

**MALAYSIAN LANGUAGE LEARNERS’
PERCEPTION TOWARDS LEARNING
ARABIC PASS THE CRITICAL
PERIOD**

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Abstract

Many people today have become aware of the outcomes and benefits that they would get from learning a second or third language. Some examples of the many benefits of learning more than just one language is that it increases people’s opportunity in landing jobs, expanding their social network and getting access to education. Though it is never too late for anyone to start learning a new language, it is widely proven by researchers that younger learners tend to secure better performance of the language compared to adult learners. Hence, this paper is an empirical study that employs a qualitative research design. For the methodology of this study, the researcher interviewed three participants who are among the undergraduate students at the Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) that are currently required to learn the Arabic language as one of the graduation requirements. The purpose of this study is to investigate the participant’s perception of having to learn a new language, the Arabic language, at a later age and how they are motivated to continue learning. In accordance with the findings, it was recorded that all three participants had a hard time comprehending the Arabic language, but they kept on learning because they all had one similar goal which was to complete the requirement. is considered as the most challenging activity and the most difficult language skill among EFL learners. This experimental study looks at how creative activities affect the writing abilities and attitudes of ninth-grade learners toward English. The study’s pre- and post-testing strategy involved one group. The study was conducted during four weeks in 2020-

2021 academic year in an English medium school of Faisalabad, Punjab. The study included 15 ninth grade students, 10 of them were females (66.7%) and 5 of them were males (33.3%). When pre and post test scores were examined, it was observed that the experiment raised students' efficiency in writing skill. Students' attitude to English course was also increased when compared after the experiment. Result revealed that using creative activities enhanced writing skill and also has a positive effect on attitude to English Language.

Keywords: *Language Learning, Perception, Arabic Language, Malaysian Learners, Critical Period Hypothesis*

1. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia is the mother tongue of the people and almost everyone in the country also has the English language as their second language. Malaysia is one of the Asian countries that adopts the bilingual system of education. The country's education system implemented both as compulsory subjects in all levels of education in Malaysia (Darmi & Albion, 2013). Not only that, but there are also some education institutions in Malaysia that offer additional languages for the students. Some even make it obligatory for students to take up additional languages as it is one of the institution's requirements.

The Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) is publicly known for its integration of Islamic knowledge and values in education which therefore made the Arabic language one of its graduation requirements for all students of that university. To add to that, it cannot be denied that learning more than just one language has become prevalent in today's world because of its perks. Those who have the ability to communicate in multiple languages are most likely to gain more social and economic benefits. Be that as it may, a large number of studies have reported that there are quite a number of factors that influence the process of acquiring a language and this applies to learning a second, third or even a fourth language.

According to Stefansson (2013), some of the few factors influencing the process of acquiring a language are age factor and the motivation of the learner in acquiring that particular language. The brain is the most complex mechanism in the body that is largely responsible for language processes and the development of the brain changes within time. In the study of applied linguistics, scholars and linguists gave the term critical period to explain that there is a certain recommended period for learners to acquire language to achieve full native like competence of a language. From that, it can be said that age factor directly affects the brain because as the body grows and becomes more developed, consequently, the brain as well as its system also develops and affects the language process.

Apart from that, there is also a part of the brain that is linked to motivation which plays a significant role in the rate and success of language learning in general (Stefansson, 2013).

According to many studies, teaching and learning Arabic as a third language has yet to achieve its intended goal (Ainon & Abdullah, 2005). Several empirical studies (Ghani et al., 2011; Awang, Mohamed, & Sulaiman, 2013) have concluded that university-level Malaysian learners are poor communicators in Arabic. Students are unable to complete Arabic courses to reach the intermediate level of proficiency. The courses' goal is to prepare students to read Islamic materials in Arabic, particularly the Qur'an and the Prophet's traditions. However, the intention to help students integrate the Islamic perspective with the contents of their disciplines is unable to achieve (Di, Ismail & Zailani, 2020). In order to identify the issues that may be causing students' poor Arabic communication skills, some researchers focus on language learning strategies (Haron et al., 2010; Yusri et al., 2012); which also affects students' drive to complete their Arabic studies.

Dörnyei (2014) cites two primary reasons for this increased emphasis on language learning motivation: For starters, motivation provides a basic impetus for starting to learn a foreign language. Following that, it acts as a driving force, assisting learners to persevere through the laborious learning process. Second, motivation aids in overcoming the limitations identified in students' language learning and aptitude. As a result, even if language aptitude accounts for a large proportion of a learner's variability while learning a language, motivational factors can help them overcome the effect of aptitude. According to Wan Daud et al. (2020), many Arabic language students are less interested and motivated by their lack of motivation, so few students take advantage of the resources available to help them learn Arabic, such as a language lab, film, magazine, newspaper, and periodicals in Arabic. According to Zamri Ariffin et al. (2014), one of the main reasons why many students skip or struggle to study Arabic in Malaysia was their behavior and mindset toward the Arabic language itself. The percentage of students who use Arabic in or out of the classroom is far too high. This demonstrates that students' motivation and use of the Arabic language are low (Samah et al., 2016).

Hence, this research aims to investigate the perceptions of learners acquiring a new language passed the critical age and what are their motivations the keep them going. In addition to that the research question that is formulated to fit this current study is what are the perception of Malaysian learners who are learning the Arabic language while having passed the critical period and their motivation to successfully acquire the language?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical Period Hypothesis

There are a variety of theories that clarify the factors that influence language acquisition. However, the theories that will be the framework for this current study is the Lenneberg's Critical Period and Krashen's motivation in second language learning. There are indeed quite a number of studies that were carried out with the purpose to answer the question of whether there is a certain age for people to acquire a new language effortlessly and accurately like how they acquire their first language. Many studies have shown that those who have passed beyond the critical age are less likely to achieve similar performance and competence of a new language as those who have learnt it since they were at a young age.

The prominent figure who is responsible in developing the theory of the critical period hypothesis in second language learning is Eric Lenneberg who claims that there is a certain age in life where language can be acquired. According to the critical period hypothesis proposed by Lenneberg (1967) one may successfully acquire a language when that person is learning within a certain period, commonly from the age of two to puberty. A research conducted by Hartshorne et al. (2018) explored how language-learning ability changes within age. The hypothesis of the study was that one's language learning ability decreases as age increases. The study was carried out by having a large scale of participants who had to take a quiz that required them to provide answers of when they started to learn the English language, their duration staying in an English-speaking country and a few multiple-choice questions pertaining to the syntax of the language. The results had shown that the youngest age a participant learnt English was at seven years. The participant had scored better on the quiz compared to the learners that learnt the English language at a later age. To add to that, the participant who had learnt the English language throughout his critical period successfully achieved native-like proficiency, but the findings also showed that language learning ability is preserved throughout childhood and begins to rapidly declines in late adolescence.

Neural research has proven that there are two parts of the brain that are involved in language processing, and they are known as the Broca's area and Wernicke's area. Broca's area is located within the left hemisphere of the brain while Wernicke's is located in the right hemisphere (Harley, 2014; Traxler, 2012). The former is responsible for the speech production in the process of language production and development whereas the latter plays its role in language comprehension. In a much simpler explanation, Wernicke's area is in charge of receiving, understanding and choosing what to reply to the input and then later

passes it on to Broca's area to produce the selected sounds that is perceived as speech.

It is mentioned that during the critical period, which is between the age of two to puberty, the brain undergoes a phase where the brain cell connections which are known as synapses are more receptive towards the certain experiences faced by the learner. These synaptic connections or also known as neural connections are the very foundation in the development of cognitive skills for language acquisition. As stated by Li (2022), these neural connections peak between the age of two to three and changes occurs to the brain when the person starts to grow. From that, it can be claimed that in order to successfully attain a native-like proficiency of a language, the best moment to learn a language would be at an early age (Li, 2022).

Motivation in Language Acquisition

Focusing on the motivation attribute, an enquiry goes like "Why does an organism behave as it does?" is contends with the motivation. He argues that in order to be motivated, the learner must have something to plan on, envision, hope for, and yearn for, such as a reason, principle, or justification related to an objective or goals. In the case of acquiring a second language, their intention would be to learn a foreign language. Essentially, the learners must have something that they sought to accomplish, with the target language operating as the mechanism to obtain it. Therefore, in 1972, Gardner & Lambert (1972) establish two motivational factors which are integrative and instrumental motivation. Learners who have instrumental motivation only seeks to learn a language because of a practical reason such as landing a job promotion or trying to enter into a university. Meanwhile, integrative motivation refers to a learner whose goal of learning the language is to integrate with the target language community and learn its culture.

In the same manner, Ryan and Deci (2000) introduced another notion in the framework of this research known as Self-Determination Theory, which aims to classify and separate different types of motivations stemming from numerous rationales, causes or goals that reinforce a performance or an accomplishment. Along with this notion, the importance of polarity between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation must be taken into an account.

Intrinsic motivation refers to an individual's eagerness and enthusiasm in doing and participating in specific pursuits owing to the fact they find them intriguing and gratifying. Extrinsic motivation, if anything, is an inclination to engage in activities for reasons unconcerned with the activity. These motivations can include the anticipation of a reward or punishment, such as passing an exam or receiving a high grade. To put it simply, intrinsic motivation is the desire to

perform a task for the sake of doing it as intrinsically driven people do and practice any kind of task or hobby because it is delightful to them. On the contrary, people with extrinsic motivation, perform a certain task or activity as a method of achieving their goals (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996).

3. METHODOLOGY

This small scale study incorporates qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2018), the collected data in qualitative research are based on words taken from a small group of individuals so that that the participants' opinions and views could be recorded. This design fits perfectly for this current study since the aim of this research is to gain the participant's perception on learning the Arabic language after passing the critical period. As for choosing the participants, a technique of convenience sampling was used. A total of three students were chosen to take part in this research. All three participants are among the Malaysian students of IIUM who are currently taking the course LQ2426 Quranic Language for Human Sciences. This course is compulsory for human science students of IIUM as it is one of the requirements to graduate.

The research instrument that was used to conduct the study was interview because as mentioned by Arikunto (2010), interview is the most common instrument that is often chosen in qualitative design. Therefore, the instrument that was applied in this qualitative research is interview. Due to the current Covid-19 situation, the participants were interviewed using an online platform which is Google Meet. Each participant was interviewed separately to ensure that the data collected were authentic and reliable. During the interview, each participant was asked similar questions and every answer was recorded using the online platform.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

From the data that have been collected and analysed, the participants had no basic of the Arabic language before taking the course. Although all the three participants are Muslims and that they are familiar with the Arabic letters because it is found in the Al-Quran, they do not understand the meanings of the words recited as it is a higher level of the Arabic language.

The findings showed that all three participants viewed the journey of learning the Arabic language as difficult due compared to learning their second language, English. However, they expressed their motivation to continue learning the language as they have their own goals to achieve. This demonstrates that each participant is highly motivated to learn the second language.

As previous studies have shown, one of the main variables that plays a significant role in language learning success is motivation. Despite that, it is found that two out the three participants have similar type of motivation which is

instrumental motivation while the other one participant have integrative motivation.

The instrumental motivation being that they are motivated to get an A or A+ and to fulfill the study requirement in order to graduate. Meanwhile, the other one participant's goal of learning the Arabic language is to integrate with the language community so that she can learn more about the culture and traditions. From this, it can be deduced that are two types of motivation that influences and impacts the learners process of learning a foreign language.

5. CONCLUSION

The curriculum should be redesigned so that students can view the activities, information, and other issues from a new perspective. In conclusion, this small scale of a study incorporated a qualitative approach to investigate the perception of Malaysian language learners towards learning the Arabic language pass the critical period and to identify the type of motivation that the learners have that influenced them to learn the language. The study used interviews as the research instrument to collect the data. The findings have presented the results showing that there are some difficulties in learning a new language at an older age and the main reason that influences the learners is to receive a high mark as well as fulfilling the graduation requirement that was put upon by the institution.

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