

Equipping Undergraduate Students in University of Malaya with Sufficient Arabic Grammar Skills

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Abstract: Putting the blame on Arabic language incapability, as the main reason why most graduates from local universities in Malaysia are not well-versed in the Qur'an and the Hadith, is not a new phenomenon. One of the factors why the graduates are not really Arabic literate is due to insufficient exposure to the language during their undergraduate studies. Most of them are the products of local universities where Arabic is not the full medium of instruction. However, not much has been done so far to rectify this handicap. The same syllabus that has been used for hundreds of years is still in practice. Thus, what the undergraduate students in local universities in Malaysia need now is a revised curriculum. For that purpose, this study discusses the role of Arabic grammar as an instrument for undergraduate students in University of Malaya (UM) to understand Islam in its fuller form. This study also tries to convince these students that there is no better way to improve their Quranic and Prophetic knowledge than through mastering the Arabic grammar itself. Only with that grammar skill, they will be able to accurately and profoundly understand the Qur'an and the Prophetic Hadith. However, the Arabic grammar, that is referred to, is the simplified version popularized by those involved in the Arabic grammar simplification movement. The question is why UM is chosen as the focus of the study. The main reason is that due to the university's standing as Malaysia's premier university, the quality of UM's graduates are always questioned/compared to its status as Malaysia's premier university. Although, other local universities have also been facing with the same dilemma but due to UM's status as Malaysia's premier university, it has always been the focus/benchmark.

Key words: Undergraduate student, grammar, skill, Arabic, Qur'an, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

We have often heard people saying that Arabic is the most difficult language to learn. The Arabic language, especially its grammar is difficult, ask anyone who has tried to learn it. We have also heard that many teachers of Arabic language are very proud to say that Arabic is one of the hardest of all. But is this true? If it is true, then why should this kind of attitude exist?

The researcher absolutely agrees that Arabic language is one of the most difficult languages to learn. In other words, it is true that learning the Arabic language has never been easier. But with the right approach, we can learn the language, especially its grammar much easier and more quickly.

As mentioned earlier, one of the many difficulties in learning Arabic is its grammar which a number of Muslim scholars frequently say that it is not a language where someone can take a couple of years of university level classes and be able to function reasonably well. In fact, Arabic is a language that anyone can use up 4 years of university education and are still not able to communicate on a day to day basis. In Malaysia, many had spent years of Arabic instruction at the university level, along with advanced grammar classes but still find it difficult.

There are a few reasons for the above mentioned phenomena. First of all, the spoken Arabic language is very regional and the dialects are often so different that even native Arabic speakers can have difficulties speaking with other Arabic speakers from different geographical settings.

Second, Arabic is just a very hard language to learn. As a proof, the United States government from time to time categorizes languages on the degree of difficulty for a native speaker of English to gain practical fluency. Category four is regarded as the most difficult. There are four of them; namely, Arabic, Chinese (Mandarin), Korean and Russian. Languages are rated according to their difficulty to learn and Arabic is at the top along with Mandarin. One of the simple reasons is that there are numerous sounds in Arabic that do not exist in English, e.g., *ayn* and *ghayn*.

Third, the language that is taught in most Malaysian universities is the classical form of Arabic, not the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). This is not the way that Arabs speak to each other on a day to day basis. It will certainly help anyone who learns it watch news or documentaries on TV and read religious and academic books but not for anyone to watch movies/dramas or talk shows since it is a long way from how most native Arabs speak. There are many students of Arabic language who have learned Arabic in several institutions of higher learning in Malaysia but their Arabic is almost unintelligible because it is spoken in a scholarly manner that is far removed from day to day local dialect.

A grievance among students of Islamic studies in Malaysia about their difficulties in mastering the Arabic grammar and complaints from others about their lacking in mastering the message of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophetic traditions is not a new issue. The complaints keep coming even until the students finish their first degree programs and take up jobs as Teachers of Islamic Studies (TISs). The problems become worse, especially among the products of local university including those from University of Malaya (UM). One of the main reasons is that they were not adequately exposed to Arabic language during their university days, since the medium of instruction is not fully Arabic, although majority of the references are in Arabic.

Therefore, they are unable to understand neither the message of the Qur'an nor the teachings of the Prophetic traditions in their fuller form. As an alternative, they have to rely very much on secondary sources, especially those written in Malay and Indonesian. As a result, many of them are influenced by some of the Indonesian researchers who are liberal in their religious stand as well as in their approach in understanding Islamic sources. If they are well-equipped/well-resourced with at least the knowledge of Arabic grammar, perhaps they are not going to face the same problems that they are faced with now.

Likewise, putting the blame on Arabic language incapability as one of the main reasons why local

graduates are not knowledgeable about the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions is not a new idea but an old enterprise. However, based on the researcher's observations, not much has been done to rectify these handicaps. The same syllabus and pedagogy are still put into practice until today, despite the fact that the same syllabus and teaching methodologies are no longer relevant and practical. The problem with Arabic, especially its grammar is that it has always been taught the same way for hundreds of years while other languages have taken advantage of more advanced curriculum designs and teaching techniques. Thus, what we need now is a new syllabus of Arabic grammar learning and teaching.

The researcher agrees that it is absolutely necessary for a student to live in an Arabic speaking country in order to be able to function/communicate effectively. But with the aim of mastering just the Arabic grammar, the researcher disagrees that the students need to have long term interaction with the native Arabs. To put it differently, they can just stay in Malaysia and learn the Arabic grammar even from non-Arab language instructors.

Thus in this study, the researcher will discuss the importance of Arabic grammar as an instrument for graduates as well as undergraduates of Islamic studies to go back to the true teachings of Islam. The researcher will then try to convince both the graduates and the undergraduates that there is no other better way to be quite an all-rounded Teacher of Islamic Studies (TIS) than through mastering the Arabic grammar itself. Only with that skill, they will be able to accurately and profoundly understand the message of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions. However, the Arabic grammar that the researcher is referring to is the simplified/reformed version popularized by the scholars and activists of the Arabic grammar simplification movement.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The early history of Arabic grammar: Grammar is one of the branches of Islamic sciences formulated to protect the Holy Qur'an from foreign elements. It was Ali bin Abi Talib (559-661) the fourth and final Rightly Guided Caliph who asked one of his close companion Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali (603-688) to write a work codifying Arabic grammar. The initial function of grammar started with the act of determining the case ending in every Qur'anic verses and putting dots on the Arabic words as done by Abu al-Aswad al-Duali in the middle of the 1st century of Islamic Calendar (Mahdi, 1986). Abu al-Aswad was also the first person to write on Arabic linguistics and he educated many students.

Later on, it was al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi (718-791) who wrote *Kitab al-Ayn*, the first dictionary of Arabic. Then came his pupil Sibawayh (760-797) who produced the most respected work of Arabic grammar known simply as *al-Kitab* (the Book) (en.wikipedia.org/). During that time (the 2nd century of Islamic calendar), the science of grammar reached its perfection in terms of its condition, principles and problems (Mahdi, 1986).

Sibawayh and his fellow friends did a deeper study and finally succeeded in strengthening the principles of Arabic grammar. However, they extensively used foreign terminologies irrelevant to Arabic; such as, *al-A'mil*, *al-Ma'mul*, *al-Nasib*, *al-Jazim*, *al-Jar* and so forth. These terminologies and concepts paved the way to the absorption of Greek scholastic theology (Mahdi, 1986).

Sibawayh was the first non-Arab to write on Arabic grammar and, therefore, the first one to explain Arabic grammar from a non-Arab perspective. Much of the impetus for this research came from the desire for non-Arab Muslims to understand the Qur'an appropriately. The Qur'an which is composed in a poetic language that even native Arabic speakers must study with great care in order to comprehend it thoroughly, is even more difficult for those who like Sibawayh did not grow up speaking Arabic (en.wikipedia.org/).

Other caliphs exerted their influence on Arabic with Abdul Malik bin Marwan making it the official language for administration of the new Muslim empire. Later on, Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (691-743) was instrumental in enriching the literature by instructing scholars to translate works into Arabic. The first was probably Aristotle's correspondence with Alexander the great translated by Salam Abu al-Ala. These translations kept alive scholarship and learning particularly that of ancient Greece (en.wikipedia.org/).

Several decades later came Abu Jafar al-Ma'mun ibn Harun (786-833), an Abbasid caliph who reigned from 813-833. He set up the *Bayt al-Hikma* (The House of Wisdom) which was a library and an institute for research and translations in Baghdad where scholars translated many foreign works into Arabic. The House of Wisdom was originally concerned with translating and preserving Persian works, first from Pahlavi (Middle Persian) then from Syriac and eventually Greek (en.wikipedia.org/).

The house was an unrivalled centre for the study of humanities and for sciences; including, Mathematics, Astronomy, Philosophy, Medicine, Chemistry, Zoology and Geography. Drawing on Persian, Indian and Greek texts, Aristotle, Plato, Hippocrates, Euclid, Pythagoras and others, the scholars accumulated a great collection of

knowledge in the world and built on it through their own discoveries. Works on those areas were thus translated into Arabic (en.wikipedia.org/).

The Greek scholastic theology eventually succeeded in dominating Arabic grammar. Then grammar started to deviate from its original nature and objectives. It started to change gradually into a science mixed with foreign elements. The attribute possessed by grammar as a science of linguistics was only noticeable on the form/the surface. Consequently, Arabic grammar lost its capability to carry out its initial and original function (Mahdi, 1986).

Accordingly, grammar turned into a science focusing on debate wherein every grammarian came up with his own analyses based on predicted problems which were accompanied by various solutions. Arabic language grammarians attentions towards the function and objectives of grammar in communication resided at the second place. As a result, Arabic language grammarians writings in the form of encyclopedias, texts of grammatical rules (*Mutn*) and interpretations failed to develop and expand Arabic grammar. The reason is that writings about grammar were only repetitions to the same issues but with various extended and exaggerated explanations (Mahdi, 1958).

If we look carefully, traditional grammar approach emphasizing on the System of Inflection (*I'rab*) and the Theory of Determinants (*Awamil*) is too detailed and too philosophical. It burdens and complicates the studies of grammar. The same goes to the Theory of Prediction (*al-Nazriah al-Taqdiriah*) that does not finalize on the prediction and diversify the ways in making inflection (*I'rab*) based on the predicted determinants. The grammatical cases of a word can be nominative (*Marfuk*) if it come after (*A'mil raf'i*) and accusative (*Mansub*) if it come after (*A'mil nasbi*) and so forth. Both the System of Inflection (*I'rab*) and the Theory of Determinants (*Awamil*) lead into long academic debates that have gone beyond the natural characters and initial objectives of the Arabic language grammar.

In short, Arabic language which developed from humble beginnings finally became one of the greatest languages of the world today. However, along the process, it was greatly influenced by universal languages such as Greek and Latin that were more dominant during that time. The fact that it has been influenced by other languages has both advantages and disadvantages. One of the shortcomings is that it carries with it the attributes of the other languages that are obviously irrelevant and unsuitable. As a result, Arabic as a Semitic language carries with it linguistic features and elements of a Greco-Roman language which comes from an Indo-

European language family. The problem is made worse when the Arabic language, e.g., its sentence structure is analyzed using the grammatical concept of the Greco-Roman language.

Historical background of arabic language program at the university of Malaya: At a time when Arabic language training held up at many local universities, the Academy of Islamic Studies (AIS) at UM in Kota Bharu and Kuala Lumpur retained its reputation for quality Arabic language instruction. Indeed, it could be said to define the gold standard of Arabic language programs in Malaysia. The Academy of Islamic Studies (AIS) Arabic program appeared to have a magic formula.

Every academic year, it drew thousands of students from across the West and East Malaysia to undertake a 2-year intensive full-immersion course. Students signed a pledge in which they vow not to speak or expose themselves to any language besides Arabic for the duration of their stay at AIS, Kota Bharu. Classes which consist of 5 contact hours 5 days a week are conducted strictly in modern standard Arabic. Modern standard Arabic is the sole medium of communication on weekends at study and meal times and during outings co-curricular, extracurricular and even private activities. What initially appears to be an intimidating and discouraging activity to most students fast became second-nature. Students were very eager to curry favor with their Arabic language instructors who would share almost everything from their knowledge and experience about Arabic language.

But, it was decades ago. The situation is no longer the same now. AIS's students do not have to take on the same 2-year intensive full-immersion course like the one undertaken by their seniors. Likewise, students have a lot of other options now. For those city dwellers who do not want to be far separated from their families, prefer to go to International Islamic University, Malaysia (IIUM) or University of Islamic Sciences Malaysia (USIM). Similarly, instead of registering themselves at AIS, students also have the choice to continue their studies at various private institutions. As a result, the fame and glory of the Academy of Islamic Studies (AIS) at UM in Kota Bharu and Kuala Lumpur is only nostalgia now.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The need to have proficiency in Arabic language grammar: Why do Malaysian graduates as well as undergraduates need to be well-versed in Arabic grammar? Mastering Arabic grammar will not only open an individual to the Qur'anic and Prophetic teachings but also to a vast body of Arabic literature and art. And

anyone who wants to be well-versed in the teachings of Islam must first be well-versed in the Qur'an and the Prophetic Hadith, since both are the main sources of Islamic teachings.

Proficiency in Arabic grammar is necessary not only for graduates of Arabic language but also graduates of Islamic studies especially during the time where many Arabic/religious schools as well as Institutions of Higher Learnings (IHLs) in Malaysia face an increased number of teachers' resignation. Therefore, many Teachers of Islamic Studies (TISs) though originally supposed to teach Syari'ah (Islamic Legal Systems) and Usuluddin (Islamic Theology) have to be redeployed to replace Arabic language specialists who gave up their teaching jobs.

One of the reasons is that many graduates from the Arabic language programs (Arabic language specialists) are venturing into other areas like publications (working as editors and writers/translators) and broadcasting (being media professionals in various radio and TV stations).

It is clear that most of the current Arabic language programs in various Malaysian institutions of higher learning have failed to produce proficient Arabic speakers among their graduates of Islamic studies programs. As a result, most of the Teachers of Islamic Studies (TISs) today are clearly not proficient in Arabic language and it is their weakness in Arabic grammar that has been identified as one of the core reasons and contributing factors. In this crisis facing TISs in Malaysia, every TIS should as soon as possible look for the real and practical solutions to their problem. The reason is that they are the one who are responsible for grooming their students to be righteous Muslims. And how is it that TISs seem to be convinced that they are on the right path if they are not very much depending on the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions due to their deficiency in Arabic?

Fully aware of the fact that most of the existing Arabic language programs in Malaysia have failed to provide adequate proficiency and to train Teachers of Islamic Studies (TISs) pursuing a government career, the researchers will make an attempt to come up with some suggestions related to Arabic language study programs focusing on simplified/reformed Arabic grammar. It is hoped that the new program will provide Teachers of Islamic Studies (TISs) in Malaysia with sufficient knowledge in Arabic grammar.

The reformed Arabic grammar: The reformed Arabic grammar referred to by the researcher in this study is the simplified version popularized by those involved in the

Arabic grammar simplification movement. Although, the impact of this movement is more noticeable in the modern days (over the past 6 decades), the idea was initiated by Ibnu Madha' al-Qurtubiy al-Andalusiy (513-604 Hijrah). His book (*Kitab al-Raddu ala-Najat*) was published in 1947. The book criticized heavily grammarians and the long-established traditions of Arabic grammar. The foreword was written by Prof., Dr., Syaui Dhaif from Cairo University who was also one of the advocates of Arabic grammar reform (Ibnu-Madha, 1947, 1988).

In the modern days, the idea to reform Arabic grammar was continued by Prof., Ibrahim Mustafa from Cairo University, through his book (*Ihya al-Nah'u*) in 1959 (Ibrahim, 1959). The introduction was written by Prof., Dr., Toha Husain, the former Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Cairo University. However, this study will focus on the ideas brought forward by Dr., Mahdi al-Makhzumiy, the former Head of Arabic Language Department at the University of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia who was also one of the disciples of Prof., Ibrahim Mustafa.

The list given by Dr., Mahdi al-Makhzumiy is very long. He managed to do so because he borrowed ideas, terms and theories from Kufah school of thought, Ibnu Madha al-Qurtubiy's views, views of his mentor (Prof., Ibrahim Mustafa) and his own opinions based on his vast knowledge and experiences. Since, time and space do not permit the author to go into the details; therefore, summary of the main proposals is attempted below:

The reform process: As mentioned before, many books have been written by various scholars on the issues of Arabic grammar reform over the past centuries. However, although the need for reform is well-accepted, the approaches and means to achieve it differ slightly. When the scholars of Arabic grammar or the advocates of reform talk about the reform process, they are not talking about reviving Arabic grammar in its classical form preserving its integrity in conformity with the past tradition.

What they really mean is an extensive reform from its classical form. This process calls for an intellectual revolution that distinguishes between the original substance of the Arabic grammar and the Greek scholastic theology brought in by ancient Arabic language grammarians from Greco-Roman civilization. The reform process requires liberation of Arabic grammar from the irrelevant Greek philosophical concepts and linguistic terms imported by earlier Arabic language grammarians perhaps to serve certain goals in the past. But now, they have become a burden upon the mind of modern days Muslim. In order to help wipe out these clouds, the

researcher believes that Arabic grammar must be returned to its original substance and objectives. To serve this purpose, it is more practical and useful to resort to a reformed Arabic grammar rather than going back to the exaggerated and distorted one that has been in existence for centuries.

The reformed Arabic grammar will also highlight the practical values of any grammatical rules without considering whether the rule comes from an individual scholar or particular group of scholars faithful to certain schools of thought (Mazhab of grammar). Therefore, TISs should not limit themselves to only one school of thought or to an individual scholar or particular group of scholars regardless of whether they consider themselves as independent or adherents to certain school of thought. The researcher believes that blind following (Taqlid) or sightless loyalty is the main reason for TISs' continuous practices of rigidity in learning and teaching Arabic grammar.

However, it does not mean that TISs should revoke their loyalty or cannot be faithful at all to certain school of thought. What the researcher is trying to say here is that in order to be a more practical learner and teacher, the minimum requirement or the bottom line is that TISs should not be rigid in their stand. In principle, TISs can adhere themselves to certain school of thought as long as they are also willing to accept other scholars' grammatical views. Thus, it is the aim of Dr., Mahdi al-Makhzumiy to help students learning Arabic grammar (in this case TISs) revise their conservative way in approaching Arabic grammar. In other words, TISs need to reform their way of learning and teaching the Arabic grammar and give up their conventional and no longer practical ways.

The main driving force of the advocates of grammar reform movement including Dr., Mahdi al-Makhzumiy was that the complexities of Arabic grammar arose as a result of Arabic language grammarians obsession with the System of Inflection (I'rab) and the Theory or principle of Determinants (Awamil: word governing another word in syntactical regimen) that tend to be too detailed and too philosophical.

On the other hand, the reformed grammar will have to simplify grammatical concepts such as making away with divergent views on one grammatical problem. Likewise, according to them the complex and difficult phenomenon of different case endings should be eliminated by adopting the silent reading of the final consonant.

It is not the intention of the grammar reform movement to overlook the richness and glory of the past history of the traditional Arabic grammar. Instead, what the reform has been aiming at is to bring back the Arabic grammar to its original path and identity. Every Muslim

has to understand the significance and place of Arabic in his/her life. Arabic has the sacred character of the Holy Qur'an. It is also the language of prayer for the Muslims, both Arabs and non-Arabs. Arabic and Islam constituted the major bonds of kinship among the people stretched from Spain to the Indian sub-continent. Therefore, it should be brought back to its original form.

CONCLUSION

The researcher admits that in this research, it is impossible to present a detailed reform process. Likewise, any kind of reform process is faced with the problems involved in implementing it. However, the researcher would like to emphasize that graduates as well as undergraduates students in local universities are really in need of a new way of learning and mastering the Arabic grammar and the proposed reform is hoped to be the solution to the Arabic grammar crisis.

The researcher admits that the reformed Arabic grammar might not be able to take two directions: First, to infuse its academic program with Arabic grammar content. Second, it constructs a new atmosphere of Arabic language program, since the one that is presented is the simplified/reformed Arabic grammar. In other words, unlike the normal Arabic language programs, the one recommended by the researcher will not be able to go beyond Arabic language instruction and finely works to inculcate the Arabic grammar component.

At the same time, it is undeniable that the reformed Arabic grammar suggested by the researcher will be alone among the existing Arabic language programs since it ignores a long-established Arabic grammar tradition. However, the researcher believes that the act of ignoring (Without having any sense of disrespect) is never an act of belittling the traditional Arabic language approach.

The researcher also believes that many Arabic language institutions will act negatively (or at least will give an unwelcoming response) on the idea of Arabic grammar reform. From the researcher's point of view, the unreceptive/unfriendly reaction on the Arabic grammar reform is more a psychological matter projected to preserve the long-accepted practice, customs and traditions of our ancestors across the Arab and Muslim world. This is the reason why the debate about Arabic grammar reform still continues until today.

In conclusion, what the researcher has done in this study is to come up with some suggestions to University of Malaya's graduates and undergraduates with the intention of recovering a portion of their acute deficiency in Arabic language education. This is simply because the key problem of every non-Arab student in Arabic language is their insufficiency in the grammar skill.

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