

NARRATIVES OF FOREIGNER'S EXPERIENCES TOWARDS MALAY LANGUAGE IN FRIDAY SERMON: AN ANALYSIS OF INTERVIEWS

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine the narrative of experiences and how the period of residency influences the attitudes of foreign congregations towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons based on their time working in Malaysia. This study focuses on Bangladeshi workers as the main group, to understand the development of their Malay language experience, including aspects of mastery, understanding and emotional response to the language of the sermon. A qualitative approach was used with an exploratory case study design through semi-structured interviews involving 5 informants who were selected through purposive sampling based on the timeline of their working time in Malaysia. The data was recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically based on the Multicomponent Model of Language Attitude by Colin Baker (1992) which includes cognitive, affective and conative components as an analytical framework. The study findings show that experience and attitudes towards the Malay language develop gradually in line with the length of time they have worked in Malaysia. Informants at the early stages of employment showed limited levels of understanding, vocabulary constraints, difficulty following the speed and formal rhythm of the sermon, and emotional responses that were mixed between confusion, stress and awkwardness. In contrast, informants who had worked for longer showed increased understanding of the main message of the sermon, confidence in interacting in the Malay language and a more positive attitude towards the language as a medium of social and religious integration. In addition to the factors of length of employment, the findings also identified the role of language ecology in the workplace and local community, social support from fellow countrymen, guidance from imams and ustaz, and the instrumental need for the Malay language in work and daily life as important factors that shape and strengthen attitudes. Overall, attitudes towards the Malay language in Friday sermons are not built statically, but rather develop through the interaction between language exposure, social networks in daily life. This study contributes to the field of sociolinguistics on the dynamics of the national language in Friday sermons and the implications for more responsive and inclusive strategies in the context of the foreign worker community in Malaysia.

Keywords: language attitude, experience, Malay language, Bangladeshi workers, Friday sermon

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji narasi pengalaman dan bagaimana periode tinggal memengaruhi sikap jemaat asing terhadap penggunaan bahasa Melayu dalam khutbah Jumat berdasarkan masa kerja mereka di Malaysia. Studi ini berfokus pada pekerja Bangladesh sebagai kelompok utama, untuk memahami perkembangan pengalaman mereka dalam bahasa Melayu, termasuk aspek penguasaan, pemahaman, dan respons emosional terhadap bahasa khutbah. Pendekatan kualitatif digunakan dengan desain studi kasus eksploratif melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur yang melibatkan 5 informan yang dipilih melalui pengambilan sampel bertujuan berdasarkan jangka waktu kerja mereka di Malaysia. Data direkam, ditranskripsikan, dan dianalisis secara tematik berdasarkan Model Multikomponen Sikap Bahasa oleh Colin Baker (1992) yang mencakup komponen kognitif, afektif, dan konatif sebagai kerangka analitis. Temuan studi menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman dan sikap terhadap bahasa Melayu berkembang secara bertahap seiring dengan lamanya waktu mereka bekerja di Malaysia. Para informan pada tahap awal bekerja menunjukkan tingkat pemahaman yang terbatas, keterbatasan kosakata, kesulitan mengikuti kecepatan dan ritme formal khutbah, serta respons emosional yang beragam antara kebingungan, stres, dan rasa canggung. Sebaliknya, informan yang telah bekerja lebih lama menunjukkan peningkatan pemahaman terhadap pesan utama khutbah, kepercayaan diri dalam berinteraksi dalam bahasa Melayu, dan sikap yang lebih positif terhadap bahasa tersebut sebagai media integrasi sosial dan keagamaan. Selain faktor lamanya masa kerja, temuan ini juga mengidentifikasi peran ekologi bahasa di tempat kerja dan komunitas lokal, dukungan sosial dari sesama warga negara, bimbingan dari imam dan ustaz, serta kebutuhan instrumental akan bahasa Melayu dalam pekerjaan dan kehidupan sehari-hari sebagai faktor penting yang membentuk dan memperkuat sikap. Secara keseluruhan, sikap terhadap bahasa Melayu dalam khutbah Jumat tidak dibangun secara statis, melainkan berkembang melalui interaksi antara paparan bahasa dan jaringan sosial dalam kehidupan sehari-hari. Studi ini berkontribusi pada bidang sosiolinguistik tentang dinamika bahasa nasional dalam

khutbah Jumat dan implikasinya terhadap strategi yang lebih responsif dan inklusif dalam konteks komunitas pekerja asing di Malaysia.

Kata kunci: sikap terhadap bahasa, pengalaman, bahasa Melayu, pekerja Bangladesh, khutbah Jumat

INTRODUCTION

The use of language in religious settings plays a crucial role in facilitating understanding and appreciation of delivered messages, particularly within societies characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity. In Malaysia, a plural society, the Malay language functions as the national language as stipulated in the Malaysian Constitution (Article 152) and is widely used across various domains of daily life, including the religious sphere. Within this context, the Friday sermon serves not only as a platform for conveying religious teachings but also as a medium for moral guidance and value formation among congregants.

However, the diverse backgrounds of congregants, especially among foreign nationals, raise important questions regarding their attitudes towards and acceptance of the Malay language in this setting. In recent years, the number of foreign workers in Malaysia has increased significantly, driven by labour demands in sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and services (Ministry of the Interior, 2022; DOSM, 2024). This demand is largely influenced by factors such as lower labour costs, willingness to undertake physically demanding work, and shortages of local workers in specific industries (Kartini & Atiqah, 2023; Azlizan et al., 2024). These workers originate from countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia, bringing with them diverse linguistic backgrounds and varying levels of proficiency in the Malay language.

Such diversity contributes to complex communication dynamics, particularly in contexts where Malay is the primary medium of interaction (Karim Harun & Asri Harun, 2025; Khalidah, 2022). In religious contexts, foreign Muslims also attend Friday prayers as part of their religious obligations. However, the delivery of sermons in formal Malay presents notable challenges, especially in terms of comprehension, familiarity with religious terminology, and the pace of delivery. These challenges may hinder their understanding of the sermon content and potentially affect their level of engagement during the sermon. In some cases, congregants may be physically present without fully grasping the message, thereby limiting the effectiveness of the sermon as a medium of guidance and reflection.

Moreover, these difficulties may influence their attitudes towards the Malay language within religious contexts. Limited comprehension can lead to feelings of discomfort, reduced confidence, or emotional disengagement, particularly among newcomers who are still adapting to the language and cultural environment. Conversely, individuals with longer residence and greater exposure to the Malay language tend to demonstrate fewer difficulties and may develop more positive attitudes (Afira et al., 2025). This suggests that the use of Malay in Friday sermons extends beyond its role as a communication tool, encompassing broader issues of acceptance, identity, and social integration among foreign communities.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language attitudes are a key factor in determining the acceptance and use of a language among non-native speakers. According to Colin Baker (1992), language attitudes comprise three main components: cognitive (knowledge and understanding), affective (emotions and feelings), and conative (behavioural tendencies). In the context of Friday sermons, these components are likely influenced by factors such as language proficiency, length of residence in Malaysia, and patterns of social interaction within the local community. Nevertheless, existing studies have predominantly focused on sermon discourse or the perspective of the preacher, while research examining the experiences and attitudes of foreign congregants remains limited.

In response to this gap, the present study aims to explore the factors influencing foreign congregants' attitudes towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons. Adopting a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews, the study focuses on the experiences, perceptions, and responses of foreign congregants as recipients of sermon messages. The findings are expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding within the field of sociolinguistics, particularly regarding the role of the national language in religious domains and its implications for the management and delivery of sermons for foreign communities in Malaysia.

The following are the objectives to be achieved in this study:

- 1) To examine the attitudes of foreign congregants towards the Malay language in Friday sermons based on the Multicomponent Model of Language Attitudes by Colin Baker (1992).
- 2) To explore how period of residence among foreign congregants' attitudes towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons.

RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design aimed at providing an in-depth exploration of foreign congregants' attitudes towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it enables a holistic and contextual understanding of language attitudes based on informants' lived experiences, which are inherently complex and subjective in nature (Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data were collected exclusively through face-to-face semi-structured interviews, allowing the researcher to explore participants' perspectives, experiences, and responses in a flexible yet focused manner, depending on the context of the discussion (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The semi-structured interview method was selected due to its ability to balance guided inquiry with openness, providing a structured set of questions while allowing informants the freedom to elaborate on their responses based on personal experiences. This approach facilitated the collection of rich and meaningful data, particularly in capturing the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions that shape attitudes towards the Malay language in Friday sermons, in line with the Multicomponent Model of Language Attitudes proposed by Colin Baker (1992). Furthermore, conducting interviews in a face-to-face setting enabled the establishment of rapport and trust between the researcher and informants, thereby encouraging more open, honest, and in-depth sharing of information (Jimenez & Seidman, 2013).

2. Sampling

The selection of informants for the interview sessions was conducted using purposive sampling, a technique that enables the researcher to identify individuals who meet specific criteria and can provide relevant and insightful information about the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2018; Silverman, 2016). In this study, the informants comprised Bangladeshi congregants who had direct experience attending Friday prayers and listening to sermons delivered in Malay, with selection further guided by variations in social and linguistic backgrounds such as length of residence in Malaysia, level of Malay language proficiency, and frequency of attendance at Friday prayers in order to capture diverse perspectives and enrich the analysis. This approach is consistent with qualitative research principles, which prioritise the inclusion of information-rich participants over statistical representativeness. A total of 5 informants were purposively selected based on the established criteria, in line with qualitative research practices that emphasise depth rather than sample size (Creswell, 2018). The number of participants was determined based on the principle of data saturation, defined as the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the data (Chua, 2014; Creswell, 2018), and was deemed sufficient to provide a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of Bangladeshi congregants' attitudes towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons while allowing for a detailed examination of patterns and variations in their experiences, thereby enhancing the credibility of the findings.

3. Procedure for Implementing the Interview Protocol

The interview procedure in this study was conducted using semi-structured interviews, which served as the primary method for generating in-depth and contextual qualitative data, particularly in relation to the informants' experiences and interpretations of the use of Malay in Friday sermons (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This method was selected for its ability to balance structure and flexibility, allowing the researcher to guide the discussion through predetermined themes while providing informants with the freedom to elaborate on their perspectives in a detailed and open manner. Such an approach facilitates a comprehensive exploration of the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of language attitudes, consistent with the study's theoretical framework based on the model proposed by Colin Baker (1992). Furthermore, the use of semi-structured interviews helps to minimise the limitations associated with overly rigid questioning formats, which may otherwise restrict the expression of informants' authentic experiences and viewpoints (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

An interview protocol was developed as a guiding framework to ensure that the discussion remained aligned with the study objectives while preserving the open-ended nature of qualitative inquiry. The protocol was structured around key themes, including the experience of attending Friday sermons, comprehension of the Malay language, emotional responses to sermon delivery, and the strategies employed by informants to understand sermon content. Although the informants differed in background and experience, the use of a theme-based protocol ensured consistency in focus, thereby facilitating the thematic analysis process. In practice, the interview sessions were conducted in stages to maintain a systematic and comfortable flow of discussion. Initially, the researcher established rapport through

informal conversation and brief introductions to create a relaxed and trusting environment. The discussion then progressed gradually to the research topic through general questions before moving into the core interview phase. During the exploratory stage, the researcher adapted the questions based on the informants' responses, allowing the discussion to develop flexibly in accordance with emerging perspectives. This approach enabled the data collected to more accurately reflect the informants' lived experiences. In the final stage, each interview was concluded by inviting informants to share any additional views or experiences they considered relevant, ensuring that no significant insights were overlooked and providing space for more open expression. Overall, the interview procedure was carefully designed to balance flexibility with structure, thereby ensuring the collection of rich, in-depth data that aligned with the study's objective of examining foreign congregants' attitudes towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

i. Informant Background

This study involved 5 informants who participated in face-to-face interviews, all of whom were Bangladeshi congregants aged 18 years and above. All participants were male, reflecting the religious obligation of Friday prayers, which applies specifically to Muslim, as well as the demographic profile of Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia, which is predominantly male. The following section presents the key findings derived from this study.

Table 1. Informant Background

Informant Code	Age	Education	Mother Tongue	Occupation Sector	Period of Residence
INF-1	21	SE	Bengal	R/F	<1
INF-2	30	SE	Bengal	P/R	2
INF-3	30	SE	Bengal	P/R	6
INF-4	40	PE	Bengal	W/C	10
INF-5	40	PE	Bengal	W/C	18

Based on the informant profiles in Table 1, the social background of the respondents showed a relatively homogeneous combination of characteristics with some significant variations for analysis. In terms of age, all informants were between 21 and 40 years old, which is in the economically and socially active adult age category. In terms of education, the majority of informants had a secondary education (SE), while a small proportion had only primary education (PE), reflecting the modest level of formal education among the respondents. All informants shared the same mother tongue, Bengali, thus providing a uniform linguistic basis and allowing the analysis to focus more on the mastery of Malay as a second language. In terms of occupational sector, informants were involved in food/restaurant services (R/F), production/manufacturing (P/R) and construction (W/C), which reflects the typical occupational distribution among Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. Overall, this combination of social variables provides an important context in understanding language experiences and the formation of attitudes towards the use of Malay in religious contexts.

In terms of length of residence, there was a clear variation among informants, ranging from less than one year (INF-1) to 18 years (INF-4), while the rest were in the middle range of 2 to 9 years (INF-2, INF-3 and INF-5). This difference reflects different levels of exposure to the Malay language and the local socio-cultural environment. Informants with a longer period of residence tended to have a better level of understanding and were more familiar with the use of the Malay language in daily life and religious contexts, thus potentially forming more positive attitudes. On the other hand, informants who had recently settled were still in the linguistic and cultural adaptation phase, which could create constraints in understanding the content of the sermon and affect their level of involvement. Therefore, length of residence was seen as an important variable that influenced attitude formation, particularly in terms of understanding, emotional response and behavioral tendencies towards the use of the Malay language in Friday sermons.

ii. Language Attitude Construct Mapping

To further examine the role of length of residence in shaping language attitudes, this study maps the interview data onto the three components of language attitudes—cognitive, affective, and conative—as proposed by Colin Baker (1992). This mapping allows for a systematic analysis of how variations in residence duration influence informants' levels of understanding, emotional responses, and behavioural tendencies towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons. By organising the findings according to these constructs, the study highlights the relationship between linguistic exposure over time and the development of attitudes among foreign congregants. Table 2 presents this construct mapping in relation to the informants' length of residence in Malaysia.

Table 2. Attitude Construct Towards Length of Residences

Informant Code	Residence Period	Cognitive	Affective	Conative
INF-1	2 Months	"I don't understand anything" Even though I am proficient in Arabic, I found the reality of the language to be different from the 10 books I studied.	Experiencing a feeling of "tension" or pressure when trying to understand the content of the sermon.	Choosing to be patient and aware of the need to learn more from teachers or imam.
INF-2	2 Years	Only understood about 2 out of 5 parts of the sermon. Can understand the verses of the Quran but fails to understand the Malay narrative in total.	Feeling "bored" , "not having fun" , and "a little sad" because I couldn't appreciate the good advice in the sermon.	Ask a friend for a simple understanding. Suggest using a "screen" or translator at the mosque.
INF-3	6 Years	Understands Malay "a little bit" . Factors of the work environment dominated by compatriots (Bangla) limit language proficiency.	I feel comfortable and enjoy ("like") listening to sermons because I have lived in Malaysia for quite some time.	Communicate in basic Malay but use your mother tongue more often at work.
INF-4	10 Years	At first I didn't understand much, but now I fully understand it thanks to the continuous guidance from the imam over the years.	Remembering the feeling of "boring" at the beginning; now feeling very "grateful Alhamdulillah" .	Take social responsibility to "help him (junior)" by translating or explaining the content of the sermon to a new friend.
INF-5	18 Years	It took me 3 years to start understanding the sermon. Now I fully understand the formal language.	I once felt very "sad" during a period of not understanding the content of a sermon.	Help teach and guide new (junior) workers. Suggest that the mosque assist in the learning process of the congregation

The data in Table 2 indicate that length of residence is a decisive factor shaping foreign congregants' attitudes towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons across the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of the Multicomponent Model of Language Attitudes proposed by Colin Baker (1992). From a cognitive perspective, a clear developmental trajectory is observed. Informants with shorter residence, such as INF-1 (2 months) and INF-2 (2 years), demonstrate limited comprehension, with statements such as "I don't understand anything" and partial understanding of only certain sermon segments. This aligns with findings by Jim Cummins (2000), who emphasises that second language proficiency develops gradually through sustained exposure. In contrast, informants with longer residence, such as INF-4 (10 years) and INF-5 (18 years), report full comprehension of sermons, indicating that prolonged immersion facilitates linguistic acquisition and domain-specific understanding. This pattern is further supported by studies on migrant integration, which highlight the role of duration of stay in improving language competence and comprehension in institutional settings (Xie & Peltokorpi, 2025).

From an affective perspective, the findings reveal a shift from negative to positive emotional responses over time. Informants with shorter residence report feelings of "tension", "boredom", and "sadness" due to their inability to fully understand sermon content, reflecting emotional disengagement commonly associated with language barriers (Brooke et. al, 2023). However, as residence duration

increases, these emotions gradually transform into more positive responses. For instance, INF-3 (6 years) expresses enjoyment in listening to sermons, while INF-4 (10 years) and INF-5 (18 years) recall earlier negative emotions but now report feelings of gratitude and acceptance. This transition supports the argument that emotional adaptation is closely linked to increased familiarity and confidence in the target language, as highlighted in second language motivation and identity research (Gardner, 2010).

In terms of the conative dimension, the findings demonstrate a progression from passive to active behavioural engagement. Informants with shorter residence tend to adopt basic coping strategies such as relying on peers for clarification or suggesting external aids (e.g., translation screens), indicating limited agency in overcoming comprehension barriers. In contrast, those with longer residence exhibit more proactive and socially integrated behaviours, including self-directed learning (e.g., using dictionaries), assisting peers, and even taking on mentoring roles, as seen in INF-4 and INF-5. This evolution reflects increased linguistic confidence and social integration, consistent with studies on migrant communities which show that prolonged exposure encourages active participation and contribution within social and religious environments (Karim Harun & Asri Harun, 2025).

Overall, the findings suggest that length of residence functions as a key independent variable that systematically influences the development of language attitudes across all three components. As exposure to the Malay language increases over time, foreign congregants demonstrate improved comprehension, more positive emotional responses, and greater behavioural engagement, highlighting the dynamic and developmental nature of language attitudes in a multilingual religious context.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion of all cases and scenarios, it can be concluded that length of residence serves as a central determinant in shaping foreign congregants' attitudes towards the use of Malay in Friday sermons across the cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions of the Multicomponent Model of Language Attitudes proposed by Colin Baker (1992). The findings consistently demonstrate a developmental pattern, whereby individuals with shorter residence experience significant limitations in comprehension, which in turn generate negative emotional responses such as tension, boredom, and disengagement, alongside relatively passive coping behaviours. In contrast, as the duration of residence increases, informants exhibit progressive improvement in linguistic understanding, accompanied by a shift towards more positive emotional orientations, including acceptance and appreciation of the sermon content. This transformation is further reflected in the conative dimension, where longer-term residents demonstrate more active and adaptive behaviours, such as seeking clarification, engaging in self-directed learning, and even supporting others through informal mentoring. Collectively, these patterns highlight that language attitudes in this context are not static but evolve dynamically over time, with prolonged exposure to the Malay language and local sociocultural environment fostering greater comprehension, emotional alignment, and behavioural engagement. Consequently, the use of Malay in Friday sermons is not merely a matter of linguistic delivery but is closely intertwined with processes of adaptation, integration, and identity formation among foreign congregants in Malaysia.

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