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Students', Teachers' and Parents' Perceptions Towards Challenges of the Teaching Arabic Language in National Religious Secondary Schools (SMKA) In Selangor

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ABSTRACT

Issue of Arabic proficiency in Malaysia is never-ending and has always been the concern of policy makers and interested groups. This study aims to investigate students', teachers' and parent's perceptions towards challenges of teaching Arabic Language at SMKA. The purpose of the study to find the effective of teaching Arabic Language which determine by the challenges in teaching Arabic Language faced by teachers. The study employs a qualitative method. The participants of the study were three students, three teachers and three parents from three identified SMKAs at Selangor. A structured interview was used to gather the data for the study. The data were classified into several themes and analysed qualitatively. The study reveals that the challenges of teaching Arabic Language depends on students' attitude towards the language itself. It was found that there was a lack of teaching method in teaching Arabic and using intermediate language. The environment at the same time is not in favour of teachers to teach Arabic language. Some recommendations were suggested by the study.

Keyword: Challenge, Teaching Arabic Language, SMKA

Introduction

The aim of National Religious Secondary Schools (SMKA) is to impart the knowledge of Islam in students comprehensively. Moreover, it is to maintain Islamic values in the life of students as well as to imbue the academic subjects to them in order to produce balanced personality of Muslim children. This is parallel with Islamic education philosophy which is to impart knowledge and skills that cater the need of job market in accordance with the teaching of al- Qur'ān and al-Sunnah, as to mould the character, skill and personality in order to bear the responsibility as vicegerent of Allah to achieve success in this world and hereafter (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2002).

Pertaining to these objectives, Arabic Language is essential in order to increase students' understanding towards Islam. Through this knowledge, the students can get much information from the sources which are written in Arabic Language, since the authentic sources of Islam are al-Qur'ān and al-Sunnah as the main reference to perform Islamic worship (Nāqat & Ta'imah, 2003) as Allah said: "*In plain Arabic Language*" (Qur'ān, *Asy-Syu'araa'*: 195). This is what differentiates between *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama* with other schools similar to it such as *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan* which do not offer Arabic Language subject as a compulsory subject to be taken in Lower Secondary Examination (PMR).

The establishment of *Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama* (SMKA) began with the takeover of 11 state SM Agama (SMAN) and SM Agama Rakyat (SMAR)

schools by the Education Ministry in 1977. The initial idea to establish SMKA was mooted by the Director of the Religious Education Department, Allahyarham Hj Nik Mohammed Mohyideen bin Hj Wan Musa. According to him (since deceased), the move was in accordance with effort to change 'luwes' schools to suit the National Education Policy. 'Luwes' was pondok schools; the institution consisted of several small huts surrounding the teacher's residence or the one-room school premise. The school hour is flexible and the curriculum depended on the knowledge of the teacher. This has certainly been the aspiration of The Education Department and those in the Islamic community which were aware of the school's benefits. Before this, steps were taken to provide aid to 'sekolah agama rakyat' and there were also suggestions that these schools be incorporated into a new system. Islamic Religious Schools (*Sekolah Rendah Agama* (SRA) is used for primary schools; *Sekolah Menengah Agama* (SMA) is used for secondary schools.

Sekolah Pondok (literally, *Hut* school), Madrasah and other Islamic schools were come of the pioneer schools in Malaysia. Early works of Malay literature such as Hikayat Abdullah mentioned these schools indicating they pre-date the current secular model of education. The earlier Hindu culture pre-dating the Islamic period of Malay history did not appear to spawn any formalized educational structure.

Another type of schools available in Malaysia is the Islamic religious schools or *Sekolah Agama Rakyat* (SAR). The schools teach Muslim students subjects related to Islam such as early Islamic history, Arabic Language and Fiqh. It is not compulsory although some states such as Johor made it mandatory for all Muslim children aged six to twelve to attend the schools as a complement to the mandatory primary education. In the final year, students will sit an examination for graduation. Most SAR are funded by respective states and managed by states' religious authority.

Previously, former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohammad suggested to the government that the SARs should be closed down and integrated into the national schools. However, his proposal was met with resistance and later; the matter was left to die quietly. Such schools still exist in Malaysia, but are generally no longer the only part of a child's education in urban areas. Students in rural parts of the country do still attend these schools. Since the academic results published by these schools are not accepted by mainline universities, many of these students are compelled to continue their education in Pakistan or Egypt.

Some parents also opted to send their children for religious classes after secular classes. Sunday schools and after school classes at the mosque are various options available.

The establishment of SMKA is in line with efforts to modernize the national education system. The process of improving the Islamic education system in religious schools is suitable to the needs of present times.

SMKA's philosophy is an effort that is organized, guarded and continued based on unity of knowledge, piety and virtuous practises and perfect education environment. The establishment strives to produce students who are knowledgeable, balanced, excellent, well-mannered, surrenders to Allah and are responsible in practising the Islamic way of life. Hence, they are those who can contribute effectively to their religion, self, people and country. Its' motto is "faith, knowledge, good deeds and good behaviour", SMKA together stand with the nations to build good citizens.

SMKA's aims are to educate students with Islamic personality, to provide education that fulfils the demands of this world and the hereafter, to develop students'

potential in terms of inclination, creativity, personality and leadership quality, to give students opportunity to further their studies in various fields locally or internationally.

SMKA's objectives are to achieve excellence in curriculum and co-curriculum, to produce students who are well-mannered, to groom a generation of leaders amongst students who can become role-models, to produce students who are resilient in overcoming cultural challenges which are against Islamic' values, to generate students who would be able to contribute effectively to fulfil the needs of the country and those of the community.

SMKA's specialties are living the Islamic life styles, provide opportunities to continue tertiary studies, fluent command in Arabic Language, *Jawi* and Qur'anic studies, be leaders, administrators, corporate figures and professionals who are committed to Islam, to groom wise and responsible preachers who are able to withstand current challenges.

Presently, there are fifty six (56) SMKA schools in Malaysia including Sabah and Sarawak. In the East Zone, there are six schools in Kelantan, six schools in Terengganu and two schools in Pahang. In addition to that, in the West Zone, there are three schools in Selangor, one in Wilayah Persekutuan, three in Melaka and two in Negeri Sembilan. Apart from these, in the North Zone, there are two schools in Perlis, four schools in Kedah, four schools in Pulau Pinang and three schools in Perak. The state of Johor which represents the Southern Zone has only four schools. In the East Coast, there are eight schools in Sabah and eight schools in Sarawak.

Descriptions of the Participants

The total number of participants involved in the present research was nine individuals: Three students (S1, S2, S3), three teachers (T1, T2, T3) and three parents (P1, P2, P3). All participants were selected from three schools of SMKAs in Selangor. The researcher has selected one student, one teacher, one parent from each school. The participants were selected using purposive sampling.

Students

The researcher has selected three students for the face to face individual interview. One student was selected based on her PMR examination results year (2010) with straight A's in nine subjects taken. The second student was a male student with 8A's except a Grade C for Arabic Language. The third student was also a male student with moderate results, 3A, 5B and 1C in Arabic Language.

Teachers

The first teacher selected was an *ustaz*, who was also the head of Arabic Language at his school and has had the experience teaching Arabic for sixteen years. He was awarded the excellent teacher in teaching Arabic Language by Ministry of Education, Malaysia. The second teacher was an *ustazah* with six years experienced in teaching Arabic. The third teacher was also an *ustazah* with nine years experienced in teaching Arabic.

Parents

The first parent selected by the researcher was a father of four children and he sent all his children to SMKA Hamidiah Kajang. He is a lawyer who has his own company in Ampang. He is the former President and Vice President of Teachers Parents Association in SMKA Hamidiah Kajang from year 2006 until year 2010. The second parent selected was a mother who was also an English teacher at the same school with

her daughter in SMKA Kuala Selangor. Her daughter scored all A's for her PMR in 2010. And the last informant in the case study was a father whose daughter scored all A's for her PMR in 2010. This case study is unique because her daughter previously took PMR at secondary school which offered Arabic subject as an optional subject, and she learned Arabic subject in the evening after the school ended. This class was known as KAA (Kelas Aliran Agama), specially designed by the SMK schools.

Challenges of Teaching Arabic Language

Sheikh as-Sudais in his speech said that there are two major challenges faced by Muslims in order to ensure the revival of Islamic civilization. The main challenge is an internal cause which comes from Muslims themselves. External challenge is thrown by non-Muslims and the surroundings. Failing to practice Islam as a way of life is amongst the challenges faced by many Muslims. Many of them misunderstood the real practice of Islam, thus poor practice of *Deen* (Shahmuzir, 2011).

The crucial challenge in teaching Arabic as foreign language (TAFL) is medium of instruction. Alaa Elgibali, Zeinab Taha (1995) said that the issue of whether to use a non-target medium, to teach a foreign language such as Arabic to foreign learners is still controversial. But, the need constantly strives to minimize the use of any language other than Arabic as the language of either instruction or interaction. There are practical and theoretical motivations for this approach. Eliminating the use of non-target media is theoretically sound because it creates for both the learner and the teacher a demanding situation in which the need for communication presents a meaningful challenge; overcoming this challenge gives both interlocutors a sense of achievement.

According to Mujāwir (2000) the challenges of teaching Arabic Language in Secondary Level in society always changes, so is the learning process, Arabic Language has its character change situated in sentences, the difference between them in formal language and informal language, the teacher himself defines the success of learning, learning language is the process of repeating, and the teachers always avoid that process. Arabic books provided are also not interesting and do not fulfill the needs of students. The failure also was caused by teacher's background and it affected how he delivered the knowledge.

Yūsuf (2002) stated the challenges of teaching Arabic by teacher. Among others are the lack of teaching tools, difficulties of Arabic itself as second language, the content of textbooks are disconnected from students' life and their needs. But he added the task of teaching Arabic does not work with Arabic teacher only. All teachers are involved.

Atotileto et al. (2013) revealed that the problems of Arabic and Islamic studies curriculum in *al-Hikmah* University is lack of conducive environment, inadequacy of qualified teachers, lack of dynamic curriculum, lack of instructional materials for teaching and learning. So, these components became challenges in learning Arabic Language.

Research Question

What are the challenges in the teaching of Arabic Language faced by the teachers?

Findings and Discussions

Challenges in the Teaching Arabic Language

Among the challenges as viewed by STP in school in this case were related to time, as it was also a contributing factor to the success of teaching Arabic Language. Teachers mentioned that they had limited time to finish their syllabus, and needed extra time. The challenges also arose when there was limited space to apply Arabic Language. Other challenges included limited sources of book in Arabic Language. Teaching and learning Arabic Language as foreign language needs enough time, especially to handle weak student. Teachers also have to rely on syllabus only while teaching Arabic Language, so that, they will use textbooks correctly and effectively to finish the syllabus. The other challenges were among others that teachers cannot use Arabic Language in totality in class. They must intersperse between Arabic language and Malay Language and this challenge was a common case faced by Arabic teacher anywhere. Since *Bahasa Melayu* is the native tongue, they could not refrain themselves from using the language in teaching.

The other problem was that was exam oriented educational system. Teaching process was based on examination and not to use Arabic as common speech in society or lifelong using Arabic. The purpose of teaching to achieve good results in examination. Teacher also had personal problem, not well prepared, voice not loud and soft, lacking of behaving an Arabic teacher, female teacher who was labour leave, teacher did not have good knowledge and experience, to be patient with different attitude of students, double job between teaching and other job. Challenges in looking Arabic environment, time of teaching Arabic at the end of school session and the number of Arabic Teacher in school not enough.

P2 explained that among challenges in teaching Arabic was burden of work. Teachers cannot concentrate the process of teaching and learning Arabic because a lot of task to do. They must focus in teaching and at the same time, there was another task to do such as editing book and out station work (P2:D.U 247).

T1 viewed that teachers' challenges are to create the exciting method which can attract student's interest towards learning Arabic.

Cabaran ya... kita kena... bina kaedah-kaedah bina pendekatan...Bina pendekatan baru... pendekatan menarik supaya pelajar tu minat Bahasa Arab. Kita guna pendekatan yang orang kata yang... seronok pelajar belajar.

Challenges, yes...we have...build methods which builds approaches...build new approaches...interesting approaches so that the students have interest in Arabic. We use approaches which we say...exciting to students. (T1:D.U 182)

This finding similar to Abdul Rahim and Hayazi (2010) mentioned earlier that teachers must increase the quality of their teaching and learning in line with the current challenges of education with facilities which could help their understanding and help them towards more meaningful learning. Other challenge as P1 said Arabic teacher using Arabic Language only in class. In other means, teacher was challenged to practice Arabic speech outside the class (P1:D.U 52). T3 said the challenge was when students weak, they were left behind by other friends who are good in Arabic Language. The challenge starts on how to help them catch up with their friends to the same level of achievement.

Dari segi ni la, cabarannya apabila ada budak yang, yang tak boleh nak, aa...maksudnya yang lemah la, yang lemah dalam Bahasa Arab. Maksudnya yang dia tak boleh nak bawa Bahasa Arab. Cabarannya, kita nak bagi budak tu...tu macam mana. Ah, tu lah. Cabarannya apabila pelajar tak boleh nak menguasai, bukan tak boleh, tak mampu, eh. Macam dia terkemudian daripada kawan-kawan dia .Ah, itu satu cabaran juga lah, nak, nak supaya tolong dia seiring dengan kawan-kawan dia yang lain.

In this respect, the challenges appear when there are students who, who cannot want, aa...meaning the weak ones, those who are weak in Arabic. This means that they cannot carry the Arabic Language. The challenge, we want to give the student...how. Ah that's it. The challenge is when students cannot master, not cannot, not able, eh. Like they are left behind by their friends. Ah, that's also a challenge, want, want to help they catch up with their friends. (T3:D.U 154)

The students give a thousand of reason, impact of their attitude towards AL. The challenge is how to make them interested towards learning and push them in doing good effort about what they are interested (T3:D.U 156).

A part of challenging in teaching Arabic is to finish syllabus. Syllabus determines the list of subject lessons in textbooks are taught in the class with time provided in a week. T1 said that Arabic textbooks focus more to Arabic grammar rather than other skills. Therefore, time teaching in class is affects directly the understanding of Arabic grammar (T1:D.U 94).

Teacher does not have enough time to finish the lessons, because there are so many things that they have to do. As T1 said he must focus on finish syllabus and at the same time to consult the students but the problem was the time is too short. Apart from teaching and learning, there were actually so many things that we have to do (T1:D.U 146). Supported with T2 said in the span of six times in a week they have to chase words before and they did not touch it (T2:D.U 314).

T3 mentioned that time limited to catch up all syllabus in the book with different skills and components in Arabic Language.

Kekangan masa sebenarnya. Waktu kan. Kekangan waktu...sepatutnya kita boleh bahagikan satu waktu untuk mendengar, satu waktu untuk ber...erm...ber-apa? Ber...berdialog kan, satu waktu lagi untuk mengejar silibus. Tapi, oleh kerana kita terlalu mengejar silibus kan, kadang-kadang kita sampai lupa yang itu. Sebenarnya, itu yang penting sekali untuk melatih budak kan.

Time limit, actually. The time. Time limit...in fact, we should divide a time to listen, a time to ...erm to what? To have ...a dialog, a time to catch up with syllabus. But, because we are too caught up in the syllabus, sometimes we forget that. Actually, that's very important to train the students. (T3:D.U 46)

As Rebecca (1969) said success, or mastery of a task, is seen as the function of five factors instructional factors: (i) presentation of material (text, teacher, etc.), (ii) time allowed for learning, (iii) student factors as general intelligence (ability to follow instructions), (iv) motivation (degree of perseverance), and (v) aptitude (time needed for learning).

Prior to that, S1 said the activity co-curriculum of Arabic also was planned without action because of limited time.

Kat sekolah ni? Belum ada lagi. Macam sekolah saya dulu, kelab Bahasa Arab ada, er macam perancangan je, tak tak terbuat pun. Sebab kekangan masa yang lain. Untuk guna aktiviti-aktiviti lain.

At this school? Not yet. Like in my previous school, there was an Arabic club, but it was only a plan, it did not materialize. Not enough time. To use for other activities. (S1:D.U 410)

Students nowadays face many challenges, not only in learning Arabic, but in all subjects. Teacher must more patience in educate and teach the children. The challenge is a teacher must understand each student. If the class size is too many, too big, that's a problem and then next coming challenge is students' attitude in class. In a class with many students, challenges the teachers' sacrifice. Teachers must sacrifice their emotions (P2: D.U 258). They must be determined to teach people's children. As a rule, they must do it wholeheartedly. They can hope that one day, in school, others would be as determined to teach their children (P2: D.U 260). Teachers must have high patience with the behaviour of each student in class.

Cabaran seorang guru pun kena memahami setiap anak muridnya. Dah jadi cikgu kan, kena faham, macam tu lah. Macam sekarang ni, mungkin saiz kelas yang...di sini tak ada masalah. Bila saiz kelas terlampau ramai, terlampau besar, itu masalah. *And then*, cabaran sikap pelajar dalam kelas, pelajar dalam kelas yang ramai tu, ah...menuntut pengorbanan guru lah. Memang guru kena korban banyak perasaan kan. Tapi boleh, kat sini...boleh sebenarnya. Sabar je lah. Sabar dan tenang. Em, jangan kita gopoh-gopoh. Jangan kita terkejut-terkejut dengan dugaan tu.

The challenge is a teacher must understand each child. A teacher, right, must understand, like that. Like now, maybe the class size which...here there's no problem. If the class size is too many, too big, that's a problem...and then the challenge of students' attitude in class, in a class with many students, ah...challenges the teachers' sacrifice. Teachers must sacrifice their emotions. But can, here...actually can. Must be patient. Patient and calm. Em, don't rush. Don't be surprised with the challenges. (P2: D.U 264)

Learning Arabic Language is special than other languages in the world. Because it is related with Islamic religion and the Qur'an as Allah said in *surah al-Qamar*, verses 17 mentioned about the easiness of learning Arabic Language, but for more practical in learning Arabic Language both teachers and students side, there were a lot of challenge in understand Arabic Language, especially in grammar (T2:D.U 260). T2 said teaching Arabic was complicated with the Arabic grammar. Teacher need to explain if students did not understand with it. Then, that are teachers' responsibilities to use effective strategies to make students understand about the language. Here, they have to teach in dual language, so that students can understand (T2:D.U 310).

An argument revealed whether Arabic should fully taught in Arabic Language, or by translate it to Malay Language. Ta'imah (1989), viewed that teacher can use intermediate language at last session of period study to make students understand what they had learnt before. The reason to use *Bahasa* (Mohamad Azrien Mohamed

Adnan et al., 2014) to explain difficult words for low achieving students, so that they do not fail to keep pace with their peers, and they have not made good progress in Arabic yet. Arabic teachers in school are Malays, so they are speaking Malay. The crisis arise between teach Arabic with its' language or by translate it into Malay Language. All students who are learning at school are Malays, so are the teachers. Therefore, both of them (students and teachers) comfortable with using Malay Language in teaching and learning foreign language like Arabic. T2 had mentioned in this view.

Bagi saya guru-guru yang sedia ada pun boleh, cuma tulah orang kata usaha kena lebihlah. Usahanya lebihlah. Sebab gurunya biasanya orang Melayu, cakap Melayu tu hadir.

As for me, the existing teachers can, only they have to, what we say, put in more effort. The effort must increase. Because the teachers are usually Malays, so they'd speak Malay. (T2:D.U 286)

The current situation shows that Arabic has not been rightfully positioned. Although Arabic is related with Islamic religion, but in reality, the ignorance towards Arabic Language in educational system seems Arabic less important compared to English language. Of course, it would be impact of viewing teaching and learning process. As a result, the students did not show interested, and teacher's motivation becoming slow. So, teacher must fight with this feeling. So teacher must be motivated all time against the student. The weaker student is, the stronger teacher get. When students are weak, teachers are become stronger (T2:D.U 384).

S3 viewed that the challenge in teaching was teachers were not prepared to start a teaching session and they might be facing personal problems (S3: D.U: 199).

The facility or equipment in develop Arabic Language not completely in good condition, very limited in some place and some time. So, the challenge come arise in teaching and learning Arabic Language (P1:D.U 120).

Conclusion and Suggestion

Challenge in the teaching of Arabic language in SMKA schools in Selangor can be categorized into four categories; educational challenge, social challenge, linguistic challenge and personal challenge.

Educational challenge: The effective method in teaching Arabic language. Teacher must have the right method or way to teach Arabic, if not it becomes challenging to them teaching Arabic. Teachers' interest toward teaching Arabic Language challenge them to teach and facing types of students' attitudes, needs and interests. Teacher use a multiple strategies in teaching Arabic such as language games and choose the right strategies based on students' interest.

Instructors' language medium of teaching also among educational challenge which contribute to the challenge in the teaching Arabic Language which is related to crisis of Malay identity both teacher and student teaching and learning Arabic as a foreign language in class. They use Malay medium, traditional method in transferring knowledge. But, the study findings from Mohamad Azrien Mohamed Adnan, Shukeri Mohamad, Arifin Mamat (2014) said that the teacher has to use L1 to ensure the comprehensibility of the Arabic contents teacher presents. Teacher attempts to make the learning process more comprehensible, more efficient and more effective and also

can save teacher's time of explaining. When L1 is not used especially when teachers try to explain the unfamiliar words or concept, the level of anxiety among students will increase (Meyer, 2008). Therefore, the teaching of Arabic Language should use *Bahasa*, but in minimum usage, encourage students to talk in direct language.

The evaluation of learning Arabic Language also identified as educational challenge which based on being exam oriented gives big challenges in teaching process. Arabic Language is less important compared to other language especially English language and becomes a challenge to teaching and learning Arabic Language as foreign language. Religious Department Arabic Language in the government department is also deemed a failure in Arabic Language acquisition related to educational system and Ministry of Education Malaysia who fails to introduce an Islamic country with authority with provided Arabic centre and best facilities in teaching and learning Arabic Language. Therefore, curriculum is determined as part of solutions of challenge in teaching Arabic Language, affected in time of teaching and evaluation in educational system. So, suggested to teacher to variety of students' evaluation, besides give them activities of language as mark contributions.

Social challenge: Environment is important for the support of teaching Arabic Language success and objective of teaching and learning must be clear in order to teach and learn Arabic Language to understand the Qur'ān. Environment becomes a challenge of teaching Arabic in school. The same findings support that social factor such as families, *masjid*, clubs, media, journalism, publications and libraries among the most important factors that have an impact on the effectiveness of teaching Arabic as a foreign language. Teacher and society should collaborate together in strengthen Arabic Language in society by organize seminar about the important of learning Arabic Language.

Linguistic challenge: Challenges of teaching come from the nature of Arabic Language itself. It is because factors of linguistic such as the sound of Arabic letters, structures and semantics, constructions, writings from right to left and influences of the mother tongue (Ahmad Hasan, 2000). Therefore, teacher should not focus on complicated rules of grammar in Arabic language, teach them the easiest about Arabic Language. According to the challenge of finishing syllabus because of limited time, there should an effective technique to finish syllabus in limited time.

Personal challenge: Related to students' attitude in class, students' weak, students' psychology. Therefore, teacher should improve his knowledge to become accepted among their students about this knowledge such as human psychology towards learning foreign language.

In conclusion, effective of teaching Arabic Language will be achieved by determine the challenges in teaching Arabic Language faced by teachers.

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