

## Challenges in Learning to Speak Arabic

Sueraya Che Haron\* Ismaiel Hassanien Ahmed  
Arifin Mamat Wan Rusli Wan Ahmad Fouad Mahmoud M. Rawash  
Faculty of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia

### Abstract

This paper describes a study to investigate the challenges and obstacles to speaking Arabic faced by good and poor Malay speakers of Arabic. The study used individual and focus group interviews with 14 participants to elicit data. The findings revealed 2 types of obstacles, namely, internal and external obstacles. Internal obstacles refer to the limitations that come from the learners' own selves, knowledge and skills; while external obstacles refer to the constraints that originate from the outside, such as the lack of a supportive environment and sufficient opportunity to speak Arabic. Both good and poor Malay speakers of Arabic felt hampered more by the internal problems than by the external problems. However, it was noted that the good speakers faced more language-related problems than other internal issues, while the poor speakers revealed more internal shortcomings such as lack of confidence and self-esteem.

**Keywords:** Arabic language, language learning strategy, problems in learning speaking skills, speaking skills.

### 1 Introduction

Most studies on the factors contributing to the problem of Arabic speaking skill share similar findings. Some of these are: a) lack of practice, b) poor vocabulary, c) poor learning environment, d) low self-confidence, e) lack of partners to communicate, f) poor command of Arabic grammar, and g) shyness and feeling intimidated (Nafi, 1995; Tarmizi, 1997; Ismail, 1999; Hasanah, 2001; Anida, 2003; Amilrudin, 2003; Khalid 2004; Mohd. Zaidi, 2005; Zawawi et al., 2005, and Siti Ikbal, 2006).

The researchers presented different views on Arabic-friendly environments in schools and higher institutions, especially outside the classroom. Nafi (1995) reported that the Arabic language teachers at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) Matriculation Centre, described the environment at the (IIUM) as conducive to the development of Arabic speaking skills. This became evident ever since the rule that Arabic was to be spoken at all times, inside as well as outside the educational setting was lifted. In addition, there were co-curricular activities such as study circles that require the students to speak in Arabic. However, these claims were found to be inconsistent with the students' responses on the same matter. The students commented that the environment at the IIUM was not conducive enough to support the development of Arabic speaking skills.

Mohd. Rizuan (2002) asserted that the school environment was conducive for students to practice speaking Arabic. His claim was based on an observation conducted in some government and federal religious secondary schools in Melaka, Negeri Sembilan and Selangor. However, the claim was contended by Siti Ikbal (2006); her findings refuted the existence of such environment in schools. Her contention was that the lack of practice of the Arabic Language as a medium of communication was the core issue. Arabic was mainly used during class meetings and lessons with teachers, as reported earlier by Tarmizi (1997), Hasanah (2001), Anida (2003) and Amilrudin (2003). This was corroborated further by Zawawi et al. (2005) who stated that the optimum environment for promoting the use of foreign languages was unavailable in Malaysia. The spectrum of dominance is claimed mostly by the Malay language, the English language and other ethnic languages, for these are the most popular media of communication in Malaysian society. Foreign language learners in Malaysia, especially the learners of Arabic, Japanese, and other L2/FL are normally unmotivated to use these foreign languages in communication due to the strong mastery of their first language, thus contributing to their weakness in their foreign language speaking skill.

Most students do not exert much effort to improve their Arabic speaking skill (Khalid, 2004). According to Amilrudin (2003), this problem is pervasive, including even the advanced students, as they are extremely shy to speak Arabic, anxious of being ridiculed and accused of being show-offs. He further found that most students never used additional Arabic materials besides the textbook, be they printed or electronic, such as magazines, newspapers, radio, television, or the internet, in the quest to improve their Arabic speaking skill. Mohd. Zaidi (2005), on the contrary, reported that students in his study performed many activities to support their learning, like reading Arabic magazines and books, watching Arabic movies, memorizing Arabic vocabularies, answering questions in Arabic, speaking Arabic with friends, asking questions in Arabic, participating in Arabic language contests. Siti Ikbal (2006) suggested that the students' rationale for learning Arabic could be the source of their weakness in speaking the language. She reported that students' objective of learning Arabic was mainly to enable them to read religious books, understanding the Quran, as well as reading Arabic literature and poetry. Ainol Madziah and Isarji (2009) discovered from a focus group discussion that the main objective of learning Arabic language was to understand *Quran* because it is the language of the *Quran*. Similar findings were reported earlier

by Nafi (1995), that the students' primary objective of learning Arabic was to understand Islam, secondly, to prepare for a career where the Arabic language is required, and thirdly, from the advice of family and friends, as well as their own personal interests. Kaseh, Nil Farakh and Zeti (2010:79) found that religious motivation played an important role in the Muslim learners of Arabic as they stated "Muslim learners' were introjected and identified regulation so strongly influenced by the religion of Islam, these religious motives with extrinsic origins have been so internalized by the learners that statistically, the items transcend the boundaries between subscales to cluster together with other religious motives irrespective of the items' originally hypothesized origins." Nevertheless, all of these require a good command of Arabic grammar and comprehension, rather than just the ability to communicate.

## **2 Methods**

This was a case study employing individual interviews and focus group interviews to elicit data. The case study mode was chosen because it clearly delineates what is to be studied and what is not to be studied. The study focused on Malay learners only. The parameters involved, on the one hand, a differentiation between Malay learners and the rest, and, on the other, between Malay learners who are good Arabic speakers, and Malay learners who are poor speakers of Arabic. If there is no clear differentiation, the discussion might simply turn out to be about the average speaker and the comparison might not be valid. Furthermore, a case study hints at deeper exploration, and offers a thick description of the case being investigated.

### **2.1 Selection of participants**

To guide in the identification of an information-rich sample, the researchers began by listing all essential criteria for the participants before locating a unit matching the list. The first step was to clarify the meaning of 'Malay'. In the study 'Malay learners' refers to Malaysians who have never been abroad. Malay learners of Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, South Thailand, and so forth, were not included in the group. The rationale for limiting Malay learners to Malaysians only is to establish some degree of congruence in the Arabic Language learning background, environment and experience. Malay learners of other countries might have received their Arabic Language education differently from their counterparts in Malaysia. Their distinct Arabic learning experiences could result in different levels of ability in Arabic speaking skill. Furthermore, those who obtained their formal study abroad from the Middle Eastern countries presumably have better Arabic speaking skills, as the consequence of direct exposure and immersion in the environment of indigenous Arab native speakers.

Secondly, the Malay learners were current students of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), comprising year one to year four students. Malay learners from other universities and school children were excluded from the list. Thirdly, the selection of good Arabic speakers among the Malay learners disregarded any Arabic language-based specialization, since the number was small compared with that of the moderate or poor Malay Arabic speakers. However, the selection was made from the Arabic Language-based specializations such as Arabic Language and Literature, Islamic Revealed Knowledge, and Teaching Arabic for non-Native Speakers. As for the poor Arabic speakers group, the study selected Malay learners from the Arabic Language-based specializations. Fourthly, the researchers applied the Arabic Placement Test (APT) results announced by the Centre for Languages and pre-Academic Development (CELPAD) of the IIUM to select good and poor Malay speakers of Arabic. Good speakers of Arabic were those who scored band 7 (out of 10) and above. According to the scheme issued by CELPAD, they were described as demonstrating high proficiency and fluency while speaking. They were also able to express their thoughts very clearly and succinctly, commit no or very few mistakes in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The poor Malay speakers of Arabic included those who scored band 4.5 (out of 10) and below. They were characterized as being unable to express or convey their thoughts clearly, made many mistakes in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. In general, their communicative interaction was very problematic. Their lack of proficiency was usually characterized as being totally clueless and not able to communicate in the Arabic Language at all.

### **2.2 Data collection and analysis**

As mentioned earlier, the researchers conducted individual interviews and focus group interviews to collect the data. For the individual interviews, the researchers interviewed six participants. Three of them were good Malay speakers of Arabic, and the other three were poor Malay speakers of Arabic. As for the focus group interviews, the researcher conducted two focus group interviews consisting of four participants each. The total number of participants involved in this study was 14. The interviews conducted were semi-structured. The questions that formed the main body of the interview required the participants to report on the strategies performed in the classroom to develop Arabic speaking skills. The individual interviews were audio-recorded while the focus group interviews were audio- and video-recorded. The data collected were then transcribed verbatim into texts and coded manually to elicit the main ideas and themes. The researcher began the analysis of the data by using the transcriptions of the verbal information from the interviews recorded as the body of material for content analysis.

The main ideas were then transferred into the coding template to be coded and assigned themes.

### 2.3 Validation strategies

For this study, the researchers engaged four validation strategies; a) multiple methods triangulation strategy, b) member checking, c) peer examination, and d) rich description of the findings. Such amount is considered sufficient as Creswell (2000) recommends that researchers engage in at least two of those validation strategies. After the data analysis, the researchers proceeded with the member checking procedure, whereby they took the tentative results back to the participants, asking for their reviews, to check if the main ideas and themes emerged corresponded to what they have said during the interviews. The necessary correction was made after the exercise. The study proceeded with a peer examination procedure whereby they sought help from two colleagues who were well-experienced in teaching the Arabic Language, including the language skills to recheck and provide comments on the main ideas and themes that emerged.

### 3 Findings

*(MGAS refers to Malay good speakers of Arabic and MPAS refers to Malay poor speakers of Arabic).*

The findings revealed 2 types of obstacles, namely internal and external obstacles. Internal obstacle refers to the limitation that comes from the learners' own selves, knowledge and skills, while external obstacle refers to the constraint that comes from the outside such as the lack of a supportive environment and ample opportunity to speak Arabic.

In terms of knowledge, vocabulary was reported to be the biggest obstacle, as mentioned by 5 MGAS and 3 MPAS, followed by the limited command of Arabic grammar, as mentioned by 2 MGAS and 1 MPAS. The least reported obstacle was the shortage of content in speaking, as mentioned by 1 MPAS. This finding corroborates the finding of Ismail (1997), who found that the lack of vocabulary knowledge would hinder reading comprehension. However, Tanveer (2007) found that in terms of linguistic difficulty, pronunciation was the first most important aspect that his participants was challenged with while attempting to speak a FL/L2 followed by grammar. Besides the inadequacy of vocabulary, the present research has identified another problem similar in nature—i.e., the problem of being too cautious to apply the technique during speaking. This problem was normally found among the MPAS specializing in the Arabic language. According to MPAS 5, his specialization made him extremely cautious when choosing the right vocabulary to be used in speaking. It takes him a long time to figure out the correct grammatical usage. As a result, he hardly speaks Arabic. He believes that the Arabic language learner should be perfect in these aspects. Hence, he feels his grammar must be impeccable before speaking the language. Similarly, Horwitz (1987), in her survey of 32 ESL learners regarding their beliefs about language learning, found that a minority of learners who were shy and over-concerned with accent and correctness, would probably handicap their attempts to participate in communicative activities. Tanveer (2007) explained that learners who fear making mistakes always regard learning and speaking a FL in the classroom as a problem for them. They are shy and nervous about “appearing awkward, foolish and incompetent” before their peers and other learners. (Jones, 2004:31, as cited in Tanveer, 2007:42). The fear of making mistakes has been found to be strongly linked with the learners' concern to save their positive image or impression in the mind of their teachers and peers (Tanveer, 2007:42). This is also related to the problem of ‘perfectionism’ (Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002). As Jones (2004: 32, as cited in Tanveer, 2007:44) observed, a learner's mistake “may bring about humiliating punishment from the teacher under the concentrated gaze of one's peers”.

The lack of vocabulary is closely related to the limited content of speaking. Sometimes learners might have ideas to share with partners but are unable to express them with suitable words. At other times, learners may have the right vocabulary but lack the ideas to apply them. A limited vocabulary and a good command of grammar are not sufficient to boost the learners' self-confidence and courage to speak in Arabic. The lack of self-confidence was a very serious issue among the MPAS, as evidenced twelve 12 times by them, while courage was mentioned only once. This problem, however, was rare among the MGAS, as only 1 of them mentioned it. MPAS 6, on the other hand, complained of his failure to engage his partner in conversing in Arabic. He attributed this to his lack of vocabulary; he struggled to express his ideas. His native speaker friends started to lose interest in conversing with him due to his slow response, and they are tired of having to constantly translate Arabic words for him. Surapa and Channarong (2011) described this situation as discontinuous interaction strategies for conveying a message to the interlocutor. They further explained that this strategy is normally used in the communication breakdown for example when the speaker fails to get the message across to the interlocutor. The speaker keeps quiet for a while just to think of the way to convey the message appropriately. Lightbown and Spada (2006: 39 as cited in Tanveer, 2007:50) offered another interpretation for the above problem by alluding that “many words do not come out when required to speak in hurry” as learners can process only a limited amount of information at a time. The silent duration is risky as speakers might lose their friends' interest to continue speaking with them. Horwitz (1987) stressed that weakness in establishing contacts will really disappoint speakers.

There was an extra internal problem mentioned by MGAS, namely that of skill. Skill refers to additional

elements that can embellish one's speech, for example, spontaneity, fluency, proficiency and native-like speaking. Of these, spontaneity and achieving native-like speaking skill, were considered most problematic, as reported by 2 MGAS. Lack of fluency and proficiency were considered as next in difficulty as mentioned by 1 MGAS. The Arabic language is totally different from the Malay language or any other language. MGAS 3 expressed his disappointment with the majority of Malay learners who tend to speak a 'Malayanized' Arabic. He commented that the Malay learners practice Arabic among themselves, and they are hesitant to approach the native speakers to learn how the natives speak their language.

Ok, my main problem em... they cannot, they are too influenced with the Malay structure. He cannot run away from the Malay structure. So when he speaks, it seems improper when speaking in Arabic. That's because he followed the Malay language dialect.

Results showed that they were barely understood by the natives. As for MGAS 2, the problem was caused by her lack of reading Arabic books, which she claimed as important to expose herself to the Arabic language structure and style.

As for external problems, 3 MGAS mentioned that the Malaysian environment is not conducive to the development of Arabic speaking skills. The environmental lack leads to the shortage of opportunity to speak Arabic, as mentioned by 1 MGAS. This concurs with the previous findings by Zawawi et al. (2005) which stated that the environment promoting the optimum use of the FL in Malaysia is conspicuous by its absence. It is dominated mainly by the Malay language, the English language and other ethnic languages, for these are the most popular media of communication in Malaysian society. FL learners in Malaysia, especially the learners of Arabic, Japanese and others languages, are normally least motivated to use the language in communication because they already have strong mastery of their first language, thus contributing to the weakness in the FL speaking skills. Siti Ikbal (2006) also affirmed that there is no stimulating environment in schools, especially outside the classroom. She asserted that the Arabic language is commonly used in the classroom only, for example during meetings with teachers. Similar findings were also reported by Tarmizi (1997), Hasanah (2001), Anida (2003) and Amilrudin (2003).

The participants listed several factors that might contribute to the problems mentioned, such as the weakness of the teaching method, the syllabus, the curriculum, teachers and the attitude of learners. The Malaysian system of Arabic education emphasizes too much on achievement rather than mastery. The syllabus focuses mainly on grammar and Arabic literature, and most Arabic subjects rely on memorization and translation. Sometimes learners are required to memorize the lengthy table of pronouns without really understanding how to use them. This kind of learning experience limits the opportunity to practice Arabic speaking in schools. The present study corroborates the findings of Siti Ikbal (2006) who claimed that all subjects in the Arabic language programs, including Communicative Arabic, are not designed to serve communication purposes. The focus is primarily on understanding Arabic grammar and comprehension. Students are only exposed to Arabic speaking indirectly during other lessons like *Insya'* (Essay writing) and *Muṭala'ah* (comprehension). On top of that, speaking skill is not assessed orally in the examination, even though it is included in the Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR).

The system also seems to have failed in producing a good generation of teachers. In spite of the fact that most teachers teaching Arabic at schools are university graduates, and most of them specialized in the Arabic language from local or Middle Eastern universities, they are not competent in practical skills like Arabic speaking and writing. The Arabic language is taught, ironically, in the Malay language, as revealed by MPAS 1, MGAS 1, 6 and 7. This finding reinforces the earlier studies conducted by Siti Ikbal (2006) and Mustafa (2004), that the Malay language is predominantly used during the Communicative Arabic Language lessons. Both researchers suggested that teachers' low command of Arabic speaking skill limits the potential to approach Arabic Language lessons communicatively.

Most Malay learners seem to put no effort to create an Arabic environment that could help them to develop the Arabic speaking skill. Perhaps they do not feel the necessity to use Arabic as a medium of communication because they are living among the Malays. This problem was addressed by Khalid (2004) as he reported that most students involved in his study did not place much effort to improve their Arabic speaking skill. According to Amilrudin (2003) most students admitted that they never used additional Arabic materials besides the textbook, be it printed or electronic, like magazines, newspapers, radio, television, the internet, and so on, to improve their Arabic speaking skill. On the contrary, Zaidi (2005) reported that students in his study performed many activities to support their learning, like reading Arabic magazines, watching Arabic movies, memorizing Arabic vocabularies, answering questions in Arabic, speaking Arabic with friends, asking questions in Arabic, participating in Arabic language contests, and reading Arabic books.

In conclusion, the findings have shown that the participants were aware of their problems to develop their Arabic speaking skills. The problems mentioned were not new as they were revealed by the previous studies as well. Similar to the findings on the pre-requisites, both the MGAS and the MPAS expressed more internal problems than external problems. However, it was noted that the MGAS faced more language problems than other internal problems, while the MPAS faced more self problems than other internal problems.

#### 4 Discussion

The researcher believes that language is the main problem for the MGAS, because it is required to achieve the advanced level of Arabic speaking skill, as aspired to by most of them. Having a good command of the Arabic language, for example, sufficient acquisition of Arabic vocabulary, a good command of Arabic grammar such as Arabic Syntax and Arabic Morphology, will surely enhance their language skill, thus enabling them to gain courage and confidence to speak. As such, learners will be willing to speak, make mistakes, be corrected and improve their language competence. Self-confidence helps them to be calm and relaxed, eliminate or at least reduce their shyness, nervousness, and anxiety to face people. These positive attitudes will motivate them to use various strategies to utilize whatever facilities and opportunities available around them to create the optimum environment and opportunity to speak Arabic. In other words they become interested to practice what they have learnt orally. When they realize that they are able to speak, they will be excited with their new speaking ability, thus establishing more positive attitudes towards Arabic speaking, such as discipline, motivation, determination, diligence, creativity and so on. These attitudes were evidently shown by the MGAS throughout their efforts to develop Arabic speaking skill. These attitudes will definitely contribute to meaningful and effective strategies inside as well as outside the classroom. According to Ellis (1994:555) "successful learners appear to use learning strategies more frequently and in qualitatively different ways than learners who are less successful." That is why external obstacles such as opportunity and environment do not matter much for the MGAS as they can create them by themselves.

As for the MPAS they put lesser priority on the role of language as the main challenge. An advanced level of Arabic speaking skill cannot be achieved without knowledge about the language. Good speaking skill does not only mean speaking fluently but also speaking correctly and to achieve the required knowledge about the language, especially grammar and vocabulary. The researcher believes that the MPAS is missing one important element to become good Arabic speakers that is knowledge about the language. It seems like the MPAS are emphasizing their weaknesses and are trying to fix it ahead of everything. As stressed earlier, having a good command of the Arabic language is crucial to becoming good speakers of Arabic. Without it learners cannot acquire good speaking skills. This is because in order to say something learners must act on their knowledge of vocabulary to form a sentence, as well as grammar to assemble the sentences correctly in the conversation. When they realize the fact that they are weak in their speaking skills, they will lose courage and confidence to speak. Without courage learners will surely be reluctant to speak Arabic with anyone because they are anxious to ensure the correctness of the language, they fear making mistakes during speaking, or being ridiculed by their partners, unwilling to be corrected and hesitant to improve their speaking skills. As a result, they become extremely shy and nervous to speak Arabic. All these negative emotions kill their excitement, and when there is no excitement they establish no positive attitudes towards their Arabic speaking skills. Consequently they become less creative, less motivated, less disciplined, less determined to look for opportunities or the environment to practice speaking Arabic. These attitudes were obviously manifested by the MPAS throughout their efforts to develop Arabic speaking skill. These attitudes affect the quality and the quantity of the strategies performed by the MPAS. No wonder the level of Arabic speaking skill of the MPAS is different from that of the MGAS, although they share similar perceptions and strategies.

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