

Enhancing Arabic Speaking Skills among Malay Students through Group Work Activities

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate strategies for Arabic speaking skills enhancement through group work activities. It highlights the effectiveness of group work activities in teaching Arabic speaking skills among first year Malay undergraduate university students studying Arabic language. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with five students, group discussions and direct observations on twenty students. The findings of the study indicated that group work activities have a crucial impact on speaking foreign language skills. They help to increase the level of confidence among students who are shy, easily get panic and fear of speaking Arabic language in front of peers. Group work activities are effective to develop speaking skills among students but it is depending on how the lecturer implements group work activities in teaching and learning Arabic as a foreign language.

Key Words: group work activities, Malay undergraduate university students, speaking skills, Arabic speaking skills, teaching and learning Arabic as a foreign language.

1. Introduction

Arabic language courses have been taught in many universities around the world. In University of Sultan Zainal Abidin, the Arabic language courses are compulsory to students who are specializing in Islamic studies. Normally, they have to learn four basic Arabic skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing– for the first two semesters in separate courses. In general, Arabic language is not new to students as they have learnt it at their former secondary schools for about five to six years especially when they came from religious or Arabic schools. Although the students have experience in learning the Arabic language for a long period of time, most of the lecturers are still not satisfied with their students' performance in Arabic language especially in terms of their oral skills. The students do not have the confidence in using the language inside and outside of the classroom. Pandian et al. (2011) stressed that students' inability to speak as fluently as they can is often reflected as unwillingness and lack of confidence when it comes to speaking. Most of the students often need to be encouraged by their lecturers to participate in speaking activities. Students should realize that when they are in the university; they must be physically and mentally prepared to face all challenges.

It is a totally different environment from the secondary school environment. If they wish to be a good Arabic speaker, they must put a lot of efforts and find opportunities to practice speaking Arabic with anyone that can respond to the conversation.

Macaro (2001) stressed that effective speakers do not give up or hesitate for too long when they cannot think of how to say something. The researchers believe that to be a good speaker in Arabic language, students must think positively no matter what others say about them. On the other hand, they must take part in tasks and activities that may encourage them to speak. Additionally, students must be more independent when they are in the university. This does not mean that lecturers at tertiary institutions play a lesser role. Lecturers have to be innovative and creative to face students who have difficulties in learning to speak Arabic language. Thus the main role of a lecturer is to teach students learning how to learn. In other words, a lecturer should be a facilitator to the students.

From the observation and the interviews with several students, most of them agreed that they had not been well exposed to the four basic Arabic skills at their former secondary schools. Most of them were taught reading and writing skills only. Listening and speaking skills were not seriously taught as they rarely speak in Arabic language. As a result their proficiency in spoken Arabic is low. So when these students are at university level, they have difficulties in learning Arabic language such as in understanding the lectures that are conducted in Arabic language, acknowledging Arabic references, comprehending some instructions and communicating with the lecturers. Rivers and Temperley (1978) mentioned that communication activities must be selected based on the goal of the course. An example of the goal is students should be able to interact freely with others and convey what they wish to share with others. Besides, learning a second language for communicative purposes requires knowledge and skills for using it appropriately, as well as knowing aspects of linguistic forms and how they are organized (Saville-Troike, 2012). These elements have been taken into consideration in order to implement Arabic language speaking activities among Malay students in the university.

To be able to learn speaking skills in Arabic language, the first-year students have to take an Arabic course which is known as Al-Muhadathah (IBF1112) or Arabic Speaking course. The primary goal of this course is enabling students to communicate correctly in the Arabic language by practicing pronunciation, choosing suitable vocabulary according to Arabic syntax and morphology. This course is conducted for four hours in a week during the fourteen weeks of study. Commonly, students have very poor communication skills at the beginning of the course. It seems that they have never heard of or used Arabic language before. It has become a big challenge for lecturers in order to ensure all students to communicate using Arabic language as the students are not a native speaker of Arabic. It also requires hard work from lecturers since learning and applying grammatical and phonological rules that do not exist in the first language give a daunting challenge to the students (Pandian, 2011).

According to Bygate (1987), one of the basic problems in foreign language teaching is to prepare learners to be able to use the language. In order to be successful in teaching and learning the target language, both lecturers and students have to put their efforts. However the students have to give more effort compared to the lecturer. Thus, students should be doing all the work, while lecturers only act as a facilitator. As mentioned by Oxford (1990), self-direction is particularly important for language learners, because they will not always have teachers around them to guide especially when they use the language outside of the classroom. Besides, the lecturers must also vary their teaching methods and approaches in order to achieve the goals in learning Arabic language as a foreign language. Highlighting the same issue, Larsen-Freeman (1986) stated that since communication is a process, it is insufficient for students to simply have knowledge of target language forms, meanings and functions. Therefore, students must be able to apply this knowledge practically as stated in the goal of Al-Muhadathah course; students should be able to communicate in Arabic language fluently and confidently using correct pronunciation, intonation, and etcetera.

2. Related Literature Review

2.1 Group Work Activities

Before discussing the issue in depth, the researchers would highlight about cooperative learning. It is an approach which encourages and promotes the maximum use of cooperative activities based on pair work and group work of learners in the classroom (Johnson et al, 1994 as cited in Pederson and Digby, 1995). In addition, Richards and Rodgers (2001) mentioned that cooperative learning is a group work structured in such a way as to enable students' interaction, the exchange of information, as well as cooperation rather than competition in learning.

There are different ways in which group activities can be defined. Hybels and Weaver (2009) claimed that a group activity is a small group consisting of three to thirteen members interacting with one another where each person influences and is influenced by others. On the other hand, Harmer (2001) mentioned that a group activity is a small group of around five students who show greater involvement and participation than larger groups.

Based on these definitions, the researchers believe that an ideal size for a group is four to five members. If there are too many members in a group, there is a possibility that the group activity will not be effective because there might be 'sleeping partners' who tend to be passive and do not participate in the activity. Therefore, researchers decide that students should be allowed to form a group of four to five members so that they can have better interaction with each other. At the same time, they will be able to share the responsibility of getting the job done and doing the planning, preparation and presentation of their gathered information as a team (Harmer, 2001).

A small group work activity requires greater involvement and contribution among students. It gives students the opportunity to learn more effectively than those who do not involve in a group work activity. Ellies (1994) stated that group work activities in learning foreign language is significant feature of communication or interaction in classroom. For example, when all the students participate and focused on the group work activities given, the most of communication is assisted. Indirectly, it increases speaking language opportunities and able to improve the quality of student talk. Besides, a group work activity also encourages broader skills of cooperation and negotiation among student. In addition, it is more private than working in front of the whole class. Other than that, a group work activity allows students to make their own decision without being told what to do by the lecturer. Therefore, lecturers do not usually involve in the group discussion. In such process, however, lecturers seldom becomes static in front of the class, but moves around, going from one group to another, answering and asking questions, watching and listening to specific groups (Harmer, 2001). In other words, a lecturer can stay for a period of time and then interrupt the group discussion if they think it is appropriate or necessary. This indirectly builds stronger relationship between the lecturer and students along the way. Furthermore, the lecturer has the opportunity to communicate with the students individually especially while discussing the task given. He or she can also encourage the students to seek help without feeling embarrassed and speak with their peers in order to practice the language either verbally or non-verbally. These will help students to reduce their fear of making errors among themselves.

A supportive learning atmosphere and environment is provided when group activities are carried out. This may help students to become more confident and they may realize that errors occurring in learning Arabic language are natural and are part of learning. If the lecturer hears someone in the group is using their mother tongue, the Malay language, all members in the group will be penalized to do things that will require them to use the target language. This is to motivate them to speak Arabic language frequently. In addition, it is to remind them not to take things for granted especially when it comes to using the language in the classroom.

Group work activities also create an active language learning process, which is interesting and enjoyable. In contrast, a study conducted by Basta (2011) found that one of the result of his questionnaires about the role of the communicative approach and cooperative learning indicates that group work activities is not fun. The reason is probably the class environment is not interested. So the lecturer supposed to ensure equal participation among the students in order to make the classroom learning process more appealing and catchy. Furthermore, the students can gain confidence and boost their self-esteem to use the language spontaneously. Besides, giving students a special role in a role play activity may give them experience to become another person and this will allow them to be braver as their cognitive ability is stimulated by the new role they have to play.

A study done by Zyoud (____) mentioned that using drama activities and techniques in teaching English as a foreign language encourages students to speak besides give them the chance to communicate, even with limited language. Therefore the classroom becomes more of a learner-centered rather than a teacher-centered one. In this case, the teacher becomes a facilitator. In general, there are many other group work activities can be done to enhance speaking foreign language among students.

There are any other studies focused on group work activities in learning English as a foreign language that were not included in this study. However, from the brief explanation above, the researchers conclude that group work activities are potentially beneficial for foreign language learners. The most important thing is each activity must be well planned and prepared before hands on.

2.2 Group Work Activities for Arabic Language Speaking Enhancement

There are many types of group work activities introduced by lecturers in promoting Arabic speaking skills among students. These activities usually involve pair work and small group work that are not more than five members.

The group work activities usually consist of discussions, role play, simulations, information gap, brainstorming, storytelling, interviews, story completion, and report presentations. These group work activities cannot be done at one time but lecturers must be creative to choose the best activity that is suitable for any particular time. The group activity chosen at one time may help to ease the process of teaching the course. The group activities carried out by lecturers will not be described in detail here because each activity has its own advantages and disadvantages. Each group work activity chosen by lecturers also has its own benefits which carry the same goals; to encourage and motivate students to speak Arabic language fluently and consistently.

Azani et al. (2012) in their study at National Religious Secondary School of Kuala Lumpur about developing speaking skills through implementation of role play activities in teaching Arabic language helps the researchers to overcome students' difficulties in learning Arabic language. On the other hand, the result of the study shows that the respondents' difficulties in speaking skills during role play activities can be divided into four categories; vocabulary, phonetic, Arabic grammar and communication strategies. However, students' attitude towards role play activities revealed that students' participation is at intermediate level. Finally the researcher found that students behaved positively toward the use of role play in learning Arabic as it becomes student-centered learning which gives opportunities for students to explore second language skills themselves.

Arnida et al. (____) as cited in Pandian et al. (2011) examine the approach of *halaqah* towards enhancing Arabic proficiency in acquiring language skills, classical terminology and language styles at Islamic Science University of Malaysia. The respondents of this study were students of Arabic language program. *Halaqah* approach in the study refers to the students were asked to analyze and discuss certain classical Arabic references in group. After that, they are asked to present either in group or in front of classroom in order to know the understanding level of the course during learning process. The findings of the study show *halaqah* gives students a lot of opportunities to participate actively in language class activities, through discussion and also presentation. On the other hand, this approach motivates the students to explore the Arabic language itself and then able to express it and exchange ideas clearly.

Thus, this study conducted by the researchers tries to investigate using group work activities in enhancing speaking Arabic skills among Malay students at higher institution.

2.3 Statement of the Problem

Teaching and learning a second language is not easy or easy. Studies of second language use have shown kinds of problem and difficulties foreign language learners face and skills they need to communicate either in secondary schools or in higher institution. In learning Arabic language as a foreign language, Rosni Samah (2012) found that most students have knowledge in Arabic grammar and vocabulary, but they are not able to use it in speaking Arabic language. This problem occurs for several factors. Among the factors are Malay students had no confidence in speaking Arabic language, the weakness of pedagogy in teaching Arabic language communication, the influence of the first language and so forth.

Therefore, this study highlights the implementation of group work activities as a one of student-centered learning approach towards enhancing speaking Arabic language proficiency among Malay learners. In addition, this study tries to find out whether or not performing group work activities assists the students' confidence and motivation to communicate in Arabic language as well as other basic foreign language skills. Besides that, this study also discusses the role of lecturer in doing group work activities among students.

2.4 Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the current study which aims to assess the extent of group work activities enhance Malay students in speaking Arabic language based on the module provided. It also helps lecturers to choose suitable strategies and approach in teaching speaking Arabic language. Besides that, this study also helps the lecturer to build up self confidence among students in speaking foreign language.

3. Methods

3.1 Sample

The subjects of this study consist of twenty Malay students. 10 males and 10 females. This represents the first year students studying Arabic language in this university.

They took Al-Muhadathah course required by the Faculty of Islamic Contemporary Studies. The rationale for using small sample size in this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the research phenomenon. Kvale (1996) as cited in Nik Suryani (2008) proofs that the number of subjects in research depends on a study purpose. For example if the purpose of the study is to explore and describes in detail the perceptions of foreign learners' towards speaking Malay language, the necessary small sample is needed.

3.2 Research Procedure

For this study the researchers have decided to use semi-structured interview with five students randomly selected, group discussions and direct observation for collecting the data. Semi-structured interview conducted twice in the whole of fourteen weeks known as pre and post interview. First interview did before the students starts involving in any group work activities. The second interview did within 14th weeks.

3.3 Data Analysis

Current study employs a qualitative research method. Observations of twenty students and in depth semi-structured interviews with five students were conducted for data collection. The participants were the first semester students who are studying Arabic language in the University of Sultan Zainal Abidin. All of them are Malays. These students have to take a course known as Al-Muhadathah (IBF1112). The lessons were carried out twice a week for a period of two hours each session for fourteen weeks of study. As proposed by Dornyei (2007), this study involves relatively small number of respondents so that researchers can yield the saturated and rich data that is needed. Furthermore, using a small sample size may help the researchers to be more focus which enables them to gain better understanding of the issue studied. At the same time, the result will be more accurate compared to the big sample size, which may give vary irrelevant information.

While studying Al-Muhadathah, students were given a big task which was a project work that they had to submit at the end of the semester. They were given freedom to choose one activity stated in the list of group work activities. They were given guidelines from the lecturer in order to attempt that task. Some instructions in the task were to record the activity that the group had chosen for about fifteen to twenty minutes, select a topic and create scripts on their own. The lecturer was not allowed to correct any errors found in the scripts.

4. Result

4.1 Observations

Based on the data collected, it was found that fifteen of the participants experienced difficulties in learning to speak Arabic. Their achievement in proficiency was also very low. The rest were at intermediate level. The researchers also found that the participants were not able to speak the language because they were just listening to the lecturer speaking the language. They only responded 'yes' or 'no'. Sometimes they preferred to use non-verbal communication by nodding their heads. It was not a practical way to practice the language because they did not respond or interact verbally with others. There is no doubt that sometimes non-verbal communication can send more messages compared to the verbal communication (Hybels and Weaver II, 2009). However, language enhancement is usually effective only when students use it orally for communication. However, these students showed very limited use of Arabic language even though they had a lot of things that they wanted to say.

The participants were also characterized as being unable to express or convey their ideas clearly, lack of confidence, and nervous. They also avoided eye contact with the lecturer and their friends. They preferred to look at the whiteboard or desks in front of them or read the text that they had prepared. They also made a lot of pronunciation and grammar mistakes. Besides, lack of vocabularies causes these participants to use wrong choice of words. In general, the interaction between students and the lecturer was very limited because of less participation in the classroom.

The lecturer had to force the students to communicate in the classroom by calling names. Otherwise, it would have been the same individuals interacted in the class or nobody in the class responded to the issue. Thus, the lecturer could not trace whether the students understood the lesson taught. After several weeks the improvement could be seen among students. They started to involve in speaking activities and eager to participate in the activities actively. They felt more comfortable, enjoyed and interested in learning speaking skills in Arabic language.

Students realized that group work activities had many advantages and benefits for them. They experienced a lot of things while attempting the tasks. Communicative approach was used in the classroom to engage students in their learning process. Previously, they just listened and watched how to become a good Arabic language speaker. They thought that it was very impossible to master the language as they were not native speakers of the language and the environment was also not conducive for them to practice speaking Arabic language. Now, they have all the opportunities to participate in interactive and functional activities. Support from the lecturer and the use of suitable approach and activities during the learning process helped to improve their skills in the target language. Thus, lecturers must create activities that will help students to master the Arabic language skills. Many tasks can be carried out in speaking activities such as watching Arabic movies, listen to Arabic songs, Arabic games, role plays, discussions and presentations. These materials, however, need to be used by means of standard Arabic language. The lecturer can guide the students in the activities for the first time. Then he or she can ask students to attempt the tasks based on what they had learnt within their group. When they are familiar with the tasks, they will be able to explore new information or find out about the materials related to the course via online movies, cartoon, songs, forums or magazines. They can share it with their peers after that.

Referring to the project work the students need to do, the researchers found that most of the groups preferred to do a role play activity instead of other activities listed. Generally, lecturers teaching the course were satisfied with their performance especially in speaking Arabic language. The students have improved in a way that they could use the appropriate intonation and stress and chose the correct words and sentences to deliver their messages. Even though there were some grammatical errors, these participants could still produce continuous speech without affecting the communication. As mentioned by Ellis (1997), although the communicative classrooms did not lead to the acquisition of target language grammatical norms, they should not be considered failures.

In terms of the flow, the project was done in a smooth, creative way. All participants in the group were equally involved. They chose a simple topic such as a conversation in a classroom, in a hostel, at the café, at the gymnasium, and during picnic. These topics were closely related to their daily life, giving them a good reason to act out the real situation. It seems that this course had achieved the goal and some improvements could be done to upgrade the course for the next semester.

4.2 Interviews

As mentioned earlier, the researchers conducted interviews with five students. The interviews conducted were semi structured. From the interviews sessions, the findings revealed that four interviewees have ability to listen, understand and respond the conversation. They perceived that speaking Arabic language is not too difficult if they have a lot of vocabulary and practice it continuously. They believed that group work activities gave opportunities to them to speak freely with their peers and built high self-confidence among themselves. They also preferred the lecturers to be creative in teaching speaking in order to encourage the students learning Arabic as well as supportive environment regarding to Malay culture. However one of them faced difficulties in speaking Arabic language. He was unable to express his ideas clearly, made many mistakes in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. The reasons were he lack of confidence and unable to control the fear to speak. He also affected with his first language even he already learnt and exposed to the Arabic language more than three years at secondary school. However, this kind of problem can be solved if the student himself realized the important of learning Arabic language as well as mastering four language skills component which are known as listening, speaking, reading and writing. According to Gamal Abdul Nasir Zakaria (2003) as cited in Sueraya (2013) mentioned that Ibn Khaldun stresses that language learning will become a reality through practice and ability to use it. So as a student, he must always initiate speaking practice in order to be familiar with the language because practice make perfect.

5. Discussion

This study reveals that group work activities are highly recommended to develop learning Arabic speaking skills among Malay students. It helps students to use different types of activities to enhance the needs of the Arabic skills. When the activities are done in groups, the students become more confident and comfortable in delivering their thoughts because they have been given wider opportunities to practice using the language more frequently. This makes group work as a valuable addition to the variety of activities which encourage and promote second language development (Lightbown et al. 2003).

In addition, everyone in the group will know their level of proficiency in the Arabic language. They will also be exposed to listening skills which are relatively close to speaking skills. At the same time the members of the group will learn to help each other in delivering the speech with confidence and in proper manner. The greatest group will get extra marks from the lecturers. In other words, students learned a great deal that no one ever teaches them. In this sense, students learned much more than they are taught.

Thus, lecturers must create activities that will help students to master the Arabic language skills. Many tasks can be carried out in speaking activities such as watching Arabic movies, listen to Arabic songs, Arabic games, role plays, discussions and presentations. The lecturer can guide the students in the activities for the first time. Then he or she can ask the students to attempt the tasks based on what they had learnt within their group. When they are familiar with the tasks, they will be able to explore new information or find out about the materials related to the course via online movies, cartoon, songs, forums or magazines. These materials, however, need to be used by means of a standard Arabic language. This makes language learning more meaningful and beneficial in preparing students for real-life situations. After that, they can share it with their peers.

One good reason why these students chose to do a role-play activity is because each of them can play their roles actively and be responsible to their group members. Due to these factors, they usually become motivated especially in producing a successful outcome. As proposed by Lightbown et al. (2003), the more one succeeds, the greater one's motivation and the greater one's motivation, the more one succeeds. Furthermore, soft skills can be instilled among students. As example, they will be able to learn how to be a group leader, manage the group members, and solve problems in groups.

Other than that, non-verbal communication can also be developed among students. This is because students must learn to think of what they want to say and what they want to do at the same time so that both body and voice communicate the total idea to their listeners. This will help the, to gain immediate feedback from their audience. Therefore, body and voice must convey the same idea (De Boer, 1973). For example, students should use their eye contact with everyone in the classrooms, while delivering their ideas. Maintaining eye contact for at least 90% of the time is important because it helps audience concentrate on the speech (Verderber et al., 2012). As a result, the students will pay more attention to their friends and the speaker will also feel appreciated when his ideas are listened by others. This can help the speaker to increase self confidence and avoid nervousness while delivering his or her speech in Arabic language. Once the students are confident, there is no more reason to call their names because everyone will raise their hands to participate in the lesson.

There is no doubt that students still made mistakes while using the language, but in most situations this did not stop the students from trying to speak Arabic language. Doing mistakes or errors are natural part of language learning. No novice speaker can speak without making any mistakes due to interference from their first language; Malay language. One thing which is very clear is that second language learning is not simply a process of putting the first language words into the second language sentences (Lightbown et al., 2003). For example, sentence أنا أسألك وأنت تجيب جواب Is meant to say "you ask me and I answer it". But in Arabic it is not a correct way to express the sentence. Of course the students had the idea about what they were going to say, but there was grammatical error in their language usage. The correct sentence is أنا أسألك وأنت تجيب. Although it seems a simple mistake, but it affects the - Arabic language usage. While performing speaking activities, however, it is advised that lecturers do not interrupt students' speech just to point out the grammatical, lexical or pronunciation error since to do so interrupts the communication and drags an activity back to the study of language form or precise meaning (Harmer, 2001). It is, however, proper to correct students' mistakes for the whole class to avoid the same mistakes to occur again.

Based on the interviews conducted with several students, they now realize that Arabic language is not too difficult as other people assumed. They have to put their efforts in order to be a good speaker in Arabic language not only for the purpose of passing the examination with flying colors but also in applying the language in the real world especially with the Muslims communities.

As Al-Muhadathah (IBF 1112) is a new course offered in the university, the researchers would like to suggest that grammar should be included in the course because language is closely related to grammar. Grammar is very crucial in learning any language. Thus, the goal of the course cannot be achieved in most situations if the teaching of grammar is not implemented in speaking the Arabic language.

6. Conclusion

Group work activities give a lot of benefits to enhance Arabic speaking skills among Malay students. The findings of the study indicate that students' interest in learning Arabic speaking skills is influenced by group work activities. The group activities allow the students to practice speaking Arabic language spontaneously and fluently with the guidance from the lecturer. Besides that, group work activities were fun, motivating, useful to help avoiding the gap between active students and passive students, helpful to build self esteem and confidence among students. The learning process also becomes more student-centered rather than a teacher-centered. Therefore it is important to create an environment that will support the students' learning process and offer opportunities for acquiring Arabic speaking skills as well as other basic skills in Arabic language.

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