Using Media to Enhance Arabic Speaking Skills among Malay Learners

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Abstract

This paper describes a study to investigate strategies to enhance Arabic speaking skills using media conducted on good and poor Malay speakers of Arabic. It highlights the similarities and the differences in terms of the types of media used by both groups of speakers, the activities commonly performed while using the media and the frequency of using the media. Finally the paper suggests some strategies for teachers, schools and universities to use media as a means to develop Arabic speaking skills.

Keywords: speaking skill learning strategies; language learning strategies and second language acquisition; media and language learning; using media in learning Arabic.

1.   Introduction

The rapid development in media technology has created new trends in language learning. Local learners of foreign languages can now enhance their language learning opportunity without having to travel abroad. A wide array of modalities is now available to facilitate FL/L2 learning *in situ*. Besides the ubiquitous internet, there are portable electronic amenities such as CD- and DVD-ROMs, MP3s, i-PODs and nano-PODs, and not forgetting, of course, the awesome new generation of cellular telephones that span the whole gamut of human communicative prowess. These are not merely intermediary communication tools, they provide content as well. The whole synergy and inter-connectedness, the reflexivity and trans-localization, emerging from all this new technological nexus, is mind-boggling; and the possibilities for learning new skills and languages, in new and enhanced ways, are virtually limitless.

The internet, contrary to popular belief, is not entirely dominated by the English language. Quality, and regularly updated websites are available across other languages as well, including French, German and even Arabic. Interaction with native speakers through emails, chatting, or web conferences have been advocated by some scholars (Yuge, 2000, c*f.* Zawawi et al., 2005). The University of Malaya has adopted this approach and has implemented it via a programme called Cu-SeeMe (Zawawi et al. 2005). This programme is meant for first year students of English and Japanese to interact with native speakers in fifteen universities in Asia, United States of America and Europe, through video conferencing. These kinds of activities would help increase the learners' self-confidence in speaking the foreign language, improve their language skills and simultaneously appreciate the values and cultures of the natives.

As for the chatting, "several studies (Beauvois, 1997; Chism, 2004; Lee, 2000) have confirmed that students utilize interactive strategies in electronic chats that promote L2/FL output skills; both oral and written" (Bueno, 2006:9). However Essberger (2001) notes that chatting is not suitable for learning language in its perfect form but is sufficient for casual language learning, because messages are usually short incomplete sentences containing a few words and in most cases are grammatically incorrect. Sometimes people often use abbreviations to save time. To some extent, online chatting can be used for developing writing skills, and it could serve as material for discussing comprehension. Combining resources, including texts, videos and asynchronous use of the internet, according to Malone, Rifkin, Christian & Johnson (2003), helps promote higher levels of oral proficiency (*cf.*Bueno, 2006:9).

Frequent watching of foreign movies or videos can help improve the FL/L2 speaking skill, strengthen the memory and exercise the vocal muscles (Yuge, 2000, *cf.*Zawawi et al., 2005, Essberger 2000, Ernenwein 2002, and Bueno 2006). Bueno (2006) notes that besides being entertained, watching movies forces the learners to speak and learn

grammar. As a result, they feel more confident especially during class discussions. She further elaborates that the strategies that students favor while watching the foreign movies, to process richer inputs from a variety of resources like reading the captions, listening to dialogue, reading text, and repeating isolated segments of the film to take note or to listen and read along with a script, may or may not contribute to developing their speaking skills. To watch effectively, Ernenwein (2002) states that learners should be attentive to words or phrases, pronunciation, and the way the voices rise and fall when questions are asked and statements are made. She further states that "children's shows are great for learning and reviewing basic concepts such as alphabets, counting, object names and more (pp:1)." In addition to movies and videos, learners also could benefit from listening to songs as suggested by Essberger (2000). It is advisable that learners repeat the songs and then try singing it with the music until it becomes automatic.

2. Methods

This was a case study employing individual interviews and focus group interviews to elicit data. The case study mode was chosen because it clearly delineates what is to be studied and what is not to be studied. The study focused on Malay learners only. The parameters involve, on the one hand, a differentiation between Malay learners and the rest, and on the other, between Malay learners who are good Arabic speakers, and Malay learners who are poor speakers of Arabic. If there is no clear differentiation, the discussion might simply turn out to be about the average speaker and the comparison might not be valid. Furthermore, a case study hints at deeper exploration, and offers a thick description of the case being investigated.

2.1 Selection of participants

To guide in the identification of an information-rich sample, the researchers began by listing all essential criteria for the participants before locating a unit matching the list. The first step was to clarify the meaning of 'Malay'. In the study 'Malay learners' refer to Malaysians who have never been abroad. Malay learners of Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, South Thailand, and so forth, were not included in the group. The rationale for limiting Malay learners to Malaysians only is to establish some degree of congruence in the Arabic Language learning background, environment and experience. Malay learners of other countries might receive their Arabic Language education differently from their counterparts in Malaysia. Their distinct Arabic learning experiences could result in different levels of ability in Arabic speaking skill. Furthermore, those who obtained their formal study abroad from the Middle Eastern countries presumably have better Arabic speaking skills, as the consequence of direct exposure and immersion in the environment of indigenous Arab native speakers.

Secondly, the Malay learners were current students of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), comprising year one to year four students. Malay learners from other universities and school children were excluded from the list. Thirdly, the selection of good Arabic speakers among the Malay learners disregarded any Arabic language-based specialization, since the number was small compared with that of the moderate or poor Malay Arabic speakers. . However, the selection was made from the Arabic Language-based specializations such as Arabic Language and Literature, Islamic Revealed Knowledge, and Teaching Arabic for the non Native Speakers. As for the poor Arabic speakers group, the study selected Malay learners from the Arabic Language-based specializations. Fourthly, the researchers applied the Arabic Placement Test (APT) results announced by Centre for Languages and pre Academic Development (CELPAD) of the IIUM to select good and poor Malay speakers of Arabic. Good speakers of Arabic were those who scored band 7 (out of 10) and above. According to the scheme issued by CELPAD, they were described as demonstrating high proficiency and fluency while speaking. They were also able to express their thoughts very clearly and orderly, commit no or very few mistakes in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. The poor Malay speakers of Arabic included those who scored band 4.5 (out of 10) and below. They were characterized as being unable to express or convey their thoughts clearly, made many mistakes in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. In general, their communicative interaction was very difficult. Their lack of proficiency was usually characterized as being totally clueless and not able to communicate in the Arabic Language at all.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

As mentioned earlier, the researchers conducted individual interviews and focus group interviews to collect the data. For the individual interviews, the researchers interviewed six participants. Three of them were good Malay speakers of Arabic, and the other three were poor Malay speakers of Arabic. As for the focus group interviews, the researcher conducted two focus group interviews consisting of four participants each. The total number of participants involved in this study was 14. The interviews conducted were semi-structured. The questions that formed the main body of

the interview required the participants to report on the strategies performed in the classroom to develop Arabic speaking skills. The individual interviews were audio-recorded while the focus group interviews were audio- and video-recorded. The data collected were then transcribed verbatim into texts and coded manually to elicit the main ideas and themes. The researcher began the analysis of the data by using the transcriptions of the verbal information from the interviews recorded as the body of material for content analysis. The main ideas were then transferred into the coding template to be coded and assigned themes.

2.3 Validation strategies

For this study, the researchers engaged four validation strategies; a) multiple methods triangulation strategy, b) member checking, c) peer examination, and d) rich description of the findings. Such amount is considered sufficient as Creswell (2000) recommends that researchers engage in at least two of those validation strategies. After the data analysis, the researchers proceeded with the member checking procedure, whereby they took the tentative results back to the participants, asking for their reviews, to check if the main ideas and themes emerged corresponded to what they have said during the interviews. The necessary correction was made after the exercise. The study proceeded with a peer examination procedure whereby they sought help from two colleagues who were well-experienced in teaching the Arabic Language, including the language skills to recheck and provide comments on the main ideas and themes that emerged.

3. Results

*Note: From this part onwards the good speakers of Arabic will be labeled as **MGAS** and the poor speakers of Arabic will be labeled **MPAS**.*

3.1 Types of media

The media used by MGAS and MPAS can be classified into electronic and printed. Electronic media include the internet, television, educational software like Arabic compact disks and radio, while printed media include books, magazines, newspapers and so on. Both MGAS and MPAS were more interested in the electronic media especially internet than other types of media. It is because the internet is easily accessible campus wide, cheap, provides wide coverage of educational resources and provides a more entertaining learning experience than other resources, as it has pictures, sounds, and a variety of options, and it is user friendly. Simultaneously the language used is usually much simpler and easier to understand than print media. According to the participants, reading prints requires more time spent on the dictionary to find meanings of difficult words, thus leaving them unmotivated to continue reading. Most of them favored online Arabic movies, cartoons, lectures, news, songs, video clips, dictionary, translation, forum and many more.

MGAS used media according to their needs in their speaking skill. Those who were looking for formal Arabic language (not colloquial language) or commonly known in Arabic as *fuṣḥa* will normally turn to religious lectures, sermons, forums on various topics such as the Quran, ḥadith and so on, news and classical movies such as the stories of prophets, poets and others. These programmes could be widely found in the internet, video, television or radio. By watching or listening to these programmes participants learned the way native speakers speak their formal language. Simultaneously they were exposed to new vocabulary.

MGAS who were interested to enhance their spontaneity and daily language normally turned to cartoons and video clips as their strategies. These programmes could be easily found in the internet. Actually the cartoons were very familiar to everyone as they were the translated version of the famous ones like Doraemon, Detective Conan, and so on. These cartoons were easy to understand because they were translated into formal Arabic or *fuṣḥa* and used simple Arabic, because they were meant for children. Even though they used formal Arabic, the way it was used was suitable for daily conversation. This strategy is highly recommended by Ernenwein (2002) for "learning and reviewing basic concepts such as alphabets, counting, object names and more" (p:1). As described by the participants, video clips showed spontaneous actions and are commonly found on the internet. An MGAS explained that they were similar to those programmes on television like Candid Camera and so on. Watching the video clips exposed the learners to spontaneous language like the sudden expressions by the native speakers especially when they were angry, shocked, sad and so on. These kinds of spontaneous expressions are not taught formally in the classroom but possible to be acquired through these types of programmes.

The MPAS were also familiar with the above media except they did not highlight specifically the aspect of speaking skills they wished to develop using the media as did the MGAS. The MPAS did mention that they watched Arabic classical movies, religious sermons and lectures, cartoons and so on to help them with the speaking skills. Sometimes they even shared the same movies and cartoons with the MGAS. The only difference was that they did it for the general purpose of developing speaking skills.

Sometimes the MGAS used programmes like religious lectures, sermons and talks to replace prints especially if the books or materials related to certain religious subjects are hard to find. They were also useful for those who disliked reading and preferred a more entertaining medium of learning. This strategy, however, was not found among the MPAS. According to a female MGAS, learning using these types of media did not only contribute to the development of speaking skills but also other language skills as they involve listening to understand what they are talking about, writing to take important notes and reading to refer to related materials to the topic being learned.

The MGAS and the MPAS whose intention was to increase their collection of vocabulary, mostly used songs, online dictionary and translation as their strategy. There is a variety of songs online, for example, adult songs, children's songs or religious songs or *nasyid*. Children's songs are better to listen to because they use simple language and formal Arabic. Essberger (2000) states that learners are better off to repeat the songs and then try to sing along until it becomes automatic. The MGAS and the MPAS turned to online dictionary and translation to find meanings for new vocabulary and to translate any expression or sentence from other languages into Arabic or the other way around.

3.2 The activities performed while using the media

There were 2 types of activities commonly performed by the MGAS and the MPAS while using the media, namely, simple and extensive activities. Simple activities do not require much effort as the participants do not attempt to record what they are listening to, watching or reading from the media. Normally they use the media for fun. Among the simple activities are imitating the native expressions, repeating the expressions, memorizing the expressions or vocabulary and just watching. In contrast, extensive activities continue even after the participants have finished using the media. They normally record what they were listening to, watching or reading, and refer to the dictionary or anyone to obtain explanations about new or difficult things found in the media. Sometimes they even apply it in their conversations.

The findings showed that the MGAS and the MPAS performed simple activities more than extensive activities. However the MGAS performed extensive activities more than the MPAS did. The media especially those with sound effects exposed the learners with nice expressions and new vocabulary and learners were reportedly interested to spot them and tried to imitate the way they were pronounced. An advantage of performing this activity is learning the correct pronunciation and the correct way to express themselves. These strategies were similar to those recommended by Ernenwein (2002) who states that learners should be attentive to words or phrases, pronunciation, and the way the voices rise and fall when questions are asked and statements are made. Some MGAS attempted to memorize those expressions and applied them in speaking. An MPAS stated that she was always attracted to nice introduction of speech every time she reads or listens to the media. She stressed that the introduction is very important to construct essays or start a presentation acknowledging the worth to be memorized. According to an MGAS he is eager to apply immediately any attractive expression heard from the media in his speaking. This strategy is effective for those who disliked memorization.

Those who did not prefer to perform follow up activities such as referring to the dictionary or lecturers after using the media can repeat several times the non-comprehensible words heard from the media to help them assume the meanings. This was frequently performed by an MGAS who said that such activity has saved a lot of her time and has helped her to enjoy the media. Some participants preferred to just watch the media. According to an MGAS being attentive is important for her to understand what she is listening or watching. If necessary she would follow up after she has finished using the media. No difference was found among the MPAS as they also preferred to merely watch the media they were using, and they refused to do the follow up activities even though there were parts that demanded explanations.

3.3 The frequency of using the media

The MGAS used the media frequently. Some of them even allocated specific periods of time for the sake of these media. An MGAS narrated that during his early years at the IIUM he allocated about 2-3 hours a day and 4 times a week to read Arabic books in the library. Presently he replaced reading with a software called *Maktabah Shamilah,* which is a collection of those books, and reads them at the hostel. Some MGAS continued using these media during semester break to avoid losing the fluency. Another MGAS said that he always uses the internet at home during semester break to keep in touch with the Arabic Language. He normally watched classical Arabic movies to listen to formal Arabic and watched video clips to learn spontaneous and informal Arabic. At the hostel, a female MGAS said that she listened to children's songs everyday to create the environment. In contrast the MPAS rarely used the media

except for one of them. She used the media approximately 3 times a week especially during her free time or in the evening. The rest used them once a week or in the early semester only.

4. Discussion

The findings showed that media are highly useful to develop L2/FL speaking skills. More importantly learners can use different types of media to develop different aspects of the speaking skills. As mentioned earlier learners turned to Arabic classical movies, religious sermons and lectures to help them with the formal Arabic language. As for the spontaneous and colloquial Arabic language, they turned to cartoons and video clips. Sometimes learners did not use the media purposely for the speaking skills, but listening to the media affected the development of Arabic speaking skills indirectly.

Both groups of speakers were aware of the media available and they shared similar media to develop Arabic speaking skills. However it was noticed that the MGAS showed an ability to specify exactly which aspect of speaking skills they want to develop. They also showed an ability to match the right media with the aspect concerned. In other words they knew what they want and how they should go about it. This ability was not found among the MPAS. They did not highlight any aspect of concern as did the MGAS, but used the media for the general purpose of speaking skills. The MGAS also showed some positive attitudes towards using media. They showed high discipline, determination and consistency in using the media. This confirms Ellis' (1994:555) findings that "successful learners appear to use learning strategies more frequently and in qualitatively different ways than learners who are less successful."

The author believes that high interest to become good speakers of Arabic has motivated the MGAS to be more serious in their effort than the MPAS. As a result they gained good Arabic speaking skills. When they realized that they were able to speak Arabic better than before, they became more enthusiastic with their new speaking ability thus elevating more positive attitudes towards developing Arabic speaking skills. As for the MPAS, they might have the same interest to become good speakers of Arabic as did the MGAS. However, the author believes that they were unsure as to how to go about it. That was why they did not demonstrate positive attitudes and did not exhibit seriousness in using the media as much as did the MGAS.

5. Conclusion

Media can be considered an effective means to develop L2/FL speaking skills. It can increase the collection of new vocabulary, teach formal and informal expressions, teach correct pronunciation and improve spontaneity. Learners should be able to identify the relevant media for different aspects of the speaking skills they wish to develop and show seriousness in using the media. Otherwise media cannot contribute much to the development of the speaking skills.

6. Suggestions for teachers and lecturers

Every learner deserves the right to become a good speaker of Arabic. However, not everyone knows how to go about it. Then comes the role of teachers and lecturers to teach the learners how to use media effectively to help them with their speaking skills. Students specializing in the Arabic language should be exposed to the potential of the media to develop their Arabic speaking skills, especially the internet, because it is accessible to almost everyone.

1) Poor and standard level speakers should be introduced to useful websites that can improve their language such as websites offering the learning of grammar and vocabulary as well as speaking skills, such as cartoons, classical movies, lectures, talks, news or forums that use formal Arabic. Programmes like video clips that offer the learning of impromptu speeches should be available to those who have reached the advanced level to enhance their fluency and proficiency.

2) To make it even more effective teachers or lecturers could design assignments using these media with commensurate evaluation. By knowing that they would not be evaluated, the learners tend to use these media just for fun.

3) Since there are a lot of complaints about time constraint, teachers can combine class participation, presentation and the use of media together. Besides saving some time, the use of the media can be observed.

    a. Example 1: Teachers or lecturers can use cartoons or classical movies that use formal Arabic in the language laboratory and ask the learners to complete the dialogue spontaneously. By this way learners are not only trained to be courageous to speak spontaneously but they also learn to be creative and critical to complete the stories.

    b. Example 2: Teachers and lecturers can also use children's songs in the class or laboratory and let the learners present spontaneously what they have understood from the songs.

    c. Example 3: Teachers and lecturers can also use movies, songs, cartoons and so on, and let the learners ask questions and answer them all among themselves. The role of teachers and lecturers are only as observers who will correct the language and solve any problem arising.

d.   Example 4: Teachers and lecturers can also use Malay or English songs, movies, news, and so on and let the learners translate into the Arabic language spontaneously.

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