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Reconstruction of Student's Arabic Language Proficiency through the International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Zainal Abidin (UNISZA) Malaysia

إعادة بناء كفاءة الطلاب في اللغة العربية من خلال برنامج التبادل الطلابي الدولي في جامعة زين العابدين (UNISZA) ماليزيا

Abstract:

Purpose, This study aims to discuss the reconstruction of student's Arabic language proficiency through the International Student Exchange program at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNISZA), Malaysia, using Albert Bandura's social learning theory approach. This program allows students to learn directly in a supportive Arabic-speaking environment.

Design/methodology/approach,

With qualitative research and a phenomenological approach, the data was organized to describe the development of Arabic language proficiency in student experience through observation of the class program and social interactions, in-depth interviews, and documenting activities. The data was analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and validated through data source, theory, and method triangulation.

Findings/result, The research findings indicate that the International Student Exchange program at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNISZA) Malaysia is an effective means of enhancing student's Arabic language skills through the creation of a (bi'ah lughawiyah) or Arabic language environment that allows students to observe, understand, and practice Arabic directly. This process unfolds through stages of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, supported by the presence of native speakers as factual learning models.

Originality/value, This study links Bandura's social learning theory with student's practical experiences in the student exchange program at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNISZA), which has yet to be extensively discussed in previous literature.

Paper type, Research paper

Keywords: Language Skill's Reconstruction, Arabic Language Proficiency, International Student Exchange

Introduction:

With its rich literary heritage and long history, Arabic holds a unique and significant position among the world's major languages. Its historical importance can be compared to

other great languages such as Greek,⁵ Latin, English, French, Spanish, and Russian. (Chejne 1965, 447) This uniqueness is not only due to the large number of speakers, particularly in countries like Egypt, which has the highest number of speakers, reaching 82.4 million out of a total population of 116.5 million, showcasing the widespread influence of the Arabic language. In Asia, countries like Saudi Arabia have more than 27 million speakers out of a total population of 33.9 million. (World Population Review 2024) The Arabic language also⁶ plays a crucial role in the history and society of Arab Muslims, deserving our utmost respect and appreciation. Despite the social unrest and political fragmentation within the Arab world, the Arabic language has undergone a remarkable resurgence, rekindling the core elements of classical Arabic throughout Arabic-speaking nations.

The essence of the Arabic language includes a system of vocal notation, meaning that Arabic is designed to assist in pronouncing the Qur'an. (Shah 2008, 267) In addition, from the perspective of grammatical scholarship, which is often associated with Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali from Basrah as the pioneer of Arabic grammar (Salman al-Jaburi 2002, 261), the grammar of the Arabic language consists of a complex morphology, tenses that are not limited to a specific time, a verb system that accurately shows gender and number, and richness in the use of synonyms.

The¹² historical development of the Arabic language and the context of lexical morphology above indirectly emphasize that Arabic functions not only¹⁴ as a means of communication but also as a symbol of cultural, religious, and intellectual heritage. As an invaluable legacy, Indonesian and Islamic educational institutions place significant importance on the Arabic language because Arabic is born from the exclusive perception (even belief) of Muslims. (Yahya, Mahmudah, and Rochma 2021, 87)

The primary motivation for learning the Arabic-Islamic language is based mainly on religious reasons. It aligns with the opinion of Qodi Abu Bakar al-'Arabi, who called for prioritizing Arabic language lessons before other subjects, after which one should proceed to study the Qur'an. Ibn Khaldun also agreed with this view, arguing that if children start learning the Qur'an, they will read what they do not understand, which he considered negligence. (Athiyah al-Abrasyi 1969, 108)

The importance of developing skills in the Arabic language has led Islamic institutions to offer various programs. Among them is UMSIDA (Muhammadiyah University of Sidoarjo) through its International Student Exchange program at Universiti Zainal Abidin (UNISZA) Malaysia. Students are exposed to different cultures and lifestyles, and this student exchange program offers excellent benefits for participants, providing the opportunity to study at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, one of the leading universities in Malaysia, known for its educational quality and innovative approaches to teaching and research. (Fakultas Agama Islam 2024)

Related to student exchange, Yang Xie and Wong (Yang, Xie, and Wong 2021, 86), through the use of the experimental learning cycle theory, explore the experiences of students in student exchange programs. The results show that challenges students face, such as cultural adaptation, benefit the design of teaching programs, management, and preparation for studying abroad. It is reinforced through the research by Sofa and Rahmaini, (Sofa and Rahmaini 2024, 46) who highlight that an Arabic-speaking environment improves vocabulary comprehension and listening skills. This improvement is facilitated through social interactions, which include conversation practice, speaking exercises like presentations and speeches, and Arabic-language advertising broadcasts.

Another study by Noor et al. (Noor et al. 2023, 518) states that the student exchange program is designed to enhance student's motivation and interest in learning Arabic more deeply by introducing them to Arab culture. By combining traditional and modern teaching methods, participants immensely enjoyed the student exchange program, especially when they answered questions through a quiz game at the end of the session. Furthermore, the student exchange program allowed participants to build their confidence in communicating in Arabic, with the challenge of speaking only in that language throughout the activities.

In line with Albert Bandura's social learning theory, implementing Arabic language learning prioritizes listening skills (*maharah istima'*) and ¹ speaking skills (*maharah kalam*) before introducing other skills. Active and continuous practice in using Arabic and creating an Arabic language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*) facilitates language practice. This approach leverages accessible learning media for students and enables interaction with native speakers. (Hijriyah et al. 2024, 634) In addition, a person's mastery of language skills is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of vocabulary they possess. It means that a broader vocabulary increases the chances of achieving language mastery. (Lestari and Kamalia 2024, 214)

Based on the context of social learning theory, Albert Bandura offers several concepts, including learning through direct experience, learning through modelling, and observational learning, which consists of ² attentional processes, retention processes, motoric reproduction processes, and reinforcement and motivational processes. (Bandura 1971, 6–11) Albert Bandura's social learning theory also aligns with the findings of Anwar and Rakhmaniah, who state that one of the effective strategies in Arabic language learning is

using the direct method through a communicative approach. (Anwar and Rakhmaniah 2024, 14)

Based on previous studies, the researcher assumes that the international student exchange program at UNISZA Malaysia, particularly in the reconstruction of Arabic language proficiency, can provide general benefits such as cultural adaptation, global insight development, and cross-cultural skills through a focus on specific aspects like the enhancement of Arabic language abilities. Moreover, the context of Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNISZA) as an institution known for integrating Islamic and modern education has yet to be extensively discussed concerning its contribution to improving student's Arabic proficiency. Therefore, this study aims to fill that gap by exploring student's experiences participating in the exchange program at UNISZA, particularly in enhancing their Arabic language competence.

Method:

This research is qualitative, generally naturalistic, and focuses on non-numeric data, thereby supporting the exploration of in-depth meanings of the International Student Exchange program at Universiti Zainal Abidin (UNISZA), Malaysia. (Nassaji 2020, 428) Meanwhile, the researcher has chosen the phenomenological approach as the analytical framework to capture the subjective experiences of participants in the student exchange program, and their profound perceptions and contextual insights. The phenomenological approach is a research design rooted in philosophy and psychology, where researchers describe human life experiences related to a particular phenomenon. (Creswell 2014, 18–19) The researcher views that the foundation for developing phenomenological research lies

in understanding the meaning of epoche, which entails suspending preconceived notions and prior knowledge of the researcher about the participant's experiences. (Yusanto 2020, 10) In phenomenological research, there are at least two key aspects that form the primary focus: textural description (the "what" of the phenomenon as it appears) and structural description (how the phenomenon is experienced). (Moustakas 2009, 68)

The phenomenological approach, specifically through the framework of Epoche, serves as a means to mitigate research bias stemming from personal assumptions. In this approach, the researcher 'suspends' and 'ignores' personal judgments about the learning subject at UNISZA Malaysia, even though the researcher actively participates in the program. The goal is to explore the 'what' and 'how' of the feelings, perceptions, and experiences of participants as they engage in an Arabic-speaking environment at UNISZA Malaysia. This method provides deep insights into social interactions, classroom learning, and cultural engagement, ultimately offering a comprehensive perspective on the program's impact on Arabic language learning.

The population of this study consisted of students from the Arabic Language Education (PBA) program, specifically from the 2019 to 2024 cohorts. Participants were selected based on specific criteria, including involvement in the International Student Exchange program. Of 24 students who met these criteria, 12 agreed to participate as research respondents. The researcher observed classroom activities and social interactions, conducted in-depth interviews with the 12 student exchange participants, and documented the activities. It was then analyzed using the single data analysis technique of ¹³ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). (Larkin and Thompson 2012, 104–12) To ensure the data's

validity, the research employed ³ Norman K. Denzin's theory through three stages: data source triangulation, theory triangulation, and method triangulation (Given 2008, 893)

Results:

The student exchange program between ⁴ Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo (UMSIDA) and Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNIZSA) in Malaysia has been a regular activity since 2019. Initially, the program included only three students from each university. However, it was temporarily suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. Despite this setback, the exchange program resumed in 2021 on a larger scale, involving 15 students from the ⁹ Islamic Education (PAI) and Arabic Language Education (PBA) programs. In 2022, the program sent seven students. In 2023, participants increased to 12 students from various study programs, including Arabic Language Education, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Teacher Education, Islamic Banking, Islamic Education, and Islamic Education Management. (UMSIDA 2023)

As of 2024, the program continues, with 11 students participating in the Islamic Education and Arabic Language Education programs. (@umsida1912 2024) This program demonstrates significant growth and reflects the commitment of both universities to enhance the quality of education and broaden the international perspectives of their students.

Students generally participate in face-to-face (offline) learning at UNISZA for one semester during the program. However, some preparatory programs were conducted online to prepare students before departure. This program not only provides a cross-cultural academic experience but also serves as a platform for students to broaden their horizons and build an international network.

This program positively impacts the participants as it provides a unique experience in improving students' Arabic skills through well-directed learning programs. As stated by one of the respondents as follows:

“Making Arabic the medium of instruction, bringing in lecturers from Eastern countries (Native Speakers), conducting frequent practice, and providing regular assessments made me feel that the learning process at UNISZA is more effective and of higher quality, as it helps increase my interest in studying.” (Amelia 2024)

The experience gained by participants in the student exchange program can indirectly be social learning related to ⁸Albert Bandura's theory. In the ⁸framework of social learning theory, Albert Bandura proposed several concepts, including learning through direct experience, learning by imitating a model, and learning through observation. Observational learning involves several stages, namely ²the attentional process, the retention process, the motoric reproduction process, and the reinforcement and motivational processes. (Bandura 1971, 6–11)

Albert Bandura is a psychologist known for developing social learning theory. He established the foundation for a cognitive learning system that facilitates the learning process through modeling or observation. (Khushk et al. 2023, 41) This learning concept can be further illustrated through the findings from the following interview results:

“My experience participating in the international student exchange program allowed us to learn about the culture in Malaysia. We also learned about the academic activities at UNISZA. Additionally, we had the opportunity to meet and share experiences with fellow students at UNISZA, particularly regarding research and teaching methods.” (Sifani 2024)

In addition to students participating in the exchange program being adaptive to the learning culture, this program also offers students the chance to enhance their Arabic language skills:

"This program can affect my Arabic language skills because it forces me to review vocabulary (*mufrodat*), expressions (*uslub*), grammar (*nahwu*), and other aspects that I last studied a long time ago." (Chafiid Dhuha 2024)

The enhancement of this skill is influenced by the encouragement that arises from stimulus-response interactions in situations where students use Arabic:

"Previously, during my studies in Indonesia, I rarely studied because most of the exams and materials were available online, making it easy to access and review. However, when I was at UNISZA, the pressure of sudden questions and exams conducted offline 'forced' me to study in any way possible so as not to embarrass my home campus. This pressure made me frequently train my abilities and improve myself... The language of instruction, the sudden questions from UNISZA lecturers using Arabic, which had to be answered in Arabic, and group assignments mixed with UNISZA students (Indonesian students were not placed in the same group but scattered)." (Cahyarani 2024)



Figure 1. The interactive learning where student exchange participants are not placed in one group
Source: The learning documentation for the International Student Exchange Program 2023-2024 at UNISZA.

Meanwhile, in the context of modeling, students can communicate directly with native speakers:

"The Arabic language program was excellent, supported by various authentic Arabic-language books and seminar programs. It stands out because the educators are native speakers, specifically scholars (*Masyayikh*) from Egypt, Sudan, and other countries. Despite my limited prior knowledge of the language, I felt motivated to enhance my skills in both speaking and writing, particularly to comprehend the content of the books we were studying." (Chafiid Dhuha 2024)

The International Student Exchange Program between Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo (UMSIDA) and Universiti Zainal Abidin (UNISZA) in Malaysia is a collaborative initiative that has been implemented five times. This program has facilitated the

participation of several students from the Faculty of Islamic Religion at UMSIDA, utilizing both offline and online learning methods with varying durations. (UMSIDA 2023)

In addition to attending academic programs, students are provided with cultural experiences that enhance their Arabic language learning. These experiences include an Arabic language reinforcement course titled “Ana Tobbakh Arabi,” visits to the Balai Cerap led by Prof. Madya Dr. Roslan Bin Umar, and trips to historical and religious sites such as mosques, churches, and temples. Students also participate in counseling sessions at the Nuur Counselling & Training Centre. (UMSIDA 2023)

Discussions:

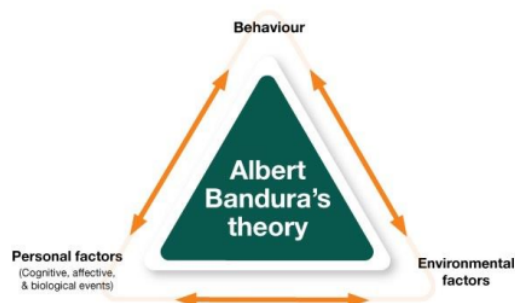
Albert Bandura stated that three systems control learner’s behavior, including stimulus before response, significantly influencing the timing and type of response. Response Feedback Influences, where after a behavior occurs, reinforcement gained through experience or observation will affect the likelihood of future behavior; and cognitive functions, which emphasize the importance of the thinking process in social learning. (Fadul 2015, 99)

The student exchange program allows students to not only enhance their Arabic language skills theoretically but also to integrate their learning with practical experiences in both academic and cultural contexts. By engaging in direct learning, students can develop new, more complex behavior patterns by personally experiencing actions and evaluating their consequences. (Siregar and Karmiyati 2024, 7) While Albert Bandura studied

aggressive behavior through the Bobo Doll experiment, in the context of Arabic language learning within the UNISZA student exchange program, students visit learning locations, gain new experiences, and practice the language with native speakers. This environment also indirectly supports the concept of modeling in learning. In relation to modeling learning, Albert Bandura stated:

“if children had no opportunity to hear speech, for example, it would be virtually impossible to teach them the linguistic skills that constitute a language. it is doubtful that one could ever shape intricate individual words, let alone grammatical speech, by differential reinforcement of random vocalizations”.(Bandura 1971, 5)

Thus, language learning with support from native speakers as primary speakers indirectly provides input to students regarding their mastery of specific vocabulary. Social Learning Theory states that social factors influence a person's personality. The three interconnected themes in social learning theory, known as self-efficacy, are environment, personality, and behavior. (Bandura 1997, 193) The image below illustrates how behavior, environment, and personality factors are interconnected and influence an individual's behavior.



Source: Adapted from the article titled "Self-Efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change", (Bandura 1977, 193)

The figure illustrates that humans are influenced by their social environment and tend to choose the dominant environment. If they are exposed to negative behavior, there is a possibility that they will imitate that behavior and vice versa. (Ghazali and Ghani 2018,

774) Learning Arabic through the student exchange program with the support of native speakers aligns with the Self-Efficacy Theory. A supportive environment, strong personal beliefs, and active behavior in imitating and practicing Arabic will enhance student's confidence and language skills.

In social learning theory, the influence of modeling produces learning primarily through its informational function, and the observer acquires a symbolic representation of the stimulus-response activity. (Bandura 1971, 6) Modeling in observational learning appears in various forms, including observational learning based on models in an individual's environment. In contemporary society, attitudes, values, ways of thinking, and behaviors are adopted from modeling that permeates symbolically through the environment. (Bandura 2008, 2)

Based on the concept explained by Bandura, learning through observation can support language mastery through several mechanisms, such as the attention process. The student exchange program creates an Arabic language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*). Students can observe native speakers (from Egypt, Sudan, and others) fluent in Arabic. Indirectly, this process creates a situation that attracts the students' attention so that they focus on the language input being delivered.

In the retention process, students repeatedly practice vocabulary, expressions, grammar, and more to internalize language patterns, vocabulary, and sentence structures. The retention process arises from students' intrinsic motivation to balance their skills in a learning environment that uses Arabic as the medium of instruction (*maharatul istima'*). Indirectly, listening to stories, dialogues, or everyday conversations in Arabic will help students remember and understand the language model they observe.

Furthermore, after obtaining information through observation and retention, students need to practice speaking skills (maharatul kalam) by engaging in dialogues or responding to questions from the instructor in Arabic. This condition creates a language environment that provides opportunities for students to reproduce the language they have learned through reproduction (behavioral production).

Correspondingly, students will be motivated through important roles where they are encouraged to practice the language they have learned. Therefore, through student exchange programs, the Arabic language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*) can create rich exposure and support the learning process through observation. In other words, students can learn the language in a real-life context.

Overall, the observational learning theory proposed by Albert Bandura becomes an important foundation in understanding the process of learning Arabic through the student exchange program, specifically by creating a *bi'ah lughawiyah* or Arabic-speaking environment as a tangible and relevant learning medium. Through the stages of attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation explained in Bandura's theory, students can observe, understand, practice, and be motivated to use Arabic actively. Additionally, the presence of native speakers as learning models provides ample opportunities for students to develop their Arabic language skills. Therefore, the combination of social learning theory and direct experience in this program not only enhances students' language skills but also builds their confidence in communication.

Conclusion:

The International Student Exchange Program at Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNISZA) in Malaysia offers a valuable opportunity for students to learn Arabic through direct interaction in an immersive language environment. This program is grounded in ¹⁰ Albert Bandura's social learning theory, which suggests that students acquire knowledge by observing, understanding, and practicing the language in real-world contexts. The axiological value of this program is significant, as it not only enhances student's linguistic skills but also builds their self-confidence in communication. Additionally, it enriches their understanding of various cultures and promotes cross-cultural perspectives. From an ontological perspective, this program demonstrates that learning Arabic occurs within a vital social and cultural context. By directly engaging with native speakers, students gain a deeper appreciation of the Arabic language and culture, making their learning experience relevant and meaningful.

The implication of Finding/ Result:

This study enhances understanding of Arabic proficiency development through a social learning approach in the International Student Exchange program.

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