

Engagement of University Students in Online Arabic Learning During the Pandemic Era

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic directly impacted the Malaysian education system. While internet technology can enhance learning, the synchronous and asynchronous context for second language learners still lacks of study. This study aims to measure the level of engagement of university students in learning Arabic during the Covid-19 pandemic, both in synchronous and asynchronous online learning sessions. This quantitative cross-sectional survey measured the engagement of 184 final-year Arabic students at eight public universities during the Covid-19 pandemic. After collecting the data, IBM SPSS software version 28.0 was used for descriptive data analysis, including mean and standard deviation calculations. The study's results indicate that the level of student engagement in Arabic during the Covid-19 pandemic was at a moderate level during synchronous learning sessions, followed by a low level during asynchronous learning. Overall, this study found that the Covid-19 pandemic did not have a significant impact on student engagement in learning Arabic. Nevertheless, authorities are advised to take the initiative to diversify learning activities to increase students' engagement in learning Arabic, both synchronously and asynchronously. This will indirectly contribute to higher achievements in Arabic and the production of excellent and authoritative Arabic language graduates.

Keywords: Engagement, Arabic, Online Learning, Pandemic, University Student

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, which struck Malaysia in March 2020, has had a dual impact on Malaysian society. With the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring it a pandemic and a sudden surge in cases, Malaysia implemented the Movement Control Order (MCO) and adopted new norms in community life to curb the epidemic's spread (Abdalqader et al., 2020; Nor Aidawati Abdillah & Mazidah Musa, 2021). The MCO imposed strict measures, including movement restrictions and bans on mass gatherings nationwide. It also resulted in the

closure of places of worship and most business premises, except for supermarkets and essential shops.

In addition, this pandemic has directly impacted the Malaysian education system. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education decided to close higher education institutions in response to the rapid spread of the epidemic. Students have been instructed to stay in their respective residences to avoid infection. Nevertheless, online study sessions are ongoing, providing students with the opportunity to participate in learning sessions without constraints on space and time (Rohani 2021).

Given the technological advancements in the country, Zahiah and Abdul Razaq (2010), state that internet technology can enhance learning abilities and provide opportunities for teaching and learning activities in various ways. According to Gonzalez et al. (2020), the pandemic situation has had a positive impact on the enrichment of online learning. This indicates that higher education students can still have a conducive learning environment even when studying from their residences, allowing them to continue their Arabic learning.

Literature Review

Engagement is a crucial factor for educators in various fields. The term "engagement" in the context of learning is frequently mistaken for other concepts like motivation and participation, which are often assessed based on observable student actions. In contrast, engagement takes into account factors in learning that may not be immediately apparent to teachers. Regarding language acquisition, students should be assigned tasks that can boost their level of involvement (Stroud, 2014). This underscores the idea that the learning environment, created by various stakeholders, significantly influences students' engagement in the learning process, whether they are inside or outside their place of study.

Nevertheless, the environment alone is insufficient for a person to learn Arabic effectively. It requires additional elements, such as an individual's commitment and personal interest in the subject (Philp & Duchesne, 2016). Achieving language acquisition is not solely dependent on the number of available learning environments but also considers the quality of a person's engagement with the language in their daily life (Ellis, 2005; González Fernández & Schmitt, 2015).

Online learning environments can be categorized into three types: synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid. A hybrid learning environment combines both synchronous and asynchronous learning sessions, and the design for these two types of instruction can vary significantly (Perveen, 2016). The primary distinction between these two learning modes is the timing of the learning process (Rigo & Mikuš, 2021). While many studies have explored synchronous and asynchronous media, the learning context, especially for second language learners, has received limited attention (Yang, 2011). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the engagement of university students in learning Arabic during the Covid-19 pandemic, both in synchronous and asynchronous online learning environments.

Synchronous Learning

Synchronous learning occurs in real-time, involving interactions between lecturers and students, even when they are located remotely. The initial attempts at conducting synchronous virtual lectures began in the late 1990s (Power & St-Jacques, 2014). This approach includes video conferencing, teleconferencing, live chat, and live streaming lectures that require real-time participation. Its primary benefits include engaging lectures, dynamic learning experiences, and in-depth instruction (Rigo & Mikuš, 2021).

Following the Malaysian government's announcement of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and the adoption of the new norm, virtual learning methods have become the norm. Digital platforms like Microsoft Teams, Google Meet, and Zoom are utilized as face-to-face interfaces between lecturers and students for conducting lectures and tutorials (Hajjah Rohani, 2021). Additionally, presentations can be conducted digitally via screen sharing (Nor Aidawati Abdillah & Mazidah Musa, 2021). These diverse platforms enable students to experience an atmosphere and learning environment similar to that of in-person lectures.

Even though learning takes place online, students can actively participate in Arabic learning during lectures. Student engagement in lectures includes activities like attending sessions and actively interacting. Student interest in their academic assignments is demonstrated through their behavior, indicating their involvement in the lecture and their willingness to tackle challenging tasks (Nguyen, 2017). Synchronous learning sessions can generate high motivation for continued engagement in activities due to the presence of lecturers and classmates (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

Interaction, on the other hand, is a social aspect that involves collective participation, also known as co-production, where all participants take part. Brown (2015) emphasizes that interaction forms the foundation of second language learning, enabling students to enhance their communicative and social skills. In lectures, the interaction between teachers and students contributes to the smooth and balanced progress of the teaching and learning process. It involves not only active communication by teachers but also active participation by students in the teaching and learning process (Naimah, 2018). According to Perveen (2016), synchronous virtual lectures serve as a platform for lecturers and students to interact and collaborate in real-time. Immediate feedback and answers can assist students in resolving any learning difficulties they encounter.

Furthermore, student-to-student discussions have been recognized as a crucial element of online learning (Ertmer et al., 2007). According to Richardson & Swan (2003), online discussions are among the activities that students consider most advantageous for their learning. This is because discussions offer opportunities for students to actively exchange and share ideas from various learning perspectives (Dunlap, 2005). This view is supported by Cogburn and Levinson (2003), who also contend that students become active participants and co-creators in every activity when online learning is employed.

Asynchronous Learning

Asynchronous learning occurs outside of live lectures and does not happen in real-time. Parsad and Lewis (2008), point out that asynchronous learning is the most commonly utilized method in online learning because it provides students with the flexibility to participate at

their convenience. Murphy et al (2011), also suggest that this form of learning is student-centered.

Asynchronous learning methods encompass self-guided study modules, lecture notes, virtual libraries, recorded video or audio, links to online resources, and online discussion boards. This material can be accessed at the learner's convenience through the institution's Learning Management System (LMS). For instance, Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) uses the Webex platform as its official platform (Rohani, 2021) and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) employs the UKMFolio platform. In asynchronous learning, students primarily learn independently and occasionally interact with teaching staff through social media platforms (Rigo & Mikuš, 2021) like WhatsApp and Telegram. Additionally, instructors can utilize various technology applications in online learning, including Kahoot, Padlet, Quizizz, Google Docs, and Google Forms (Mohammad, 2020).

Furthermore, active participation in activities has a positive impact on grades and skills like critical thinking, as noted by (Ackerman et al., 2003). Encouraging students to engage in asynchronous learning activities can be challenging because the effects of their contributions may not be immediately evident, and students have the freedom to choose the frequency and intensity of their participation (Northey et al., 2015). Nevertheless, studies by Guo (2011) have demonstrated that student participation in activities can extend their language learning beyond lecture sessions by making them aware of opportunities to use a foreign language in their environment. Hence, we observe that online learning centers on the use of media as a teaching and learning tool. However, this does not hinder students from engaging in Arabic learning within the social context and current university activities.

Research Methodology

Study Design and Sample

This study is a quantitative research study that utilizes the cross-sectional survey method. This method involves collecting data using instruments such as questionnaires from a sample of individuals or the entire population (Ahmad Munawar Ismail & Mohd Nor Shahizan Ali, 2019). The population of this study includes 184 students enrolled in Arabic bachelor's degree programs at eight public universities in Malaysia, all of which offer bachelor's degrees in Arabic, namely the International Islamic University of Malaysia (UIAM), Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI) and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM).

The population of this study is restricted to final year students who have completed their first, second, and third years and are potential graduates with a bachelor's degree in Arabic. The selection of final year students at public universities as the study population is based on their maturity and extensive experience in learning Arabic, particularly at the university level. At this stage, they have undergone an extended period of Arabic language education, amounting to at least four years at the university, complemented by their prior experience with Arabic subjects at the school level.

Research Instrument

Student engagement in online Arabic learning is assessed using a questionnaire adapted from Lily Hanefarezan (Asbulah et al., 2020). The questionnaire comprises a total of 14 items, categorized into two sub-constructs: student engagement in lectures and engagement outside of lectures. Some questionnaire items were modified to align with the terminology and context of learning Arabic during the Covid-19 pandemic, specifically in an online learning environment. A 4-point Likert scale was employed to gauge the frequency of students' engagement in Arabic learning, with 1 indicating "not very often" as the lowest level of engagement and 4 representing "very often" as the highest level of engagement. This scale excludes a neutral option to discourage students from selecting a middle-of-the-road response when describing their choices. Retief Lutz & Potgieter (2013) also recommended using a 4-point scale to assess agreement because a neutral scale often leads to difficulties.

Validity of Research Instrument

The study's questionnaire underwent evaluation by a panel of five experts chosen for their expertise in psychometrics, social science, questionnaire design, and Arabic linguistics. Following the expert evaluation, the instrument's content validity was assessed using the Content Validity Ratio (CVR) and the Content Validity Index (CVI). CVR measures the empirical importance of each item in the instrument and aids in determining whether to retain or remove an item (Mohd Effendi @ Ewan Mohd Matore et al., 2017). CVR values typically range from -1 to +1, with a value closer to +1 signifying expert agreement on an item's importance. In this case, all items in the instrument achieved a positive agreement coefficient, demonstrating their representativeness and importance within the construct domain.

The CVI is calculated after determining the CVR value for each item. According to Lynn (1986), an accepted CVI value is >0.80 , considering the average level of agreement among the expert panel. In this case, the CVI value for all items in the questionnaire instrument exceeded the suitable agreement coefficient of 0.80. Consequently, this instrument is deemed capable of assessing the content aspects as evaluated by the expert panel. Nevertheless, the researcher made several improvements to the research instrument based on the recommendations of the expert panel, including: (a) Some items are overly general and require more detailed explanations, and (b) Certain items need to be revised to align with the sub-constructs of the instrument.

Data Collection Process

Before commencing data collection, permission was obtained from the heads of the Arabic language departments at the eight selected public universities. Given that the teaching and learning process was entirely online due to the pandemic, data collection was conducted via online means. Following the receipt of permissions, the questionnaire was distributed in the form of a Google Form through student representatives and department heads to the respondents. Data findings were collected in a Google Form spreadsheet and later transferred to an Excel file. Subsequently, the data was descriptively analyzed using IBM SPSS software version 28.0, employing descriptive statistics to characterize variables through indicators such as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation. Conclusions were then drawn based on numerical data (Darusalam & Hussin, 2016). The interpretation of the mean score levels in this study is in accordance with Oxford (1990), here a mean score of 1.0

to 2.4 indicates a low level, a mean score of 2.5 to 3.4 is considered moderate, and a score of 3.5 to 5.0 is categorized as high.

Results

The research findings from the questionnaire indicate that the overall mean for the 14 engagement items was 2.60, with a standard deviation of 0.82, which is interpreted as a moderate level. This means that none of the items reached a high mean score interpretation level. Specifically, 8 items (57%) fall into the medium interpretation level, while 6 items (43%) are categorized as low. The mean scores for all items range from 1.77 to 3.24. These results suggest that students' engagement in online Arabic learning is at a moderate level, even though they are in their final year of university studies. The data on this engagement was analyzed based on two sub-constructs: student involvement in virtual learning synchronously and asynchronously.

Table 1 presents the mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and interpretation of public university students' engagement in online Arabic learning for the synchronous learning sub-construct, ordered in descending fashion. The results show that 83% of the items are interpreted as medium, while 17% are categorized as low. The three items with the highest mean scores pertain to receptive skills, including "I listen to my lecturer speak entirely in Arabic" (M=3.24, SD=0.68), "I read the Arabic slides displayed by my lecturer" (M=3.23, SD=0.69), and "I search for information on the internet in Arabic during the synchronous learning session" (M=3.18, SD=0.73). Conversely, the three items with the lowest M scores involve productive skills: "I present assignments online in Arabic entirely" (M=2.98, SD=0.87), "I ask questions to my lecturer in Arabic" (M=2.64, SD=0.88), and "I have a group discussion online in Arabic" (M=2.15, SD=0.80).

The findings reveal that during the Covid-19 pandemic, students tend to employ receptive skills, such as listening and reading, more frequently in online synchronous Arabic learning sessions compared to productive skills, particularly speaking. This indicates that students' engagement in synchronous learning demands a high level of concentration and focus. Moreover, students appear to rely heavily on the lecturer's role and the provided teaching materials exclusively during synchronous learning sessions.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation and Engagement Interpretation during Synchronous Learning

Type of Engagement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
I listen to my lecturer speak entirely in Arabic.	3.24	0.68	Moderate
I read the Arabic slides displayed by my lecturer.	3.23	0.69	Moderate
I search for information on the internet in Arabic during the synchronous learning session.	3.18	0.73	Moderate
I present assignments online in Arabic entirely.	2.98	0.87	Moderate
I ask questions to my lecturer in Arabic.	2.64	0.88	Moderate
I have a group discussion online in Arabic.	2.15	0.80	Low

Table 2 shows the mean, standard deviation, and interpretation of public university students' engagement in online Arabic learning for the asynchronous learning sub-construct,

arranged in descending order. The results indicate that only three items (37.5%) reached a medium interpretation level, while the remaining five items (62.5%) fell into the low interpretation category. Items with the higher interpretation include "I watch Arabic videos" (M=2.71, SD=0.76), "I participate in activities organized by the Arabic language association online" (M=2.65, SD=0.87), and "I read Arabic articles" (M=2.51, SD=0.85). In contrast, the five items with low interpretation include "I read Arabic books" (M=2.47, SD=0.84), "I read Arabic advertisement" (M=2.36, SD=0.85), "I interact on social media with lecturer in Arabic" (M=2.26, SD=0.90), "I participate in Arabic language competitions online" (M=2.17, SD=0.97), and the lowest item, "I interact on social media with friends in Arabic" (M=1.88, SD=0.77).

The findings indicate that students have a preference for asynchronous Arabic learning through video consumption. Additionally, they often engage in self-presentation in online activities organized by the Arabic language association. However, they tend to participate less in organized competitions and exhibit limited interaction with both friends and lecturers in Arabic on social media. This suggests that students may feel more at ease learning and practicing Arabic individually rather than in social contexts, potentially due to a lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes during interactions with others.

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation and Engagement Interpretation during Asynchronous Learning.

Type of Engagement	Mean	SD	Interpretation
I watch Arabic videos.	2.71	0.76	Moderate
I participate in activities organized by the Arabic language association online.	2.65	0.87	Moderate
I read Arabic articles.	2.51	0.85	Moderate
I read Arabic books.	2.47	0.84	Low
I read Arabic advertisements.	2.36	0.85	Low
I interacted on social media with lecturer in Arabic.	2.26	0.90	Low
I participated in Arabic language competition online.	2.17	0.97	Low
I interact on social media with friends in Arabic.	1.88	0.77	Low

Discussion

In general, public university students' engagement with Arabic during the Covid-19 pandemic was observed to be at a moderate level. This finding aligns with a study Lily Hanefarezan Asbulah et al (2020), which also reported that students' engagement with the Arabic language prior to the global Covid-19 pandemic was at a moderate level. This suggests that public university students' efforts in engaging with Arabic learning, whether through face-to-face or online methods, remain consistently at a moderate level. Individual desire for continued learning and the interest in applying and practicing what is learned play pivotal roles in determining the learning process (Nor Aidawati Abdillah & Mazidah Musa 2021). Therefore, students with a strong interest in learning exert similar effort in the learning process, regardless of the mode of instruction. However, it is important to note that the level of engagement differs between synchronous and asynchronous learning. The level of student engagement in synchronous Arabic learning is moderate, whereas engagement in asynchronous learning is at a lower level. Further details are discussed below:

Synchronous Learning

At the public university level, students' engagement in synchronous learning predominantly revolves around activities like listening to the lecturer speaking in Arabic and reading the Arabic slides presented by the lecturer. This indicates that public university students tend to rely heavily on the guidance of lecturers during synchronous learning sessions. This observation aligns with the perspective put forth by Murphy et al., (2011) that synchronous learning is more teacher-oriented. In teacher-centered sessions, the teacher maintains full control, often resulting in student passivity and reduced active participation during the learning process (Brophy, 2006). This is supported by Ive Emaliana (2017), who notes that in teacher-centered learning, the teacher becomes the primary source of information, with limited student engagement. Nevertheless, study Nagaraju et al (2013), have highlighted some advantages of teacher-centered learning, such as teachers encouraging students to use the target language for communication in the classroom. This indirect involvement encourages students to speak more in a foreign language. Thus, it can be inferred that lecturers play a significant role in enhancing student engagement in synchronous Arabic learning, even in an online setting.

Conversely, students appear to limit their engagement solely to achieve good exam grades. The study's findings indicate that students engage in information search in Arabic at a moderate level, often as part of assignments provided by the lecturer during synchronous learning sessions. This suggests that students tend to focus on materials or assignments given by the lecturer with the primary aim of obtaining high scores or grades in learning assessments. As noted by Ghazali Yusri et al. (2010) when students associate learning with grades, particularly their cumulative grade point average (CGPA), their learning becomes oriented toward improving their CGPA. This can lead to students lacking the initiative to engage with the Arabic language independently and becoming dependent on the lecturer for guidance.

In the context of online synchronous learning at the university level, students are rarely observed using Arabic in situations that necessitate speaking, such as giving presentations, asking questions, and participating in group discussions in Arabic. These activities are typically included as mandatory tasks provided by lecturers during synchronous learning sessions, highlighting that those lecturers create opportunities for students to actively engage with the Arabic language during the learning process. However, students do not fully exploit these opportunities and the space provided. This finding aligns with the results of a study by Rigo and Mikuš (2021), which indicated that the majority of respondents, approximately 62%, believed that lecturers had offered sufficient opportunities and space for active student involvement in online synchronous learning. In contrast, only 38% of respondents agreed that students made effective use of the provided opportunities and space. This suggests that students tend to avoid active participation in synchronous virtual learning.

Additionally, other factors that hinder students from actively engaging in speaking Arabic are negative emotions, including a lack of confidence, low self-esteem, shyness, and a fear of being ridiculed for making mistakes while speaking. These findings are consistent with the results of studies conducted by Ab. Halim Mohamad (2009), which revealed that the majority of students, around 65.2%, attribute their reluctance to speak in Arabic to self-

doubt. Similar conclusions were drawn by Anuar Sopian (2016), he found that university students have low proficiency in Arabic speaking due to feelings of fear, shyness, and insecurity. As noted by Nadwah and Nadhilah (2014), these negative feelings are often rooted in vocabulary limitations. When students have a limited vocabulary, they struggle to speak fluently, resulting in unclear communication (Gan, 2012). Therefore, it can be inferred that students are hesitant to speak in Arabic during synchronous learning sessions due to a lack of confidence in their language skills and mastery of Arabic.

Asynchronous Learning

During asynchronous learning sessions, students tend to engage in activities like watching videos and reading articles in Arabic. These resources are part of the learning materials available within the Learning Management System (LMS) of each institution and can be accessed at the students' convenience (Perveen, 2016). While these materials are provided by the lecturer, it requires students' initiative to access them and complete the assigned tasks within the course requirements, provided the deadlines are met (Rigo & Mikuš 2021). The results of the study indicate that students' engagement in watching Arabic videos and reading Arabic articles reached a moderate level. This reflects students' commitment to continue learning outside of synchronous sessions with the lecturer.

The study's findings indicate that students' engagement in reading Arabic books is at a low level, typically requiring access to the library. Given the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) during the Covid-19 pandemic, public libraries across Malaysia remain closed. Nevertheless, this obstacle hasn't impeded students' access to reading and reference materials because the National Library of Malaysia and educational institutions have provided digital platforms with free access to e-books and e-journals (Yazid Ibrahim, 2020). However, as noted in the study by Zulfa Fahmy et al (2021), 62% of students prefer reading printed books over digital versions using mobile devices such as smartphones and laptops. Furthermore, study Siti Aisyah Mohamad Zin et al (2021), assert that excessive screen time for studying can adversely affect students' mental, physical, and social well-being, leading to negative feelings towards the learning process. In line with Fazley Fadzil et al. (2020), students may become demotivated and less engaged when studying solely on laptops and in the comfort of their home environment. Consequently, it can be inferred that students may experience fatigue and reduced interest in reading digital books after engaging in synchronous learning and completing assignments online.

While student engagement in online activities is anticipated to hold a special place in students' hearts due to the flexibility that online activities offer - allowing students to participate from any location and at any time - the study's findings present a different picture. Specifically, the level of student engagement in presenting themselves in activities organized by the Arabic Language Association online is moderate, while the level of student participation in online Arabic language competitions is low. Typically, these activities and competitions are oral in nature, involving open debates and interviews, as noted in the study by (Zailani et al., 2018). In such instances, students may experience glossophobia, a form of anxiety associated with public speaking, leading to feelings of nervousness when addressing an audience. Consequently, students may feel as though they are being scrutinized and may lack the self-confidence needed for effective communication (Kamaruddin, 2017). These findings align with studies conducted by (Haizah and Farakhanna, 2022), which emphasize

that student engagement in activities, even online, remains low when students lack enthusiasm for learning and exhibit passive behavior.

In the context of asynchronous learning, the findings reveal a notable lack of social engagement among students, particularly in interactions on social media with both friends and lecturers. As emphasized by Irawan et al (2020), the absence of social interaction represents a challenge for students in the online learning process. However, the study by Lily Hanefarezan Asbulah et al (2020), reveals a distinctive pattern: while students' engagement in speaking with lecturers in Arabic outside of lectures remains at a low level, their interaction with friends in Arabic outside of lectures was high prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. This indicates that the pandemic has indeed impacted students' conversational interactions in Arabic with peers outside of synchronous learning sessions. This shift may be attributed to the students' home environments, which may not encourage Arabic conversation as it occurs in academic settings. Furthermore, the social distancing measures introduced during the pandemic have contributed to feelings of isolation among students (Tea Pavin Ivanec, 2022), resulting in a sense of disconnection from both friends and lecturers (Boling et al., 2012). Consequently, students may feel hesitant to engage with their lecturers outside of synchronous learning sessions.

Conclusion

In summary, this study concludes that the Covid-19 pandemic does not deter public university students from engaging with the Arabic language, provided they maintain a strong interest and desire to learn Arabic. Despite the shift to entirely online learning sessions and activities, students have demonstrated unwavering enthusiasm and a commitment to actively involve themselves in learning the Arabic language. As evidenced by the study's findings, students' engagement with Arabic during the pandemic remains at a moderate level, consistent with the observations made in the study by Lily Hanefarezan Asbulah et al (2020), conducted before the pandemic era.

Nonetheless, it has been observed that students are beginning to experience a loss of focus as they spend prolonged hours in front of screens due to the predominance of online learning, leading to reduced engagement in asynchronous learning. Consequently, this study recommends that educational authorities take proactive steps to diversify online learning activities, thereby enhancing student involvement within public higher education institutions in the pursuit of learning Arabic. This, in turn, will contribute to elevated proficiency in the Arabic language and the development of accomplished and highly proficient Arabic language graduates.

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