JC☾IS
Journal of Contemporary Islamic Studies

Metacognitive Strategies in Arabic Language Learning among Senior Citizen Learners of Jamiah Dar Al Huda

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ABSTRACT

The Arabic language is considered foreign in Malaysia despite Islam being its official religion. Although Muslims in Malaysia are aware that learning Arabic enables them to understand the meaning of the holy Quran, the uptake is still low. Learners' beliefs, difficulties, and strategies are part of the challenges in their learning processes. Strategies are ways of managing the complex information received by the learners regarding the language. Thus, this study aims to find out (i) learners' awareness of the importance of learning the Arabic language, (ii) learners' learning difficulties (iii) strategies learners use to manage their learning. Ten senior citizen respondents participated in the study. A structured interview was conducted to gather the data for the study. The results show that the learners

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are aware of the importance of learning Arabic. The learners also shared their learning difficulties and strategies used to overcome the difficulties and achieve their goals. In conclusion, even though the learners are senior citizens above 60, they still have the determination and enthusiasm to learn Arabic effectively.

Keywords*: Arabic, Language, Learning Difficulties, Metacognitive Strategies, Senior Citizens*

INTRODUCTION

The Arabic language is not widely spoken in Malaysia. For many reasons, Malaysian Muslims tend to neglect to pursue studying the Arabic language despite knowing its importance in maintaining Islamic values by understanding Islam itself (Hamidin, 2019). According to Hamidin (2019), Muslims can only comprehend Islamic teachings from the authentic sources of al-Quran and al-Sunnah by mastering Arabic. Evidence in the literature on language learning suggests that Malaysia's belief in developing skills for better communications and transforming the country into the centre of academic excellence in the region is always in English, not Arabic. Since they were young, Malaysian Muslims have been trained with skills and provided with the necessary knowledge, yet they fail to prioritize the need to master the Arabic language.

Although Malaysia is moving in tandem with modernization, people should not forget the need to learn Arabic. Zailani and Liza (2020), Xuan et al. (2020), and Ghani (2016) reported that Arabic had become a popular emerging foreign language in Malaysia, especially in religious schools and higher institutions. However, Ruslimi et al. (2020) and Yusoff et al. (2020) found that many students have difficulties learning Arabic and are not determined enough to see its benefits. In the long run, Muslims in Malaysia who are illiterate in the language will anticipate certain challenges. Their inability to master Arabic will cause them to misinterpret the Quran, leading to the poor practice of *religion* (Shahmuzir, 2011). Nonetheless, acquiring a new language in later years, especially for older learners, is just as challenging, particularly in verbalizing their mental processes while performing a new language (Fenwick & Tennant, 2020).

Mastering the Arabic language is required to understand the true meaning of the Quran. Ideally, senior citizen learners must be trained to become efficient learners who know how to plan, monitor, and evaluate their work to overcome learning difficulties. The findings are anticipated to contribute to a better understanding of how senior citizens succeed in learning the Arabic language. As adult learners, the culture of instructor-dependent is no more appropriate for them. Instead, an instructor is a facilitator, and learners are expected to apply self-direct learning. These elderly learners are expected to adopt the new learning culture in the fast-moving digital age. Therefore, this study aims to determine how senior citizen learners cope with mastering the Arabic language using their identified effective strategies to overcome difficulties. This could be done by understanding (i) learners' beliefs and awareness of the importance of learning the Arabic language, (ii) learners' learning difficulties in learning the Arabic language, and (iii) what learners will do (strategies) to manage their learning.

Learners' Beliefs in Learning Strategies

Researchers used different terms to define learning strategies. O'Malley et al. (1987) define them as techniques, approaches, or deliberate actions that students take to facilitate learning and recall linguistic and content area information. McDonough (1999) defines learning strategies as articulated plans for meeting particular types of second language learning problems or difficulties. This study adopts the critical concepts of learning strategies summarised as specific actions or plans used ethically by the learner as a control system to facilitate and get the desired results in their Arabic learning.

Learners' beliefs of their strengths and weaknesses as language learners can influence their use of opportunities available for language learning and the priorities they set for themselves (Richards & Lockhart, 1999). Ellis and Sinclair (1989) conducted a study and concluded that excellent language learners are self-aware of the reasons for their attitudes and feelings toward language learning. Mac Leod (2002) found that successful learners employed many learning strategies. A study by Mills et al. (2007) examined the influence of self-beliefs on their achievement. These researchers found that learners who perceived themselves as capable of using effective strategies to monitor their work time could achieve better results. Richard

and Lockhart (1999) added that learners' belief systems cover a wide range of issues and can influence their motivation to learn, their expectations about their learning, their perceptions about what is easy or difficult, and the kind of strategy used to affect their learning.

Concept of Metacognitive Strategies

Researchers put forward the concepts of Metacognitive Strategies (MS) differently. For example, Wenden (1991) sees MS as self-management skills to oversee and manage learning, planning, monitoring, and evaluating. Cohen (1998) put forward the concept of controlling one's cognition by planning, organizing, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process. Out of so many concepts put forward, MS is summarised as higher-order executive skills that enable us to approach learning systematically, efficiently, and effectively by using planning, monitoring, and evaluating elements.

Related Studies on the Role of Metacognitive Strategies in Arabic Learning

For senior citizen learners, a vital component of self-direct learning lies in the ongoing evaluation of their tasks and achievements. Whatever the context or method, it is essential for senior citizen learners to have the chance to reflect on their learning and the strategies used. Reflecting upon one's thinking and learning is metacognitive thinking. Once they begin to think, learners implicitly use Metacognitive strategies (MS) such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating their learning.

The three critical elements of MS are planning for learning, monitoring, and self-evaluation of learning. Zimmerman and Schuk (2011) stress the importance of MS as they provide potential benefits in developing and becoming self-regulated learners. When senior citizen learners face challenges in learning Arabic, using MS as a learning activity appears essential. These strategies include increasing senior citizen learners' awareness, control of learning, memorizing and evaluating their thinking processes.

However, it is essential to note that the learning process is not as linear as the models suggest. In reality, they go back and forth: planning,

monitoring, then planning again, managing, and organizing. MS positively impacts learners with learning problems or difficulties because it provides them with an efficient way to acquire, store, and express information and skills (O'Malley & Chamot, 1985). This suggests that highly proficient learners use planning, which reflects the awareness of the need to plan before engaging in a reading process. This can be applied to learning Arabic. Learning Arabic can be very difficult for some. The verbs and their intonations constitute the most challenging part. There are many verb patterns, for each of which one must memorize the conjugation and the vocalization of the different persons in the active and passive voices. It would be good to start with the basics. First, learn all the Arabic letters, form those letters into words, then learn how to form sentences, and then learn proper syntax and grammar (Muhammad Fahmi, 2020). This all seems easy; however, in an actual way learning Arabic is not as easy as it seems. Learners must stay focused and find the right strategies to learn it. Thus, it could be concluded that 'without metacognitive approaches, learners are without direction and without the ability to review their progress, accomplishments and future learning directions' (O'Malley et al., 1987).

METHODOLOGY

The following section describes the methodology employed in this study.

Respondents

A class of ten senior citizens who are retired government servants enrolled as Arabic language learners. The main reason why they were taking up the Arabic class was that they wanted to spend some of their time learning the language. They attended Arabic classes every Saturday and Sunday morning from 10.00 am to 12.00noon.

Instrumentation

In order to obtain information regarding learners' beliefs and awareness of learning the Arabic language, learners' learning difficulties in learning the Arabic language, and what the learners will do (strategies) to manage their learning, three structured interview questions were used. The three interview questions are:

1.   Do you believe that learning Arabic is essential? Are you aware that it is a duty to learn Arabic?

2.   What are your difficulties in learning and acquiring the Arabic language?

3.   What will you do (strategies) to manage your learning?

Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

All responses from the interview were collected. The respondents were reminded to share their experiences concerning their learning process in mastering the Arabic language. The interview sessions with the ten senior citizen learners were conducted individually for 15 minutes. Immediately after the interview sessions, the recordings were transcribed, and gross grammatical errors were edited while keeping the intended meaning. The transcriptions were placed as vignettes as qualitative data. They were analyzed thematically and presented accordingly based on the study's objectives.

RESULTS

The subsequent sections present the findings for the research objectives.

Learners' Awareness of the Importance of the Arabic Language

The responses indicate that all ten learners were aware of the importance of learning the Arabic language. They had a particular belief regarding the importance of the language before enrolling on the class. Some learners, for example, L9 and L10, believe that learning the Arabic language is important because *"it is the language spoken by Rasulullah s.a.w."* and it is *"used to understand Al Quran,"* in a way its acquisition is related to the in-depth understanding of the Al-Quran and Hadith. It appears that from their responses, they have set their goal. It can be understood that goal setting benefits the learners' motivation. The ten learners in this study were aware of what needed to be learnt, how the learning works, and how to evaluate their behaviours. These ten senior citizens were self-regulated

learners with their own beliefs on the importance of learning the Arabic language.

Difficulties in Learning and Acquiring the Arabic Language

The findings indicate that senior citizen learners differ in how they face difficulties in their Arabic learning. The senior citizen learners appear to have greater use of the strategies to succeed. The findings have suggested that these learners face several problems and obstacles in learning Arabic. The main obstacle was learning the language pattern and vocabulary. From the data, L1, l2, L3, L4, L5, and L6 were easily confused with how *"Isim," "Fi'il," and "Harof"* are used to write error-free sentences. The learners' responses to interview questions were presented as vignettes below.

L1 – "In the first place, I got confused between Isim, Fi'il, and Harof. I was trying to associate Isim with Nouns, Fi'il with verbs, and Harof with a conjunction, but in Arabic, it was not so".
L2 – "It was difficult when it involved terms such as Isim, Fi'il, and Harof and these three have their sub-sections".
L4 – "I tend to forget terms like Isim Fiil and Harof. I also easily forget the term ``Muzakkar and Muannas".
L4 – "I tend to forget terms like Isim Fiil and Harof. I also easily forget the term ``Muzakkar and Muannas".
L5 – "After learning the three categories of word classes, I find it so difficult to remember, and I hardly have time to do my revision on my own".

It is suggested that ignoring the learners' needs to understand the language would hinder them from learning. The findings also show that senior citizen learners were facing difficulties in learning the Arabic language, varying in how they managed to learn. For example, L7, L8, L9, and L10 appeared to use "memorization" as the primary technique to learn Arabic as their third language.

L7 - I need to train myself to memorize all of them.
L8 - Now that I am retired, I joined the Arabic class… but my problem is I tend to forget what I learned quite fast.
L9 - I have to face the challenge of memorizing certain terms and to make sure that I understand the meanings of the words in my language.
L10 - I keep forgetting what I have learnt. I need time to do my revision.

However, they kept forgetting the terms, grammar rules, and new words they had learned. Thus, this suggests that these senior citizen learners must instil the same kind of behaviours, be more reliant and confident, and have the ability to evaluate themselves. L2, L7, and L10 reflected that more time was needed for revision to improve their understanding of Arabic as a third language. In addition, in this challenging learning situation, as reflected by L4, self-reliance can work hand in hand with teamwork and collaborative learning.

The Use of Strategies to Manage to Learn

The interview shows that the ten senior citizen learners have their own strategies for their Arabic learning. Their responses show that they implicitly used Metacognitive strategies, i.e., planning, monitoring, and evaluation, as shown below. The final findings indicate that senior citizen learners see the importance of strategies; however, they lack metacognitive knowledge (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987). Therefore, specific basic proficiency may be a prerequisite for them to be able to reflect on their learning. The data of this study clearly shows that the senior citizen learners had a substantial awareness and control of their metacognitive activities while mastering Arabic as their third language.

Planning

All of the senior citizen learners commented that at the initial stage, they planned to strategize how they could become proficient users of the Arabic language; *"to learn fast"* (L1), *"want to understand my Quran reading"* (L2), (L7), (L8) and (L9), *"took notes*" (L3) and (L4), *"read the textbook on my own"* (L5) and (L6), and *"study hard*" (L10).

Monitoring

However, a few senior citizen learners monitored their own progress after planning and trying out the first few attempts at learning Arabic. Only L2 realized that he had to take *"noted and do a revision*," L3 and L4 reflected they had *"to work hard*," L5 decided to read textbooks to become more familiar with new words, L8 *"to discuss certain terms or words to understand better"*, and L9 L10 agreed that they had *"to do a revision"*. Here, it appears that some learners acknowledged that by reflecting on what worked and did not work, they could plan on another strategy for them to be able to master Arabic.

Evaluating

Out of the ten senior citizen learners, two appeared to find evaluating useful as one of the approaches to successfully managing their learning of the Arabic language. Evidently, these two students not only planned and monitored their progress rate but also evaluated their performance by getting support from their peers. L8 and L9 preferred *"discussion"* to complete the exercise, ensuring they were on the right track.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study showed how senior citizen learners may be similar or dissimilar in their beliefs in learning and acquiring the Arabic language. The findings help bring awareness to the senior citizen learners about what they can do or avoid in facilitating their Arabic Language learning methods. The study provides empirical support and reveals the need for Arabic teachers to give senior citizen learners more opportunities to evaluate their work and to continue encouraging them to become independent learners. It will be helpful for the Arabic teachers to explicitly discuss the three metacognitive strategies: Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluating in the classroom. Arabic teachers need to provide these senior citizen learners with Strategy Training at any stage of their Arabic Language learning.

Among the difficulties these senior learners face are; slowing down in memorization, difficulty in understanding and the lack of time given by teachers or instructors. This requires providing strategy training or designing a specific module to fulfil the senior citizen learners' needs. Hence, the information provided by the participants demonstrated that third language learning at their age was a complex process, but they consciously and actively invoked a repertoire of metacognitive strategies. They used these strategies to plan, monitor, and evaluate while learning Arabic. Understanding these strategies keeps enthusiasm high throughout the learning process.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests, such as financial or personal relationships, regarding the writing of this article.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1 and Co-author 1 designed the study and gathered the literature. Author 1, Co-author 2, and Co-author 3 analysed the results and wrote the article.

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