

## THE RELEVANCE OF ARABIC LANGUAGE IN ISLAMIC STUDIES PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY OF OPEN UNIVERSITY MALAYSIA (OUM).

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### ABSTRACT

*Numerous studies have been carried out to identify the relevance of Arabic language to Islamic studies subjects. As a medium of communication like other languages, Arabic has its own function in conveying Syariah knowledge. This is mainly because Arabic is the language of the Holy Quran and Sunnah, which are the primary sources of Islam. This study attempts to analyze the relevance of learning the Arabic language amongst Open University Malaysia (OUM) students. This research involves students of two programs in OUM, Bachelor of Islamic Studies and Diploma in Islamic Studies. A survey was conducted to identify a relationship between student's Arabic language proficiency and their learning process on courses taught. It is also intended to know student's perception on the relevance of Arabic language to Islamic studies courses. The study found that most respondents agree on the importance of mastering the Arabic language in Islamic studies.*

Keywords: Arabic language, Islamic studies, language proficiency

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### Introduction

Language is a medium of communicating ideas, thought and knowledge. Across the centuries, the Arabic language has always been the backbone of Islamic sciences due to its epistemological relation. Not only Al-Quran and Prophet Muhammad's traditions, the main epistemological sources for Islamic sciences were revealed in Arabic, both too, have been engrossed with Arabic metaphors and semantics. Thus a sufficient command of Arabic language or at least, certain degree of competency in understanding certain Arabic terminologies and grammar are expected for one to mastering Islamic studies. This interconnectedness between Arabic language and the learning of Islamic sciences through what is known nowadays as Islamic studies is pertinent as been explained by scholars and researchers in the field.

In the modern day, studying Islam has been offered not only by specialists and scholars in the field. Islamic studies as a discipline have been a favourite course taken by many Muslims in Malaysia, at least, in the higher learning institutions. Many higher learning institutions have offered different courses in Islamic studies due to the overwhelming demands by the people since the year 2000. In all of the courses offered, Arabic language has been made mandatory to all students who are taking the courses. It is widely believed that any students of Islamic studies must have some degree of command of Arabic language. However, there are debates on the relevancy of making Arabic language compulsory in those courses, and there are also researches showing that students of the courses feel that they are less-interested in Arabic language, and are able to handle their courses even without strong command of Arabic language (A. Rahman Chik, 2007; Anzaruddin Ahmad, 2004; Najib Jaffar, 2013).

Due to such a premise, this study attempts to identify the relevance of learning Arabic language to those who are studying Islamic studies programs in one of the higher learning institutions in Malaysia, Open University Malaysia (OUM). OUM offers two undergraduate courses for Islamic studies, namely the Bachelor of Islamic Studies (BIS) and Diploma of Islamic Studies (DISE) programs. The main reason behind choosing OUM as a case study is the various background of the adult working learners. This study too aims to understand the necessity of Arabic language to the students of BIS and DISE in their study, which according to aforementioned statement as mandatory to Islamic studies learners through the students' perceptions. Hence, this study will look into the students' responses through a survey. A survey on 64 students from both BIS and DISE programs was conducted to identify the relationship between student's Arabic language proficiency and their learning process on courses taught based on the respondents' perception of the significance of Arabic language in the programs. This paper will begin with the explanation of the applied research methodology followed by an introduction on the position of Arabic Language in Islamic Studies programs. The subsequent sections will explain in brief about Islamic Studies program in OUM as a prelude to the findings and discussions of the survey.

### Methodology

In maintaining the objectivity of this study, it is conducted based on mixed methods research which involves collecting, analyzing and integrating quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (data and observation). The data for this study were obtained using questionnaire instruments. A set of questionnaire has been distributed randomly to the students of BIS and DISE. It contains two sections; the respondent's demographic and their opinion and experiences on the subjects. 64 students have replied and given responses. All data collected is analysed and processed descriptively using Microsoft Excel.

### **Arabic Language In Islamic Studies**

According to Samir Abu-Absi (2016), Arabic language belongs to the Afro-Asiatic family of languages. The earliest known example of Arabic is an inscription found in the Syrian Desert dating back to the fourth century A.D. Some believe that Arabic is a sacred language because it is the language of the Quran. However, the language, by origin, it is believed to have come into existence around three thousand years ago, before the revelation of the Quran (Abdul Majid Hasan Bello, 2015).

The Quran was revealed in Arabic. Allah says: *"Indeed We have made it an Arabic Quran that perchance you will comprehend."* (Surah al-Zukhruf: 3). The Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad also came in Arabic. These two are the primary sources of Islam that lead scholars to consider mastering Arabic language is a prerequisite to learn and understand Islam. Thus, a good understanding of the language will enable a person to understand the meanings being indicated by the Quran and Sunnah with respect to Islamic Law. In other words, any negligence will lead to deviation from the true meaning of the Quran and Sunnah (Faisal Ahmad Shah, 2016).

Despite the recognition of the need for Arabic language in Islamic studies in general, however, there are debates amongst educators on this subject. According to the majority of academicians involved in teaching Islamic studies in the institutions of higher learning, these subjects can be better taught in a language easily and commonly understood by both teachers and learners. They contend that all the subjects of Islamic studies can be learned and taught through the translated work.

On the other hand, others who believe that the proficiency in Arabic Language is a prerequisite for learning and teaching Islamic studies. This mainly because the entire Islamic literature including al-Quran and hadith are all in Arabic. It cannot be denied that much of this heritage has been translated into different languages, but a known fact remains that translations have their limitation in conveying the whole idea of certain knowledge and concepts. This limitation will lead to the inability for the learners to understand and attaining the depth of the field.

In supporting this argument, in practical context, Imtiaz Ahmad has highlighted the prevailing methods of teaching Islamic studies in Institutions of Higher learning in non-Arab countries as Pakistan, Malaysia, Brunei, Indonesia, and Thailand. According to him, most of the Islamic Studies programs in these countries are taught in their local/national language or English (Imtiaz Ahmad, 2001).

Furthermore, almost all the institutions of higher learning, with exception of the University of Brunei Darussalam are producing Islamic Studies graduates through the medium of their local language. To reconcile the two contradicting views, Imtiaz Ahmad proposed that Arabic language must form part and parcel of Islamic Studies curricula of all graduate programs. In view of the practical difficulties and in order to make the subjects more easily understandable, local or national languages may also be used as the medium of instruction (Imtiaz Ahmad, 2001).

### **Arabic Language In Islamic Studies Program In Open University Malaysia (Oum).**

The history of Islamic studies in Malaysia is still in the pragmatic and liberal phase which started early 1980's. Three universities in Malaysia do offer Islamic studies leading to bachelor, master and doctoral degrees in Islamic Studies. They are University of Malaya, National University of Malaysia (UKM) and International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). (Ibrahim Abu Bakar, 2000)

Open University Malaysia (OUM) is the seventh Malaysia private university and it is owned by the Multimedia Technology Enhancement Operations (METEOR) Sdn. Bhd, a consortium of 11 public universities. It leverages on the quality, prestige and capabilities of its consortium. The main campus is at Jalan Tun Ismail, Kuala Lumpur. In addition to this, there are 37 learning centers throughout Malaysia, out of which 10 are regional learning centers.

Currently, OUM has a cumulative learner enrolment exceeding 79,000 compared with its initial intake of 753 students in August 2001. (<http://www.oum.edu.my/>) accessed on 20 October 2016). OUM has revolutionised the education landscape in Malaysia when it first introduced the concept of blended learning – combining the learning technologies with the face-to-face mode. The flexibility learning system in OUM also open its door to adult working learners (Open University Malaysia, 2016).

Islamic studies program in OUM started in the year 2009 with Bachelor in Islamic Studies and later in the year 2011 with Diploma in Islamic Studies. They were part of the programs taught in the Faculty of Applied Social Sciences. Arabic language is taught as the core subjects of the programs. For BIS, the students are required to take two levels or courses of Arabic language and for DISE, students are required to take a course of Arabic language. All these courses are aimed to provide the students with basic knowledge of the language in order to assist them to get familiar with Arabic terminology in most subjects of the Islamic studies.

### **Findings And Discussion**

a)Students demographic

Table 1: Students Demographic

| Item    | Subject        | No | Percentage (%) |
|---------|----------------|----|----------------|
| Program | DISE           | 27 | 41.3           |
|         | BIS            | 37 | 58.7           |
| Age     | Under 20       | -  | -              |
|         | 21-30          | 22 | 34.3           |
|         | 31-40          | 27 | 42.1           |
|         | 41-50          | 11 | 17.2           |
|         | 51-60          | 4  | 6.3            |
|         | 61 and above   | -  | -              |
| Mode    | Normal entry   | 49 | 76.6           |
|         | Flexible entry | 15 | 23.4           |
| Year    | 1st            | 12 | 18.8           |
|         | 2nd            | 11 | 17.2           |
|         | 3rd            | 16 | 25             |
|         | 4th            | 11 | 17.2           |
|         | Graduated      | 14 | 21.9           |

In identifying the significance and relevance of Arabic language to Islamic studies programs in OUM, a survey has been conducted amongst 64 students as respondents from two main Islamic studies programs in the university. Essentially, 27 of the respondents (41.3%) are from the BIS program, while 37(58.7%) of them are from the DISE program. The respondents are mainly from different level of age and year of study, in which 44.8% of the respondents are from the age range of 31-40 years, followed by 32.8% from the age range of 21-30 years, 17.2% from 41-50 years, and 6.3% from 51-60 years. Accordingly, 78.1% of the respondents are students of the first until the fourth year and the rest have completed the program and graduated successfully. In term of the mode of study, 49 (76.7%) respondents are enrolled in the normal mode program; in contrast to the rest 15 (23.4%) respondents are enrolled in the program through the flexible entry mode.

Table 2 : Students Arabic language proficiency

| Item  | Response | No | Percentage (%) |
|---|----------|----|----------------|
| A7. Already have a basic command of Arabic Language (before enrolling in the program) | Yes      | 34 | 53.1           |
|   | No       | 30 | 46.9           |
| A8. Level of Arabic Language proficiency (current)                                    | Good     | 5  | 7.8            |
|   | Average  | 31 | 48.4           |
|   | Weak     | 28 | 43.8           |

|   |     |    |      |
|---|-----|----|------|
| A9. Already taken Arabic Language test in OUM | Yes | 35 | 54.7 |
|   | No  | 29 | 45.3 |

The study also finds that 46.9% of the respondents are without Arabic language background before enrolling in BIS or DISE programs. However, after enrolling the programs, 56.2% of them managed to upgrade their Arabic language proficiency up to good and average level. This percentage is a good sign of their good performance in obtaining the language skills in the programs. The study also received positive comments on further courses of Arabic language in OUM. More than 5 respondents proposed to have additional classes to enhance their Arabic language proficiency after the programs. Nonetheless, as for the crux of the study, which is identifying the relevance of Arabic language in Islamic Studies, the survey finds that 90.6% of the respondents agree that Arabic language is the foundation of Islamic studies (QB1) and most of them are aware of the significance of the language in Islamic studies (QB2). This reflects the argument discussed by previous researchers and Islamic studies scholars that students of Islamic studies should be equipped with a certain degree of command of the Arabic language.

Table 3 : Respondents views on Arabic language and Islamic studies

| Item  | SD        | D          | A          | SA         |
|---|-----------|------------|------------|------------|
| B1. Arabic Language is a fundamental need in Islamic Studies  | -<br>9.4  | 6<br>9.4   | 29<br>45.3 | 29<br>45.3 |
| B2. Arabic Language helps me to understand my Islamic Studies subjects  | -<br>14.1 | 9<br>14.1  | 30<br>46.9 | 25<br>39.1 |
| B3. Arabic course in OUM helps me to cope up with my study  | 7<br>10.9 | 10<br>15.6 | 33<br>51.6 | 14<br>21.9 |
| B4. Arabic Language helps me in my job  | 6<br>9.4  | 12<br>18.8 | 31<br>48.4 | 15<br>23.4 |
| B5. Arabic course syllabus fulfils the needs of Islamic Studies students in OUM   | 5<br>7.8  | 11<br>17.2 | 37<br>57.8 | 11<br>17.2 |
| B6. The study of Islamic Sciences requires a good command of Arabic Language  | 1<br>1.6  | 3<br>4.7   | 29<br>45.3 | 31<br>48.4 |
| B7. Arabic Language Courses must be solely focusing on helping Islamic Studies' students to understand their subjects           | 1<br>1.6  | 6<br>9.4   | 30<br>46.9 | 27<br>42.2 |
| B8. Knowledge of Arabic Language is an added value for students of Islamic Studies  | -<br>1.6  | 1<br>1.6   | 26<br>40.6 | 37<br>57.8 |
| B9. References for Islamic Studies in non-Arabic Language are hard to be found  | 4<br>6.3  | 13<br>20.3 | 38<br>59.4 | 9<br>14.1  |
| B10. The existence of non-Arabic literature for Islamic Studies is not significance in compared to the needs of Arabic Language | 1<br>1.6  | 4<br>6.3   | 33<br>51.6 | 26<br>40.6 |

In addition to that, 86% of the respondents agree that the Arabic language courses in OUM are considered to have met the need of the students in their learning process (QB5). Putting a certain level on the language proficiency is a reasonable measure due to the fact that acquiring such in-depth knowledge of Arabic is not a small task. It is difficult even for a native speaker of Arabic to obtain such knowledge and this difficulty is multiplied for someone who is not a native speaker. Following that, 89.1% of the respondents agree that all the Arabic language courses should be designed to provide them skills in learning Islamic studies programs (QB7). Furthermore, according to 98.4% respondents, Arabic language is an added value to those who are studying Islamic studies programs (QB8).

This study also proves the relative significance of Arabic language in learning Islamic Studies programs in OUM, in which 73.5% of the respondents agree that the Arabic language skills acquired in the courses offered in OUM, helps them in their learning process (QB3). Additionally, 71.8% of the respondents found that the Arabic courses taken did help them with their

career (QB4). This can be seen as stated in Table 3. The percentage is justified with the various career backgrounds of the BIS and DISE students. They are teachers, medical doctors, police officers and housewives who are interested in furthering their knowledge in Islamic studies.

Accordingly, in evaluating the respondents' perception on Arabic language in Islamic studies, 90.1% of the respondents agree that Arabic language is a foundation in Islamic studies (QB1), and should be one of the top priorities for a person who wishes to deepen their study in Islamic sciences. Similarly, 93.7% of them agree that the proficiency of Arabic language is a complement to the learning process of Islamic studies. Nevertheless, since Islamic studies courses in OUM are taught in Malay. Therefore, 73.5% of the students found that Islamic studies learning materials in other languages besides Arabic are available and reachable. Despite that, 92.2% still agree that Arabic language is still significance and crucial in Islamic studies learning process.

As a conclusion to the study, the findings indicate that Arabic Language is non-arguably significant in the life of Islamic studies students. Though they are not required to mastering the language as linguists or literalists, but certain degree of command of the language is proven important to assist them in dealing with Islamic studies subject that mostly dealing with Arabic-Islamic terminologies. Akin to OUM, other universities which offer Islamic studies programs should take this into its consideration. Moreover, apart from making the Arabic language courses in the early semesters of the studies compulsory, the design of the courses should take into consideration the needs of the students too.

### Conclusion

Based on the survey done on 64 respondents of BIS and DISE program, it could be concluded that Arabic language is pertinent for the students in completing their course. Most enrolled the programs by normal mode of the respondents agree that Arabic language is necessary for them to deal with major references related to the subjects, which mostly in Arabic. Similarly, Arabic language plays a major role in assisting the students in understanding the Quranic verses, Traditions of the Prophet (hadiths) and classical literatures relate to the subjects they learn in the program. The lack of mastering Arabic language amongst the students will affect their understanding of most of the subjects taught in the program. This study also found that the least knowledge of Arabic language in studying Islamic sciences may be as futile as dealing with English law without the knowledge of English language.

However, the findings in this paper are limited to the unique nature of BIS and DISE programs in OUM, which mainly attended by adult learners. It should be noted too, that the subjects taught in the abovementioned courses were conducted in Malay Language, which may differ from other universities that use Arabic or English as medium of instruction. A way forward for further future researches is to make a comparison between samples from students of Islamic studies from different universities that use different languages to teach the courses to get a more comprehensive picture on the relevance and significance of Arabic Language for students of Islamic studies.

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