

ARABIC DEBATE AND ITS IMPACT ON ARABIC SPEAKING SKILLS

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Abstract	<p><i>Mastery of Arabic-speaking skills has been a never-ending issue in Malaysia. Various studies showed that the level of students' mastery of Arabic speaking skills among the Malay students is still at an unsatisfactory level, whether at the school level or higher education level. Numerous efforts were implemented, especially through the curriculum, teaching, and learning methods; however, the mastery level still needs more attention. Simultaneously, studies also showed that debate is a potential tool to improve speaking skills. Therefore, this particular study attempts to qualitatively investigate the impact of Arabic debate on the Arabic speaking skills of two Malay students at Sekolah Menengah Agama (Atas) Sultan Zainal Abidin. The data for this study were collected using a face-to-face, semi-structured interview. The results showed that Arabic debate helps students gain improvements in two aspects, namely language improvement and self-improvement. The findings revealed that students do not only improve Arabic speaking skills but also self-confidence, soft skills, and motivation.</i></p> <p><i>Keywords: Arabic, Debate, Speaking, Skills, Malakah Theory.</i></p>
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INTRODUCTION

Arabic speakers are estimated to exceed 422 million worldwide (Al-Muslim & Zamri Arifin, 2012). Arabic language has been placed as one of the major languages of the world and plays an important role in human history and civilization. After the independence of Malaysia in 1957, to keep up with the demand to understand the primary sources of Islam; the Quran, prophetic sayings, and other Islamic Sciences, the teaching of Arabic in Malaysian schools had taken a systematic turn.

Coping with the current needs of language learning, Arabic language was gradually introduced in all level of education in Malaysian system of education. The Arabic language subject was introduced in national secondary religious schools and was made a compulsory subject in its syllabus (Majdi & Akmal, 2018). In 2016, Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM) came out with a new set of Arabic language teaching and learning objectives, among them is to produce learners who can speak Arabic in various contexts and situations with fluent pronunciation (Siti Salwa et al., 2021) The Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM) aims to produce students who have Arabic communicative competence as a result of learning Arabic language at the secondary level for several years. At the level of higher education, Arabic as a Second Language and Arabic for Academic Purposes programs are offered to students who are interested in studying this language at a higher level (MQA, 2019).

Arabic Speaking Skills and Its Problems in Malaysia

Speaking skills are defined as the ability of students to convey creative and critical information, opinions, feelings, and ideas orally with correct pronunciation and intonation in a polite manner (Masyitoh Yaacob & Kaseh Abu Bakar, 2018). When a student has Arabic speaking skills, he can communicate with people around and with the Arabs in Arabic language. Mastery of speaking skills is one of the goals of Arabic language learning in Malaysia. Speaking skill is the most difficult skill for the majority of foreign language students to master compared to other language skills. The ability of students to master speaking skills well and effectively usually shows a high level of mastery of a language (Siti Salwa et al., 2021).

The challenges faced by Arabic language learners in speaking skill is never ending. Previous studies showed similar and unchanged condition of Malaysian students in Arabic speaking skill performance. Mohammad Najib Jaffar et al. (2018) and Siti Salwa et al. (2021) found that students feel it difficult to practice Arabic language at school or at home, because they feel shy and afraid to make mistakes in speaking as well as lack of self-confidence. Other factors causing students weakness in Arabic speaking skills are anxiety, students cannot organize and deliver their pronunciation correctly and confidently, which then makes them feel afraid and shy (Ashinida, 2012; Nadhwah & Nadhilah, 2014; Mohammad Najib et al., 2018; Nurwaina & Zawawi, 2019; Mohd Ieruwani, 2020; Zawawi Ismail et al., 2020), lack of motivation (Nurul Amalia et al., 2022), weak in grammar and phonology (Nadhwah & Nadhilah, 2014; Mohammad Najib et al., 2018), lack of vocabulary, inaccurate vocabulary in speech, the use of unnecessary vocabulary, as well as leaving out the vocabulary that should be in a sentence structure (Azani et al., 2012; Gan, 2012; Nadhwah & Nadhilah, 2014; Siti Rohani Jasni et al., 2020; Nurul Amalia et al., 2022).

In sum, it is clear that the issue of Arabic speaking skill among Malay students was a challenge and it still is. Regardless of various suggestions to improve Arabic speaking skills through teaching and learning methods it seems like the issue is still needs attention.

Debate and the development of Arabic speaking skills

Language learners need opportunities to practice their speaking skills. Co-curricular activities like those conducted outside the classroom setting may influence the positive development of speaking skills (Suhaila et al., 2018). Language based activities that are conducted in a structured manner with an emphasis on developing language skills can increase their vocabulary collection thus motivate students in language learning process.

Meanwhile, Selamat Husni et al. (2020) stated that through debate, students' speaking skills would improve significantly. It is also supported by Rybold (2006) who stated that debating will eventually shape the students to be better speakers in any given situation. It is because, through debate, students will learn how to create a reason, analyse it, clarify it, and present arguments (Bellon, 2000). Siti Rohani et al. (2020) stated that there are three approaches frequently used by debate trainees during debate activities to improve speaking skills, as explained in Rosni et al. (2013). First, searching and collecting words and sentences through the Arabic-Malay dictionary. Second, strengthening activities by correcting language mistakes by debaters. Third, Arabic language application activities through translating words that students do not understand, creating short sentences, and expanding and imitating the sentences. Furthermore, Siti Salwa (2017), as cited in Siti Salwa et al. (2021), mentioned that the level of students' mastery in speaking skills through debate can generally be summarized in four main aspects, namely the voice aspect involving pronunciation and fluency, the language aspect involving vocabulary, morphology and syntax, the content aspect involving the results of thinking, and the aspect of understanding.

In sum it could be seen that debate offers greater potential to improve speaking skills if this activity is taken seriously or be part of the teaching and learning process or part of the curriculum.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Studies have shown that Arabic speaking skills of majority Malay learners is weak. Even though studies have approached the problem from the teaching and learning aspects, the problem remains and seems to find no way out. In this study the researcher tries to approach the problem from outside the classroom as Suhaila Zailani et al. (2018) mentioned earlier that debate may influence the positive development of Arabic language skills including speaking skills as this activity can accustom students to face unexpected situations. It is also supported by Asyiani (2018), who stated that one of the alternatives to teaching a speaking skill is through debating. In addition, according to Selamat Husni et al. (2020), students' speaking skills would improve significantly through debate. Meanwhile, Azlan et al. (2020) concluded in their study that debating has an effective impact on developing and advancing speaking skills among participants, which include four aspects of the standard development of speech, namely the intellectual aspect, the linguistic aspect, the audio aspect, and the interactive aspect. It is also in line with the findings of the study by Siti Syazwani (2020) who found a positive relationship between debating and development of speaking skills among IIUM students who participated in debates.

From the above problems, it is understood that weakness in Arabic speaking skills among Malay learners is either caused by language or self-deficiency. Therefore, the focus of this study is to investigate in what way Arabic debate activity can improve Arabic language and self of Malay learners to be a better Arabic speakers.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on one theory called "*malakah*". *Malakah* is a derivation from the Arabic word *mim lam* and *kaf*, and Imam Jurjani in his book "*al-ta'rifat*" comes with the meaning of the nature that etches in the soul, the manifestation of the behavior in the soul as a result of the actions performed (Machmudah, 2015). In addition, according to Ibn Khaldun (as cited in Umi Machmudah, 2015) *malakah* or mastery will not exist without the repetition of work and actions until it becomes a nature that etches in the soul.

Therefore, it can be concluded that *malakah* can be achieved through practice and repetition as mentioned in the study by Ahmad Azhari et al. (2021), *malakah* according to Ibn Khaldun is interpreted as an effort of ownership and mastery stored and rooted well, so that it can be developed again. To obtain *malakah*, someone must go through training, such as speaking exercises, expressing thoughts in discussions and scientific debates. Thus, the students who often do exercises and discussions will achieve the excellent and perfect *malakah*.

Based on the explanation above, students can achieve *malakah* in their speaking skills through debate activities, in which they will do many practices and repetitions in the process of preparing for a debate, as they will go through these three approaches frequently used by debate trainees during debate activities to improve speaking skills which are: first; searching and collecting words and sentences through the Arabic-Malay dictionary, second; strengthening activities by correcting language mistakes by debaters, third; Arabic language application activities through translating words that students do not understand, creating short sentences, expanding and imitating the sentences (Rosni et al., 2013 as cited in Siti Rohani et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This research employed qualitative research as Creswell (2012) states when the researcher does not know the variables and needs to explore, then this method is the best suited to address a research problem. On the other hand, the selection of a qualitative research design is highly relevant to be administered and carried out in this study because the understanding of a phenomenon can be done in detail and accurately to form a meaning (Faridah Darus et al., 2013). Qualitative research is also found to offer an opportunity for

researchers to clearly understand social and cultural contexts that lead to aspects of human opinion, experience, and understanding in depth rather than simply trying to link variables (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Sampling

The study employed a purposive sampling method or also called judgment sampling. According to Bernard (2002), and Lewis & Sheppard (2006) as stated in Maria Dolores (2007), this technique is the deliberate choice of an informant due to the qualities the informant possesses. This method was also chosen because study participants are experts because they have meaningful information on an issue being studied (Mason, 2002; Maxwell, 2008; Merriam, 1988; 2009).

This study involved 2 upper secondary school participants, aged 17 and 18 years old of Sekolah Agama (Atas) Sultan Zainal Abidin in Batu Burok, Terengganu. This school was chosen by the researcher because of its active involvement in Arabic debate competitions and used to win the IIUM International Arabic Debate Open 2018 under school category, apart from winning several other awards including the overall best debater in that competition. Other than that, SMA(A)SZA also won 3rd place in the ASEAN Schools Arabic Debate Competition, which was held in USIM on April 2018 (Radhuan Hussain, 2019). The participants was recommended by a teacher of that school. Both students have joined the debate team for 1 year and have joined the Arabic competition 1 time.

Data Collection Procedures

According to Arikunto (2010), a research instrument is chosen as assisting tool to collect data to facilitate the researcher. The most common research instruments used in qualitative research are observation, interview, and document analysis (Ary, 2010). In this study, the researcher used the interview to collect the data.

In this study, the researcher applied a face-to-face semi-structured interview, where the question is prepared but the interviewer may add several questions that have not been prepared yet freely during the interview process. It is also known as open-ended questions to probe the answers from participants. In addition, Turner (2010) stated that this method of interview permit participants to give plenty of information that the researcher needs from their verbal response, facial expression, and body gesture. Therefore, the researcher must exercise effective communication skills and establish a good rapport with the participants to make them feel more comfortable while exchanging information during the interview.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, the researcher continued to analyse the data through four stages, which are transcribing the data, coding and theming, recoding, and the last one is analysing the data. In this study, the researcher started extracting the data by checking the interview recording, then transcribing it into verbatim. Then, the researcher moved to the second stage, which is the coding and theming stage by understanding and recognizing the data. After that, the researcher started coding the data by interpreting the topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are revealed through the participants' narratives and relating the themes with the research questions. In this process, the researcher used a template that is divided into five columns, namely DU; which is as ID code, the researcher/students, transcript, keywords and themes. The researcher then went through the process for recoding in the third stage by referring to the transcription. This stage required the researcher to re-read and re-evaluate the transcription by validating the themes with the research questions, categorizing and drawing together the themes, lastly linking the themes with literature review. At the final stage, the researcher ran a peer review with a master student from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) to refine all the words resulted from the category formation process. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions based on the data analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The in-depth interviews revealed that students who joined the Arabic debate activities and competitions showed positive impacts on speaking skills. The improvements happen in two aspects; namely language improvements which covers vocabulary, grammar, speaking fluency, and the prosodic aspects, and another aspect is self-improvement which include self-confidence; helping others, active and standing out, soft-skills improvements in term of analytical skills, interpersonal communication, mental aspect or adaptability and critical thinking, and the last one is motivation in term of practice and high enthusiast.

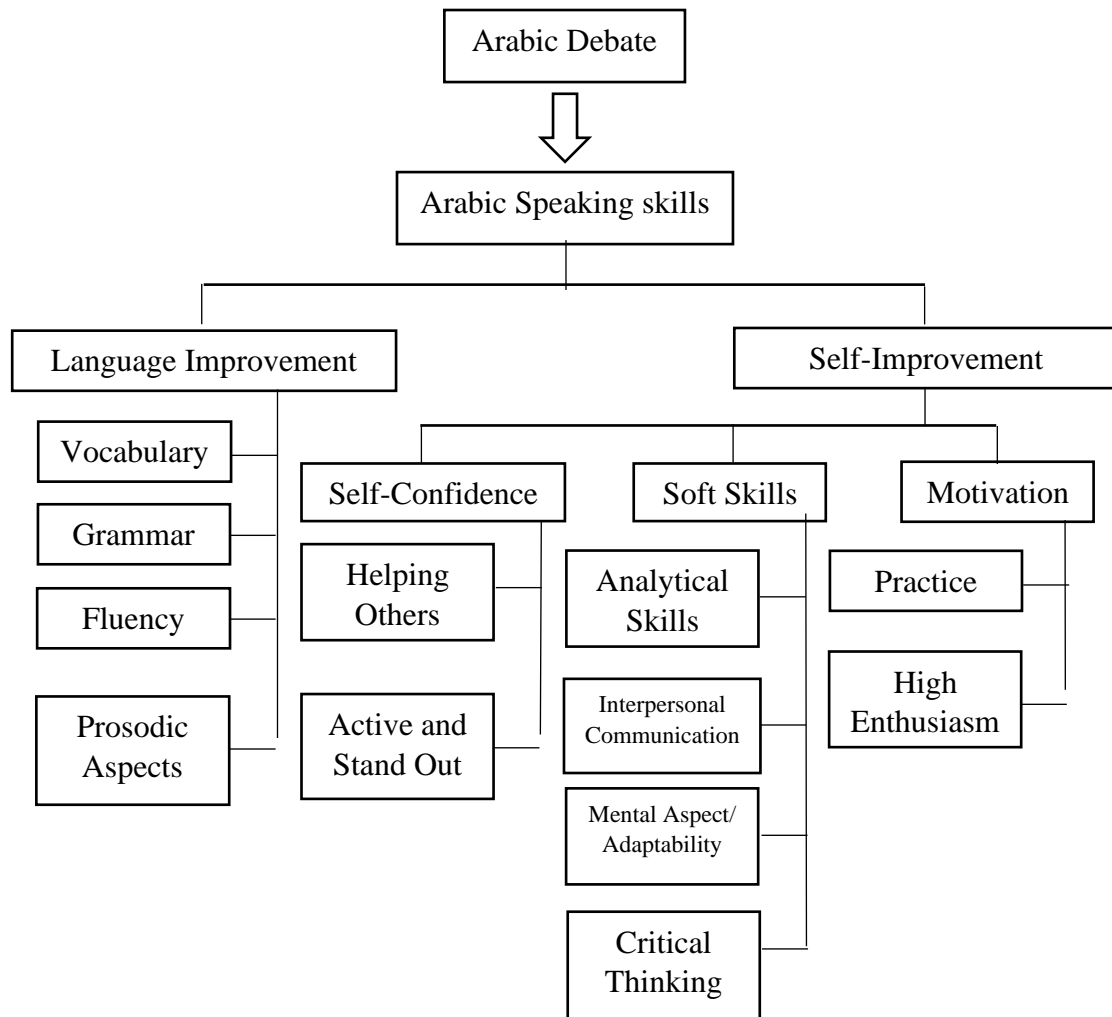


Figure 1: The impact of Arabic debate on language and self improvements

Based on the language improvements in terms of vocabulary, grammar, speaking fluency, and mastery of the prosodic aspects, the researcher found that these findings are very similar to findings of the study by Alasmari, Ahmed (2013) as cited in Cinganotto (2019); Azlan et al. (2020) and Siti Syazwani (2020), which concluded that debate can help students in enhancing their vocabulary and foster language fluency as it trains students to speak in public.

Meanwhile, these findings on high self-confidence, which lead students to have high motivation, were supported by Siska Setianingsih et al. (2020), who concluded in their study that the application of debate techniques improved students' speaking skills and also improved not only their academic grades but also their behaviour during the learning process, which is they became more active, enthusiastic, confident, and cooperative to be taken part in the learning process.

Furthermore, by joining the debate, the researcher found that students' soft skills were also improved as they went through the practice phases which will build their analytical skills, interpersonal communication, mental aspect or adaptability, and critical thinking. These findings are very similar to the findings of the study by Michelle Schwartz (2019) which has concluded that debate has been shown to benefit student learning in content expertise, critical thinking, communication, professional practice, empowering students, and positive learning experience. These are also in line with the findings of the study by Fithrotul Jannah (2017), who concluded that Arabic debate also teaches how to think logically in understanding problems, compose systematic arguments, and sharpen the mind when answering an opponent's objections. Even the rhetoric and manners of presenting ideas in front of the public are no less important in helping the mentality of the debaters.

In relation to the concept of *Malakah* by Ibn Khaldun, it is proven that by going through all the processes in preparing for Arabic debate, which also needs the process of practicing and repetition, learners can build *malakah* in self and language overtime, which is learners will achieve the mastery of Arabic language skills in terms of language competency; vocabulary, grammar, fluency and prosodic aspect, improve their selves in terms of self-confidence, soft skills and also motivate them to keep mastering the language as stated above. It is in line with the saying: "practice makes perfect". Therefore, to achieve and master any skills and knowledge, students must go through the hard process by keep practicing and repeating until the failures and weaknesses become a success and strengths, which is finally etched in the soul as the state of *malakah*.

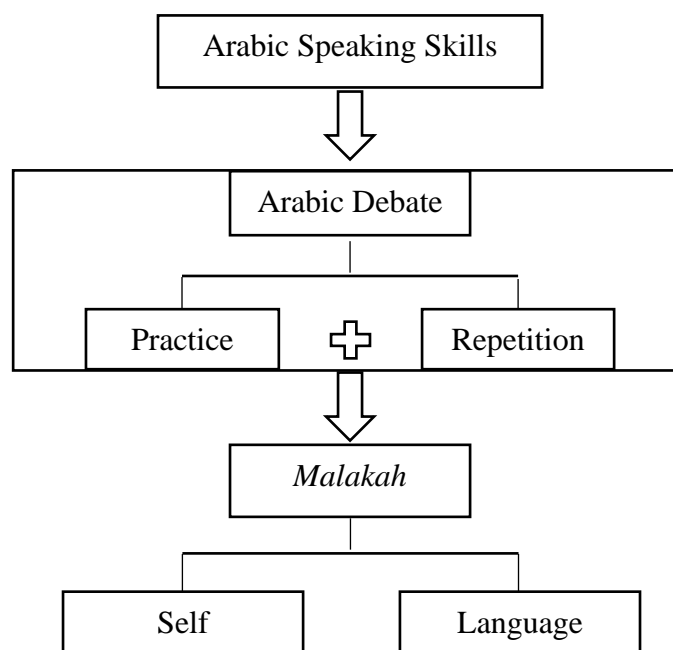


Figure 2: The adoption of malakah theory in the process of mastering Arabic speaking skills

CONCLUSION

Practice makes perfect. The processes involved in debate offer good opportunity for students to not only practice the Arabic language but also to improve themselves to become more confident, highly motivated and possessing good soft skills. Therefore it is a good idea for any school and institution to consider Arabic debate as part of the curriculum, assessment or co-curriculum for their students. It is because by time students will be able to develop their Arabic speaking skills and become good Arabic speaker.

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