

Tahfiz Students' Attitudes and Motivation in L2 Learning: Through the Eyes of English Teachers

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Abstract

Nowadays, English remains one of the most essential international languages covering various spheres namely entertainment, politics, business, culture, and education. Another area which is also worthy to be investigated is the religious matters. In Malaysia, there has been an increasing demand and inclination for parents to enrol their children in Tahfiz schools and institutions with the hope to shape the children into morally upright individuals. Generally, Tahfiz students possess high Islamic-related knowledge, and due to the Islamic focussed subjects, Arabic instead of the English language is emphasised. This has caused the majority of Tahfiz students to have poor English performance. With a broader aspiration of becoming international *Da'ie* (preachers), it is imperative for these students to be proficient in the English language. If this issue is neglected, Malaysian Tahfiz students would be left behind, failing to take the centre stage in disseminating Islam to the international world, causing dismay and frustration since they possess high level of Islamic knowledge and wisdom, and are expected to uphold the holiness of Islam. Thus, this paper sought to deliver an understanding regarding the attitudes and motivation in English language learning among Tahfiz students. Framed within the qualitative research design, data were collected through focus group interviews with English teachers at selected Tahfiz schools in Selangor, Malaysia to capture their views concerning the attitudes and motivation of their students in learning English. On the whole, three main themes were identified in relation to Tahfiz students' attitudes and motivation in learning English from the teachers' viewpoint which are: 1) a mixture of positive and negative outlook, 2) purposeful language learning and 3) Islamic drives. These key findings are worthy areas to focus on as they can serve as a yardstick to assist the upgrading of Tahfiz students to a higher and respectable standing. The study also contributes to the literature of attitudes and motivation by describing a unique context of Tahfiz students—a rare setting—yet a commendable one, to provide better insights into this group of students in relation to mastering the English language. This study bridges the gap regarding L2 attitudes and motivation in Tahfiz setting. Uncovering the attitudes and motivation of Tahfiz students enables a revived language pedagogy to be implemented for this special group of students. Nevertheless, future studies with comparable context, e.g., Tahfiz in other ASEAN countries, should be conducted to arrive at more conclusive decisions.

Keywords: Attitudes, Motivation, English, Tahfiz, Teachers' Perspectives

Introduction

According to statistical data, there are around 1.27 billion English speakers worldwide either as native or as a second language, slightly higher than Mandarin Chinese speakers of 1.12 billion in year 2022 (Million, 2022). This proves that English is a worldwide communication tool. The fact that there are millions of English speakers across the globe has manifested that English is a dominant language for all sorts of professional and personal goals. In Malaysia, the Malay language is acknowledged to unify the social bonding of the Malaysian society while English has always become an important language since it is utilised as a global language of correspondence in the economic, education and other sectors, hence, exhibiting its unavoidable impact through its various major roles in the country (Abdullah, 2018).

English is regarded as a second language in Malaysia (Gill, 2002). While students are aware of the importance of the English language, there are various factors that influence the learning process of the students at school. Many studies have been conducted to identify the factors that contribute to second language acquisition. For example, Nor et al (2019) conducted a study regarding students' problems in learning English, and they concluded that students' shyness, nervousness, and lack of engagement in participating in the classroom activity are the factors that affect the second language acquisition. Another study by Adwani & Shrivastava (2017) concluded that there are six factors affecting second language acquisition, which are: vocabulary, grammar, interference of mother tongue (L1), self-efficacy, and motivation for second language acquisition. In addition, there is a study by Hiew (2012) which stated that student's learning style, student's perceptions, teaching and learning methods, curriculum, attitude, and motivation may affect second language learning.

According to Alaga (2016), many researchers have widely regarded motivation and positive attitudes as key factors that influence the success of English language learning. Ganapathy (2016) also mentioned that students' attitudes and motivation have been identified as the two most important factors influencing students' success in learning English as a second language. This is further supported by Duc & Thuan, (2021), who stated that students' success can be determined through their attitudes and motivation towards learning English and are regarded as two major attributes that influence how well a student learns a language. Additionally, Fakeye (2010) concluded that one of the most important factors in learning a language is the attitude and motivation of the student. This is aligned with Dörnyei (2001), Oxford and Ehrman (1992), who proposed that learners' attitudes toward and motivation for learning the target language are important factors for second language acquisition.

The Learning of English among Tahfiz Students

There are two main streams of education in Tahfiz schools: a solely Tahfiz education of fully Quranic instruction and an integration of Quranic teaching and academics (Bani et al., 2016). Tahfiz schools that emphasise memorising the Quran and religious studies like Hadith (sayings and teachings of prophet Muhammad S.A.W.), Nahu and Soraf (Arabic grammar), and Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence based on the Quran and Sunnah) are known as Tahfiz education of totally Quranic and Arabic instruction. In contrast, Quranic instruction and academics are combined to create a generation that excels in religion, science, and technology by fusing the Tahfiz curriculum with the mainstream, standardised curriculum known as Ulul Albab (Che-Hassan et al., 2015).

Some previous studies indicate that religious background students have low English skills. For example, a previous study by Ahmad et al (2014) revealed that students who attend religious schools typically have inferior English language skills. Apart from Islamic religious schools, Tahfiz schools share quite similar background of students, though not many studies on English look at the Tahfiz context. The dualistic educational system in Malaysia—Islamic vs. Western-based—leaves a void since students who attend religious and Tahfiz schools are frequently viewed as having poor English language skills. Being proficient in English is important for them since nowadays there are a lot of capable Da'ie, or preachers, who can communicate Islamic teachings in Malay but are unable to converse effectively in English. They have good knowledge of Islam, but their low level of English mastery somehow limits them from becoming global Da'ie or preachers. This is crucial, because as a future Da'ie, they must be good in English too, not only having Islamic knowledge to be spread in their Malay mother tongue. Thus, in the present study, the authors aimed to discover the attitudes and motivation for learning English among Tahfiz students from the perspective of their English teachers.

Attitudes and Motivation

There are many definitions of attitude and motivation that have been proposed by researchers. Motivation can be defined as what drives a person's behaviour or what makes a person want to repeat a behaviour and vice versa (Ahmadi, 2016). Pardee (1990) said that a motive is what encourages the person to act in a certain way or develop an inclination for behaviour. Oxford and Shearin (1994) defined motivation as a desire to gain an objective, combined with the energy to work towards that objective. Additionally, according to Gardner (1985), as motivation plays a significant role in language learning success, motivation is the combination of attempt plus desire to obtain the aim of learning the language, as well as favourable attitudes toward learning the language. According to Brown (2000); Gardner (1985), there are two basic types of motivation: integrative and instrumental. Gardner (1985) stated that motivation plays the role to help lead to a set of goals, either with a strong interpersonal quality (integrative motivation) or a strong practical quality (instrumental motivation) (Dornyei, 1994).

Apart from that, attitude can be defined as something that can influence a person's ideas, feelings, and behaviour (Sen, 2013). Liu (2014) defined attitude as a pattern of beliefs developed over time in a given socio-cultural context which plays a critical role in the learning process. According to Gardner (1985) learners' attitudes toward learning the target language are expected to be more relevant to obtaining a high grade in target language proficiency than learners' interest in learning a foreign language or the people who speak the target language. Hence, positive attitudes and high motivation towards learning the English language are two important factors to determine students' success in learning the language. Correspondingly, attitudes and motivation are recognised as closely inter-related factors and are often investigated together (Mihaljevic, 2012).

Attitudes and Motivation in Learning English

Many studies on attitudes and motivation in language learning have revealed that attitude and motivation are important and have an impact on how well students learn a language (Duc & Thuan, 2021). Additionally, according to the findings by Thang et al (2011), there is a correlation between higher competence levels and enthusiastic attitudes and enthusiasm to learn English. The association between a greater proficiency level and

favourable attitudes and enthusiasm for learning English leads the researchers to the conclusion that attitudes, and motivation are the factors that influence students to reach proficiency level. Besides, a study by Ganapathy (2016) looked at school students' views and motivation in Penang toward the ideal setting and instructional methods. Based on the findings, the researcher confirms that a lack of an appropriate setting and teaching methods led to student developing both positive and negative attitudes and motivation for ESL. Further study by Liu (2014) who explored on attitudes and motivation factors to stimulate potentialities in learning English, the researcher revealed that students' potential to learn English is greatly influenced by attitude and motivation. Lastly, another study by Dital (2012) who investigated the motivation for and attitude towards learning English found that learners were highly motivated and had positive attitudes toward learning English.

Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative research design which took place at Tahfiz schools of Mahaad Integrasi Tahfiz Sains or MITS, under the jurisdiction of the Selangor state government. Guided by the research question: 'What are the teachers' perceptions toward Tahfiz students' attitudes and motivation in learning English?', the aim of this study is to discover English teachers' insights regarding their Tahfiz students' attitudes and motivation towards learning the English language. According to the researchers' initial inquiry to the school administration, there are two English teachers at each MITS. More specifically, this study was conducted at two (2) out of four (4) MITS (at the time of the research) in Selangor namely MITS 1 and MITS 2 (pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality). Thus, all four English teachers at the two selected MITS participated in this study. All the four teachers have extensive background of teaching English, including primary and secondary schooling, as well as a bridging programme known as the Matriculation programme. Below is the demographic information regarding the participants.

| | Participant | Gender | Age | Teaching Experience | School |
|---|-------------|--------|-----------------|---------------------|--------|
| 1 | Mr. Ilyas | Male | 34 years old | 10 years | MITS 1 |
| 2 | Ms. Anna | Female | 29 years old | 3 years | MITS 1 |
| 3 | Ms. Alin | Female | 38 years old | 4 years | MITS 2 |
| 4 | Ms. Hayati | Female | 35 years old | 9 years | MITS 2 |

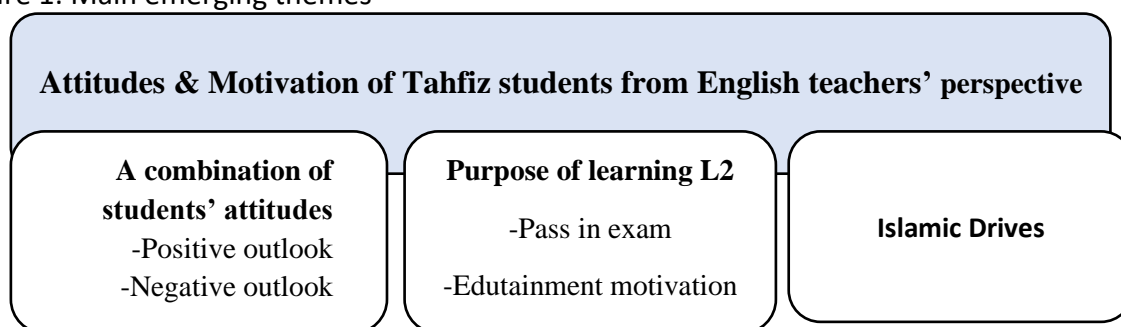
The four teachers were interviewed in two separate focus group interview sessions according to their schools. For the goal of conducting the interview, a semi-structured interview was used, involving both planned-out questions and supplementary, situation-specific inquiries. The interview protocol form was adapted from Creswell (2008) and it was also used to record information during the interviews with the participants as it is "important to have some means for structuring the interview and taking careful notes" (Creswell, 2008, p.233). The respondents were contacted to set up a semi-structured interview through the Google Meet platform. For this study, consent forms for teachers were issued. Before the study was carried out, an official letter was sent to JAIS and to the principals of both MITS 1 and MITS 2, whereby approvals were also secured from those institutions.

The data analysis was based on the interview data that have been transcribed. The findings pertaining to the students' attitudes and motivation were analysed using the thematic analysis technique by (Braun and Clarke, 2006). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the first step when doing the thematic analysis is familiarisation with the data. The second step is doing the coding based on the code that the researcher codes through the data extract. The third step is searching for themes. Next is the fourth step, which is reviewing the themes. The fifth step is defining and naming the themes that emerge based on the analysis. Lastly, the sixth step is writing up which involves doing the analytic narrative and data extractions to convince readers about the analysis. The analyses of the current study were performed following all the recommended steps.

Findings and Discussion

From the interview data gathered, two main themes have emerged regarding the attitudes and motivation of Tahfiz students: a) A combination of Attitudes in learning L2 and b) Purpose of learning L2 in learning English. Adding to that, there is also an interesting point brought up by the teachers, which is unique to the Tahfiz context of the current study that is Islamic drives. Figure 1 below shows the main themes that have surfaced from the analysis.

Figure 1: Main emerging themes



A Combination of Students' Attitudes

i. Positive Outlook

Based on the findings, the teachers view the students as having positive attitudes toward learning English. This is evident through the illustrated excerpts, such as:

"They are very positive in learning English emm i think as a teacher we can help them to enhance their English language" (Excerpt 1, Mr. Ilyas).

"As a teacher myself, I see that they are very positive when using the language" (Excerpt 2, Ms. Hayati).

There are also teachers who admitted that their students work hard during activities in the class.

"They do work hard for example recently I ask them to do emm i think acting okay and they perform very very well very fluent during that acting because they memorise the dialogue but some of them not even memorising the dialogue they do spontaneous, so they do all the work greatly" (Excerpt 3, Ms. Anna).

Adding to that, Ms. Hayati mentioned her students' positivity displayed in the classroom.

The students seem very aaa...energetic and they can't wait for that subject ...and then they can't wait for the teacher to enter the class" (Excerpt 4, Ms. Hayati).

Students with a positive outlook will be more involved in class and eager to learn the English language than students who have a negative outlook and are reluctant to learn and participate in classroom activities. According to Dital (2012), learners are in high motivation if they have positive attitudes towards learning English. This is aligned with the study by Ahmad, Abdullah and Ghani (2014) regarding attitudes and motivation of Islamic studies students in English language. They mentioned that the students held negative attitudes and lacked motivation resulting in poor English performance. In this current study, based on the teachers' views, there are also certain attitudes such as students' reluctance to speak English outside the classroom and their lack of confidence.

ii. Negative Outlook

One of the teachers said that even though her students are quite capable in English, majority of her students tend to speak the language only in the classroom or whenever they are asked to speak.

"Even though they are very good they are really good the language itself in the English language when we test them when the teacher tests them actually, they are quite good in terms of speaking but then, they are reluctant to speak the language. Why is that so? Because the environment - we need to create the environment in the classroom - students tend to speak the language but when they step out outside the classroom, no more" (Excerpt 5, Ms. Hayati).

Another teacher also mentioned the same situation as he realised that his students only speak English when asked to do so, and many of the students lack confidence to speak in front of other people.

"They are very good in writing and reading because they are from various high-profile background for example their parents are lecturers, majority of them, but not all of them, as a teacher I seen the students are lack of fluency in speaking because they don't have the confident to speak English and they don't willingly speak English outside of the classroom" (Excerpt 6, Mr. Ilyas).

Moreover, due to the focus given on Islamic and Quranic-related subjects, most Tahfiz students see Arabic as more important than English, and this has sometimes led them to ignore or to overlook the importance of English in the globalised world.

"Some of them are aware of the importance of English language, but some was not.... That is my view for my students" (Excerpt 7, Ms. Anna).

Another teacher added a similar point by saying that his students take for granted of the importance of English.

"They sometimes said that they forget the importance of English...and... as far I know English will be a second place compared to Arabic. Because it's not that difficult for them, they always.... ..couldn't think.... the importance of English" (Excerpt 8, Mr. Ilyas).

Ms. Hayati also stated that many times, her students question her of why they should learn English instead of mastering the Arabic language, which is the language of the holy book of Quran.

"Because the Quranic language is more obligatory to learn to speak it than English, why don't we learn Arabic" (Excerpt 9, Puan Hayati).

Based on the findings, it could be gathered that the teachers' perceptions on the students' attitudes toward learning the English language are a mixture of positive and negative thoughts. The findings have shown that the students have the interest to learn the language, but most of the time, they refuse to speak the language when they are outside of

the classroom. Adding to that, there are also some students that are not aware of the importance of the English language.

Having Purpose in Learning L2

i. Passing the exams

As mentioned earlier, regarding students' motivation in learning English, two sub-themes have emerged from the analysis, which are passing the exams and edutainment motivation. The findings show that, the main reason students want to learn English is to pass their exams. According to Gardner (1983), instrumental motivation is "Learning a language because of someone or less clearly perceived utility it might have for the learner" (p. 2003). More specifically, a learner is instrumentally motivated when s/he has the desire to learn a language "to pass an exam, to use it when visiting a foreign country and to get a well-paid job" (Wilkins, 1972, p. 184).

The teachers expressed that students see the English language as one of the subjects they need to pass the exams.

"They tend to see the language itself as a part of the subject they need to aaa...acquire in order to pass the exam" (Excerpt 10, Ms. Hayati)

A similar point was stated by Ms. Anna, who mentioned that her students' biggest motivation is because they need to pass exams.

"Examination purpose but not all of them have that kind of thinking okay some of them do really see the importance as i mention before this that why they are very good in English ... i think their motivation the biggest motivation is because of that exam" (Excerpt 11, Ms. Anna).

However, Ms. Hayati always reminds her students that learning English is not only for exams but for new knowledge and for the future.

"For exam purposes or the exam oriented then, they reach aaa... Form 2 and then Form 3 after several brainwash form the teachers from English teacher after some encouragement, that the teacher keeps saying English language is not only for academic and not not only for examination but, then you can make use it okay" (Excerpt 12, Ms. Hayati).

According to the researchers' findings, the teachers also perceive students' goals as being to pass tests and obtain high exam scores as discovered from the interview data. In general, the results indicate that teachers believed their students have high motivation in learning the English language. Next is the second sub-theme, which is edutainment motivation, a factor that piques students' interest.

ii. Edutainment Motivation

The next sub-theme which is edutainment motivation can be referred to as integrative motivation. Because integratively motivated students enjoy learning the L2 and the culture of that community, there should be some sort of enjoyment while learning to be motivated to continue studying the L2 (Wu, 2003). This means that the students participate in the activity because they want to enjoy themselves.

One of the teachers said that the students are seen to be motivated when he implemented edutainment elements i.e., teaching English through the use of songs and movies.

"Another motivation that I realise from my students is they tend to show interest to English songs and movies ... so i also use movie extracts to get them attracted in the lesson" (Excerpt 13, Mr. Ilyas).

Another teacher also agreed that if she included an edutainment element in her classroom activities, her students would be more engaged in her lessons.

"I notice that my students are waiting for my class i don't know maybe because i like to play English song... I like to show them the video that related with the topic that can trigger on the language, I mean the teaching approach itself is the one, the major factor that activate themselves to learn and then you try to be versatile when teaching literature.... but make it more understandable for the students, since the literature content is based on Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia" (Excerpt 14, Ms. Hayati).

Based on the findings, edutainment elements that the teachers incorporate in their teaching and learning of English serve as a motivating factor for Tahfiz students to learn English.

Islamic Drives

Apart from the abovementioned discussion, there is a special emerging theme which is unique to the Tahfiz context of the current study. According to the teachers, Tahfiz students are excellent memorisers because they constantly practise memorising the Quran. A teacher, Mr. Ilyas, stated that his students can use their 'memory power' to practise using the language more e.g., in English activities such as drama, public speaking and debate.

"Yes i can see because they can memorise a page of Quran every day and then read it to Quranic teacher and then read it in front of them every day so this is repeating process everyday they non-stop process so if they can memorise something as difficult as Al-Quran of course how hard is it for them to memorise a simple and basic dialogue in the play or dramas something like that so i think it's a good way la i think" (Excerpt 15 Mr. Ilyas).

Another teacher said that her students realise the importance of English language because her students believe that if they want to preach to non-Malay speaking communities, they have to use an international language.

"They do see and realise the importance of English because English is an international language so English is very important, they do realize that and for me to be a Da'ie ... it's not only by learning Arabic.... that is important but also.... the need of the knowledge about the religion as well and their abilities to speak many in languages...for them to be a good Da'ie" (Excerpt 16 Ms. Anna).

The teacher also advises her students that as Tahfiz students, they should further spread Islam and encourage more people to recite the Quran, which requires them to be conversant and proficient in the English language. This will enable them to reach out to more groups of people.

"I always encourage them if you want to be on the top of the world and then you want to spread Islam...and lead to whatever in Quran so, you have to have the ability have to speak in other language other than Malay, other than Arab" (Excerpt 17, Ms. Anna).

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to shed light on English teachers' perceptions regarding Tahfiz students' attitudes and motivation in learning English. The findings of the current study showed that the students have both positive and negative attitudes towards learning the language. It is also found that motivation of the students is high owing to the students' purposes in learning English. Apart from that, the finding of Islamic drives has emerged as a unique finding of the Tahfiz students in order for them to be respectable global Da'ie in the future.

This study fills the gap pertaining to L2 attitudes and motivation in Tahfiz context. By discovering the attitudes and motivation of Tahfiz students, a reconceptualisation of language pedagogy can be carried out for this group of students so that apart from the highly acquired Islamic and Quranic knowledge that they possess, Tahfiz students are also equipped with good mastery of the English language. This will indeed be an added value for them to serve the Ummah.

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