The Linguistic Challenges Faced by Malaysian Students in Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the linguistic challenges that Malaysian learners face in learning Arabic as a foreign language. The findings of the study showed that Malaysian learners face the following linguistic challenges in learning Arabic, Diglossia, the dissimilarities between the two languages, the pronunciation of Arabic language sounds, and Arabic writing system. This research recommends that further research should be conducted to find out more about this issue.

Keywords: Difficulties, Learning Arabic, Diglossia.

1. Introduction

Arabic was ranked as one of the six United Nations official languages, and is currently the 5th commonly spoken native language in the world. It is spoken by approximately 300 million native speakers who are largely concentrated in 23 countries calling the Arabic-speaking world extending from the Persian Gulf in the East to the Atlantic Ocean in the West, from the Mediterranean Sea in the North to the Indian ocean in the South. The Arabic-speaking community involves a number of different cultures and religions, including Christians, Jews and other religious minorities whose first language is Arabic, alongside a Muslim majority that itself embraces a variety of different and often conflicting religious strands. Moreover, there are approximately a further billion Muslims throughout the world who do not speak Arabic as their native language, but who employ Arabic in their daily interactions and for religious purposes. Kendall(2009)

Learning Arabic as a second language started to play its role in Malay community from the early of the fourteenth or fifteenth century when Islam reached the indigenous population in Malayan Peninsula. What motivates Malaysians to learn Arabic during this era was to simplify the understanding and the recognition of Islamic principles. Although there were no other primary reasons for learning Arabic at that time, there were some indications that Malay merchants need Arabic in their commercial dealing with Arab traders. This indicates that Arabic was used for religious and commercial purposes during this period of Malaysian history. Ismail (1993)

The importance of learning Arabic in Malaysia stems from two causes. First, understanding the Holy Quran. Second, there will be many excellent job opportunities in many fields for those who speak Arabic due to investments from countries in the Middle East. Furthermore, learning the third language will enable graduates not only to get access to the recent technology and information but also to get privilege in a multicultural work environment where more opportunities are opened to the labor force that masters different languages. Zubairi (2009)

Azman et.al (2009) asserted that Arabic language can also be beneficial in strengthening the diplomatic and the economic relationship between Malaysia and Arab countries. It can also play an important role in creating a harmonious relationship, and understanding between each nation which will lead to an everlasting relationship. In Malaysia, the concern of learning the Arabic Language cannot be considered as a new trend for the Malays. Since the early history of business in the country, that is during the Malacca Sultanate, the Arabic language had been the important language to the Muslims in religious activities and Islamic education. Malaysian people are very interested in learning their children Arabic language. It has been noted that many Malaysian families are sending their children to learn Arabic. (Teh, Embi, Yusoff,& Mahamod, 2009).
2. Literature Review

Abu-Irmies (2014) conducted a study to examine the challenges of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers in Jordan. Two instruments were employed, students’ questionnaire and informal interviews with teachers of Arabic. The sample contained 43 students learning Arabic as a foreign language in a number of private language centers and ten teachers who teach Arabic to speakers of other languages at the same centers. Findings of the study revealed that the non-native learners of Arabic have positive attitudes towards Arabic culture. The researcher also came up with the results the non-native speakers of Arabic faced different linguistic challenges such as the use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) with the native speakers of Arabic in Jordan, Understanding Jordanian colloquial Arabic and reading unpunctuated words. She attributed this to the existence of different varieties of Arabic, the linguistic dissimilarities between Arabic and the students' mother tongue in addition to the numerous morphological and syntactic restrictions in Arabic.

Al-Shallakh (2010) carried out a study to determine the problems that the non-natives encounter in learning Arabic at Public Jordanian Universities. Two instruments were used namely informal interviews, and two questionnaires. This study was conducted on (9) teachers and (53) non-native students who learn Arabic as a foreign language at the University of Jordan and Al-Albayt University. The findings of the study indicated that the non-native speakers faced different problems in learning Arabic such as linguistic difficulties and problems that are associated with textbook materials. The causes of these problems are related to the nature of Arabic and textbook materials.

Another study was conducted by Alsrid (2013) to identify the learning, social and psychological difficulties faced by foreign students in the programs teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. The study employed a descriptive analytical method. The data was collected through analysis of (30) studies. The findings indicate that foreign students in learning Arabic language programs face difficulties related to learning some sounds, like (Hamza, distraction, eye, Elgin, ha, etc.), uncommon writing system which begins from right to left and the structure of sentence in Arabic language which is different from the sentence structure in many of the world's languages. They also faced difficulty in dealing with customs and traditions of Arabs because they are exposed to a new culture and this culture carries a new language.

Zouhir (2013) examined the difficulties that influence the teaching and learning of Arabic as a foreign language among U.S. university students. The results revealed that Arabic is sophisticated and posed a serious problem to the students due to many dissimilarities between Arabic and English. Students were to acquire a new language, which is totally different from English and the languages they mastered in high school. They also encountered serious challenges in Arabic morphology and faced difficulties with case, definiteness, word order, and the number system.

3. Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives of this study, this paper addresses the following question:
What are the linguistic difficulties that non-native speakers particularly Malaysian face when learning the Arabic language?

4. Methodology

The sample of the study consisted of 30 Malaysian students who were enrolled in a training course conducted by the south center for training and consultation at Mu'tah university. The researcher developed a questionnaire to achieve the goals of the study. It was written in both English and Arabic. The first section of the questionnaire elicited personal data about the participants. The second section of the questionnaire elicited the difficulties that Malaysian learners face. This section included 14 items where the participants were asked to read statements and indicate to what degree they agree or disagree with them. Each statement was followed by 3 points, namely: 1-Disagree 2- Neutral 3- Agree.
Results showed that Malaysian learners faced numerous linguistic difficulties. The mean of the study sample was 2.40 with standard deviation 0.223. The most problematic difficulty was the first linguistic difficulty which states "The diglossic nature of Arabic (The existence of two varieties of Arabic MSA and colloquial). The mean of participants' responses related to this difficulty was 2.60 with standard deviation .564. Learners also have a high level of difficulty in Understanding Jordanian spoken Arabic (al-‘ammiiyya). The mean of participants' responses related to this difficulty was 2.57 with standard deviation .626. The linguistic dissimilarities between Arabic and Malay and the pronunciation of certain Arabic sounds are also regarded problematic difficulties for Malaysian students. On the contrary, learners face a low-level of difficulty in "Discrimination between the masculine and feminine, plural."

### Table 1: Linguistic Difficulties of Learning Arabic as a Foreign Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>The diglossic nature of Arabic (The existence of two varieties of Arabic MSA and colloquial).</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>.564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Understanding Jordanian spoken Arabic (al-‘ammiiyya).</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>.626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The differences between the everyday colloquial language and the standard written language.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>.505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The linguistic dissimilarities between Arabic and Malay concerning phonology, vocabulary, structure, sentences, grammar, and syntax.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>.575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>The pronunciation of certain Arabic sounds particularly Hamza, Al Ain, ha, Za, Shin, pollinator, distraction, antibiotic, the Seine, Althae.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>.778</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Applying and familiarity with the Arabic writing rules related to the use of Al-Hamz’a.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Discrimination between the masculine and feminine, plural.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The Arabic alphabet since letters take different forms according to their positions in words.</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>.802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>.802</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Discussion

As shown in Table (1), The diglossic nature of Arabic is the most problematic difficulty that Malaysian learners encounter. This result is consistent with (Asher, 1994, Dwiek &Al-Shallakh (2015). Diglossia is regarded the most popular difficulty faced by teachers and learners of Arabic as a foreign language. Diglossia refers to the linguistic situation which is characterized by the existence of two dialects of the same language (Asher, 1994). In the case of Arabic language, Modern Standard Arabic is the formal variety employed in the educational system and used basically for written, formal spoken and religious targets. Colloquial varieties of Arabic are used for vernacular and ordinary speech. This situation is regarded problematic since learners have to acquire two different forms Arabic—Classical or Modern Standard Arabic to read and write and speak formally, and one of the various colloquial forms of the language for unofficial speaking cases (National Foreign Language Center, n.d.). Consequently, the choice is harder in a non-Arabic native speaking environment. What variety of spoken Arabic should learners be acquired? learners won't be able to deal with real life situations in case that teachers teach classical Arabic because classical Arabic is not used in daily settings. Braima(2006).

Based on Dwiek&Al-Shallakh ’s study (2015) the diglossic nature of Arabic is considered the most problematic challenge for the learners and teachers of Arabic as a foreign language where learners read and write in the Modern Standard variety of Arabic in the classroom but get exposed to the Jordanian colloquial dialect outside. He also revealed that there is no obvious and strong target for teaching Arabic in non-native countries which will result in learners' reluctance, and poor learning outcome. The study shows a diminishing role and presence for Arabic as a First Language, and an external religious motivation for learning ASL from the part of the parents and not the learners.

Ryding (2006) explained that the Arabic employed in an ordinary and daily dialogues is quite different from the written form in its sounds, structures, and words. With the greater concentration on communication in teaching Arabic, we are faced with the question whether Standard Arabic variety or one of the colloquial varieties should be taught and learned. Al Batal (1992) mentioned learning two different varieties of languages in one is a well-known difficulty in learning and teaching Arabic. There is more to be learned than one language. This is obvious in the experience of learners who learn Modern Standard Arabic then get exposed to a variety. “Although MSA and the dialects do show a considerable amount of overlapping and the student’s knowledge of MSA will greatly simplify their learning of any Arabic variety, this does little to relieve the learners’ frustration and disappointment when they encounter the fact of the diglossic case in the Arab world.

Learners' attitudes toward the several forms of Arabic will be a side of the difficulty related to the diglossia. Despite the fact that colloquial variety is widely used in informal and daily speech, many Arabs particularly educated consider modern standard Arabic is the only variety of language which should be taught. This feeling is often reflected in attitudes to foreigners' attempts to learn Arabic. Holes, et al. (1995). The results also revealed that Malaysian learners encounter linguistic difficulties when learning Arabic which attributed to the dissimilarities between Arabic and Malay. This result agrees with (Aldeeky, 2014) who mentioned that one of the challenges that teachers and learners of Arabic as a foreign language encounter is the differences between Arabic and most other languages. Since Arabic and Malay language are from different language categories, the dissimilarities between them are obvious whether in phonology, vocabulary, structure, sentences, grammar, and syntax systems...Arabic is a Semitic language and has different structures that do not exist in Indo-European languages which are widely spoken by English speakers. Arabic also has some sounds that do not exist in other languages in addition to a very complicated morphological system. The sentence word order is often VSO instead of SVO as in English. (Ryding & Johnson, 2003) Concerning the Malay language, it is an Austronesian language (Karin et al., 1993). The most significant linguistic features of the Malay language are that it is un inflectional, and the sentence word order is often ( SVO). It is limited to the natural gender. Feminine and masculine aren't
differentiated based on morphemes whether in the verb, the noun, and the adjective. Dual aspect does not also exist in it like Arabic. Concerning tenses past and present tenses do not exist in it, but the morpheme “telah” is often added to the verb to show the past tense. The same word is normally repeated to make the plural form of a noun. It also has only a single relative pronoun. (Karim et al.,1997). The findings also showed that the pronunciation of the Arabic sounds is regarded another difficulty that Malay learners encounter which can be attributed to the fact that there are many alphabetical unique sounds in the Arabic language that pose a difficult for learners to pronounce the Arabic vocabularies well. since these sounds are not found in other languages such as Malay. Nevertheless, the Malay language has additional alphabets such as ch, g, nya, p, v, that do not exist in Arabic and these additional alphabets pose a challenge for Malay learners when they write.(Ismail & Pa, 2006). Arabic writing system is considered the main hurdle for both native and non-native speakers Abdullah, A. M. (2005). Hansen, G. F. (2010) Arabic writing system begins from right to left and this system is unfamiliar in other languages.(Alshrid,2013) Abdul-Hamed(2004) found that Malaysian students encountered a difficulty in applying the Arabic writing rules specifically rules related to the use of Al-Hamza. A large number of non-native speakers, face problems and get puzzled when they write a word including Al-HAMZA. Arabic spelling system is more regular than that of English, and there is a greater consistency between spelling and pronunciation in Arabic. Also, mastering of the handwriting plays an important role in motivating students and raising their attention (Ryding & Johnson, 2003). Currently, many Malaysian students encounter problems in using the Arabic Language despite the fact that they learned it for years at religious school (Mahmud, Nik Hanan, Nadwah, Nik Farhan, Lubna, 2007). Hamidin (2016) explained that the problem increased when they complete their studies at the higher institutions where they are unable to master the Arabic Language and recognize the significance of it which causes learners' reluctance towards learning Arabic since a lot of them do not see the advantages of learning the Arabic Language for future.

7. Conclusion
The findings of the study revealed that Malaysian learners of Arabic face many linguistic challenges during the learning process of Arabic. The most problematic difficulty is related to the diglossic nature of Arabic. Other linguistic difficulties are related to dissimilarities between the two languages, the pronunciation of Arabic language sounds, and Arabic writing system.

References

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