

Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 18 (2011) 481–490

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

Kongres Pengajaran dan Pembelajaran UKM, 2010

The Empowerment of Postgraduate Students in Arabic

Kaseh Abu Bakar*, Hakim Zainal, Maheram Ahmad & Md. Nor Abdullah

Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 UKM Bangi, Malaysia

Abstract

The Arabic language is very critical in the study of Islamic Sciences. This paper reports i) the initiative taken by the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia to enhance the competency of postgraduate students to research in Arabic; and ii) postgraduate students' perception of a remedial Arabic course. Two remedial Arabic courses were designed based on the paradigms of learner empowerment, student-centeredness and educative assessment. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of Remedial Arabic 1 course, students enrolled in the course for semester 1/2010-2011 were asked to respond to a questionnaire. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results showed that the students perceived the course as having achieved its objectives, that they had shown improvement in their Arabic reading comprehension, use of Arabic dictionaries, as well as theoretical understanding and practical application of Arabic morphology and grammar. On top of that, they also reported higher motivation, confidence and independence in reading Arabic texts and learning Arabic. The study concludes that the way the Arabic course is designed and implemented has enriched learners with a different, more effective, motivating, enabling and empowering learning experience. The researchers suggest that such approach should be expanded to the curriculum of other Arabic courses.

© 2011 Published by Elsevier Ltd. Open access under CC BY-NC-ND license.

Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Kongres Pengajaran & Pembelajaran UKM, 2010

Keywords: Teaching Arabic; Remedial Arabic; Student-centered Learning; Learner Empowerment;

1. Introduction

In pursuing graduate studies in Islamic Sciences, proficiency in Arabic is critical for three reasons: i) to enable the students-cum-researchers to benefit from sources and references in the discipline which are largely written in Arabic; ii) to encourage the non-Arab students to engage in social interaction and academic discussion with Arab lecturers and students; and iii) to enable graduates to continuously engage in future professional development. As such, all non-native graduate students of Faculty of Islamic Studies (FPI) are required to sit for a qualifying test in Arabic language, irrespective of the language of their theses or dissertations (Fakulti Pengajian Islam 2010). Failure to pass a certain level in the said test requires them to take both or one of the subjects, Remedial Arabic 1 and Remedial Arabic 2, or Remedial Arabic 2 only. This paper discusses only Remedial Arabic 1. No previous studies have been conducted or reported on the effectiveness of this course.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +006-03-8921-4187; fax: +006-03-8921-3185.

E-mail address: kaseh@ukm.my

2. Remedial Arabic Language 1 (PPPZ6013)

2.1. Course design and content

The purpose for the course is to enable graduate students to benefit from Arabic resources confidently and independently for their research and for their life-long learning professional development. The accumulative experience of the teachers involved in teaching Arabic to postgraduate students tells that the students who are required to take the remedial courses generally exhibit the following problems:

- i. Inability to comprehend Arabic texts independently, thus leading to diffidence, anxiety and avoidance;
- ii. Lacking mastery of basic morphological skills such that severely impede their ability to recognize words and comprehend texts (Khaldieh, 2001);
- iii. Inability to effectively consult dictionaries due to low proficiency in Arabic morphology and to inability to determine meaning based on reading context;
- iv. Failure to appreciate the communicative value of basic syntactical features;
- v. Low application of effective language learning strategies and reading strategies.

The underdevelopment of reading skill and essential linguistic skills for Arabic reading is presumed to be due to prolonged dependency on teachers and spoon feeding paradigm in the students' previous learning experiences. To meet the aforementioned needs and to overcome the above challenges, the course needed to be designed to give the students a different curricular experience. Subsequently, the current design for this course was proposed and approved in a workshop in May 2008 (Kaseh, 2008). This new experience should move away from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness in which learners would be more engaged in a meaningful learning process (Nunan, 1988). In order to increase learner dependency on themselves, and to promote learners' sense of belonging, responsibility and ability to pursue life-long learning, the course designer proposed a curriculum that empowers learners with learning skills and strategies (Benson & Voller, 1997; Dickinson, 1992). As such, the purpose of the course was stipulated as to train students to understand contemporary Arabic texts by emphasizing on effective interaction with texts and active construction of meaning (Bernhardt 1991). Teaching and learning should focus on practical application of reading strategies, individual and group interaction with texts, use of dictionaries as resources for comprehension, and self-initiated vocabulary enrichment. Both intensive and extensive reading for comprehension are emphasized. Given the advantages of reading aloud for Arabic learning (Larkin 1995), reading aloud is not done mechanically, but exercised meaningfully through Readers Theatre of literary texts (Noble 1976; Koziol & Richards, 1996). Where grammar is concerned, the course focuses on practical application of basic Arabic morphology and grammar to aid comprehension and dictionary use. Despite the strong dominance of *i'rab* or parsing in traditional Arabic classrooms, this practice is kept to the very minimal as its role in comprehension is negligible, and possibly obstructive to comprehension (Khaldieh, 2001).

With regards to assessment of learning outcomes, multiple indicators of achievement and learning progress (Nitko, 2004; Genesee & Upshur, 1996) and educative assessment (Wiggins, 1998) are believed to lead to more effective learning experiences and optimal attainment of learning outcomes. Hitherto, classroom-based evaluation and performance-based evaluation are incorporated into the curriculum alongside a formal examination, and all criteria for evaluation are communicated verbally and in print to students in the first meeting (Kaseh & Maheram, 2008; Hakim & Kaseh, 2010). Students are assessed based on i) a multiple-choice examination on comprehension, morphology and grammar; ii) successful completion of a learning portfolio comprising extensive reading and strategy application, morphology and grammar; and iii) performance in Readers Theatre.

2.2. Course objectives

The objectives of the course are:

1. Students will be able to understand and interact literally and critically with contemporary Arabic texts.
2. Students will be able to effectively use micro-skills and reading strategies for comprehension purposes.
3. Students will be able to effectively use dictionaries as resources to aid comprehension.

4. Students will be able to strengthen their knowledge of morphology and grammar as well as to utilize them to aid comprehension.
5. Students will be able to master some 100 new vocabularies.

Table 1. Details of Course Content

Week	Reading	Morphology & Grammar	Assignment
1	Introduction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course Introduction • Self-assessment of Reading Skills • Reading micro-skills and strategies Text: نكات وطرائف نظيفة	الفعل الماضي والفعل المضارع والأمر والمصدر واسم الفاعل واسم المفعول واسم المكان واسم الآلة <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morphological information in dictionary • Why the need to master Morphology for reading skill? 	Extensive reading Vocabulary Conjugational Drills: الفعل الصحيح: السالم والمهموز والمضعف
2	Text: قصيدة حبلى قصة قصيرة	Usage exercises: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • المعتل المثال والأجوف • المصدر والمصدر المؤول 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive reading • Vocabulary Conjugational Drills: الفعل المعتل المثال والأجوف
3	Text: Tafsir - العزيز	الفعل المعتل والناقص واللفيف Usage of <i>wazn sarfi</i>	Extensive reading Vocabulary Conjugational drills: الفعل المعتل الناقص واللفيف
4	Text: المري والمروض	Why the need to master Grammar? Description of object and place Description of the subject and object Description of verb	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive reading • Vocabulary • Grammar exercises
5	Text: فنانون تائبون	Usage of purpose clause المفعول لأجله	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive reading • Vocabulary • Grammar exercises
6	Text: حديث: قصة الذي فاجر بآبائه الكفرة	<i>Adverb: time</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive reading • Vocabulary • Grammar exercises
7	Text: تفسير سورة المنافقون	Importance of meaning الأفعال المزيدة Usage of pattern فاعل [] فعل [] أفعال مناقشة إعراب سورة المنافقون	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive reading • Vocabulary • Conjugational drills: أفعال [] فعل [] فاعل
8	Text: عوامة الدين	Usage of pattern افتعل [] تفاعل [] تفاعل [] تفاعل []	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive reading • Vocabulary • Conjugational drills: تفاعل [] تفاعل [] تفاعل []
9	Text: فتاوى معاصرة	Usage of pattern انفعَلَ [] استنفعَلَ [] Usage صيغة التفضيل/صيغة التعجب	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive reading • Vocabulary • Conjugational Drills: انفعَلَ [] استنفعَلَ []
10	Readers Theatre التمثيلية	-	-
11	Readers Theatre التمثيلية	-	-

2.3. Form of Course Teaching

The teaching of this course emphasizes on the self-effort of students to improve their skills in Arabic language. Reading is done through group interaction with texts, and guided by the lecturer. Efforts to overcome all shortcomings whether in the area of morphology or in grammar are through self-access learning whereby students are coached to refer to and learn from the appropriate references.

Table 2. Form of assessment

Final Examination	50%
Assignment (Portfolio)	30%
Activity(Readers Theatre)	15%
Participation	5%

2.4. Description of Assignment (30%)

To prepare a student portfolio. Covers summary/ personal response/ report on readings of *أهلا* magazines or other texts, compilation of vocabulary, morphology and grammar exercises as well as guided self-assessment.

Table 3. Evaluation rubric for Portfolio

Criteria (commitment, earnestness, accuracy, ability to apply learning strategy)	Marks 60=30%	Very Good	Good	Average	Weak
Grammar and Morphology Exercises	15	13-15	9-12	5-8	1-4
Vocabulary	15	13-15	9-12	5-8	1-4
Extensive Reading <i>القراءة الموسعة</i>	20	16-20	11-15	6-10	1-5
Ability to objectively monitor and self-assess progress.	10	9-10	6-8	4-5	1-3

2.5. Description of Activity (15%)

This activity involves group presentations of Readers Theatre/ Chambers Theatre in the 10th and 11th weeks. Each group will act out a short story. This activity is important to train students to read aloud meaningfully and expressively. For effective presentation and to enhance learning benefits, students need to comprehend the story, observe pronunciation, intonation, morphology, grammar, discourse markers as well as the context of a reading material. Each presentation is assessed by the following criteria:

Table 4. Evaluation rubric for Readers Theatre

Criteria	Scale	Description
Fluency of pronunciation and suitability of intonation.	8-10	Pronunciation and intonation are close to those of native Arab speaker. Very clear and easy to follow by audience.
	4-7	Pronunciation and intonation are less close to those of a native Arab speaker, but comprehensible enough for a sympathetic listener. Sometimes not clear, causing slight difficulty for audience to follow presentation.
	1-3	Pronunciation and intonation not at all close to those of native Arab speaker. Not clear, causing difficulty for audience to follow presentation.
Reading accuracy from the aspects of morphology, grammar and discourse markers.	8-10	Accurate reading from aspect of morphology and grammar as well as observing of discourse markers. Very helpful for listener to follow and understand story.
	4-7	Reading sometimes does not follow rules of morphology & Grammar and less observing of discourse markers. Listener sometimes faces difficulty to follow and understand story.
	1-3	Frequently breaches rules of morphology & grammar, and hardly observes discourse markers. Very difficult for listener to follow and understand the story.
Creativity and suitability of performance to the context of the story.	8-10	Smooth presentation. Body movements and facial mimics very appropriate and helpful for understanding.
	4-7	Presentation was sometimes discontinuous. Body movements & facial mimics were not much used, & even if used, were not so appropriate and not so helpful for understanding.

	1-3	Presentation was frequently discontinuous. Body movements and facial mimics were not used or not appropriate and not helpful for understanding.
Total Marks	30	Assessment percentage 15%

2.6. Description of Participation (5%)

Student participation in the class is assessed based on the following criteria:

Table 5. Evaluation rubric for participation

Marks	Description
5	Participates in class activities without compulsion. Shows earnestness outside of class.
4	Participates in class activities with earnestness without being asked to.
3	Participates in class activity when requested with partial earnestness.
2	Participates in class activity when requested without showing earnestness.
1	Needs to be forced to participate in class activities and shows no earnestness.

2.7. Class Requirements

In order to empower learners with independent Arabic learning skills for life-long learning, students are coached to use some critical resources. Therefore, each student is obliged to bring to class a dictionary (preferably *Al- Mu'jam al-Wasit*), a reference on Arabic grammar and a reference on Arabic noun and verb conjugation.

3. Students' Perception Of The Course

To assess the extent to which the course Remedial Arabic 1 meets its objectives, a set of questionnaires were distributed to 40 students during the final class meeting of semester 1 of session 2010/2011. Items are analyzed using descriptive statistics. Generally, the students are satisfied with the achievability of course objectives, course content compatibility with course objectives as well as the teaching methods practiced.

Table 6 summarizes items pertaining to the course content and objectives. The students showed high agreement to statements relating to the attainment of the course objectives, their ability to understand contemporary texts, and improved proficiency in the subcomponents and sub skills which are critical for reading comprehension such as morphology, grammar and practical use of dictionaries. However, the means for items on the ability to use micro-skills and reading strategies effectively, the acquisition of new vocabulary and the representativeness of contemporary Arabic texts are relatively lower than other items, albeit still on the favourable side of the scale. The students agreed that the time allocated is sufficient, that the course is satisfactory and that they would recommend the course to other students. The course structure and objectives can thus be said to meet the students' academic needs and are attainable.

Table 7 present items pertaining to course teaching and learning. Students highly agreed that the way the course is taught have reinforced their theoretical understanding and practical application of Arabic morphology and grammar, and that the teaching and learning processes are more effective for their learning than their past experiences. They also agreed that the lecturers possess the skills to teach the course components, and that the way the course is taught contribute to the attainment of the course objectives and increase their motivation in learning Arabic. Students reported effective use of class time and with respect to the atmosphere in the classroom, they reported feeling comfortable to discuss and ask questions, and motivated to learn Arabic. These results show that a pedagogue which is based on learner-centered activities appear to create a conducive learning atmosphere and a positive and effective learning experience for the students.

Table 8, with regards to the portfolio assessment, the students agreed that the portfolio as a learning and assessment tool was effective in improving their skills in morphology and grammar, motivating them to read Arabic

texts, encouraging them to apply reading strategies and to exercise self-assessment, heightening their motivation to learn Arabic, and increasing their independence in learning Arabic.

Table 9 summarizes the students' responses to the Readers Theatre activity. The results indicate that the activity has improved their Arabic pronunciation, fluency and intonation in reading. It has also boosted their confidence to understand Arabic texts and improved their ability to apply their knowledge of morphology and grammar. They also expressed interest in obtaining a copy of their performance for self-enhancement purpose. However, the students expressed relatively less agreement on the items related to logistics, namely venue and adequacy of microphone. These results indicate that the Readers Theatre has been a useful and effective tool for reading aloud-cum-comprehension and for boosting learners' confidence in reading. Future improvements need to look into logistic aspects such as performance venue, the use of microphones suitable for theatrical performances and availability of quality recording. As shown in Table 10, the students also perceived the exam questions as truly assessing their ability to comprehend texts, their proficiency in morphology and grammar. These agreements show that the course assessment corresponds to the stipulated course objectives.

As observed in Table 11, over 55% of students reported improvement of 50 to 69% and 70 to 100% in every indicator. The highest percentage of improvement are seen in items related to interest in learning Arabic (75%), confidence in using Arabic-Arabic dictionary (75%), confidence in reading Arabic texts (69.5%), and ability to comprehend Arabic texts (67.5%). These are followed by improvements in Arabic the areas of vocabulary (68.5%), morphology (60%), and grammar (55%). Some 20 to 35% of the students reported improvement of around 20 to 49%. Only one student reported minimal improvement, and this number is very negligible. This shows that the course is successful in remedying learners' linguistic aspects of Arabic such as morphology and grammar, and reading skills, and especially their comprehension ability, confidence, interest and resourcefulness in Arabic learning and reading.

Table 6. Attainment of course objectives and general satisfaction

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not certain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 Able to understand contemporary text literally & critically	0	1	7	23	9	4.0000	.71611
2 Able to use reading strategies and micro-skills effectively	0	2	9	21	8	3.8750	.79057
3 Able to use dictionaries effectively	0	1	4	19	16	4.2500	.74248
4 Improves student's confidence to use Arabic-Arabic Dictionary	0	1	3	18	15	4.2703	.73214
5 Learning morphology improves knowledge of morphology	1	0	5	21	13	4.1250	.82236
6 Learning morphology improves proficiency in morphology	1	0	7	20	12	4.0500	.84580
7 Learning morphology helps to understand text	1	0	6	21	12	4.1000	.74421
8 Learning Grammar improves knowledge of grammar	1	0	4	24	11	4.1000	.77790
9 Learning grammar improves proficiency in grammar	1	0	3	26	10	4.1000	.74421
10 Learning grammar helps to understand text	1	0	4	23	12	4.1250	.79057
11 Mastered more than 100 new vocabulary	1	7	8	15	8	3.5641	1.09532
12 Objectives of PPPZ6013 course are clear	0	1	3	20	16	4.2750	.71567
13 Objectives of PPPZ6013 course are attainable	0	0	4	20	16	4.3000	.64847

14	Course content meets course objectives	0	2	4	22	12	4.1000	.77790
15	Course is satisfactory	2	0	2	20	14	4.1579	.94515
16	Text is suitable for postgraduate level	1	2	3	22	11	4.0256	.90284
17	Texts represent contemporary Arabic language	0	5	5	18	11	3.8974	.96777
18	Topic of morphology meets academic requirement	0	1	4	22	12	4.1538	.70854
19	Would suggest to other students to enrol for this course	1	0	1	18	18	4.3684	.78572
20	Time allocated for course is sufficient and achieves course objectives	1	3	5	15	14	4.0000	1.03975

Table 7. Evaluation of teaching

	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not certain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	The teaching of morphology strengthens existing knowledge	0	1	5	20	13	4.1538	.74475
2	Teaching morphology reinforces ability to use a dictionary	0	2	4	21	12	4.1026	.78790
3	Teaching morphology improves competency	0	2	5	21	11	4.0513	.79302
4	Teaching morphology improves mastery of vocabulary	0	1	5	22	11	4.1026	.71800
5	Grammar topics meet academic requirement	0	1	6	25	7	3.9744	.66835
6	Teaching of grammar reinforces existing knowledge	0	2	3	24	10	4.0769	.73930
7	Teaching of grammar improves skills	0	1	4	23	11	4.1282	.69508
8	Teaching of grammar improves skill to understand text	0	0	4	25	10	4.1538	.58663
9	Teaching of grammar improves skill to construct sentences	0	0	10	17	12	4.0513	.75911
10	The approach of teaching grammar is more effective than past experience	0	0	6	21	12	4.1538	.67037
11	The way the course is taught helps to achieve objectives	0	0	6	20	13	4.1795	.68333
12	Lecturer possesses the skills to teach reading strategies	0	0	2	19	18	4.4103	.59462
13	Lecturer possesses the skills to teach morphology	0	0	3	16	20	4.4359	.64051
14	Lecturer possesses the skills to teach Arabic grammar	0	0	4	13	22	4.4615	.68234
15	Teaching methods increase interest	0	0	1	21	17	4.4103	.54858
16	Lecturer utilises time effectively	0	0	1	18	20	4.4872	.55592
17	Lecturer encourages student discussion	0	0	2	19	18	4.4103	.59462
18	I feel comfortable to ask questions	0	1	3	19	16	4.2821	.72361
19	I feel comfortable to discuss with lecturer	0	0	3	19	17	4.3590	.62774

20	Class activity increases understanding of Arabic texts	0	0	2	23	14	4.3077	.56911
21	I enjoy the way the course is taught	0	0	3	23	13	4.2564	.59462
22	Methods of teaching motivate me to learn Arabic	0	0	3	21	15	4.3077	.61361
23	The approach of teaching morphology in this course is more effective than past experiences	0	0	3	19	17	4.3590	.62774

Table 8. Perception on Portfolio Evaluation

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not certain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 Portfolio assignment improves knowledge of morphology	1	0	2	19	16	4.2895	.80229
2 Portfolio assignment improves skill in morphology	1	0	1	21	15	4.2895	.76786
3 Portfolio assignment strengthens understanding of grammar	1	0	1	20	16	4.3158	.77478
4 Portfolio increases vocabulary	1	0	2	20	15	4.2632	.79472
5 Portfolio assignment motivates to read Arabic text	1	0	0	21	16	4.3421	.74530
6 Portfolio assignment helps to apply reading strategy	1	0	2	23	12	4.1842	.76601
7 Portfolio assignment motivates self-assessment	1	0	0	22	15	4.3158	.73907
8 Portfolio assignment increases interest to learn Arabic language	1	0	1	19	16	4.3243	.78365
9 Portfolio assignment leads to more independence in learning Arabic	1	0	2	19	16	4.2895	.80229

Table 9. Perception on Readers Theatre

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not certain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation
1 Readers Theatre activity increases confidence to understand Arabic text	1	0	2	22	13	4.2105	.77661
2 Readers Theatre activity improves Arabic pronunciation	1	0	3	18	16	4.2632	.82803
3 Readers Theatre activity improves fluency of reading text loudly	1	0	2	18	17	4.3158	.80891
4 Readers Theatre activity improves skill in applying knowledge of morphology	1	0	6	16	15	4.1579	.88612
5 Readers Theatre activity improves skill in applying knowledge of grammar	1	0	3	20	14	4.2105	.81067
6 Readers Theatre activity improves intonation	1	0	2	21	13	4.2162	.78652
7 Readers Theatre activity increases interest to read Arabic text	1	0	1	20	16	4.3158	.77478
8 Readers Theatre activity increases interest in Arabic language	1	0	3	19	15	4.2368	.81983
9 The place for conducting Readers Theatre activity is suitable	1	1	8	18	10	3.9211	.91183
10 There is sufficient opportunity to rehearse Readers Theatre activity	1	4	9	15	9	3.7105	1.03735
11 There is sufficient microphone equipment	1	4	5	17	10	3.8378	1.04119
12 Wish to buy recording of presentation for enhancement purpose	1	1	5	18	13	4.0789	.91183

Table 10. Perception on examination

	Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not certain	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	Examination questions assess ability to understand Arabic text	1	0	2	18	17	4.3158	.80891
2	Examination questions assess proficiency in morphology	1	0	3	14	20	4.3684	.85174
3	Examination questions assess proficiency in Arabic grammar	0	0	5	11	19	4.4000	.73565

Table 11. Perceived Improvement

Improvement Percentage	Below 5%	5% - 19%	20% - 49%	50% - 69%	70% - 100%
Ability to understand contemporary text	1(2.5%)	1(2.5)	8(20%)	18(45%)	9(22.5%)
Proficiency in morphology	0	3(7.5%)	10(25%)	20(50%)	4(10%)
Proficiency in grammar	0	3(7.5%)	12(30%)	16(40%)	6(15%)
Arabic vocabulary	1(2.5%)	3(7.5%)	8(20%)	19(47.5%)	6(15%)
Confidence in reading and understanding Arabic text	0	1(2.5%)	8(20%)	19(47.5%)	9(22.5%)
Interest in Arabic language	0	1(2.5%)	6(15%)	10(25%)	20(50%)
Confidence in using Arabic-Arabic dictionary	0	2(5%)	5(12.5%)	16(40%)	14(35%)

4. Discussion

4.1. Aspects that need redressing

It is apparent from the above results that the students are satisfied with the course objectives, the course content, the teaching, the learning experience, and the assessment. Relatively lower satisfaction with regards to logistic matters for Readers Theatre does not impede the attainment of desired outcomes. Nevertheless, the researchers believe that better logistics and facilities could lead to learners taking the activity more seriously and thus, to better preparation and performance. With respect to perceived improvement, the improvement in grammar is somewhat lower compared to other areas. One possible reason is that the learners have learned grammar in detail in their past experiences, whereas in the current course, very little syntactical grammar is emphasized and is limited to those aspects that matter most in carrying communicative values of texts. The results also imply that there is also a need to study reasons underlying the little improvement felt by some students. Factors could range from lack of readiness for student-centered and autonomous kind of learning (Cotterall, 1995), inconsistent methods of teaching, lack of motivation (Dornyei, 2001) or the existence of differing ability levels in the classroom.

4.2. Empowerment through student-centered learning and assessment activities

The learners testified that the learning experience they gained in this course is different and more effective than their previous experiences. The design principles underlying the course, namely learner centeredness, autonomous learning, and educative assessment appears to be fruitful in boosting learners' confidence, motivation and proficiency to interact with Arabic texts. It has also led to some improvements in morphological and syntactical aspects that matter most to reading comprehension. The attitudinal and procedural improvements in learners' use of Arabic-Arabic as well as other dictionaries help learners to be more resourceful and independent in their reading. All these empower learners with the sense that they are responsible for their learning, that they can be in control of the

process and have been equipped to do so, and thus they should be able to pursue further learning confidently and independently (Benson & Voller, 1997; Dickinson, 1992). This is in line with the course purpose which is to enable graduate students to pursue postgraduate studies and to benefit from Arabic resources confidently and independently for their research and for their life-long learning professional development.

5. Conclusion

This paper reported one attempt that has been quite successful in providing a somewhat 'different, more effective, motivating, enabling and empowering' learning experience to postgraduate learners of Arabic. The relative success of this approach can be attributed to the principles underlying the course design: empowerment, student-centeredness, and educative assessment. The researchers believe that such approach should be expanded to undergraduate Arabic courses so that the undergraduates' proficiency in Arabic could be harnessed much earlier. Only then, could postgraduate studies do away with Arabic remedial courses and instead focus on advanced presentational Arabic skills for scholarly and professional discourses. To truly empower students with proficiency in Arabic, expertise in foreign language education need to be engaged in designing an empowering learner-centered curriculum and in providing appropriate training to teachers.

6. Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their gratitude to Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia for sponsoring this study under the project entitled 'Evaluation of the Assessment System for PZ6013 Remedial Arabic 1, Faculty of Islamic Studies, UKM' (Project code : UKM-PTS-078-2010).

References

- Bernhardt, E. (1991). *Reading development in a second language: theoretical, empirical and classroom perspectives*. Norwood: Ablex.
- Benson, P. & Voller, P. (1997). *Autonomy and independence in language learning*. London: Longman.
- Cotterall, S. (1995). Readiness for autonomy: Investigating learner beliefs. *System*, 23 (2), 195-205.
- Dickinson, L. (1992). *Learner training for language learning*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Dornyei, Z. (2001). New themes and approaches in second language motivation research. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 21, 43-59.
- Fakulti Pengajian Islam. (2010). *Panduan Siswazah Sesi Akademik 2010-2011*. Bangi: Fakulti Pengajian Islam, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Genesee, F. & Upshur, J.A. (1996). *Classroom-based evaluation in second language education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hakim Zainal & Kaseh Abu Bakar. (2010). Modul PZ6013 Bahasa Arab pengukuhan 1. Bangi: Fakulti Pengajian Islam, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Kaseh Abu Bakar & Maheram Ahmad. (2008). Modul PZ6013 Bahasa Arab Pengukuhan 1. Bangi: Fakulti Pengajian Islam, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
- Kaseh Abu Bakar. (2008). Bahasa Arab Pengukuhan PZ6013 dan PZ6023. A paper presented at Bengkel Pengukuhan Bahasa Arab Jabatan Pengajian Arab & Tamadun Islam 2008 [Workshop on Remedial Arabic Department of Arabic Studies & Islamic Civilization 2008] 9-11 May 2008, Kuala Lumpur.
- Khalidieh, S. (2001). The relationship between Knowledge of Trarb, lexical knowledge and reading comprehension of non-native readers of Arabic. *The Modern Language Journal*, 85 (3), 416-431.
- Koziol, S.M. Jr. & Richards, L.A. *Basic informal drama exercises for active learning in the primary classroom: A practical handbook*. Sarajevo, Bosnia: UNICEF
- Larkin, M. (1995). The role for close reading in the elementary Arabic curriculum. In M. Al-Batal (ed.) *The teaching of Arabic as a foreign language: Issues and directions* (pp. 157-173). Provo: American Association of Teachers of Arabic.
- Nitko, A.J. (2004). *Educational assessment of students*. Upper Saddle River: Merrill.
- Noble, J.A. (1976). Readers Theatre: Oral reading with purpose. ED Reproduction No. 177519. www.eric.ed.gov/EricWebPortal.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centered curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wiggins, S. (1998). *Educative assessment: Designing assessments to inform and improve student performance*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.