

Exploring Teachers' Creative Teaching Strategies in Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language at a Private Islamic Secondary School in Malaysia

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Abstract: Arabic is an important language for Muslims but teaching the language is not an easy task. It needs efforts to improve and simplify the learning process through creative teaching strategies. Creative teaching involves the development of materials and approaches that foster students' interests and motivation in learning. This study explored the experiences of Arabic teachers in fostering students' interests by developing creative approaches in teaching Arabic as a foreign language at Adni Islamic School, a private Islamic secondary school in Malaysia. In collecting the data, semi-structured interviews were used as part of qualitative research. The findings indicated that teachers have been using creative teaching strategies in the teaching and learning process. These are categorized into three strategies: (1) creativity in making daily lesson plans, (2) creativity during the teaching and learning process, and (3) creativity in evaluating and assessing the outcomes of teaching. The application of these creative strategies is in accordance with the message of the Islamic principles of teaching. Recommendations were made to the relevant authorities, including the teachers themselves, so that creative teaching can be applied to the subject of Arabic language in order to produce a meaningful lesson.

Keyword: creative learning, creative teaching, teaching Arabic as a foreign language, teaching for creativity, teaching strategies

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Introduction

Creative teaching can be understood as how a teacher attempts to make learning fun and engaging (Starbuck, 2006). It refers to the process of instruction when the teacher's mind is in a creative state. In creative teaching, teachers link the learning process to real-life experiences, introduce existing knowledge into novel form of lessons, improvise performance, and invent spontaneous situations in the classroom (Fisher, 2005; Oliver, 2013; Sawyer, 2012).

Although the term 'creative teaching' is not widely used in teaching Arabic language, it is considered important to teach the language creatively. Arabic is a special language for Muslims regardless of their nationalities. It has an exceptional position in Islam as the language of Qur'an. Hence, whenever a person acknowledges Islam as his religion, he should consider Arabic as his language and try to learn it as best as he can especially to perform five time prayers.

In various verses of the Qur'an, Allah SWT has clearly mentioned:

'Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an that you might understand' (Yusuf, 12:2);

'And indeed, the Qur'an is the revelation of the Lord of the worlds. The Trustworthy Spirit has brought it down. Upon your heart, [O Muhammad] - that you may be of the warner -. In a clear Arabic language' (Ash-Shu'ara, 26:192-195);

'A Book whose verses have been detailed, an Arabic Qur'an for a people who know' (Fussilat, 41:3);

'And thus We have revealed to you an Arabic Qur'an that you may warn the Mother of Cities [Makkah] and those around it and warn of the Day of Assembly, about which there is no doubt. A party will be in Paradise and a party in the Blaze' (Ash-Shuraa, 42:7).

Al-Qur'an also presents its message through empirical and realistic examples, such as stories (*qissah*) of the previous Prophets, scientific truths, guidance and wisdom. It offers opportunities to create creative and authentic learning environments for students in which they would be able to reflect, think

and acquire wisdom from various examples. In this study, creative teaching of Arabic language is constructed as a process of teaching in which the existing knowledge, Islamic values and wisdom (*hikmah*) are combined within the novel form of lessons and understandings.

Malaysia, as one of the Muslim countries, also recognises the importance of Arabic language. The subject of Arabic language is from since the primary and secondary levels. Arabic language as part of the national curriculum for secondary schools was officially enacted in 1977 with the establishment of National Religious Secondary School (SMKA). In the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM), the name of the subject was changed to Communication Arabic Language (BAK).

In addition, the Ministry of Education (MoE) also introduced Higher Arabic Language (BAT) in 1992. The objective of teaching and learning Arabic Language Communication at the primary and secondary levels is to attract the interest of students in learning the Arabic language. This is an important part in order to master language skills besides enabling students to communicate the language easily.

To meet the objective of learning Arabic language in the secondary school, the MoE enacted certain regulations related to the teachers. The teachers who teach BAT and BAK must hold Masters degrees in Arabic language in addition to Diploma in education specializing in teaching Arabic language. As many schools still have unqualified Arabic teachers, the Ministry encouraged them to attend in-service courses related to the teaching and learning of Arabic language.

Problem Statement

Learning Arabic as a foreign or second language has gained much attention among Muslims all over the world. This is due to the emphasis of the importance of Arabic as a lingua franca in the Muslim world. Malaysia, as a country whose Muslim population is approximately 60%, has required students to pass Arabic at various levels depending on their areas of specialization. Many religious schools in the states of Malaysia, both government and private owned, conduct classes in the Arabic language.

Achieving overall proficiency in language use is not an easy task. Language learners should recognize their potential sources of errors and teachers should help students to focus on the possible causes of the errors. Jassem (2000), in his studies about error analysis in learning Arabic as a second language, argued that there are several possible major causes of errors in learning the language, i.e. mother tongue interference, inherent difficulty of the Arabic language, overgeneralization, simplification, the dictionary, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, incomplete mastery of Arabic, the textbook, the teacher, teaching method, false analogy, lack of vocabulary, and hypercorrection.

To avoid the mistakes and improve the teaching learning process, Jassem (2000) made some suggestions, especially to teaching Arabic grammar and the verb phrase in particular. They include adopting a communicative approach to teaching Arabic, using graded teaching materials, employing both deductive and inductive approaches, having linear and spiral syllabuses, emphasizing all the four basic language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening), encouraging the use of Arabic both inside and outside the classroom, reviewing and editing current textbooks, seeking the expertise of qualified native Arab speakers, and forming Arabic language societies in schools.

The informal investigations, through interviews, on the current pattern of teaching practices of the Arabic language subject in private Islamic secondary school in Malaysia showed that Arabic language teaching is not interesting enough. Based on the observations, most of the Arabic teachers emphasized on rote memorization for the sake of passing examinations and focus on one-way communication only. Teachers simply used chalk and talk methods and hardly ever prepared teaching aids for the lesson.

Thus, the primary objective of this research is to explore the experiences of Arabic teachers in fostering student's interest in learning Arabic language at a private Islamic secondary school in Malaysia. The research also seeks to find evidences from Arabic teachers' experiences in developing creative approaches in teaching Arabic as a foreign language and how creativity in teaching and learning Arabic has been implemented by the teachers.

In the field of Arabic language teaching, it is important, considering the scarcity of resources and the need for researches in teaching and learning process, to enhance students' performance at school. For Arabic teachers, the

study of teacher creativity can inspire them to perform better in the classroom and improve their teaching performance. For schools, especially Islamic schools, the findings from this study are hoped to promote creative teaching to all teachers, particularly Arabic teachers. In general, this study will offer suggestions and recommendations to enhance creative teaching in Arabic language subject.

Framework for Creative Teaching

Theories of creativity in education are varied. They can be drawn, based on different approaches, from the scholarly field of creativity studies, such as psychological, behaviourist, cognitive, social-psychological or humanistic approaches. The approach to creativity in education, however, has unique concerns in terms of the relationship between creativity and knowledge, curriculum, and pedagogical strategies to foster creativity (Craft, 2005). In general, there are two premises underpinning creativity in education, i.e. creativity can be developed and everyone has the potential to be creative (Lin, 2011). To illustrate the relationship between creativity and pedagogical practices in education, Lin (2009) proposed a framework of creative pedagogy. It has three interrelated elements: creative teaching, teaching for creativity, and creative learning (Figure 1).

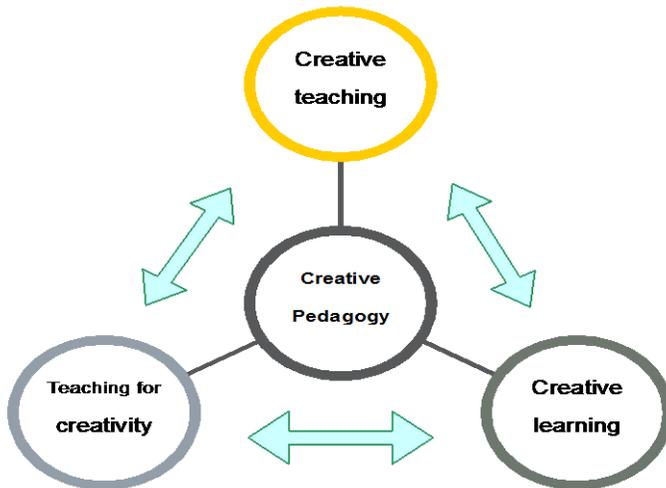


Figure 1. The Three Interrelated Elements of Creative Pedagogy (Lin, 2009)

Compared to two conventional parallel processes of teaching and learning, in which the teacher delivers knowledge and the learners accept what is taught, the three interrelated elements create a supportive climate to develop creative abilities and qualities of students through the interaction between effective teaching (creative teacher) and creative learning (active learner).

As one component of creative pedagogy, creative teaching is linked to creative learning as an imaginative, dynamic and innovative approach (Jeffrey & Craft, 2004) that can inspire children's learning. Cropley (1992) stated that teachers have significant role in fostering creativity through many ways to help students produce ideas in classroom activities, such as creative learning strategies and exploring new possibilities. Thus, teaching for creativity relates to creative teaching, and creative teaching leads to creative learning.

The Concept of Creativity

There is no single definition or consistent view on how creativity is defined (Craft, 2005; Oliver, 2013). Cropley (2001) described it as a cause, effect and interaction between a human and the environment, while Fisher (2005) defined creativity as an imaginative activity which is related to the whole person. Other researchers concluded that creativity relates to novel experiences, high in quality, relevant to the individual and societal levels (Stenberg, 2007), and involves new and valuable ideas.

One of the experts in the notion of creativity is Guilford. He stated that creativity is the ability to think divergently (spreading, not the direction, as opposed to convergent, centralized) for finding various alternative answers to a problem, which is equally true (Guilford, 1967). This definition gives us the understanding that creativity is the ability to think to choose.

From the Islamic perspective, Al-Karasneh and Jubran (2010) recorded the notion of creativity from the Muslim scholars. According to them, creativity can be understood as a special condition, attitude or state of being that reflects passion for work, independence, goal setting, originality, flexibility, a wide range of interests, average or above-average intelligence and motivation as stated above, emphasized that creativity should aim at applying the Divine Principles to all aspects of life. In this case, those who are dealing with creativity should ensure that their works or inventions do not contradict Islamic principles.

At the same time, they should feel a responsibility to raise Islamic societies to a higher level, allowing them to face future challenges creatively and successfully.

Al-Mazeidy (1993) added a new dimension to the definition of creativity. He defined it as “the ability of designing new forms that are beneficial for humanity and are in accordance with the Islamic shari‘ah” (Al-Mazeidy, 1993, p. 306). In this definition, the emphasis is to the newly created things that should be useful and helpful to human beings in their life. He emphasized also that the new things should follow Islamic foundations and principles.

Creative Muslims in this case, will be distinguished from others by following the divine guidance from Allah SWT. They consider the approval of the Islamic *Shari‘ah* before creating anything. Nonetheless, Islam is creative by nature; it came with new and unique principles that rejected the prevailing practices of the Arab society in terms of worshiping God. It is different from the beliefs of the people at that time. It came for the purpose of change for the better. This kind of change was a shift from a system based on mere imitation of the old generation to a new and unique model based on thinking, realizing and understanding the mission of people on earth.

The Qur’an itself contains great and creative ideas including a complete system of guidance for life, enabling people to live in accordance with Islamic foundations. Al-Qur’an was revealed as a miracle to the Prophet Mohammad SWT. It challenged all people to produce verses like the Qur’an but they failed. It is a sign of divine creativity to reveal an inimitable book that is unique and relevant to all people in all places and times.

Finally, it can be concluded that most of the definitions have two major criteria in defining creativity: novelty and appropriateness. Referring to the variety of definitions of creativity perceived by many experts, there is one fundamental thing as the meeting point of all definitions related to creativity, which is the ability to produce something or create new ideas.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach for a number of reasons. Firstly, the research was concerned with teacher creativity and their experiences in teaching Arabic to engage students’ interest in learning. Secondly, it gives flexibility to

follow unknown ideas during the research and explore the processes effectively. Finally, it provides possibility to study symbolic dimensions and social meaning to develop new empirically supported ideas and theories. The study phenomenological approach to some subject coordinators through semi-structured interviews. Each element of teacher creativity in teaching Arabic to engage students' interest for learning was explored.

The study mainly used interviews for data collection. Based on the review of literature, a set of interview questions was designed to investigate the creativity in teaching Arabic as foreign language. Semi-structured interview allows the researchers greater freedom in the sequencing of questions, and allows flexibility in the amount of time and attention to be given to different situation compared to structured interviews. The data were collected from Adni Islamic School located in Selangor, Malaysia.

The objective of the interview guide was to allow the researcher to ask and probe questions freely in exploring creativity in the teaching Arabic language as foreign language. The guide was designed to elicit data in order to answer the research questions concerning informants' experiences and give them opportunity to explore their own experiences on creative teaching. The interview was mainly connected to the following points; (1) teacher's qualities that have inspired the informants, (2) the materials that informants use in the classroom to support their teaching, (3) the informants' views about the physical appearance of an ideal classroom, (4) how the informants plan when starting a new study unit or topic with their class, (5) how they develop their daily lesson plan and what do they include and (6) how they evaluate the success of their teaching.

It is difficult to determine who is truly a creative teacher or otherwise. In this paper, the informants were selected from Arabic teachers who have taught Arabic as foreign language for more than ten years. Two informants (Teacher 1 or T1 and Teacher 2 or T2) for the study were selected from Adni Islamic School, a private Islamic school located in Selangor, Malaysia. Both informants (T1 and T2) were senior Arabic teachers known to teach Arabic creatively, use various strategies in teaching, and regularly supervise other teachers.

T1 was a graduate of Arabic language from an International university and has been teaching for more than 10 years. T2 graduated from the Middle East, often asked to train other teachers and has been teaching for almost 15 years. They were informed that their identities and other information would be kept confidential and only aggregated information would be used for analysis. Since this study used small sample size, the findings cannot be generalized to all private Islamic schools.

Due to the small sample size (T1 and T2), the researchers have opted to use manual content analysis. In order to review the transcribed interview and to analyse it meaningfully, coding was made. Coding enabled the researchers to differentiate and assign units of meaning to the information compiled in the study. The coding protocol provided the framework for the researcher to group those summarised ideas into smaller sets of themes and main ideas.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this findings and discussions section, the researchers expected the results to show the creativity of Arabic language teachers in teaching Arabic as a foreign language. Based on the interviews, there were three activities considered as creative in the teaching and learning process: (1) creativity in setting daily lesson plans, (2) creativity during the teaching and learning process, and (3) creativity in evaluating and assessing the success of teaching. The three activities are closely interconnected and cannot be separated in its implementation.

Creativity in Setting Daily Lesson Plans

The first category involved adding more information according to the new topic, especially the initial plan, and how to make students active and cooperative during the teaching and learning process. The first informant (T1), for instance, used to connect the new topic to what students have learned from other languages. While the second informant (T2) put the duration for each step, for example, setting stage change properly. These kinds of teacher creativity are in-line with the idea of connecting teacher interests with his teaching and linking lessons to real-world learning (Chamot, 2004).

In terms of setting the daily lesson plans, actually there are many issues to be considered. In general, Chamot (2004) highlighted that there are eight issues that affect both teachers and learners of foreign languages, i.e. identification procedures of learning strategies, terminology and classification of strategies, the effects of learner characteristics on strategy use, the effects of culture and context on strategy use, explicit and integrated strategy instruction, language of instruction, transfer of strategies to new tasks, and models for language learning strategy instruction.

Based on the two informants experiences (T1 and T2), they have tried to set daily lesson plans creatively using several of the above methods. Both of the informants are considered as professionals in what they are doing, but they have different approaches in teaching and learning the Arabic language. T1 believes to more enjoyable strategies:

Learning should not be always conducted in the classroom. To make the journey enjoyable, I sometimes plan outside activities so students can have fun while studying Arabic language. Believe me that it can positively change their moods. So once every week I plan to have the learning sessions in different places such as *surau*, schoolyard, library, canteen, and sometimes outside of school like Zoo Negara.

While T2 prefers various methods in teaching and learning:

I normally plan short breaks during the lessons and resume when the students are ready for the next sessions. To make the lesson interesting, I plan to make various activities such as conversation, translation, games and role-plays. I believe that students should memorize new vocabularies at least 5 per sessions. I don't mind using both Arabic and *Bahasa Melayu* as long as I can ensure that students can understand well the topic in daily conversation.

Most importantly, teachers' and students' perceptions on effective foreign language teaching might be different. T1, for example, favours a grammar-based approach, whereas his students preferred a communicative classroom. Almost similarly, T2 does not like the static instruction. He said that, "Learning the Arabic language becomes boring if we focus only on using one method." As a

consequence, both T1 and T2 agreed that some students claimed to be unable to read simple Arabic texts and had little interest in learning the language. Brown (2009) suggested that teachers might need to actively seek out their students' perspectives on certain instructional strategies.

Creativity During the Teaching and Learning Process

The second category is creativity during the teaching and learning process. It includes having a variety of attractive activities that can be done in the classroom, such as singing, quiz, educative games, and group competition. According to T1:

Most of students preferred a humorous teacher who could make jokes while teaching the contents of Arabic language. Sometimes we need to use *Bahasa Melayu* to make them understand better. If they are sleepy, ask them to go to toilet and wash their faces. This will keep them awake for the rest of the class.

T1 preferred not to give students homework but encourage them to study in groups. He also promotes using information technology (IT) in class and taking students outside the school:

In order to make students understand the real life situation, I sometimes brought the students outside of the school, such as to the Zoo Negara in order to introduce the characteristic of animals in Arabic as the application of the direct method 'see and tell'. Another option is bringing students to Arabian restaurant so they can communicate with the waiters in Arabic as the application of conversation and speaking and listening skill, and to the Selangor Arabic Centre to introduce the software application for developing four Arabic skill and planning language game connected to the lessons learned.

All of these are somehow like the translation of the recommendation building creativity from Sawyer (2012) which pertains to an inclusive classroom culture in which collaboration and the cross-fertilization of ideas is valued.

Meanwhile, T2 often uses simple examples in introducing hard topics like grammatical concepts and asks students to work in groups. The examples are usually related to students' daily life experiences so that they can understand easily the concept and relate the topic to what they have learned before:

To ensure they understand it well, I normally ask them to write down new vocabularies with complete sentences and discuss with their friends, either in their notebooks or on the whiteboard. For the practice of the four skills of teaching and learning Arabic (*qira'ah, kitabah, muhadatsah* and *istima'*), I try to directly use verses from the Qur'an. For example, explaining *jumlah ismiyyah* and *jumlah fi'liyyah*.

These activities are in line with Jeffrey's (2006) suggestions on the characteristics of creative pedagogies, which include the development of meaningful experiences that offer and reinforce social identities and roles for students; creative learning processes such as intellectual enquiry, possibility thinking, engagement with problems and a range of intelligences; and altered teaching and learning relationships, such as those that enable students to negotiate or lead the learning process.

Both T1 and T1 agreed at one point that all of the above-mentioned strategies have positive results. It mainly makes the students more confident in practicing Arabic especially with their friends.

Before I use this strategy, students felt hesitated to answer even a simple question. They were struggling to speak and afraid of making mistakes. But when I implemented this strategy, students are enjoying the class and they can even create simple dialogues among themselves in the classroom. (T1)

Some students are afraid of making mistakes. But after working with their classmates in groups, their language has improved significantly. They can now make simple conversation. I noticed that they are more confident working in groups. (T2)

Surprisingly, T2 also mentioned that:

Many teachers do not master the content knowledge of Arabic language and are not enthusiastic enough to enrich their knowledge. Perhaps it is due the fact that most of teachers restrict themselves to the textbooks only and sometimes they received little support from the schools.

Hence, perhaps in this situation, Sawyer's (2012) recommendations for building creativity in the classroom can be more carefully reviewed. His synthesis of the "teacher behaviours most commonly associated with creativity" (p. 4) included eight items: 1) openness of attitude and perspective, an inclusive classroom culture in which collaboration and the cross-fertilization of ideas is valued; 2) the deliberate cultivation of surprise and the unexpected as fruitful learning opportunities, that is closely coupled with; 3) trust and a safe environment for risk-taking, in which time is allowed for thinking and incubation; 4) the development of students' self-efficacy; 5) support in the resistance to conformity of peers; 6) fostering of problem-finding, idea generation, questioning of assumptions, and imagination of alternative perspectives and view-points; 7) the mastering of factual knowledge; and 8) explicit modelling of creativity.

Creativity in Evaluating and Assessing the Success of Teaching

The final category is creativities in evaluating and assessing the success of teaching. This includes setting the assessment not only through written and verbal tests but also including individual and group projects. Both T1 and T2 expressed their ways of creativity in evaluating and assessing the success of teaching Arabic through grouping the students. However, T1 focused more on study in groups and T2 took more actions on divided them into different grades:

To evaluate and assess the result of their study, I would encourage them to study in groups. It actually could promote cooperativeness among students in the group by sharing experiences. Furthermore, we often organize Arabic week which can give student new perspective of learning and do not get bored easily. (T1)

In order to evaluate and assess students' performances, I give them a lot of exercises, ask them to take notes and read textbooks. I will divide students into different categories according to their grades, like A, B, C and D. Then we can easily focus on the students one by one. Basically, I will give them more exercises, repeat the lessons and encourage them to ask questions. (T2)

It is evident here that there is no one single pattern in evaluating and assessing the success of teaching and learning process. Even the most accomplished, innovative people in any fields are also highly creative in areas outside their professional lives (Root-Bernstein & Bernstein, 1999). This refers to the idea of connecting teacher interests with teaching and learning process (Root-Bernstein, 2003). Hence, creative people actively draw on outside interests and creative ways of thinking to improve their professional practices.

According to T1:

To make teaching successful, I usually stimulate students' creativity by deliberately observing the world around them, keeping their eyes open for new ideas. So, to make good evaluation and assessment, teachers must keenly observe their classes and students.

Slightly different from T1, T2 believed that:

In order to have successful evaluation, teachers should seek out colleagues to ask questions and share lessons and ideas. I believe that teachers tend to partner with others who teach similar content. Furthermore, to think outside the box, it is good to open up conversations among teachers from different subject matters to discuss areas of crossover. For teachers, becoming an intellectual risk taker comes down to trying new things in the classroom as often as possible. It simply means that teaching practice can only be creative when it is always evolving.

It is clear then, there is no single strategy that could make all the lessons, evaluation and assessment interesting. As Neo (2005) briefly explained, a creative teacher is imagining himself in the position of students, asking how a particular class or group of students would want to learn something and what methods could make a topic interesting for that group. With that, it can be described that creativity is characterized by a learning mindset.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has finally achieved the objectives of the study which are exploring creativity in teaching Arabic as a foreign language at Adni Islamic School, a private Islamic secondary school in Malaysia and describing the application of creativities in teaching implemented by two senior Arabic teachers. The findings suggest that teachers' creativities in teaching Arabic as a foreign language are basically categorized into three: (1) creativities in setting daily lesson plan, (2) creativities during teaching and learning process, and (3) creativities in evaluating and assessing the success of teaching.

In general, the applications of these creativities are in accordance with the message of the teaching of Islamic Principles (Al-Mazeidy, 1993; Al-Karasneh & Jubran, 2010). It is useful and helpful to reach the purposes of teaching and learning process (Lin, 2009; Cropley, 1992). However, due to fact that the interview sample is only two informants, the findings cannot be generalized to other private Islamic schools.

As recommendations, Ministry of Education (MoE) should provide qualified Arabic teachers by training them to have competency in teaching the subject. Teachers, on the other hand, should be creative enough to stimulate students in teaching learning process and always open to new ideas. Not only teachers should set a creative daily lesson plan, but also to engage learning in a fun and enjoyable way as possible. Additionally, in this modern era incorporating the information and communication technology (ICT) in teaching Arabic language could be a viable and effective strategy to enhance student learning. Finally, engaging students in group-based co-operative learning can also make the learning process active and creative.

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