

**STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES AND
MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE
ACHIEVEMENT OF SABK SCHOOLS IN
PENANG**

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by

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**CARA PEMBELAJARAN PELAJAR UNTUK BELAJAR DAN MOTIVASI
DALAM PENCAPAIAN BAHASA INGGERIS DI SEKOLAH-SEKOLAH
SABK DI PULAU PINANG**

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji cara pembelajaran pelajar untuk belajar dan motivasi di sekolah SABK (Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan) dalam pencapaian Bahasa Inggeris. Rekabentuk kuantitatif digunakan untuk menyiasat jenis cara pembelajaran dan motivasi dan data statistik diguna pakai dan disokong dengan temu bual separa berstruktur. Pada awalnya, pengumpulan data pada fasa kajian kuantitatif telah dijalankan ke atas 94 orang pelajar dengan menggunakan skala Likert dengan penggunaan kaji selidik Perceptual Style Learning Preference (PLSPQ) dan motivasi. Fasa kedua ialah temu bual untuk triangulasi data yang dikumpul daripada kaji selidik. Responden adalah daripada pelajar-pelajar SABK dalam daerah Seberang Perai Tengah. Analisis deskriptif menunjukkan bahawa pelajar-pelajar SABK mempunyai pelbagai cara pembelajaran untuk belajar. Cara pembelajaran major dan minor diambil daripada penjelasan oleh Reid (1995). Aras pelajar SABK adalah tinggi untuk motivasi instrumen dan motivasi integratif. Interpretasi terhadap aras motivasi telah diambil daripada kajian Khan, Sani dan Shaikh-Abdullah (2016). Tiada korelasi yang signifikan antara motivasi integratif dan pencapaian Bahasa Inggeris dan tiada korelasi yang signifikan antara motivasi instrumen dan pencapaian Bahasa Inggeris. Pelajar-pelajar berada dalam kelompok sederhana dan lemah dalam pencapaian Bahasa Inggeris. Cadangan dalam kajian ini ialah pelajar perlu diberi masa yang secukupnya

untuk mereka mempelajari Bahasa Inggeris kerana asas mereka adalah lemah. Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris juga perlu mengambil kira kepelbagaian cara pembelajaran pelajar tonjolkan. Untuk menggalakkan motivasi pelajar dalam pencapaian bahasa Inggeris ialah dengan menjalin hubungan pelajar dari luar negara untuk menggunakan Bahasa Inggeris dengan pelajar SABK. Cadangan yang diberikan memberi manfaat kepada pihak Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia dan para pendidik akan terus membuat kajian ke atas pelajar SABK agar pelajar ini akan menghasilkan keputusan yang lebih baik dalam peperiksaan PT3 Bahasa Inggeris.

STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES AND MOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACHIEVEMENT OF SABK SCHOOLS IN PENANG

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the learning styles and motivation of SABK (*Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan*) religious school learners in the achievement of the English language. A quantitative approach was used to investigate the types of learning styles and motivation and this statistical data was further supported with qualitatively semi-structured interviews. The quantitative phase of the study collected data from 94 learners using Likert type scales using The Perceptual Style Learning Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) and motivation questionnaires. The other phase was the interview for the triangulation of the data gathered from the questionnaires. The respondents were the learners of SABK school students from the district of Seberang Perai Tengah. Descriptive analysis showed that SABK school learners had a variety of learning styles. The major and minor learning styles were identified amongst these learners and the indicator for major and minor learning styles followed the total score for learning styles by Reid (1995). SABK religious school learners had high level of instrumental and integrative motivation using the interpretation of the levels of motivation by Khan, Sani and Shaikh-Abdullah (2016). There was no significant correlation between integrative motivation and achievement in English and there was no significant correlation between instrumental motivation and achievement in English. They were moderate and weak in their achievement in English. The

suggestions from this study were the learners should be given ample time to learn English as their foundation in the language was poor. The learning of English should make use of the multiple learning styles that these learners had portrayed. To encourage learners' motivation so that they could achieve in English was to have students from other countries to speak with them. From the suggestions given, it would be beneficial for the Ministry of Education and the educators to continue to study on SABK religious school learners so that these learners would have better result in their PT3 English examination.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The motivation and learning styles of Malay Muslim students in the English language achievement are something that is worth the investigation. The Malay Muslims are changing from having negative attitudes towards learning English into a more positive attitude. The students have realised that English is no longer the language for non-Muslims instead the acquiring of this language is needed for the development of self, race, religion and nation (Washima, Harshita & Naysmith, 1996).

There is a strong evidence that suggests that while negative attitudes towards English may still exist among Malay Muslims, the situation is changing and many of them, have positive attitude towards the language (Ratnawati, 2005). After independence in 1957, the Malays have been trying to free themselves of their English masters and the language that was tied to this colonial past. Malay identity is closely tied to the use of the Malay language. However, with the increasing realisation of the importance of English and of the fact that fewer opportunities are open to those who are not proficient in English, many Malays see the need to learn and want to learn the language (Ratnawati, 2005). It is possible to be highly proficient in English and yet maintain their identities as Muslims. It is the knowledge of who they are and believing in the values that they profess that would prevent them from becoming westernised.

English is more than a language and Islam is more than a religion. One of the many areas in which English and Islam come into contact is in the teaching of English

as a second or a foreign language. In the last few decades, much has been written on the attitudinal resistance of Muslims towards English, on the supposed conflict between English and Islam. The need for English teachers to take into account the socio-cultural aspects of learning English when teaching Muslim students, and for Muslims to value the importance of learning English for the purpose of acquiring contemporary knowledge.

The interest to study how students prefer to learn English as a second language is because the belief is that if students show the interest to study and learn in accordance to the way that they like, chances are that the students may excel in learning the language. If the belief is true, then religious school students would be able to excel in terms of their achievement in the English language. However, in the case of the students in the government-aided religious schools or *Sekolah Menengah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan* (SABK) henceforth referred to as SABK, the learning styles, motivation and the performance of the students in English are yet to be studied.

The need to study the learning styles and motivation of the Islamic religious school students with their achievement in the English language is because learning styles have been linked to the success of language learning of the target language. Each student has his or her learning styles and that the styles have their weaknesses and strengths (Reid, 1995). Learners who are aware of their learning styles are expected to use them in a variety of learning situations (Reid, 1995). In addition, the teachers too, should guide students so that they can become aware of their learning strengths and weaknesses.

1.2 Background of Study

When it comes to the study of learning styles and motivation and the students from SABK schools, as for now, there is no extensive study. However, there is a study about SABK schools in terms of the administrative aspect (Ahmad et al., 2014). There is also a study on teachers' personal experience, practices and perspectives with regards to students' learning the second language in Islamic schools. Therefore, is a need to study students in the Islamic education background particularly in the SABK schools in terms of their learning styles and motivation and their achievement in English as it appears to be that these students are weak in the English language and they also hold negative perception in learning the language (Ahmad et al., 2014).

Gardner et al. (1997) state there are many variables that have been suggested as potential attributes to the success of learning a second language. The variables include language anxiety, language aptitude, motivation, attitude, learning styles, self-confidence and learning strategies. The students' attitude and motivation towards learning the language along with their learning styles are crucial in determining how well they will succeed in learning English. According to Gardner (2007, p.10), a motivated person will be "goal directed, expands effort, is persistent, is attentive, has desires (wants), exhibits positive effect, is aroused, has expectancies, demonstrates self-confidence (self-efficacy) and has reasons (motives). In the present study, the researcher is interested in looking into the aspects of motivation and learning styles of the students in Islamic religious schools.

The focus of this study on Islamic schools is because Islamic education has been dominated by the belief that Islamic education has a direct learning on the future

of the Muslim community. The present study wishes to explore the motivation and students' learning styles of students whose background is the Islamic education system. Although research on motivation and learning styles of L2 learners has produced a lot in the literature for decades, there is still yet a sense of ambiguity in different contexts. The exploration on motivation and learning styles with English language achievement has not been extensively conducted with SABK schools in Malaysia.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Not many studies have been conducted with regards to learning styles and motivation especially in the Malaysian context and within the religious school students. The study by Helan (2004) is in one demographic religious school in Malaysia. A study on the Malaysian setting by Washima, Harshita & Naysmith (1996) investigated the attitudes of Malay Muslims secondary school students towards English. Ratnawati (2005) has studied the Malaysian context in which she has looked into the Islamic perspectives on the role of the language and the attitude that Muslim students should adopt towards language learning. She also stresses on the need for English teachers to look into the socio-cultural aspects of learning English so that Muslim learners would be able to appreciate learning.

In the case of the researcher, the experience that she has with her students who give up on their learning and one of the reasons given is that English is ever so difficult and they will not make it even if they have studied very hard for the examination. The concern now is that these secondary school leavers are expected to further their studies at the tertiary level and when they find English is difficult even at the secondary level,

they will not be ready to perform at the tertiary level where English is taught and used (Mohd Adnan, 2017)

It is also observed that SABK students have their styles of learning. They used memorisation to learn second language such as Arabic and English languages. They used this kind of learning based on what their teachers had been doing, and in the recitation of the Al-Quran in which to become a *tahfiz*, one should memorise the verses of the Al-Quran. They are generally rote learners in which they read aloud the text, memorising the text without understanding the meaning of the text. Therefore, the researcher is interested to study the link between the achievement of these students in English and the styles of learning English. From the experience of the researcher who was also an Islamic religious school student, the style of learning when she was a student was through rote learning. She and her classmates would listen to the teachers without interrupting them. She and her classmates were shy in giving ideas and opinions for the fear that they would make mistakes in class. Mistakes were not treated as good, and if they were unlucky, they had to rewrite the whole text that contained with errors.

In terms of the motivation of the religious learners, the researcher and her classmates were mostly of the instrumental motivation. The students were only motivated only if the teacher had focused on her work, and most of the time, the teachers would give drills and exercises for them to complete. The researcher too felt that the command of English had deteriorated because the classmates were reluctant to speak in English. Based on the experience of the researcher and the need to improve the English achievement of the SABK religious school students, this study was deemed necessary.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

This research attempts to look into the students' approaches to learning at the SABK religious schools in the district of Seberang Perai Tengah in Penang. The objective of the study is to investigate motivation and learning styles of the students and how these variables correlate with the outcome in the learning of English language as a second language in the religious schools chosen in Penang.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to help learners to be aware of their own learning styles and motivation and to help them develop strategies for dealing with the diverse demands of the school and life in general. In addition, when students examine their own learning styles with that of their classmates' learning styles, students can learn new strategies for accomplishing tasks.

The main aim of this study is to investigate the learning styles, motivation and attitude in learning English at the upper form level of three religious schools in Penang. The objectives are to:

1. determine the learning styles of SABK learners.
2. determine the major learning styles of the SABK learners.
3. determine the minor learning styles of the SABK learners.
4. determine the level of integrative motivation of SABK learners.
5. determine the correlation between integrative motivation and achievement.
6. determine the level of instrumental motivation of SABK learners.
7. determine the correlation between instrumental motivation and achievement.
8. determine the major learning styles of moderate and weak students?

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions in this study are based on the objectives of the study in which they are:

1. What are the learning styles of religious (SABK) school students?
2. What are the major learning styles of the SABK students?
3. What are the minor learning styles of the SABK students?
4. What is the level of integrative motivation of SABK students?
5. What is the correlation between integrative motivation and achievement?
6. What is the level of instrumental motivation of SABK students?
7. What is the correlation between instrumental motivation and achievement?
8. What are the major learning styles of moderate and weak students?

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study is limited to a group of Form Four students of Islamic religious schools particularly SABK schools in Penang. As such, the findings of this study cannot be generalised to other groups of students in Malaysian schools.

The other limitation of this study is the achievement that the students have received for the PT3 examination. In this study, the researcher is only able to use the achievement of the grades B until E because no one has achieved an A for the PT3 examination. Thus, the researcher is unable to look at students who are at high end of the scale with excellent results in English

1.7 Significance of the Study

This research aims to help teachers to understand what kind of learners their students are. Once the teachers know the students' preferred learning styles and motivation, they can develop effective instructions that make the most of their students' abilities. The understanding of learning styles and motivation will challenge the teachers to rethink their methods to improve students' learning. After all, effective educational decisions and practices must emanate from an understanding of the ways individuals learn (Guild & Garger, 1985). Teachers in these Islamic religious secondary schools should be made aware of the learning style patterns and motivation their students bring into the ESL classroom. They should attempt to discover a connection between how they teach and how the students learn. By this way, they can compile a general profile of their class and then orient their teaching styles to meet the needs of their students.

This research could also have positive social impact as Malaysian Muslims can now be confident to change their mind-sets and not view English as bad or totally "not Islamic". As for the learners, the awareness on the importance of learning English for the use at tertiary level and future workplace will motivate them further to be proficient in the language. Teachers too, should guide the students so that these students can become aware of their learning strengths and weaknesses.

1.8 Operational Definitions

This section gives the operational definitions of the terms specifically for this study.

1.8.1 SABK Religious School

A school that uses the Malaysian syllabus but is owned either by private organisations or semi-owned by the government. *Sekolah Pondok* (literally Hut School), *Madrasah* and other Islamic schools are the original schools in Malaysia. Another type of school available in Malaysia is the Islamic Religious School or *Sekolah Agama Rakyat* (SAR). These schools teach Muslim students the subjects that are related to Islam such as early Islamic history, Arabic language and *Fiqh*. This is not compulsory in most states for young children to be sent to these schools but in Johor it is compulsory to all Muslim children aged 6 to 12 to attend SAR schools as a compliment to the mandatory primary education. SAR schools are funded by respective states and managed by States' religious authority.

Following the sources from the Ministry of Education, to date, the number of registered religious schools as Government-Aided Religious Schools (SABK) is 154 out of 380 Islamic religious schools. The secondary school was categorised into four types of schools namely the Public Religious Schools, the National Religious Schools (owned by the government and state Islamic Religious Council), State Government-Aided Religious Schools (SABK) and common Secondary Religious Schools with no curriculum of the *Diniah* or the Al-Azhar curriculum (Ezad Azraai Jamsari et al.,2012).

1.8.2 English Language Achievement

This is based on the results of the PT3 examination. All the skills tested are in line with the PT3 examination, there are 7 sections for students to complete within the time frame of 2 hours. For paper 1, reading, writing, literature and grammar are being tested for the students. The other paper is the reading and speaking session. The listening test that students will have to sit is similar to the MUET speaking examination.

1.8.3 Learning Styles

In this study, there are 9 variables of learning styles that the researcher investigates to determine the types of learning styles of SABK learners (Refer to figure 1.1) The 9 variables in this study are under the learning styles domain which are individual, kinaesthetic, group, global, auditory, visual, analytical, impulsive and reflective (Dunn & Dunn 1993, Reid 1995).

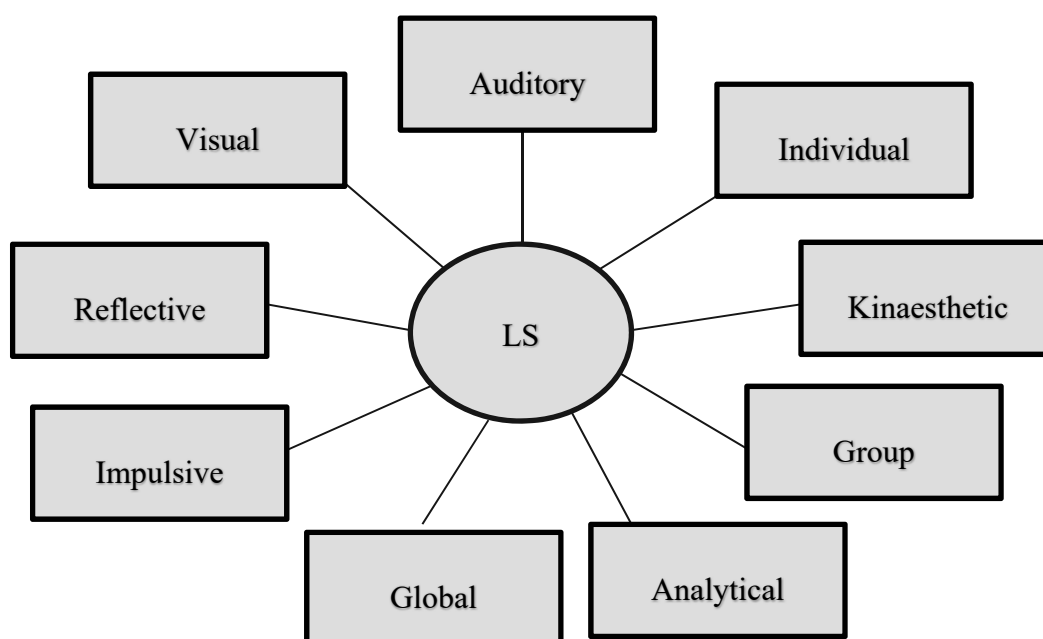


Figure 1.1 The Nine Variables of Learning Styles

Individual learning style is when learners prefer to study alone and feel it will help them to study better. Even if there is a class project, individual learning style learners want to work alone.

Group learning style on the other hand, find that they can get the work done if they work with others. In addition, they learn more when they are put into groups and enjoy working within the group

Visual style learners learn better by reading instructions, textbooks and what the teacher writes on the board. Learners in this style learn better by reading than listening to someone or instructions given by someone.

Auditory learning style learners learn better if someone tells them how to do something in class. Learners too learn better when the teacher gives them the instruction.

Kinaesthetic learning style learners learn by doing something in the class. Learners learn better when they make drawings as they study. In addition, learners also understand things better in class when they participate in role- playing.

Global learning style learners learn better when the concept is explained first, then the details. In addition, learners can work two or more tasks at one time. They also learn better when they have frequent breaks.

Analytical learning style learners learn better in a sequence, that is step by step. They enjoy learning in detail for example the grammar rules. They want the instruction to be explained in detail so that they are able to learn more.

Impulsive learning style learners prefer to take risks when they learn English. They do not mind making mistakes when they learn English.

Reflective learning style learners prefer to take time to think of what they want to say. They worry about making many mistakes especially when they perform grammar exercises. In other words, they do not want to make many mistakes when learning English.

1.8.4 Integrative motivation

In the field of language learning, students in the integrative motivation learn the language because they want to get to know more about the people who use the language and the culture of that language (Gardner, 1985). In addition, there are family members who use the language and that has become a heritage language. Therefore, students have the integrative motivation to succeed in learning the language.

1.8.5 Instrumental motivation

Students who are instrumentally motivated have the drive to learn English because they long to enter pre-university or college (Brown, 2000). Thus, to be able to gain entry into such higher institutions would require them to be proficient in the language. In addition, they also learn English because after they leave school, there is the need for them to go for interviews conducted in English.

1.8.6 Major and Minor Learning Styles

They are indications that learners can best function in the learning styles that the learners had answered in the Perceptual Style Learning Preference Questionnaire (PLSPQ) (Reid, 1995). A score of 38 to 50 for a particular style is the indication that it

is the students' major learning style. Minor learning styles are indications that learners can still learn with these learning styles. A score of 25 to 37 is the indication that the learners are in the minor learning styles (Reid 1995).

1.9 Summary

Chapter One is an introduction that describes the objective and the purpose of this study. Chapter Two reviews the literature on the definitions of learning styles and motivation, the models of leaning styles, the theories of motivation and the conceptual framework. Chapter Three deals with the research design the instrumentation, the quantitative approach, and the procedure of the research. The findings of the pilot study of a selected school had been included in this chapter. Chapter Four presents the findings to answer to the research questions posed in Chapter One. This is followed by the discussion of the results, the implications and recommendations of this research that offer possible research in the future study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

A teacher's role is to facilitate students into learning English as a second language. To do so, the teacher needs to find ways to motivate his or her students. One way to make the students learn is to motivate them and make them aware of their strengths and interests into learning.

Montenayor et al. (2009) stated that the responsibility to engage in learning which include the control, direction and focus is the responsible of the individual learner. Dunn & Griggs (1998) in their studies have found that students learn more and better when they are taught through their identified learning styles. Recognizing students' learning styles not only profits the students but also the teachers as well.

A coherent definition of learning styles allows for better understanding of what learning styles are, and as for this section, the explanation is on learners' learning styles. Learning preference means that the learner favours one teaching method over the other. Learning strategy is adopting a plan action in the acquisition of knowledge, skills or attitudes. This mode deals with attitudes and situational responses. Learning style is adopting a habitual and distinct mode of acquiring knowledge and the behaviour that we have which is not acquired as it is something learners do without thinking (Markham, 2004). Cognitive style that is preferred or habitual patterns of mental functioning; patterns of attitudes and interests that affect what an individual

will pay the most. Dunn & Griggs (2000) believe that learning styles have some biological base; that we are born to have certain learning styles.

In this chapter, the researcher looks into the history of Education in Malaysia. The researcher also looks into the elements of learning styles, motivation and attitude of the religious school students. In this literature, the researcher hopes to link the literature of the learning style and motivation of the religious school learners with the studies conducted in relation to the elements of learning styles and motivation with the achievement of the learners.

2.2 The History of Education System in Malaysia

The researcher looks into the history of the education system as Islamic education. It starts with the education system of the Islamic religious school before the independence and then is followed by the education system after the independence.

2.2.1 Before the Independence

Before English schools came into being, the Malays had their own types of education according to the needs of the Malays. The Malays held Al-Quran classes for their children in which the children were taught to recite the Al-Quran and the basic knowledge of Islam (Asmah Omar, 1992). This was also when the “*pondok* schools” came into being in which the parents sent their children to have better understandings of Islam. Until now this form of education is still being practised, in which the schools are getting aids from the government and from public donations.

The national education system since 1956, has stated that Islam is taught as a single subject known as Islamic Religious Knowledge. In this subject of knowledge, students are being taught about ritual aspects such as the prayer, pilgrimage and other basic articles of faith (Asmah Hj Omar, 1992).

2.2.2 The Education after the Independence

In 1960, there was a review towards the Abdul Razak Committee Report known as the Rahman Talib Report. In this report, it went a step further in which the National language was to be used as the medium of instruction in schools in the country, not only at the primary level but also at the secondary and tertiary levels (Asmah Hj Omar, 1992).

On the one hand, the gradual change to the Malay medium teaching in schools and universities in 1983 was something to be looked for by the Malays, but on the other hand, has led to the poor performance and achievement in English particularly among the rural Malays (Sharifah Zakiah, 2006). The Malay students' problem in English was further compounded by the fact that the teachers who taught them were themselves the product of "the Malay medium teaching" and at one stage when there was a shortage of teachers, the government had to recruit retired teachers into the teaching force (Sharifah Zakiah, 2006).

Nalliah & Thiagarajah (2002) mentioned that English is the second official language after Bahasa Melayu and not the second language as defined by linguists. This is because English language is only used when the subject is taught in school but not the language used at home. Thus, by looking at the past history of the education in Malaysia, gives a clearer understanding of how English has now become the second

official language and also the drop in the usage of English especially amongst rural Malays.

Before the gradual abolishment of the English-medium schools in the 1970s, almost all the subjects in these schools were taught in English. In 1982, within the period of 12 years, English is no longer the medium of instruction (Nalliah & Thigarajah 2002). The situation has changed entirely as all the subjects are taught in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language. This has resulted in an unfavourable challenge to the learning of English as there is a drastic drop in the English standard amongst the students in Malaysia (Helan, 2004)

2.2.3 English Language in Malaysian Classrooms

The conversion of the English schools to the national schools was to provide an education system that was national in nature from primary to tertiary level. The education policy also sees to it that English is taught as a compulsory subject in all schools in Malaysia and not only confined to English schools in big towns (Asmah Hj Omar, 1992).

Malay and English are used when different ethnic groups interact at social level. In social interaction, it is quite difficult to determine the language of choice of English-Malay bilinguals. Two Malays who are Malay-English bilinguals may resort to code-switching between English and Malay (Sarjit Kaur, 2003). The researcher has experienced this in her school in which the Malay teachers resort to speaking Malay even when they are both teaching English. Furthermore, the teachers will also discuss the content subject in their mother tongue instead of English. Thus, it is indeed a

challenge to instil the use of English amongst students if the teachers themselves do not portray as being the role-models of the language.

The English language becomes one that communicates with others' own cultures, values, expressions and meanings. For the means of communication to be effective, we must ensure that the English that we use is understood by the interactors who come from other nations and also operate in business environments in various parts of the world (Sharifah Zakiah, 2006). Mastery of the language amongst students is then essential as mastery of the language gives students additional strength because it enables them to reach out effectively to various countries on the international platform (Sharifah Zakiah, 2006). As mentioned earlier, the interaction can be done when students interact with one another in the classroom using English without the need to code-switch between English and Malay languages.

Lee et al. (2014) mentioned that Malaysian classrooms were culturally diverse and therefore, code-switching was being practised not only by the learners but by the educators as well in order to facilitate the learning of the students. In their study, the aim was to find out if the students favoured the practise of code-switching from English to other languages while the instructor was teaching. The findings from the research were that the students did not see code-switching as an effective method in enhancing students to be attached emotionally and the students' negative perception of their lecturers who had practised code-switching. These students felt the instructors were incompetent in the English language which then might affect their confidence towards the teachings by their instructors. As for the religious school students, the study on the use of the English language and whether they have less confidence in

themselves as well as their teachers who practise code-switching has yet to be explored.

2.2.4 Education at the Islamic Religious Schools

Islam is very closely related with the Malay race in Malaysia. The Malaysian Cultural Congress which convened in 1971 accepted Islam as an integral component of the Malay culture. Even though Islam is the official religion in Malaysia, studies about the students who are in the Islamic religious schools have yet to be conducted in terms of their learning English as a second or a foreign language. In line with such view, this has prompted the researcher to investigate in depth of the religious school students particularly students from the SABK schools.

The interest to study on the religious students is also because of the experience that the researcher had as being one of the students in a religious school in Malaysia. From her experience, the attitude, motivation and learning styles of the students with regards to Malay and Arabic languages differ from that of the learning of English that is being taught in schools. English is perceived mostly by many Malaysian students as a foreign language as English is not the mother tongue and they do not use the language as much as they are supposed to in their daily conversation (Hamidah, Fisher & Rich, 2014)

The name *Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan* (SABK) or government-aided religious school is the new name for a number of SMAN and SMAR schools, both secondary and primary, registered under the Education Act 1966. By this Act, SABK is categorised as a government-aided school similar to SRJK or National Type (Chinese) Primary School and National Type (Tamil) Primary Schools (Sia, 2005).

Prior to this, both types of religious schools, SMAN and SMAR were only registered under the State Islamic Religious Council Enactment. The SABK is the outcome of a proposal in the Tan Sri Murad Special Committee Report which aims to strengthen or empower the school and arrange its registration process under the Ministry of Education of Malaysia. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed by the two parties to avoid any future disputes. It is implemented nationwide since the year 2004. The major part of its contents is the same but there are small differences between each state in Malaysia to suit the individual state and the respective schools (Umar, A. et al., 2012).

The process to register *Sekolah Menengah Agama Rakyat* to government-aided schools was made possible after the directive was made by the then Prime Minister, YAB Tun Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi. It came about after the Special Committee Report known as Tan Sri Murad Special Committee that proposed the *Sekolah Agama Rakyat* to be registered with the Ministry of Education so as these schools would be getting aids and financial support. In addition, the registration with the Ministry of Education would also mean that the quality of education would be improved for these particular schools. In terms of the aids for the school as in per capita and also other financial aids for the school from the Ministry of Education (Umar, et al., 2012). In addition, the assistance from the Ministry of Education included issues like the school management, the recruitment of the teachers with qualifications required by the Public Service Department, the teachers' salary, subject per capita and all government assistance. However, the school and the compound were still under the ownership of the school management board. The *Diniah* subjects and curriculum were also retained.

The interest of the society towards the Islamic religious school seems to be encouraging. Previously, they were seen as schools for students who misbehaved or who did not have the qualification needed to be in any government schools. This has changed over the years when religious schools registered to be part of the schools in the Ministry of Education. This is based on the application in which the number of students had exceeded to the number of places that have been reserved by the school (Jaffary Awang et al., 2008). This phenomenon has happened not only in schools that are being run by the federation of Malaysia but also by schools that are being run by the state governments (Jaffary Awang et al., 2008). This has shown that the hopes and confidence levels of the society towards Islamic religious schools are high especially in terms of their credibility to provide a sound education system besides the teachings of the religion Islam.

However, in terms of the level of motivation in the learning of English as a second language as this has yet to be studied. From the experience of the researcher as a former student of a religious school, students were motivated to learn but in terms of English as a language to be acquired, they did not favour it as the students did see the purpose of them learning the language as their aims were to study in the Middle East.

In terms of other subjects being taught besides the English language, the teachers too do not have to explain explicitly to the students as the students have the initiative to do their own learning. These students are not only getting the instructions from the teachers but they have their own learning styles such as developing group work, and asking the teachers for clarification.

In a study by Mohd Ismail Mustari et al. (2004), they have conducted the study with regards to the characteristics of the students in an Islamic school. Their concern was in relation to establishing SMAKJ (Johor Islamic Secondary School) in its vision to bring in students who not only excel in their behaviours but also in their academic achievement. Thus, they felt the need to study the well-being of the students and the characteristics of rebuilding their behaviours from the view points of the students, teachers and the board of governors of the SMAKJ.

According to Jaffary Awang et al. (2008), the school environment of the students in the religious schools can influence the students' thought and self being. One example is that the teachers and the students either inside or outside the classroom can be one of the factors that can shape the character of the students. A study was conducted by Mohd Ismail Mustari et al. (2004) which looked into the factors that would influence the attitude of Islamic religious school students in Johor. They found that the attitude of the students was influenced by the environment to which the students were exposed. When the person is admired by his or her friends, this will eventually raise the level of his or her self-esteem. Having high self-esteem will make the environment even healthier. Less active children or children that are often sick will cause them to be left out in their studies as most of the time spent in class would be at the sick bay (Mohd Ismail Mustari et al., 2004).

2.2.5 Studies on Islamic Religious School Students

In terms of students' attitude as seen from the perspective of the teachers, the study conducted by Jaffary Awang et al. (2008) had shown that in general the teachers

agree that the students' attitude and their achievement level were good. The teachers however, disagreed that negative influence existed in the Islamic religious schools.

Sharifah Zakiah (2006) in her study of the preferred learning styles and learning strategies, motivational and difficulties in language learning among rural form four mentioned that the unwillingness to learn and communicate in English will not make an individual less intelligent, but it will render him or her to be handicapped in the borderless global society. The attitude of the students who do not wish to take seriously the learning of English as a second language will make them to be less fortunate to compete with other students at the global level. That is also the reason for the implementation of the New National Education Blue Print (2013-2025) on the rising importance of the English language for the immediate actions to be taken care of for students with low proficiency problems.

Jaffary Awang, et al (2008) in the study on socialisation amongst religious school students, have looked into the relationship between the teaching of Islam and the thinking and behaviours of the students. School is a place where there is the assimilation and the shaping of the behaviours and characters of the students especially in their intellectuality. The process of religious socialisation is the process in which the religion, Islam, is put as the base of character building in the students (Jaffary Awang et al (2008).

In a study by Helan (2004) on one religious school in one of the states at the northern region of Malaysia showed that the SPM (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*) results was surprisingly better than the results achieved at the state and national levels. In his research, he needed to find out the learning style profile of these students so as to have

a better understanding on how these groups of students learnt because these students' English was a foreign language after *Bahasa Melayu* and Arabic. It would also be interesting to study at other Islamic religious schools especially in the performance of ESL and how these students had surpassed the performance of students from non-Islamic religious schools. Looking into the previous studies of the development of the education system at the Islamic religious schools has led the researcher to discuss the next section of the literature review the elements of the learning styles, the types of motivation and the attitude of the learners towards learning.

2.3 Definitions of Learning Styles

Before we can examine what learning styles are, we need to understand the features of learning styles. What is learning style? A style is a combination of many biologically and experientially imposed characteristics that contribute to learning, each in its own way and altogether as a unit. Dunn & Dunn (1993) have mentioned that learning style is the way which each learner begins to concentrate on, process and retain new and difficult information. However, not all learners are able to concentrate, process and retain new and difficult information at the pace similar to the rest of the students. Thus, we need to be aware of such differences and that learners have different ways to process and retain such information.

To identify a person's learning style pattern, it is necessary to examine each individual's multidimensional characteristics to determine what is most likely to trigger each student's concentration, maintain it, respond to his or her natural processing style (Dunn & Dunn, 1993). Keefe (1990), an expert on learning styles at the National Association of Secondary School Principals, defines learning styles as