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Malaysian University Students' Comprehension on the Text of Arabic Literature Kalilah Wa Dimnah

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Abstract

The importance of Arabic literature whether prose or poetry makes it one of the main subjects in the bachelor's degree curriculum among public universities in Malaysia. Students' comprehension of Arabic literary texts is very important as by understanding said literature, they are able to deepen their heights of understanding towards the Quranic language and appreciate the history and culture of the Arabic. If the problem of comprehensibility of Arabic literary texts cannot be overcome, it will result in the mastery of the Arabic language not being fully achieved. The main purpose of this study is to measure the level of students' comprehension of Arabic literary texts of the prose quoted from the book Kalilah wa Dimnah. The study is a quantitative study involving 109 undergraduate students from International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). This quantitative study used Text Comprehension Tests to obtain data. The obtained data were analysed descriptively to determine the level of students' comprehension of the text. Findings showed that the level of students' comprehension of Arabic prose literary texts is at a moderate level. This study suggests that further research on the causes of students' level of comprehension of literary texts can be conducted so that this problem can be overcome in the future.

Keywords: Arabic Literary Prose Texts, Quranic Language, Comprehensibility, Kalilah Wa Dimnah, Text Comprehension Test

Introduction

Through reading, a reader will gain comprehension. Comprehensibility, often called as mutual understanding, refers to a language context that may be comprehended by two or more speakers who speak different dialects (Sarhini-Zin et al., 2019). Several studies have been undertaken on students' proficiency of Arabic, particularly in relation to Arabic literature (Moustafa, 2020; Mustapha et al., 2019; Yusoff et al., 2014). Every individual must master reading and comprehension skills throughout their lives (Wan Mustappa, 2017). A

fundamental goal of reading behaviour is comprehension. Reading comprehension does not occur by itself. Reading takes time, and the aim can be attained with a progressive effort, i.e., moving from a traditional view of reading behaviourism to a comprehensive perspective with a greater emphasis on the cognitive side. Reading methods are also required during the reading process in order to achieve more good comprehension results (Othman, 2008). Readability (Hussain & Mamat, 2018; Rahman et al., 2016) and comprehensibility of Arabic literary works (Abdul Ghani et al., 2019; Alias, 2018; Yusoff et al., 2012) have been the subject of extensive literature studies and research (Mustapha et al., 2019; Ahmid et al., 2018; Kamarudin et al., 2017; Samah et al., 2016). Students value readability of Arabic literary writings because knowing Arabic literature allows them to expand their comprehension of the Quran's language, the historical experience of the original Arab culture, and the language's power (Kamis et al., 2018). This means that unless the problem of comprehensibility of Arabic literary texts, whether poetry or prose, is solved, the process of learning Arabic will not be completed. As such, this study aims to unravel the level of difficulties faced by students in selected public universities in Malaysia in understanding Arabic literary prose texts.

Literature Review

Reading & Comprehension

Reading Concept

Mastering a language necessitates the development of reading skills. Reading, according to Kamus Dewan (2010), is the process of carefully observing and interpreting the content of either written or printed. While reading is a very complicated action involving the perception of meaning, feelings, and thoughts in terms of terminology, it is also a very simple action in terms of execution (Adawiyah et al., 2020). Reading is the process of extracting information from a text in order to comprehend it (Widianto & Subyantoro, 2015). Reading provides a variety of useful input explorations when linked to past experiences and current events. Students will perform the process of text comprehension by selecting, analysing, testing, and validating the information read throughout the reading process. This means that there will be an interaction between one's language and thought throughout the reading period (Osman, 1990; Othman, 2008; Mustappa, 2017).

Reading Theory

Recognising the importance of reading, the best approaches and procedures based on theory must be used to improve reading proficiency (Pardede, 2008). There are a variety of reading theories that can aid students or readers in comprehending a material. These theories can describe the position and the process of reading that runs either at low or high levels. Among the theories of reading are:

Constructivism Theory

Constructivism is a theory that is developing in terms of ability and understanding in the learning process that is expected to be able to increase the activity and intelligence of students (Suparlan, 2019). According to the constructivist theory, it is the reader who is responsible for constructing, creating meaning and knowledge (Smith, 1993). This is stated so because knowledge is constantly increasing and changing according to the current situation. It serves as adaptability, or adjusting to needs, according to the ideas of this philosophy. To

put it another way, after reading, the reader is able to explain and develop new knowledge from the information obtained, based on their own experiences (Othman, 2008).

Bruner's (1966) constructive theoretical framework demonstrates that learning is the process of constructing ideas and concepts using prior and current information. While reading a text, readers can select, transfer information, build hypotheses, and make cognitive decisions in addition to completing assignments. This approach views reading as altering the teacher's role, i.e., pupils will be allowed complete freedom to process a given book in order to construct their own idea of comprehension of the text.

Schemata Theory

The reading process relies heavily on schemata theory, which is an interactive process that integrates textual material with the reader's prior knowledge (Abdul Rahman et al., 2017). Schematic theory is a reading strategy that looks for connections between the reader's existing knowledge system and new information (Othman, 2008). Comprehending, according to Anderson and Pearson (1988), is the interaction of old and new information. To claim that a person has understood a text is to state that he or she has created a mental 'home' for the text's information, or that he or she has modified an existing mental home to fit the new information.

Therefore, the student's schema will rearrange itself to accommodate new information as that information is added to the system (Omaggio, 1993). With basic knowledge or remembering previous knowledge, this theory assumes that the reader will have ease in mastering new knowledge and can help their understanding of the text. This is because the reader has built up or retained basic knowledge before interacting with fresh information.

Traditional Theory (*Bottom-Up*)

The Bottom-Up model is a key method related to the bottom-up reading approach also known as asphonics, which requires students to match letters with sounds in a specified sequence. Bottom-up theory explains information flow as a succession of phases that change the input and move on to the next stage without any feedback or risk of failure (Stanovich, 1980). To put it another way, language is considered as a code, and the reader's primary responsibility is to recognise pictures and convert them to phonemics. As a result, the reader is regarded as a passive receptacle of the text's information. The reader must reproduce the meaning found in the text (Pardede, 2008). This idea is especially effective for struggling first- and second-language readers, who tend to focus on individual words rather than the overall meaning (Othman, 2008).

Cognitive Theory (*Top-Down*)

Cognitive gives meaning to the mental process of interpreting, learning and understanding something (Dictionary of the Board, 2010). Cognitive refers to the knowledge a person possesses from the aspect of his awareness and understanding (Othman, 2008). This cognitive processing and top-down approach revolutionised the concept of how students learn to read (Smith, 1994). Based on this theory, the reader not only extracts meaning from the text but connects the information in the text with the knowledge brought by the reader. In this sense, reading is a dialogue between the reader and the text that involves an active cognitive process in which knowledge of the reader's past background plays a key role in the creation of meaning. Reading is not a passive mechanical activity but purposeful and rational, relying on the prior knowledge and expectations of the reader. It is not just a problem of decoding print

to sound but also a problem of making a sense of written language (Smith, 1994). Briefly for this cognitive theory, reading is a psycholinguistic game of guessing, a process in which the reader models a text, makes hypotheses, confirm or reject it, make new hypotheses, and so on.

Arabic Literature

According to Dewan (2010), literature gives the meaning of the language used in books (which is not a colloquial language), while literature is the work of art (written work) of writers in the form of prose or poetry that has certain special characteristics. Literature is a stream of thought produced by a nation, either in oral or written form (Atoh et al., 2020).

The purpose of literature is to teach students how to predict, formulate, analyse, draw conclusions, make decisions, and solve issues (Najendran, 2000). In Arabic literature is called *Adab* (أدب). Ethics & morals, behaviour, manners, morality, processes, and so on are all defined by the word *adab* (Khusna, 2017). The word *adab* emerged after the development of Arab life and its migration from rural areas to urban areas and development. If referred to the Lisan al-Arab dictionary, the origin of the word *adab* carries the meaning of good morals among human beings. والمأدبة الأدبة also carries the meaning of every food cooked, served and then invited to eat (Ibn Manzur, 2012).

Literature can be defined as a description of one's experience in a living picture. The living image (الشعورية التجربة) describes the value of the writer himself, describes the reality of divinity, the creation of nature, the creation of life and man and what is most important is to affect the inner soul of the other soul. This is what is most important in Arabic literature (Madkur, 2009). With the advent of Islam, Arabic literature bore an important body and great responsibility to spread its teachings (Osman & Nasir, 2011).

Division of Arabic Literature

In learning the Arabic language, there are four pillars that need to be learned, namely language, grammar, *bayan* (semantics) and *adab*, especially for religious people (sharia) because most religious laws are all taken from the Qur'an and hadith, including *syarah* (explanation) of the Qur'an. and Hadith. This means that in order to deepen knowledge related to religion, one must learn Arabic (Ibn Khaldun, 2015).

The meaning of Arabic literature is the work of an artist on the Arabic language that is not just focused on Arabic poetry alone. In the division of *adab* or Arabic literature, it is divided into two categories, namely poetry or poetry composed of المنظوم الشعر and prose (nathr) النثر (Ibn Khaldun, 2015; 'Asyur & Al-Hawamidah, 2010).

Kalilah Wa Dimnah

The original manuscript of Kalilah Wa Dimnah was written to be presented to the tyrannical king of India at that time. Similarly, the purpose of 'Ibn al-Muqaffa' in translating this essay to be presented to Khalifah Abu Jaafar al-Mansur (Al-Fakhuri, 1991). The original book in Ancient Indian language has not been found yet (Puriyadi, 2010). This being a factor of various countries makes it one of the references of Arabic literary prose to be translated into their languages such as Syrian, Turkish, Malay, Japanese, Siamese and Ethiopian (Marzuki & Hajimaming, 2017). The original purpose of the book Kalilah Wa Dimnah was to reprimand and apply noble values among the government and society (Hajimaming et al., 2019; Al-Thubaity, 2006).

This book is the best literary work produced by 'Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa' in the 'Abbasiyyah Period'. He translated the original work from Persian into Arabic which was very suitable as a medium to educate and spread good moral values among the leaders and the 'Abbasiyyah community at the time. Kary aini uses the dialogue of animal life as a background aimed at improving human morals and behaviour (Pabiyah et al., 2019).

Methodology

This research employs a quantitative approach to determine the amount of difficulty faced by students at three Malaysian public universities: the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), the National University of Malaysia (UKM), and the Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM). The participants were chosen based on their understanding of Arabic literature. The percentages and means were used to describe the study data acquired from the text comprehension exam.

Comprehension Tests of Arabic Literary Texts

This test is concerned with students' understanding of Arabic literary texts (prose genre) using the book *Kalilah Wa Dimnah* by Abdullah bin al-Muqaffa'. Excerpts of text from the book are given to students. Based on the Arabic text, the sample will answer the question in Malay in the space provided. There are two paragraphs in this Comprehension Test. There are four questions in the first passage and four questions in the second passage. Questions are presented in an organised format, eliminating the need for a lengthy essay. This method is used to determine whether or not the respondent is capable of providing the correct answer. Before the test began, a brief oral briefing was conducted to avoid misunderstanding of the course of the test. This is because, in the event of a misunderstanding, it can affect the sample response score in turn having an impact on the level of reliability of the test performed.

Research Findings

In analysing the text comprehension test, the researcher referred to the UniSZA undergraduate academic rule book for the division of scoring grade levels. This is because the scoring grades between public universities in Malaysia are more or less the same. The mean for all respondents by university is UKM (18 students) at 72.77%, USIM (47 people) 67.47% and IIUM (44 people) 66.96%. All the findings of the comprehension test on the level of difficulty in understanding the text of Arabic literature showed that all respondents were at the B+level, which is Honors or Good.

Discussion and Recommendation

We should examine student accomplishment in Arabic language competence in light of the favourable development of Arabic language education in Malaysia from primary school to tertiary level. The researcher will present some past research findings that support the findings of this study, including findings from students at the intermediate level who are primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.

According to past research, students' Arabic proficiency is still at an unsatisfactory level, namely moderate and frustrating. Yusoff et al (2016) conducted a study on 60 form two students to determine their level of Arabic language understanding according to the reading taxonomy. The study found that the first level of taxonomy is at a moderate level, while the remaining levels are at a weak level. The findings also show that students are at the level of needing guidance for the first and second levels in terms of readability level and are at the

level of frustration at the rest of the level. This indicates that students' mastery is at an unsatisfactory level. Another study conducted in Negeri Sembilan found that Arabic language learning is still at a moderate level (Mustapa & Arifin, 2012).

To further support the findings of this study, the researcher also referred to the analysis of SPM subjects for Arabic subjects and the average grade of subjects at the National level in 2019. The SPM Analysis Report (2020) from MOE also showed findings from 27857 candidates who took Arabic subjects, the highest percentage achieved by the candidates was at the intermediate level, i.e., 46.3% of the candidates obtained the Honors percentage (B +, B, C + & C). The same result also applies to the findings of SPM for Arabic subjects 2018. The most percentage achieved by students is also at a moderate level, which is 47.6% of the 38390 candidates who took Arabic language subjects.

In addition, if we examine the analysis of Sijil Tinggi Agama Malaysia (STAM) MOE 2019 examination results, out of 9826 candidates who sat for STAM 2019, the National Average Grade (GPN) showed an increase, from 3.02 in 2018 to 2.98 in 2019. What strikes the attention is the field of Arabic language which consists of subjects 1) Nahu and Saraf, 2) Isya 'and Mutalaah, 3) Adab and Nusus 4) 'Arudh and Qafiyah and 5) Balaghah.

Based on the Analysis of STAM 2019 Results Report for Nahu and Saraf subjects, the percentage of Mumtaz is 9.2%, while Jayyid Jiddan is 12%, Jayyid is 22.6%, Maqbul is 34.2% and Rasib (Fail) is 14.8%. As for the percentage of Insya 'and Mutalaah subjects, Mumtaz by 10.2%, Jayyid Jiddan by 28%, Jayyid by 35.4%, Maqbul by 21%.

2% and Rasib (Failed) by 5.2%. What is interesting is for the literary subject of Adab and Nusus, where the percentage of STAM 2019 candidates achieved Mumtaz by 6.5%, Jayyid Jiddan by 12.0%, 36.9% for the percentage of Jayyid, Maqbul by 35.7% and Rasib by 8.9%. This shows that students who study Arabic at the diploma level are still at a moderate and weak level.

The problem of students' level of proficiency in Arabic will continue to the tertiary level if the cause of this matter is not addressed. A study on the level of vocabulary mastery of students studying Arabic at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) showed that students are generally only able to master the total vocabulary around 1500-2000 words while the required number of students learning Arabic is about 3000-5000 words in order to facilitate them to pursue studies in their field (Razak et al., 2020).

According to a study on the construction of Arabic sentences among Arabic students at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), morphology and syntax are at a high level, but lexical aspects (vocabulary) are moderate (Abdul Ghani et al., 2019). Razak et al (2016) found that 115 STAM candidates were able to answer the test effectively for the word frequency category, but moderate for the keyword category, based on their ability to master Arabic language in STAM syllabus textbooks. Students' moderate knowledge of keywords, on the other hand, caused their level of understanding to drop significantly, with only more than half of them answering 28 out of 50 questions, compared to 44 on the frequency list. This indicates that, in order to overcome the issues, keyword mastery should be emphasised as well.

Furthermore, a study was conducted on the level of readability of the *Maharat al-Qira'ah* textbook which was used as a textbook at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). Study respondents consisting of 162 students were distributed a set of cloze tests involving words omitted in the text. The results of the test conducted found that an average score of 65% obtained showed that the level of the book is still at a low level, which is less suitable for use for teaching and learning in the classroom (Sjahrony et al., 2017). Students from the International Islamic University (IIUM) who concentrate in Islamic Studies and Arabic were also given a course to help them boost their academic performance by

mastering Arabic speaking abilities. However, a total of 70% of pupils are unable to properly understand classroom discussions due to a lack of Arabic vocabulary.

Conclusion

Arabic language education is provided at all stages of formal education, including preschool, primary school, secondary school, college, and university (Sahrir, 2015). Ideally, Arabic language proficiency among students has increased in line with the development of teaching and learning techniques, coupled with various technological facilities and various studies that have been done to improve students' mastery of the Arabic language. However, the outcomes of this study, which are consistent with prior studies, reveal that student mastery is moderate to poor. Further research into the causes of this weakness is required in order to resolve this issue in the future.

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