

Mastering Malay Idioms among Young Non-Malays

Kalthum Ibrahim

School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The main aim of teaching the Malay language at school is to enable students to master the grammar of the language. Mastering the language means students' competency in understanding, knowing, identifying and using the rules of the Malay grammar correctly. Malay idiom is a tool that depicts the rich poetic imagination with rhetoric aspect and not just beautiful and creative language. Thus, this article describes and explains the achievement of non-Malay secondary students in Kedah, Negeri Sembilan, and Sarawak, in mastering the Malay language grammar system that covers the use of idioms. The subjects consist of 300 Form 4 students in the three states. The research findings show that in general, the achievement of non-Malays is weak in terms of the correct use of idioms. In fact, the use of idioms among young non-Malays is still weak, particularly in understanding intended meanings and thus needs a serious attention. The finding also shows that the achievement of language among non-Malay students has a significant relation with their achievement in mastering grammar.

Keywords: Malay idioms, Malay language, teaching, non-Malays, grammar

INTRODUCTION

In line with the National Education Policy of the 1996 Education Act, the Malay language is a core subject in all primary and secondary schools. In fact, the aim of the Malay language curriculum for the secondary

school is to complete the students with language proficiency and communication to fulfil the students' self-requirements in their daily routine, education and at work place (Ministry of Education, 2008). Thus, knowledge in the Malay language is the pillar to the success of a student.

All students should master the Malay language to achieve a high level of proficiency in terms of speaking and writing. Mastering of the language refers

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 13 September 2012

Accepted: 15 March 2013

E-mail address:

kalthum@ukm.my (Kalthum Ibrahim)

to the students' ability to know, understand, identify and analyze rules and formula, which are the basis of the Malay language grammar system. In order to be able to master all the four aspects of the language (namely, reading, writing, speaking and comprehension), students must formally learn them and this can be done at school where they are taught with a specific aim. The aim of the Malay language teaching and learning is to enable students to communicate appropriately. However, mastering of the language among secondary school students is not encouraging. In fact, there are students who are still having problems in with oral and writing (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin *et al.*, 2003; Ramli Md. Salleh *et al.*, 1999; Zulkifley Hamid, Karim Harun & Sa'adiah Ma'alip, 1999).

To observe the poor mastery of the Malay language among non-Malay students, a study has been conducted to observe the extent to which and the problematic areas of learning bahasa Melayu among the non-Malays in selected states in Malaysia. The proof of this problem can be clearly seen in our research findings by looking at the examination papers that tested on the students' ability to write essays in a mature, relevant and clear manner in terms of grammar. The students were expected to avoid errors in sentence structures and spelling, as well as to avoid using dialects. To find answers to the issue of students' weakness in mastering the Malay language, a group of students was selected for the study conducted in three states that represented the north, south and East Malaysia zones, i.e Kedah, Negeri Sembilan

and Sarawak. A preliminary study had also been carried out in three schools in Kuching, Sarawak, from which the findings are discussed in this paper. The study observed the mastery of the Malay language based on the examination areas of grammar in section B of the examination paper. This article focuses on the analysis and explains achievement of non-Malay students in mastering the Malay idioms.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article is an extract on the findings of the research conducted in Kedah, Negeri Sembilan and Sarawak, whereby the number of non-Malay students is high and the three states represent the different zones of the north, south and East Malaysia. Meanwhile, the selection of data was done based on the number of non-Malay students of various races in all the three states. For instance, Sarawak has the most number of multi-racial communities in Malaysia, with 27 ethnic groups who live together although they come from different backgrounds. However, the focus of this paper is only in Kuching, which is the fourth biggest city in Malaysia. In this research, the ethnics involved are the Chinese, Indians, Iban and so on. The difference in terms of students' ethnicity is also considered as important to find out aspects that become a major hindrance in mastering the Malay idioms. There are several aims of the research and one of them is to analyse the level of achievement of the non-Malay students at secondary schools in terms of mastering the Malay idioms.

In order to achieve the objective of the research, we used field work where students from the selected schools were given examination questions similar to those of SPM so the data would be more valid due to students being in their school areas. Environment is important as data can be verified. The students were asked to fill in a set of questionnaire before answering the examination questions. The questionnaire records students' personal details, socio-economy status, attitude and perception, learning strategies, and other information relating to the students. The Malay language examination paper consists of essay writing, language knowledge and proficiency.

The examination paper was marked by teacher examiners who have had experience in marking Malay language SPM papers according to the actual SPM format. All the particulars and grade achieved by the students for all aspects of the language grammar were recorded in SPSS; for instance, sentence structure building through words, essay marks and marks for understanding meaning of words.

The researcher used idioms given in section D, whereby the students were asked to use them correctly in writing sentences. This would enable observation on students' understanding of the idioms given. A pragmatic study was used to analyse it. Idiom is a part of figure of speech in the Malay culture which develops the mind and thinking. However, today, students tend to memorise them although idioms have existed in the Malay language for a very long time, i.e. since the beginning of

the Malay and the language itself (Abdullah Hussein, 1989).

In terms of its significance, it can be said that this language heritage is a form of expression that contains deep philosophical meaning behind it with regards to the aspects of civilization, thoughts, ethos and moral of the Malays since many centuries ago (Abdul Samad Idris, 1989). The direction towards upholding use in the Malay language in the Malaysian society in general is determined by the attitude of users of the language, which depends on the mindset that in turn influences an individual towards something in a dynamic way. In the context of the Malay traditional community, using expressions that are created with thoughtful minds refers to the way members of the community are given advice, views, suggestions, or express sarcasms. Idioms are easily understood and accepted by members of the community where they exist (Abdullah Hassan & Ainon Mohd., 1993). Using idioms has its own objectives so people who listen (in speaking discourse) or read (in writing discourse), are not offended or receive a high impact on their thinking or feelings. Thus, the researcher feels that an appropriate use of idioms is very relevant to see students' ability in mastering the language.

DATA ANALYSIS

Students' General Achievement

Idiom is a part of figure of speech in the Malay culture. In terms of idioms in education, the teaching and learning of idioms usually pose problems among

students in using idioms effectively (Ishak Ramly, 1990). Nowadays, students memorise idioms, which should not be a yardstick to indicate their understanding of the use of idioms. Their understanding and comprehension, as well as the surrounding factors which include culture and where they live) play important roles to indicate the extent to which they have mastered and understood idioms. Idioms have been established as a form of indirect message with its own means of educating. However, it erodes due to the change of life values and other environmental factors that cause the younger generation to ignore its existence.

The fact is, besides linguistic information, non-linguistic or pragmatic information is also important for students to understand the indirect messages contained in idioms. Thus, the research was an attempt made to observe the extent to which students have acquired non-linguistic information in order to understand the Malay idioms and answered the examination paper. In the research, there are three sentence situations given, and students were asked to provide the correct idioms in the context of the sentences. The following are the examples of the sentences given:

- i. *Walaupun kita berasa kasihan atas nasib malang yang menimpa Amira, tetapi dia yang menanggungnya tentulah berasa lebih perit lagi.*
- ii. *Jamal menikmati segala kemewahan yang disediakan oleh bapanya tetapi dia tidak gembira*

kerana tidak dibenarkan bergaul bebas sesuka hati seperti remaja yang lain.

- iii. *Perbelanjaan kita hendaklah bersesuaian dengan pendapatan dan janganlah kita berbelanja berlebih-lebihan.*

In general, the three questions require a high understanding as they involve implicit meanings. For question (i), the correct answer is “*berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul*”, for question (ii) “*bagai burung di sangkar emas, badan terkurung mata terlepas*” while for question (iii) “*ukur baju di badan sendiri*”.

The research found that young Malaysians acquired a low mastery of idioms. The percentage of the correct use of idioms is not more than 60%. For the question that requires the answer “*berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul*” the percentage of the students giving the correct answer is the highest. Meanwhile, 58.3% of the students answered it correctly, as compared to 41.7% who failed to do so. The idiom “*bak burung di sangkar emas, badan terkurung mata terlepas*” showed the least correct answers with only 32.3% of the students answering it correctly, while 67.7% gave wrong answer. In addition, 46.3% of the students answered correctly for the idiom “*ukur baju di badan sendiri*”, while 53.7% others had failed to give the correct answer based on the context of the sentence. The pragmatic mastery of the students in the aspect of idioms will be explained in details in the subsequent section.

(i) “berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul”

The research data showed that 41.7% of the students did not give the correct idiom to depict the situation given in the question paper. The situation given was:

- i. *Walaupun kita berasa kasihan atas nasib malang yang menimpa Amira, tetapi dia yang menanggungnya tetntulah berasa lebih perit lagi.*

Based on the marking of the students’ papers, it was found that various answers were given by the students. Among them are as follows:

1. Sudah jatuh ditimpa tangga
2. Berat sama dipikul, ringan sama dijinjing
3. Berat mata memandang, berat lagi mata yang memikul
4. Berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu yang mengalas bebannya
5. Beg berat dijunjungnya, berat lagi hati yang memikulnya
6. Berat yang memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul
7. Siapa makan cili, dia terasa pedas

As mentioned earlier, question on idiom does not refer to its literal meaning alone, as it also involves intended meaning. The role of pragmatic in cognitive knowledge can be seen in interpreting the intended meaning of an idiom. The combination of the pragmatic role with cognitive knowledge and psychological development in a student’s mind encourages the development

of speculation relevant to the student. Meanwhile, logical information provided by semantic knowledge helps the students to interpret the meaning of sentences literally. However, the interpretation does not stop there. The relevant cognitive effects will help the students to interpret indirect message in the sentence and relate it to the appropriate idiom.

Based on question (i), from semantic interpretation, the student is able to guess the meaning the single layered meaning which is the direct meaning to the sentence *Walaupun kita berasa kasihan atas nasib malang yang menimpa Amira* as a situation that shows “difficulty”. Although the given idiom is not as exact as the actual situation given in the sentence, the students are able to provide a similar concept, which is “a difficult life”. Examples (2) to (6), for instance, show students’ achievement to relate difficulty with “burden”. This is proven with the word “berat” in the given answer. In this situation, the cognitive effect assists the students to interpret the “concept of difficulty” with the phrase “beg berat dijunjungnya”. Their experience to carry bag to school every day enables them to relate difficulties faced by Amira in the situation of the sentence, such as “heavy bag” carried every day. Thus, the students came out with their own version of idioms such as “*Beg berat dijunjungnya, berat lagi hati yang memikulnya*” and “*Berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu yang menggalas bebannya*”.

Besides, there are also students who gave “*sudah jatuh ditimpa tangga*”, and

“*siapa makan cili, dia terasa pedas*”. The idiom “*sudah jatuh ditimpa tangga*”, means tragedy or mishaps on someone who is already in trouble or difficulty. Seen from the context of meaning of the idiom “*berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul*”, it is no wonder why the students answered “*sudah jatuh ditimpa tangga*” to depict the situation in the sentence, “*Walaupun kita berasa kasihan atas nasib malang yang menimpa Amira, tetapi dia yang menanggungnya tentulah berasa lebih perit lagi*”.

This is because, although both idioms have different meanings, the message they carry are similar. Both have the message of “*difficulty*”. The only difference is in “*berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu yang memikul*”, which involves a reaction to the feeling of the observers which is a sympathy to the one who goes through the difficulty. On the contrary, the idiom “*sudah jatuh ditimpa tangga*” only involves observation on the one experiencing the difficulty without involving the feeling of the observer. In the context of the given answer, the students were only able to provide a literal answer for the phrase “*nasib malang yang menimpa Amira*” but were not able to interpret the meaning for the phrase “*walaupun kita berasa kasihan*”.

Likewise is the answer to “*siapa makan cili, dia terasa pedas*” that the students tried to depict for the situation in the sentence given. The meaning of this idiom is “the guilty one will be self-conscious”. This Malay idiom clearly shows that the guilty person is aware of the situation although

is not being obvious about it. The idiom relates to someone who has taken chilies and will feel their spicy taste.

Although the meanings of the idioms “*siapa makan cili, dia terasa pedas*” and “*berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu yang memikul*” are totally different, the researcher realized that the situation which the students tried to depict for “*siapa makan cili, dia terasa pedas*” is not based on the implicit meaning of the idiom; instead, there was another message that they were trying to convey. The message hidden in the meaning of the idiom is “*siapa makan cili dia terasa pedas*” which depicts whoever is the wrong doer he knows it himself. In the context given, the intended message “Amira yang bernasib malang” depicts Amira is in difficulty. In this context, “*siapa makan cili dia terasa pedas*” is intended to the situation that befalls Amira, whereby only Amira experiences the mishap and difficulty, so only she has felt the difficulty and hardship. On this basis, the youngsters seem to master this idiom more than the other two (namely, “*bagai burung di sangkar emas, badan terkurung mata terlepas*” and “*ukur baju di badan sendiri*”); however, their achievement on this question is also low.

In understanding idioms, pragmatic information (non-linguistics) is important. The cognitive effect generated from the experience and their surrounding can assist students to answer not only single layer meanings, but also intended meanings, despite the literalness. Based on racial achievement, non-Malay students show unsatisfactory achievement for the question

for the idiom “*berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu yang memikul*”. The Chinese students had 15.6% correct answers, followed by Indians (30%) and others (14.3%). The researcher also found that low achievement in the mastery of idiom is related to the lack of reading materials in the Malay language. Meanwhile, 73.3% of the Chinese students, 60.0% of the Indians and 56% other races admitted that they are not interested in reading or writing in Malay.

This is due to the fact that they have not been exposed to the Malay language and idioms much and thus, lack the ability to use them in the correct and appropriate context. Besides not reading enough materials in the Malay language, the low achievement in using the idiom is probably related to the environment. Based on the questionnaire, only 50% of the students admitted that the television could be a medium for them to improve their Malay language. Such a perception proves that their lack of watching television causes them to become unable to improve in the language. Meanwhile, programmes such as “*Bersamamu*” shown on TV3 always carry the concept of idioms including “*berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu yang memikul*” to depict the society in difficulties.

(ii) “*Bagai burung di sangkar emas, badan terkurung mata terlepas*”

The second question tests students on the idiom, “*Bagai burung di sangkar emas, badan terkurung mata terlepas*” which depicts the sentence situation “*Jamal menikmati segala kemewahan yang*

disediakan oleh bapanya tetapi dia tidak gembira kerana tidak dibenarkan bergaul bebas sesuka hati seperti remaja yang lain.”

The finding shows that the students faired lowest on this idiom than the other two with their own meanings. In general, 67.7% of the students did not master this particular idiom. From this, 73.3% of the Chinese students, 100% of the Indians and 85.7% of other races failed to provide the required idiom for the sentence situation given. The following are the examples of the answers given by the students:

1. Ibarat seekor burung di dalam sangkar, mata bebas, badan terkurung
2. Bagai burung di dalam sangkar
3. Seperti burung di dalam sangkar, kaki diikat mata memandang
4. Sangkar yang cantik, burung tak bebas
5. Ibarat burung dalam sangkar
6. Seperti katak di bawah tempurung

Based on the answers given by the students, it was generally found that the students gave direct interpretations of the idioms. However, the problem was the students could not give the correct interpretations of the meanings of the sentences in term of the idioms. To add to this, the logical information provided in semantic knowledge only enables them to interpret the sentence based on semantics only. At this level, the roles of pragmatic and cognitive knowledge as well as psychological development will help the

students to make assumptions related to the situations portrayed in the sentences. Based on the interpretation, the sentence “*Jamal menikmati segala kemewahan yang disediakan oleh bapanya*” is interpreted as “owning richness”, sentence “*tetapi dia tidak gembira*” is interpreted as “in sadness” and the sentence, “*not allowed to mix with others unlike his friends*” is interpreted as “has no freedom” or “feeling of no freedom”. From this sentence, the students interpreted it as “*Walaupun Jamal memiliki kekayaan, namun Jamal tidak gembira kerana hidupnya tidak bebas dan terkongkong.*”

The interpretation is only single-layered. However, the logical information provided through semantic knowledge is not enough for the students to relate it to the appropriate idiom. In other words, it is not sufficient to interpret at one level only. The students need to require enough contexts to interpret the extra layer of the meaning of the idiom. From the sample answers (1) to (5) given by the students, they were found to be able to interpret the premise of the sentences to an implicit meaning. Through the premise, “*tidak dibenarkan bergaul bebas sesuka hati*” of the sentence, the students were able to relate it to “*kehidupan seseorang yang hidup terkurung.*” From the speculations and assumptions, one’s life of that has no freedom is related to “*burung di dalam sangkar*”. The experience from the students’ encyclopedic information enables them to relate “*kurung*” with “*sangkar*”. The phrase, “*bebas sesuka hati*”, is associated with “*burung*” because

freedom is synonymy with a bird that has freedom to fly. However, the students were unable to relate it to the element of “luxury” in the sentence with “gold” thus pulling it away from the actual concept of the sentence.

However, in answering (4), the concept of “luxury” that should be associated with the word “emas” or gold was wrongly interpreted with “cantik” or pretty. In answering (6), the students tried to relate “*kehidupan yang hidup terkurung*” with the idiom “*seperti katak di bawah tempurung*”. The idiom actually means one who is not aware of his surrounding; “*Kehidupan Jamal yang tidak dibenarkan bergaul dengan bebas*” was interpreted as “*kehidupan katak yang hidup di bawah tempurung.*” The frog seems to be in its own world and does not know of the world outside the coconut shell. Although in fact, the answer is not like the actual situation as in the sentence, the students were able to relate the literal meaning of “*terkurung*” from the phrase “*tidak dibenarkan bergaul bebas*” with the concept “*terkurung*” of the frog under the coconut shell.

Based on the researcher’s observation, the students were unable to master the idioms due to environmental factors. In order to answer a question on the idioms, apart from the knowledge through reading, the surrounding factors also help the students to understand idioms. Malay idiom is a means of communication widely used in the traditional Malay community. Idioms are not only used to correct the community but also to praise or give credits or to depict human

habits or even to convey a message. The surrounding is used to relate it to thoughts with human actions. Thus in the context, “hidup terkurung” is previously related by the community to “burung di dalam sangkar”, while the concept, “kemewahan” is associated with “emas”. This is because the word “terkurung” is synonymy with “sangkar” and “kemewahan” with “emas”.

To modern society, the idioms related to their surrounding do not seem significant to them as they are not closely associated with things around them. Students’ modern life’s contacts with the environment in which the majority lives in the city has disadvantaged them to relate the idiom to non-freedom and birds in the cage. Thus, they were unable to relate life of a bird in a cage, let alone to a golden cage. Besides, this could be due to students’ reading strategy in understanding the meaning of certain texts. Based on the qualitative analysis on the whole, only 60.7% of the students have a reading strategy to understand texts, while 39.3% were without such a strategy. The lack of strategy in understanding the texts influenced their comprehension, too. The students failed to interpret the single layer meaning and this led to their failure to relate it to the second layer, which contains the implicit meaning. Moreover, insufficient contextual information has also caused their failure to relate with the correct idioms. Thus, the students’ simple lifestyle today causes them to fail to understand the idioms such as “ukur baju di badan sendiri” which is apparently no longer relevant to them. According to the relevance theory, with the

presumption that everything is balanced, the lower the effort to process information, the more relevant is the utterance (Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, 2003). Today’s simple modern life does not require them to have tailor-made outfits. Ready made outfits have created a different lifestyle, causing the students to become unable to relate it to traditional elements including the idioms and their meanings. In particular, non-Malay students do not associate to the concept of “ukur baju” which seems no longer relevant to them and this has caused them to fail in understanding the situation of the sentence related to the idiom “ukur baju di badan sendiri”.

DISCUSSION OF DATA ANALYSIS

Mastery of Idioms

Based on the data, it was found that the students from the three selected schools in Kuching had low mastery of any of the idioms used in the research. The percentage of the students who gave the correct meanings to the idioms was very small. In general, the research findings showed that the students had failed to answer questions with the intended meaning. However, out of the three idioms given, the question on the idiom that requires the answer, “**berat mata memandang, berat lagi bahu memikul**” showed the highest correct answer as compared to the idiom “**bak burung di sangkar emas, badan terkurung mata terlepas**” and “**ukur baju di badan sendiri**”. The lack in mastering the idioms is due to several factors that include:

i. Environmental Factors

Environmental factors include different backgrounds or context and students' experiences. Today's simple and modern life causes them to see idioms such as "ukur baju" to be no longer relevant to them and because of this they failed in understanding the situation sentence for the "**ukur baju di badan sendiri**". Similarly, the same goes for "**Bagai burung di sangkar emas, badan terkurung mata terlepas**". The students' modern life with, with the majority of city life background, caused them to become unable to associate a caged bird, and thus, they do not understand the situation where a bird in cage or even a bird in a golden cage is in captivity.

ii. Attitudinal Factor

The attitude of the non-Malay students who are not interested in reading materials in Malay can be taken as a factor that has caused them to fail in answering the questions related to idioms. The percentage of the respective races, Chinese Indians and other ethnic groups who admitted that they have no interest in reading or writing in Malay is more than fifty percent, respectively. This caused them to lack the exposure to the Malay language and the Malay idioms, and thus failed to understand the Malay idioms correctly.

iii. Strategy Factor

The absence of a reading strategy in understanding the meaning of a text is considered as another factor that causes the students to become unable to master

idioms. This affects their comprehension as well. The students failed to interpret the meanings when they interpreted only at literal level, and thus they faced problems in relating the idioms to the intended meanings or the implicit meanings. This also occurred because the students were unable to associate their skills in incorporating the contextual knowledge which led them to fail to relate the sentences with the correct idioms.

CONCLUSION

The research conducted in the three states showed that the students from these states generally belong to various races that are much influenced by their native languages. From the findings, it can be concluded that in Kuching, the students' level of mastery of idioms is not encouraging. In more specific, the level of mastery ranges from mediocre to weak due to several teaching and learning factors. From the data collected, on the whole, students' achievement relating to pragmatic is not satisfactory. This actually reflects that non-Malay students in Malaysia, particularly in Kuching, are unable to tackle the questions on the implicit meanings. The general factors associated to this include environmental, attitude and reading strategy, which have deterred students' understanding of the actual meanings of the texts in Malay. Although their perception towards the Malay language is positive, there is still room for improvement.

REFERENCES

- Abdul Samad Idris. (1989). *Dengan 300 Pepatah*. Kuala Lumpur: Pustaka Budiman
- Abdullah Hassan, & Ainon Mohd. (1993). *Kamus Peribahasa Lengkap Utusan*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Publications and Distributors Sdn. Bhd.
- Abdullah Hussein. (1989). *Kamus Istimewa Peribahasa Melayu*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.
- Ishak Ramly. (1990). Perkembangan Peribahasa dalam Bahasa Melayu. *Jurnal Dewan Bahasa* Januari – Mei, 120-123.
- Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia (2008). *Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah Sukatan Pelajaran*. Kementerian Pelajaran Malaysia, Malaysia.
- Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, *et al.* (2003) *Penguasaan bahasa Melayu oleh pelajar Melayu dalam arus globalisasi*. Laporan Akhir Penyelidikan Arus Perdana II Kumpulan 7. Fakulti Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Ramli Md. Salleh, *et al.* (1999). Prestasi Pelajar dalam Peperiksaan Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR): Analisis Berdasarkan Format Soalan Bahasa Melayu 1. *Jurnal Dewan Bahasa*, 44(10), 1063-1076.
- Zulkifley Hamid, Karim Harun, & Sa'adiyah Ma'alip. (1999). Tahap Penguasaan Bahasa Melayu Sebagai Bahasa Pertama dan Bahasa Kedua. *Jurnal Dewan Bahasa*, 44(1), 40-49.

