

# Teaching Noun Classifiers in Malay as a Foreign Language: Applying the Translanguaging Method

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## Abstract

The individuation of an enumerated noun in many Asian languages requires the modification of the noun stem with a numeral and a specific classifier. Malay noun classifier as a grammar topic is a worthy lesson unit in the curriculum of Malay as a foreign language. This is because the topic highlights the construction differences between a Malay noun iteration and an English noun iteration, respectively. Furthermore, a pedagogical discussion on noun classifiers presents a cross-cultural worldview on noun enumeration in Malay to speakers of non-classifier languages such as English. Selecting an accurate Malay noun classifier for enumeration underscores the understanding of a unique noun phrase structure, thus important to Malay language maintenance. In teaching Malay classifiers, the conversation techniques exploited for iterating the Malay nouns frame the iterated Malay nominal references based on the distinction between type and token. Underlying a nominal specification is a noun classifier that conceptually derives a token of the noun type. Cultural generalization rounds off the learning for special Malay classifiers such as *bentuk* (shape) and *kaki* (foot) in this discussion. Debunking the conventional bias, we propose that memorization is relevant to acquire *sebentuk cincin* ‘a shape of ring’, or *sekaki payung* ‘a foot of umbrella’ in Malay similar to a learner memorizing *a school of fish*, or *a fleet of aircraft carriers* in English.

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## 1 Introduction

At the Beginner’s level, many learners of Malay as a foreign language are unaware that the noun classifiers are part of Malay nominal quantification and specification. Classifier languages such as Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Malay, Mandarin, Thai, and Vietnamese invoke the noun classifiers in nominal specifications, respectively (Aikhenvald, 2000; Gao, 2010; Liaw, 1985; Mintz, 1994; Sato, 2004). Consequently, the learners of classifier languages are presented with an intriguing grammar point as part of their language learning experience. The translation of four English noun phrases into Japanese, Malay, and Mandarin in Table 1 exemplify the use of Malay, Chinese, and Japanese noun classifiers in the respective nominal iterations.

Table 1. English-Malay-Mandarin-Japanese noun phrases

English noun phrase	Malay noun phrase	Mandarin noun phrase	Japanese noun phrase
Three tables	Tiga <i>buah</i> meja	三张桌	<i>sandai</i> no tēburu
Five teachers	Lima <i>orang</i> guru	五位老师	<i>gonin</i> no kyōshi

Six houses	Enam <i>buah</i> rumah	六个房子	<i>rokken</i> no ie
Seven flowers	Tujuh <i>kuntum</i> bunga	七朵花	<i>nanahon</i> no hana
Nine apples	Sembilan <i>biji</i> epal	九个苹果	<i>kyu-ko</i> no ringo

The noun classifiers in Table 1, which are in italics, have an obligatory position in the construction of the Malay, Chinese, and Japanese nominal reference. The iteration of a specific reference involving a classifier may precede either as a concrete, or an abstract noun. Based on the examples in Table 1, it is evident that Japanese, Malay, Mandarin regulate nominal references with classifiers. The mandatory use of classifier in sorting the nouns for referential purpose is a defining feature of classifier languages (Hiroki, 2013; Hussein et al., 2018; Liaw, 1985; Omar, 1972). For example, the denotation of three durians in Malay requires the specification of the noun classifier *biji* between the numeral three, *tiga*, and the noun *durian*, i.e., *tiga biji durian* ‘three-classifier-durian’. Further, an abstract reference *percintaan* (love) may take a classifier-specification to denote a romance, *sebuah percintaan* ‘a romantic relationship’, in which *buah* is a classifier and *se* is the grammaticalized numeral one in Malay. A distinction between *iteration* involving a noun classifier specifying a token, e.g. *sebatang kayu* (a stick wood, i.e. a stick), and *enumeration* that combines a numeral with noun classifier in quantifying the individuated token, e.g. *dua batang rokok* (two sticks of cigarette, i.e. two cigarettes) is adopted in this discussion.

Malay nominal derivations offer an interesting learning point in the curriculum of Malay as a foreign language. A Malay noun stem morphs into distinct meanings under several basic derivations. It may be obvious to the tertiary learners speaking several languages that the basic Malay noun stems in Table 2 undergo a series of affixation in denoting abstract noun references. With little effort, the tertiary language learners would notice that Malay affixation is a meaning-making strategy for generating vocabulary in an agglutinative language, such as Malay.

**Table 2. A derivation of abstract noun reference from Malay noun**

Concrete noun	Meaning	Noun derivation	Abstract noun	Meaning
<i>rumah</i>	house	<i>per-rumah-an</i>	<i>perumahan</i>	housing
<i>jalan</i>	road	<i>per-jalan-an</i>	<i>perjalanan</i>	journey
<i>ikan</i>	fish	<i>per-ikan-an</i>	<i>perikanan</i>	fishery
<i>guru</i>	teacher	<i>per-guru-an</i>	<i>perguruan</i>	teacher training
<i>budak</i>	child	<i>ke-budak-an</i>	<i>kebudakan</i>	childishness
<i>lelaki</i>	male	<i>ke-lelaki-an</i>	<i>kelelakian</i>	manhood
<i>raja</i>	king	<i>ke-raja-an</i>	<i>kerajaan</i>	kingdom/government
<i>tuan</i>	sir	<i>ke-tuan-an</i>	<i>ketuanan</i>	sovereignty

Apart from affixation, nominal iteration using a specifying word such as a noun classifier is common, but less obvious to the foreign language learners of Malay. A noun stem adjoins with a noun classifier to denote a token of individuated nominal reference. Mary Erbaugh (2002) has clearly pointed out that classifiers plays the specification role in the construction of noun reference. Noteworthy, language researchers such as Eriko Sato (2004) uses counter words instead of classifier although we adopt the term noun classifier throughout this paper. A noun classifier defines several salient characteristics of a noun at the sentence level. The categories include material, shape, consistency, size, location, arrangement, and quanta (Allan, 1977, p. 297). There is a difference between a noun stem representing a type, and a noun token denoting an individuated reference. Citing Japanese as an example of classifier languages in contrast to English, Pamela Downing (1993) outlines the distinction of type and token in noun (see below). One may refer to Zhang and Liu (2013) for a typological difference in stipulating the nominal reference between classifier and non-classifier language.

It is not always clear from the explicit form of a noun phrase in Japanese whether it refers to a semantic category, the MEMBERS or that category or PARTICULAR MEMBERS of that category. An unmodified noun may serve any of these functions. In this way, Japanese...noun is 'collective', that is, neutral concerning number, and 'singulative' marking is required to explicitly denote individual referents. *Languages with numeral classifiers are typically this sort*. English...unmarked noun is taken to represent an individual member of the category represented by the noun, and addition of a plural marker is required to represent a plurality of individuals (Downing, 1993, p. 76; italics mine).

The noun stems of the classifier languages require markings to ascertain a particular meaning from a range of semantic denotations. Based on the semantic examinations in Japanese nouns (Downing, 1993, 1996), we infer that the semantic basis of multiple conceptualizations in a noun stem is observable in Malay. Based on the crosscutting semantic basis in Japanese, we may conjecture that a Malay noun stem represents a semantic category, the members of that category, or the particular members of that category. Without any derivational markings, the Malay noun *pulau* (island), for example, denotes three separate meanings in the Malay daily *Berita Harian* as outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3. References of *pulau* (island) in *Berita Harian***

<i>pulau</i> cited in <i>Berita Harian</i>	Topic coverage	Reference of <i>pulau</i> (island)
... <i>pulau haba</i> (heat island) (Noh & Malek, 2019).	Air pollution in Pasir Gudang, Johor.	A member of the <i>pulau</i> category.
... <i>di Pulau Ubin</i> (at Ubin Island) (Setempat, 2020).	Illegal camping.	A particular member of the <i>pulau</i> category.
... <i>sepanjang berada di pulau itu</i> (throughout the stay on that island) (Zulkifli, 2020).	Covid-19-related issues.	The <i>pulau</i> category.

Additional the psycholinguistic basis for the mandatory use of classifier in Malay is verifiable in a study indicating that Malay children would substitute an alternative classifier in place of the correct classifier in a noun elicitation task (Salehuddin & Winskel, 2009, p. 304). The children's attempt to provide an alternative substitute in place of the accurate classifier in noun iteration implies that an underlying classificatory role exists in the construction of nominal reference in Malay. Preempting any claim that numeral classifier has a one-to-one mapping between the noun and the classifier in Malay, we revisit the point, "all flowers take *kuntum*" (ibid., p. 293), and explain that '*bunga*' (flower) takes classifiers such as *tangkai* (stalk), *jambak* (bouquet), and *pohon* (plant). On the other hand, the classifier (*kuntum*) may specify *cinta* (love) to denote a romance (cf. anolanstube, 2012 for *sekuntum cinta*). Other *kuntum*-related noun specifications include *sekuntum senyuman* (a bloom of smile), and *sekuntum kasih* (a bloom of tender loving). Different classifiers including sortal classifiers such as *kuntum*, e.g. *sekuntum mawar* (a rose), and mensural classifiers such as *mangkuk* (bowl), e.g. *tiga mangkuk nasi* (three bowls of rice), and *cawan* (cup), e.g. *dua cawan air* (two cups of water) highlight different characteristics of a noun.

## 2 Theoretical framework

Several researchers assume that noun classifiers such as *helai* 'piece', *keping* 'piece', and *naskhah* 'copy' in Table 4 are genuine noun classifiers because they never appear as noun beyond the specifying function. Asmah Haji Omar (2009, p. 312) explains that *helai* 'piece' is a Malay noun classifier that does not appear as a noun on its own. This discussion differs with the claim that *helai*

is a unique classifier not least because *helai* may appear as a noun after the suffixation of /-an/. A Malay speaker may say the following:

1. *Mimi nampak banyak helaian wang kertas di dalam dompet suaminya.*  
Mimi notice many pieces money paper in inside wallet husband-clitic  
Mimi notices many pieces of paper notes inside the wallet of her husband.

In a noun-driven principle in our pedagogy, however, any terminology dispute is immaterial to our lesson. As such, *helai*, *keping*, and *naskhah* remain as noun classifiers that are relevant to specify flatness as the physical quality in a noun reference. In other words, all the Malay nouns classifiable with *helai*, *keping*, or *naskhah* would have a flat exterior. Copies of nouns that are flat such as a book, newspapers, and a magazine take *naskhah* as its classifier. As both *helai*, and *keping* mean *piece* in English, learners of Malay as a foreign language may seek additional explanation to differentiate the function of each noun classifier of the individuated objects. We compare the prototypical objects under each noun classifier in providing a contrastive differentiation in Table 4, and Table 5.

**Table 4. Flat Malay nouns in *keping* vs. *helai* classification**

Number	Noun Classifier 1	Noun Classifier 2	Malay Noun	English glosses
<i>Dua</i>	<i>Keping</i>	* <i>Helai</i>	<i>daging</i>	Two pieces of meat.
<i>Tiga</i>	<i>Keping</i>	* <i>Helai</i>	<i>poskad</i>	Three pieces of postcard.
<i>Empat</i>	<i>Keping</i>	* <i>Helai</i>	<i>biskut</i>	Four pieces of biscuit.
<i>Lima</i>	<i>Keping</i>	* <i>Helai</i>	<i>gambar</i>	Five pieces of pictures.
<i>Enam</i>	<i>Keping</i>	* <i>Helai</i>	<i>sijil</i>	Six pieces of certificates.

Table 4 shows that *keping* classifies certain flat objects not specifiably by *helai*. Some of the typical flat objects under the classification of *helai* are listed in Table 5.

**Table 5. Flat Malay nouns in *helai* vs. *keping* classification**

Number	Noun Classifier 1	Noun Classifier 2	Malay Noun	English glosses
<i>Dua</i>	<i>Helai</i>	* <i>Keping</i>	<i>sapu tangan</i>	Two pieces of handkerchief.
<i>Tiga</i>	<i>Helai</i>	* <i>Keping</i>	<i>kertas</i>	Three pieces of paper.
<i>Empat</i>	<i>Helai</i>	* <i>Keping</i>	<i>rambut</i>	Four strands of hair.
<i>Lima</i>	<i>Helai</i>	* <i>Keping</i>	<i>tuala</i>	Five pieces of towel.
<i>Enam</i>	<i>Helai</i>	* <i>Keping</i>	<i>baju</i>	Six pieces of shirt.

Based on the comparison, the flat objects classified under *keping* in Malay tend to be durable and massive flat objects. The flat objects classifiable by *helai*, on the other hand, tend to be light, less massive, and flimsy (cf. Othman, 2012, p. 72). The learners were reminded that noun classification may differ among Malay speakers of different locales. Demonstrating the point with an English example, *drugstore* would sound like a haven of crime to speakers of English in London, Malaysia, New Delhi, and Singapore although a drugstore represents a place for securing medicinal respite to speakers of English in Tokyo, and the United States. It is discernable that *Pharmacy* may be an authorized *drugstore* to the English speakers of non-Commonwealth countries.

Noun classifiers such as *botol* ‘bottle’, *cawan* ‘cup’, and *pinggan* ‘plate’ are considered measure words, or marginal classifiers (Croft, 1994, p. 162). These measure words create countable units from mass nouns, such as *susu* ‘milk’, *kopi* ‘coffee’, and *nasi* ‘rice’ for individuating mass reference. The quantifying function is of practical importance to the learners who want to purchase beverage, and meal at the Malay eateries. These measuring-classificatory words make good anaphoric references in place of the noun phrases. The pragmatics of Malay noun classifiers is observed in the following example. One may exploit the social frame of Malay as lingua franca as the operating pragmatics (see the example in Karim (1988) below).

2. *Encik, tolong berikan nasi goreng, dua pinggan dan kopi susu, empat cawan.*  
Mr. please give rice fried, two plates, and coffee milk, four cups.

In interaction, appropriating noun stems into individuated reference, and enumeration empowers Malay learners to converse according to Malay speech style (Karim et al. 2014; Liaw, 1985; Omar, 2009). Should the sentence in example 2 raises any suspicion, we offer, *mereka makan nasi dua pinggan*, ‘they eat rice two plates’ provided in Karim (1988, p. 69) as the evidence for such styling in Malay communication. Additionally, in his elaboration of noun classifiers, Kassim Ahmad (1959, p. 36) has recorded example showing the noun classifier as anaphoric reference for the noun, *dia tiada berkata-kata melainkan air matanya sahaja yang keluar beberapa titik* ‘he never murmured a word except his tears shed a few drops’. The use of noun classifiers as the representation of the nouns is common in English spoken in the Southeast Asian region. For example, *get three plates*, *buy two cups*, and *keep four bottles* are proper iterations of food, and beverages in the dining contexts. A temporary social frame invoked by the speakers of English as lingua franca (Kecskes, 2019) may explain the metonymic use of noun classifiers in place of the nouns.

The discussion on semantic universals of classifier system allocates marginal classifiers such as *botol*, *cawan*, and *pinggan* in the noun classifier category. These marginal classifiers specify a mass noun to denote a token of reference. Further, the Malay classifiers *pinggan*, and *cawan* in example 2 invoke anaphoric reference, thus specifying the mass nouns of fried rice, and milk coffee into units of enumeration. As a language universal, the noun classifier replaces the noun that it specifies to invoke anaphoric reference, e.g. *The police officer confiscated this bunch/carton/pair/packet instead of that bunch/carton/pair/packet*. Appealing to a comparative view, the anaphoric reference for a tree, or plant in the Hokkien proverb, *ka-kī tsing tsit-tsâng; khah-iânn khuànn pát-lâng* (Grow one in the lawn ourselves; nothing from the next door we would yearn), is denoted with *tsâng*, a classifier for plants (Sew, 2018). Remarkably, the tree, or plant was never invoked in the Hokkien proverb.

### 3 Survey of current textbooks

In line with a focus on Malay language pedagogy, we survey the extent to which Malay language materials incorporate noun classifiers in its pedagogical scope. Specifically, we examine if Malay noun classifiers are consistently included in the curriculum of Malay as a foreign language. Notably, the National University of Malaysia Press has produced a relevant publication for teaching learners with zero background in Malay. The book, which is edited by three academics (Othman, Hashim, & Abdullah, 2015), has a promising title, *Modul Komunikasi Bahasa Melayu Antarabangsa* (International Malay communication module). The language material, however, does not allocate any content for noun classification in Malay let alone the explication of Malay noun classifiers. Another material focusing on Malay language learning is *Learning Bahasa Malaysia through its History and Culture* (Ahmad, 2002). This book has no provision for Malay noun classifier in its scope. Similarly, *Pedagogi Bahasa Melayu: Prinsip, Kaedah dan Teknik* (Talib, 2000) that suggests pedagogical approaches as its practice does not accord any discussion on Malay nominal classification. Obviously, the need for learners to iterate and quantify noun references escapes the scope of these three Malay language materials. Two other titles that do not include any explanation on noun classifiers are *Speak standard Malay: A beginner’s guide* (Liaw, 2001); and *Betulkan kesalahan bahasa anda* (Mahmood, 1994).

Several Malay language materials highlight the relevance of numeral classifiers in learning to speak and write in Malay. The topic on numeral classifier is included in *Efektif Bahasa Melayu Asas* (Hussein et al., 2018); *A Student’s Grammar of Malay Indonesian* (Mintz. 1994); *Malay Grammar Made Easy: A Comprehensive Guide* (Liaw, 1999); and *Malay for Daily Use* (Liaw, 2005). The presentation comes in a catalog of noun classifiers with a basic explanation introducing the classifiers as common words accompanying Malay nouns whenever a speaker quantifies Malay nouns. Other materials providing examples of noun classifiers in passing include Othman (2012), Karim

(1995), and Keeney (2008). No explication on the role of noun classifier in the morpho-syntactic structure of a noun phrase is provided in these materials.

In addition to the seven language materials, Hassan et al. (2006) mention noun classifiers in the discussion of Malay sentential patterns but the so-called classifiers highlighted in the book, namely *semua* (all), and *belaka* (all) are, in fact, quantifiers (see Karim et al., 2014, p. 287; Mustafagani, 1991, p. 40). The cited examples show that the two quantifiers appear inversely against the common Malay syntactic pattern of a noun classifier. The inverse syntactic order, namely the noun preceding a quantifier as described in Hassan et al. (ibid.) is reflective of a rhetorical speech style. The stylistics may be compared to the English phrase, namely *men are all the same*, rather than *all men are the same*, where the quantifier *all* is in the post nominal position of the English phrase. The reversed noun-numeral-classifier pattern is not uncommon in Malay (cf. Salehuddin, Winkler & Maros, 2011).<sup>1</sup> Such Malay pattern is a rhetorical routine, which is less concerned with the iteration of the nominal references classifiable under the stylish frame (cf. Tannen, 2007, p. 36).

Presently, the literature review shows that five Malay language materials do not offer any clarification on Malay noun classifiers let alone teaching techniques to assist learners understanding the noun classifiers in nominal reference. Another seven language materials mention noun classifiers at different lengths. One Malay language material has confused noun quantifiers as noun classifiers. In all the thirteen Malay language materials surveyed, there is no elucidation on noun classifiers that derive instances of noun token. We consider the omission an opportunity to deliberate on noun classifiers as part of Malay nominal derivation in semantics.

Noteworthy, no translanguaging approach (cf. Table 3) has been adopted for teaching noun classifiers in any of the language materials. Translanguaging underscores an important point, namely multilingual speakers do not think unilingually in a politically named linguistic entity, even when they are in a ‘monolingual mode’ for a specific stretch of speech or text (Li, 2018, p. 18). In language education, Conteh (2018), Li (2011, 2016), Ng and Lee (2019), and Shah, Pillai, and Sinayah (2019) suggest that translanguaging is beneficial to language pedagogy. A pedagogical deliberation on Malay noun classifiers in the foreign language classroom that factors in the translanguaging viewpoint is timely. Beyond the scope of this discussion, but worthy of our attention, is that the foreign language spoken in the classroom is a lingua franca variant rather than the original speech variant.

Many foreign language instructors appreciate translanguaging as an emergent framework to accommodate a unitary existence of languages in a person speaking, and learning another language (Garcia, 2019; Garcia & Lin, 2017). Hamman, Beck, and Donaldson (2018) explain that the bilingual mind is a holistic system containing diverse linguistic resources, and that the different repertoires are evoked for different communicative purposes whenever the need arises. Adapting the principles of translanguaging to Malay language teaching, this discussion coordinates two important aspects for teaching Malay noun classifiers. Firstly, the learning instructions are purposeful designed as depicted in Fig. 2, and Fig. 3 (see section 5). Secondly, the instructions strategically incorporated multilingual data to facilitate the learners’ experience in acquiring the noun classifiers. In Cummins’ terms, the multilingual data allow for a transfer of literacy-related proficiency from one language to another (2017, p. 106). Cross-referencing the Japanese, and Mandarin noun classifiers are instrumental to bridge the conceptual gap of coordinating the noun classifiers in the pedagogy of Malay noun enumeration (Sew, 2019).

#### 4 Functions of noun classifier

This paper suggests that noun classifier is a relevant topic in the curriculum of Malay as a foreign language for several reasons. Teaching Malay noun classifier instills knowledge on specifying Malay noun stems into unique noun phrases for iteration, and enumeration. As indicated in the literature review, many Malay language materials do not provide any deliberation on noun classifiers, which may either be a genuine oversight, or a reflection of language attrition in Malay. The omission of

noun classifiers in a language that previously regulate the nouns may be a sign hinting that the language may be undergoing the pidginization process. George Lakoff (1986) thinks that the classifier systems reflect the experiential, imaginative, and ecological aspects of the mind. (The missing classificatory system speaks volume of a delimited language variant). The pedagogy of noun classifiers directs the learners' attention to the categorizing capacity in these noun specifiers. Apart from mastering the grammar conjugations, identifying the basic classificatory range of a noun classifier may diversify the language learning experience of Malay language learners. Learning noun classifiers as specifiers of noun tokens encourages the Malay language learners to exercise their mental recalibration towards a mastery of nominal iteration. At the very least, the ability to categorize and specify by means of noun classifiers implies the application of linguistic and visual-spatial intelligences (Lazear, 2003). Correspondingly, the application of Malay noun classifiers infuses a degree of creativity for organizing different types of noun in nominal iteration (Li, 2016). For example, the use of *kujur* (stiff) as the noun classifier for *tubuh* (body) in the novel *Satu Bumi* requires a reasonable metonymic awareness in correlating a body, and a corpse (see Isa Kamari, 1998, p. 113 for the use of the noun classifier).

Imparting knowledge on classifiers as specifying words provides a restorative vigor in the curriculum of Malay language education. An advantage of teaching Malay noun classifiers is the possibility of reinforcing grammar maintenance against the dominance of English in language contact situation, lest the learners become ignorant of the semantic role of Malay noun classifier. There is much to explore and learn about the world in language lenses other than the English ones (cf. Pavlenko, 2015; Sew, 2009, 2018; Zhu, Li & Jankowicz-Pytel, 2020). Language maintenance becomes a bread and butter issue because it underscores a rather unadulterated curriculum of foreign language education. The original phonetic features, and unique grammar constructs of a language are the components that attract the learners, a point visible in the reflections of the Hokkien learners at NUS (NUS NEWS, 2020). In maintaining the Malay linguistic uniqueness, the grammatical difference between English and Malay in Table 2 suggests that learning noun classifiers is relevant for understanding the linguistic distinctions of classifier languages, such as Malay, from the non-classifier languages, such as English.<sup>2</sup>

Progress in foreign language learning is relatable to an expanded content in the target language. Logically, any language assessment would expect advanced foreign language learners demonstrating higher command of language skills with advanced grammar command. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) that equates proficiency progress with an ascending grammar accomplishment is a case in point (Sew, 2013). Correspondingly, teaching noun classifiers as a lesson unit may complement the evaluation proper, not least it provides a legitimate Malay grammar component for testing purposes. The noun classifiers in Table 1, for example, are useful schemata for a series of cloze questions as shown in Table 6.

**Table 6. Cloze with noun classifiers as stimulants**

1. <i>Ada tiga _____ meja di dalam bilik kuliah.</i> [There are three _____ tables in the lecture room]
2. <i>Lima _____ guru telah pergi ke negara Jepun.</i> [Five _____ teachers had gone to Japan]
3. <i>Saya beli tujuh _____ bunga dari kedai itu.</i> [I buy seven _____ flowers from that shop]
4. <i>Dia bawa sembilan _____ rambutan ke sekolah.</i> [S/he brings nine _____ rambutan to school]

Based on the previous Malay pedagogy experience, we suggest that the accurate use of Malay noun classifier would be an indicator for advancing a learner to the rank of B grade ahead of the peers who have yet to command the use of noun classifier (Sew, 2015). The ascending alphabetical grade system adopted as our standard foreign language measurement is potentially in alignment with the common ranking criteria of CEFR measurement.

## 5 Teaching noun classifiers

Studies in Malay, and Chinese language education suggest that teaching noun classifiers are relevant to first, and foreign language education, respectively. For instance, Salehuddin and Winskel (2009) recommend that formal teaching of Malay classifiers should begin at an early age, based on a quantitative study on classifier acquisition among Malay primary school learners. Separately, Zhang and Liu (2013) recommend that the teaching of Chinese classifiers should be part of the curriculum of Chinese as a foreign language. This discussion provides a deliberation on the pedagogy of the Malay classifier conducted by the author and observed by two experts in an actual classroom at the tertiary level in the following sections. A class of Malay as a foreign language with about twenty students received the information on two incoming experts a week beforehand.<sup>3</sup> The tertiary foreign language learners were mostly students from Faculty Arts and Social Sciences, Business School, Faculty of Science as well as two exchange students from Canada, and USA, respectively. All the topics scheduled for the Malay module were readily available and accessible to the registered students via the defunct NUS online platform *IVLE* (Integrated Virtual Learning Environment, under the heading LAM1201 Malay 1). Presently, the NUS teaching and learning community has migrated to a new online platform known as LumiNUS. The actual turn-out rate of the learners for this lesson was 85%.

Illustrating the learning layout, Fig. 1 displays the actual site for teaching Malay noun classifiers discussed in this pedagogy project. If one takes a monolingual perspective on foreign language pedagogy, the site was a space to learn segregated linguistic inventions of a named language (Turner & Lin, 2020).



**Fig. 1. An actual language classroom at NUS**

Fig. 2 shows the way in which the learners moved and turned around on the learning site while interacting with one another. In his keynote lecture, Phil Benson (2018) explained that the visual-spatiality experience of a learner may impact the process of language acquisition, which in turn may motivate, or demotivate language learning. At the learning site, the learners discovered how to identify actual objects in Fig. 3 using Malay noun classifiers face-to-face. The aid of similar constructions from Mandarin, and Japanese as translanguaging support in the discovery was a multilingual reinforcement.





**Fig. 2. An actual Malay language learning at NUS**

The learning site in Fig. 1, in which the lesson observation took place has engendered a conducive footing for the tertiary learners deploying the conversational techniques to enumerate the items found in Fig. 3. Five pairs of foreign language learners have examined and enquired about the selected objects ranging from a ball, a bag, a ring, a pen, and a piece of paper. The Malay variant in the lesson observation has a similar function noticeable in English as a lingua franca (cf. Kecskes, 2019), namely both language variants operated in a pragmatic frame established momentarily to complete a communicative task.



**Fig. 3. The objects of enumeration for learning Malay classifiers**

In the interactivity, a learner would greet the interlocutor in Malay with an address term that they had learned previously. The second question would be checking on the item in hand, and the respondents would have had a simple task of naming the object, only to find it challenging when one begin to enumerate the object that requires a classifier in response to the question *ada berapa X?* (How many X is there? [X being one of the items in Fig. 3]). While many knew that number one is *satu* in Malay, the corresponding noun classifier was a new feature to the learners.<sup>4</sup> Creating an awareness for using a Malay noun classifier as the specifier of the object in conversation was the initial intention. An awareness of the classifier role transpired as soon as the learners offered information such as *ada satu biji bola* ‘there is one ball’ in their learning turns.

In response to a reviewer who pointed out that *\*satu bola* remains a communicative phrase despite of lacking the noun classifier, we stress the need to differentiate language use at the bazaar level from language pedagogy at the tertiary level. It is important for the foreign language learners to notice and learn the nominal reference system accurately in the language classroom. After which, the learners may decide to omit the grammar words, engage in translanguaging for verbal haggling, or even replace minimal linguistic constructions with gestural cues at the marketplace. By learning the full construction of a specified Malay noun phrase, it would be possible for the expert speakers, and researchers to recognize code-switching (cf. Ting, Then & Ong, 2020), or detect the omission

of the classifier in speech as an onset of language shift in speaking a classifier language (Sew, 2007a).

At the beginning of the lesson, the noun classifiers were introduced as special Malay words required for iterating a noun stem. Directives to use classifier when iterating a Malay noun was accompanied with similar exercises of iterating nouns in Mandarin, and English. Cross-checking the Malay noun classifier, *helai* in *dua helai kertas* with its counterparts, *piece*, and *zhang*, namely *two pieces of paper* in English, and *两张桌* (*liang zhang zhuō*) in Mandarin, respectively, demonstrated that noun classifier has an obligatory role for specifying an object. Comparing English, and Mandarin nominal specification further developed an awareness of using a noun classifier as part of the noun iteration.

In terms of educational linguistics, adopting a comparative framework to teach noun classifiers offered some pedagogical advantages. Learning noun iteration solely based on Malay examples could delimit the comprehension of Malay nominal specification. A lesson adopting a multilingual perspective, on the other hand, generated the efficacy for rediscovering the grammar category. In our case, the exploit of similar enumerated nominal constructions from different languages as the scaffolding has prevented the alienation of Malay noun classifiers as a difficult category in foreign language learning. By cross-examining the word order of iterated nominal references in English, and Mandarin, the learners' acquisition of Malay noun classifiers has become saliently augmented by the recurring syntactic patterns. Translanguaging has, thus, developed the confidence in speakers of other languages to learn noun classifier anew by appropriating similar examples of other languages. Foreign language education may exploit translanguaging as a strategy, especially in nurturing mutual empowerment between the teachers, learners (Conteh, 2018), and between the fellow learners (Shah, Pillai, & Sinayah, 2019). The use of multilingual data reinvigorated the fact that common speech has always been multilingual in style (cf. Li, 2016, 2018; Ting, Then & Ong, 2020).

## 6 Teaching type and token in noun classification

In our Malay lesson, the learners are equipped with a straightforward type-token demarcation that underlines the conceptualization of a token from a noun. The type-token distinction is a well-established demarcation in stipulating a nominal reference (Lyons, 1995; see also noun type vs. token instance in Langacker, 2008). We claim that a noun type becomes an iterated token whenever a classifier precedes the noun stem in Malay. The derivations of noun with 11 classifiers that the learners acquire in the lesson observation, are available in Table 7.

**Table 7. Noun individuation with classifiers**

Noun type	Malay noun token in expression	English Gloss
<i>lelaki</i> (man)	<i>Dia ada empat orang anak lelaki.</i>	S/he has four sons.
<i>ayam</i> (chicken)	<i>Ibu beli seekor ayam di pasar.</i>	Mother buys a chicken at the market.
<i>guli</i> (marble)	<i>Mimi ambil sembilan biji guli.</i>	Mimi takes nine marbles.
<i>daun</i> (leaf)	<i>Ada sehelai daun di atas meja.</i>	There is a piece of leaf on the table.
<i>gigi</i> (tooth)	<i>Dia cabut dua batang gigi.</i>	S/he extracts two teeth.
<i>susu</i> (milk)	<i>Saya bawa sebotol susu.</i>	I bring a bottle of milk.
<i>buku</i> (book)	<i>Ali baca senaskhah buku.</i>	Ali reads a copy of book.
<i>meja</i> (table)	<i>Bilik kuliah itu ada sebuah meja.</i>	That lecture room has a table.
<i>kopi</i> (coffee)	<i>Mereka minum secawan kopi.</i>	They drink a cup of coffee.
<i>nasi</i> (rice)	<i>Bapa makan sepinggan nasi goreng.</i>	Father eats a plate of fried rice.
<i>daging</i> (meat)	<i>Pemasak panggang dua keping daging.</i>	The cook roasts two pieces of meat.

Malay language learners equipped with the two distinct notions of type, and token could generate different conceptualizations of Malay noun. They could see the Malay noun *meja* conveying the concept of table with temporal, and spatial dimensions as type (cf. Table 1). Noun classifier becomes

a grammar feature for noun derivation in classifier languages. For example, a Malay noun such as *meja* (table) represents a type, whereas a noun classifier *buah* derives a token of table reference from the type. In the iterated *sebuah meja* (a table), the classifier supplies the noun *meja* with the qualities of singularity, specificity, and uniqueness. The combination of a round number with a classifier before a noun stem underscores enumeration, thus the quantification of an iterated nominal reference. Apart from the noun classifiers, the determiners such as *ini* (this) and *itu* (that) may specify the noun into a token, thus *lelaki* (man) as a type reference becomes *lelaki ini* (this man), a specific token (cf. Sew, 2007b).

## 7 Understanding transparent noun classifiers

The teaching framework to explicate the Malay noun classifier is a noun-driven not classifier-driven practice. Our focus proceeds from a generic concept of a thing represented by the Malay noun to an individuated derivation of a classified token of the object. A noun-driven approach in understanding classifier prevents one from making uninformed claims such as one-to-one mapping between the object and the classifier. Fronting the classifier *kuntum* as the underlying modifier for all flowers (cf. Salehuddin, & Winskel, 2009, p. 293) is inaccurate when *kuntum* also specifies love, and smile in Malay noun specification. With a noun-driven focus, we set the perimeter of learning on understanding the noun features such as shape, size, or mass as noun qualities. While the features in Japanese nouns recognizable for classification are shape, size, and type (Sato, 2004) the classifiable features of Malay nouns are size, shape, texture, and partition (Omar, 2008). In Malay grammar, noun classifiers originating in common nouns are either transparent noun classifiers, or opaque noun classifiers. The transparent noun classifiers are Malay nouns showing meaning correlation with the noun stems under its classification. Asmah Haji Omar distinguishes genuine, and derived noun classifiers as follows:

*...penjodoh bilangan dalam bahasa Melayu boleh dibahagikan ke dalam dua kategori sintaksis, iaitu: (i) penjodoh bilangan yang boleh berfungsi sebagai kata nama penuh; (ii) penjodoh bilangan yang hanya berfungsi sebagai penjodoh bilangan...kategori (i) memperlihatkan perbezaan makna dengan kata nama yang sebunyi dan seasal dengannya. Penjodoh bilangan yang seperti ini boleh "jernih" atau "tak jernih". Penjodoh bilangan yang jernih memperlihatkan perkaitan makna pada keseluruhan atau sebahagiannya dengan kata nama yang berkenaan,...*(Omar, 2009, p. 310-311).

...numeral classifiers in Malay may be divided into two syntactic categories, which is (i) numeral classifiers that function as complete noun; (ii) numeral classifiers that only function as noun classifiers...category (i) shows meaning different from the nouns that are homophonous and share the same origins. Numeral classifiers of this kind may be "transparent" or "not transparent". Numeral classifiers that are transparent shows meaning correlating either completely, or partially with the related nouns...(author's translation).

Transparent noun classifiers iterate Malay nouns with overlapping qualities inherent in the classifier, and the classified object. A mapping of common qualities between the transparent noun classifier with the object it classifies leads to the word *biji* 'seed' designated as the classifier for small roundish object, such as the marble in Table 7. Apart from *biji*, the transparent noun classifiers in Table 7 are *orang* 'person' that classifies humans, *ekor* 'tail' that classifies animals, and evil spirits including ghosts (cf. Omar, 1993; Osman, 1995), and *batang* 'rod' that classifies rod-like objects.

Remarkably, the Malay noun *buah* 'fruit' functions as a classifier for *meja* 'table' in Table 6. As a transparent noun classifier, *buah* specifies many common nouns in Malay including airplane, airport, car, competition, composition, event, house, seaport, stadium, story, war, yacht, etc. We suggest that the noun classifier *buah* represents an ecological imprint in Malay grammar. The incorporation of *buah* in the grammar of classification points to the metaphorical fruition of a token from a noun category. Tham Seong Chee's views point to the relevance of nature in Malay grammar.

...cultural life is inconceivable without reference to an ecological base. This implies that culture must come to grips with the environment and its demands in order to survive...Language, however, is not merely communicative but cognitive as well. Language plays the surrogate for culture, maintaining and reinforcing cognitive patterns and preferences. Seen from the individual or psychological perspective, culture represents a cognitive system linked to the ecological characteristics of its physical environment...It is in this connection that language comes into play. Not only does it bind the separate individuals in communicative behaviour but also represent for the same individuals a structure of cognition *vis-à-vis* reality (Tham, 1990, p. 24).

The ecological basis in the semantics of classifiers sensitizes our attention to the bearing of nature in the grammar of individuated noun reference. Compared to counting, and separating nouns according to products, types, and organization in analyzing the classifier *buah* (see Chung, 2010), the proposal of *buah* as a metaphorical fruition of a noun token from the noun type makes an elegant explication in the pedagogy of noun classifiers.

## 8 Understanding classification with cloze practice

A valuable aspect of learning a foreign language is access to the intricacies of cultural knowledge unique to the target speech community. In English, for example, the classification of nouns into nominal expressions such as *a school of fish*, *a litter of puppies*, *a cackle of geese*, and an *iota of doubt*, or *truth* is unique to English speakers. Using Malay noun classifiers to derive noun tokens meets the purpose of cross-cultural awareness in the Malay language curriculum. In our Malay lesson, we introduce two classifiers, namely *bentuk* ‘shape’, and *kaki* ‘foot’ that offer noun classification unique to Malay speech culture. In line with the multilingual comparison model in Table 8, *bentuk*, and *kaki* are comparable to the Mandarin classifier 出, 部, 齣 for movie, and English classifier *school* for fish in highlighting that unique classification is a cultural-specific phenomenon. Table 8 is the depiction of unique classification that the learners of *Elementary Malay* learn at NUS are exposed to.

**Table 8. Cultural-specific Malay classification in comparison to English and Mandarin**

Classifier	Syntactic role	Noun phrase
<i>kaki</i>	Malay noun classifier for an umbrella	<i>Dia membawa sekaki payung.</i> s/he brings an umbrella
<i>bentuk</i>	Malay noun classifier for a ring, and a fishing hook	<i>Mimi membeli sebentuk cincin.</i> Mimi buys a ring.  <i>Atan mengikat sebentuk kail pada tali pancing.</i> Atan ties a fishing hook to the fishing line.
<i>school</i>	English classifier for a cluster of swimming animals	<i>The sperm whales attacked a school of fish.</i>
出, 部, 齣	Mandarin classifier for a movie	我想看一出/部/齣电影。 I want to see a movie.

Given the longish shape of an umbrella, many learners of Malay tend to select *batang* ‘rod’ as the classifier instead of *kaki* ‘leg’. (The polysemous Malay word *kaki* may denote a leg, an in-group member, or a measurement of 12 inches). We remind learners that classifiers are tools to specify a noun token not to be confused as a scientific descriptor. Shape as a dimension of the object is not the ultimate criterion in noun classification, and cultural-specific knowledge takes precedence in the

classification of certain objects. Functionally, a classifier tends to foreground qualities, such as specificity, realis, concrete, count, enumerated, and presentative in discourse (cf. Hopper, 1986).

Translanguaging as a teaching method offers a multilingual modeling technique as an answer. Citing more examples of cultural-specific noun classification that are familiar to the language learners is useful to demonstrate the point. The classifier for umbrella is *buah* in Indonesian. In northern Sumatera, the classifier for umbrella may be *tangkai*, e.g. *setangkai payung* in Acehnesse Malay (Liana Kokasih pc). In Malay, *tangkai* denotes stalk, *setangkai payung* literally means a stalk of umbrella, which profiles the umbrella as a flower, when it is opened. The use of the common noun classifier *buah* for umbrella suggests that specific classifiers have an unstable construction as there is a tendency for them to be replaced with the generic classifiers.

A comparison of traditional Malay classifiers and classifiers in Bahasa Indonesia...shows that the human classifier (*orang*) and the animal classifier (*ekor*) are the most stable. Specific classifiers tend to disappear first. Classifiers for inanimates based on shape, function, and material tend to be replaced by the generic classifier *buah* previously used for round objects...(Aikhenvald, 2000, p. 281).

The Mandarin and Cantonese examples of an umbrella, 一把雨傘, and *yat ba je*, respectively use the word *handle*, 把 and *ba* as the noun classifier, respectively. The specification of umbrella in Chinese languages is cultural-specific because it is not the common practice to use either rod in Mandarin, or zhi (rod) in Cantonese as the classifier of an umbrella. That the classification of umbrella in Mandarin, and Cantonese being incongruent with the shape of the object is an evidence that shape is not the definitive criterion in noun classification. Similarly, in English, we use a carton of milk instead of a \*box of milk; and they say a pack of cigarettes, rather than a \*box of cigarettes.

Learners may memorize cultural-specific noun classification in Malay as a foreign language lesson. Using language drills in Malay as a foreign language pedagogy has been introduced as a possible technique to compensate for the lack of first language entrenchment. A hands-on practice completed our Malay as a foreign language lesson with a learning task. The task was a practice to validate the understanding of the lesson content. In engaging the learners to use the noun classifiers, the lesson projected the *PowerPoint*-content of Table 9 directly to the whiteboard bypassing the screen in sync with the current pedagogy in-sync with the preference for convenience (Sew, 2017). Utilizing the whiteboard as the base for learners to scribble the answers allowed for immediate erasure of any incorrect input during the hands-on practice.

**Table 9. Cloze practice to use the classifier *batang***

				
se	se	se	se	se

The screen projection offered the learners the opportunity of filling the blanks with a stipulated classifier, i.e. *batang* 'rod'. The process of repeating the same classifier on several prototypical members, such as *pokok* 'tree', *jalan* 'road', *sungai* 'river', *pensel* 'pencil', and *tiang lampu* 'lamp post' provided the learners an exploratory window to discover the range and depth of classification inherent in a particular noun classifier. An observer suggested the alternative of using several classifiers as the practice in the cloze exercise. However, the objective of the grammar practice was inclined to provide an in-depth understanding on the specifying power of the noun classifier *batang*. The one-to-many classifying exercise illustrated the specifying range of a noun classifier, which was useful for debunking shape-preference as the ultimate criterion in Malay noun specification.

## 9 Conclusion

We present an actual lesson designed to teach noun classifiers as a relevant topic in Malay as a foreign language. Noun classifiers become an interesting if not essential Malay lesson due to its definitive syntactic role for generating specific reference in Malay communication. Specifying a noun referent in Malay correctly is the prerogative of learners whenever he or she iterates a concrete or abstract noun reference. Indeed, it is a pedagogical mission to teach noun classifiers for proper enumerating purpose in Malay. In teaching noun classifiers, noun-token demarcation is the foundation for understanding the Malay noun classification. By stipulating noun stems as a conceptual type, specifying a nominal reference entails noun classification. The difference between type, and token is especially relevant because adopting the type-token demarcation in the pedagogy is a useful strategy to supersede terminological discrepancy towards an eloquent description of a noun token with a classifier. All types of noun classifiers would derive an individuated nominal reference from a noun stem. The derivational principle accords descriptive adequacy to the lesson resulting in a straightforward understanding of the semantico-syntactic function afforded by the noun classifiers.

In the pedagogical practice, the instructions on the unique noun classification may benefit from a translanguaging model of exploiting the intricacies of noun classification in the languages spoken by the learners. Instructors may use several examples from different languages to illustrate the relevance of cultural propensity in noun classification against erroneous assumptions based on an empirical shape-based association. The *batang* 'rod' noun classifier selected as a cloze practice eliminates the tendency to assume shape as the criterion of Malay nominal classification, not least the scope of classification involves multicompetent linguistic intelligence in classifying nouns that range from a straight pencil to a windy road, and a curvy river. Answering the cloze practice projected onto the whiteboard correctly completes the learning experience with a positive reinforcement, especially when the depth of specifying power in a noun classifier is the target of the learning exploration.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Examples of inversed order between the noun classifier and noun in Malay were documented in Nor Hisham Osman (1995, p. 27), *Bersamalah kita menikmati rezeki yang ada, walaupun hanya nasi sesuap, garam sebutir, dan sirih sepiak*... (Let's enjoy the windfall available, although it is merely rice a mouthful, salt a grain, and betel leaf a blade...author's translation with underlines added). In fact, an inverse order between the noun classifier and noun is invoked in Malay whenever a noun classifier becomes the anaphoric reference of the noun (cf. Ahmad 1959; Karim, 1988 in section 2 above).

<sup>2</sup>During his stint as a Malay visiting lecturer at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Dr. Samsur Rijal Yahaya informs that his Indonesian colleagues did not consider noun classifiers as an important grammar component. Limited noun classifier command with the repeated use of a particular classifier for specifying all the noun references among young Mandarin speakers, as informed by Dr. Ding Seong Lin, may suggest that language shift has begun with accurate classifiers missing in noun iteration.

<sup>3</sup>In terms of pedagogical accountability, two NUS academics participated as expert observers. A/P. Dr. Maznah Mohamad (Malay Studies, NUS), and Ms Indrianti (Centre for Language Studies, NUS) observed the lesson on 15 Mar 2018 before providing their written comments in a peer review report.

<sup>4</sup>A reviewer raised a suspicion if the learners were acquainted with the Malay noun classifiers prior to the actual classroom observation. We inform that any attempt of shortchanging the intelligent learners by delivering

the same content twice may risk for it surfacing in the NUS Student Feedback, an online evaluation system. Furthermore, skipping the same rope tricks twice makes a mundane pedagogical task, which may result in a staccato teaching and learning classroom experience.

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