and reinforced:

“Every Hari Raya, there are certain words and phrases we only use during that time, when asking forgiveness, when greeting relatives, when praying together. As a child I just repeated what the adults said, but now I understand the meaning, and I feel my Malay is more refined because of it.”

— Amir, 19

Some participants directly connected their exposure to religious customs with a broader sense of linguistic confidence in formal settings:

“Because I grew up attending Maulidur Rasul events and community religious programmes, I became used to hearing and using more formal, polished Malay. This gave me confidence when I had to speak formally in school, because that style already felt familiar to me.”

— Puteri, 18

Theme 4: Identity Reinforcement and Navigating Globalization

Finally, participants widely described their engagement with cultural and religious linguistic practices as reinforcing a stable sense of identity that helped them navigate the pressures of globalization, including the prestige of English and the pull of global digital media. Rather than experiencing heritage and modernity as opposed, several participants described actively adapting cultural practices to new contexts, a pattern consistent with Nur et al.'s [10] documentation of pantun's migration into digital spaces:

“I post pantun on my Instagram sometimes, mixed with modern captions. My friends who are not very close to Malay culture end up asking me what the words mean, and I get to explain. For me this is not making the tradition less serious; it is keeping it alive in a way my generation actually uses.”

— Nadia, 19

For a participant who had spent part of his upbringing abroad, reconnecting with these cultural and religious linguistic practices was described as central to reclaiming a sense of belonging:

“Growing up outside the country, my Malay was very basic. When I came back and joined cultural and religious programmes at university, learning pantun and proper Islamic greetings actually gave me back a part of my identity I felt I had lost. It was not just about the language; it was about feeling Malay and Muslim again.”

— Haziq, 20

Others reflected more broadly on how this rootedness gave them confidence to operate in globalized, English-dominant academic and professional environments without feeling that their heritage was under threat:

“I study in an English-medium programme and use English every day, but I never feel that my Malay is weaker for it, because pantun, peribahasa, and our Islamic customs give me something solid to stand on. Globalization does not scare me because I know where I come from.”

— Yusuf, 23

Discussion

Read together, the four themes support the view, articulated theoretically by Kramsch [1] and Vygotsky [2], that fluency in Malay is not reducible to grammatical or lexical competence acquired in the abstract, but is cultivated through participation in culturally and religiously meaningful practices. Pantun and peribahasa function as repositories of vocabulary and figurative reasoning (Theme 1); traditional performance disciplines the oral-aural dimensions of fluency, intonation, rhythm, and delivery (Theme 2); Islamic-infused customs furnish a pragmatic and stylistic register grounded in adab (Theme 3); and all of these practices, taken together, anchor a sense of identity that participants drew upon, rather than felt threatened by, in an increasingly globalized linguistic environment (Theme 4).

These findings extend the existing literature in several ways. Whereas prior scholarship on pantun and peribahasa has often examined these forms as objects of literary, structural, or curricular analysis [6], [7], [12], the present study foregrounds how students themselves experience these forms as generative of specific fluency-related competencies, vocabulary, intonation, and style, rather than as inert cultural content to be memorized. The findings also extend Gay's [13] culturally responsive pedagogy framework by showing that Islamic values, and not culture alone, constitute an equally important axis around which culturally responsive Malay language teaching might be organized, particularly in Muslim-majority contexts across the Malay world.

Implications for Malay Language Pedagogy

These findings suggest several implications for language teaching. First, curricula might deliberately integrate pantun composition and recitation, not merely as literary appreciation but as a structured method for

vocabulary and stylistic development. Second, opportunities for oral performance, whether through drama, communal pantun exchange, or recitation competitions, should be treated as core rather than extracurricular activities, given their apparent contribution to intonational competence. Third, explicit attention to the pragmatics of Islamic-infused registers, greetings, expressions of respect, and festival-related vocabulary, could be incorporated into communicative language teaching to strengthen learners' stylistic range. Finally, educators might explicitly frame heritage-based language learning as compatible with, rather than opposed to, globalized and digital modes of communication, following the adaptive model observed in students' own practices.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As a qualitative study relying on a purposively sampled group of participants, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalizable, and the transferability of the themes to other contexts within the Malay world, including non-Muslim Malay-speaking communities, or Malay-speaking populations in Singapore, southern Thailand, or the Malay diaspora, warrants further investigation. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design to examine how the relationship between cultural and religious practice and language fluency develops over time, or could employ mixed-methods designs that combine interview data with direct linguistic measures of vocabulary range, intonational accuracy, and stylistic variation, to substantiate the mechanisms suggested by participants' self-reports.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued and empirically illustrated, through the lived experiences of students, that Malay language fluency is nurtured not by grammar and vocabulary instruction alone, but by sustained engagement with the cultural traditions and Islamic values that give the language its depth and meaning. Pantun and proverbs enrich vocabulary and figurative reasoning; traditional performance sharpens intonation and oral delivery; Islamic-infused customs cultivate stylistic and pragmatic sophistication; and all of these practices together reinforce a sense of identity that equips students to engage confidently with a globalized world while remaining rooted in their heritage. Situating Malay language teaching within its cultural and religious foundations therefore offers a holistic and contextually relevant strategy for language education, one with clear relevance to multicultural and multilingual societies more broadly.

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