Demotivating factors in the Arabic language classroom: What demotivates non-Muslim Malaysian learners when it comes to learning Arabic?

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to investigate the demotivating factors associated with learning Arabic as a Foreign Language (FL) on the part of non-Muslim Malaysian learners. The data were obtained from an open-ended questionnaire distributed to 207 students learning the Arabic language at a public university in Malaysia and from semi-structured interviews with twenty respondents. Using qualitative data analysis, nine demotivational factors were identified, namely (1) subject-related factors; (2) teacher-related factors; (3) class-related factors; (4) negative attitudes towards the FL; (5) course materials and learning content; (6) the compulsory nature of the Arabic course; (7) time constraints; (8) lack of opportunities to communicate in Arabic; (9) lack of ability. It is hoped that by understanding the factors that demotivate learners of Arabic, teachers can improve the process of teaching and learning the Arabic language, and try to avoid pitfalls in order to enhance learners’ motivation towards learning Arabic.

Keywords: motivation; demotivation; Arabic language; foreign language; Malaysia context

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a developing country located in Southeast Asia. It has a total population of over 28 million people of various ethnicities and religions. Malaysia, as a multi-cultural society, is often defined in terms of ethnic and religious plurality (Ahmad, 2007). The major ethnic groups are the Malays (63.1%), followed by Chinese (24.6%), Indians (7.3%), indigenous peoples (4.3%), and others (0.7%). While the official religion is...
Islam which is practiced by about 61.3% of the population, the rest of the population freely practice Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), Hinduism (6.3%) and other religions (3.4%) (http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php).

The history of teaching and learning the Arabic language as part of the formal Malaysian education system can be traced back to twenty five years ago. In the Malaysian context, the Arabic language is always perceived to be taught only to the Malay ethnic population who are Muslim by religion. As a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious country, Malaysia can be a platform for learning various foreign languages in order to promote better understanding with regard to different peoples and different cultures in an era of globalization, and especially in terms of understanding the Muslim culture in Malaysia itself. A study conducted by Aladdin (2010) found that non-Muslim Malaysian learners held a high positive attitude towards learning foreign languages, and held a moderately positive attitude towards the Arabic language and its native speakers. The study also revealed that non-Muslim Malaysian learners showed that they are instrumentally motivated to learn Arabic as a foreign language for the reason that it fulfils university needs. In view of the fact that non-Muslim Malaysian learners are motivated to learn Arabic, it is important to research the flip-side of motivation in the form of demotivation. By investigating the underlying demotivating factors associated with foreign language learning, this study will offer support in terms of comprehending theories of motivation, and in the case of teachers or language instructors, will allow them to try, as much as possible, to avoid being the cause of demotivation during the teaching and learning process, and to try to sustain the students’ positive attitudes and motivation when it comes to learning Arabic. Thus, the current study attempts to investigate the demotivational factors which impact on non-Muslim Malaysian learners in learning Arabic language as a foreign language in the multi-cultural Malaysian context.

Demotivation can be considered a relatively new issue in the field of second or foreign language learning which “…in spite of their great significance, have received very little attention either in mainstream psychology or L2 research” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 3). Even though there are comparatively few pieces of research into foreign language learning demotivation (FLLD), teachers, language instructors and researchers might be interested in this matter in that, by investigating the factors behind demotivation in language learning, it might be possible to offer support in comprehending theories of motivation, and also in trying, as far as possible, to avoid being the cause of demotivation during the teaching and learning process. There are various definitions of demotivation. According to Dörnyei (2001, p. 143), demotivation concerns “…specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action.” Hence, a demotivated learner is someone who initially has had motivation to achieve a goal, but has lost his or her interest (or motivation) to do so because of negative external influences. Dörnyei (2001) also points out that demotivation does not mean that all negative influences may be perceived as a demotivating factor. It only means that a strong negative factor restrains the current motivation, with some other positive motives still remaining and ready to be activated. Deci and Ryan (1985) use a similar term - “amotivation”, which means “…the relative absence of motivation that is not caused by a lack of initial interest but rather by the individual’s experiencing feelings of incompetence and helplessness when faced with the activity” (Deci and Ryan 1985, as cited in Dörnyei, 2001, p. 144).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The participants of this study consist of all non-Muslim Malaysian undergraduate students from the Faculty of Law (FOL) at The National University of Malaysia (known in Malay as Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, henceforth UKM) who are studying and have been studying the Arabic language as a compulsory subject in the Faculty. The majority of the participants are female in that they account for 131 of the participants (63.3%) while males account for 76 (36.7%). Of the 207 non-Muslim Malaysian learners of Arabic, 130 (76.81%) are of Chinese ethnic origin, followed by 43 (20.77 %) who are Indian, 3 (1.45%) who are Bumiputera (Indigenous), 1
(0.48%) who is Punjabi and 1 (0.48%) who is Portuguese. Of these participants 130 (62.8%) are practicing Buddhists, followed by 39 (18.84%) who are practicing Hindu, 32 (15.46%) who are practicing Christians, 3 (1.93%) are practicing Taoists, 1 (0.48%) is a practicing Sikh and 1 (0.48%) described him/herself as a ‘free thinker’. Of the 207 respondents taking part in the survey, 168 respondents gave their feedback in the form of an open-ended questionnaire.

2.2. Instruments

To gather the data with regard to the demotivating factors in learning Arabic as a foreign language in FOL of the UKM, two instruments were developed – an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The open-ended questionnaire was administered to 207 students so that participants could express their ideas in their own words with regards to the demotivating factors that impacted on them while learning the language. Of the 207 respondents, 168 of them provided comments in response to the open-ended questions.

As for the semi-structured interview, this was conducted with five students in each academic year, i.e. students from year one to year four, - 20 students in total. The interview sessions were conducted on a casual basis. Some limitations existed with regard to the interview sessions in that it was quite difficult to find suitable times to carry out the interview with the students since they were very busy completing their assignment sat that time. It took about two weeks to finish the interview sessions with the students.

2.3. Analysis

To explore the demotivating factors with regard to non-Muslim Malaysian learners of Arabic (NMMLAs), the written and oral data were qualitatively analyzed. Once data are collected, it is necessary to organize them into a manageable, easily understandable, and analyzable base of information (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Accordingly, at the initial stage, all the responses or comments related to the open-ended questions were listed, and the written responses were analysed. Then, coding was undertaken, based on a list of factors. Coding involves making decisions about how to classify or categorize particular pieces or parts of data. Finally, the frequency and percentages for each factor in terms of the code or themes were calculated.

For the semi-structured interviews, the students were asked whether they liked studying Arabic, what they liked or disliked about their Arabic classes, whether they had lost interest in studying, and a description of the situation when they lost interest in studying Arabic. Their responses were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Following that, the data were coded based on themes.

3. Results

In this section, the results of the underlying demotivational factors with regard to the NMMLAs were reported. The research question asked what the salient demotivating factors for NMMLA were, and from the findings, nine demotivating factors were extracted from the open ended-questionnaires and interviews. These are as listed in the Table 1.
### Table 1: A coding framework for demotivation: Categories of frequencies stated by NMMLAs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demotivating Factor</th>
<th>Frequency (f)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Arabic subject-related factors:</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>32.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Teacher-related factors:</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>17.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Class-related factors:</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Course materials and learning contents:</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The compulsory nature of Arabic study:</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>8.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Time constraints</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Lack of opportunities to communicate in Arabic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lack of ability</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>242</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4. Discussion and conclusion

From the preceding analysis, nine main categories of demotivational factors were obtained from the open-ended questionnaires and interviews in terms of learning Arabic. In this study, Arabic subject-related matter is the most frequently mentioned demotivational factor among the NMMLAs. The majority of the respondents found that Arabic is a difficult language to master, especially with regard to pronunciation, followed by the grammar, the writing system and orthography, the diacritics, the memorisation of the vocabulary, reading skills and finally the recognition of the alphabet. In other words, the complexity of the Arabic language in general is a demotivating factor when it comes to the students learning Arabic. This finding supports Zouhir’s (2010) study in which it was shown that Arabic is seen as being complex and poses a serious challenge to learners. This result is also in line with a study conducted by Qashoa (2006) where subject demotivation factors ranked first in terms of language learning.

The second highest frequency in terms of demotivating factor was related to teachers. As reviewed, most previous studies (e.g. Chambers, 1993; Oxford, 1998; Ushioda, 1998; Dörnyei, 2001; Arai, 2004; Hasegawa, 2004; Keblawi, 2005; Kikuchi, 2010) have shown that factors related to teachers are the most demotivating type of factor. However, in this study, surprisingly the teacher related aspect was the second factor in terms of demotivating NMMLAs. It is undeniable that teachers play an important role in motivating students to learn. Krashen (1987, p. 32) asserts that “…the effective language teacher is someone who can provide input and help make it comprehensible in a low anxiety situation.” Hence, according to the results of this research, teachers should try to improvise their teaching styles and their attitudes in order to motivate the students with regard to learning Arabic.

The third most frequently mentioned demotivating factor is the class-related factor in that the respondents expressed their concerned about competing with peers who have a prior background of Arabic, namely Malay-Muslim learners. Even though not all the Malay-Muslim learners have the basics when it comes to Arabic, most of them have the experience of learning Arabic in secondary schools to some extent. The fourth demotivating factors is related to negative attitudes towards L2/FL in that the respondents found that Arabic was not relevant to their studies, they lacked any interest in Arabic, and there were no clear the objectives in relation to learning Arabic. The next factor is course materials followed by the learning content factor such as an inability to read the textbook on their own, followed by the uninteresting course materials used and the course book which focused particularly on grammar. The teachers should revise the text book and the materials used in the classroom. The most important aspect is to make the text book bilingual, and have the transliteration, especially for beginners. The aim should be to make the book more attractive and to make it fun to learn.
Another significant demotivating factor is the compulsory nature of the Arabic language course. The students expressed concern over the fact that they have no choice but to learn Arabic in the Faculty. They suggested that it should not be made compulsory for FOL students. However, this factor is related to the policy of the Faculty of Law, UKM, and to totally change the policy is almost impossible to do. The Arabic course offered to students in the Faculty of Law is due to the uniqueness of the FOL in that some of the Islamic Law subjects are taught at the FOL. These include Islamic Family Law and Mu’āmalat in order to give the students a better understanding of the range of law practice in general, and in Malaysia in particular. Hence, the students have to learn Arabic as a tool to further research Islamic Law if they want to.

Time constraints, lack of opportunities to communicate in Arabic and lack of ability are the final three demotivating factors that emerged from the analysis. As a student, one has to know how to manage one’s time properly in order to be able to do revision, assignments and tasks, not only with regard to the Arabic language, but also for other subjects. By managing one’s time appropriately, one will manage to cope with the subjects one learns. With regard to the lack of opportunities to communicate in Arabic, the teachers should find ways to provide students with more chances to communicate in Arabic, whether inside or outside the classroom. To some extent, I agree with Kikuchi’s findings (2010) where he suggested that the teacher should avoid the grammar-translation approach in their teaching, because the nature of this approach does not generally allow students any chance to engage in communication in the target language. Teachers should consider a two-way approach with regard to teaching and interactive language learning. Lack of ability was perceived by some participants to be demotivating in terms of an inability to do revision independently and being incapable of doing homework without help from friends or the teacher. Learners with this kind of negative psychological feeling need specific attention from the teacher and possibly need to consult a counsellor in order to build up their confidence.

From these findings, by understanding the factors that demotivate learners, it is hoped that teachers can improve the teaching and learning process in terms of the Arabic language, and try to avoid the pitfalls as far as possible in order to enhance the learners’ motivation when it comes to learning Arabic in the Malaysian context.

References


