

Language Acquisition, Linguistic Creativity and Achievement: Insights from the Qur'an

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Abstract. This paper discusses the relationship between learning the Qur'an by heart and academic achievement, language learning and linguistic creativity. It also attempts to arrive at Qur'an-grounded foundations for language acquisition theory. This opinion paper outlines the basis from which to consider the Qur'an not only as a book of religious teachings but also as a linguistic miracle for Arabs. In this vein, the paper considers available research evidence documenting the relationship between language creativity and learning the Qur'an and establishes a relationship between learning the Qur'an and scholastic achievement in other school subjects. Research has indicated that the Qur'an can be a strong source for teaching thinking methods and creativity. The paper re-considers language acquisition in the light of the Qur'an and research investigations into its effects on creative language learning based on relevant scholarly Arabic writings. The paper ends with pedagogical notes and implications for L1 and L2 learning.

Keywords and phrases: Qur'an, language acquisition, language learning, linguistic creativity, language aptitude/innateness

Introduction

Past researchers have detected a relationship between the language of religion and creative production over a wide range of scholarly disciplines, including language learning (Milgram and Milgram 1976; Milgram et al. 1978; Keane 1997), contending that ritual language induces creative thinking and that creativity can be attributed to the language of religious rituals (Csordas 1987, p. 445). Muslims, therefore, often encourage their children to memorise and comprehend the sacred text of the Qur'an. Common Muslims also, draws parallels between creativity and the ability to memorise and comprehend a large, complex text. This competence, referred to in relevant literature as "precocious literacy", develops in only a few children. Precocious literacy is a form of intellectual giftedness frequently occurring at an early age (Henderson 1993).

The relationship between language and religion can be especially evident, for instance, in the context of proselytisation and conversion, through which language may help make the supernatural believable or, at least, conceivable (Harding 1987; Stephen 1997). In this context, Keane (1997) observed that:

"Language is one medium in which the presence and activity of beings that are otherwise unavailable to the senses can be made presupposable, even compelling, in ways that are publicly, yet also subjectively available to people as members of social groups" (p. 49).

Religious observance, furthermore, tends to demand a highly marked and creatively self-conscious use of language resources. Keane further indicated that "no single set of formal or pragmatic features is diagnostic of religious as opposed to other marked uses of language, such as poetic or ceremonial speech" (op cit., p. 49).

Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the book of divine guidance and direction for mankind, considering the original Arabic text to be the final revelation of God. Muslim believers commit to keeping the text in their hearts, i.e., to commit the Qur'an to memory and heart and to abide by its teachings.

Muslims regard the Qur'an as the culmination of a series of divine messages that started with those revealed to Adam, regarded in Islam as the first prophet, and continued with the Scrolls of Abraham, the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David and the Gospels of Jesus.

The view of these books in Islam differs from Biblical views. To a Muslim, all of these books are divine revelations, devoid of any misrepresentation by human error at the time they were revealed. They have all come from the same lamp, i.e., from a divine, heavenly source. Muslims believe that the Qur'an, an extension of these books that seals them and rules over them, was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)¹ in parts and not as a whole. Thus, the Qur'an was revealed at intervals on different occasions during the Prophet's life because it addressed not only issues related to faith but also other issues related to life events and incidents that serve as general rulings for Muslim life.

Initially, the Qur'an was communicated by word of mouth; only toward the end of Muhammad's (PBUH) life was it documented by his companions. The text of the

¹ PBUH is short for Peace Be Upon Him, an honorary way to address the Prophet of Islam as it is recommended in his Hadiths and in the Qur'an itself.

Qur'an was compiled in the time of Abu Bakr, the first caliph, and was standardised in the time of Uthman, the third caliph (Al-Sindy 2009).

The Qur'an was sent in the language of the Arabs, who were known for their linguistic talent, especially in poetry. Traditionally, poetry and other literary forms, such as narratives, signalled giftedness, an idea shared by modern applied linguists and anthropologists. While linguistic anthropologists focus mainly on traditional oral art, some researchers have argued that the framing and critical potential of linguistic performance is keyed by the more fleeting use of poetic and/or other creative language in everyday interactions (Maybin and Swann 2007).

Most Muslims have a strong interest in starting their children from a tender age to memorise and comprehend the sacred text of the Qur'an, which consists of a large number of verses, systematically arranged in a particular order in chapters (known as surahs) that should be memorised verbatim, as was revealed to Muhammad (PBUH), with no vocal or written misrepresentations.

As such, the Qur'an has added value to the cultural concept of "language" as manifest in the first words of Revelations: "Read! In the name of your Lord who created mankind from a clot of blood". Throughout the Glorious Book, the Qur'an considers language a divine gift:

"And He taught Adam all the names (of everything), then He showed them to the angels and said, "Tell Me the names of these if you are truthful." They (angels) said: "Glory be to You, we have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Verily, it is You, the All-Knower, the All-Wise." He said: "O Adam! Inform them of their names," and when he had informed them of their names, He said: "Did I not tell you that I know the Ghaib (Unseen) in the heavens and the earth, and I know what you reveal and what you have been concealing?" [Chapter 2 (The Heifer), Verses 31–33]

Emphasizing the significance of language is not a peculiarity of the Qur'an, however. Prior divine books of the major Abrahamic religions, the Bible and the Torah, also stress the fact that language came via divine inspiration. According to the King James Bible:

"And out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every fowl of the air; and brought them unto Adam to

see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature – that was the name thereof." (Genesis 2: 19)

These prior books, however, did not elucidate the significance of language as did the Qur'an. More frequently, the Qur'an emphasises the fact that language is the vehicle of thought and communication. In fact, the Qur'an ridicules and further dubs infidels as dumb and deaf:

"Verily! The worst of (moving) living creatures with Allah are the deaf and the dumb, those who understand not (i.e., the disbelievers)." [Chapter 6 (The cattle): Verse 22]

This verse, as well as others, patently expresses the relationship between language and perception, understanding, analysis and critical power.

This study seeks to bring together the various ideas and insights into first- and second-language acquisition implied by the Qur'an. There are several verse that indicate that language acquisition is a developmental process that occurs in phases and can be nurtured or impeded by the environment; some of these ideas are compatible with modern theories of language acquisition. There are also some insights and suggestions that are not commensurate with current theories of first-and/or second-language acquisition, such as the theory of the origin of language. This paper highlights points of concurrence and points of difference with current theories of first language acquisition and/or second or foreign language learning. Hereafter, the writer draws implications for language acquisition theory.

Section I

The Qur'an as a linguistic miracle: implications for creative language use/output

The Qur'anic text is a linguistic miracle and was intended to challenge Arabs fluent in classic Arabic and poetry at the time it was revealed. Poetry, as other literary forms, like narratives, signalled linguistic giftedness, according to traditionally teaching. Modern applied linguists and anthropologists also subscribe to this view of poetry. In other words, while linguistic anthropologists focus mainly on traditional oral art, some researchers argue that the framing and critical potential of linguistic performance is keyed by the more fleeting use of poetic and/or other creative language in everyday interaction (Maybin and Swann 2007). The most eloquent of Arabs-Prophet Mohammed-came to challenge them to produce a product equal to the Qur'an, either in meaning or in language. In Chapter 41 (Explained in Detail), Verse 44, God says:

"And if We had sent this as a Qur'an in a foreign language (other than Arabic), they would have said: "Why are not its verse explained in detail (in our language)? What! (A Book) not in Arabic and (the Messenger) an Arab?" Say: "It is for those who believe, a guide and a healing. And as for those who disbelieve, there is heaviness (deafness) in their ears, and it (the Qur'an) is blindness for them. They are those who are called from a place far away (so they neither listen nor understand)."

In Chapter 2 (The Heifer), Verse 23, it is said,

"And if you (Arab pagans, Jews, and Christians) are in doubt concerning that which We have sent down (i.e., the Qur'an) to Our slave (PBUH) then produce a Surah (Chapter) of the like thereof and call your witnesses (supporters and helpers) besides Allah, if you are truthful."

In Chapter 11 (Hud), Verse 13, it is also said,

Or they say, "He (Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) forged it (the Qur'an)." Say: "Bring you then ten forged Surahs (chapters) like unto it, and call whomsoever you can, other than Allah (to your help), if you speak the truth!"

In Chapter 10 (Yunus), Verse 37 and 38, it is said,

And this Qur'an is not such as could ever be produced by other than Allah (Lord of the heavens and the earth), but it is a confirmation of (the revelation) which was before it (i.e., the Taurât (Torah), and the Injeel (Gospel)) and a full explanation of the Book (i.e., laws, decreed for mankind) - wherein there is no doubt - from the Lord of the 'Alamîn (mankind, jinn, and all that exists). Or do they say: "He (Muhammad (peace be upon him)) has forged it?" Say: "Bring then a Surah (chapter) like unto it, and call upon whomsoever you can besides Allah, if you are truthful!"

From the perspective of cognitive neuroscience, humans have a genetic predisposition towards language, what Pinker (1994; 2002) called an "instinct for language." Chomsky (1995), in his book on the minimalist programme, used the term "Universal Grammar" (UG) to describe initial linguistic knowledge (see p.

166). Edelman and Waterfall (2007: 257) explained the minimalist programme as follows:

Minimalism seeks to describe the knowledge of language (that is, grammar) using a minimum amount of theoretical machinery. Its name expresses the overarching meta-theoretical principle according to which the derivation distance, as measured by the number of steps needed to link meaning and sound, should be as small as possible. That is, the process that maps thoughts to utterances and vice versa should resort to no representations other than those that are "conceptually necessary".

Hauser et al. (2002) maintained that such "innate dispositions" are tantamount to the notion of "universal grammar". Present-day researchers have replaced the notion of UG with a more general notion of the faculty of language (in a narrow sense, which includes the capacity of recursion, the existence of which is implied by the characteristics of UG). This replaced term of language faculty, however, is not new to Chomsky; Chomsky (2000) referenced the initial state of language faculty (see p. 4).

This language instinct is nurtured by interaction with caregivers to mould brain development and foster the neural re-organisation of early linguistic input which, if provided soundly in a good order, can hypothetically help reset language parameters. This often occurs very early, by the age the child can learn a sequence of two words—that is when s/he starts to perceive language. In fact, established theories of parameter-setting all define the process as one of perceptual learning, best described by Wexler and Culicover's (1980) "learning on errors" approach to learning grammatical properties and the "Principles and Parameters" framework in Gibson and Wexler (1994). Wexler (1998: 31) aptly observed:

Since children have set the parameters correctly before instantiating these values in productions (i.e., they have set the parameters by the end of the one word stage), the children have learned the parameter-settings without making responses which involve the parameters. We can say that the learning of parameters is a kind of perceptual learning, since it is done perceptually, rather than behaviourally.

Further research thoroughly documents the multilingual talents of infants, who shift at 10 months from the ability to perceive minimal sounds (phonemes) in all languages to perceive solely the phonemes of the language environment in which

they live. Surrounded by an endless flow of phonemes, prosodic cues and acoustic patterns aid the ability of babies to detect word boundaries. This observation closely touches on the notion of a universal grammar that indicates a set of principles and maxims of grammar shared by all languages and innate in all humans. The idea that there is a universal grammar supports that this parameters—setting rules can potentially explain language acquisition in child development. Recent research has further favoured the notion that the acquisition mechanisms of universal grammar rules are potentially available to the second language (L₂) learner to expand to a second language (Lasnik 2002; Aarts 2006; Schachter 1996; Parisse 2005; Francis 2010). The availability of a limited number of language parameters and rules flexible enough to be used in numberless language use situations constitutes the creativity of language production, which is characterised by structural and lexical intricacies that "appeal the human capacity for generating what appears to be an infinite variety of novel utterances" (Edelman and Waterfall 2007: 256).

In the language of mothers and caretakers (and, perhaps, Qur'an teachers who teach it to young children at an early age), clauses tend to be grouped under an intonation contour that is clearly marked by the lengthening of the terminal segment and by modulation of vocal pitch at the end of the clause. These prosodic groupings are generally consistent with grammatical organisation (syntax), thereby serving to parse meaningful units.

The memorisation of the Qur'an provides training at three levels that conform to the three levels of representation of minimalism;

In keeping with this notion, Minimalism posits three levels of representation: (1) Logical Form (LF), which encodes the meaning of a structure; (2) Phonetic Form (PF), which contains its overt sound pattern; and (3) Syntax, which mediates between LF and PF. Syntactic representation, then, is defined as the minimum number of steps needed to link meaning and sound. The inner workings of Syntax consist of 2 fundamental operations: Merge, which combines lexical items and phrases into trees; and Move, which moves elements along the tree based on certain requirements. (Edelman and Waterfall 2007: 257)

At the onset, children memorising the Qur'an internalise the form of Qur'anic structures at the surface level by conforming to the sound representations of such forms and also by linking the phonetic and logical forms to meanings. Qur'an teachers try to enable these processes, especially given that many of the verses of the Qur'an share similar structural forms, which could possibly be confusing for

pupils. Through time, as experience, common sense and numerous anecdotes of children memorising the Qur'an tell us, these children will gain a deep knowledge of the grammar of the Qur'an—a set of standard grammar universals appropriate for learning classical Arabic.

People who memorised the Qur'an at an early stage manage the grammar of Arabic better than those who lack systematic education in the Qur'an. Qur'anic learners produce novel grammatical speech that emulates the standard language patterns of Qur'anic expressions (Al-Shehri 2010), much akin to the two processes of *merging* and *moving* described above by Edelman & Waterfall. Qur'anic learners reset or acquire the standard rules of Arabic grammar or the parameters of Arabic that match the innate grammar universals in their Language Acquisition Devices (LADs) when they are taught a book of Arabic linguistic corpus as widely used as the Qur'an – a process known as *parameterisation*.

Additionally, some researchers (Milgram and Milgram 1976; Milgram et al. 1978) have detected a very strong relationship between the quantity and quality of creative activities in such areas as language arts, writing, music, drama or social leadership in high school seniors ($r = 0.92$ and 0.89 for boys and girls, respectively), concluding that a wide variety of activities, even at a superficial level, is necessary for unusual and excellent creative attainment.

The Qur'an, being an exemplary text of standard classical Arabic, provides an ample model text (oral or written) for resetting the parameters of language in the Broca region of the human brain to foster grammatical and stylistic correctness.

In this vein, Al-Kubaisy (2009) indicated that learning the Qur'an helps develop creative language use and the creative production in Arabic. He suggested that learning the vocabulary of the Qur'an can help effectively develop synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, polysemy, metonymy and collocation, which eventually helps in developing linguistic creativity. The following diagram charts how learning the Qur'an induces creative language use.

The few studies tackling the relationship between language creativity and learning the Qur'an (Jäkel 1999; Shokr 2006; Al-Harthy 1999; Al-Thubaity 2002; Alfi 2004) have found that learning Qur'anic text through critical and analytical understanding, reciting and memorising is conducive to creative language production in oral and written skills; it can also enhance performance in grammar acquisition (Al-Ghamdi 1995; Al-Oraify 1991; Saber 1996). Al-Sweidy (1994) further explored the relationship between Qur'an learning and vocal reading and writing skills in Qatar, identifying a positive correlation between Qur'an learning and enhanced vocal reading skills. Al-Magamsy (1991) reported similar findings

in his study on the role of memorising the Qur'an in enhancing reading skills. There is also a correlation between learning the Qur'an and the general creative factor (Al-Mushaikhah 2000; Al-Thubaity 2002).

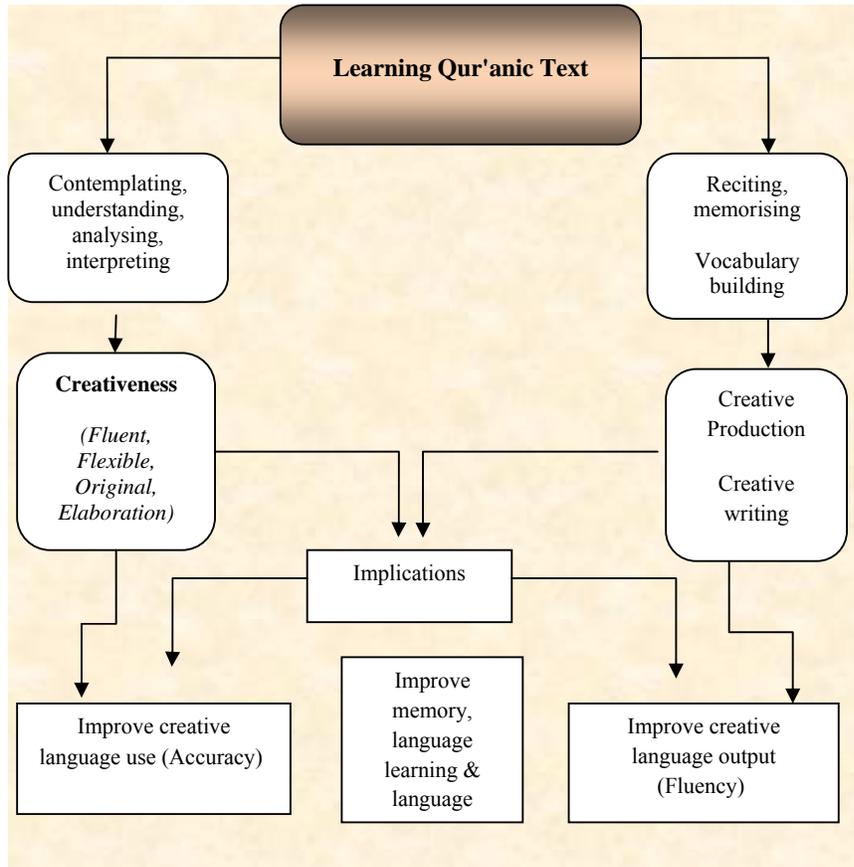


Figure 1. The Qur'anic Text, Creative Language Use and Creative Language Learning: Implications for Language Learning
 Source: Al-Dhahri (2010)

Furthermore, researchers have found a strong positive correlation between Qur'an learning and writing skills. In this vein, Mu'alem (2001) investigated the effects of Qur'an learning on the development of receptive skills in primary school students. Mu'alem's findings indicated that Qur'anic school students outperform

their peers in regular schools in both listening comprehension and reading comprehension. More significantly, Al-Kubaisi (2009) showed that Qur'an learning develops holistic language, especially reading, writing, listening, pronunciation and speaking skills. That study also showed that Qur'an learning is conducive to the development of divergent thinking skills.

Past research has examined the effects of the study of the Qur'an for achievement in disciplines of knowledge other than language. Al-Ghamdi (1995), in his study of the impact of Qur'anic schools on achievement in elementary students in Jeddah, revealed that the study of the Qur'an led to improved performance in favour of the comparison group. Furthermore, Maymani (1986) concluded that learning the Qur'an develops critical and creative thinking skills. In addition, Al-Thubaity (2002), in a correlational study designed to recognise the effects of Qur'an learning on the development of creative skills in primary school students in Saudi Arabia, concluded that Qur'an learners were more creative than their non-memorising peers in all dimensions of the Torrance's Figural Creativity Test.

Studying the Qur'an also improves memory processes and language learning, which can help improve creative language production (Malakawy 1994; Dweidy 1996; Maymani 1986; Al-Thubaity 2002). These findings have been schematically represented in Figure (1).

The Qur'an describes innateness (as elaborately examined in the next section) with its Arabic equivalent "fitra", which refers to a natural propensity to acquire skills, knowledge and affect, starting with human language. This notion of innateness, as applied to language and as implicitly described in the Qur'an, includes the notion of an intrinsic motivation in first- and second-language acquisition and the notion of a universal grammar. The following section discusses these notions in more detail.

Section II

Motives for Language Learning: Research Findings *vis-à-vis* Implications from the Qur'an

There are structural and functional relations between motivational aspects and learning strategies with regard to language acquisition and learning, which is referred to as an integrative motivation, that may be more than just a facet of intrinsic motivation (Cohen 1998; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant and Mihic 2004; Gardner and Tremblay 1994; Lamb 2004).

Prior research and pertinent literature on motivation have come up with different interpretation theories of motivation in general. (Gardner and Lambert 1959; Ryan and Connell 1989; Turner 1995; Kaplan et al. 2002; Gardner and Tremblay 1994; Dörnyei 2005). The literature on motivation identifies four types of motivation relating to language learning, which are set in two tandem categories: intrinsic motivation versus extrinsic motivation and instrumental motivation versus integrative motivation (Dörnyei 2000; 2005).

According to Gardner (1985), the term "motivation", as applied to language acquisition and learning, is used in the context of "referring to the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity" (p.10). Gardner and Lambert (1959; 1972) pioneered the exploration of motivation specific to language study. Researchers have argued that two basic types of motivation should be considered: intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation (Ryan and Deci 2000; Vallerand 1997). Intrinsic motivation is defined as the "inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (Ryan and Deci 2000). Self-determination theory asserts that humans have an innate need to feel autonomous and competent and to have sense of belonging. Extrinsic motivation, however, refers to an external reward, such as high grades or praise. Integrative/instrumental motivations are forms of extrinsic motivations (Gardner 1985). In this vein, Gardner highlighted two different types of motivations subsumed under intrinsic motivation: 1) Instrumental motivation: the desire to learn a language because it fulfills certain utilitarian goals, such as getting a job, passing an examination, etc., and 2) Integrative motivation: the desire to learn a language to communicate with people from another culture that speak that language or to identify closely with the target language group.

Many motivational theorists have identified the relationship between intrinsic motivation and motivational constructs grounded in socio-cognitive theories. While drive theories, such as Clark Hull's theories on motivation or Yerkes-Dodson's law of performance and arousal, have argued that motivation is mostly driven by unconscious needs, socio-cognitive theories, such as goal theory, are primarily concerned with reasons to engage in academic behaviours as perceived by the students themselves (Kaplan et al. 2002). Goal theory suggests that learners may adopt two main goals in achievement settings, one of which is referred to as a mastery goal. Students who adopt a mastery goal focus on the development of competence and learning relative to the task (Harackiewicz and Elliot 1993; Pintrich 2000; Pintrich et al. 1994), which is akin to the definition of intrinsic motivation as the inherent tendency to explore and learn but does not necessarily imply a general "inherent tendency".

Researchers (Gardner 1988; Gardner et al. 1983) developed a conceptual model of motivation that distinguishes between the "instrumental" motivation to learn a foreign language (FL) and the "integrative" motivation, which reflects the student's aim to identify with the FL culture. Integrative motivation may also be considered instrumental in the sense that foreign language learning facilitates immersion into a culture. Here, learning a foreign language is an integral component of the acculturation process (See Schumann 1986), whereas with "instrumental" motivation to learn a language, the skill itself is not necessarily valued. For example, an individual with an instrumental motivation to learn a foreign language may do so only as a step towards earning a higher degree, which will, in turn, garner a larger salary.

Based on Gardner's socio-educational model, the concept of integrative motivation overlaps the concept of intrinsic motivation. As Noels, Clement and Pelletier (1999) pointed out, intrinsic and integrative motivations both refer to "positive attitudes towards the learning situation and the learning process" (p. 31). These attitudes towards the L2 community might involve an interest in interacting with "target" language speakers as a means to immersion in and identification with a specific culture (Gardner and Tremblay 1994). A person with purely instrumental motivations may also be interested in interacting with native speakers but primarily for the sake of improving the language skill considered helpful to reach a different goal (e.g., a successful business). A person with purely intrinsic motivations would interact with a native speaker because he or she enjoys the challenge of successfully communicating in a foreign language. In other words, unlike integrative motivations, instrumental and intrinsic motivations do not entail cultural identification or acceptance by native speakers.

In the traditions of both Christians and Muslims, learning or learning about "the Book" (for example, the Bible and the Qur'an) is a vital part of their religious observance. It is not surprising, therefore, that literacy acquisition has been part of religious education throughout history and to the present. Whereas Muslims mainly concentrated on educating children through the exact recitation of the Qur'an, in Christian education, reading and writing skills have been taught to children and adults irrespective of religion because believers are expected to draw from knowledge of the Bible to grow in faith (Watkins 1978; Klem 1982; Gfeller 1997). In this context, Gfeller (1997: 103) wrote:

"This emphasis on literacy skills for an independent, individual application of religious teachings has been a strong motivation for individual believers throughout the ages and still is."

Both the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet of Islam (Hadiths) emphasise the need to acquire a native language and a foreign language, motivated by a desire to understand how others think, given the relationship between language and thought. According to one saying of the prophet, "He who learns the language of a people will be safe from their trickery (or evil)." The Qur'an stated that language variety is a sign of the creativity of God. In Chapter 30 (Romans), Verse 22, God said,

"And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of your languages and colors. Verily, in that are indeed signs for men of sound knowledge."

The implication in the above verse is that language acquisition occurs in an ethnic community, and therefore, there is a variety of tongues in as much as there is a variety of colour, i.e., ethnicities. Language acquisition cannot occur in the absence of a human community because language is necessary for communication. If there were no such community, the innate abilities to acquire a language would be doomed to stagnation and desuetude. The attrition of this natural propensity to acquire language is reported in many cases when particular humans were deprived of exposure to language input at an early age; for these individuals, it was relatively difficult for to acquire even their first language after a certain age. A famous case is that of the wild boy of Aveyron, who was found running wild in the woods of France in 1800. Taken to a psychologist, the boy was unable to speak, although he had perfect hearing. He was 11 or 12 years when found, was unable to speak and was suspected of being linguistically and mentally disabled due to severe deprivation of language. Another famous case is that of Genie, a 13 year old girl from Los Angeles who was confined to a room and never spoken to as a form of parental abuse. Even later, when she was exposed to a remedial developmental language programme and speech in a foster home, she had trouble with certain phonetic combinations and experienced difficulty asking questions and using deictic areas of speech. These cases verify the critical age hypothesis proposed by Eric Lenneberg (1921–1975), who argued that a critical period exists for human language acquisition and changes in language acquisition ability link to stages in brain maturation. Even before Lenneberg, Penfield and Roberts (1967) claimed that children under nine can learn up to three languages (now, some linguists claim that they can learn up to 20 languages): according to researchers, early exposure to different languages activates a reflex in the brain allowing them to switch between languages without confusion or translation into first language (L1) (Penfield and Roberts 1959; Thompson-Schill, Ramscar and Gitcho 2009; Bongaerts, Plariken and Shils 1995; Moyer 1999; Johnson and Newport 1989; Lightbown and Spada 2006; Robertson 2002; Zhao and Morgan 2005). Lenneberg (1967) asserted that if no language is

learned by puberty, it cannot be learned in a normal, functional manner. He also supported Penfield and Roberts' (1959) proposal of neurological mechanisms responsible for the maturational change in language learning abilities.

The notion of *fitra*, or the natural state of man, often referred to in language acquisition literature as "innateness", forms part of Islamic literature, including the Qur'an itself [Chapter 30 (The Romans), Verse 30]:

"This is Allah's *fitra* on which He has created all mankind. No change, let there be, in this natural state of mankind, (that they believe in Islamic monotheism) - that is the straight way, but most of men know not."

The early exegesis of the verse dealt with *fitra* concerning only one aspect, the human belief system—that we are all born with an innate belief in monotheism. But the Qur'anic text leaves room for broader interpretations of the term, including "innateness" of the human aptitude for language acquisition: namely, the properties that humans have for learning and using a natural language. *Fitra*, as used in the Qur'an, being synonymous with innateness, refers to the natural state in which God created human beings on specific principles of development, the deviation from which is mutilation (Mohamed 1996).

In this context of defining what linguistic *fitra*, Chomsky (1975) postulated that humans demonstrate a general ability to acquire language. According to Chomsky's hypothesis on innateness, language acquisition would be difficult or even impossible without an innate grammar: "How do we come to have such rich and specific knowledge, or such intricate systems of belief and understanding, when the evidence available to us is so meager?" (Chomsky, quoted in Cook, 1988) As such, there is a "system of principles, conditions and rules that are elements or properties of all human languages. . . the essence of human language" (Chomsky 1975) that constitute the threshold of language acquisition and can be referred to as a universal grammar. The mere existence of language universals supports the hypothesis that these universal rules and language parameters are innate. Universality in this sense implies innateness because many of the similarities between languages can be adequately explained by their having a common origin (Chomsky 1975; 1977; Hoekstra and Kooij 1988; de Luce and Wilder 1983). This view, adopted by innatist psycholinguists, is commensurate with that of *fitra* proposed in the Qur'an. God gifted language as we experience it to Adam and Eve and their off-spring. Language, therefore, is uniquely human.

As such, language acquisition depends on an innate, species-specific module implanted in our cognitive system via heredity, but language acquisition still has

to be nurtured by a human community that caters to our linguistic developmental needs. There are several verse and Hadiths of the Prophet of Islam that postulate that children should be taught the Qur'an at an early age because it provides sufficient linguistic input for their linguistic development. The Qur'an provides an ample standard vocabulary that assists in consequent language development. Al-Asfahani stated,

"The vocabulary of the Qur'an is the core of Arabic language, its cream of the cream of the Arabic lexicon. Learning the Qur'anic lexicon helps in the acquisition of the Arabic tongue, which, consequently, helps in developing creative language both of poetry and prose."

Some scholars have also suggested that early exposure to a standard tongue, such as that of the Qur'an, helps with the smooth development of the phonological and syntactic structures of Arabic.

There are several other such verse, implying, along with many of the Prophet's Hadiths, that learning, especially that of language, should start at an early age before puberty. For example, a prophetic saying states that children should start learning the ritual language of religious observance (especially the prayers) in Islam at the age of seven and should be punished if they fail to do so at the age of ten (around puberty). Islam emphasises the extrinsic motivation to learn generally, and to learn language in particular, including the concepts of punishment and reward.

Section III **Rethinking Language Acquisition/ Learning Theories in Light of the Qur'an**

Past research done in the Arab world has indicated that the Qur'an helps facilitate language acquisition (Al-Ameen 2009). Early Muslims considered learning the Arabic language as part and parcel of religion and believed that learning the Qur'an facilitates effective acquisition of Arabic for young Muslim children. Omar Ibn Al-Khattab, the second Muslim Caliph once said, "Learn your religion and learn the Qur'an through learning Arabic." In an epistle to one of his governors, Abu Moussa, Omar Ibn Al-Khattab also said (cited in Ibn Al-Anbari 1957: 3),

"Learn the tradition of the Prophet, learn Arabic, and learn how to vocalise the Qur'an in a standard Arabic tongue; do speak it without having an accent. The Qur'an is the standard Arab tongue."

Ibn Taymyia, the Muslim theologian and philosopher, wrote in this vein,

"The best way to speak Arabic is by teaching it to children in their tender years through formal schooling institutions and in the (Muslim) home. Learning standard Arabic, rather than the sub-standards, is best achieved at an early age." (Ibn Taymyia 2000: 370)

He further explained that, when they start to pick up the language, children should be

"exposed to the standard dialect first in order to indoctrinate the grammar and lexicon as they are best incorporated in language. But if children deviate from learning the standard language or they speak it with an accent, they should be instructed in the right dialect. The point is that once they acquire a standard dialect, they will be able to speak and write the language correctly. But if they otherwise learn the sub-dialects, they will fail to conform to the straight dialect standards of the Qur'an." (Ibn Taymyia 2000: 371)

Ibn Taymyia (2000) further explained that "Our (Muslim) predecessors were teaching their children plain classical Arabic free from phonological or syntactical errors. It is implied (in the Qur'an) that we sustain and maintain the grammar of our language and correct the errors of children who learn Arabic and speak it with an accent. This will help our children learn the Qur'an and the Hadith in the best way deemed. It will also set an example for speakers of Arabic to follow their ancestors who used to speak a standard Arabic as a second nature. Learners cannot acquire a language on their own at their early years. They have to be exposed to the standard tongue as they should be corrected if they make a mistake. This becomes a must, especially in a multilingual milieu where Arabic is the first language and other languages are spoken (by minorities) because those non-natives will bring their accent as well as erroneous syntax and flawed structures to Arabic, corrupting the tongues of our native children who come into direct contact with them." (Translated freely by the researcher from Ibn Taymyia 2000: 373).

From these quotes by Ibn Taymyia, several points have to be emphasised: Firstly, the Qur'an encourages learning a standard dialect to aid in the sound acquisition of the language. By "sound", I mean a natural order acquisition or development of the language, which indicates that any language consists of a variety of dialects and a standard dialect, the latter being understood by the majority of the community speaking it. Exposure to input from the standard dialect can be efficient in nurturing language acquisition and language development. Ibn Taymyia captured this point based on his exegetic understanding of the implications of the Qur'an and the Hadiths of the Prophet of Islam.

The second major point Ibn Taymyia has to do with error fossilisation. In his (2000), he stressed that language errors should be corrected when they emerge at an early age; otherwise, they fossilise. This statement accords with the modern theory of error fossilisation and inter-language. This theory of Ibn Taymyia postulates that fossilisation occurs when language errors become a permanent feature (Selinker 1972; Canale and Swain 1980; Johnson 1992; Selinker and Lamendella 1978). Ibn Taymyia (2000) warned of five categories of error fossilisation—phonological fossilisation, morphological fossilisation, syntactic fossilisation, semantic fossilisation and pragmatic fossilisation—brought about by a variety of causes, mainly deemed to be socio-linguistic.

A third and integral point has to do with inter-language problems created in multilingual environments. At the time of Ibn Taymyia, Muslim conquests brought about a widely spread state of multilingualism and multiculturalism in the Muslim world, extending from Mesopotamia to Andalusia down to Abyssinia and over the Indian sub-continent. According to Ibn Taymyia, inter-language errors occur as a result of direct contact with multilinguals in the pure Arabic speaking community. He suggested that leaving education and Arabic acquisition in the hands of educators and/or care-takers who were not native Arabic-speaking Muslims posed a threat to standard dialect acquisition, which could corrupt the accent and other syntacto-semantic features of Arabic.

Under such conditions, fossilisation becomes an inevitable outcome of the influence of contact with non-natives at the early age of language development for children.

Furthermore, the Qur'an explicitly and implicitly deals with the direct relationship between language and religious observance on the one hand and language and thought on the other, conceptualising first-language acquisition as a cognitive sociolinguistic process. The Qur'an states plainly: "Verily, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an in order that you may understand." (Joseph: 2) The translation of this verse stops short of describing this implicit relationship

between acquiring a language and thinking translated in the above Qur'anic quote as "understanding". However, for a native Arabic-speaking reader of the Qur'an, the relationship between language and thought is visible.

Ibn Taymyia explained that acquisition of the Arabic language is necessary to understand and ponder the wisdom of the Qur'anic text. As such, language is not only a vehicle of thought but also a meaning-making process necessary for Muslims and Arabic speakers to know and practice the rules of their religion. In this vein, he wrote,

"Arabic *per se* is part and parcel of religion; learning Arabic for non-natives is a must, acquiring it for natives ought to be a second nature, as Arabic is instrumental to understanding the Qur'an and the Hadiths of the Prophet. Neither of these, i.e., the Qur'an and the Book of Hadiths, can be understood without learning Arabic (even as a second or foreign language for non-natives). Therefore, considering that learning the Qur'an and the Hadiths is a duty for every Muslim, then learning Arabic is a duty too in the first place as being an inevitable means to achieve the first duty." (Ibn Taymyia 2000: 376)

Another theologian and language scholar, Al-Bakalani (1963) adeptly suggested that language is a cognitive process involving critical skills to be manipulated for the analysis and evaluation of linguistic discourse, written or spoken, especially religious discourse. He also suggested that the critical analysis and use of language should be done at an early age for native speakers and non-native speakers of Arabic alike. He wrote,

"A native speaker of Arabic who fails to acquire the standard dialect as eloquently as it can possibly be spoken, and fails to cognitise discourse analysis techniques and syntax, taking into account what Arabs consider as standard is just like a non-native speaker who learns Arabic at a late age, incapable of understanding the meanings of the Qur'anic linguistic miracle." (Al-Bakalani 1963: 375)

Ibn Khaldun, in his *Introduction* to the emergent science of sociology at the time, indicated that language is a socio-cognitive process nurtured by "extensive exposure to memorised classical linguistic input characterised by quality and infallibility". He further suggested that the development of the language faculty is an inevitable conduit to infallible language input and intensive training in classical Arabic. Comparing the poetry and prose of pre-Islamic writers to those

of post-Islamic writers, he concluded that Muslim prose writers and poets who have been exposed to the Qur'an develop an eloquent style and delicate language superior to their pre-Islamic predecessors. Ibn Khaldun, in this vein, explained that:

"The reason is that those poets and prose writers in the early Muslim era have listened and read a high calibre standard of Arabic discourse in the Qur'an and the Hadiths, genres of discourse that humans may fail to produce the like of which, having been brought up on a language best acquired in the most eloquent style as never been experienced in pre-Islam. Therefore, their literary production, be it prose or poesy, is more delicately tintured and more adroitly structured." (Ibn Khaldun 1991: 167)

Learning the Qur'an implies that exposure to standard language can develop one's vocabulary and that regular reading training can help improve reading comprehension skills. The Qur'an, in its own right, invites a contemplative, critical reading:

"Have they not pondered over the Word (of Allah, i.e., what is sent down to the Prophet (peace be upon him)) or has there come to them what had not come to their fathers of old?" [Chapter 23 (The Believers), Verse 118]

"(This is) a Book (the Qur'an) which We have sent down to you, full of blessings that they may ponder over its verse, and that men of understanding may remember." [Chapter 38 (Saad), Verse 88]

Prior research has indicated that exposure to the Qur'an and, hence, to standard language, helps to enhance reading comprehension skills and speaking skills (Al-Sweidy 1994; Al-Kubaisy 2009; Abdullah and Malakawy 1994; Dweidy 1996; Maymani 1986; Al-Thubaity 2002); it also helps improve receptive skills (Al-Kubaisy 2009; Mu'alem 2001; Al-Sweidy 1994).

As such, the Qur'an indicates that a wide range of vocabulary is essential for improving thinking skills, expressing emotions and developing argumentative skills, which in the end, induces creativity. On the other hand, the deprivation of linguistic input or language desuetude is conducive to intellectual stagnation or "linguistic impoverishment".

Noting that the Qur'an consists of approximately 77,000 words, it constitutes a rich vocabulary source for vocabulary-building exercises, given that memorising (or, at least, reading) it at a regular pace is a duty for every Muslim. Much of the research cited earlier suggested that exposure to the standard language of the Qur'an should commence at an early age in early childhood, which, again, fortifies the critical period hypothesis.

The Qur'an also deals with the natural order of language development. Language, it is now taken for granted, cannot be acquired by the deaf:

"Those who do not believe are deaf, dumb and blind. So they do not understand." [Chapter 2 (The Heifer), Verse 286]

Despite the fact that deafness and blindness are primarily mental states rather than physical states, this verse and several others observe that one who loses aural ability is very likely to lose oral and thus lose listening and speaking skills (those of language); as a consequence, these individuals will lose the ability to think properly. This sequence of development skills can be deduced from observation of a child's development of oral and written language, which follows the sequence of listening, speaking, reading and writing observed by Strang (1972):

'Listening precedes speaking and reading. Children acquire their native tongue through listening to and imitating the speech of their parents. Speaking is basic to both reading and writing'. (p. 291)

In many situations, several Qur'anic verse suggest that the language skills of listening, speaking and reading interrelate, which consequently implies that these skills are integrative and they should be developed holistically. That suggestion is consistent with prior research (e.g., Strickland 1964; Loban 1963; Ruddell 1966; Thomas 1974; Cayer and Sacks 1979), which suggested that the child's ability to use listening and speaking skills closely relates to the learner's ability to comprehend written language and to further deploy these skills to reading comprehension. A competence in aural/oral skills reflects a similar competence in reading/writing skills because "Oral language activities may help to develop students' reading, writing, and thinking strategies". (Loban 1963).

Conclusion

Researchers have mostly attributed first language acquisition to genetic socio-affective and cognitive factors that are prone to be nurtured by socialisation. For second language acquisition and foreign language learning, other factors, including those mentioned earlier, need to be considered, e.g., intelligence, memory processing and academic achievement (Koro-Ljungberg and Tiri 2002; Torrance 1981; Milgram and Milgram 1976, 1978; Revheim 2000; Gold et al. 1997; Delis et al. 1987; Verschueren et al. 2004; Al-Thubaity 2002). The Qur'an includes highly intricate abstractions of ideas and notions presented in creative language deemed as divine by Muslims. Both the content of the Qur'an and its language can foster linguistic creativity. The contemplative nature of the verse and the explicit directives for mankind to critically think and ponder the self and the cosmos help nurture creativity and critical thinking through studying, understanding, analysing and interpreting the verse of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is not only a religious text that contains a list of directives and instructions for performing the rituals of Islam, but it is also a didactic and aesthetic book. Irrespective of the creative style and adorned language of the text, which itself induces creative language, the plurality of meanings that each verse produces and the pluralistic interpretation of the text, which has produced several books interpreting the Qur'an, may be a good reason for nurturing the fluency and flexibility important to creativity. The variety of language employed in the Qur'anic text, the variety and consistency of narrative and expository presentations of the Qur'anic stories, anecdotes, instructions and descriptions and the creative and varied lexicon used across the text nurture originality, flexibility and fluency in the language and ideas of learners. In Chapter 39 (Congregations), the Almighty Allah said,

"Allah has sent down the Best Statement, a Book (this Qur'an), its parts resembling each other (in goodness and truth) and oft-repeated. The skins of those who fear their Lord shiver from it (when they recite it or hear it). Then their skin and their heart soften to the remembrance of Allah. That is the guidance of Allah. He Guides therewith whom He wills; and whomever Allah sends astray, for him there is no guide." (Verse 23)

According to this line, learning the Qur'an contributes significantly to learning the grammar of Arabic, the use of which in classical linguistic contexts is associated with creative dimensions of originality, elaboration, fluency and flexibility (Al-Oraify 1991).

In this vein, researchers recognised a relationship between the language of religion and creativity (Keane 1987). Datta (1967), in research relying on a longitudinal empirical investigation, claimed that religion plays an important part in nurturing creativity. According to this view, as earlier noted, scholars argued that ritual language induces creative thinking and that creativity can be attributed to the language of religious rituals (Csordas 1987: 445) because of the variety in lexicon, the creativity of the style and the instructions and directives that foster the contemplation of the uniyaya and the creation of the heavens.

Furthermore, the abundant lexicon that is readily available at the tip of the mouth when the Qur'an committed to memory induces flexibility; this lexical repertoire helps one to overcome impediments to thought, which is consistent with Al-Harthy's definition of creativity as "the ability to overcome thinking problems" (Al-Harthy 1999).

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