

The Use of Help-Seeking Strategy in Oral Arabic Learning

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Abstract

Researchers have identified the learning environment as one of the most important factors in the learning process, especially for developing oral skills, which require sufficient practice. In Malaysia, students learn Arabic as a second or third language, and many find it challenging to use the language in daily life, particularly for oral practice. Speaking Arabic orally has gotten more challenging since the 2019 coronavirus epidemic, which affected everyone on the planet. Most institutions have turned face-to-face classes into online classes, making oral Arabic practice more difficult. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the extent to which students seek help if they face difficulties in learning oral Arabic. This study was conducted at the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Malaysia. It is a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative study using a questionnaire of self-regulated learning strategies and interviews. 445 samples were involved in the quantitative data, which were selected based on the stratified random sampling, while the qualitative data involved 13 interviews. Overall, this study found that the level at which students sought help if they faced problems in learning oral Arabic was high. However, they sought help from their peers more often than from their course instructors. As a result, this study suggested using peers as learning assistants and the internet as a communication tool between students and instructors.

Keywords: *help-seeking strategy, MSLQ, self-regulated learning, Arabic language learning, oral Arabic skills*

Introduction

Arabic has been taught in Malaysia as a second or third language. Although it is closely related to Islam, the official religion of Malaysia, it has not been used as a language for daily communication among Malaysians. It is primarily used in school settings under teachers' supervision. Furthermore, during the coronavirus pandemic that began in 2019, practicing oral Arabic became more difficult. Most face-to-face classes shifted to online sessions. Students found it hard to communicate with each other and to discuss with teachers. In this context, ensuring that students learning Arabic develop strong oral skills is a significant challenge. One strategy that can be used is to employ a help-seeking approach.

Literature Review

Based on the self-regulated learning strategic framework, the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) by Pintrich et al. (1991) identifies help-seeking strategy as one of the sub-components of the learning resource management strategy. Help-seeking strategy focuses on managing learning support from external parties like lecturers and peers to improve learning performance. A good learner knows how to seek the right sources when facing difficulties in learning (Pintrich, et al., 1991; Hsu, 1997; Rhee & Pintrich, 2004; Lynch, 2006; Fong et al., 2023; Yang, F. et al., 2024). In this case, a good Arabic learner is someone who knows who to rely on when facing challenges in learning oral Arabic. They can utilize surrounding resources to solve their problems.

The concept of help-seeking strategy is derived from Vygotsky's theory, which explains the development of cognitive control as a social process occurring in stages. It also stems from learning initiative, which initially depends on others before shifting to rely on self-effort (Hsu, 1997; Van Meter & Stevens, 2000). Before self-regulated learning occurs, learning depends on other people, such as friends and lecturers, who are able to support an individual's learning needs. Comparing a learner's performance with that of a more competent individual can lead to collaborative learning, which continues until similar competence is achieved (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Van Meter & Stevens, 2000). Vygotsky's theory also explains that humans have the ability to modify their environment to suit their needs, rather than merely responding passively to it as described in behaviorist theory (Schunk, 1996).

Oral skills include listening and speaking skills. There are several previous studies carried out at the UiTM level that investigate the level of learners' oral skills in Arabic (Sahabudin, 2003; Norhayuza et al., 2004). These studies, in general, conclude that UiTM students are still weak in oral skills even though they have studied Arabic at the school level. The level of utilisation of self-regulated learning strategies is among the elements contributing to this predicament. This is due to the correlation between students' performance and the extent of self-regulated learning technique use (VanZile-Tamsen & Livingston, 1999; Al-Alwan, 2008).

Concerning this, several studies have been conducted to examine the level of use of several components of self-regulated learning strategy among UiTM students (Ghazali Yusri & Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2010; Ghazali Yusri et al., 2010a, 2010b). However, these studies did not focus on the use of the help-seeking strategy. According to Moore (2008), Fong et al (2023), and Jiang and Yu (2025), students who attended sessions on help-seeking strategy recorded better grades than those who did not. Realizing the importance of the help-seeking strategy in the learning of Arabic oral skills, a study on this area must be conducted so that further action can be planned to assist students in their learning.

There are two research questions for this study:

1. To what extent have the UiTM students used the help-seeking strategy in learning oral Arabic?
2. How do UiTM students seek help in learning oral Arabic?

Methodology

Arabic is one of the compulsory three-semester third language courses to be completed by all UiTM undergraduates. It is estimated that 2600 full-time students enrol in this third-level Arabic as a Second Language course throughout UiTM. Based on this population, this study has selected 445 respondents, a sufficient number for any generalization to be made on the actual population (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Respondents were chosen to follow the stratified random sampling technique that is based on the different faculty clusters in UiTM.

Additionally, we used a disproportionate sampling method because student course participation varied across faculties. Furthermore, only students enrolled in UiTM's highest-level Arabic course (level three) participated in the survey. The rationale for this is that the respondents of this level have gone through all the levels of Arabic learning and gained enough experience to which they have developed their distinct attitude in using the help-seeking strategy in dealing with challenges in the learning process.

This study is a mixed-methods study and employs a survey and an interview as tools for data collection. The questionnaire used in the survey has been adapted from The Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ) by Pintrich et al (1991) with 7 Likert scale. Before the conduct of the survey, written permission was secured from the owner of MSLQ. Furthermore, the questionnaire was later translated into Bahasa Melayu to accommodate the Malay respondents. Three translation experts have been referred to validate the translation process. The questionnaire has also gone through a content validity process with three experts and three students involved in the face validity process. Finally, before the commencement of the actual survey, the Cronbach's alpha value of the questionnaire was analyzed to determine its reliability. Through the analysis, the Cronbach's alpha value was recorded to be 0.74, an acceptable validity value (Sekaran, 2003).

After the actual data had been gathered, a descriptive analysis was conducted to identify the mean of the help-seeking strategy for all respondents. To interpret the descriptive data, this study has divided the mean scores into three levels as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of Levels of Likert Scale Mean Scores (Adapted from Nik Mohd Rahimi, 2004)

Mean Score	Level
5.01 to 7.00	High
3.10 to 5.00	Moderate
1.00 to 3.00	Low

Besides this, interview sessions were also carried out in this study using an MP3 player. The recorded interview sessions were later coded, given dates, and verbatim transcribed. Before the transcribed interview was analyzed, respondents' verification was sought. Then, the data was analyzed using NVIVO7 as to create the related themes. The created themes were later referred to experts, and Cohen Kappa analysis was carried out to measure their agreement.

13 students were involved in the interview. Four of them represent the Science and Technology cluster, six from the Social sciences cluster, and the rest represent the Business management cluster. Besides that, concerning the students' Arabic learning experience, six of them had completed Arabic learning up to the upper secondary level, three up to primary school level, and four had no Arabic learning experience.

The variation of the students' level of Arabic learning and also the cluster of where they are from is crucial to be considered in the research design so that a more comprehensive and varied perspective of the issue can be gathered.

Findings

Table 2: Help Seeking Strategy: Descriptive Analysis

Item	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation(SD)	Interpretation
Peers' help	5.81	.89	High
Lecturers' help	4.95	1.34	Moderate
Overall	5.36	.73	High

Table 2 shows the mean value of the help seeking component for all the respondents is high ($M=5.36$, $SP=.73$). The finding also reveals that the help-seeking strategy among peers is higher ($M=5.81$, $SP=.89$) compared to the lecturers ($M=4.95$, $SP=1.34$).

Based on interviews, students were found to seek help from their peers as well as from their seniors when facing difficulties in learning. There are also students who seek help from their peers initially, but later turn to their lecturers. Among the comments from those students:

“What is important in learning, to me, is that we must have someone else (to seek help)... friends to study... I just can't... being sleepy is one thing... but he will... I will ask him to teach me... if I study alone... if I am not clear of things... and who shall I ask... that's what makes me feel lazy to do.”

(Informant 11, female, 21 years old)

“...Refer to friends a lot... we also have seniors who are taking arabic too... so, maybe we refer to them because they have gone through it earlier than us.”

(Informant 5, female, 21 years old)

“Err... normally friends first... but if it is complicated or something... then only (I) consult (lecturers).”

(Informant 1, female 21 years old)

Among the factors that caused the students to seek help from their peers is that they see their peers or seniors in some cases as a source of reference, they are shy of their lecturers, and they also have a tight learning timetable. These factors were picked up from the interview, as some of them said:

“...If I study alone... if I am not clear of things... and who shall I ask... that what makes me feel lazy to do.”

(Informant 11, female, 21 years old)

“Question: More to friends...

Answer: Haha...because (I am) shy (with the lecturer) I guess...”

(Informant 2, male, 22 years old)

“Our schedule is packed... so, how to meet the *Ustaz* if we have to... too long... so, instead of that long wait... it is better to ask our friends... I am always with them (friends).”

(Informant 4, female, 21 years old)

Besides, it is also due to their close relationship they have with their friends and the difficulty that they face in meeting up with their lecturers. They say:

“...This is because, to me, meeting (asking) the lecturer would be the last resort... friends are much closer to us... sometimes... they (friends) know what we don't understand because we are in the same boat, right?”

(Informant 4, female, 21 years old)

“I refer more to my friends tahn my lecturer because it is difficult to meet the Arabic lecturer because we are not in the same faculty... we can only meet once a week.”

(Informant 5, female, 21 years old)

Beside referring to friends, they also refer to dictionary, family members and lecturers. They say:

“Most importantly it is a must have... whatever it is we have to... have dictionary... it's important.”

(Informant 11, female, 21 years old)

“...If I am at home I learn either with my brother or my younger brother... I learn from someone who knows better than me.”

(Informant 11, female, 21 years old)

“...If I don’t understand... I will ask *Ustaz* (lecturer) directly.”

(Informant 12, female, 21 years old)

Among the reasons for the students to refer to the lecturers is that the lecturers are considered to be the most qualified people, and they normally ask questions in class. This is reflected in the data from the interview when they say:

“Even the Arabs don’t understand... and if (I) don’t understand and ask friend... (my) friend will give me something else (wrong answer)... so, (it is) better to ask those who teach us.”

(Informant 7, female, 21 years old)

“To me, if I want to ask that *Ustaz* (lecturer)... (If I) ask in class... ha... *Ustaz* (lecturer) teaches us a little... if (we) don’t understand... ask directly.”

(Informant 3, female, 21 years old)

Discussion

The study has found that the level of help-seeking strategy for all the students is high. However, it has also been discovered that the use of help seeking strategy is higher with friends than lecturers. This is in line with the findings by Ohta and Nakaone (2004) and Alexitch (2002). Alexitch (2002) relates the use of this strategy to students’ high intrinsic motivation instead of their extrinsic motivation. Furthermore, a study by Song et al. (2017) revealed that queries triggered by students have created a collaborative atmosphere and engagement in learning activities among the students.

In help seeking, students’ dependence on peers rather than lecturers is caused by several factors that have been identified in the data collected from the interview sessions. The first factor is the learning environment of oral Arabic at UiTM. Arabic courses are offered by APB to all faculties in UiTM to which are located quite far from one another and scattered all over the campus. Due to this, lecturers who have been given the hours to teach at a particular faculty will only be able to be at the faculty at the stipulated time. Lecturers also do not have a dedicated room at each faculty to allow any meeting or discussion with students to take place. As a result, students find it difficult to meet their lecturers. Students also have a very minimal chance of consulting their lecturers, except for the limited opportunity they have during class to do so. Normally, after class, students and lecturers will rush to fulfill their other working commitments, which also include attending classes located at different venues. Furthermore, both lecturers and students will only

meet again the following week as the contact hours allotted for the Arabic course are only two hours a week. There is no suitable time for both parties to meet and discuss, except for a specially arranged time agreed by both parties, which in reality is also scarce and limited.

The second factor is related to students' issues. It has been identified through the responses in the interview that students feel shy to refer or meet the lecturers because they do not want to reveal their weaknesses or difficulties they face in the course. This finding is in line with studies conducted by Ewald (2007), Ghaith and Diab (2008), and Newman (2002). Students were found to be more comfortable meeting and discussing the problems with their peers, especially their close friends, compared to the lecturers. They feel more secure in seeking help from this group and do not feel that their self-esteem is at stake when their weakness in learning is exposed to others. Similar reasons, as reported in previous studies (Holmes, 2003), are used by students in choosing their study group members so that they will feel more comfortable in learning. This has also supported other studies that have been carried out (Newman, 2002; Fan et al., 2009). In addition to this, more intelligent students have always been seen as arrogant when they do not give the right response to the questions raised by others (Ghazali Yusri, et al., 2010b) and their intention to correct mistakes among their peers are seen to be an act of showing off (Yoshida, 2008).

Data from the interview shows that students seek help from their peers as well as their seniors when faced with difficulties in learning. Some students rely on friends for help, but later turn to lecturers. This echoes the finding by Yoshida (2008), who states that students, in seeking help in learning, will eventually turn to the lecturers to verify what they have discussed earlier with their friends. This is because the lecturers are seen by the students to be the experts in learning.

Implications

This study has revealed that students prefer to seek help from their peers when facing difficulties in learning oral Arabic. Therefore, this study proposes two suggestions to improve the learning of Arabic. First, intensify the function of teaching assistants among students who have acceptable ability in oral Arabic through a special appointment that is recognised by APB and UiTM.

Several previous studies like Rodriguez-Sabater (2005) and Roscoe and Chi (2007) have looked into the aspect of using learning assistants among students and discovered that it has a positive effect on both students and the learning assistant. Learning assistants have to be tested and have to pass a certain level of the language skills index. They need to be trained on how to supervise students or their peers, and the training also includes how to conduct group activities and other related learning activities. Similar findings are also reported by Fuchs et al. (1999) as well as Fuchs dan Fuchs (2005). They have developed a learning strategy for reading skills called Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS). In a more recent development,

Puranik, Patchan, and Lemons (2017) shared similar findings and developed Peer-Assisted Writing Strategies (PAWS), where they found that students who used PAWS showed positive and significant improvement in reading skills compared to the control group. Furthermore, Jones, G. et al. (2017), in a similar context, reported improvement in reading skills among the students who received help from peers in their learning. Ko (2020) also studied the factors of using Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) that contribute to the success of improving students' ability in reading skills. A similar study to Ko (2020) is Priestly (2020), who studied PALS in increasing reading comprehension of the biology test.

It was also noted from this study that among the factors that have caused the students to have fewer meetings with the lecturers is the limitations of time and space. Therefore, this study proposes the second move to improve students' learning, which is to utilize the use of internet as a platform for discussion to be carried out between students and lecturers, an initiative that has been taken by UiTM through the use of i-Learn. Besides this, lecturers can also opt for a more open platform, like a blog and website, to create an interactive learning environment. The existence of such platforms, however, may not be effective if students as well as lecturers are not trained on how to use them effectively. Training is an important element in any initiative involving the use of technology. Elbassiony (2006), in his research in Egypt, highlighted that teachers who are not ready to embrace internet facilities have caused the low use of internet facilities and not due to the unavailability of such facilities.

Conclusion

This study discovered that UiTM students used the help-seeking strategy at a level that is considered high. Despite this, they prefer to seek help from peers rather than lecturers, due to circumstances including lack of time, space, and internal problems. As a result, the study makes two recommendations in regards to learning oral Arabic in UiTM: (1) using a student-selected learning assistant and (2) using the internet as a medium for students and lecturers to discuss issues. During the 2019 pandemic, online classes have taken place in most of the oral Arabic learning. Students need to use online discussion to communicate with each other and to discuss with lecturers. However, some new issues have arisen which are related to both technical issues, such as problems in internet connection, and also students' attitudes. Being at home in most of the time because of the movement-controlled order which has been imposed by the Malaysian government, they seem to be complacent about communicating in Malay language rather than Arabic. This issue needs a separate study, which is not covered by this research.

Author Contributions

All authors conceived the study and contributed to the data interpretation and literature review. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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