

Attitude towards Learning Oral Arabic as a Foreign Language among Malaysian Students

Yusri, G.^{1*}, Rahimi, N. M.², Shah, P. M.² and Wan Haslina, W.³

¹*Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia*

²*Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia*

³*Faculty of Medicine, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 56000 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

The Arabic course in UiTM is an elective course offered to undergraduate students. Students' attitude towards language learning has been identified to influence the learning process. This study was aimed to determine (1) students' attitude level in learning oral Arabic at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia, and (2) the differences in attitude level among students with different prior experience and gender. It was a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative study using questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) involving 445 subjects who had been selected using stratified random sampling technique. As for qualitative data, 13 interviews were conducted. This study found that (1) the attitude level among UiTM students was high. It was also discovered that the cognitive and affective components were high while conative was moderate. (2) There were statistically significant differences in the attitude level among the students with different prior experience and gender. In specific, more experienced learners and female learners were found to have higher positive attitude as compared to their counterparts. It was thus recommended that the teaching approach used should be appropriate to students' prior experience and gender. Appropriate approach is therefore vital in moulding students' behaviour, as this will consequently affect their performance in learning spoken Arabic. The uses of collaborative learning strategies as well as portfolio and e-portfolio assessments are suggested based on the individuals' performance.

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E-mail addresses:

gy_ar@yahoo.com (Yusri, G.), nrahimi@ukm.my (Rahimi, N. M.),

drparila@hotmail.com (Shah, P. M.), afifyad@yahoo.co.uk (Wan

Haslina, W.)

* Corresponding author

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INTRODUCTION

The Arabic course as a third language in UiTM is an elective subject offered to undergraduate students. Starting from June 1999, UiTM has improved the third language courses to become one of the university's requirement subjects, making it compulsory to all first degree students. This means the students need to choose one of the third language courses offered and complete it before their graduation. Meanwhile, two hours is allocated for Arabic language classes every week. Cumulatively, within three semesters of the course, the students will have six credit hours and this equals to approximately 84 hours of meeting, with 28 hours of meeting in every semester (the Academic Affairs Division, 2009).

However, the students' learning backgrounds were different in terms of their prior experiences in learning Arabic and the faculties they belonged to. Some of them had years of experience in learning Arabic at school, while others did not have any experience at all. For them, learning Arabic at UiTM was the first step. During formal teaching, all these students were combined in the same classroom consisting of mixed abilities and experienced learners. According to previous research (Ghazali Yusri, Nik Mohd Rahimi, & Parilah, 2010b; Ghazali Yusri & Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2009), a combination of classes comprising of students with mixed abilities has some negative effects towards some students. In addition, according to the Causal Attribution Theory, individual factors such as prior

experience and knowledge are expected to influence the level of self-efficacy for learning and students' perceptions to succeed in their learning (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). The different gender has also been found to influence the level of motivation and attitude among students (Bembenuddy, 2007; Lundeberg & Mohan, 2008; Ray, Garavalia, & Murdock, 2003).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The attitude towards a language refers to the perception of a community towards that language such as whether a particular language is interesting and easy to learn. It can also be influenced by some factors related to economic, social, politic, culture and religiosity (Norizah, 2005). According to Socio-Educational Theory (Gardner, 1985), attitude is part and partial of motivation. There are two types of attitude in language, namely, the attitude towards language learning and the attitude towards language community. The former refers to the attitude towards the language itself and the language teachers, while the latter refers to the attitude towards a language community such as Arab or Malay. Gardner (1985) divided attitude into three main components, namely, cognitive, affective and conative. The cognitive component refers to a person's belief towards a language, while the affective component refers to his emotional reaction according to his previous belief towards the language, and the conative component is associated with his behavioural actions

towards his belief. According to Yorio (1986), perception and belief can influence learners conatively towards learning. For instance, if students' perception towards a subject is low, they will not give their full focus and effort towards that particular subject. Alkusairy (1998) found that the main problems faced by Malaysian students in speaking Arabic were fear and shyness of making mistakes due to their low self confidence.

On the contrary, experienced learners were expected to positively influence less experienced learners (Burke, 2007; Holmes, 2003) due to the collaborative learning activities (Burke, 2007; Ghaith & Diab, 2008; Holmes, 2003; Ohta & Nakaone, 2004; Rodríguez-Sabater, 2005; Stepp-Greany, 2002, 2004; Yoshida, 2008; Zha, Kelly, Park, & Fitzgerald, 2006) and also their use of peer learning strategy (Lynch, 2006; Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1991; Van Meter & Stevens, 2000; Yoshida, 2008). Meanwhile, dialogues among students can also solve many learning problems (Ohta & Nakaone, 2004) which cannot be solved if they study on their own. Therefore, according to Burke (2007), high ability learners should not be separated from low ability learners in order to initiate communications among them. Moreover, the number of students in a class should not be high and in fact, it should not exceed 25 students.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Oral skills consist of listening and speaking. Generally, research in oral skills has been

carried out widely either at the international level (see for instance, Brown & Yule, 1983; Buck, 2001; Bygate, 1987; Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Elkhafaifi, 2005; Finnochiaro & Brumfit, 1983; Fulcher, 2003; Haycraft, 1984; Hughes, 2002; James, 1998; Rost, 2002) or at the national level (see for example, Baskaran, 1990; Khatijah Rohani & Abdul Aziz, 1987; Raminah & Rahim, 1986). At the national level, there were studies either solely on listening Arabic (Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2004) or speaking Arabic (Zawawi, 2008). Meanwhile, at UiTM level, previous research (see Norhayuza, Naimah, Sahabudin, & Ibrahim, 2004; Sahabudin, 2003) generally concluded that UiTM students were still weak in oral Arabic. Azman and Ahmad Nazuki (2010), on the other hand, stressed on the importance of the use of transliteration in learning Arabic at UiTM to help students in mastering the language.

There were two previous studies investigating UiTM students' attitude in oral Arabic context (Ghazali Yusri *et al.*, 2010b; Ghazali Yusri & Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2009). However, these studies were entirely based on qualitative data and not meant to generalize the findings into UiTM population. Therefore, this study is a further investigation on UiTM students' attitude to previous studies (Ghazali Yusri, *et al.*, 2010b; Ghazali Yusri & Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2009) in a broader perspective. It was aimed to investigate students' attitude level in UiTM by using quantitative data descriptively and inferentially, supported by insight findings through interviews.

This paper discusses some classroom implications that might be considered to improve the Arabic language instructional practices in UiTM. Meanwhile, there are other previous studies investigating some components of self-regulated learning strategies among UiTM students in oral Arabic context such as motivation and test anxiety (Ghazali Yusri, Nik Mohd Rahimi, & Parilah, 2010a) and the effect of different courses on the use of self-regulated learning strategies (Ghazali Yusri & Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2010).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addressed two main research questions:

1. To what extent did students have positive attitude in learning oral Arabic at UiTM?
2. Are there significant differences in the attitude level among students with different prior experiences and gender?

METHODOLOGY

This study was aimed to investigate students' attitude in learning oral Arabic at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia. It was a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative study using a self-report questionnaire - *The Attitude/Motivation Test Battery* (AMTB) - developed by Gardner *et al.* (1985) and interviews with 13 students. This study only used the AMTB scales, which were related to the attitudes towards learning French and were then adapted to

measure students' attitude towards learning Arabic. Students responded to a seven-point Likert scale from 'not at all true of me' to 'very true of me'. Before distributing the questionnaires to the students, the scales were translated into the Malay Language because all the students are Malays. All items were also modified according to the research objective to measure their oral Arabic skills. The questionnaires were also referred to some parties for validity purposes, and these included: (1) three language experts for translation validity; (2) five experts for content validity; and (3) three students for face validity. A study had also been conducted to determine the internal consistency of the items. The alpha value for these scales was .72, which was accepted by scholars (Sekaran, 2003).

A sample of 445 students was selected from a population of 2600 students from the third level of the Arabic course as a third language at UiTM. According to Krejcie and Morgan (1970), this number is suitable to generalize the findings into a population. The samples were selected based on the stratified random sampling because the students came from different faculties. A disproportionate sampling technique was also used because the number of students' enrolment in the course was different from one faculty to another. The collected data were analysed using SPSS version 11.5. In order to analyze means of the scales descriptively, their interpretation is as given in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
Categories of means for seven Likert scales
(Adapted from Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2004)

Mean score	Category
5.01 to 7.00	High
3.01 to 5.00	Moderate
1.00 to 3.00	Low

Meanwhile, this study was also supported by 13 series of interviews with the students. The students were selected based on purposeful sampling technique using maximal variation sampling technique. It also took into consideration their prior experience in learning Arabic and the faculty clusters they belonged to. The acquired interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using NVIVO7 software in order to establish the relevant themes which were then referred to the experts for *Cohen Kappa* agreement. Before the interview, all the respondents were informed that the interview scope was only on oral Arabic context and not other language skills.

RESULTS

Table 2 shows that students' attitude was high ($M=5.14$, $SD=.909$). The study also found that affective component was high ($M=5.46$, $SD=.977$) and it was even higher than cognitive ($M=5.12$, $SD=1.241$) and conative ($M=4.51$, $SD=1.455$). Meanwhile, the affective and cognitive components were also at a higher level compared to conative, which was moderate.

A one-way between groups analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was conducted to explore the impacts of prior experience

on students' level of attitude. The students were divided into four groups according to their prior experiences. The first group ($N=110$) comprised students without any experience, the second group ($N=122$) consisted of students with six years of experience in primary school, the third group ($N=96$) had students with nine years of experience (six years in primary school and three years in secondary school) and the fourth group ($N=127$) had students with 11 years of experience (six years in primary school and five years in secondary school). The different numbers of the samples between the groups did not exceed the ratio of 1:1.5, which was crucial to compare means between the groups (Coakes & Steed, 2001; Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006). The Levene's test for homogeneity of variances for the data was $p=.020$ ($p<.05$), showing that the homogeneity of variance assumption was violated. However, according to some scholars (see for instance, Coakes & Steed, 2001; Field, 2000; Hair, *et al.*, 2006; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), this study could still be carried out due to the large number of the samples used ($N=455$).

TABLE 2
Mean and Standard Deviation of Attitude towards Learning Oral Arabic

Scales	M	SD
Affective	5.46	.977
Cognitive	5.12	1.241
Conative	4.51	1.455
Overall attitude	5.14	.909

Table 3 shows that there was a statistically significant difference in the attitude based on students' prior experience: $F(3, 451) = 13.025, p = .000$. A post-hoc analysis (as shown in Table 4) was conducted using Tukey to determine the difference between the groups. It was found that group 4 ($M = 5.44, SD = .823$) and group 3 ($M = 5.31, SD = .833$) were significantly higher than group 1 ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.027$) and group 2 ($M = 4.96, SD = .808$) (as shown in Table 5).

Apart from that, a Mann-Whitney U test was also conducted to explore the impact

of gender on the students' level of attitude. This non-parametric test was an alternative for t-test and was chosen because the difference between the males and females exceeded the ratio of 1:1.5, which was vital to compare means between the groups (Coakes & Steed, 2001; Hair, *et al.*, 2006). Table 6 shows that there is a significant difference between the males and females ($N = 455$) = $-3.229, p = .001$ ($p < .05$), of which the females' mean rank (240.60) was higher than that of the males (196.82).

TABLE 3
One-way ANOVA - Tests of the Between-Subject Effect

Effect	Dependent Variable	F value	df1	df2	Sig.*
Prior experience	Attitude	13.025	3	451	.000*

*significant at $p < 0.05$

TABLE 4
Post hoc analysis - the Multiple comparison between the groups

Groups I	Groups J	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.*
1	2	-.1440	.11501	.594
	3	-.4904	.12217	.000*
	4	-.6283	.11393	.000*
2	3	-.3465	.11934	.020*
	4	-.4843	.11089	.000*
3	4	-.1378	.11830	.649

*significant at $p < 0.05$

TABLE 5
Descriptive analysis of the effects (prior experience) for attitude

Effect	Dependent Variables	Groups	N	M	SD
Prior experience	Attitude	1	110	4.82	1.027
		2	122	4.96	.808
		3	96	5.31	.833
		4	127	5.44	.823

TABLE 6
Mann-Whitney U test for attitude

Effect	Dependent Variables	Z value	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	Groups	N	Mean Rank
Gender	Attitude	-3.229	.001	Male	131	196.82
				Female	324	240.60

DISCUSSION

This study found that the students' attitude towards learning oral Arabic was high. This study also revealed that the affective and cognitive components were high compared to conative which was moderate. This finding indicated that students' attitude was high emotionally and cognitively, but not in the conative component. This situation was justified through the interviews. Through the interviews, some respondents showed their positive attitude towards learning oral Arabic. Cognitively, they thought that Arabic is unique and beautiful. They were also enthusiastic and amazed to speak Arabic even though this was mostly using easy sentences and words. Moreover, based on the interviews, some factors were identified to have caused students' attitude to become conatively moderate. Firstly, peers' perception towards Arabic practices. Some of them, especially the non Arabic course takers, seemed to have a negative impression towards students who were practising oral Arabic outside the classrooms, and thus, making those students to feel upset and not at ease to speak Arabic. They preferred to speak Arabic with their regular speaking partners, and this might limit their chances of using the language orally. This finding is similar to that of Ghaith and Diab (2008)

who found that students hesitated to use their language in their learning environment when they were feeling depressed and annoyed. If students' community perception towards Arabic language practices becomes positive, the students' conative attitude towards speaking will also be positive as well, and this will further encourage them to speak Arabic. This finding is similar to the previous studies conducted by Taha (2007), Ghaith and Diab (2008), and Young (2005).

Taha (2007) investigated students' attitude towards Arabic after the September 11 incident. He concluded that international students' attitude towards Arabic was more positive as compared to American students due to their higher use of the language. Ghaith and Diab (2008) concluded that students who were enthusiastic in their learning and their interactions with their peers and teachers showed a more positive attitude towards language learning. On the other hand, Young (2005) stated that faculties which offered more interaction opportunities among students would also contribute to a more positive attitude among students in language learning. Through interviews, the oral Arabic use among UiTM students was still not encouraging, and they admitted the lack of usage in oral practices. Some students also admitted that they only

studied the course when exams were just around the corner.

Another factor contributing to the moderate level of conative was the difficulties in mastering Arabic language, especially among less experienced students. Based on the interviews conducted, less experienced students affirmed that Arabic language was difficult to learn, even though they were enthusiastic to learn it. Therefore, the difficulty factor seemed to have caused this component to be at a moderate level as compared to cognitive and affective.

Meanwhile, there were some factors which led to high level of cognitive and affective components among the students, and these were religiosity, culture and language status in the Malay community (Csizer & Dörnyei, 2005; Norizah, 2005). Based on interviews, all the respondents affirmed that oral Arabic was important to them. Although some other students did not agree with the importance of the language, it was found that this was due to the low credit hours allocated for the subject and not due to the language itself. The importance of the language to them might be due to the respondents' religion, which is Islam. All the respondents are Muslims and they have been exposed to the importance of Arabic through their religious rituals, such as reciting al-Quran and prayers. In addition, the cultural factor in Malaysia, which uses this language very frequently in daily activities, might also cause them to get used to Arabic. In fact, learning Arabic in Malaysia cannot be separated from its culture, especially in the Malay Muslim community. Islam has been

identified as the main motivation in learning Arabic (Kaseh, Nik Farakh, & Zeti Akhtar, 2010) and this has also become one of the learning strategies used very frequently by students (Kamarul Shukri, Mohd Amin, Nik Mohd Rahimi, & Zamri, 2009). This noble and sacred status contributes to a high positive attitude among students affectively and cognitively, and this is similar to the finding reported in some previous studies (see Csizer & Dörnyei, 2005; Norizah, 2005; Rueda & Chen, 2005).

Although quantitative data showed that students' cognitive and affective attitude was high, through interviews, it seemed that there were some students who did not realize the importance of the Arabic course. They only put their effort to do revisions on the subject for the purpose of sitting for their test. It was even more interesting to discover that these respondents were less experienced students who should have logically put more effort in order to compete with more experienced students. This finding is similar to that of Lynch (2008) who concluded that it was due to students' failure to internalize the professional ethics of their major. Based on interviews, some factors were identified to have contributed to this consequence. Firstly, the low credit hours for the Arabic courses (i.e. two credit hours per semester) did not influence much on the students' CGPA as compared to other courses having higher credit hours. Therefore, students with high extrinsic motivation would not prioritize this subject and exhibit low attitude towards learning oral Arabic cognitively and affectively

as well as conatively, even though they admitted the importance of this language at the same time. Dornyei (2001) warned that one of the factors demotivating students from participating in learning tasks was performing activities, which did not have any meaningful value in their life - in this case, their CGPA - at least from their perception. Based on the interviews, extrinsically motivated students seemed to limit their target to just pass the course with minimal grades because they seemed to calculate the low effect of the subject on their CGPA, which carried only two credit hours.

The second factor was related to Arabic lecturers. It has been discussed before that Arabic is the official language of Islam. Muslim students respect this language as it is associated to Islam. Therefore, this respect was also shown to the lecturers teaching this subject. Through the interviews conducted, the students had a positive perception towards their Arabic lecturers. They assumed that the lecturers found it very hard to fail them in the subject. Thus, making them feel comfortable, at least to pass the course and not to repeat it in the next semester. However, the number of students with this kind of perception seemed to be insignificant based on the quantitative data which stated a high positive attitude among the overall students, but this type of students did exist among students.

This study also found that there were significant differences in the attitude of the students with different prior experiences. It could be concluded that the longer the

experience of a student in learning Arabic, the more positive the attitude that he/she would exhibit towards oral Arabic learning. Experience seemed to contribute in nurturing their attitude towards learning Arabic. From their experience, they knew the value of learning oral Arabic and this level had increased after years of learning experience. This attitude also increased to a certain level when they continued their studies at UiTM. On the contrary, less experienced students seemed to start nurturing their attitude from day one of their formal learning at UiTM. This was relatively late as compared to the students of the other group. Therefore, their level of attitude was significantly lower. In a class of learners with mixed prior experiences, students could be expected to react differently towards the learning process, depending on their different levels of attitude. In particular, the students with a higher level of attitude were expected to participate actively in the learning process.

Through interviews, the effect of experience was explained further. In terms of subject's difficulty, experience seemed to have given advantage to experienced learners, especially when the lessons started from the very basic Arabic. They felt that Arabic was easy to learn and they could actually master some topics that they were going to learn because they had learnt it previously at school. This kind of belief might have a positive effect towards their expectation to succeed in the course and thus increase their effort and resilience (Brophy, 1998). This result is consistent with a previous study on UiTM's motivation level

(Ghazali Yusri, Nik Mohd Rahimi, Parilah, & Wan Haslina, in press).

This particular advantage, on the other hand, seemed to be a disadvantage point for less experienced learners. They felt that Arabic was difficult to learn and therefore decreased their level of expectancy as well as their involvement in learning (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). At the same time, they also felt anxious, with low self confidence and were afraid of making mistakes in learning. This finding is consistent with the Causal Attribution Theory (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996) which stated that personal factors, such as experience and knowledge, influence students' attitude and motivation towards learning. It is also similar with the finding of Alkusairy (1998) who concluded that among the problems faced by Malaysian students in speaking Arabic were their anxiety and shyness, as well as their low confidence and fear of making mistakes while speaking.

When these less experienced students were placed together with experienced ones in a classroom, they would feel more anxious because they were surrounded by learners with high ability and this could cause them to feel the inability to compete with their peers. Even though some previous studies (Burke, 2007; Holmes, 2003) have indicated that a class of mixed ability learners seems to give positive impacts on less ability students, but this study found a reversed impact. This feeling might due to the competitive learning situation in UiTM, which is mainly based on competition and grade comparison. The negative impacts

of competitive learning situation have been discussed by many scholars such as Pintrich and Schunk (1996) and Ames (1981). They concluded that students' motivation would increase if they could perform better than their peers, and it would decrease if it happened to be vice versa. Therefore, when less experienced students start comparing their performance with other experienced peers, their motivation and attitude will become lower because they feel that they cannot compete with their counterparts.

Meanwhile, learning oral Arabic should be in a collaborative environment, whereas learning success belongs to all and not to individuals (Dornyei, 2001; Economides, 2008; Holmes, 2003; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Students share their success or failure as a reflective to their grouping tasks, and thus can positively influence on their self-perception and attitude (Burke, 2007; Ghaith & Diab, 2008; Holmes, 2003; Ohta & Nakaone, 2004; Rodríguez-Sabater, 2005; Stepp-Greany, 2002, 2004; Yoshida, 2008; Zha *et al.*, 2006). One of the factors that contributes to a competitive learning environment is the nature of oral tests which compare students' grades. During oral tests, lecturers are to give grades to their students based on a set of standard oral questions, which make no difference among the students of different abilities and prior experience. Students compete with each other to get better results. Therefore, it will put some students, especially the less experienced ones, under pressure as they have to compete with those with more experiences and higher ability. To overcome

this problem, this study suggests that the grading system be done not in a comparing manner, but based on students' individual assessment and personal improvement in learning oral Arabic. The evaluation is done for individuals and students are responsible for their learning progress and improvement, regardless of their prior experience and knowledge by using portfolio (Rhee & Pintrich, 2004) or e-portfolio assessment (Chang, Wu, & Ku, 2005) concepts.

On the other hand, this study also found that there was a statistically significant difference in the students' attitude according to their gender; the females were shown to exhibit a higher degree of attitude or a more positive attitude than their male counterparts. Therefore, lecturers should also be concerned about gender composition in their classes. They could expect their female students to perform better because of their attitude level, which was statistically shown to be significantly different and higher than the male students. Consequently, this study recommends that the lecturers conduct group activities in the classroom, and group members should be mixed in terms of their gender. In other words, collaborative grouping activities between male and female students should be implemented to nurture positive attitude towards learning (Ames, 1981; Brophy, 1998; Cajkler & Addelman, 2000; Dornyei, 2001; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996), whereas less positive attitude students are expected to be influenced by other high positive attitude students.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, UiTM students' attitude towards learning Arabic as their third language is generally at a high level. However, conative component was found to be moderate for some reasons that have been discussed earlier. Meanwhile, cognitive and affective components among the students were high due to the reasons which were figured out during the interviews. This study also found that female students and students with more experience were significantly higher in their attitude towards learning oral Arabic as compared to their other counterparts. Some pedagogical implications have been recommended; these include using appropriate teaching approaches based on students' prior experiences and gender, collaborative learning strategies and portfolio or e-portfolio assessments, which are based on individual performance.

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