

## Learning Other's Language and Culture: the Personal Experience from the Perspectives of Learning Theories

(Pembelajaran Bahasa dan Kebudayaan Orang  
Lain: Pengalaman Peribadi daripada Perspektif  
Teori Pembelajaran)

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### ABSTRACT

This study concerns about teaching and learning related to the learner. The authors present their experience both as facilitators and learners in understanding Yemeni and Malay culture. To begin the discussion, the authors present the background of the concept of learning, and learning others' language and culture. To discuss the experience, they use the key theories of humanist, social learning and constructivist. Another important model that needs to be used in adult learning is Knowles' model of Andragogy. This model is used in order to help us to understand the core principles of adult learning: the need to know; the self-concept; experience; readiness to learn; orientation to learning; and motivation to learn.

Keywords: adult learning; learning and teaching; informal learning; self-directed learning; and language and culture.

### ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menumpukan kepada pengajaran dan pembelajaran dan hubungannya dengan pelajar. Para penulis membentangkan pengalaman mereka sebagai fasilitator dan pelajar dalam memahami budaya Yaman

dan Melayu. Penulis memulakan perbincangan dengan membentangkan latar belakang konsep pembelajaran dan pembelajaran bahasa dan budaya orang lain. Untuk membincangkan pengalaman, mereka menggunakan teori-teori utama pembelajaran humanis, sosial dan konstruktivis. Satu lagi model penting yang perlu digunakan dalam pembelajaran dewasa adalah model andragogi oleh Knowle. Model ini digunakan untuk membantu kita memahami prinsip teras pembelajaran dewasa: keperluan untuk mengetahui; konsep sendiri; pengalaman; persediaan untuk belajar, orientasi kepada pembelajaran dan motivasi untuk belajar.

Kata kunci: pembelajaran dewasa; pembelajaran dan pengajaran; pembelajaran formal; pembelajaran sendiri; dan bahasa dan budaya.

## INTRODUCTION

Adults, as Knowles (1980) put it, “accumulate an increasing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasingly rich resource for learning”. According to Johnstone and Riviera (1965), adult learning is “an activity that requires acquisition of knowledge, information and skills through some form of instruction (formal or self-directed)”. Maple and Webster’s (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999) definition of learning, “Learning can be thought of as a process by which behaviour changes as a result of experiences.”

According to Penland (1999), 80% of adults above 18 see themselves as continuous learners and three fourth of them have their own learning project. Among areas of study quoted are personal development; home and family; hobby and recreation; general education; job and religion; voluntary activity; public affairs, and agriculture or technology (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). I describe myself as a continuous learner and in this particular example, my quest for knowledge is related to general education, i.e to widen my understanding about others’ language and culture.

To inquire further about the concept of learning, we are going to use our experience in learning Arabic language and ArabYemeni culture and teaching Malay and Malaysian culture to that particular participant. For the sake of confidentiality, the participant will be known as Mahmood.

We have conducted our ‘language and culture lessons’ informally. According to Coombs (Neal & Hainlen, 2012), informal learning is unstructured and spontaneous learning, it is a by-product of engaging in other activities. It is unstructured in the sense that we do not plan what we are going to cover, the learning happens when we engage in interaction. The spontaneity of the learning is in the sense that, we learn new concepts as they are mentioned in the interaction and not through systematic efforts. To illustrate what we have

learned, the selected learning journals are presented in Appendix 1 and 2. For the sake of clarity, the pronoun "I" throughout this paper refers to the first author.

## LEARNING OTHERS' LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Hall (1966) believes that it is not possible for people to 'divorce' themselves from their own culture, no matter how they try, because the culture has penetrated to the roots of their nervous system and determined how they perceive the world. He believes that most of the culture is hidden and not within our voluntary control, but nevertheless, makes up the warp and weft of human existence. He also implied that people cannot act or interact at all in any meaningful way except through the medium culture.

Problems may arise when they enter a new environment which is markedly different from their own. They become confused and anxious and may appear apathetic and long for surroundings in which their needs are more certain and predictable. This experience is common among newly-arrived migrants, cross-cultural travelers and overseas students. Studies by Bochner (1972) revealed three typical phases that student characterize the adjustment process of an overseas student to the new culture: (1) Positive anticipation; (2) Depression, confusion and hostility towards the host country; and (3) Realistic adaptation.

As I have experienced the cultural adjustment when I was a student in Australia, my focus was to help Mahmood to make his adjustment to Malaysian culture a smooth one. The positive anticipation phase was marked by the positive perception of Mahmood and his wife about the culture of the host country. In the second phase, they had experienced initial confusion regarding their unfamiliarity with the education system of the host country. This did not last long as they had made 'relistic adaptation' to the newenvironment in their host country. Although I expected that his wife had more problem in adapting the new environment, Mahmood told me that the problem was not as serious as I thought, "She was adapted the culture very well from the beginning and she loved Malaysian culture very well. And she never fell even me any hostility towards the host country at all."

This study is important in order to show how learning others' language and culture can improve human communication, especially in regard to cross-cultural communication. Language, as viewed by Fay et al. (2010), Lesdeydorff (2010) is an important part of human communication systems. In the context of a new student in a foreign land, his or her adjustment to a new cultural environment depends on how much he learns. To learn he needs to communicate and interacts with the members of the host culture. This is in line with Maude's (2011) view that adjustment can be achieved through communication with the members of the new host culture.

## THEORIES OF LEARNING

Learning as a process focuses on what happens when a learning activity takes place. Explanations of what happen are called learning theories (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). They made five classifications of the learning theories: behaviourist, cognitive, humanist, social learning and constructivist. These classifications were later termed as ‘key learning theories’. Although Merriam and Caffarella (1999) recognise that there are differences between learning of adults and children, there is no single adult learning of theory developed in order to codify those differences. They however acknowledge that the best effort that contributes to our understanding of adults as learners is the framework of Andragogy, a concept introduced by Knowles. To further examine my learning experience, I will be using the key theories of humanist, social learning and constructivist. As participants in my learning experience are adults, the Knowles’ model of Andragogy will be used to explain principles involved. The outline of the relevant key theories is outlined in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Five orientations to learning

ASPECT	HUMANIST	SOCIAL LEARNING	CONSTRUCTIVIST
<b>Theorists</b>	Maslow, Rogers	Bandura, Rotter	Candy, Dewey, Lave, Piaget, Rogoff, von Glasersfeld, Vygotsky
<b>View of the learning process</b>	A personal act to fulfil potential	Interaction with and observation of others in a social context	Construction of meaning from experience
<b>Locus of learning</b>	Affective and cognitive needs	Interaction of person, behaviour and environment	Internal construction of reality by individual
<b>Purpose of education</b>	Become self actualised, autonomous	Model new roles and behaviour	Construct knowledge
<b>Teacher’s role</b>	Facilitates development of whole person	Models and guides new roles and behaviour	Facilitates and negotiates meaning with learners
<b>Manifestation in Adult Learning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Andragogy</li> <li>• Self-directed learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Socialisation</li> <li>• Social roles</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Locus of control</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiential learning</li> <li>• Self-directed learning</li> <li>• Perspective transformation</li> <li>• Reflective practice</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Merriam and Caffarella (1999) p. 264.

### HUMANIST ORIENTATION

According to humanist orientation, learning process is viewed as a personal act to fulfill potentials. I believe that I have the potential to develop my Arabic speaking skills from elementary to proficiency level, which explains the reason why I embark on this learning. The learning is my personal act to fulfill my potentials. The locus of learning is the affective and cognitive needs. The learning is my act to satisfy my cognitive curiosity and I do it because purely out of interests, i.e. I learn it because I love it.

The purpose of learning is to become self actualized and autonomous. This is true in my case as my motivation for learning is to become self actualized. However, to become autonomous does not yet explain my purpose, as my learning is for self gain. As far as I am concerned, to learn something, I will use whatever avenues available, including enrolling in structured courses. It is true that I can manage my learning autonomously, but to get into the higher level of knowledge, I need somebody to facilitate me.

The teacher's role is to facilitate development of whole person. In this case, my role is to facilitate Mahmood's understanding of Malaysian culture. For Mahmood, his role is to facilitate the development of my Arabic speaking ability. This mutual arrangement is our effort to enhance each other's learning.

### SOCIAL LEARNING ORIENTATION

The social learning orientation views the learning process as the process of interaction with and observation of others in social context. The locus of learning is modeling new roles and behaviour. The purpose of learning is to model new roles and behaviour and teacher's role is to model and guide new roles and behaviour.

As language learning is about words and context in which words are used, social learning is very much relevant in my case. To improve my Arabic pronunciation, it is never enough for me to use dictionary or travel survival books. For example, I learn from a book that the Arabic phrase for "Glad to see you" is "*Anaa saeed jiddan bimuqa balatih*". As the Roman scripts cannot adequately explain the Arabic pronunciation, non native speaker can easily make mistake. Likewise, when Mahmood pronounced '*putra*' as '*butra*', I quickly corrected him, I showed him how to say it correctly. We, therefore serve as models in our learning efforts.

Social learning is about context and socialization, learning can be best facilitated through interaction and communication. To learn, we do not need any classroom, what we need is what the linguists called "the genuine language

event”. Through this, I learn do and don’ts and the appropriate context for uttering certain phrases.

### CONSTRUCTIVIST ORIENTATION

Constructivist orientation is about constructing meaning from experience. A learner internalizes his construction of reality by making meaning and this is dependent on the learner’s previous and current knowledge structure. Learning is therefore a as Driver and colleagues (quoted in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999) viewed as “progressive adaptation of an individual’s cognitive schemes to the physical environment” (p.261).The teacher’s role is to facilitate and negotiate meaning with learners. Learning is done through experiential and self directed learning.

I agree with the notion held by Drivers and colleagues as in language and cultural learning, we have to progressively add new concepts and that has to be learned through our understanding of the relevant context. We keep on building our new words, and at the same time understanding how each of those will be used in the appropriate context. To say, “*Hal tatakallam injiliziyyah?*” is perfectly correct in Arabic grammar, but to ask this in the streets of Cairo, you will be laughed about. In Egypt, the conventional way to ask this is, “*Bitatkallim inglizi?*”

### ANDRAGOGY

Andragogy means the art and teaching of adults. The emergence of this concept can be attributed to the notion that adults and children are differ in their learning. The model of Andragogy was introduced by Knowles in order to highlight the learning of adults. To view my learning and teaching experience through Knowles’ model of Andragogy, we need to refer to the ‘Core Adult Learning Principles’ as outlined in Table 2.

TABLE 2: Core adult learning principles

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ANDRAGOGY: CORE ADULT LEARNING PRINCIPLES
1. The need to know
2. Self-concept
3. Experience
4. Readiness to learn
5. Orientation to learning
6. Motivation to learn

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Source: Knowles et al, 1998, p.4

The need to know concept is very much the case in my learning experience. My motivation of learning is out of curiosity and to satisfy my curiosity I have to know what I need to learn. The need to learn is like the thing that triggers my learning. I believe that the need to know is the powerful tool that stimulates our learning, in this case an informal learning. It determines your focus of learning for that particular day. In formal learning, what you need to learn is already outlined in the course guide, and this somewhat weakens 'your need to know' curiosity.

The self concept means adults are responsible for their own decision. My motivation for learning comes from within myself and I venture the ways to satisfy my need to know. At this time, Mahmood serves as a good model and referent person. When we learn, we use our experience as 'text' for learning, because according to Lindeman in 1961 (quoted in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999), "... the resource of the highest value in adult education is the learner's experience ... A learner's textbook ... already there waiting to be appropriated" (p.222).

Adult learning is life-centred. In terms of readiness, adults learn knowledge that is relevant to their life situations. They are motivated to learn in order for them to perform tasks in their life situations better. For Mahmood, he is interested to learn about Malaysian culture because he is living in the culture. The knowledge on Malaysian culture will certainly helps him to perform better, as Jarvis says (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999), "Those who have been already socialized into a culture that is sympathetic to the dominant culture, or into the dominant culture itself, are more likely to acquire the fruits of education than those who have not" (p. 80).

The last core principle of Andragogy is the motivation to learn. Adults are motivated to learn because of internal pressures. The phrase 'internal pressures' in my context of learning means self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970), learning-oriented learners (Houle, 1961) and learning motivated by cognitive interest (Morstain and Smart, 1974). For the sake clarity, this discussion is spelt out in the succeeding section.

## MOTIVATION TO LEARN

To understand motivation for learning, Houle (1961), and Morstain and Smart (1974) provided the frameworks. Maslow (1970), in proposing five 'levels of hierarchy', regarded self-actualisation as the goal of learning. Merriam and Caffarella (1999), in highlighting Maslow's contribution, emphasise that "educators should strive to bring this about" (p.257).

According to Houle (1961), there are three types of learners: the goal-oriented learners; the activity-oriented learners and the learning-oriented learners. I describe myself as a learning-oriented learner, which according Houle means, 'seeking knowledge for its own sake'. I am not looking for certificate or any other interest; it is just for my personal satisfaction. My interaction with others from different cultures has created interests for me to learn in order to understand their culture. My interests have made me learned basic phrases in languages such as Urdu, Turkish, Japanese, Polish and Spanish.

For Morstain and Smart (1974), motivation to learn can be examined through the use of 'Six-factor solution, where they describe factors for learning as: (1) Social relationships; (2) External expectations; (3) social welfare; (4) Professional advancement; (5) Escape/Stimulation; and (6) Cognitive interests. For me, my learning is more of 'cognitive interest', learning for self gain.

## CONCLUSION

This paper discusses author's experience in learning and teaching language and culture. One aspect that needs to be highlighted is the fact that the learning is done informally without any systematic planning. Learning happens and this is manifested in the learner's ability to increase his proficiency level.

Using the framework of key theories of humanist, social learning and constructivist, the particular experience of learning is examined. I have found that in the experience of learning is very much is compatible with what have been suggested by those theories. For theory of humanist, learning is for the development of a person, and the learning experience is an effort towards that. Learning is very much to do with social context, and language and culture learning is very much to do with communication, interaction and the context. Learning is also a process of making meaning and as a learner, I continuously construct my knowledge through experience.

To further understand the learning experience, Knowles' model of Andragogy was used. This model outlines core principles of adult learning. As an advocate of Andragogy, those principles are very much useful in guiding my process of learning and teaching.

Motivation to learn also deserves to be highlighted. Adults motivation to learn can be attributed to 'internal pressures'. In my context of learning, it means self-actualisation (Maslow, 1970), learning-oriented learners (Houle, 1961) and learning motivated by cognitive interest (Morstain and Smart, 1974).

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## APPENDIX 1

## SELECTED PERSONAL LEARNING JOURNAL

## PERSONAL LEARNING JOURNAL 1

As we were taking a break from Program Development class discussion, I quickly got Mahmood before somebody else took him. I taught just to take this opportunity to learn few Arabic expressions, as Arabic is the language I truly desire to learn. From books, I managed to learn a few expressions, but that would hardly be enough.

I began to converse with him, “*Akhi, tafadhdhal thishrab shai?*”. *Akhi* means ‘my brother’, *al-akh* means ‘the brother’ and *ikhwah* is the plural of *akh*. I understood *tishrab* as ‘to drink’ and *shai* is ‘tea’. He understood but quickly corrected my poor grammar by saying, “*Tafadhdhal lishurbish shai?*”. To show appreciation I said, “*shukran jazeelan*”, it means ‘Thank you very much’. The correct way to respond to this ‘thank you’ message is by saying “*afwan*”, means ‘you are welcome’. I told him that he got the Egyptian accent, they way he pronounces any syllable beginning and ending with “j” as “g” sound. For

instance, “*jazeelan*” is pronounced as “*gazeelan*”; “*Najwa*” as “*Nagwa*”. He acknowledged my sharp observation and stated the fact that he studied in Egypt for his master’s degree.

In return, I taught him some Malay expression. My approach was to highlight Arabic-originated words such as ‘*fikir*’ (think), ‘*akhbar*’ (newspaper), and ‘*musykil*’ (inquire). He seems to be able to build good sentences based on the words. He reminded me of the differences in the word ‘*akhbar*’. In Arabic, ‘*akhbar*’ means news and the Arabic word for newspaper is ‘*waraqah*’.

#### PERSONAL LEARNING JOURNAL 2

To get to Mahmood’s residence, I rang him on the phone. He answered the phone and gave me the direction “Go to Bosnian flat at Seri Kembangan”. To get it clearer, I asked “Which block?” He responded, “Kemp . . . . (unintelligible sound)”. Then I asked him to spell. Yes, it is “Kempas block!” After parking my car, my family and I went to the fifth floor. Mahmood welcomed us with his Yemeni tradition, by kissing his own hand while handshaking with my 5 kids. Here I learned the cultural lesson. My wife, Rosita whispered, “This is probably Yemeni’s way of showing affection towards children, *abang*”. I just nodded my head and anticipated more cultural lesson. Mahmood took me to his study room and we engaged in small topics like the health condition of his wife, the Yemeni culture and the family. My reason for going to Mahmood’s house was actually to visit his wife who got dengue only after few days arriving in Malaysia. We (my wife and i) are longing for multicultural interaction just like what we had when we were studying in Australia. Another thing is to show our hospitality to others from different culture.

My wife and the kids were in the next room. Aisha, Mahmood’s wife was not able to walk or get up due to dengue. I expected some funny things happen as Rosita is not an Arabic speaker and Aisha does not speak good English. Communication was done using basic English words such as ‘good’, ‘children’, ‘husband’, ‘eat’, ‘drink’ and these have to be supported by gestures and facial expression.

Mahmood had troubled himself by preparing the spicy Yemeni tea, something he does not normally do when his wife is around. We were also joined by our children.