

# “At Lost for Words”: A Case Study on the Dialect Vocabulary Knowledge among Bruneian Youths in a Higher Institute of Education

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**Abstract.** This study aimed to identify the knowledge of Brunei Malay dialect vocabulary among youths and to discuss the challenges as well as steps in enhancing the knowledge of this dialect. Brunei Malay dialect or known as ‘Cakap Barunai’ is a dialect widely used among Bruneians, and considered as the mother tongue and the daily communication language among the locals. According to studies, the Ethno Vitality Rate of Brunei Malay dialect was high and considered safe; however, recent trends have shown decreasing usage of Brunei Malay especially among the Bruneian youths (15-40 years old). There are insufficient studies to ascertain whether this trend affects the youths’ Brunei Malay vocabulary knowledge. This study adapted the Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) test on the Brunei Malay vocabulary and a set of survey containing Likert scale and open-ended questions to collect the research data distributed among 102 respondents. Based on the data, the knowledge of Brunei Malay dialect was considered low as only 20.9% received responses that indicated the correct vocabulary’s meaning. The survey showed that influences from different languages and social media, and lack of exposure and intergenerational transfer were the main causes of this issue. Suggestions to preserve this dialect included education, campaigns, social media and family involvement.

**Keyword:** Brunei Malay Dialect, Vocabulary Knowledge Scale, Language Preservation, Language Maintenance

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## 1 Introduction

Brunei Darussalam is a small country located in Borneo, with a population of more than 400,000 people. The official language of this country is Malay Language as stated in the Brunei 1959 constitution chapter 82 (1). More than two-thirds of the Brunei population are Brunei Malay, and the

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rest is comprised of Chinese, Iban and other Brunei minority ethnics, such as Dusun, Murut and Belait. Even though the Brunei Constitution 1959 states the main language as Malay, there are a few variants of Malay spoken in the country. Clynes (2001) stated that there were a few variants of Malay used and spoken in Brunei, such as the Standard Brunei Malay (SBM) and the Brunei Malay dialect.

The Standard Brunei Malay is highly similar to the Standard Malay language or *Bahasa Malaysia* that is being used in Malaysia and *Bahasa Indonesia* in Indonesia (Clynes, 2001). In the context of Brunei, the Standard Brunei Malay is generally used in the official or formal events (Martin, 1996) and in the media, such as the *Titah* or Sultan Speeches, television (TV), radios and newspaper (Clynes, 2001). Apart from that it was widely used in Brunei's administration, official meetings, and official letters. The vowels and the consonants of SBM are the same with the Standard Malay language (Clynes, 2001). However, there are distinctive words taken from the Brunei Malay dialect, such as 'titih' (perseverance), 'sungkai' (breaking the fast during Ramadhan) and 'bariga' (announce). Generally, the Standard Brunei Malay is regarded as a type of Malay language used mainly in formal events and official media.

The second is the Brunei Malay (BM) dialect or also known as '*Cakap Barunay*' which is the central focus of this study. The language is generally treated as the daily communication language among Bruneians and other Brunei ethnic groups, such as the Kedayans, Dusuns, Tutongs and others (Martin 1996, Yusof & Mahali, 2019). According to a study by Huszka, Yusof, Tan and Ahmed (2021), even though this dialect is distinctive to Brunei Malay, it has a lot of loanwords from various languages, such as English, Chinese and Arabic. This language is spoken in not only Brunei, but also the neighbouring country, such as Sabah and Sarawak, Malaysia (Alas, 1997, Yusof, 2021). Study by Mahali (2020) also reported that Brunei Malay dialect had greatly influenced the Sabah Malay language and other ethnic languages in Sabah. There are a few distinctive linguistic features of Brunei Malay, such as:

- i. The "...vowel phonemes (/a, i, u/)... [and the] consonants phonemes... labials p, b, m, w; apicals t, d, n, l, r; laminals c, j, ʃ, s; dorsals/glottal k, g, N, h" (Clynes, 2001:15).
- ii. Significant differences of vocabulary with the Standard Malay language, such as: *karit* BM - *kedekut* (stingy), *tabuk* BM – *jendela* (window), *mamurancan* BM – *tidur* (sleep), *ngalih* BM – *letih* (tired), *rangka* BM – *lahap* or *gelojoh* (eating greedily).

Generally, the status of Brunei Malay dialect is considered safe (Clynes 2001) because the cognate percentage between Brunei Malay dialect and Standard Malay language is 84% (Nothofer, 1991). Martin (1995) and Othman (2005) had suggested that the Ethno-Vitality Rating for Brunei Malay dialect was as follows:

**Table 1.** Brunei Malay Ethno Vitality Rating

<b>Dialect</b>	<b>EV Rating. Martin (1995)</b>	<b>EV Prediction. Noor Azam (2005)</b>
Brunei Malay	6.0	6.0

Table 1 shows the scale of EV Rating (0 low- 6 high) of the Brunei Malay dialect. This dialect was rated 6.0, meaning that it had a higher number of speakers in this country and was considered to be safe. However, a study by Abdullah (n.d.) has shown a worrying trend of the usage of Brunei Malay dialect by different age groups as follows:

**Table 2.** Brunei Malay Usage (Adapted from Abdullah, 2022)

<b>Group</b>	<b>Frequency</b>
Elderly People (Grand Fathers and Grand Mothers)	54.1%
Middle-age People (Parents)	31.4%
Youths (Grand Children)	29.2%

Table 2 shows that the youth generation, comprising of age between 15 and 40 in Brunei has been using less Brunei Malay dialect compared to the older generation. This phenomenon would indirectly affect the vocabulary knowledge of the ethnic language (Yusof & Mahali 2019). There are many factors contributing to the declining use of Brunei Malay dialect, such as the presence of other dominant languages like English.

The presence of other languages is inevitable in Brunei and it potentially affects the local language. Colluzi (2010) stated that the Brunei Malay dialect was assumed safe in Brunei, but the presence of other dominant languages, such as English could ‘minoritise’ the local Brunei languages (Colluzi, 2012). According to Poedjosoedarmo (2008), this phenomenon is known as the ‘language external change’ in which a language undergoes changes due to the contact with other languages. This was supported by Haryono (2012): he stated that the presence of other languages would greatly impact the local language, leading to the code-mixing phenomena and language stratification effects, and indirectly affecting the knowledge vocabularies of each particular language (Koizumi & In’nami, 2013). However, this phenomenon is inevitable as human activities such as economy, politics and education require communications using different languages, thus affecting the local language (Haryono, 2012).

The Government of Brunei has taken proactive measures through various agencies to ensure that the Brunei Malay vocabulary could be maintained and preserved. One of the agencies responsible for this issue is the Brunei Language and Literature Bureau or known as *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Brunei* (DBP). DBP has played a vital role in preserving the Brunei Malay vocabulary since 1991 when they started the first edition of Brunei Malay dictionary that had more than 3000 entries. They continued the effort by revising the dictionary in 2007 and adding more words, amounting to more than 15,000 entries. Apart from that, they are also active in social media, such as Facebook and Instagram. They upload many posts that introduce vocabulary and fun quizzes (occasionally) on Brunei Malay dialect. Another important agency is the Brunei Radio and Television department or also known as *Radio dan Televisyen Brunei* (hence forth RTB). RTB has also put efforts in introducing Brunei Malay vocabulary, such as daily broadcasting of short clips or short interviews on Brunei Malay vocabulary through their TV and radio channels. The last but not least is the Brunei's national newspaper *Pelita Brunei* that is published three times a week. They actively introduce Brunei Malay vocabulary through a column called 'Know our (Brunei Malay) language'. There are many more agencies involved in maintaining and preserving local dialects, showing that the Government of Brunei is proactive in preserving and maintaining the Brunei Malay dialect.

However, there is limited research in the vocabulary knowledge on Brunei Malay dialect among youths, especially those in higher education institutions. Their perception on the status of Brunei Malay dialect and opinion in enhancing the Brunei Malay are also largely unknown. This issue needs to be studied as the data could give new insights and inputs, which can help the Government of Brunei, NGOs and communities to perform language planning on local dialect. With regard to that intention, this paper has three objectives:

- i. To identify the vocabulary knowledge of Brunei Malay dialect among youths.
- ii. To identify the students' perception on the status of Brunei Malay dialect.
- iii. To discuss the steps that can enhance and maintain the Brunei Malay dialect.

Following the objectives are the three main research questions:

- i. How many students can correctly identify the vocabulary in Brunei Malay dialect?
- ii. What is their perception on the status of Brunei Malay dialect?
- iii. How can the Bruneians enhance and maintain the Brunei Malay dialect?

## **2 Method**

This study used the mix method approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data samples. A survey conducted through online questionnaire was used as a research tool during the data collection. This approach was suitable as the survey could address both the quantitative (e.g., Likert scale data) and qualitative approach (e.g., open ended questions) (Kaprawi, 2013). Furthermore, a survey could

help the researchers to collect reliable data on language knowledge and students' perception (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010).

The survey was divided into two main categories. The first category (Category A) was a language test using Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (VKS) invented by Wesche and Paribakht (1996). This scale was a five-point scale, but it was then modified into the four-point scale by Brown (2008). The scale was divided as follows:

**Table 3.** Vocabulary Knowledge Scale (Brown 2008)

Scale	Statement
i	I have never seen this word
ii	I have seen it but I don't know what it means.
iii	I have seen it but I'm not sure what it means.
iv	I know this vocabulary (fill in the blank)

**Table 4.** Example of a sentence

Brunei Malay	<i>Ampar sul si Awang atu. Banyak kali karajanya</i>
English	Awang looks <b>exhausted</b> , maybe he had a lot of works

'Category A' consisted of 24 items which comprised of 8 nouns, 8 adjectives and 8 verbs that were taken from *Kamus Bahasa Melayu Brunei* (Brunei Malay Language Dictionary, 2007). Each vocabulary was given in a sentence such as shown in Table 2. Each student had to identify the word based on the VKS as mentioned in Table 1. If a student chose scale 'iv', he/she had to give the synonym or the meaning of the word in the space provided.

The second category was 'Category B' which consisted of two types of survey. The first part was five-point Likert scale questions (1- strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree) that contained four items focusing on the perceptions and opinions of the Brunei Malay dialect. The second part was two open-ended items asking for the challenges and steps on promoting the Brunei Malay vocabulary.

For the quantitative data analysis, Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) was used to calculate the frequency and reliability of the data collected from the samples. For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was applied to analyse the open-ended questions. A pilot project was conducted before the actual survey to check the reliability value of each items. The Cronbach alpha value was 0.626, which was acceptable. Therefore, the survey was considered reliable for this study (Urasachi, Horodnic & Zaid, 2015).

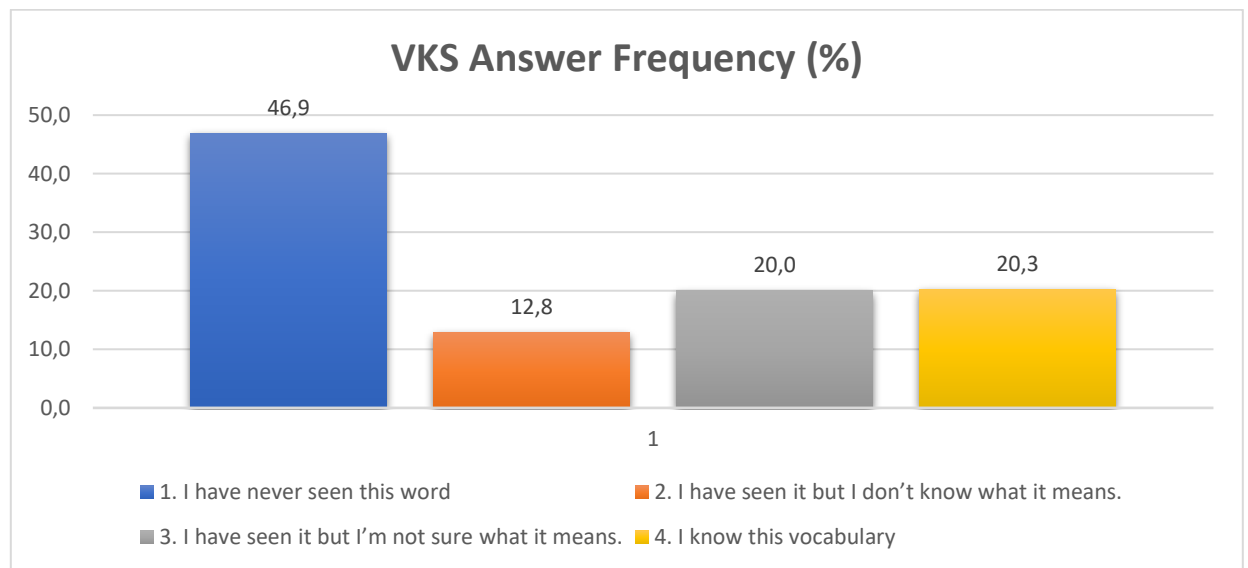
In this study, the purposive sampling method was selected to collect the data. A total of 102 students who were enrolled in the Modern Language Programmes in LC UBD participated in study. They were chosen as samples based on their ethnicity as Brunei Malay and on their age group within the youth category of 15-40 years old.

**Table 5.** Respondents' Gender and Age

Gender					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	25	24.5	24.5	24.5
	Female	77	75.5	75.5	100.0
	Total	102	100.0	100.0	
Age					
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	16-20	45	44.1	44.1	44.1
	21-25	56	54.9	54.9	99.0
	26-30	1	1.0	1.0	100.0
	Total	102	100.0	100.0	

### 3 Result and Discussion

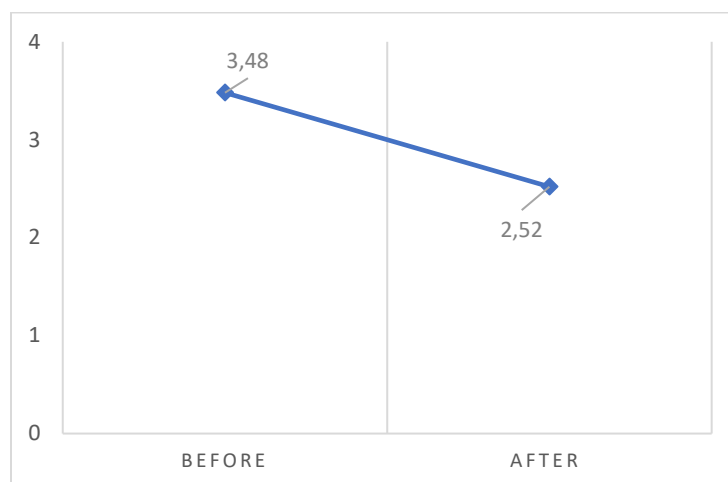
This section presents the data analysis and the discussion obtained from the survey. It is divided into two parts: Category A that consisted of 24 items was analysed and presented first, followed by Category B that consisted of Likert scale and open-ended questions.



**Figure 1.** VKS Answer Frequency

Figure 1 shows the frequency of the answers given by the respondents in category A. Out of 2448 answers received (102 respondents  $\times$  24 items), 46.9% of the answers indicated that they had never seen the word or vocabulary in the sentence (scale 1), 12.8% indicated that they had seen it but they did not know what it meant (scale 2), 20% indicated that they had seen it but not sure what it meant (scale 3), and lastly 20.3% indicated that they knew the vocabulary given (scale 4). By percentage, this data suggested that the respondents had never seen (or heard) almost half of the words given in the questionnaire. They had seen (or heard) about 30% of the words but either did not know what it meant or were not sure what it meant. Lastly, they only knew about 20% of the words. This data

suggests that the number of words that they never heard is greater compared to the number of words that they have seen, but not sure what it means and the words that they know.



**Figure 2.** Perception of Brunei Malay dialect Vocabulary Knowledge before and after test

Figure 2 shows the perception of Brunei Malay dialect vocabulary knowledge before and after the test in the survey (4- Very good, 3 – good, 2 – average and 1 – poor). The data in Figure 2 showed that the mean value of the survey declined from 3.48 to 2.52, suggesting that the respondents thought that they knew many Brunei Malay dialect words before they took the test. However, after they took the test, they changed their view as the number of words that they thought they did not know were greater than the ones they thought they knew. This data compliments the data in Figure 1 which shows that the number of words they do not know are almost half of the survey.

In category B, the study focused on the usage, challenges and ways to preserve the Brunei Malay dialect. In this category, the questionnaire used the Likert scale and open-ended questions. The results are as follows: The analysis of each data will begin by providing an overview of each campaign in which each poster appears, describing its main visual and linguistic features, and comparing and contrasting the various texts using Kress and van Leeuwen's model (2006), followed by political analysis with the purpose of demonstrating the interplay between verbal and visual clues.

**Table 6.** Student Perception on Language Usage

	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree or Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	I don't think Brunei Malay dialect status is in danger	11.8% 12	39.2% 40	15.7% 16	30.4% 31	2.9% 3
2	I think using Brunei Malay dialect fully to communicate would be difficult.	2% (2)	23.5% (24)	16.7% (17)	43.1% (44)	14.7% (15)
3	I think Brunei Malay dialect can survive if there are	2% (2)	0% (0)	5.9% (6)	54.9% (56)	37.3% (38)

suitable steps in introducing the language						
4	Efforts to introduce the Brunei Malay vocabulary in media such as radio, TV and social media are needed	5.9% (6)	21.6% (22)	22.5% (23)	43.1% (44)	6.9% (7)

Table 5 shows four items on the perception of the Brunei Malay dialect. Item 1 and 2 showed how they perceived the status of Brunei Malay dialect and its usage. According to the survey, the data showed that out of 102 respondents (n=102):

**Item 1:** There were 11.8% of respondents who strongly disagreed, 39.2% disagreed, 15.7% neither agreed nor disagreed, 30.4% agreed and 2.9% strongly agreed on this statement. This data indicated that more than half of the students agreed that Brunei Malay dialect was in danger.

**Item 2:** There were 2% of respondents who strongly disagreed, 23.5% disagreed, 16.7% neither disagreed nor agreed, 43.1% agreed and 14.7% strongly agreed on this statement. This data indicated that the majority of the students agreed that using Brunei Malay dialect fully to communicate would be difficult.

Item 1 and 2 showed that the majority of the respondents believed that the status of Brunei Malay dialect was in danger and that it would be difficult to use it fully to communicate. To understand this issue, the students were asked the factors they felt that could contribute to the declining knowledge of Brunei Malay (item 5 – Cat. B). The data in the survey could be divided into three themes such as follows:

a. Influence from different languages:

“Too much exposure from Western or Korean movie, thus decreasing the knowledge of Brunei Malay dialect” (Respondent 10).

“Today, many people are more concerned with foreign languages so that they can be accepted by the state that use that language” (Respondent 47).

“Being bilingual has impacted and deteriorated the authenticity of a language” (Respondent 56).

“Globalization has made English as the *lingua franca* of the world, which means that learning and using English are necessary in order to communicate and trade with foreigners. Moreover, the view that using other languages, such as English or others, would signify that someone is usually of high status. Anyone who wants to feel that way tends to follow and prioritize other languages” (Respondent 102).

b. Lack of exposure and intergenerational transfer:

“Lack of exposure and digitalisation of information related to Brunei Malay dialect. Most are only available through book sources” (Respondent 4).

“Today's children are not often introduced to the vocabulary from their parents” (Respondent 30).

“Lack of practice in the use of Brunei Malay dialect vocabulary in daily life. In fact, parents tend to teach foreign languages to their children because the use of foreign languages is already widespread in communicating with foreigners” (Respondent 60).

“Parents are more likely to use English with their children, making them unfamiliar with the vocabulary of the Brunei Malay dialect” (Respondent 88).

c. Social media:

“In my opinion, I think the main factor is social media because children now have easy access to Youtube and watch stories that do not use the vocabulary of the Brunei Malay dialect” (Respondent 17).

“Infrequent use of social media using Brunei Malay dialect vocabulary” (Respondent 41).

“Most children today watch Youtube in English. So, they are more familiar with English than Malay Brunei” (Respondent 46).

“Social media play a critical role. They are more concerned with English and other languages” (Respondent 80).

Item 3 and 4 showed how they perceived the status of Brunei Malay dialect and its usage. According to the survey, the data for item 3 and 4 showed that:

**Item 3:** There were 2% of respondents who strongly disagreed, 0% disagreed, 5.9% neither agreed nor disagreed, 54.9% agreed and 37.3% strongly agreed on this statement. This data indicated that the majority of the students agreed that Brunei Malay dialect could survive if there were suitable steps to introduce the language.

**Item 4:** There were 5.9% of respondents who strongly disagreed, 21.6% disagreed, 22.5% neither agreed nor disagreed, 43.1% agreed and 6.9% strongly agreed on this statement. This data indicated that the majority of the students agreed that the efforts to introduce the Brunei Malay vocabulary in media such as radio, TV and social media were critically needed.

Item 3 and 4 showed that the majority of the respondents believed that the Brunei Malay dialect could survive and the efforts made nowadays were insufficient. To understand this issue, the students were asked for solutions that could be taken to preserve the knowledge of Brunei Malay dialect (item 6 – Cat. B). The survey showed that the data could be divided into four different themes such as follows:

a. Through education institutions:

“Encourage students to learn the vocabulary since primary school in order to maintain the vocabulary of the Brunei Malay dialect” (Respondent 30).

“Teach Brunei Malay dialect vocabulary in schools, conduct awareness campaigns on the Brunei Malay dialect vocabulary, conduct competitions in using the Brunei Malay dialect” (Respondent 34).

“Create a course, such as the Introduction of Brunei Malay in schools and universities”. (Respondent 69).

“Make it as a core subject up until university level or treating the dialect at the same level as English” (Respondent 97).

b. Competitions and campaigns:

“Try to conduct the Brunei dialect language forum. Make it part of the CCA of schools and institutions. We can make quizzes or contests on the Brunei Malay dialect by offering prizes” (Respondent 12).

“Organise competitions and make our Brunei Malay dialect a compulsory subject in schools” (Respondent 39).

“Organise programs or activities or games that can introduce the Brunei Malay dialect. Make it fun to learn” (Respondent 101).

“Conduct cultural exchange, and find out ways to increase tourism. Tourists may be curious about the language. Hence, more foreigners would love to learn new languages” (Respondent 102).

c. Social and Mass media:

“Make the vocabulary for Brunei Malay available online for people to refer to since this method is more accessible to everyone” (Respondent 4).

“We can do Language campaigns by using platform that the current generation is interested in such as social media” (Respondent 55).

“Create an Education Channel for the Brunei Malay language” (Respondent 70).

“It is recommended to apply the modern technology to disseminate knowledge, such as online quizzes on social media or mobile apps on the Brunei Malay dialect” (Respondent 88).

d. Intergenerational Transfer:

“Parents should be diligent in using the vocabulary of the Brunei Malay dialect among family members” (Respondent 15).

“Instruct youths to use the Brunei Malay dialect in everyday conversation” (Respondent 47).

“You can learn the Brunei dialect through formal and informal education. Parents also play an important role in introducing the vocabulary of the Brunei Malay dialect to their children” (Respondent 81).

“We must practice speaking Brunei language with people who know the language in Brunei, that is, people who can speak pure Brunei Malay language” (Respondent 84).

In this study, we pursued the question, whether the knowledge of Brunei Malay vocabulary among the youths, particularly among university students in Brunei Darussalam was affected by the worrying trend of decreasing dialect usage. Although the Brunei Malay is considered as well-taken care of, and

hence a flourishing language, a significant portion of youth speakers tend to communicate in English not only with foreigners, but also among themselves. The reasons behind this development are multifarious and they range from the presence of English-speaking expatriates in the country (who aside from some basic phrases, generally do not speak Malay), no dubbed (only subtitled) motion pictures in the cinemas to better career opportunities that are associated with the mastery of English. Oftentimes, for the sake of practice, parents are also supportive of the excessive use of English even in situations where it would be unnecessary.

Before our survey was conducted, the participants generally had graded their knowledge of Brunei Malay vocabulary as 'good' to 'very good'; however, after they had completed the questionnaire, the respondents regarded their familiarity with the Brunei Malay vocabulary as 'average' to 'good' at best. Although the test words were not archaic or extremely rare, almost the half of them were completely unknown to the participants. They admittedly had not heard or seen them before. As the questionnaire centred on three different parts of speech (eight nouns, eight verbs, and eight adjectives), a further and in-depth analysis of the data could help identify particular uncertainties in the native vocabulary knowledge of the Bruneian youths.

Furthermore, learning which parts of speech (nouns, verbs, adjectives) are the most affected by the code mixing between Brunei Malay and English could be helpful to single out particular cognitive concepts (animate / inanimate things, actions / occurrences, qualities) where external language changes are happening. Such observations could be addressed by different agencies (Language and Literature Bureau, schools, universities, etc.). When these issues are studied, they can become a valuable data to start teaching this language in schools or universities. For example, LC UBD has started to teach Brunei minority ethnic languages since 2011 and the responses from the students have been very encouraging (Yusof & Alas 2021a). This means that the Brunei Malay dialect has the potential to be offered as part of the optional course in HiE. It is suggested that to start teaching local dialects in Brunei, the institutions need to experiment with various teaching techniques, to create abundant learning material and to conduct community engagement (Yusof & Alas, 2021b; Yusof, 2012). These are some of the criterion needed if we want to enhance and maintain the Brunei Malay dialect.

As for the questions regarding its ability to fully function as a means of communication, its survivability and the institutional efforts to uphold its status, the respondents gave their opinion not only using the five-point Likert scale, but also through the open-ended questions to support their point of view. Intriguingly, the majority felt that the Brunei Malay dialect was endangered and that it would be challenging to exclusively use it for communication. The reasons included the continuous strong

exposure to foreign languages or unbalanced bilingualism, the parents' lack of willingness to teach Brunei Malay vocabulary to their children, and English-speaking social media.

Suggestions from the respondents varied from the inclusion of Brunei Malay as a (compulsory) subject in the curriculum in schools and universities, organizing campaigns or competitions on the dialect, establishing online Brunei Malay resources to counteract the "anglicizing" effects of social media, and emphasizing the elder generations' role in passing down the Brunei Malay vocabulary to their children and grandchildren. Moreover, the role of native language or dialect in establishing and preserving identity of the individual and of the community as a whole is extremely important. Nevertheless, it is a natural phenomenon that certain words or expressions fray over time and lose their original meaning(s), or that eventually, they may be replaced by loanwords from other languages and be forgotten. However, the line between evolving language and latent language loss is very thin, and proactive and popularizing measures in particular are necessary to preserve the dialect for future generations. In this sense, the evident loss of Brunei Malay vocabulary among the youths is certainly an alarming linguistic phenomenon worth given attention to and being addressed.

#### **4 Conclusion**

As a conclusion, there is evidence of dwindling Brunei Malay dialect vocabulary among youths. Factors such as influences from different languages, social media and lacking of intergenerational transfer could cause the particular language to gradually become endangered (Guérin & Yourupi, 2017). In this study, most of the respondents thought that their ability in Brunei Malay vocabulary was good, but in reality, some of the words were lost unconsciously. The need for preserving and maintaining Brunei Malay dialect needs to be taken seriously now to ensure the survival and longevity of this dialect and so that it could be passed down the future generations. According to Yusof (2021), in the context of Brunei, the local and other indigenous languages need all the support from various agencies and the communities. All parties need to be proactive and responsible for all local languages so that the knowledge could be passed down the future generations (Fabian, Sintian & Yusof, 2022). This study hopes to raise the awareness to start enhancing and maintaining the Brunei Malay dialect.

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