

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO GIFTED AND TALENTED STUDENTS USING TABLETS

Abdel Rahman Ibrahim
abdelrahman@usim.edu.my
PERMATA Insan College

Nik Mohd Rahimi Nik Yusoff
nik@ukm.edu.my
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Zulkarnin bin Zakaria
zulkarnin@usim.edu.my
PERMATA Insan College

Ahmad Bazli bin Ahmad Hilmi
ahmadbazli@usim.edu.my
PERMATA Insan College

Mahiz bin Spawi
mahiz@usim.edu.my
PERMATA Insan College

Abstract

PERMATA Insan College is a gifted and talented education institution in Islamic Science University of Malaysia. It places the importance of English and Arabic across its curriculum as the main medium of instruction. In the effort to enhance students' language performance, the college implements language teaching and learning with the aid of tablet. This study aims to find out of the effectiveness of language learning among the gifted and talented students of PERMATA Insan College who use smart devices and tablets as the main tool in the classroom. Interviews were conducted among six students with highest and lowest academic achievement in both English and Arabic language. Students' responses were later analysed by identifying commonalities and differences among students, and then these responses were coded and identified by its main themes. Results showed that there were differences between students' perspectives on the use of mobile learning devices to learn English and Arabic in three main themes. The first group believed that mobile learning was an excellent strategy and the best way to learn both languages. Meanwhile, the second group believed that mobile learning was good but still required face to face learning with the language teachers. Finally, the third group believed that mobile learning was not suitable for learning languages as they prefer the traditional language classroom with daily face to face practice.

Keywords: language learning, mobile device, gifted and talented education.

1. Introduction

Since 2012, the Malaysian Ministry of Education has been trying to raise the educational standard for students through various measures in all levels of education in Malaysian schools. Many new policies and strategies were introduced to get students to be more involved and creative in the teaching and learning process. Teachers underwent various training and workshops to get them to experience new teaching and learning methods and approaches. With the new methods, teachers get the chance to develop their skills and capabilities so that they could transfer the classroom environment to be more conducive and encourage students to improve themselves to a higher level. This implementation of continuous improvement in the education system echoed the idea explained by Yunus et. al. (2013) who stressed the importance of upgrading students at all levels, be it physically, emotionally and intellectually to best suit the current demand and need of our educational system. The continuous improvement in key areas of education would be the key factor that decides the standard and quality of education will always be maintained and improved from time to time.

1.1 International Language as A Medium of Instruction

English and Arabic language are important languages used throughout the education world and both are widely used in the academic courses and programmes in many Islamic countries. In Malaysia, since the introduction of religious schools and institutions, Arabic is used to read and understand the Quran and Sunnah as well as understanding volumes of traditional religious books in Islam. Historically, this country seemed to put its faith on the religious education by sending many bright Muslim students to the centre of Islamic knowledge and heritage in the Middle East. Students were sent abroad to Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and many other middle east nations because these countries were used to be the centre of the world's knowledge. Many graduates who came back from Middle Eastern countries dedicated their life establishing and teaching in many of the traditional religious schools that put emphasis on the memorisation of the holy Quran and established books or *kitab* of Islamic teaching. Today, Arabic is almost like a third language among the Muslims as they learn and practised the Quranic and hadith teaching.

Arabic is also considered one of the important languages in Malaysia, and it could be treated as a second language similar to the English language. It could also be considered as a third language, therefore prompting the government to get native speakers to be part of the teaching team in schools throughout Malaysia. However, the number of proficient Arabic speakers are quite high in Malaysia and it is not difficult to get teachers in Arabic language. In today's curriculum, the Education Ministry of Malaysia has introduced Arabic as a subject in the primary school to enable students to improve the Arabic language in the four main skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In many states in Malaysia, the dual-system national and religious schools are common. Students are having two-school system in which they would go for both national as well religious school daily. In some states, religious study or schooling are being operated by private institutions. There are also formal and informal religious schools where they have different mission and objectives. Some religious schools just focus on the memorisation of Quran and understanding the hadith. Today, the government and private sector

have established religious curriculum that not only cover Islamic subjects but also focus on academic excellence of all their students.

The initial decision made for teaching Arabic language in public schools was based on the decision of the curriculum Central Committee No. 2/96 on 7 November 1996, and it was part of the National Education policy, which believes that education in Malaysia is an on-going process, aimed at a comprehensive and integral development of the potentialities of individual; to prepare a balanced citizen—compatible mentally and physically, spiritually, emotionally, committed to religious faith, obedient to God. With the lofty target, the National Education policy also aim to create a society of the educated Malaysian, with high efficiencies, skills, great moral, equitable sharing of responsibility, and willing to provide every effort to achieve harmony of the family, community and nation.

2. Gifted and Talented Education in Malaysia

As for the gifted and talented education which is relatively new in this country, the academic needs and requirements should be made a priority as the gifted students require a different set of educational settings and policies (VanTassel-Baska, 2005). Since it involves the standard policies across the national educational level, the Ministry of Education has to ensure the schools, teachers and administrators are ready for the changes. There are not many countries that believe there is a need to separate the gifted and talented students and form another group of students who would need different set of academic requirement at all (Mohd Yassin, S. F., 2012). There was no standard model in place when the government decided to embark on this educational path. In 2007, the government embarked on a new initiative called PERMATA Negara programme which was setup to overlook the implementation of this noble academic programme for the gifted and talented children in this country. Experts believe that the educational industry should be able to take advantage of their talent not found in the ordinary students. In gifted education, the importance is placed "where it should be on teachers' sufficient awareness of the gifted students' needs in addition to overcoming the obstacles that affect their progress" (VanTassel-Baska, 2001).

Gifted students have been identified with their special characteristics and they display a differentiated form of capabilities from normal students. This requires a better understanding from the part of the teachers for these students, especially in the language subjects. The curriculum has been designed to enable students to utilise the languages they learn as in Bahasa Malaysia, Arabic and language across the curriculum. PERMATA Insan College which is located Islamic Science University of Malaysia, is built to help the Muslim gifted and talented students to excel in their own choice of subjects and areas of study. All students have been carefully selected through special intelligent tests based on the internationally accepted standard.

The college adopted the blending learning methods in teaching Arabic and English for non-native speakers and at the same time apply the theories of gifted and talented education (Yunus. M., 2013). In order to achieve high level of students' proficiency in Arabic and English language, the curriculum was prepared with such strategies as the theory of brainstorming, Multiple intelligences in learning Arabic and English language to gifted and talented students. The brainstorming technique in language learning simplifies the steps and processes. At the same time, there is no any kind of criticism or evaluation as students are encouraged to take part in group activities and problem-based teaching and learning. Language

learning is supposed to be treated as a therapeutic process because it is an important way of training in creative thinking (Yunus. M., 2013).

3. Background of The Study

It is important to note that the college has been implementing smart device adoption in its language education in accordance to flexible mobile learning strategy. Languages has been taught using iPad and iTunes U. This study specifically tries to determine the impact of the mobile learning strategy in learning both Arabic and English language. Basically, it is part of the differentiated learning approach which is implemented in the college's academic system. The ratio for online and physical classes would range between 30 to 50 per cent depending on the topics and lessons. Students are encouraged to study outside of the classroom and comes to class to present and discuss what they have learned, and practice it under the supervision of teacher through participatory learning (Diezmann, 2001).

Since the device in the classroom approach was considered new, there appeared to be some difficulties of the parts of students in learning the languages using the device (Fadzleen, 2013). The purpose of this study is to find out the problems and difficulties faced by the students in adjusting to the new method of learning language using the applications found in the device's platform. The study investigates the reasons for the problems and discovered the preferred approach they hope to have in the implementation of the mobile learning initiative. As the college aspires to be the leading centre of academic excellence in using 21st century learning, the findings would present significant information that could be used to overcome the obstacles in using applications and device in language learning effort.

4. Literature Review

PERMATA Insan College of Islamic Science University of Malaysia is one of the leading educational institutions that develop gifted and talented students in Malaysia. It was an expansion programme initiated by PERMATA Foundation which deal with Malaysian talented students. For the first programme known as PERMATApintar College in National University of Malaysia (UKM), (Abu Bakar. A., 2010) students at the age of 16 were given compacting and accelerated learning programme that allowed them to sit for international university entry examinations such as SAT and O-Level. Most of the first batch gifted and talented performed well in their test and they managed to get scholarships to study in top universities in the US, UK, Australia and Europe. The students PERMATA Insan programme, which was established in 2010, were roped in at the early age of 8 years old. They were also selected through the two standard intelligent tests known as UKM 1 and 2. To determine their ability and suitability for this PERMATA Insan programme, there were also asked for Islamic inclination tests called USIM 1 and 2. Once accepted into the programme, the students would be given enrichment activities in e-learning form. There would also be assigned tutors to assist them in the four pre-college modules that include personality-building, Arabic, English and Quran and Science. They would also be asked to attend twice-a-year summer camp until they reach the age of 12. In order for them to enter the PERMATA Insan College, students would be tested on Quran memorisation (2 *juzuk*) and a special assessment camp known as *Mukhyyam Al-Abrar* (Md Sallehan. S., 2016).

The college aims to nurture future Muslims geniuses, innovators and qualified leaders to help the world, country and society. They would be the future hope in dealing with issues and problems affecting humanity

as a whole. The philosophy of education in PERMATA Insan College focused on student education, through a larger role in learning, whether through small or large educational groups, according to the theories of teaching gifted students, such as the scientific method to solve problems, multiple intelligences, brainstorming and other educational theories and mental skills, in addition to learning based on solving problems through technology in smart devices and advanced technology (Zakaria.Z.2016), not forgetting laboratory experiments and addition to the scientific research by students in cooperation and partnership with the lecturers, in other hand programs of spirituality and personal and recreational in college, the philosophy of education at the college on the basis of scientific integrity and the emotional and spiritual among students.

4.1. Characteristics of Gifted Students

Special theories of gifted education emerged as an important science but majority of specialists in this field, disagreed on one answer for this questions as who is the talented and what are the characteristics that have to be owned by the student to be gifted and talented, which showed the many definitions that existed such as Gagne (1995) who stated that the talented is proving a distinctive ability to learn and think, efficiency and self-confidence.

Renzulli showed in his research on the talent and talented students that there is a potential ladder which is the talented student owns, and has been arranging these potential in accordance with skills mastered by the student, including creativity and the potential for leadership and excellence in academic fields, and learn faster than others and the ability to rapidly understand and solve the problems, but it focuses on these Characteristics be with him from childhood and even young people (In most of the age stages) (Renzulli & Reis, 2003).

4.2. Mobile Learning Contribution in Teaching Foreign Languages

Once technology is accepted in an area of life, it would normally evolve into many strands of our life. Technology in education has long been considered a catalyst to many great achievements in academic landscape. Many would disagree as they regard technology as nuisance or ‘too-good-to-be true’ idea the business and corporations are trying to sell. Technology obviously has come a long way in education and created a different degree of success in its implementation. The proponents of technology would never admit its shortcomings and continue to use and claim its effectiveness. One thing for sure, we cannot deny the influence of mobile devices in all areas of life—even in education and its many areas. The technology introduced in the classrooms could become obsolete in a short period of time and would never even remembered. Some technologies would work in some fields and may deemed a failure in some. But for teachers of foreign languages, technology could find a place in its classrooms and students (Bachore.2015)’ devices. With the emergence of e-learning, distance learning, blended learning, mobile learning up to the flipped classroom, these technologies and platforms helped the language teachers and students in their quest of teaching and learning a foreign language. They have helped in overcoming language learning difficulties and become the means of early education in language (Zakaria. Z., 2016).

Technology could make students become independent language learners as they discovered the many apps in their device that could help them achieve their language learning goals. Apps such as Duolingo and Memrise present a new dimension in understanding and applying language skills at their pace. Even smart

personal digital assistant such as Siri and Cortina could be a language learning app that would not require much effort or money in it. After all, most of these apps are free and easily available with the mobile devices students purchase.

4.3. Malaysians' Mobile Affection

Malaysians love their gadgets and most of the things that come with it. They enjoy using many apps for social interaction and communication. For students, the world comes in the form of their devices and with it comes the learning opportunity, be it in things they love and languages they want to develop. Current generation of students have been exposed to the technology at a very early age and their familiarisation with apps and devices put them ahead of many of their older siblings or family members (Song, H & Murphy, A. 2013). The need to fully utilise their apps and devices also encourage them to learn language especially English, on their own. Most popular apps and software are in English and improving their skills in this language would clearly put them in a favourable position. Social recognition and respect from others motivate them further and it helps them avoid the fear of making mistakes because they can always practice their English with Siri or any of the language learning apps downloaded from AppStore or PlayStore. After all, you can always “google” it before you use the language. From pronunciation to grammar, many things could help them become their own language teachers (Said, M. & Adham, K., 2013).

Even in Arabic language, one can begin learning the language through smartphones or mobile devices, either using laptops, tablets, even smart devices, which simplify the job in overcoming the problems faced by the students, and this has resulted in the growing number of students who learn through self-learning on smart devices, especially in Arabic language and the holy Quran. Furthermore, the experience of developing the content of education for Arabic language found great acceptance among the international Islamic university students in Malaysia. They have been able to provide lessons and some e-translators and dictionaries and mobile applications for learning Arabic language not only to improve the academic level but to improve effectiveness even up to having fun when they learn Arabic language (Fiham et. al., 2014).

5. Research Methodology

This study utilised a qualitative approach which aimed to analyse the impact of smart tablets to teaching languages to the gifted and talented group of students (Creswell, 2013). The participants were chosen based on purposive sampling method as each individual had been trained to use tablets in their learning process and a part of the gifted and talented. Individual interviews were conducted with six randomly selected students. They had the experience of learning Arabic and English language using tablet and smart devices. As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the interview was to understand the problems and impact of mobile technology and smart devices in their language classes. Students were asked to download and use language learning apps or website of their own choice and discover how it felt to learn Arabic and English language on their own and in their own device. The interview guide was prepared for the students and among them, it contained questions and important information that students were required to share based on their experience with the apps and devices. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Nvivo 10 software. The questions and answers were piloted before being used in the actual interview. Structured questions for the interview were prepared as to help students share all the important information regarding their experience in using the apps to learn the two languages.

6. Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were done in an air-conditioned room and students made themselves comfortable. As mentioned in the proper interview procedure, the whole process of interview managed to provide appropriate privacy. Trust and confidentiality were maintained throughout as the process stressed on the trust earned when interviewing more than one person in a small group. As expected, the respondents were selective in their responses as one or two respondents would decide to keep silent as others chose to speak. The individual interview helped the whole process better as responses were recorded successfully throughout the interview process.

7. Data Analysis

Students were given the choice of doing the interview in either Arabic, English or Malay. Students were given the option as it would determine the accuracy of the information being shared in the language of their choice. The responses were much clearer when they decided to speak in the language of their own preference. Basically the interview could be described as follows:

1. The interviews were held in a nice setting with the students who were selected intentionally from students with high and low achievement in Arabic and English language. There were equal number of male and female participants. Two-days were spent for the whole session and the dates were (21-22 November 2015), and each interview had taken an average of half an hour (30 minutes).
2. The interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy based on the recordings done.
3. The transcription was also checked by a neutral researcher to make sure the interview results were held fixed.
4. It was later coded and all the main ideas identified. From there, main themes were selected and clarified.
5. Finally, the results were analysed and described in the final report.

Based on the steps explained above, the findings are summarised below.

No	Student Code	Language achievement	Students opinion about mobile learning
1.	M1M	low achievement	Disagreed that mobile learning is effective for teaching both languages.
2.	M2A	high achievement	Agreed that mobile learning is suitable for teaching languages.
3.	M3N	low achievement	Agreed that mobile learning is suitable for teaching languages.
4.	M4A	high achievement	Considered the blend of mobile and traditional education to learn Arabic. Preferred face-to-face best.
5.	M5F	high achievement	Considered the blend of mobile and traditional education to learn Arabic. Preferred face-to-face best.
6.	M6H	low achievement	Agreed that mobile learning is suitable for teaching languages.

8. Data Analysis

Hsieh & Shannon (2005) defined qualitative analysis of the data as a personal way in which the person explained and clarified a particular content, and by clarifying and identifying and coding the content, it could later reach the analysis objective of the content.

The students' overall responses in the interviews illustrated the similarities and differences in their responses. This could also be due to their attitudes and tendencies of learning a language. Preferences towards language learning apps on a mobile phone, could also trigger the responses recorded and analysed in the interviews.

9. Results

Arabic and English languages are common languages in the academic programme in Malaysian schools and educational institutions. While English is considered Malaysia's second language, Arabic is a language close to the heart of the majority of Malay Muslims. The familiarity and attitude towards language learning could influence the analysis discussed in the finding. Technology is not an issue for many of the students but their reasons in using and choosing the apps and spending time on it would determine the outcome of such effort. Perhaps they need more encouragement and guidance in the choice of language learning apps as some of them regarded traditional language classroom would suit them more than the availability of such language learning apps. It could also be the influence of time and motivation to embark on the journey of an individual learning experience on their device.

There were some students who believed that mobile learning was the best way to learn Arabic, as mentioned by (M2A\Q5) and (M5F\Q13) and especially writing and speaking skills. They mentioned that mobile learning provides many tools that support the learning process, and (M2A\Q10) focus on possibility of back to different references, both readable and audible. The response made by (M2A\Q3) and (M5F\Q3) confirmed that mobile language learning helped them to know the way of writing and the correct way to pronounce the letter or word, as well as to communicate with native Arabic speakers that would increase the skill of conversation, as (M5F\Q7) said through their responses. The study respondents believed that mobile language learning is the best style to learn Arabic. They preferred the blended learning strategy which is a combination of the traditional and the modern educational technology as (M1M) and (M4A) and (M5F) approved.

The third group of respondents believed that mobile learning was an excellent educational way, but it is not suitable for learning languages in general and Arabic language in particular, because the language need to be communicated directly until they get it. This was mooted as the right and best way by (M1M) and (M4A) and they believed that learning through mobile apps was enough for assignment, self-learning and testing students. They added that learning and teaching shall be made in the traditional way and then the assignment (receiving and sending) ought to be done through modern devices. In addition, respondent (M5F) reiterated the fact that a language teacher must be present in the classroom since the students might want to ask questions on certain topics or lessons. One-way teaching where the teaching materials are available online while teachers encourage students to extract it would bring the class to its traditional root.

Individual learning or self-learning was not a concept acceptable by respondent (M1M\Q11) who argued that students' commitment in language learning should be further enhanced by traditional teaching assisted by current technology.

Among the suggestions on how to improve language learning activity, some students recommended mobile learning language games which help them to acquire language skills in an interesting way, and it stays longer in their memory as mentioned by (M3N\Q12). Some respondents thought that those in charge of teaching the Arabic language through mobile learning should not focus on non-educational applications, such as (M2A\Q15) who claimed that language learning could thrive in a creative input classes in the processing of academic material, such as graphic applications and movie maker and educational presentations that support language practice and assignments, echoed by (m1m \ Q 12) and (m4a' \ Q 12) say.

10. Results Discussion

As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, PERMATA Insan College students were chosen based on their IQ tests and their intelligence level. The tests would usually focus on pure science subjects, such as mathematics, chemistry, physics and biology because the college is an educational institution for gifted and talented students, as these gifted and talented students were usually focus on their tests on scientific subjects and do not focus seriously on social science subjects such as languages. This shows that some students have a relative weakness in the field of languages, so this marks the need to find the best solution on this pressing matter. More effective and modern ways such as mobile technology perhaps would help develop interesting apps in the Arabic and English language. Teachers and management in college should pay attention to the students, since giftedness could mean nothing in the acquisition of language skills. Attitude, interest and motivation would come into play when discussing language learning effort. This paper discussed the initial findings in general. The data would be further analysed to understand the usefulness of language learning approach taken in PERMATA Insan College of Islamic Science University Malaysia. The Ministry of Education of Malaysia could use the finding here as a guide in the adoption of mobile learning as an effective way to help students to study foreign languages easily and effectively with the hope of producing gifted and talented students who are excellent in both STEM and social science subjects.

11. Conclusion

After the completion of the interview procedures and analysis of data, the most important points that were mentioned in the interview and highlighted by the interviewers can be summarised here. Responses could be divided into three sections—approved, mixed and disapproved to learn Arabic and English language through mobile learning. Here are the points of consideration:

1. **Smart Devices:** the supporters confirmed and believed that these smart devices are an important source of learning tool in the field of language, but the mixed group supported the fact that smart devices can be a good learning source, but should be supported through laptops and desktop computers, while final group opposed the use of smart devices to learn Arabic and said that the language has to be learned through direct communication (face to face).

2. **Learning language:** Supporters believed that the smart devices could help in learning language through self-learning and collective learning and communicating via cyberspace, but the mixed group believed that learning a language through mobile learning leads to weak Arabic language because the online contents for Arabic are not extensive enough and lacking. The final group however still hope that smart phones would assist in the teaching of the language, but direct communication with friends is necessary and continuous meetings with teacher are important.
3. **Finding information:** All respondents agreed that the mobile phone was the first step in searching for information but not all steps. Therefore, students need to deal with information through laptops, because it saved time and provided the required information.
4. **Homework:** For this part, all students agreed that the smart devices helped in finishing off homework, and submitted them on time. Students enjoyed the flexibility of sending, sharing and discussing their work and it proved to something enjoyable for them.
5. **Educational communication:** all respondents agreed on the importance of smart devices and tablets in educational or academic communication. It was further boosted by the social media and they believed that it has many benefits. They were also confident that smart devices and tablets in academic communication could accelerate the language learning process but they would still prefer direct communication because language learning experience is more effective through face-to-face communication.

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