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Non-native Arabic Students' Perception on Virtual Communication Program with Native Speakers

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Abstract

Speaking skills are one of the most challenging skills to be mastered by students of Arabic as a foreign language. Various activities were carried out by the parties involved to improve the proficiency of speaking skills among Arabic language students. At Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), an initiative was carried out to give students the opportunity to communicate with Arabic speakers from an institution of higher learning in Morocco (Muassasah Dar el Hadith). Therefore, this study was conducted to identify the perceptions of Arabic language students at UiTM on the implementation of the program. This study is a descriptive study that uses a quantitative approach through a survey questionnaire. The study sample comprises 37 students from UiTM's Professional Communication in Arabic language program. All students who participated in this program interacted orally with native speakers through the Google Meet platform. The results of the study found that students have diverse and mixed perceptions in terms of acceptance, attitude and motivation towards the program. Overall, it can be concluded that most students showed a positive perception and very good acceptance of the program. Only a small number of students had negative perceptions and stated that the program was quite burdensome and had disrupted their learning process.

Keywords: Perception, Arabic Speaking Skills, Virtual Communication, Collaborative, Non-Native Speakers

Introduction

Arabic is a Semitic language that falls under the Afro Asia language family (Frajzyngier & Shay, 2012). It is a language spoken by Arabs living in 22 Arab countries located in the Arabian Peninsula, northern Africa and the Mediterranean coast. Arabic is the official language of Islam through which the Qur'an was revealed. Arabic has its own characteristic features such as inflection, derivation, emphasis on gender elements, and others (Pa, 2017). Today, Arabic speakers are estimated at 422 million people worldwide (Hussin, 2021). The Arabic language has spread around the world through educational activities, da'wah, business, and so on. The phenomenon of globalization and the explosion of information technology also go hand-in-hand to help the spread and development of the Arabic language around the world.

Learning Arabic as a second or foreign language is now on the rise (Mohamad et. al., 2017). This can be seen with the emergence of various academic institutions that offer the field of Arabic language learning with various purposes and streams. All these parties strive to improve and advance the quality of teaching and learning of Arabic. Today's technological developments also help the teaching and learning of Arabic to non-native speaking students. There are many free and paid materials now that provide Arabic learning opportunities at your fingertips. This includes websites, blogs, social media, and so on. For students who are learning Arabic as a foreign language, the first aspect that must be mastered is language skills. This covers four language skills, namely reading, listening, speaking and writing skills. The same goes for some very important aspects of language such as sound, vocabulary and Arabic grammar. All these elements must be mastered well to ensure that an individual can master the Arabic language effectively.

In Malaysia, Arabic language learning is offered as early as at the primary level and continues to the secondary and tertiary levels (Kamis, 2021). In general, learning Arabic in Malaysia holds several functions such as religious functions, linguistic and literary functions, communication functions and educational functions. Most public and private institutions of higher learning in Malaysia offer Arabic language courses either as elective courses or courses under certain academic programs. The Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) is a public university in Malaysia that emphasizes the field of technology and at the same time offers Arabic language learning to its students. Apart from being a compulsory elective course for all undergraduate students, Arabic is also offered at UiTM through an academic program called the Bachelor of Arabic in Professional Communication. This program aims to produce graduates who have the ability to communicate in Arabic in a variety of career backgrounds. The coursework in this program provides communication skills such as speaking skills, writing skills, discussion skills, professional communication Arabic, public speaking, discussion and persuasion, and many others.

In achieving the goals of the program, the curriculum committee has tried to diversify the learning activities for its students. One of the newly introduced activities is interaction with native Arabic speakers online. This activity runs through the Professional Communication Arabic course offered in Semester 4. This program is known as the Ta'akhiy (تأخي) program and aims to give students the opportunity to communicate and interact with native Arabic speakers. The selected Arabic speakers were a group of Arab students from Muassasah Dar el Hadith Morocco, an academic institution in Morocco that has a Memorandum of Understanding with UiTM. Through this program, UiTM Arabic students met with Arabic students through the Google Meet platform. A total of five meetings were held and each meeting lasted for 30 minutes. The topics of communication in the meeting were around self-identification, university, exchange of culture-related information, and others. Thirty-seven UiTM students were divided into 17 small groups consisting of 2 or 3 people. Meanwhile the number of Moroccan students involved were 17 students. Each meeting was represented by 2-3 UiTM students and a student or native speaker from Morocco. Therefore, this study will examine students' perceptions of this program before starting the program, during the program, and after following the program. It is hoped that the findings of this study can provide feedback to help UiTM improve the program in the future.

Statement of Problem

In a foreign language learning, there are four main language skills that need to be mastered, namely listening, reading, writing and speaking skills. However, speaking skills are the most widely used skills in everyday life compared to other language skills, as it allows one to interact with the individual and the environment (Noor et. al., 2020), exchange thoughts, and convey emotions verbally (Ashour & al-Hawamidah, 2014)

Arabic students face difficulties in learning speaking skills due to several challenges. Among the factors are lack of exposure and involvement in the development of speaking skills in Arabic as well as the absence of a conducive language environment for speech practice, such as lack of opportunities to speak with native speakers in daily life. Mukhtar and Damit (2017) stated that in order to improve Arabic language learning, teachers need to encourage students to practice the language by using classroom language such as queries, giving feedback, greetings, and so on. Zulharby et.al (2019) in their study suggested that language learning should be integrated between the language curriculum and communication in the real life of students outside the classroom to strengthen the speaking skills.

Weakness of vocabulary among students is also a factor for low level Arabic speaking skills. This is supported by Nadwah and Nadhilah (2014) who found that difficulties in speaking Arabic as well as lack of vocabulary are among the factors that interfere with students' fluency in activities that require speaking skills such as presenting assignments verbally. Similarly, Zainur et.al. (2020) also concluded that students who study Arabic as a second language in Malaysia still face critical problems in mastering Arabic vocabulary.

In addition, the weakness in effective mastery of Arabic speaking skills is also due to low motivational factors, lack of self-confidence, and shyness among students. Anuar (2016); Mohammad (2009) confirmed in a study that among the factors that contribute to the lack of proficiency of this language in speech is due to shyness, insecurity, fear, and lack of enthusiasm to learn this language.

Thus, this study was conducted to identify the perceptions of Arabic language students at UiTM on the implementation of online communication (speaking) programs with native speakers represented by a group of Arab students in a Moroccan institution of higher learning (Mu'assasah Dar el Hadith el Hasaniyyah). Arabic language activities involving collaboration with native speakers from abroad are still lacking. There are few studies related to language activity programs such as "Arabic Language Camp as a Medium of Enhancing Arabic Language Skills" (Ahmad et.al., 2018), "Effectiveness of Outbound Program for Bachelor of Arabic Language Students with Sultan Idris University of Education (UPSI)" (Ramli et.al., 2019), "The Attitudes Among Non-Arabic Speaking Students in Malaysia Towards Using an Educational Program Based on Collaborative Learning via Social Networking Site" (Al-Khawaldeh et.al., 2017), "Mastery Learning of Second Language through Asynchronous Modeling of Native Speakers in a Collaborative Mobile Game" (Fan et. al., 2017), and "Enhancing Vocabulary, Motivation and Confidence Among Primary School Students Through Arabic Language Program" (Nawi, 2020). However, no studies have been found on online communication collaboration between non-native Arabic students with Arabic speakers, especially from abroad. In this regard, it is hoped that this study can further develop knowledge in terms of improving Arabic speaking skills as well as provide benefits to students and lecturers through feedback on students' perception on the program implemented

Objective

The objective of the study is to identify the perception of Arabic language students at UiTM on virtual communication program with native speakers.

Literature Review

According to Abdullah et al (2018), 21st-century education is an education based on high-level thinking skills, where the application of technology is seen as the mainstay of national education today. The aim of 21st century education is to provide teaching and facilitation characterized by creativity, critical thinking, collaboration and communication. To assist in achieving Arabic language proficiency, Saipolbarin et al (2021) suggested for collaborative teaching to be implemented. He stated that collaborative learning helps facilitate the learning of Arabic and creates a culture of knowledge sharing among students. Samah (2014) in his study discussed the imitation method of Ibn Khaldun, a prominent Islamic scholar, that can be used in improving students' Arabic language proficiency. This method begins with listening activities, proposing or imitating, and then building language skills through specific behaviors. This behavior can be represented by various language activities conducted on students. Ibn Khaldun's imitation method has characteristics that combine several language teaching methods such as cooperative methods, direct methods, communicative methods, and student-centred learning.

The communicative approach is preferred for communication learning purposes among the Arabic language education methodologies. According to Hassanein (2005), the communicative approach was first introduced in 1972 by Del Hymes, a figure in language and the humanities. According to Hymes, the communicative learning method recommends that students use the language learned as much as possible, especially in daily life. This means that students need to increase the target language use in the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This approach highlights language activities that help students interact with each other.

The communicative approach uses two-way learning techniques that require students to interact with each other. Teachers are more of a facilitator and not an instructor, whose role is to guide students to produce language by performing various activities. With this, the students need to move a lot, interact and be active, and the teacher only needs to be involved as a monitor and mentor throughout the learning session. This situation is also referred to as the student-centred learning process. Ellis (2003) outlines several forms of language activities often used in communicative approaches, such as storytelling activities, sharing experiences, group discussions, making comparisons, dialogues and interviews, language games, etc. Richards (2006) puts forward critical assumptions in language teaching based on communicative methods. Among them is that students who are proficient in a second language will be more easily facilitated when engaged in meaningful communication and interaction. This means that the two main aspects of language learning are the need for interaction and communication through meaningful activities in students' daily lives.

Scholars have developed several other approaches to motivate students in communicative activities, such as task-based learning. Communicative approaches through a variety of task-based activities can be used and be aligned with the requirements of 21st century education. According to Richards & Rodgers (2004), these activities involve students performing tasks

that provide a better context for activation of the learning process. According to Ellis (2003), a task is a structured plan to provide opportunities to refine knowledge and abilities in a new language and its use during communication. Task-based learning uses specific tasks to stimulate the speaking environment, such as giving students the task of explaining a feature, discussing, making a presentation, acting out, contacting someone using the language they have learned, and others. In addition, task-based learning can create a communication environment that encourages students to interact with each other more spontaneously. Monica (2010) points out that language learning becomes more meaningful and natural if task-based teaching occurs.

The language environment through communication with native speakers is also one of the strategies to improve Arabic language proficiency. Al-Khuly (2002) provides a view to create a language learning environment to help train students to practice the language more spontaneously. Here, native speakers are needed to help students practice speaking and learn to imitate or be influenced by a better or more authentic language style. Communication programs with native speakers, for example, can open up opportunities for collaboration and create a network of friendship between students and Arab friends, even if done remotely and not face-to-face. This is doable and is not something that is considered impossible due to the development of technology today and available applications such as WhatsApp, Telegram, Google Meet, Zoom, and others. This way, a person who has an Arab friend from abroad can interact with that friend almost every day as if the person is living nearby.

Mustapha et. al (2016) described the use of remote technology as an advantage in the modern era, named the e-forum, also known as e-learning among technology practitioners. With technology like this, long distances are no longer a barrier for students in Malaysia to interact with native speakers among Arabs living in other countries. Lewis and O'Dowd (2016) stated that programs such as online intercultural exchanges can become critical tools for institutions of higher learning. It can help foreign language learning in addition to building cross-cultural awareness. Such learning methods require students to be actively involved in interacting with peers from foreign countries. Students will acquire cultural knowledge and master the language being studied authentically compared to the discourse used in class with the lecturers.

The problem of learning Arabic, especially the mastery of speaking skills, is the main topic of discussion for teachers and researchers. Poor mastery of oral skills can be observed among Arabic language students in most institutions at various levels, which has prompted many studies to be conducted with various topics, objectives, and approaches. Din et al (2014), for example, conducted a study on the suitability of role-playing in learning Arabic speaking skills at the Sultan Zainal Abidin University (UniSZA) to improve speaking ability, self-motivation, and expand vocabulary. The results of the study found that all respondents reported that the experience of learning through the roleplay technique can increase their confidence to speak in Arabic because they can master more vocabulary through the course.

Hassanein (2016) in his study on teaching strategies of oral communication skills in Arabic for non-native speakers, found that the use of certain strategies can help students to better communicate in Arabic. This includes eliminating shyness to speak Arabic, eliminating the fear

of Arabic difficulties, enriching students with sufficient vocabulary to speak, and increasing students' self-confidence to speak in Arabic. Ismail & Serkan (2017) conducted a study that aims to identify problems in the mastery of Arabic speaking skills among Turkish students at the Turkish University of Giresun. This study revealed several issues related to the motivation of students to learn Arabic, the use of traditional teaching methods, students' tendency to master language knowledge more than its practical aspects, and failure to use modern technology in teaching activities.

Collaborative learning is one of the ways of learning in groups that influences the basic learning system and is expected to be able to improve language skills. Abdul Hamid & Al-Khawaldeh (2017) conducted a study on the perceptions of 25 non-Arabic speaking students at IIUM on the use of educational programs based on collaborative learning through social networks. The results of the study in general showed that the level of students' perception of the collaboration program conducted was very positive. The study suggested the use of collaborative learning through social networks, especially in the teaching of Arabic writing skills. Zailani et. al (2018) conducted a study on the need for language activities in the study "Arabic Language Camp as a Medium for Strengthening Arabic Language Skills". They argue that Arabic language co-curricular activities such as language camps, language months, language weeks, and mentor-mentee programs can improve Arabic language proficiency among students. The results of a study of 38 people who attended language camps showed that the activities that students were most interested in and that had helped strengthen their language skills were "open interviews" and "knowledge search" (97%), followed by "giving advice" and presentations, acting (92%), and "open debate" (89%) as spontaneous and relaxed speaking skills. This study also showed a very positive perception of students in increasing students' self-confidence to communicate in Arabic.

The study of Maromar et. al (2019) attempted to discuss the difficulties faced by students while learning speaking skills in selected private universities as well as teacher education institutes in Malaysia. This study aimed to reveal the difficulties faced by students in developing speaking skills as they learn the language. The common difficulties experienced by students while learning speaking skills found in this study include students not being able to use correct Arabic grammar while speaking in class and their failure to follow listening activities in Arabic and integrate with native speakers in university campuses. In addition, a study was also conducted by Ramli et. al (2019) on the effectiveness of the outbound program for Bachelor of Arabic Language Students with UPSI located at Al Al-Bayt University Language Centre in Mafrqa, Jordan. The study found that the program conducted was able to strengthen students' mastery of the size of the Arabic vocabulary and subsequently practice it in the daily lives of students in the right context. In addition, the program can also encourage students to participate in activities at the global level and build a network of international relations.

The above study proves that students face problems speaking in Arabic and that there are various programs conducted to help students improve their speaking skills. Past studies have focused on identifying student problems, obtaining the views of students and teachers, evaluating the effectiveness of a program, and others. The use of a variety of activities, strategies, and techniques is needed to help students master communication skills. The latest methods that are in line with the development of 21st-century education need to be explored

further and applied to help solve the problem of teaching and learning of Arabic. The advancement of the technological era and the phenomenon of globalization should be harnessed so that learning becomes more meaningful and have a positive impact on student achievement in Arabic language proficiency.

Methodology

This study is a descriptive study that explores the perceptions of UiTM students on the online communication program with native Arabic speakers from Morocco. The study uses a quantitative approach using the survey method. The sample of this study was selected using purposive sampling based on a criteria set by the researcher. The sample in the study consisted of 37 Semester 4 Arabic language students from UiTM Shah Alam who participated in an online communication program with students of Muassasah Dar el Hadith, Morocco. A questionnaire was used as the data collection instrument. The distribution of the questionnaire was conducted online through the Google Form platform. The questionnaire was prepared by the researchers and has 17 main items that include students' perceptions before the program (5 items), during the program (7 items) and after it was conducted (5 items). The data of this study were analyzed using descriptive statistics through percentage values, frequency, mean, and standard deviation. The researcher used SPSS v.8 software to analyze the data.

Data Analysis

To answer the objectives of the study, a questionnaire was constructed by the researcher based on the objectives determined which comprised of 17 items. Frequency, percentage, mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values were used to analyze the study data. The interpretation of the mean score used in this study refers to the recommendation of Pallant (2010) as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Interpretation of Mean Scores

Min Score	Interpretation of Mean
1.00-2.33	Low
2.34-3.67	Moderate
3.68-5.00	High

The following are the findings of this study, which have been divided into three parts namely before, during and after the program.

Perceptions of Students before the Implementation of the Program

Table 4.2 shows the findings of four Likert scale items related to students' perceptions prior to the implementation of the Ta'akhi program. Based on the mean value, all respondents showed a positive perception of the program. All four items showed a high mean value interpretation, where students will make certain preparations each time before holding a meeting (M = 4.54; SD = 0.505), students agreed with the division of students in pairs in the program (M = 4.27; SD = 0.871), students agreed with the arrangement of topics and content/questions proposed for these five meetings (M = 4.19; SD = 0.660) and students agreed with a total of five meetings (M = 3.86; SD = 0.976).

Table 4.2

Students' Perceptions Before the Implementation of the Ta'akhi Program

	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Interpretation
a. I agree with the number of meetings (5 times).	3.86	0.976	High
b. I will make certain preparations each time before holding a meeting.	4.54	0.505	High
c. I agree with the arrangement of titles and content/questions proposed for these five meetings.	4.19	0.660	High
d. I agree with the division of students into pairs in this program.	4.27	0.871	High

Meanwhile, Table 4.3 shows the findings of the questionnaire related to students' feelings before starting communication in this program. The findings of the study showed that 34 students stated they were "pounding" followed by 30 who were "excited", 18 who were "scared," 17 who were "worried", 16 who were "happy", and two who were "confident". The findings showed mixed feelings of the students. However, the feeling of worry was the highest choice.

Table 4.3

Students' feelings before starting the program

No	Student Feelings	Frequency	Percentage
1	Happy	16	43.24%
2	Worried	34	91.89%
3	Excited	30	81.08%
4	Worried	17	45.94%
5	Fear	18	48.64%
6	Sure	2	5.40%

Students' Perceptions during the Implementation of the Ta'akhi Program

Table 4.4 shows the findings related to the level of fluency for the five meetings conducted. The mean value for each encounter showed an increase ranging from 2.78 to 3.81, while the overall mean of encounters recorded for this item was 3.44 and SD 0.52 (refer to Table 4.5). This indicates that the interpretation of the mean scores is moderate.

Table 4.4

Level of Communication Fluency Per Meeting

	N	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Meeting 1	37	2.78	1,058	Moderate
Meeting 2	37	3.30	.878	Moderate
Meeting 3	37	3.59	.551	Moderate
Meeting 4	37	3.81	.518	High
Meeting 5	37	3.76	.641	High

Table 4.5

Overall Findings of the Level of Fluency of Communication of Each Meeting

	Mean (M)	Interpretation
Level of fluency of student communication with Arab friends at each meeting.	3.4486	Moderate

Next, Table 4.6 shows the item related to students' views of their Arab peers. The findings showed that the Arab friends of the students had shown interest and commitment to communicate, had curiosity about the students and about Malaysia, were cheerful, witty, not serious and also fun. Meanwhile, Table 4.7 shows that the overall mean recorded for this item is 4.32, SD 0.55 and the scope of interpretation is very high.

Table 4.6

Students' Perspectives on Arab Friends

	N	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SP)	Interpretation
RA1 Shows interest	37	4.41	.832	High
RA2 Shows curiosity	37	4.32	.884	High
RA 3 Merry	37	4.24	.925	High
RA 4 Serious	37	2.86	1,228	Low
RA 5 Likes to joke	37	3.73	.990	High
RA 6 Less fun	37	2.00	1.312	Low
Valid N (listwise)	37			

Table 4.7

Findings of the Overall Mean of Students' Views of Arab Friends

	Mean (M)	Interpretation
Students' views on Arab friends	3.5991	Moderate

The next item as in Table 4.8 relates to the party that dominates the communication/conversation at each meeting. The findings showed that 28 students stated that no one was dominant and they interacted with each other in a balanced manner, however there were 8 students who stated that their Arab friends were more dominant and one student stated that UiTM students dominated the conversation.

Table 4.8

Parties that dominate communication/conversation

No	Item	Amount	Percentage
1	You dominate	1	2.7%
2	Arab friends dominate	8	21.6%
3	Equally communicate with each other	28	75.7%
Number of Respondents		37	

The next item as in Table 4.9 highlights the experience through misunderstanding during the communication period. Findings for this item found that 28 students stated misunderstanding occurred only once in a while, three students stated never, and six students stated that they often experience misunderstanding when communicating.

Table 4.9

Misunderstanding During the Communication Period

No	Item	Amount	Percentage
1	Once in a while	28	75.7%
2	Never experienced misunderstanding	3	8.1%
3	Often experience misunderstanding	6	16.2%
Number of respondents		37	

The next item as in Table 4.10 is the communication period of UiTM students with their Arab friends during the five meetings. The results of the study showed that over 51.4% of the students stated that each meeting lasted more than 30 minutes. These findings indicate that both parties gave a high commitment to the success of this project.

Table 4.10

Duration of student communication with Arab peers

	Less than 30 minutes	Exactly 30 minutes	Over 30 minutes	Number of Respondents
Meeting 1	11 29.7%	7 18.9%	19 51.4%	37
Meeting 2	5 13.5%	7 18.9%	25 67.6%	37
Meeting 3	8 21.6%	4 10.8%	25 67.6%	37
Meeting 4	7 18.9%	9 24.3%	21 56.8%	37
Meeting 5	2 5.4%	8 21.6%	27 73%	37

The next item relates to the communication between the students and their Arab friends (refer to Table 4.11). Thirty-one students with a percentage of 83.7% stated that they communicate with their Arab friends in a relaxed and friendly manner. Only six students with a percentage of 16.3% stated that they communicated semi-formally. None of the students

stated that they communicated formally and were less friendly with their Arab friends. This indicates that students and their Arab friends are comfortable communicating with each other.

Table 4.11

Ways of communication between students and Arab friends

No	Item	Amount	Percentage
1	Relaxed and friendly	31	83.7%
2	Semi formal	6	16.3%
3	Formal and less friendly	0	0%
Number of Respondents		37	

The next item was students' perceptions of themselves and their Arab peers in their effort to ensure smooth communication throughout the meeting. The findings showed that over 97% of the students with a mean value of 4.5 agreed and strongly agreed that each of them always strived to ensure that communication ran smoothly (refer to Table 4.12). Only one student stated that he disagreed with the statement given. This may be because there were constraints such as many past assignments causing him to be unable to strive to ensure smooth communication throughout the meeting.

Table 4.12

Efforts to Ensure Smooth Communication

	N	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Interpretation
I always try to make sure communication runs smoothly throughout the meeting.	37	4.51	0.559	Height
My Arab friend always strives to ensure smooth communication throughout the meeting.	37	4.62	0.492	Height
Valid N (listwise)	37			

Student Perceptions after Program Implementation

For this section, the first item was the level of satisfaction of the students in communicating with their Arab friends at each meeting. The mean of the five meetings was 3.92 and SD 0.69 (refer to Table 4.13). These findings indicate that the interpretation of the mean score is high, which shows that the level of satisfaction of students with the communication of their Arab peers is high.

Table 4.13

Level of student satisfaction with communication with Arab peers

	N	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Interpretation
Are you satisfied with your communication with your Arab friends at every meeting?	37	3,9243	.69658	High
Valid N (listwise)	37			

The second item explores the extent to which these programs add to their workload and interfere with the learning of other courses. The results showed that 24 or 64.9% of the students stated that the program was not disruptive and not burdensome. However, there were 13 students with a percentage of 35.1 who felt disturbed and burdened (refer to Table 4.14).

Table 4.14

Disruptive and burdensome programs

No	Scale	Amount	Percent
1	Very annoying and burdensome.	1	2.7%
2	Annoying and burdensome.	4	10.82%
3	A little annoying and a little burdensome.	8	21.62%
4	Not annoying and not burdensome.	22	59.46%
5	Very unobtrusive and very unburdening.	2	5.40%
Number of Respondents		37	

The next item explores the benefits students derive from the program. The results of the questionnaire showed that the mean of each benefit was more than 4.9 (refer to Table 4.15). The findings found that the program can improve Arabic language skills, increase motivation, enthusiasm and interest in learning Arabic, increase knowledge related to Arabic culture as well as increase self-confidence to speak Arabic. Apart from that, this program also gives students the opportunity to gain Arab contacts from abroad and indirectly, they also obtained new and more meaningful experiences. This program can also help the understanding of the Intercultural Pragmatics course that they study in Semester 4. The mean value obtained for this item was 4.6, SD 0.39.

Table 4.15

Benefits gained by students from the program

	N	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Interpretation
MU 1 Improve Arabic language skills.	37	4.70	.463	High
MU 2 Increase motivation, enthusiasm and interest in learning Arabic.	37	4.62	.545	High
MU 3 Improving knowledge of Arab culture.	37	4.68	.475	High
MU 4 Get new contacts from abroad.	37	4.78	.417	High
MU 5 Gain new experiences and more meaningful new learning opportunities.	37	4.65	.484	High
MU 6 Increase confidence in speaking Arabic.	37	4.49	.607	High
MU 7 Can help understanding of other courses such as Intercultural Pragmatics course as being studied in the current semester/Semester 4.	37	4.51	.607	High
Valid N (listwise)	37			

Table 4.16

Mean of overall benefits gained by students from the program

	N	Mean (M)	Standard deviation (SD)	Interpretation
The overall benefits that students derive from the program.	37	4,6332	.39918	High
Valid N (listwise)	37			

The next item is the desire to continue the friendship between the two parties even after the program ends. The findings showed that 34 students representing 91.8% agreed and strongly agreed to continue the friendship after the program ended. The mean for this item was 4.2, SD 0.54 and the mean interpretation value was high. However, there were three students who were not sure whether to continue or not (refer to Table 4.17).

Table 4.17

Suggestions for continuing friendships after the program

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
My Arab friend and I plan to continue our friendship even after the program.	37	4,2432	.54800	High
Valid N (listwise)	37			

The next item explored whether the students agreed for such a program to be conducted with Semester 4 students in the future. The findings of the study showed that 32 students agreed

and strongly agreed that the program should be conducted with Semester 4 students, compared to only three students who disagreed and one who very disagreed. The mean for this item is 4.1 SP 0.92 and the mean interpretation value is high.

Table 4.18

Agreement for this program to be conducted with Semester 4 students

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
Do you agree for such a program to be conducted with Semester 4 students?	37	4.1622	.92837	Height
Valid N (listwise)	37			

Conclusion

Overall, it can be concluded that most students had a positive perception of the program. This includes before the program was run, during the program, and after the program was implemented.

First, for perceptions before the program was conducted, most students expressed support for the content used, communication methods in pairs, as well as the preparation done before communicating. In terms of the frequency of meetings, a few students did not agree with the number of meetings (five times) with the assumption that it is burdensome and disrupts the current course. Students also had mixed feelings before initiating communication. Most felt excited and happy and too few students had the confidence problem at an early stage to communicate with their Arabic-speaking peers.

Second, for students' perceptions during the program, the students showed a variety of feedback. It can be observed that the level of fluency for each meeting increased from the first meeting to the fifth meeting. Students also had a positive perception of their Arab friends such as being cheerful, liked to joke and showed a high interest in communicating. The two parties were seen to be interacting with each other equally although there were a handful of students who stated that their Arab friends dominated the conversation a lot. There were also misunderstandings throughout the communication between the two parties, but this was relatively minimal

Third, students also showed a positive perception of the program after it was implemented. Most students were satisfied with the program once it was completed. However, it can be observed that one third of the study respondents stated that this program somewhat disrupted their study journey and felt a little burdened. However, all students were aware of the benefits of the program from various aspects such as increasing their confidence in speaking, gaining new acquaintances, gaining new learning experiences and even strengthening the understanding of other courses being studied, namely Cross-cultural Pragmatics. Most of the students intended to continue their friendship with their Arab friends and agreed for the program to be continued in the next semester.

It can be concluded that through this program, students had successfully and actively engaged with native speakers, gained new contacts and experiences, and made communication learning informal, relaxed and interesting. The involvement of students to communicate with native speakers increased their confidence to speak and apply all the Arabic language skills they have learned. Although the students in the early stages expressed anxiety to communicate, after going through five meetings, most students managed to overcome the obstacles of anxiety and expressed many benefits gained from this program.

The results of this study support the findings of previous researchers who emphasize the importance of language environment (Al Khuly, 2002), the role of intercultural communication in language learning (Lewis and O'Dowd, 2016), and the need for collaborative learning that facilitate language learning (Ramli et al., 2021). This study proves that students need language environment and real-life experience to increase their motivation and language proficiency in their learning. With the advancement of information technology nowadays, modern ways of teaching and learning in foreign language should be optimized to encourage communication with native speakers in order to assist the learning. Apart from that, this study also highlighted the importance of continuous learning processes and the advantage of meeting new friends from other cultures in fostering meaningful language learning.

Through these findings, it is suggested for a follow-up study to be conducted to review the problems encountered throughout the program such as misunderstandings in communication, increased workload with the existence of this program, and explore options for a more ideal form of implementation. Further research can also be done to examine the comparison from the aspect of perception or problems faced between the two parties, either the Arabic students of UiTM and the Arabic-speaking students from Morocco.

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