Developing Language Proficiency For Academic Purposes: A Study Of Sharia Law Students In Malaysia

Mahmoud Abd El Fattah Ibrahim Essa, Isyaku Hassan, Mohd Noor Afiq Ramlee

Abstract—Understanding a second language for specific purposes is useful especially in the academic environment. In recent years, the use of Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP) has increased particularly in Malaysia where Arabic is gaining popularity. ASP has been introduced across various fields of study including Sharia Law. Arabic language proficiency used in teaching and learning Sharia Law is required. This study aims to explore the basic proficiency required for Arabic language as a medium of studying Sharia Law among final year students of Law in Malaysia. A sample of 30 final year students of Law was selected using purposive sampling technique. This sample was chosen based on the students’ ability in academic reading and their interest in enhancing Arabic language proficiency for academic purposes. The study found that Sharia Law students consider Arabic language important in studying Sharia Law. It was also found that the students have low level of Arabic language proficiency prior to their admission into the Sharia Law program. Therefore, there is a need for special Sharia Law curriculum in Arabic. The findings of this study is expected to influence the process of Arabic curriculum development and provision of academic reading materials to further suit the needs of non-native speakers of Arabic among Sharia Law students particularly in Malaysia.

Index Terms—Arabic, basic proficiency, Malaysia, reading material, second language, academic purpose.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of reading skills in the development of functional literacy and language proficiency is recognized by many researchers (Gottardo, 2002; Freel, Clark, Anderson, Gilbert, Musyoka, & Hauser, 2011). Reading skills provide students with the ability to acquire information and knowledge at different levels of education (Tahar et. al., 2010; Zin et al., 2014; Reddy, 2018). Reading skills involves the process of decoding the meaning of text (Anderson, 2015; Sohail, 2015; Howard, 2018) where an active interaction occurs between the reader's contextual knowledge and the information gathered through the text (Howard, 2018). Through reading, students could enhance their skills for knowledge acquisition. In fact, reading skills play a vital role in the process of teaching and learning, transfer of knowledge, and information acquisition (Adams & Collins, 1985; Al-Kalbi, 2015). This is equally important for students in various institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. Students are expected to acquire knowledge through reading in their respective disciplines (Geisler, 1994; Allen, 2012; Manarin, 2012; Lockhart & Soliday, 2016).

Research shows that reading enhances comprehension skills (Valeri-Gold & Demming, 2000; Lockhart & Soliday, 2016) and improves critical thinking (Paul & Elder, 2008). Reading for academic purpose, as opposed to reading for pleasure, helps students to achieve their educational goals. It involves a complex and multifaceted process in which students are vigorously engaged with a variety of reading strategies (Sohail, 2015). In comparison with listening and writing skills, reading skills are more recognized and easier to be applied in the process of learning and teaching of second language (Doležalová, 2015; Doležalová, 2015; Sohail, 2015). In Malaysia, students of Sharia Law face various challenges in developing second language for academic purposes (Howard, 2018). The students have to use Arabic language for study purposes as part of the requirements established by the Malaysian Qualification Agency (MQA) and Commission for the Rehabilitation of Legal Profession. In this case, academic reading is associated with ASP, and thus improving Arabic language proficiency among the students of Sharia Law is necessary. In some of the articles of Malaysian Civil Law, especially with regard to social issues such as inheritance and marriage. Therefore, the government realized the importance of studying Sharia Law in Arabic. The main argument is that the sources and fundamental references of Islamic Law were documented in Arabic (Sohail, 2015; Cragg, 2006; Zarina, 2017). Nevertheless, the students find it difficult to use Arabic for their academic reading purposes, perhaps due to lack of Arabic language background. In addition, most of the students generally learned Arabic not for Sharia purposes. Hence, there is a need for the improvement of Arabic language proficiency among the students, particularly for Academic purposes. This study aims to explore the Sharia Law students’ perceptions regarding their level of Arabic language proficiency and its importance as a medium of instruction in studying Sharia Law in Malaysia. This could be useful in the process of developing an effective Arabic language curriculum for Sharia Law purposes, particularly in the Malaysian context.

SHARIA AND LEGAL LANGUAGE IN MALAYSIA

Though the constitution makes Malaysia a secular country, Islam is recognized as the state religion (Moten, 2003; Aziz & Shamsul, 2004; Ariffin & Asraf, 2014). According to the Population and Housing Census of 2010, approximately about 61.3% of the population practice Islam, while the jurisprudence Shafi’i school of thought is predominant in the country. Hence, Sharia Law is recognized as one of the fundamental pillars of jurisprudence in Malaysia. In addition, Muslims are obliged to follow the decisions of Sharia Courts especially in matters concerning their religion, and Islamic judges are expected to follow the Shafi’i jurisprudence. The jurisdiction of Sharia courts is limited to Muslims in matters such as marriage, inheritance, divorce, apostasy, religious conversion, and
custody (Ariffin & Asraf, 2014). Despite being the supreme courts of the land, the Civil Courts do not hear matters related to Islamic practices. Proper design of academic reading material is crucial to enhance the students’ understanding and knowledge in their designated areas of expertise. There is inadequate academic reading material for specific purposes especially in Law studies where the meaning of most terms cannot be completely captured by second language learners. According to Zarina (2017) reading material previously used in Sharia Law was translated into English with lack of translation accuracy and coherence. This reinterpretation of reading material commonly occur throughout history (Atiyah, 2001; Auda, 2008; Zarinam 2017). Hence, this situation motivated many researchers to highlight the importance of redesigning the Arabic teaching and learning materials for Sharia studies based on purpose and content (Mahmoud, 2019). In fact, students in Malaysia face a lot of challenges in relation to legal language especially for Sharia purposes. The basic proficiency for both languages used in teaching and learning Sharia law is required to avoid the challenges of translation inaccuracy (Hanafi, 1998). One way to confront these challenges is by referring to cases documented in traditional Arabic text. Sharia reading materials are closely related to legal cases in Islamic law. In legal cases, reading is done with more in-depth understanding than in normal reading process (McLeod, 2007; Ariffin & Asraf, 2014). In Sharia Law, accurate understanding is required to critically analyse cases in the exact context. Scholars agreed that the subjects of Sharia Law should be developed from the basic roots of Sharia, and therefore, the use of Arabic language in Sharia studies is necessary to develop in-depth understanding of Sharia terminologies. Some studies highlight the importance of reading Islamic texts in context to develop understanding of Sharia (Hanafi, 1998; Nurkhalis, 2017). Original reading materials offer significant benefits for the improvement of teaching and learning. In fact, original and authentic materials could develop the students’ understanding of actual information and provide opportunities for language use in a more relevant and communicative way (Nunan, 1995; Sanchez, Perex & Gomes, 2010). This is because original reading materials expose the students, particularly non-native speakers, to the real world language usage beyond the classroom context. They further motivate students simply because they serve as evidence of the language usability and its purpose of existence in real life (Nuttall, 1996). ASP faces various challenges especially in the case of Sharia Law students in Malaysia. Sharia students have to use Arabic language as a requirement set by MQA. In this case, ASP becomes necessary in the teaching and learning process, particularly in Sharia Studies. It is also necessary improve the Arabic reading skills amongst Sharia Law students, especially the non-native speakers of Arabic language. This could help the students to have a good understanding of the Sharia Law. Though there are various studies on the importance of ASP in academic reading (Chik & Rahman, 2012; Ghani, Daud, & Ramli, 2019), the current study focuses on ASP in the context of Sharia Law.

**METHOD**

This study employed a mixed methods approach, in which interview and questionnaire were used to gather data. The population sample in this study comprises a total of 32 final year students of Sharia Law in the Faculty of Sharia Law, International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). The sample consists of 7 males and 25 females. The sample is limited to 32 respondents because this number represents exactly the population of final year students of Sharia Law in the selected university. The final year students were considered as they have acquired enough experience on previous academic materials. A focus group discussion was conducted using semi-structured interview to explore the students’ perceptions regarding their level of Arabic language proficiency for Sharia Law. The interviews were analysed using inductive thematic analysis. On the other hand, structure questionnaire was used to gather data related to the students’ perceptions of the importance of Arabic language in studying Sharia Law. The questionnaire consists of eight questions using 5-likert scale. Questionnaire was used to gather information on the use of ASP amongst the students to determine their perceptions regarding the importance of ASP in the learning process (Qadir, 2005; Nhapulo, 2017). Descriptive statistics was used to analyse the data through SPSS version 23.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The first phase of this study used focus group interview to determine the students’ perceptions regarding their level of Arabic language proficiency in the learning process. As explained earlier, the population sample consists of 32 final year students of Sharia Law at IIUM, out of which seven are males while 25 are females. To reduce the sample into manageable size during the data collection period, the students were divided into three sessions for the focus group interviews. The following table represents the students’ perception of their level of Arabic language proficiency.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Exemplary quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What are your experiences regarding Arabic language before and after you started your studies in the Faculty?</td>
<td>Low level of general Arabic proficiency</td>
<td>…..some of us had studied general Arabic in secondary school,…...before we started our study in sharia law, we have to sit for general Arabic exam,...…..you have to set for one or two semesters to improve our general Arabic...…..does not relate to our Sharia subjects...,Reading, because we spend much time in reading…....even when we could not understand,...…...Reading is most important regularity we do......we need to improve our reading...Good job carrier...,Following up the new issues regarding Sharia Law....... Updating my knowledge in relation to Sharia Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What could you suggest to improve your Arabic proficiency for Sharia Law studies?</td>
<td>The students’ Arabic proficiency could be improved through reading Sharia materials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What will you get in turn if you master Sharia terminologies in Arabic?</td>
<td>Job opportunities and knowledge update</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in reading even when we could not understand". This suggests that the students do not usually have complete understanding of the lessons in the classroom, and therefore, they must struggle to understand through reading. The students also opined that mastering Sharia terminologies in Arabic would help them update their knowledge of Sharia Law and provide them with job opportunities. The students also demonstrated the importance of Sharia reading materials in Arabic. In line with the students' perceptions, many researchers recognized the importance of reading for the development of functional literacy and language proficiency (Gottardo, 2002; Freely, Clark, Anderson, Gilbert, Musyoka, & Hauser, 2011; Al-Kialbi, 2015). This is equally important for students in various institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. In addition to reading strategies (Sohail, 2015), proper design of academic reading material could help in the process. This information confirms that, in Malaysia, students of Sharia Law face various challenges in developing second language for academic purposes (Howard, Gorzycki, Desa, & Allen, 2018). The second phase of this study used questionnaire that was used to determine the students' perceptions regarding the importance of ASP in the learning process. In this regard, a high response rate (93.8%) was achieved. Out of a total number of 32 questionnaires, 30 were returned and found valid for analysis. The students' perceptions were measured in terms of understanding the Sharia Law subjects, ability to excel in the field of Sharia Law, and communication with lecturers. The following table represents the students' perception regarding the importance of ASP in the learning process of Sharia Law.

Table 1: Importance of ASP in Sharia Law

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SN</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>A+SA (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Arabic is the dominant language in Sharia Law subjects in my intuition</td>
<td>4.90</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Arabic language is important in understanding Sharia Law subjects</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Arabic language is necessary to master Sharia Law subjects</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Arabic language is important in communicating with my lecturers inside and outside classroom</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mastering Sharia Law in Arabic language is important to me as a non-native speaker of Arabic</td>
<td>4.70</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>90.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mastering Sharia Law terminologies in Arabic language is important to me for good job opportunities</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>86.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Mastering Sharia Law terminologies in Arabic language is necessary for me to excel in the field of Sharia Law</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mastering Sharia Law terminologies in Arabic is important for achievements of high grades in the field of Sharia Law</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>85.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As presented in Table 1, the use of Arabic language in studying Sharia Law is highly recognized (Mean=4.50) amongst the students of Sharia Law at International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM). The students believe that Arabic is "the dominant language" used in teaching and learning of Sharia Law at IIUM, with a mean value of 4.90 and a standard deviation of 0.31. Most of the students (90.0%) considered Arabic language important in studying Sharia Law. In addition, most of the students (86.7%) believe that Arabic language is required to master Sharia Law subjects. Most of the students (83.3%) find Arabic language useful in communicating with their lecturers both inside and outside classroom. Moreover, most of the students (90.0%) believe that mastering Sharia Law subjects in Arabic is beneficial to them as non-native speakers. Most of the students (86.7%) believe that mastering Sharia Law terminologies in Arabic language could help them find good job opportunities. They believe that mastering Sharia Law terminologies in Arabic language is necessary (76.7%) for them to excel in the field of Sharia Law. They also opined that mastering Sharia Law terminologies in Arabic is important (76.7%) for achievements of high grades in the field of Sharia Law.

Overall, almost all of the students agreed that mastery of Arabic language is necessary particularly in Sharia Law. The students realized the importance of Arabic language in understanding Sharia Law and its terminologies. This indicates that Arabic language could help the students greatly in the learning process. This is consistent with the government's realization of the importance of studying Sharia Law in Arabic (Sohail, 2015; Cragg, 2006; Zarina, 2017). In addition, research highlighted the importance of Arabic text in enhancing the understanding of Sharia Law in particular (Nurhalis, 2017).

**CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the use of Arabic for Sharia Law purpose in Malaysia, particularly at International Islamic University. It was found that Sharia Law students in the selected institution have low level of Arabic language proficiency before and after their admission into the Sharia Law programme. This situation makes the students to adopt reading Sharia materials written in Arabic, which suggests that the students need special Sharia Law curriculum in Arabic. Therefore, there is a need for the improvement of Arabic language proficiency amongst the students of Sharia Law in Malaysia. It is also evident in this study that Sharia Law students consider Arabic language important in studying Sharia Law, which could be influential in the process of improving the students' Arabic proficiency. Although the present study has provided valuable information, its design contains inevitable limitations. The study is limited to ASP amongst Sharia Law Students at IIUM. Future research may consider other Malaysian institutions. In addition, since there is a need for special Sharia Law curriculum in Arabic, future research may determine the scope and focus of such curriculum. The findings of this study is expected to influence the process of Arabic curriculum development and provision of academic reading materials to further suit the needs of non-native speakers of Arabic among Sharia Law students particularly in Malaysia.

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REFERENCES


