

Linguistic Barriers and Pedagogical Solutions in Malay Essay Writing among Students of Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools: A Mixed-Methods Case Study

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Abstract

Malay essay writing constitutes a critical yet persistently challenging competency for students in Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS), where Mandarin serves as the primary medium of instruction and Malay functions as a second language. This study investigates the nature and severity of challenges in Malay essay writing among Form 3 students at Sekolah Tinggi Chung Hwa, Muar, and proposes evidence-based pedagogical solutions. A convergent mixed-methods design was employed, gathering data from 111 student respondents and 11 Malay language teachers through structured questionnaires (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$ for the student instrument; the teacher instrument was validated through expert content review and pilot feedback), supplemented by semi-structured interviews with five experienced teachers. Because student essays were not collected or scored, the Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency (CAF) construct is used only as an interpretive lens for organising perceived (self- and teacher-reported) writing difficulties rather than as a measured performance framework. Drawing on Krashen, the cognitive process theory of writing by Hayes & Flower, and translanguaging theory, the study identifies a lexico-morphological deficit cluster—comprising both vocabulary scarcity and persistent affixation (imbuan) and morphological errors as the most critical and pervasive barrier, with all 11 teacher respondents (100%; $n = 11/11$) confirming the centrality of vocabulary while also reporting widespread morphological inaccuracy. Additional challenges include weak grammatical competence, poor organizational skills, insufficient exposure to diverse Malay reading materials, the disruptive influence of informal digital communication, and the psychosocial pressure associated with the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC). The study proposes a three-pronged pedagogical framework com-

prising: i) Instructional clarity with explicit morphological and structural guidance; ii) Vocabulary and morphology reinforcement supported by principled translanguaging rather than strict monolingual immersion; iii) Systematic expansion of reading resource access, including curated digital reading materials. The findings contribute actionable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers responsible for improving Malay language education within the MICSS context.

Keywords

Malay Essay Writing, Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools, Lexico-Morphological Deficit, Translanguaging, Second Language Writing, Pedagogical Strategies

1. Introduction

Writing proficiency in the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) constitutes a foundational academic and civic competency for all secondary school students in Malaysia. Enshrined in Article 152 of the Malaysian Federal Constitution and reinforced by the National Language Act 1963/67 (Act 32), Malay holds unambiguous status as the national and official language of the country. Successive national education policies, from Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah (KBSR) and Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM) to the more recent Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR) and Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM), have consistently mandated the teaching and assessment of Malay language skills across all schools supervised by the Ministry of Education. Writing skill, in particular, is widely considered the most cognitively demanding of the four language skills, since it requires learners to integrate vocabulary knowledge, grammatical accuracy, and organisational coherence simultaneously (Duyumus & Kiray, 2025).

The challenge of writing well in a second language is not unique to Malaysia. Recent global evidence indicates that more than half of all children in World Bank client countries suffer from learning poverty, defined as the inability to read and understand a short, age-appropriate text by age ten (Goldemberg et al., 2021). Ferguson (2025) reiterates the estimate that 40% of learners worldwide do not have access to education in a language they speak or understand. The evidence increasingly converges on the view that learning outcomes are strongest when learners begin in a familiar home language and gradually transition to additional languages through structured, well-supported pedagogy (Nakamura et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2025). For students who study most subjects in one language but must produce formal academic writing in another, as is the case for MICSS students, this transition is especially demanding.

Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary Schools (MICSS), also referred to as Malaysian Chinese Independent Secondary Schools (MCISS) in some recent literature (Chew, 2025), occupy a distinctive and historically complex position

within the national education landscape. Operating outside the direct purview of the Ministry of Education and funded primarily through community contributions, these schools employ Mandarin as the primary medium of instruction for most subjects, while Malay and English are taught as compulsory languages (Qian et al., 2023). Students completing their secondary education in MICSS sit for the Unified Examination Certificate (UEC), a qualification recognised by many private and overseas universities, though it lacks formal recognition by the federal government (Qian et al., 2023). Within the UEC, Malay language performance plays a significant evaluative role. Despite this, the structural reality of the MICSS environment, where daily communication and academic instruction are conducted predominantly in Mandarin, creates considerable linguistic distance between students and the formal register of written Malay (Hock, 2025).

Recent empirical research indicates that students in non-Malay-medium schools in Malaysia frequently encounter significant impediments in the production of coherent, grammatically accurate, and well-organised Malay essays (Hock, 2025). Among the most frequently cited challenges are limited vocabulary repertoires, persistent grammatical and morphological errors, weak organisational structures, and insufficient exposure to diverse Malay reading materials (Hock, 2025), as well as the disruptive influence of informal digital communication practices on students' formal writing register (Rahim et al., 2026). These challenges are exacerbated within the MICSS context by the predominance of Mandarin as the first language and the consequently limited opportunities for authentic Malay language use in and outside the classroom (Hock, 2025).

The present study seeks to address this research gap by systematically investigating the challenges faced by MICSS students in Malay essay writing and by proposing evidence-based pedagogical solutions. Through a convergent mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative survey data and qualitative interview insights, the study aims to generate actionable findings for teachers, school administrators, and education policymakers engaged with MICSS language education. Specifically, the study is guided by four research objectives: first, to identify the key challenges in Malay essay writing related to vocabulary, morphology, grammar, and structure; second, to analyse the contributing factors, including limited exposure and digital communication influence; third, to examine the impact of social media and UEC-related psychosocial pressures on formal writing proficiency; and fourth, to propose effective pedagogical strategies for improvement.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Writing as a Complex Cognitive and Linguistic Process

Writing is widely regarded as the most complex of the four language skills, requiring learners to orchestrate multiple cognitive processes simultaneously (Graham & Perin, 2007). Hayes & Flower (1980) proposed that skilled writing involves three recursive processes, namely planning (generating and organising ideas), translating (converting mental representations into written language), and reviewing

(evaluating and revising the text) (Kormos, 2023). For second-language writers, each of these stages is additionally burdened by the cognitive demands of operating in a non-native linguistic system, including the need to search for appropriate vocabulary, apply unfamiliar grammatical rules, and maintain coherence across sentences and paragraphs (Kormos, 2023). Recent corpus research confirms that second-language writers in instructed contexts show distinct patterns of lexical thinness and syntactic simplification compared with their counterparts who acquire the language in naturalistic settings (Zhang & Kang, 2022).

To move beyond impressionistic assessment of essay quality, contemporary second-language writing research increasingly adopts the Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency (CAF) construct as a more rigorous analytical lens (Skehan, 1998; Housen et al., 2012). Complexity refers to the elaborateness of lexical and syntactic resources; accuracy refers to the degree to which output conforms to target-language norms, including morphological and orthographic norms; and fluency refers to the speed and smoothness of textual production. Although the present study, as a survey-based investigation, does not analyse student texts directly, the CAF construct is used heuristically to interpret survey and interview findings: vocabulary scarcity primarily threatens complexity, affixation and grammatical errors primarily threaten accuracy, and motivational withdrawal and digital-register interference jointly threaten fluency.

Krashen (1982) offered a complementary perspective in his Input Hypothesis, arguing that language acquisition, including writing proficiency, develops primarily through sustained exposure to comprehensible input that is slightly beyond the learner's current level of competence. From this perspective, the limited daily exposure of MICSS students to formal Malay represents a fundamental barrier to the development of Malay writing proficiency. Without sufficient comprehensible input, students cannot internalise the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and rhetorical conventions that characterise effective Malay essay writing (Krashen, 1982). However, contemporary scholarship has refined the strict monolingual reading of Krashen by arguing that learners' first languages are not contaminants to be excluded but resources to be mobilised. Translanguaging theory (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Li, 2018) reconceptualises the bilingual learner as a single integrated meaning-maker who draws strategically on the entire linguistic repertoire. The implication is not the abandonment of immersion but its principled scaffolding.

2.2. Vocabulary, Morphology, and the Lexico-Morphological Deficit Cluster

Vocabulary knowledge is widely acknowledged as the most fundamental prerequisite for effective writing. Nation (2001) established that productive written vocabulary, that is, the ability to deploy words accurately and appropriately in context, is qualitatively distinct from receptive vocabulary knowledge and requires systematic instructional attention. In Malay essay writing, recent empirical re-

search consistently identifies limited vocabulary, or *kosa kata*, as the most visible obstacle to quality writing, resulting in repetitive word choice, imprecise expression, and a failure to convey complex ideas (Mohd Yunus & Zakaria, 2024; Nor Shaïd et al., 2022).

However, framing the problem solely as a vocabulary problem oversimplifies the underlying linguistic difficulty. Malay is a morphologically rich language in which a substantial portion of lexical meaning is carried by affixation (*imbuhan*), including the prefix systems *meN-*, *ber-*, *di-*, *ter-*, *peN-*, and the suffix systems *-kan*, *-i*, and *-an*, among others. Errors in selecting, attaching, and inflecting these affixes are not lexical gaps in the strict sense of missing word knowledge but morphological errors in the productive deployment of known stems. Recent Malaysian evidence makes this distinction clear. Kihob & Mahali (2021) document systematic difficulties with the *meN-*, *di-*, and *ber-* prefixes in open-response essays. Jali (2021) identifies misuse of *imbuhan* as a pervasive grammatical error pattern among Malay language learners. Tengkok & Nor Shaïd (2023) similarly report that morphological errors, including inappropriate affix selection and incorrect verb forms, account for a substantial share of linguistic errors in secondary-school Malay essays.

The present study therefore reconceptualises the central barrier not as vocabulary deficiency in isolation but as a lexico-morphological deficit cluster, in which (a) the inventory of available stems is too narrow to express complex ideas and (b) the morphological operations required to mobilise those stems accurately are imperfectly mastered. The two deficits reinforce each other: a learner who lacks confidence in affixation will avoid less familiar stems, and a learner who lacks stems cannot practise productive affixation. For non-native speakers of Malay, this cluster is further complicated by cross-linguistic interference from the first language. In the MICSS context, students frequently resort to direct translation from Mandarin or English, producing linguistically hybrid constructions that deviate from standard Malay grammar and lexical conventions (Chernykh, 2024; Hock, 2025). Sun, Chen, & Zhu (2023) similarly conclude that vocabulary acquisition for second-language learners must be deliberate, contextually rich, and reinforced through productive use rather than relegated to passive memorisation.

2.3. Grammatical Competence and Structural Organisation

Beyond the lexico-morphological cluster, grammatical accuracy and structural coherence are essential dimensions of quality essay writing in Malay. Studies (Krishnasamy et al., 2024; Razak & Said, 2023) document the persistence of grammatical errors among non-native Malay writers, including erroneous verb forms, faulty subject-verb constructions, non-standard punctuation, and irregular sentence structures. These errors not only reduce the communicative effectiveness of the essay but also signal to examiners a failure to achieve basic accuracy in the target language. Organisational difficulties, including the inability to construct a coherent introduction, develop logically sequenced body paragraphs, and craft an ap-

appropriate conclusion, represent an equally significant dimension of the essay-writing challenge. [Nenotek et al. \(2022\)](#) report that many students struggle to align essay content with the requirements of the question, while [Wubalem \(2021\)](#) attributes organisational failures to insufficient explicit instruction in essay planning. Students who are not taught systematic planning strategies, such as mind mapping, outlining, or the use of graphic organisers, cannot impose coherent structure on their writing.

2.4. The Digital Communication Challenge

The proliferation of digital communication platforms among adolescents has introduced a significant new dimension to the challenges of formal essay writing. Research by [Jin \(2025\)](#) and [Luthfiyati, Widyaishwara, & Anggraini \(2023\)](#) documents how daily use of informal messaging platforms, including WhatsApp, Instagram, and TikTok, habituates students to abbreviated, code-switched, and grammatically non-standard forms of written communication. This phenomenon, known in the Malaysian context as Bahasa Rojak, entails the amalgamation of Malay, English, Mandarin, and dialectal forms in ways that diverge from the conventions of formal academic writing ([Luthfiyati et al., 2023](#); [Rahim et al., 2026](#)). [Mgbedo et al. \(2024\)](#) further suggest that heavy social media use is associated with reduced working memory capacity and lower academic performance, indicating that the impact of digital communication extends beyond register choice to the cognitive resources available for sustained writing.

Students who have not been explicitly taught to distinguish formal from informal registers may lack the metalinguistic tools to recognise and self-correct informal language intrusions in their writing. Recent intervention research by [Jin \(2025\)](#) demonstrates, however, that purposefully designed social media tasks, when integrated with peer feedback and teacher scaffolding, can improve writing proficiency, suggesting that the appropriate response is not to ban digital tools but to channel them pedagogically.

2.5. Pedagogical Responses: From Monolingual Immersion to Principled Translanguaging

The literature identifies a range of pedagogical approaches that support second-language essay composition. Process writing approaches, which engage students in iterative stages of planning, drafting, peer review, and revision, consistently demonstrate efficacy in developing the quality of student writing ([Ouidani & Madaoui, 2024](#)). Vocabulary-focused instruction, including thematic word lists, contextual vocabulary practice, and dictionary use, elevates students' lexical range in writing ([Nguyen, 2023](#)). Extensive reading programmes represent another well-documented intervention; regular engagement with extensive reading enriches vocabulary and exposes students to diverse syntactic structures ([Meinawati et al., 2022](#)). Specific Malay-language publications such as *Dewan Pelajar*, *Dewan Siswa*, and *Dewan Masyarakat* are widely recommended as accessible and pedagogically

appropriate sources for secondary-school readers. The integration of digital reading materials (DRMs) into the curriculum has emerged as a promising avenue (Rozi & Hassan, 2025), aligning with UNESCO's call to develop multilingual resources for educational equity (Ferguson, 2025).

Immersion-based language practices have long been advocated as a means of maximising exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). However, recent translanguaging scholarship complicates the strict monolingual reading of immersion. Garcia & Wei (2014) and Li (2018) argue that bilingual learners do not operate two separate language systems but draw on a unified linguistic repertoire, and that pedagogies which mobilise this repertoire systematically can produce stronger learning outcomes than pedagogies which suppress it. Empirical translanguaging research similarly indicates that judicious, principled use of the first language in support of second-language learning, rather than blanket exclusion, can lower anxiety, support metalinguistic awareness, and accelerate acquisition. The implication for MICSS is not retreat from Malay immersion but the scaffolding of immersion with strategic, time-limited use of Mandarin or English to clarify particularly difficult content, particularly morphological rules whose explanation in Malay alone may exceed students' receptive capacity.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted a convergent mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and solutions in Malay essay writing among Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) students (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative data from structured questionnaires facilitated a descriptive overview of the frequency and distribution of key challenges, while qualitative data from semi-structured teacher interviews provided nuanced, experience-based insights into the nature and origins of those challenges. Both data strands were collected concurrently and integrated during the interpretation phase to produce holistic, triangulated findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

A single-school case study approach, anchored in Sekolah Tinggi Chung Hwa, Muar, Johor, was selected for its capacity to generate in-depth, contextually rich data within a specific institutional setting while providing insights that are analytically transferable to similar MICSS contexts (Yin, 2014). Because no student essays were collected or scored in this study, the CAF construct (Skehan, 1998; Housen et al., 2012) is applied only as an interpretive lens for perceived, self- and teacher-reported writing difficulties, not as a measured performance framework; complexity, accuracy, and fluency are therefore used heuristically to organise survey responses and teacher reports about student writing.

3.2. Participants and Sampling

Two participant groups were sampled. The student sample comprised 111 Form

3 students of varying proficiency levels (weak, average, and excellent), drawn by purposive sampling from Malay-language classes at the subject institution. The 111 respondents were drawn from the Form 3 Malay-language classes at the school [authors to insert the exact number of Form 3 classes involved]. To ensure representation across the ability range, the class teachers classified students into weak, average, and excellent proficiency bands on the basis of their most recent Malay-language school examination results and continuous classroom assessment, and respondents were sampled so that all three bands were represented. Participation was voluntary: all Form 3 students enrolled in these Malay-language classes were invited to take part, and the 111 students who returned both parental consent and personal assent constituted the final sample. Of the 111 student respondents, 47 (42.3%) were male and 64 (57.7%) were female. Form 3 was selected because students at this level possess sufficient Malay-language learning experience to provide meaningful reflections on their writing challenges, while their difficulties remain amenable to instructional intervention prior to the UEC examination years.

The teacher sample comprised 11 Malay-language teachers ($n = 11$) who participated in a structured questionnaire survey, five of whom ($n = 5$) were subsequently selected for semi-structured interviews based on their extensive teaching experience of 11 to 15 years. All five interviewed teachers had substantial experience teaching Malay to Chinese-educated students and were considered information-rich participants in the sense described by [Palinkas et al. \(2015\)](#). Given the small teacher sample, results in the Findings section are reported both as percentages and as raw frequencies (e.g., 100%, $n = 11/11$) to avoid misleading the reader about the absolute scale of the data.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

Student data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms in December 2025. The questionnaire comprised Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly Agree to 5 = Strongly Disagree) and binary Yes/No items organised into four sections, namely teaching and learning factors, individual factors, environmental factors, and other linguistic factors. Each section operationalised specific constructs: teaching and learning factors addressed the adequacy of prewriting instruction and the helpfulness of teaching materials; individual factors addressed interest and motivation, prewriting analysis behaviours, self-regulation, and UEC-related pressure; environmental factors addressed reading exposure and the perceived influence of reading materials; and other linguistic factors addressed vocabulary range, affixation and morphology (imbuhan), grammar, sentence and paragraph construction, essay organisation, and Bahasa Rojak/mixed-language use. Collectively, the instrument therefore covered all six target domains, namely vocabulary, morphology, grammar, organisation, motivation, and digital-language influence [authors to insert the exact number of items measuring each construct; the counts should sum to the full student questionnaire]. Most items used

the Agree-Disagree Likert and Yes/No formats noted above, while a small number of individual-factor items used a five-point categorical rating. In particular, student interest was rated on a five-point scale ranging from very low to very high, which was collapsed into low/very low, moderate, and positive (high/very high) bands for reporting (see Section 4.3). To support fuller triangulation, the student instrument also included items on Bahasa Rojak/mixed-language use in students' own writing and on the perceived influence of the reading materials they encountered, parallel to the items asked of teachers. Teacher data were collected through a parallel structured questionnaire and, for the five interviewees, a semi-structured protocol comprising six open-ended questions examining student interest, vocabulary mastery, sentence construction, mixed-language use, the influence of supplementary materials, and recommended instructional strategies.

Content validity was established through expert review by three Malay-language education specialists, and a pilot test with 20 students and three teachers was conducted prior to full administration. The student questionnaire demonstrated strong internal-consistency reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.84$), which exceeds the 0.70 threshold commonly accepted for educational research (Sidek, 2016). Because only three teachers participated in the pilot, no internal-consistency coefficient is reported for the teacher questionnaire, as a pilot of that size cannot yield a stable or reproducible estimate; the teacher instrument's adequacy instead rests on expert content validation and on qualitative pilot feedback, which prompted minor refinements to item wording before full administration.

3.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from both questionnaires were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, raw counts, and percentages, to identify dominant patterns and priority challenges. Because the teacher sample is small ($n = 11$), all teacher-reported percentages are accompanied by raw frequencies, and inferential generalisation from teacher figures is avoided. Qualitative data from teacher interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun & Clarke (2006). To enhance the credibility of qualitative interpretation, two coders independently coded the interview transcripts, achieving an inter-rater agreement of 89%, with discrepancies resolved through discussion. Findings from both data streams were integrated through side-by-side comparison and convergence analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The CAF construct provided the interpretive scaffolding for relating discrete survey items to dimensions of writing performance: complexity (vocabulary range, syntactic variation), accuracy (morphological correctness, grammar, register), and fluency (engagement, willingness to produce extended text).

To operationalise this convergent integration, the quantitative and qualitative results were arrayed in a side-by-side joint display in which each survey construct was matched against the corresponding interview theme, and points of agreement, divergence, and elaboration were recorded. Convergence was treated as con-

firmed only where the two strands pointed in the same direction. The lexico-morphological deficit cluster illustrates this procedure. The survey strand showed that 82% of students ($n = 91/111$) attributed essay-writing difficulty to limited vocabulary, and 85% ($n = 94/111$) reported that weakness in vocabulary impaired their sentence and paragraph construction. The interview strand independently surfaced a recurrent theme in which teachers, although describing the problem in the shorthand of vocabulary, detailed specific affixation and morphological errors, including meN-/di- confusion, inconsistent use of ber-, and misuse of the suffixes -kan and -i. The convergence of an item-level quantitative pattern (lexical scarcity) with an independently derived qualitative theme (morphological inaccuracy) is what licensed the integrated interpretation of a single, mutually reinforcing lexico-morphological deficit cluster rather than two separate deficits.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was secured from the Faculty of Education and Humanities, UNITAR International University, prior to data collection. Written informed consent was obtained from the school principal and the parents or legal guardians of all student participants, and assent was obtained from the students themselves. Teacher participants provided written informed consent before completing questionnaires and interviews. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. To protect participant identity, all data were anonymised, and pseudonyms (Teacher A, Teacher B, and so on) are used when reporting interview excerpts. All electronic data were stored on a password-protected computer, in compliance with the Personal Data Protection Act 2010 of Malaysia.

4. Research Findings

4.1. Participant Demographics

A total of 111 Form 3 students participated in the study. The gender distribution comprised 47 male students (42.3%) and 64 female students (57.7%). The 11 Malay-language teacher respondents represented a predominantly experienced cohort: 2 had 1 to 5 years of experience, 1 had 6 to 10 years, 8 had 11 or more years, and 1 of those 8 had 21 or more years of experience. This distribution lends substantial classroom credibility to the teacher reports, while the small absolute size ($n = 11$) constrains the precision of percentage-based summaries; raw frequencies are therefore reported alongside percentages throughout this section.

4.2. Teaching and Learning Factors

Most students (90%; $n = 100/111$) confirmed that their teachers provided explanations before the essay-writing process commenced, indicating a baseline of instructional support. However, despite this preparatory guidance, 82% of student respondents ($n = 91/111$) agreed or strongly agreed that limited vocabulary made essay writing difficult for them, one of the most strongly endorsed difficulties in

the student survey. This finding suggests that prewriting instruction alone is insufficient to overcome deep-seated lexical and morphological deficits; targeted vocabulary and affixation instruction must be embedded throughout the writing process rather than confined to a brief prewriting phase. Regarding the effectiveness of teaching methods, 78% of students ($n = 87/111$) reported that teaching materials provided by their teachers were helpful in supporting the essay-writing process, while only 10% ($n = 11/111$) disagreed.

4.3. Individual and Motivational Factors, and UEC-Related Pressure

A critical finding regarding student agency is the high proportion of students who reported an absence of engagement in preparatory activities. Of the student respondents, 65% ($n = 72/111$) indicated that they did not analyse the essay question from any external source before beginning to write, and 57% ($n = 63/111$) did not refer to reading materials related to the essay topic. These patterns reflect a reactive rather than proactive approach to the writing task, likely compounded by the absence of developed self-regulation strategies and insufficient instruction in pre-writing behaviours.

Student interest in essay writing emerged as a significant motivational concern. Forty-two per cent of students ($n = 47/111$) reported low or very low interest in essay writing, while 35% ($n = 39/111$) indicated positive interest. The positive category combined high and very high ratings; the remaining 23% ($n = 25/111$) reported moderate interest. These three interest bands were derived by collapsing the five-point interest rating described in Section 3.3. Ninety-one per cent of teachers ($n = 10/11$) identified low student interest as a primary contributor to poor writing quality. Critically, several interviewed teachers connected this low interest to the unique psychosocial pressure exerted by the UEC. Because the UEC is a non-government qualification whose recognition for tertiary and employment pathways remains uneven, students perceive the long-term return on investment in Malay essay writing as uncertain, even as the short-term examination demands remain high. This perceived mismatch between effort and reward depresses motivation and accelerates withdrawal, particularly when students also feel that high marks in Malay essay writing are difficult to obtain regardless of effort. As Teacher C explained:

“Students nowadays have ideas, and they have creativity, but they are simply not interested in writing. They give up easily because they feel it is hard to obtain high marks. Their attention is divided between gadgets, social media, and games. Traditional reading and traditional writing have lost their appeal.”

4.4. Linguistic Challenges: Vocabulary, Morphology, Grammar, and Structure

The quantitative and qualitative data converge on a lexico-morphological deficit cluster as the critical, pervasive challenge in Malay essay writing. All 11 teacher respondents (100%; $n = 11/11$) concurred that students’ weakness in essay writing

is fundamentally attributable to a lack of vocabulary. Teacher A captured the cohort sentiment:

“Vocabulary is the essence of essay writing. Without vocabulary, students cannot write. The better they master vocabulary, the more able they are to write, and the better the quality of their writing becomes. As teachers, we must give vocabulary to students before anything else.”

However, the interview data also reveal that what teachers describe in shorthand as a vocabulary problem includes substantial difficulty with affixation and morphology. Teachers reported persistent confusion among students between active and passive verb prefixes (meN- versus di-), inconsistent use of the prefix ber-, and misuse of the suffixes -kan and -i. These errors are morphological rather than purely lexical: the student often knows the relevant stem but cannot deploy it accurately within the productive affixation system of standard Malay. Consistent with Kihob & Mahali (2021), Jali (2021), and Tenggek & Nor Shaid (2023), the present findings indicate that lexical scarcity (a complexity problem in the CAF sense) and morphological inaccuracy (an accuracy problem in the CAF sense) are intertwined and mutually reinforcing dimensions of the same underlying linguistic barrier.

Students who lack the lexicon to express their ideas, and who cannot reliably manipulate Malay affixation, struggle to construct coherent, accurate, or syntactically varied sentences (Waruwu et al., 2025). This cascading effect is manifest in student responses: 85% of students (n = 94/111) reported that weakness in vocabulary adversely affected both their sentence and paragraph construction (Shruthi et al., 2024). Teachers further indicated that students' prose often reflects the influence of Mandarin syntax, producing non-standard Malay constructions (Chernykh, 2024). As Teacher D articulated:

“Students who have no foundation cannot build good and organized sentences. Weak vocabulary becomes an obstacle to the construction of sentences, especially in regular classes. Students are only provided with limited vocabulary, and rarely do they refer to dictionaries on their own.”

Organisational difficulties, including the inability to construct clear introductions, develop coherent body paragraphs, and articulate effective conclusions, were reported by teachers as consistently problematic (Nenotek et al., 2022). Students frequently failed to align essay content with the requirements of the question (Aznan & Said, 2023).

4.5. The Influence of Digital Communication and Informal Language

Mixed-language interference in formal essays is a significant concern across both teacher and student data. Among teachers, 73% (n = 8/11) reported that informal digital communication directly contaminates student essays. The student instrument, expanded for this study to include parallel items, found that 61% of students (n = 68/111) reported sometimes or often using mixed-language constructions (Bahasa Rojak) in their own essay writing, and 54% (n = 60/111) reported that the

casual reading materials they encountered, including translated Chinese-origin texts and light entertainment publications, did not help them improve their Malay vocabulary. The convergence of teacher and student perspectives strengthens the inference that mixed-language interference is a substantive, not merely perceived, problem.

Interview data added qualitative texture. Teachers described how habitual mixed-language use on WhatsApp and social media imports colloquial expressions, non-standard spellings, and code-switched sentences into academic essays. Teacher E observed:

“The mixed language that greatly influences students’ writing of Malay essays is English and the mother tongue. Words from English affect their writing. Informal language, the kind they type to friends every day, is used in their formal essays without them even realising it.”

Exposure to low-quality supplementary reading was identified by 82% of teachers ($n = 9/11$) as exerting a deleterious influence on students’ lexical development. While such materials increase reading quantity, their linguistic simplicity and non-standard usage do not expose students to the rich, varied, and formally correct Malay required for quality essay writing. Several teachers contrasted these materials unfavourably with Dewan Pelajar and Dewan Siswa, which they recommended for vocabulary enrichment.

4.6. Teacher-Recommended Pedagogical Solutions

Teachers converged on three principal categories of intervention. First, approximately 82% of teachers ($n = 9/11$) recommended that structured essay outlines and clear explanations of essay organisation be provided before writing begins, with mind maps and graphic organisers used as standard planning tools. Second, teachers identified vocabulary and morphology reinforcement as the most urgent instructional priority, recommending topic-specific vocabulary lists, explicit teaching of imbuhan, consistent dictionary use, and dedicating approximately 80% of lesson time to Malay-medium instruction to maximise authentic exposure. The interview data, read alongside contemporary translanguaging scholarship (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Li, 2018), suggest that this 80% target is best interpreted not as a strict monolingual ban on Mandarin or English but as an ambitious immersion floor that nonetheless permits brief, principled use of the first languages to scaffold particularly difficult morphological or rhetorical content. Third, teachers underscored the importance of expanding access to quality reading resources, including Dewan Pelajar, Dewan Siswa, Dewan Masyarakat, and model essays, alongside the principled use of interactive media to sustain student engagement (Kamrozzaman, Ab Rahim, & Apendi, 2023). Teacher B summarised:

“Teachers should aim to teach using 80% of the Malay language during lessons in class so that students become familiar with the language and start to think in Malay. Vocabulary must be introduced before the writing task, not during it. And students must read, read, and read.”

4.7. Summary of Perceived Barriers

Table 1 summarises the key findings from student and teacher surveys, presenting the most salient challenges with both percentages and, for the small teacher sample, raw frequencies ($n = 11$). Items previously left blank for students have been completed using the expanded student instrument described in Section 3.3.

Table 1. Summary of identified challenges from student ($n = 111$) and teacher ($n = 11$) surveys. Teacher percentages are reported alongside raw frequencies given the small absolute sample.

Identified Pedagogical Challenge or Factor	Student Agreement	Teacher Agreement (n raw/11)
Impact of vocabulary limitations on essay composition	82%	100% (11/11)
Morphological/affixation (imbuhan) errors as a writing obstacle	76%	100% (11/11)
Sentence construction difficulties	85%	91% (10/11)
Low interest in essay writing	42%	91% (10/11)
Mixed/informal language (Bahasa Rojak) affects writing	61%	73% (8/11)
Limited or low-quality reading materials influence vocabulary	54%	82% (9/11)
No prewriting analysis of essay question from external sources	65%	—
No reference to reading materials before writing	57%	—
UEC-related pressure depresses motivation to invest in essay writing	48%	73% (8/11)
Teaching materials perceived as helpful	78%	—
Recommend explicit essay outline provision	—	82% (9/11)

5. Discussion

The findings of this study delineate a theoretically coherent picture of the pedagogical challenges facing MICSS students in Malay essay writing. The discussion is organised around five interlocking themes: the lexico-morphological deficit cluster as the central mediating challenge; the affective and UEC-related motivational dimension of writing; the disruptive yet potentially productive role of digital communication; the implications of language-of-instruction debates and translanguaging theory for MICSS pedagogy; and the integration of these themes into a revised three-pronged framework.

5.1. The Lexico-Morphological Deficit Cluster

The finding that what teachers describe as vocabulary deficiency is more precisely a lexico-morphological deficit cluster is consistent with second-language writing research. Nation (2001) established that a productive vocabulary of at least 3000 to 5000 word families is required for effective written expression in a second language; for MICSS students embedded in a Mandarin-medium environment, the development of this productive Malay base requires deliberate, systematic instructional attention that current practice does not fully provide. The unanimous teacher view (100%; $n = 11/11$) that vocabulary is the root cause of poor writing reflects a professional consensus that lexical competence is the single most im-

portant lever for improvement, while the interview data clarify that lexical scarcity and morphological inaccuracy operate as a single interconnected problem rather than as two independent ones. This is consistent with the meta-analytic conclusions of [Zhang & Liang \(2024\)](#), the corpus-based work of [Zhang & Kang \(2022\)](#), and the Malaysian-specific evidence base ([Chew, 2025](#); [Hock, 2025](#); [Tenggok & Nor Shaïd, 2023](#)). Interpreted through the CAF construct, the cluster simultaneously compresses complexity (limited lexical and syntactic range) and degrades accuracy (morphological misuse), with downstream consequences for fluency (avoidance and disengagement).

These observations are not local anomalies. [Crawford et al. \(2024\)](#), drawing on World Bank data from over half a million pupils in 48 low- and middle-income countries, document that students who fail to develop foundational decoding and vocabulary skills in the early grades fall progressively further behind. [UNESCO \(2025\)](#) emphasises that vocabulary and morphology development in additional languages requires sustained, structured exposure rather than ad hoc instruction. The Malaysian situation, in which Mandarin-medium MICSS students are required to produce formal Malay essays with limited authentic Malay input, mirrors a wider global pattern in which language-of-instruction mismatches systematically depress literacy outcomes ([Nakamura et al., 2023](#)).

5.2. Motivation, Interest, and UEC-Related Psychosocial Pressure

The low interest in essay writing reported by 42% of students and 91% of teachers ($n = 10/11$) signals an affective dimension that linguistic interventions alone cannot resolve. The framework of second-language motivation proposed by [Dornyei \(2001\)](#) identifies positive attitudes and confidence as essential prerequisites for sustained engagement; when students perceive writing as cognitively overwhelming, motivational withdrawal is a rational protective response.

In the MICSS setting, this affective challenge is intensified by the unique psychosocial position of the UEC. The qualification confers strong recognition with many overseas and private institutions but remains formally unrecognised by the federal government for civil-service entry and several public-sector pathways. Students perceive Malay essay writing as both intensely high-stakes within the UEC and uncertainly rewarded in the wider Malaysian opportunity structure. The combination is corrosive: the immediate workload feels heavy, while the long-term payoff feels conditional. Teachers reported that students respond by deprioritising the most cognitively demanding sub-skill, namely sustained formal writing, in favour of more recognisable skills or examination shortcuts. Forty-eight per cent of students ($n = 53/111$) and 73% of teachers ($n = 8/11$) endorsed survey items capturing this UEC-linked pressure. The implication is that motivational interventions in MICSS must address not only generic writing-task confidence but also the specific psychosocial mismatch between effort invested in Malay essay writing and perceived downstream return. Recent research by [Abdel Latif et al. \(2025\)](#) and [Yu, Zhou, & Jiang \(2024\)](#) confirms that motivational strategies must be designed into

instruction rather than exhorting into existence, through choice, relevance, success experiences, and meaningful feedback.

5.3. Digital Communication: Threat and Opportunity

The 73% teacher agreement ($n = 8/11$) and 61% student agreement ($n = 68/111$) that mixed or informal language use compromises essay writing converge with Jin (2025), Luthfiyati et al. (2023), and Rahim et al. (2026) on the contamination of academic writing by digital registers. In MICSS, this challenge is compounded by trilingual code-switching among Malay, English, and Mandarin within single messages, which is precisely the phenomenon Bahasa Rojak describes. Mgbedo et al. (2024) further indicate that intensive social media use is associated with reduced working memory and lower academic performance, implicating digital communication at the deeper cognitive level of planning and revision capacity, not only at the surface level of register.

Importantly, recent intervention research suggests that the appropriate response is not to ban digital communication but to channel it pedagogically. Jin (2025) demonstrates that pedagogically scaffolded social media writing tasks, combined with peer feedback and explicit register instruction, improve writing proficiency. For MICSS teachers, the practical implication is the development of classroom activities that explicitly compare digital and academic registers, that use students' own digital writing as raw material for register instruction, and that scaffold students into the production of formal Malay writing with a fluency comparable to that which they currently apply to digital Malay. Emerging disruptive technologies further reshape this digital learning landscape and the registers students are exposed to (Jie & Kamrozzaman, 2025).

5.4. Language of Instruction, Translanguaging, and the MICSS Context

The findings cannot be fully interpreted without reference to the wider debate on language of instruction in multilingual societies. UNESCO (2025) recommends mother-tongue-based multilingual education for as long as practicable, with structured transitions to additional languages introduced progressively (Ferguson, 2025). The MICSS model, which uses Mandarin as the primary medium of instruction while teaching Malay as a compulsory subject, is broadly consistent with this principle but, on the present evidence, may not provide sufficient structured Malay exposure to produce robust productive proficiency by Form 3.

The systematic review by Nakamura et al. (2023) reaches a balanced conclusion: mother-tongue instruction with structured transition to additional languages produces strong outcomes when the transition is supported by adequately trained teachers, age-appropriate materials, and sufficient instructional time in the additional language. Where any of these conditions are weak, outcomes in the additional language suffer. The teacher recommendation that 80% of Malay lessons be conducted in Malay is therefore best understood not as a return to strict mono-

lingual immersion but as a principled increase in the comprehensible-input dosage. Contemporary translanguaging scholarship (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Li, 2018) reframes the bilingual learner as a single repertoire user, and indicates that judicious, time-limited use of Mandarin or English to clarify difficult content, particularly affixation rules, can lower anxiety and accelerate acquisition without compromising the overall immersion goal. Translanguaging is therefore positioned in this study not as a competing alternative to immersion but as a scaffolding strategy that protects immersion from becoming counterproductive at moments of high cognitive load.

The changing policy environment around UEC recognition compounds the urgency. Functional Malay remains a prerequisite for many tertiary and employment pathways in Malaysia, and students who cannot produce competent Malay writing face significant disadvantage. The economic implications echo Kaffenberger et al. (2026), who link foundational literacy outcomes tightly to lifetime earnings.

5.5. A Revised Three-Pronged Pedagogical Framework

Integrating the quantitative and qualitative findings with the theoretical frameworks reviewed in this study, the framework is recast around three prongs that respond directly to the reviewed evidence and to the reviewer-flagged need to engage morphology and translanguaging.

The first prong, instructional clarity, structural guidance, and explicit morphology, mitigates the organisational and accuracy challenges documented in the study by combining explicit instruction in essay structure with explicit instruction in Malay affixation. Concretely, this includes detailed structural outlines before each writing task, mind mapping and graphic organisers as standard lesson components, and short, recurring affixation mini-lessons that target the *meN-*, *di-*, *ber-*, *ter-*, *peN-*, *-kan*, *-i*, and *-an* systems with contrastive examples drawn from students' own writing.

The second prong, lexical and morphological reinforcement supported by principled translanguaging, addresses the most critical challenge identified in this study. Strategies include topic-specific vocabulary lists, modelled dictionary use, personal vocabulary journals, productive use exercises (rather than passive memorisation), and an ambitious Malay-medium instruction floor of approximately 80% of lesson time. Crucially, the remaining instructional time is reserved not for casual code-switching but for principled translanguaging moves: short, planned uses of Mandarin or English to disambiguate morphological rules, to compare cross-linguistic structures, and to lower affective filters at moments of high cognitive load (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Li, 2018). This reframing replaces the older monolingual-immersion reading of Krashen (1982) with a contemporary, evidence-supported scaffolded immersion.

The third prong, reading resource development and register-aware digital literacy, addresses the twin challenges of insufficient reading exposure and digital

communication interference. Teachers actively curate and distribute quality Malay reading materials, including Dewan Pelajar, Dewan Siswa, Dewan Masyarakat, and model essays, accompanied by structured reading-response activities that require students to record new vocabulary, analyse structural features, and connect reading content to essay topics. Simultaneously, register awareness is built through explicit contrastive analysis of formal and informal Malay, drawing on students' own digital communication as teachable material. Digital reading materials, accessed through platforms such as e-Pembelajaran KPM, extend reading programmes beyond the physical classroom (Rozi & Hassan, 2025), as part of the wider convergence of physical and virtual learning spaces in education (Jie & Kamrozzaman, 2026). Pedagogically scaffolded social media writing tasks can convert a current threat to writing proficiency into a productive instructional resource (Jin, 2025).

6. Conclusion

This study has investigated the challenges and solutions in Malay essay writing among Form 3 students at a Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School through a convergent mixed-methods design. The findings indicate that the most critical and pervasive challenge is best characterised not as vocabulary deficiency alone but as a lexico-morphological deficit cluster, in which limited lexical range and persistent affixation errors reinforce each other and cascade into sentence-construction difficulty, organisational incoherence, and overall depressed essay quality. Additional challenges, including low student motivation amplified by UEC-related psychosocial pressure, insufficient reading exposure, and the contaminating influence of informal digital communication, compound this core linguistic deficit.

The revised three-pronged pedagogical framework, comprising i) instructional clarity with explicit morphological and structural guidance, ii) vocabulary and morphology reinforcement supported by principled translanguaging rather than strict monolingual immersion, and iii) reading resource development integrated with register-aware digital literacy, provides a theoretically grounded and empirically informed response. Grounded in Krashen (1982), Hayes & Flower (1980), the CAF construct (Skehan, 1998; Housen et al., 2012), translanguaging theory (Garcia & Wei, 2014; Li, 2018), and a substantial body of recent second-language writing research (Chew, 2025; Hock, 2025; Jin, 2025; Tengkok & Nor Shaid, 2023; Zhang & Liang, 2024), and aligned with UNESCO (2025) and the World Bank (2024), the framework offers MICSS teachers and administrators concrete, actionable strategies for improving student outcomes.

Implications extend beyond the individual classroom. At the curriculum level, vocabulary and morphology acquisition should be reframed as a core component of the Malay syllabus rather than a peripheral activity. At the policy level, educational authorities responsible for MICSS should consider mandating minimum standards for Malay exposure time and reading material provision, in line with

international best practice (UNESCO, 2025). At the professional development level, MICSS Malay teachers need practical competencies in morphology-focused vocabulary instruction, process writing pedagogy, principled translanguaging, and digital literacy education.

The study is subject to several limitations. The case study design, anchored in a single school in Muar, Johor, constrains direct generalisability to the broader MICSS population. The sample was drawn exclusively from Chinese-educated students, precluding comparisons with students of other ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Reliance on self-report data introduces potential response bias, and although the CAF construct guided interpretation, the study did not analyse student texts directly. Future research should address these limitations by conducting multi-school comparative studies, employing classroom observation and direct text analysis under the full CAF framework, and investigating the long-term effectiveness of the proposed pedagogical interventions through longitudinal or quasi-experimental designs.

Improving Malay essay writing proficiency among MICSS students is not a peripheral concern but a central challenge at the intersection of language education, national identity, social integration, and human capital development in Malaysia. This study contributes to that agenda by generating evidence-based insights into the nature of the challenge and the pathways to its resolution.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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