

Measuring Malay Language Fluency Among Foreign Workers Based on the CEFR Model

Mohammad Fadzeli Jaafar^{1*}, Adreena Natasya Ahmad Daud¹, Mohammed Azlan Mis¹

Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Malaysia, Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor, 43600, Malaysia.

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.1015EC0057>

Received: 01 June 2026; Accepted: 06 June 2026; Published: 24 June 2026

ABSTRACT

Many studies in Malaysia have reported communication problem or a lack of fluency among foreign workers in Malay or English in the workplace. These issues have been examined using both qualitative and quantitative approaches across various employment sectors such as construction, services, and manufacturing. Overall, previous studies have consistently shown that the level of language fluency among foreign workers is weak. However, there is a lack of research that measures foreign workers' fluency based on actual language use. Therefore, this study aims to measure the level of Malay language proficiency among foreign workers based on the CEFR model. A total of 10 informants were interviewed through semi-structured open-ended interviews. The conversations focused on the informants' work and personal environments. The study was conducted in Bandar Baru Bangi, Selangor. The findings indicate that the informants can be classified into two proficiency levels only: basic (A1 and A2) and intermediate (B1). At the basic level, informants were able to use basic vocabulary, respond to simple questions, and frequently made grammatical errors. At the intermediate level, informants were able to interact using simple sentences and appropriate discourse markers, although typical grammatical errors were still present. These findings provide preliminary insights into the Malay language proficiency of foreign works, particularly those from Bangladesh and Pakistan.

Keywords: communication problem, fluency, foreign worker, CEFR model, interview

INTRODUCTION

Issues of language proficiency among foreign workers have been reported in many countries with high numbers of migrant labor. For example, limited proficiency in English has been identified as a major barrier in the United States, leading to lower wages among immigrants (Murillo, 2020). McKay (2013) also reported that weak English proficiency among foreign workers in Singapore has caused problems with employers. Meanwhile, low proficiency in Japanese among foreign workers from the Philippines, Thailand, and Indonesia—both verbal and written—has led to misunderstandings in the hospitality industry (Basalamah, Ardani & Fransisca, 2021).

Language barriers have also been widely reported in Malaysia. For instance, Salleh et al. (2012), Mohd Salleh et al. (2021), and Ne'Matullah et al. (2021) highlighted such issues across various industries, particularly in manufacturing, construction, and services. According to Yusop et al. (2025), communication problems have been an ongoing issue in the construction sector, contributing to accident risks, project delays, and increased costs. Dalib et al. (2023) further noted that among more than 2 million skilled and unskilled foreign workers in Malaysia, several issues have arisen, including behavior that is not aligned with local societal norms, weak language skills, and negative social perceptions.

Although previous studies have reported language barriers in Malay in Malaysia, no study has specifically attempted to measure the level of basic language proficiency among these workers. Assessing the language proficiency of foreign workers can help employers select workers suited to specific job requirements. Employers can also develop basic language learning modules for foreign workers. In this way, language fluency among foreign workers can be improved.

In relation to this, the present study aims to measure the level of Malay language proficiency among foreign workers in Malaysia based on the CEFR model. The study focuses on the service and manufacturing sectors. It employs a semi-structured interview method. The study participants consist of foreign workers from South Asian countries, namely Bangladesh and Pakistan. The scope of the study is limited to Selangor, also known as the Golden State of Malaysia. The findings of this study will reveal the level of Malay language proficiency among foreign workers based on selected social variables.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many previous studies showing that foreign workers have a low level of proficiency in the Malay language. For instance, Salleh, Mohd Nordin, and Abdul Rashid (2012) stated that language barriers faced by foreign workers in Malaysia are not new, particularly in the construction sector. Interviews conducted with employers confirmed this issue, whether in terms of communication or written language. According to Valithern (2014), communication problems arise because most foreign workers cannot speak or understand the local language used by supervisors, as they come from poorer countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal. Based on survey findings, Valithern (2014) reported that workers with 1–5 years of experience have an average level of language proficiency, while those with 6–10 years of experience are able to speak fluently. Therefore, Valithern suggested that one solution is to use interpreters as intermediaries between workers and employers.

Another study by Rosli and Ismail (2018) aimed to identify the factors contributing to language barriers and to explore approaches that employers can use to overcome this issue. A questionnaire using Likert-scale items was employed as the research instrument, involving a total of 316 respondents. Similar to Valithern (2014), the findings of Rosli and Ismail showed that the main factor influencing local language proficiency among foreign workers is their work experience in Malaysia. Workers who have been employed longer in Malaysia are more proficient in the local language compared to new workers. The proposed solution is for foreign workers with limited proficiency to attend local language training classes.

Furthermore, based on a questionnaire, the study by Mohd Saleh et al. (2021) conducted at the Sheraton Hotel in Petaling found that language barriers and discrimination have impacted the work productivity of foreign workers. Meanwhile, Ne'Matullah, Lim, and Siti Aishah (2021), as well as Abd Wahab, Nik Mahmood, and Minghat (2023), reported that foreign workers in Malaysia face communication problems with employers, particularly those from South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Nepal) who are not proficient in Malay. The implications of these language barriers have affected productivity and aspects of Occupational Safety and Health in certain sectors, such as construction and manufacturing. The situation becomes more problematic when findings show that foreign workers lack confidence in communication, have limited knowledge, do not understand instructions or assigned tasks, and exhibit poor time management in completing tasks. All of these issues stem from the language barriers experienced by foreign workers.

Therefore, to address the problem of language barriers among foreign workers, Ne'Matullah, Lim, and Siti Aisyah (2021) suggested that employers should provide Malay language modules or training classes for less proficient workers. Meanwhile, Abd Wahab, Nik Mahmood, and Minghat (2023) proposed the development of a Malay language syllabus specifically for foreign workers, as they are currently only able to use a limited number of basic Malay words in communication. However, previous studies have not clearly explained the factors that cause foreign workers to struggle with the Malay language, nor have they identified their level of language proficiency. The development of language learning modules or classes cannot be effectively carried out without understanding the factors behind these weaknesses and the level of language mastery among foreign workers. In other words, once the level of language proficiency is determined, appropriate learning modules—whether at the basic, intermediate, or advanced level—can be developed.

A recent study on communication issues among foreign workers by Yusop et al. (2025), based on 125 responses, found that respondents have low levels of fluency in both Malay and English. The study therefore suggested several potentially effective strategies, such as mandatory language training, translation services, and multilingual safety resources. However, all the studies discussed here have not attempted to measure the basic speaking proficiency of foreign workers. Therefore, this study aims to measure the basic Malay language

proficiency of foreign workers based on the CEFR model. The findings of this study can serve as a reference for industry stakeholders in particular and the government in general.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a semi-structured interview method. A total of 10 foreign workers representing the service and manufacturing sectors participated in this study. The interviews were conducted for approximately 5 to 10 minutes for each informant. The questions focused on the informants' jobs, experiences, and their views on the Malay language. The following demographic information of the informants was collected: age, country of origin, level of education, length of stay, and type of occupation.

Table 1. Informants Demographics

Informant	Age	Nationality	Education	Length of stay	Occupation
01	23	Pakistan	Educated	1 year +	Sell clothes
02	26	Bangladesh	Uneducated	1 year	Business
03	24	Bangladesh	Educated	1 year +	Business
04	24	Bangladesh	Educated	2 years	Factory
05	25	Bangladesh	Educated	2 years	Business
06	40	Bangladesh	Uneducated	7 years	Sell sofa
07	35	Bangladesh	Educated	7 years +	Factory
08	28	Bangladesh	Uneducated	9 years	Restaurant
09	30	Bangladesh	Educated	10 years	Factory
10	26	Bangladesh	Uneducated	3 years	Sell clothes

Table 1 above shows that 2 informants are from Pakistan and 8 are from Bangladesh. The informants' ages range from 23 to 40 years, with 7 individuals aged 23–28, 2 individuals aged 30–35, and one aged 40. A total of 4 informants have no formal schooling, while the rest have received some education. In terms of length of stay in Malaysia, 6 informants have stayed for 1–3 years, while 4 informants have stayed for 7–10 years. The types of jobs held by the informants vary across sectors, including services (selling clothes or sofas, car washing, food shop assistants, and sales assistants) and production (factory work).

The recorded conversations were transcribed into written text. The transcription process used the software *Turboscribe*, an artificial intelligence (AI)-based transcription service that provides unlimited audio and video transcription. The researcher uploaded MPEG-4 recording files into the *Turboscribe* software to generate transcriptions in DOCX format (Microsoft Word). The transcribed data were then reviewed to ensure their accuracy and authenticity based on the original recordings.

Next, the data were analyzed using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to determine the language proficiency levels of the foreign workers. The CEFR framework consists of six proficiency levels, from A1 to C2, which are grouped into three categories: Basic, Intermediate, and Proficient. These proficiency levels are designed to assess an individual's speaking ability and focus on different qualitative aspects of language use. Data analysis was conducted based on CEFR criteria, including range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. The researcher listened to the recordings and reviewed the transcripts to determine the language proficiency levels of the foreign workers.

CEFR Model

The CEFR model was developed in 2001 by the Council of Europe to measure language ability, design curricula, develop teaching and learning materials, and assess language fluency. Initially, CEFR was introduced as an assessment framework applicable to all European languages. However, due to its straightforward and practical nature, it has since been adopted outside Europe (Affendy Lee, Mohd Kassim & Aboo Bakar, 2022).

To date, the CEFR model has been implemented in various countries such as Canada, Turkey, and Portugal (Kassim & Hashim, 2023) and has been translated into more than 36 languages as a guideline for identifying language learning and assessment levels. The model has influenced language policies in several countries. For example, Vietnam was one of the earliest ASEAN countries to formally adopt CEFR in its education system (Md Nawawi et al., 2021). Malaysia, on the other hand, began implementing CEFR in classrooms in 2018 (Aziz et al., 2018).

In assessing language proficiency, CEFR provides six reference levels, ranging from A1 to C2. Each level is supported by a set of guidelines that can be used by teachers, curriculum developers, and program administrators. The CEFR model is based on an action-oriented approach to language learning and use (Broek & Ende, 2013). Many educators believe that CEFR has a stronger impact on assessment than on classroom teaching. The six proficiency levels are categorized based on language use contexts: A1 and A2 (Basic), B1 and B2 (Intermediate), and C1 and C2 (Proficient).

In general, the basic level represents the lowest level of proficiency. At this level, individuals (i) can communicate and exchange simple information, (ii) understand common expressions and basic phrases such as self-introduction and personal details (possessions, acquaintances, place of residence), and (iii) speak relatively slowly. The intermediate level reflects a higher level of ability, where individuals can understand and provide information about work, future plans, opinions, hopes, dreams, and ambitions. The highest level, proficient, includes the ability to (i) communicate appropriately according to context, (ii) understand implicit meanings, and (iii) use language effectively in professional and social settings with appropriate discourse markers and coherence.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis was conducted based on the category of length of stay in Malaysia. Based on the information obtained, the informants were divided into two groups: (i) those who have stayed for 1–3 years and (ii) those who have stayed for 7–10 years. The social variables considered in this study include type of occupation and level of education.

Basic Proficiency Level

Based on the CEFR model, 8 informants can be categorized at the basic level of Malay language proficiency, with 6 informants at the A1 level and 2 informants at the A2 level. Meanwhile, 2 informants fall under the intermediate category, specifically at the B1 level. No informants were categorized as proficient, such as at the C1 or C2 levels.

Table 2. Informant’s Fluency Level

Informants	A1	A2	B1
01	√		
02	√		
03		√	
04	√		
05	√		
06	√		
07		√	
08			√
09			√
10	√		
Total	6	2	2

A1 Category

The following are the characteristics of speakers who fall into the most basic category of speaking proficiency, namely A1. The informants in this study will be assessed based on five aspects in the CEFR model: range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence.

Table 3. A1 Aspect

Aspect	Features
Range	Has a very basic repertoire of simple words and phrases related to personal information and specific concrete situations.
Accuracy	Shows only limited control of a few grammatical structures and simple sentence patterns within a memorized repertoire.
Fluency	Can produce very short, isolated utterances, mostly pre-formulated, with frequent pauses to search for expressions, articulate unfamiliar words, and repair communication.
Interaction	Can ask and answer questions about personal details. Can interact in a simple way, but communication depends entirely on repetition, rephrasing, and clarification.
Coherence	Can link words or groups of words using very basic connectors such as “and” or “then.”

Based on the characteristics mentioned, the informant in category A1 is not able to understand the Malay language well. The informant only uses basic words during conversation and has very limited control of grammar. For example,

Example (1)

B: *Itu ada Bangladesh.*

(That there Bangladesh.)

That person is from Bangladesh.

B: *Fahamlah, tapi bukan semua. Sikit-sikit.*

(Understand, but not all. Little-little.)

I understand, but not everything. Just a little.

B: *Dua tahun. Enam bulan, kan? Enam bulan.*

(Two years. Six months, right? Six months.)

Two years and six months, right? Six months.

During the interview, the informant admitted that they could not understand all the content of the conversation. When asked who taught them Malay, the informant answered “That there Bangladesh”. This answer shows that the informant cannot arrange and control sentence structure accurately. The use of the phrase “little-little” explains that the informant’s interaction style is still very limited. The informant also repeats the same information during interaction, for example “Two years. Six months, right? Six months”. The repetition of six months shows that the informant is unsure of their answer. Please see the following example:

Example (2)

A: *Di sini 2 tahunlah. Sebelum ini, kerja jual baju juga ke atau kedai makan ke?*

(Here already 2 years. Before this, work selling clothes also or food shop?)

You have been here for two years already. Before this, did you work selling clothes or at a food shop?

B: *Kedai makanan.*

(Food shop.)

At a restaurant.

A: *Jadi, awak 10 tahun dekat sini. Boleh faham tak apa yang saya cakap kepada awak?*

(So, you 10 years here. Can understand or not what I say to you?)

So, you have been here for 10 years. Can you understand what I am saying to you?

B: *Ya.*

(Yes.)

The example above shows that the informant is only able to answer the questions asked word by word, without giving additional information. The informant is able to understand the questions asked, but cannot explain or elaborate on their answers.

Example (3)

B: *TikTok saja. TikTok, cakap. Saya macam, dia tahu pasal saya macam kerja jual baju. Hari-hari pergi, mari customer, saya cakap-cakap. So, ajar sikit-sikit kan? So, ajar belajar di TikTok.*

(TikTok only. TikTok, speak. I like, he knows about me like work selling clothes. Every day go, come customer, I speak-speak. So, teach little-little right? So, teach learn at TikTok.)

Only through TikTok. On TikTok, people talk. He knows that I work selling clothes. Every day customers come and go, and I talk to them. So, they teach me little by little, right? That's how I learn through TikTok.

B: *Tak ada. Belajar TikTok ke. Kawan-kawan kasi ajar sikit-sikit. I can speak English than what untuk Malay.*

(None. Learn TikTok or. Friends give teach little-little. I can speak English than what for Malay.)

No. I learn from TikTok too. My friends teach me little by little. I can speak English better than Malay.

B: *Guna TikTok, many friends TikTok live. Buka live kan? Sekali duduk, cakap sekali.*

(Use TikTok, many friends TikTok live. Open live right? Once sit, speak together.)

Using TikTok, there are many friends doing TikTok Live. We open a live session, sit together and talk together. The informant repeats a lot, for example “TikTok only. TikTok speak” and “I like”. The informant also cannot control sentence structure. That is why many structures are not arranged according to the correct Malay language system. For example, “Every day go” (Go every day), “come customer” (customer come). In fact, word choice is also not accurate, for example “teach, learn at TikTok” – the informant is not sure of the difference between the words teach and learn. In this context, actually the informant wants to say that they learn Malay through TikTok (not at TikTok). The word “give” is a colloquial form, which can actually be omitted, for example “Friends give teach little-little” (Friends teach me a little). More interestingly, the example above shows the use of colloquial English that is not structurally correct, for example “I can speak English than what for Malay” (I can speak English (better) than Malay). This shows that the informant's ability in Malay and English is very limited.

A2 Category

Category A2 is slightly higher in level compared to A1 because the speaker will use simple sentences that are commonly used in daily situations. The details of category A2 can be seen in the following table:

Table 4. A2 Aspect

Aspect	Features
Range	Uses basic sentence patterns with memorized phrases, groups of words, and formulaic expressions to convey limited information in simple everyday situations.
Accuracy	Uses some simple structures correctly but still makes systematic basic errors.
Fluency	Can introduce themselves in very short utterances, although with pauses and false starts.
Interaction	Can answer questions and respond to simple statements. Can show that they are following a conversation but rarely understand enough to sustain it independently.
Coherence	Can link groups of words using simple connectors such as “and” “but” and “because.”

Speech characteristics that can illustrate the level of fluency for category A2 can be seen in the following examples:

Example (4)

A: *Tapi, yang mengajar kamu cakap bahasa Melayu tu orang Bangladesh ke atau orang Malaysia?*

(But, the one who teaches you to speak Malay, is it Bangladesh people or Malaysian people?)

But, the one who teaches you to speak Malay, is it Bangladesh people or Malaysia people?

B: *Orang Bangladesh punya ada. Malaysia punya ada.*

(Bangladesh people have. Malaysia has.)

Bangladeshi people did, and Malaysians did too.

A: *Tapi, macam mana kamu belajar bahasa Melayu?*

(But, how do you learn Malay?)

But, how did you learn Malay?

B: *Itu ajar Malaysia punya orang. Tapi, dia benda ajar, saya kasih ingat.*

(That teach Malaysia people. But, the thing he teach, I give remember.)

It was taught by Malaysian people. Whatever they taught me, I remembered.

If we examine the example above, the informant uses simple and short sentences. However, the choice of words and sentence structure used are not correct, for example “Bangladesh people have. Malaysia have”. Actually, the informant wants to say that the ones who teach them Malay are Bangladesh people and Malays. But they use the possessive form “have” (punya) to explain that Bangladesh people also teach Malay, and Malays also teach them (Bangladesh people also teach Malay. Malaysian people also teach Malay). The word “Malaysia” in this context refers to Malay and non-Malay people in Malaysia. The influence of the native language is very clear when the informant uses the structure “That teach Malaysia people. But, the thing he teach, I give remember”. The structure “that teach” is an inverted form, which is also used by non-Malay speakers in Malaysia, for example among Indians and Chinese. We may have heard the phrase “that car”, which should actually be said as “car that”. Therefore, the correct structure is “The one who teaches (Malay), that is Malaysian people”. The word “punya” is influenced by colloquial language. The same goes for the structure “But, the thing he teach, I give remember”, which should be “But the thing that he teaches, I try to remember”. The word “give” refers to “kasi” (try). Compared to category A1, the informant for category A2 speaks more and with greater confidence

in Malay, although they frequently make grammatical mistakes. In addition, informants at the A2 level try to memorize Malay words/phrases (“But, the thing he teach, I give remember”) and use the conjunction “but” to connect sentences.

Example (5)

A: *Ok. Jadi, kamu datang kerja naik apa? Dari rumah ke sini?*

(Ok. So, how do you come to work? From home to here?)

B: (Bicycle.)

B: *Boleh. Tapi dulu susah sikit. Saya tak tahu apa-apa. Dia ada tak apa cakap. Tapi sekarang dah faham. So, ok lah.*

(Can. But before a bit difficult. I don’t know anything. He has not what speak. But now already understand. So, ok.)

I can. But at first it was a bit difficult. I didn’t know anything. I couldn’t understand what people were saying. But now I understand already, so it’s okay.

Example 5 above shows better sentence structure, with only a few grammatical errors. The informant seems comfortable using the English pronunciation for the word “bicycle”. This is not surprising because foreign workers in the manufacturing sector are more exposed to English compared to Malay. When asked about their ability in Malay, the informant is able to explain quite well and convincingly. This shows that the informant understands and can control their delivery in a fairly organized way. For example, the informant is able to make a comparison between their previous ability in Malay (“But before a bit difficult”) and now (“But now already understand”). The less accurate sentence structure is “He has not what speak” (I do not know how to speak Malay). The informant not only uses the word “but”, but also uses the word “so”.

B1 Category

A total of two informants can be categorized at the mid-B1 level, based on the CEFR model. At this stage, speakers are fairly independent when speaking, as they are able to describe themselves in familiar situations. They can provide additional information and express opinions on a particular matter. The detailed aspects of the B1 category are as follows:

Table 5. B1 Aspect

Aspect	Features
Range	Has sufficient language to communicate, with an adequate vocabulary to express themselves with some hesitation and circumlocution on topics such as family, hobbies and interests, work, travel, and current events.
Accuracy	Uses a repertoire of routine expressions and frequently used patterns related to more predictable situations with reasonable accuracy.
Fluency	Can generally be understood, although they pause for lexical planning and grammatical correction, especially during longer stretches of free production.
Interaction	Can initiate, maintain, and close simple face-to-face conversations on familiar topics or topics of personal interest. Can repeat part of what someone has said to confirm mutual understanding.
Coherence	Can link a series of shorter, simple elements into a connected sequence of related points.

Based on the characteristics found in Table 5 above, examples of conversations from informants categorized as level B1 are presented.

Example (6)

A: *Bangladesh tu di daerah mana?*

(That Bangladesh is in which district?)

B: *Area jauh sikit la macam dekat sini Seremban - KL macam itu lah tapi nama situ tempat itu Sathira pun macam itu lah.*

(Area a bit far like here Seremban – KL like that but the name there that place Sathira also like that.)

It's a bit far, like the distance between Seremban and KL here. The place is called Sathira, something like that.

A: *Penting tak? Belajar bahasa Melayu.*

(Important or not? Learn Malay.)

Is learning Malay important or not?

B: *Sebab saya kan, sebelum Malaysia masuk, sebelum Malaysia datang. Saya tak tahu ini Malaysia punya bahasa. So, ada kita sama-sama kawan atau orang duduk lama tinggal sini ikut sama sama kerja baru faham bahasa apa. Lepas tu, last-last saya boleh faham lah. Macam itu.*

(Because me, before Malaysia enter, before Malaysia come. I don't know this Malaysia have language. So, there is we together friends or people stay long live here follow together work then understand what language. After that, last-last I can understand. Like that.)

Because before I came to Malaysia, I didn't know that this was the Malaysian language. So, by being together with friends or people who had lived and worked here for a long time, I slowly understood the language. After some time, I was finally able to understand it. That's how it was.

B: *Susah, tapi orang English faham.*

(Difficult, but people English understand.)

It's difficult, but people understand English.

A: *Bahasa Inggeris faham? Tapi awak datang sini awak boleh cakap bahasa Melayu.*

(English language understands? But you come here you can speak Malay.)

You understand English? But when you came here, you were able to speak Malay.

B: *Boleh, sebab saya lama tinggal di sini. Kawan-kawan ada cerita-cerita atau ikut sama-sama jalan-jalan. Dia bolehlah.*

(Can, because I long stay here. Friends have told stories or follow together go out. He can lah.)

Yes, because I've lived here for a long time. That's how I was able to learn.

A: *Melayu lah, bahasa Melayu lah? Sebab bahasa Inggeris tu susah sikit nak faham lah?*

(Malay right, Malay language, right? Because English language a bit difficult to understand right?)

Malay, the Malay language, right? Because English is a bit difficult to understand, right?

B: *Tapi, saya sekarang dari lebih faham yang Melayu. Melayu punya.*

(But, I now from more understand the Malay. Malay have.)

But now, I understand Malay much better. The Malay language.

Unlike categories A1 and A2, informants in category B1 use more complex sentences. The informant is able to explain the distance of their birthplace through examples and comparisons, “like here Seremban – KL”. The speech style resembles speakers in Malaysia, for example using the tag form “kan”, “Because me kan”. However, it still shows inverted structure, “before Malaysia enter, before Malaysia come”. The correct structure is “Before entering Malaysia, before coming to Malaysia”. This error is quite typical as it is often made by non-Malay speakers. The informant is able to control their speech through the use of conjunctions such as “so”, “after that”, “last-last” (finally), which help the flow of conversation. However, the informant does not know how to differentiate “English people” (referring to the English ethnicity) and “English language”.

Example (7)

A: *Sepuluh tahun sudah. Jadi sudah bekerja di sini berapa lama?*

(Ten years already. So, already working here how long?)

Ten years already. So, how long have you been working here?

B: *Sini I baru datang. Dulu I kerja Johor Bahru*

(Here I just come. Before I work Johor Bahru.)

I just came here recently. Before this, I worked in Johor Bharu.

A: *Jadi sepuluh tahun tu memang kamu bekerja di Johor Bahru sahajalah? Ke berpindah-pindah?*

(So, the ten years you really work in Johor Bahru only? Or move around?)

So during those ten years, did you only work in Johor Bharu, or did you move around?

B: *Johor Bahru, I kerja sembilan tahun.*

(Johor Bahru, I work nine years.)

I worked in Johor Bharu for nine years.

A: *Sembilan tahun di sana. Kerja apa tu?*

(Nine years there. Work what?)

Nine years there. What work did you do?

B: *Dulu I kerja kilang. Satu tahun lebih. Lepas tu saya... Macam saya punya kilang dia sudah tutup. Bos sudah mati, dia macam tak boleh bagus punya lah. Itulah. Macam **bankrupt**, sudah. Saya sudah lari. Lari sini rumah buat.*

(Before I work factory. One year more. After that I... Like my factory it already close. Boss already die, it like cannot good one lah. That's it. Like bankrupt, already. I already run. Run here house make.)

Before this, I worked in a factory for more that a year. After that, the factory closed. The boss passed away, and things were not going well anymore. It went bankrupt. So I left and came here to do construction work.

A: *Enam bulan sudah lah. Okey. Boleh saya tahu macam mana awak boleh bercakap dalam bahasa Melayu? Dengan siapa? Belajar dengan siapa?*

(Six months already. Okay. Can I know how you can speak in Malay? With who? Learn with who?)

It's been six months already. Okay. Can I know how you learned to speak Malay? With whom? Who taught you?

B: *I dulu I kerja sama untuk Melayu. Macam ada budak-budak ada kan? Dia sekolah kan? Dia datang dia part-time juga. Itulah dia belajar.*

(I before I work together for Malay. Like have kids have right? They school right? They come they part-time also. That's it they teach.)

Before this, I worked together with Malays. There were also some younger people, students who came to work part-time. They were the one who taught me.

Example (7) above is delivered in a more convincing way, through examples and detailed information. The informant uses the pronouns “I” and “saya” interchangeably, showing that they are comfortable conversing. The informant’s answers are short but easy to understand. The informant is able to understand and answer simple questions, for example regarding place and duration of work. The informant also tries to explain their work for 9 years in Malaysia using short sentences, “Before I work factory. One year more.” In addition, the informant frequently repeats, for example “Like have kids have right? They come they part-time also.” Then uses time discourse markers (“After that..”), comparisons (“Like my factory, like cannot good, like bankrupt”). In other words, the informant tries to tell the story chronologically, that is before moving to another place. This ability is not found in informants in category A1. However, basic grammatical errors can still be detected, for example “Like bankrupt already” (Like already bankrupt) and “Run here house make” (Run here make house). Errors like this are quite typical for foreign speakers who cannot differentiate the Explained–Explaining (DM) structure. Malay uses the DM structure, for example “make house”, not MD “house make”.

Social Variable Factors

The average age for the A1 category is between 23–30 years, except for one informant who is 40 years old. Based on observation, it was found that Malay language fluency among the informants is influenced by their length of stay in Malaysia. Most A1 informants have lived in Malaysia for between 1 to 3 years, with only one informant having stayed for more than 7 years. However, this informant from Pakistan works as a car washer, a job that does not require much interaction with local people. This informant also has no formal education.

The A2 category shows a higher level of fluency, as the informants have worked in Malaysia for more than 3 years. The attitude of the informants also influences their level of Malay language fluency. For example, Informant 3 stated that he learned Malay through TikTok and interactions with Malay friends. Meanwhile, the B1 category demonstrates the highest level of fluency in communication, although grammatical errors are still present. One important factor contributing to the fluency of B1 speakers is their length of stay, which exceeds 9 years. In addition, both informants reported learning Malay through Malay friends and having worked in several states in Malaysia. This suggests that experience, social interaction, and type of employment contribute significantly to the fluency of B1-level informants in conversation.

Table 6. Fluency Level

Category	Basic (A1)				
Aspect	Range	Accuracy	Fluency	Interaction	Coherence
Level	A1	A1	A1	A1	A1

1	√	-	-	√	√
2	√	-	√	√	-
4	√	-	√	√	-
5	√	-	√	√	-
6	√	-	-	-	-
10	√	-	-	√	-
Category	Basic (A2)				
Aspect	Range	Accuracy	Fluency	Interaction	Coherence
Level	A2	A2	A2	A2	A2
3	√	-	√	√	√
7	√	√	√	√	√
Category	Intermediate (B1)				
Aspect	Range	Accuracy	Fluency	Interaction	Coherence
Level	B1	B1	B1	B1	B1
8	√	-	√	√	√
9	√	√	√	√	√

Table 6 above presents the assessment of the fluency levels of all informants based on the CEFR model. In general, all informants demonstrate a basic level (range) in speaking Malay. However, A1-level speakers show the most minimal range. In terms of accuracy, the majority of informants use simple sentence structures and frequently make grammatical errors, particularly in sentence structure. This is influenced by their native language and the use of colloquial language, which they imitate from everyday conversations with Malaysians. A similar phenomenon has been observed in the Philippines, as reported by Meniado (2019), where immigrants admitted that they learned the host country’s language through imitation, such as interacting with friends or watching television.

Next, in terms of fluency, most informants generally understand the questions and are able to respond accordingly. Only three informants at the A1 level experience difficulty in understanding the questions due to limited proficiency in Malay. The use of discourse markers or connectors among A1-level informants is also very limited.

Informants at the A2 level demonstrate better fluency compared to those at the A1 level. They are able to understand questions and provide responses that support smoother conversations. The use of connectors is generally appropriate to the conversational context. However, their lexical choices remain limited. Speakers at this level also occasionally borrow words from English during interaction, as they recognize that English is widely used in Malaysia.

Finally, the B1 level shows the highest degree of fluency in conversation. This can be observed across all assessed aspects. However, B1 informants still make grammatical errors and use colloquial language. One notable characteristic of speakers in this category is their ability to express themselves and describe events in a fairly clear chronological manner.

CONCLUSION

This study has successfully explained and assessed the level of fluency among foreign speakers in Malay conversations based on the CEFR model. However, the conversational context was limited to work-related topics and the process of learning the Malay language among foreign workers in Malaysia. If the context or topics of conversation were expanded, a more accurate assessment of the speakers’ Malay language proficiency could be achieved. Nevertheless, this study has at least demonstrated the actual use of language by foreign speakers, analyzed according to the CEFR model.

In fact, the CEFR model has been applied within the KBSM framework in Malaysia. Based on KBSM assessments, foreign workers in Malaysia are categorized at the A1 and A2 levels, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

“In the context of KBSM, foreign individuals are assumed to be able to understand and use simple, very basic everyday expressions aimed at meeting immediate needs, such as introducing themselves and asking and answering simple questions about personal information.” (p. 88)

The A1 and A2 levels are insufficient for jobs that require more extensive communication, such as those in the service and construction sectors. This explains why many previous studies have reported issues related to language and communication barriers among foreign workers, which in turn affect work productivity.

Nevertheless, this study has demonstrated that the lack of fluency in Malay among foreign workers is influenced by factors such as education level, age, and length of stay in Malaysia. In other words, educational level is one of the factors contributing to foreign workers’ limited proficiency in Malay or English. This is not surprising, as the majority of foreign workers in Malaysia fall into the category of low-skilled workers who have low levels of education or have never attended school. In addition, length of stay also affects language ability— the longer foreign workers remain in Malaysia, the better their language use becomes.

The implications of this study are useful as a guide for employers and the Government to hire foreign workers, according to their level of fluency in the Malay language. The results of this study can also be a guide for Malay language proficiency workshops to improve the level of fluency of foreign workers. Further studies should use a larger data sample, and involve various other job sectors. In this way, the level of Malay language proficiency of foreign workers can be better explained.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is funded by the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia; grant project FRGS/1/2023/SS109/UKM/02/2. The project is titled ‘Building a basic skills model (KEMAS) of the Malay language among foreign workers’

REFERENCES

1. Abd Wahab, N., Nik Mahmood, N. H., & Minghat, A. D. (2023). Barriers in the foreign workers in industry: Investigation during Training Safety Programs in the case of a language barrier, safety knowledge, and background of workers. *ASEAN Journal of Science and Engineering*, 3 (3), 219-226. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ajse.v3i3.45476>
2. Affendy Lee, N. A., Mohd Kassim, A. A., & Aboo Bakar, R. (2022). The CEFR-aligned curriculum execution in Malaysia and other countries: A conceptual paper. *Malaysian Journal of ELT Research*, 19(1), 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.52696/TGCT6849>
3. Aziz, A. H. A. A., Rashid, R. A., & Zainudin, W. Z. W. (2018). The enactment of the Malaysian common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): National master trainer’s reflection. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 8, 409-417. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v8i2.13307>
4. Basalamah, A., Ardani, E. G., Fransisca, A. (2021). Communication challenges for foreign workers within multicultural hospitality working environment. *International Journal of Social Science and Business*, 5(1), 120-126. <https://doi.org/10.23887/ijssb.v5i1.32295>
5. Broek, S & Ende, I. V. D. (2013). *The Implementation of The Common European Framework for Languages in European Education Systems*. <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/studies>
6. Dalib S, Mohamad B, Nadeem MU, Halim H and Ramlan SN. (2023). Intercultural communication competence among migrant workers in Malaysia: a critical review and an agenda for future research. *Frontiers in Communication*, 8: 1147707. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2023.1147707>
7. Kassim, N., & Hashim, H. (2023). Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): A review on its implementation in ESL/EFL classrooms. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(12), 2991-3016. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i12/20149>

8. Kerangka Standard Bahasa Melayu. (2018). Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia. Mudah Urus Enterprise Sdn. Bhd. Kuala Lumpur.
9. McKay, S. L. (2013). Globalization, localization and language attitudes: the case of “foreign workers” in Singapore. *Multilingual Education* 2013, (3), 3.
10. Md Nawawi, N., Zuhaimi, N., Sabu, K., Mahamud, N. S. R., & Mohd Nasir, N. A. (2021). CEFR for languages and its effective implementation in secondary schools in Malaysia. *Asian Journal of Assessment in Teaching and Learning*, 11(1), 63-72. <https://doi.org/10.37134/ajatel.vol11.1.6.2021>
11. Meniado, J. C. (2019). Second Language Acquisition: The Case of Filipino Migrant Workers. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 10(1), 47-57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.10n.1p.47>
12. Mohd Salleh, M., Mohi, Z., Nordin, N., Mohamad, N. A., & Razali, N. A. S. (2021). The impact of language barriers and discrimination issues on work productivity of foreign workers. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(16), 42–52. <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i16/11215>
13. Ne’Matullah, K. F., Lim, S. P., & Roslan, S. A. (2021). Investigating communicative barriers on construction industry productivity in Malaysia: An overview. *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)*, 10(2), 476-482. <http://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v10i2.21163>
14. Rosli, M. F., & Ismail, K. (2018). Communication barriers between local contractors and foreign unskilled labour. *Proceeding of 3rd Undergraduate Seminar Built Environment & Technology*. September 2018. UiTm Perak @ Seri Iskandar.
15. Salleh, N. A., Mohd Nordin, N., & Abdul Rashid, A. K. (2012). The language problem issue among foreign workers in the Malaysian construction industry. *International Journal of Business and Social Science*, 3(11), 97-99.
16. Valitherm, A. (2014). Communication barriers in Malaysia construction sites. *International Journal of Education and Research*, 2(1), 1-10.
17. Yusop, N., Ismail, N. H., Wan Ismail, W. N., Mat Isa, S. S., Jenuwa, N., & Ali, S. (2025). Practical strategies for the language barriers of foreign workers at Malaysian construction sites. *International Journal of Business and Technology Management*, 7(7), 322-334.