



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development**

**DIGLOSSIA AND EARLY SPELLING IN MALAY**

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**Diglossia and Early Spelling in Malay**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables.....	viii
Abstract.....	ix
Abstrak.....	x
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Background to the Study.....	1
1.3 Statement of the Problem.....	3
1.4 Objectives of the Study.....	4
1.5 Research Questions.....	5
1.6 Significance of the Study.....	5
1.7 Limitations of the Study.....	5
1.8 Definition of Terms.....	6
1.9 Summary.....	6
<b>Chapter 2: Review of Related Literature</b>	
2.1 Introduction.....	7
2.2 Diglossia.....	7
2.3 Early Spelling Development.....	9
Phonological perspective.....	9
Statistical-learning perspective.....	11
2.4 The Malay Language.....	12
The Malay spelling reform.....	13
Rumi Orthography.....	16
2.5 Influence of Diglossia towards Early Spellings in Malay.....	17
Non-standard Malay in Malaysia.....	17
Linguistic influence.....	19
2.6 Summary.....	22
<b>Chapter 3: Research Methodology</b>	
3.1 Introduction.....	23
3.2 Research Design.....	23
3.3 Population, Sample and Sampling.....	23
3.4 Instrument.....	24
3.5 Pilot Study.....	28

3.6	Validity and Reliability.....	28
3.7	Ethics in the Study.....	29
3.8	Data Collection.....	30
3.8	Data Analysis.....	30
3.9	Summary.....	31
<b>Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results</b>		
4.1	Introduction.....	32
4.2	Demographic Details.....	32
4.3	Findings for Research Objective 1.....	32
	Picture naming.....	32
	Spelling.....	33
	Significant relationship.....	33
4.4	Findings for Research Objective 2.....	36
	Picture naming.....	36
	Spelling.....	36
	Significant differences.....	36
4.5	Findings for Research Objective 3.....	39
4.6	Summary.....	41
<b>Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion</b>		
5.1	Introduction.....	42
5.2	General Discussion.....	42
5.3	Study Limitations and Future Research.....	47
5.4	Implication and Conclusion.....	48
<b>References.....</b>		<b>50</b>
<b>Appendices</b>		
A.	Instrument (Students' Copy).....	58
B.	Instrument (Teacher's Copy).....	64
C.	Consent Letters.....	72
D.	Transcripts of Interview.....	79

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Differences between the Wilkinson and Van Ophysen System .....	14
Table 2. List of Test Items in the Instrument .....	26
Table 3. Interview Questions for Students Who Named Pictures in the Non-Standard Malay Pronunciation but Spelt the Words in the Standard Malay Pronunciation .....	27
Table 4. Interview Questions for Students Who Named Pictures and Spelt the Words both in the Non-Standard Malay Pronunciation .....	27
Table 5. Students' Performance in Picture Naming and Spelling Words with Diglossic Pronunciation .....	35
Table 6. Comparison of the Performance of Students from East and West Malaysia in Picture Naming and Spelling Words with Diglossic Pronunciation .....	38

## Abstract

Diglossia is a widespread sociolinguistic condition (Schiffman, 1998) where two distinct varieties of the same language (standard and non-standard) coexist in a speech community (Ferguson, 1959). Each of the variety has clear functional separation where the standard language is the superposed variety used in all formal occasions and writings while the non-standard language is the variety used for everyday conversations. Generally, the nonstandard Malay is characterised by four vowel variations, namely <i> /i/ to <e> /e/ (e.g. *katil* /kʌtil/ “bed” as /kʌtɛl/), <u> /u:/ to <o> /ɒ/ (e.g. *telur* /təlu:r/ “egg” as /təlpɪr/), <a> /ʌ/ to <ə> /ə/ (e.g. *saya* /sʌjʌ/ “I” as /sʌjə/) and <r> /r/ to non-rhotic /r/ (e.g. /təlu:r/ as /təlu:/ or /təɒ/). This study explored the influence of diglossia towards early spelling in the Malay language. Performance of Primary One students ( $n = 120$ ) in reading and spelling 21 common words with diglossic pronunciation was tested through picture naming and spelling. Six students were then interviewed to probe into how these diglossic words were spelt. Most of the students named the pictures with diglossic pronunciation ( $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = 0.129$ ) but they did not make as many diglossic spelling errors as in picture naming ( $M = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 0.058$ ). From the interviews conducted, students were not aware of the phenomenon of diglossia and hence were not able to justify the mismatch between their pronunciation and spelling. This study suggested early intervention and the increase of awareness towards the phenomenon of diglossia among parents and educators.

*Keywords:* diglossia, early spelling, Rumi orthography, Malay

## Abstrak

Diglosia merupakan sejenis keadaan sosio-linguistik yang meluas (Schiffman, 1998) di mana dua variasi bahasa yang berbeza (standard dan tidak standard) wujud bersama dalam ujaran masyarakat (Ferguson, 1959). Kedua-dua jenis bahasa ini mempunyai fungsi tersendiri yang ketara. Bahasa standard ditekankan dalam urusan rasmi manakala bahasa tidak standard banyak digunakan dalam perbualan harian. Secara umumnya, bahasa Melayu tidak standard dapat digambarkan oleh empat variasi vokal, iaitu <i> /i/ kepada <e> /e/ (cth. katil /kʌtil/ sebagai /kʌtel/), <u> /u:/ kepada <o> /ɒ/ (cth. telur /təlu:r/ kepada /təɒr/), <a> /ʌ/ kepada <ə> /ə/ (cth. saya /sʌjʌ/ kepada /sʌjə/) dan <r> /r/ kepada “non-rhotic /r/” (cth. /təlu:r/ kepada /təlu:/ atau /təɒ/). Kajian ini meneroka pengaruh diglosia terhadap sistem ejaan bahasa Melayu pada peringkat awal. Keupayaan murid Tahun Satu ( $n = 120$ ) membaca dan mengeja 21 perkataan umum yang mempunyai variasi sebutan diglosia telah diuji melalui ejaan dan penamaan gambar. Seterusnya, sesi temu ramah diadakan dengan 6 orang murid untuk mengkaji cara perkataan diglosia dieja. Kebanyakan murid menyebut gambar dengan sebutan tidak standard ( $M = 0.80$ ,  $SD = 0.129$ ) tetapi mereka kurang melakukan kesilapan dalam ejaan ( $M = 0.03$ ,  $SD = 0.058$ ). Melalui sesi temu ramah ini, didapati murid tidak menyedari fenomena diglossia dan hal ini telah menyebabkan murid tidak dapat menjustifikasikan ketidaksepadanan sebutan dan ejaan mereka. Oleh itu, kajian ini mencadangkan intervensi awal serta peningkatan kesedaran terhadap fenomena diglossia dalam kalangan ibu bapa dan para pendidik.

Kata kunci: diglosia, ejaan, ortografi Rumi, Bahasa Melayu

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Introduction**

This chapter laid out the overview of this study by discussing the background to the issue addressed in this study at first. Then, the problem statement was detailed before the research objectives, research questions, significance of study, limitation of the study and the definition of terms from the conceptual and operational perspectives were presented. The chapter ended with a short summary.

### **1.2 Background of Study**

Literacy is integral to success in modern society. Early literacy skills such as letter recognition, alphabetic knowledge and vocabulary are good predictors of children's later academic achievement (Skibbe, Connor, Morrison & Jewkes, 2010; Wylie & Thompson, 2004). However, a substantial student population in Malaysia are still ill-equipped with basic literacy skills. In 2008 alone, 54,000 Year One pupils were enrolled in the Early Intervention Reading and Writing Class (KIA2M) due to low literacy skills (Kang, 2012). Moreover, students in Malaysia attained a mean score of 414, a score which was statistically and significantly lower than the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 493 on the reading literacy scale of Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in its maiden participation in PISA 2009+ (Walker, 2011). Students' reading performance further declined to a mean score of 398 in PISA 2012, a score which was lower than the OECD average of 496 in PISA 2012 (OECD, 2013).

Hence, early literacy was laid special stress in the Government Transformation Programme (GTP) unveiled in 2010 as part of the National Key Results Areas (NKRAs) mandate to increase the enrolment rate of preschool education and to ensure the acquisition of basic literacy skills within the first three years of mainstream primary education (PEMANDU, 2011). In the meantime, the Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) programme is introduced to identify students with special needs so that early intervention could be given in time (PEMANDU, 2011). Students are expected to be able to read, write and understand simple and complex words and sentences as well as to apply such knowledge in everyday communication. Students who are not up to par will be enrolled in the remedial class where special assistance is rendered. Early literacy is further highlighted in the Malaysia Education Blueprint (MOE, 2012). It is envisioned that after three years of schooling, every child will achieve 100% literacy in both the Malay and English languages.

Writing is an integral part of literacy while spelling is an essential component of writing. The ability to spell remains important in the 21<sup>st</sup> century even with the availability of tools like spellchecker because both the ability to spell and to read rely on the same underlying knowledge of specific sound-to-letter correspondences or alphabetic knowledge (Ehri, 2005). Therefore, spelling complements reading by allowing the mental representation of a word to be more sturdy and accessible for fluent reading (Moats, 2005) and enable more cognitive resources to be available for other higher order aspects like writing (Treiman and Kessler, 2013). Hence, spelling is often treated as an aspect of literacy that should be taught in relation to other language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking (Winch, Johnston, March, Ljungdahl & Holliday, 2010).

Diglossia, or the use of two varieties of the same language under different conditions (Ferguson, 1959) is common in Malaysia, be it the Malay, English, Chinese or Tamil mainstream

languages. Generally, diglossia is characterised by the standard form used for formal occasions and writing as well as the nonstandard form used for casual conversations. As early spellings are speech based where young children spell by attempting to represent the sounds they hear in words (Gentry, 1982; Jalil & Rickard Liow, 2008; Rickard Liow & Lay, 2004; Treiman & Barry, 2000), exposure to the nonstandard phonology would influence young children's phonological representations evidenced by diglossic spelling errors.

### 1.3 Statement of the Problem

Orthography is the conventional spelling system of a language (Stevenson, 2010). The orthography of the Malay language or the Rumi orthography is a very transparent orthography with distinct grapheme (letters) and phoneme (sounds) relationship for the standard pronunciation. Hence, Rumi orthography is often characterised as one of the easiest orthography to be learnt compared to other deep orthographies such as English where the correspondence between grapheme and phonemes is irregular.

However, the phonology of the vowel changes when certain Malay words were spoken with the nonstandard pronunciation (e.g. *katil* /kʌtɪl/ “bed” as /kʌtɛl/, *telur* /tɛlu:r/ “egg” as /tɛlɔr/ or /tɛlɒ/, *saya* /sʌjʌ/ “I” as /sʌjə/). Hence, young children who had limited exposure to print and the standard form will invent phonologically plausible but incorrect spellings by transcribing speech, evidenced by observed vowel substitutions (e.g. spelling <katil> as <katɛl>, <telur> as <telɔr> or <telo>, <saya> as <sayə>). This is because early linguistic experience, especially the exposure to the nonstandard phonology, influences the development of phonological representations or spelling skills and thus the literacy skills of young children.

Therefore, the influence of diglossia towards early spelling is specially highlighted in the curriculum specification for the teaching of Year One Malay (Ministry of Education, 2010). One

of expected outcomes enumerated under the learning standards in the curriculum specification for writing specifies that students should be able to “*mengedit and memurnikan hasil penulisan daripada aspek ejaan*” or “edit and correct the writings from the aspect of the spelling” (p. 20). Hence, exercises that require students to identify and correct spellings that accord to the non-standard Malay pronunciation are included in the official textbook and workbook for Year One Malay. Nevertheless, students’ performance in dealing words with diglossic pronunciation remained unknown as studies that probe into diglossia and early spelling in Malay especially in Malaysia are limited. This study attempted to bridge the gap by examining the extent of the influence of diglossia towards early spelling in the Malay language among Primary One students who spoke Malay as their first language.

#### **1.4 Objectives of the Study**

This study attempted to examine the extent of the influence of diglossia towards early spelling in the Malay language among students in Primary One who spoke Malay as their first language. Specifically, the objectives of this study were as follows:

1. to determine students’ performance in naming and spelling words with diglossic pronunciation.
2. to determine the performance of students from East and West Malaysia in naming and spelling words with diglossic pronunciation.
3. to find out how students spell words with diglossic pronunciation.

## **1.5 Research Questions**

This study answered the following research questions:

1. How do students perform in naming and spelling words with diglossic pronunciation?
2. How do students from East and West Malaysia perform in naming and spelling words with diglossic pronunciation?
3. How do students spell words with diglossic pronunciation?

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This study contributed to the knowledge in the field by providing indigenous research data regarding the influence of diglossia towards students' performance in early spelling. It also served to create awareness among educators and parents about the possible influence of diglossia towards students' performance in early spelling. Besides, the methodology and instruments adopted in this study proposed possible methods for future researches as well. Also, this study suggested early intervention and the increase of awareness towards the phenomenon of diglossia among parents and educators.

## **1.7 Limitations of the Study**

The small sample size of 120 respondents from two primary government schools (Sekolah Kebangsaan) using one survey and interviews did not generate data findings that represent the population of Primary One students in Malaysia and hence generalising from the findings may be questionable. However, only Primary One students who attended at least one year of preschool education and categorised as the *Perdana* students in the LINUS programme were involved in this study so that all the respondents would have similar ability in spelling. *Perdana* students are those who had mastered the basic literacy skills, i.e. to read and write in the Malay language. Hence, they should be able to represent their phonological representations of

the tested words clearly. Moreover, only students who spoke Malay as their home language were included because they were routinely exposed to the colloquial non-standard Malay during their conversations at home. Furthermore, all the students throughout Malaysia should have similar exposure to the non-standard Malay pronunciation because the entire population in Malaysia is extremely diglossic. This thus served as the basis to use the findings in gauging the possible influence of diglossia towards early spelling in the Malay language among Primary One students.

## **1.8 Definitions of terms**

The relevant terms in this study were defined conceptually and operationally.

**Diglossia.** Diglossia is the use of two varieties of the same language under different conditions (Ferguson, 1959). Operationally, diglossia refers to the phenomenon of the widespread use of non-standard Malay especially in daily conversations in Malaysia.

**Performance.** According to the Oxford dictionary (Stevenson, 2010), performance is defined as “the action or process of performing a task or function”. Operationally, performance refers to Primary One students’ ability in naming the pictures and spelling the words with diglossic pronunciations in standard Malay.

## **1.9 Summary**

This chapter introduced the study and its objectives in examining diglossia and early spelling in Malay. The background of the study was highlighted in general to give a comprehensive overview before the problem and its significance in conducting the study were further discussed. Also, the limitations of the study were briefed and the terms used in this study were clarified. The next chapter would highlight the related literature for this study.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter is the review of the literatures that probed into diglossia and early spelling. The notion of diglossia was first examined before the development of early spelling, the nature of the Malay language and the possible influence of diglossia towards early spelling in Malay were further discussed.

#### **2.2 Diglossia**

Ferguson (1959) proposed the seminal notion of diglossia as a linguistic situation, where two varieties of the same language “are used side by side throughout a speech community, each with a clearly defined role” (p. 233). He referred the High variety or the standard language as the appropriate form used in formal contexts such as sermon in church or mosque, formal letter, poetry and lectures; and the Low variety or the non-standard language as the dialectal forms used in informal, non-academic and non-professional interactions such as conversation with family, friends or colleagues.

Ferguson distinguished diglossic communities from others based on certain characteristics. Winford (1985) classified these characteristics into ten key features of two categories, namely the linguistic and sociocultural features. The linguistic features include: (1) the two languages are genetically related, demonstrated by scientific evidence and perceived by the community themselves; (2) the linguistic situation is stable and persisted for at least several centuries and more; (3) all or most of the vocabulary are shared between the High and Low varieties, although variations in form and meaning may be observed; (4) the High and Low

varieties have remarkably different grammar structure, where the High variety has much more complex structures than the Low variety; (5) the phonology of both the High and Low varieties are either quite close or strikingly divergent, but the Low variety would serve as the basic system while the divergent features of the High phonology are either a subsystem or parasystem. On the other hand, the sociocultural features of diglossic communities include: (1) both the High and Low varieties complement each other and are used for distinct functions; (2) the High variety is superior to the Low variety; (3) the High variety bears the responsibility in literacy heritage, where literatures exist in the High variety and are held in high esteem; (4) the High variety is codified for pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary which allow variation only within certain limits but the Low variety is not; (5) the Low variety is the first language of all speakers while the High variety is acquired through formal education. Hence, there are very few truly diglossic communities because according to Scotton (1986), two conditions must hold: (1) everyone or at least the majority must speak the Low variety as mother tongue and (2) the High variety is never or almost never used in informal conversations because “any attempt to do so is felt to be either pedantic and artificial or else in some sense disloyal to the community” (Ferguson, 1959, p. 245).

Due to the prestige of the High variety (H), it is thus highly valued and preserved because “even where the feeling of the reality and superiority of H is not so strong, there is usually a belief that H is somehow more beautiful, more logical, better able to express important thoughts, and the like” (Ferguson, 1959, p. 237). As the result, the High variety is superimposed and taught via schooling whereas the Low variety is learnt naturally at home. As both the High and Low varieties differ in grammar, vocabulary and phonology, diglossia thus has significant implications toward education to promote the effective diffusion of the High variety.

### **2.3 Early Spelling Development**

Generally, spelling reflects children increasing recognition of the patterns of words through phonics, visual cues, and knowledge of morphemes and etymology (Winch et al., 2010). The development of early spelling will be further discussed from the phonological and statistical-learning perspectives.

**Phonological perspective.** Many approaches are employed in the study of early spelling development in alphabetic writing systems. The phonological perspective holds that alphabetic knowledge or knowledge of specific sound-to-letter correspondences is fundamental in developing spelling skills. Written words are linked systematically to their pronunciation (Bowman & Treiman, 2008) while spelling is to a large extent a creative process and an attempt to represent the linguistic structure of spoken words (Treiman, 2004; Treiman & Bourassa, 2000). Phonological awareness or the child's awareness that spoken words can be broken down or manipulated into smaller units of sound is the key to master an alphabetic orthography (Winskel & Wadjaja, 2007). Models of spelling development often illustrate children's increasing ability to encode or map sounds of words to phonetically appropriate letters by describing how children advance from a preliminary stage in which spellings are non-phonological to a later stage in which spellings are phonologically adequate (Pollo, Treiman, & Kessler, 2008). Two representative models of spelling development are the stage theory proposed by Gentry (1982) and the phase theory proposed by Ehri (2005).

Both models show that children's spelling is initially random strings of letters that have no relationship to the sounds in the word (Pollo et al., 2008), in which Ehri called the prealphabetic phase and Gentry called the precommunication stage. Children may not conform to the left-to-right progression, include number symbol and invent shapes as part of the spelling of a

word or confuse between uppercase and lowercase letters frequently (Gentry, 1982; Winch et al., 2010). However, children start to recognise that letters symbolise sounds when they learn about letters and sounds in Ehri's partial alphabetic phase or Gentry's semiphonetic stage. This transition is often evidenced by the use of letter name strategy to substitute a few of the sounds in words with phonologically appropriate letters (Pollo et al., 2008), the left-to right arrangement of words and correct word segmentation (Winch et al., 2010). For example, a child may write *birds* as BRZ, *garbage* as GABJ, *car* as KR (Gentry, 1982) or *today is Monday* as TD Z MDA (Winch et al., 2010) by writing out the more salient sounds, especially at the beginnings than the ends of words (Bowman & Treiman, 2008). Young children tend to leave out the medial letters because they cannot segment the word's pronunciation into all of its phonemes due to the lack of full knowledge of the alphabetic system, especially vowels (Ehri, 2005).

Children enter Ehri's full alphabetic phase or Gentry's phonetic stage by being able to produce spellings that represent most of the phonological forms of words because they understand the major grapheme-phoneme correspondences and are able to segment pronunciations into phonemes that match up to the graphemes they see (Ehri, 2005). Hence, children at this stage remember correct spellings of words better and invent spelling to represent sounds that they do not know (Ehri, 2005; Pollo et al., 2008). Meanwhile, children enter Gentry's transitional stage when they start to learn more about conventional spellings and spelling patterns that occur in words (Gentry, 1982; Pollo et al., 2008). Hence, children can now include vowels in every syllable and begin to spell digraphs (Winch et al., 2010), demonstrated by spelling eighty as EIGHTEE rather than ATE. Ultimately, children attained Gentry's correct stage or Ehri's consolidated alphabetic phase as competent readers and spellers (Pollo et al., 2008) who are able to consolidate letters into chunks that facilitate memorisation (Ehri, 2005) and deal with

morphological structures such as prefixes and suffixes, contractions, compound words, derivations and silent letter sequences (Winch et al., 2010), especially after frequent writing experiences with some formal instruction (Gentry, 1982).

**Statistical-learning perspective.** On the other hand, the statistical-learning perspective holds that young children hypothesise the nature of writing through finding meaningful patterns or the statistical regularities of words before they understand that letters represent phonemes (Pollo et al., 2008). The applicability of this learning perspective to spelling is built on the fact that children in literate societies are well exposed to prints such as those on street signs and labels, in books and magazines, and more. Hence, children learnt the orthographic patterns by observing the salient visual characteristics of prints and their orthographic structure (Borassa & Treiman, 2009; Treiman & Bourassa, 2000). The amount of exposure to print affects the orthographic processing efficiency (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1990). Orthographic processing or “the ability to form, store, and access orthographic representations” (Stanovich & West, 1989, p. 404) is a good predictor of visual word recognition. This is because the identification of a visually presented word involves the matching of an input letter sequence with the representation of the word’s orthography that has been learnt through experience with print (Burt, 2006). Hence, good readers can often gain visual reinforcement of how to spell high-frequency words through their wide reading because spelling is heavily dependent on our visual memories of words and their parts (Winch et al., 2010). As the result, reading volume is one of the significant measures and predictor of spelling (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1991, 2001). However, the skill to induce orthographic knowledge from the exposure to print varies over individuals (Burt, 2006; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1990).

Letters are arranged in certain patterns. For example, certain letters may occur as doublets such as the double *o* of *food* or double *l* of *fill*, but rarely for letters like *i* or *y*. Furthermore, these doublets usually occur at the middle or at the ends of words, but rarely at the beginning of words. Children begin to develop this knowledge of orthography from an early age. Rosinski and Wheeler's (1972) study shows that children from first to sixth graders were able to identify the nonwords that are more like real words or words that are more orthographically regular and pronounceable such as *tup*, rather than words that are orthographically irregular and unpronounceable such as *nda* at a better than chance level. Treiman's (1993) study also found that middle-class kindergartners, first graders and second grades were able to choose non-words that conformed to the regular pattern, such as preferring *nuck* over *ckun* at an above chance performance since *ck* occurs at the ends of English words but not at the beginnings. Hence, children can make use of the statistical regularities that give them the information of graphical and phonological patterns of printed words in the language at the early stage of their spelling development (Pollo et al., 2008).

#### **2.4 The Malay Language**

Limited studies were conducted on the cognitive processes involved in Malay reading and spelling, even though it is the most widely spoken language by about 250 million people in SouthEast Asia, namely Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and Singapore (Tadmor, 2009). Originated from the Malayic subgroup of Western Malayo-Polynesian, a branch of the Austronesian language family, the Malay spoken in Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and Singapore is the same (Asmah Haji Omar, 1989; Mintz, 1992; Tadmor, 2009). It is traditionally assumed that the standard Malay spoken in these countries is originated from the Johor-Riau Malay (Asmah Haji Omar, 1965, 1967) and thus allows related researches across these nations to

be cross-referenced and compared. However, there are minor lexical and syntactic differences in the standard Malay used in Indonesia due to the earlier British and Dutch colonisation (Asmah Haji Omar, 1967, 1989; Jalil & Rickard Liow, 2008). Nevertheless, the same Rumi orthography is employed and most of the words overlap semantically (Jalil & Rickard Liow, 2008).

**The Malay spelling reform.** Arabic orthography was used in the Malay archipelago that mainly comprised of Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Brunei Darussalam for communication and to record religious and literary traditions before the Rumi (Romanised) orthography was introduced (Asmah Haji Omar, 1989). It was only in 1904 that the first Malay spelling system, namely the Wilkinson system which was named after its creator and based on the English graphemes was introduced and used in Malaya, Singapore and Brunei (Asmah Haji Omar, 1967, 1989). Indonesia on the other hand had formulated the van Ophuysen system based on the Dutch graphemes. Table 1 summarised the differences between the Wilkinson and the van Ophuysen system (Asmah Haji Omar, 1967, 1989).