

# Chapter 6


## Caught Between Tongues: Language Learning, Dialectal Divide, and Belonging in Brunei

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### ABSTRACT

*This study, titled “Caught Between Tongues: Language Learning, Dialectal Divide, and Belonging in Brunei,” investigates the experiences of international students learning Malay in Brunei Darussalam, focusing on the impact of the dialectal divide between Standard Malay and Brunei Malay. Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of teaching materials. The analysis reveals a significant linguistic mismatch, leading to feelings of frustration and reduced communicative confidence among students, who often relied on English for communication. Classroom observations indicated that instructors adapted their teaching methods to accommodate varying proficiency levels, yet this limited immersive*

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*practice in Malay. The study advocates for pedagogical approaches that integrate local dialects and promote peer support, ultimately enhancing students' cultural integration and sense of belonging.*

## **1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE**

In Brunei Darussalam, the national language is Standard Malay (Bahasa Melayu Baku), which serves as the official medium in government, legal contexts, and formal education. Brunei Malay and Standard Malay coexist in a dynamic diglossic relationship. Brunei Malay, the vernacular, dominates informal interactions and functions as a key identity marker, whereas Standard Malay is primarily associated with formal education, literacy, and official domains (Kirkpatrick, 2007; McLellan, 2016). These varieties differ in phonology, lexicon, and syntax, and students are often educated in Standard Malay while socialized in Brunei Malay, resulting in bidialectal competencies. Research suggests that understanding the functional domains of each variety is crucial for analyzing language attitudes, classroom interactions, and identity construction (Haji-Othman, 2018). This creates a unique diglossic environment, where the official and spoken varieties of the same language coexist but serve different functions.

For international students in Brunei, this linguistic landscape poses unique challenges. Most students have no prior exposure to Malay and encounter the language for the first time upon arrival. While they receive instruction in Standard Malay within the university classroom, their opportunities to apply what they learn are limited by the widespread use of Brunei Malay in informal settings. Moreover, Brunei's bilingual education system, in which English is widely used, further reduces the practical necessity for international students to engage with Malay outside formal learning contexts.

To provide pedagogical implications for the Malay classroom, a deep understanding of how international students in Brunei navigate the mismatch between formal language instruction and sociolinguistic reality is required.

## **2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This study explores the complex relationship between language, identity, and integration, focusing on how learning Standard Malay—surrounded by dialectal variation—affects students' institutional belonging, cultural adaptation, and communicative confidence.

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