

Motivational Orientations and Learning Strategies among Undergraduate Students in Study Circle Course

Sri Rahmayana Syam¹, Nik Md Saiful Azizi Nik Abdullah¹ & Kamal J. I. Badrasawi¹

¹ Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia, Malaysia

Correspondence: Kamal J. I. Badrasawi, Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia, Gombak, 53100, Selangor, Malaysia. Tel: 603-6196-5333. E-mail: dr.kamalbadrasawi@gmail.com

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Abstract

In line with the vision and mission of the International Islamic University Malaysia, the study circle (*halaqah*) course is designed to improve undergraduate students in all aspects (intellectual, moral, spiritual, social, and physical) as well as develop their communication and critical thinking skills. Learning motivation and learning strategies are essential to achieve the desired learning outcomes of the course. Thus, this research aims to assess the students' perception on their learning motivational orientations (i.e., self-efficacy and task performance and task value) and learning strategies (i.e., elaboration and peer learning). This research employed the quantitative approach in which a survey design method was used. A sample of 329 undergraduate students randomly selected from the students registered in study circle (*halaqah*) course were asked to complete sub-scales adopted from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ). Descriptive statistics using mean scores and standard deviations, t-test and Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient were used in the data analysis. The students, regardless of gender, showed high level of learning motivational orientations in taking the study circle in terms of interest, importance and utility. They were motivated and confident to understand and perform the study circle tasks. Elaboration and peer learning strategies were used to perform such tasks. There was also a large positive relation between learning motivational orientations and learning strategies. Further qualitative and quantitative researches were recommended to get more in depth information.

Keywords: Learning motivation, learning strategy, self-efficacy, study circle

1. Introduction

1.2 Background of the Study

Curriculum design includes four major components: objectives, content, learning experiences, and evaluation (Ornstein & Hunkins, 2013). They further elaborate that learning experiences component come under "method and organization," and it is related to the question of 'what instructional strategies, resources, and activities should be employed?' The instructional strategies are chosen, and carried out to successfully meet instructional objectives, taking into account that the ultimate purpose of all strategies is fostering students' achievement and motivation. Hence, instructional strategies should be organized into, for instance, short-term units and daily lesson plans (Oliva, 2009). According to Eggen and Kauchak (2012) the term of 'teaching strategy,' is sometimes interchangeably used with instructional strategies, instructional learning strategy, instructional approaches, and instructional models. However, Oxford (2003) highlighted that learning strategies refer to specific behaviors or thought processes that students use to enhance their own learning. In other words, learning strategies are used to accomplish certain learning goals (O'malley & Chamot, 1995) in all types of subjects including science, math, history, languages and others, in both formal (classroom) and informal learning environments (Ghani, 2003).

In their widely used questionnaire, "Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire," Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, and McKeachie (1991) explained that learning strategies could be divided into 'cognitive and metacognitive' strategies including (rehearsal, elaboration, organization, critical thinking, and metacognitive self-regulation) and 'resource management' strategies including (time and study environment, effort regulation, peer learning, and help seeking). Two kinds of learning strategies, namely elaboration and peer learning, are examined in the current study.

Pintrich et al. (1991) further explained that 'elaboration' strategies "help students to keep information into long-term memory by building internal connections between items to be learned. They include paraphrasing,

summarizing, creating analogies, and generative note-taking; and then they help the learner integrate and connect new information with prior knowledge.” (p.20) Whereas peer learning is “an activity which collaborating with one's peers to have positive effects on achievement; and dialogue with peers can help a learner clarify course material and reach insights one may not have attained on one's own” (Pintrich et al., 1991, p.28). In peer learning, students assist each other with both course content and personal concerns (Griffiths, Houston and Lazenbatt cited in Boud (2001).

Motivation plays a fundamental role in all human activities, particularly in learning, as it involves learners desires to succeed in the activities performance and the subjects they are learning (Owens, Aultman, & Glynn, 2005; Tella, 2007). Students who have intention in learning could be influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. These two motivations, in terms of students' learning motivation, are the most important factors on education (Deckers, 2010; Eggen & Kauchak, 2012). In particular, the current study focuses on two components of motivation, namely self-efficacy (i.e., expectancy component) and task value (i.e., value component) (Pintrich et al., 1991). According to Bandura (1995) self-efficacy refers to people's beliefs about their capabilities to accomplish assigned tasks which in turn, influences their lives, at individual or collective levels. Bandura (1995) added that self-efficacy determines people's feeling, perception, motivation, and behavior; and “efficacy beliefs regulate human functioning through four major processes: cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes” (p.5). Pintrich et al. (1991) mentioned that self-efficacy for learning and performance has two categories of expectancy: success and self-efficacy. The former is concerned with performance expectations, and the latter includes a self-appraisal of one's ability to master a task (i.e., judgments about one's ability to accomplish a task and confidence in one's skills to perform that task). For the ‘task value’, Pintrich et al. (1991) elaborated that it refers to the student's evaluation of the how interesting, how important, and how useful the task (i.e., students' perceptions of the course material in terms of interest, importance, and utility). It is expected that high task value should lead to more involvement in one's learning (Pintrich et al., 1991).

The study circle (*halaqah*) concept is known as “the most expeditious shape adult education” (Baba, 2005, p.2) which has become very popular in different parts of the Muslim world and in many other countries. According to Richmond (2000), study circles have long history in the United States and Scandinavian countries. The study circle usually consists of a small group of about five to twelve participants but not more than twenty (Richmond, 2000), where they meet regularly to discuss topics in different subjects, for example, religion and politics. It is implemented in a less formal educational environment under the supervision of a friendly, cooperative, skilled, confident, open-minded and diligent facilitator (Co-Curricular Activity Centre, 2007; Richmond, 2000). Among the benefits of the study circle are: it assists participants with different backgrounds work together and exchange ideas and experiences (McCoy, 2005) in a more democratic environment (Richmond, 2000); it enhances participants' self-confidence, strengthens their awareness and sense of unity and moral, provides them with new information and knowledge as well as improves their skills, including problem solving and communication skills (Richmond, 2000).

1.2 Problem of the Study

The study circle (*halaqah*) course is offered for the undergraduate students from all science and non-science faculties at the International Islamic University Malaysia. In essence, this course aims to enhance students' commitment to the Islamic way of life that is based on Qur'an and *Sunnah* (Prophetic traditions and practices); to generate the spirit of Islamic brotherhood that transcends ethic and cultural identities, and to enable students to understand the different aspects of contemporary social realities (Co-Curricular Activity Centre, 2007). Lectures, discussion, presentations and camping are among the instructional teaching strategies. Interestingly, all the undergraduate students from various faculties, ranging from Engineering, Architecture, Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Science, Economics, Law, Information and Communication Technology and Education, who also come from around 100 countries in the world, have to take this study circle (*halaqah*) course. Therefore, this study mainly aims to assess the students' learning motivational orientations (self-efficacy and task performance and task value) and learning strategies (elaboration and peer work) in the study circle (*halaqah*) course, based on the belief that learning motivation and learning strategies are related to each other (Pintrich et al., 1991), and they could influence or improve students' performance in various aspects of teaching and learning process (Liao, 2006; Lin, 2010; Wang, 2012; Yoshida, Tani, Uchida, Masui, & Nakayama, 2014). It is important to add that this is the first study conducted on study circle (*halaqah*) course, particularly in terms of students' motivational orientations and learning strategies. This study will provide significant information that would allow the facilitators to employ the proper instructional strategy in teaching this study circle course, and identify if there are differences in students' perceptions in the motivational orientations and learning strategies, and shed light on the relationship between motivational orientations and learning strategies.

1.3 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer these questions:

1. What is the undergraduate students' perception towards study circle (*halaqah*) course in terms of interest, importance and utility?
2. To what extent are the undergraduate students confident in their skills to master and perform the tasks in study circle (*halaqah*) course?
3. To what extent do the undergraduate students use elaboration and peer learning strategies in study circle (*halaqah*) course?
4. Is there a relationship between students' motivational orientations and learning strategies?

2. Materials and Method

2.1 Study Design and Sampling

This study employed the quantitative approach in which a survey design method was used. The survey design is commonly used in educational studies (Creswell, 2013; Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011). Creswell (2013) highlights that in the survey research, researchers often administer a survey to a sample or to the entire population of people seeking for their attitudes, opinions and behaviors. Schreiber and Asner-Self (2010) also explain that a survey design is used to describe attitudes, habits, preferences, and other types of phenomenon or behavior. Creswell (2013) further explicates that the cross sectional and longitudinal research designs are the basic types which are still widely used in research. The former is used to collect data about current attitudes, opinions, or beliefs i.e., at the point time; while the latter is used to study individuals over time. This study used the cross sectional research design to collect data on learning motivational orientations and learning strategies from undergraduate students taking the study circle (*halaqah*) course.

The population of a study is defined as the entire collection of individuals being considered (McBurney & White, 2009) or a group of individuals who have same characteristic which make them different from other groups (Creswell, 2013). The population of this research comprised of two thousand and one (2001) undergraduate students taking the study circle (*halaqah*) at the International Islamic University Malaysia in semester I, 2014/2015. They were divided into 147 sections; the male and female sections were separated. Each section consisted of about 15 students. In the 57 male sections, eight hundred and fifty four (854) (43%) students were registered, and one thousand and one hundred forty seven (1147) (57%) students in the 68 female sections. The said registered students came from various faculties, ranging from Engineering, Architecture, Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Science, Economics, Law, Information and Communication Technology and Education. They came from various countries in the world, but the majority was from Malaysia.

A list of students' names registered in study circle (*halaqah*) in semester I, 2014/2015 was obtained from the Centre for Credited Leadership and Soft Skills (CLASS) at IIUM. A representative sample, the subset of the population (McBurney & White, 2009) was selected following the simple random sampling procedures (Creswell, 2013). All the students were given an equal probability of being selected from the population. The sample of this study was made up of three hundred and twenty nine (329), (141 males and 188 females) based on the Raosoft sample size online calculator, with margin error 5%, confidence level 95%, the population size of 2001, and the response distribution 50% (www.raosoft.com).

2.2 Research Instrument

The '*Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)*' developed by (Pintrich et al., 1991) was used in this study. The original questionnaire has fifteen different scales on the MSLQ which can be used together or individually, in the way that fits the needs of both the researchers or instructors (Pintrich et al., 1991). All the scales used a seven point Likert category, ranged from "not at all true of me" to "very true of me." This questionnaire has been widely used in many related researches (Liao, 2006). However, in his study Liao (2006) modified categories as "never true of me" to "rarely true of me", "occasionally true of me", "sometimes true of me", "often true of me", "usually true of me", and "always true of me."

The current study used only two subscales of 'motivation'. The first one was the 'self-efficacy for learning and performance' which assessed two aspects of expectancy: success and self-efficacy. The former refers to performance expectations i.e., (task performance), and the latter is "a self-appraisal of one's ability to master a task; it includes judgments about one's ability to accomplish a task as well as one's confidence in one's skills to perform that task" (Pintrich et al., 1991, p. 11). The second subscale was the 'task value,' which referred to the student's evaluation of the course materials with regard to its interest, importance, and utility. For the learning

strategy scale, two subscales were also used, namely ‘elaboration’ under cognitive and metacognitive strategies and ‘peer learning’ under resource management strategies. Pintrich et al. (1991) clarified that in ‘elaboration,’ learners can paraphrase, summarize, create analogies, and use note-taking to store obtained information into their long-term memories, and link it with prior knowledge. Whereas ‘peer learning’ helps learners improve their achievement and come out with more insightful decisions by working together, discussing and clarifying course topics and materials (Pintrich et al., 1991) (Table 1).

All the above strategies are useful and highly needed in the study circle for the following reasons. The content of study circle focuses on religious and social knowledge which has been lightly covered in early schooling stages. Therefore, students need to use ‘elaboration’ strategies to understand the assigned concepts. In line with that, students in the study circle sections are from various backgrounds in terms of nationality, culture and study specialization. By engaging the peer learning strategy in class, it is expected that the students could perform together in a harmony milieu. More importantly, as all the students are Muslims, and most content of the study circle is related to religion and daily affairs, students are expected to be more motivated to learn and apply what they learn in all aspects of life.

Table 1. Distribution of Items in the Instrument

Item Numbers	Dimensions
2	Demographic information
	Part I: Motivation
8	Self-Efficacy
6	Task-Values
	Part II: Learning Strategy
6	Elaboration
3	Peer learning

2.3 Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Though the questionnaire was adopted from previous researches, the questionnaire’s face and content validity were verified by two academic staff from the Faculty of Education-IIUM. The internal reliability test of the questionnaire using SPSS version 22 was carried out. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .96, indicating the items have high internal consistency. The individual Cronbach alphas for the four subscales, namely (self-efficacy, task value, elaboration, and peer learning) were also found as (.92, .94, .92, and .89, respectively).

2.4 Survey Administration

The distribution of questionnaires among the samples of the study was employed in *ibadah* (worship) camp program of the study circle in semester I 2014/2015. Attending the aforesaid camp is compulsory for the students taking the study circle. Therefore, it was easy for the researchers to find all the participants in the study. Also, the facilitators (instructors) helped the researchers to administer the questionnaires. In order to maintain confidentiality of the responses, there was no provision for individual name in the content of questionnaires.

2.5 Data Analysis

In this study, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 22 was used to analyze the collected data. Descriptive statistics using mean percentage scores and standard deviations were used to describe the data. The independent sample t-test was used to compare the mean scores of students’ responses in terms of gender and nationality. Person correlation was also used to find if there is a relationship between motivational orientations (self-efficacy and value task) and learning strategy (elaboration and peer learning).

3. Results

3.1 Demographic Information

A total of three hundred and twenty nine (329) students participated in the study. The researchers were able to get the entire sample because the data were collected during a compulsory activity, (worship camp). Table 2 shows that the final sample consisted of 188 (57%) female students and 141 (43%) male students, with 289 (87.8%) local students (Malaysian), and only 40 (12.2%) international, particularly from Singapore, Bangladesh, Kenya, Indonesia, China, Iran, and Guinea. The small number of the international students depended on the number of those students registered in the sections, either females or males in semester I 2014/2015. It is normal that

international students, mainly first year students, do not register this study circle in the first semester as they are not quite familiar with such courses, while the local students are usually more familiar with nature of the study circle and the content as well. Therefore, students' responses on the questionnaire's items could be compared for both gender and nationality. However, it is recommended to have more international students in other similar studies.

Table 2. Demographic Information of Study Sample

Variable		Number of respondents (<i>n</i>)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	188	57
	Male	141	43
Nationality	Local	289	87.8
	International	40	12.2

3.2 Learning Motivational Orientations

It is important to highlight that students rated themselves on a seven point Likert scale from "never true of me" to "always true of me." Scales were constructed by taking the mean of the items that make up each scale. Pintrich et al. (1991) demonstrated that a higher score such as a 4, 5, 6, or 7 is better than a lower score like a 1, 2, or 3. In other words, for the items learning motivational orientations scales, the mean scores higher than 4.00 refer to higher level in self-efficacy and performance tasks and value task in the course. Additionally, for components of learning strategy scales, scores above 4.00 generally indicate a more or positive use of the learning strategy. The means and standard deviations were rounded up to two decimals.

Table 3 shows the descriptive analyses (means and standard deviations) for the students' responses on learning motivational orientations (self-efficacy and task performance and Task value). Overall, students showed high learning motivational orientations (self-efficacy and task performance and task value) indicated by the high means scores (5.06 and 5.42, respectively). More specifically, in the self-efficacy and task performance, the highest means were (5.49) for item 6 (*I expect to do well in this class*), (5.28) for item1 (*I believe I will receive an excellent grade in this class*), and (5.23) for item 3 (*I am confident I can understand the basic concepts taught in this course*). All other item means were around 4 and above, implying that students were highly confident in learning and performing the course tasks. For the value task, the highest means were (5.63) for items 14 (*Understanding the subject matter of this course is very important to me*), (5.57) for item 4 (*I think the course material in this class is useful for me to learn*), and (5.49) for item 2 (*It is important for me to learn the course material in this class*). However, all the items got means above 5, indicating that the study circle course is motivating in terms of interest, importance and utility.

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations for Students' Learning Motivational Orientations

No.	Items	Mean	SD
Self-Efficacy and task performance			
1.	I believe I will receive an excellent grade in this class.	5.28	1.50
2.	I am certain I can understand the most difficult material presented in the readings for this course.	4.70	1.49
3.	I am confident I can understand the basic concepts taught in this course	5.23	1.29
4.	I am confident I can understand the most complex material presented by the instructor in this course.	4.77	1.43
5.	I am confident I can do an excellent job on the assignments and tests in this course	5.12	1.26
6.	I expect to do well in this class.	5.49	1.34
7.	I am certain I can master the skills being taught in this class	4.98	1.65
8.	Considering the difficulty of this course, the teacher, and my skills, I think I will do well in this class	5.10	1.36
Overall		5.06	1.40

Task Value			
9.	I think I will be able to use what I learn in this course in other courses.	5.19	1.47
10.	It is important for me to learn the course material in this class	5.49	1.44
11.	I am very interested in the content area of this course	5.29	1.45
12.	I think the course material in this class is useful for me to learn	5.57	1.33
13.	I like the subject matter of this course	5.34	1.46
14.	Understanding the subject matter of this course is very important to me.	5.63	1.36
Overall		5.42	1.47

3.3 Learning Strategy (Elaboration and Peer Learning)

Table 4 shows the descriptive analyses (means and standard deviations) for the students' responses on learning strategy (elaboration and peer learning). Overall, the students were more positive to use the elaboration and peer learning strategies indicated by the high means (4.88 and 4.78 respectively). For the 'elaboration' strategy, the highest means were (5.19) for item 17 (*When reading for this class, I try to relate the material to what I already know*), (5.06) for item 16 (*I try to relate ideas in this subject to those in other courses whenever possible*), and (5.01) for item 20 (*I try to apply ideas from course readings in other class activities such as lecture and discussion*). All the other means of the other items were above 4, implying that the students were in favor of using all elaboration strategies. Table 4 also shows the means of the peer learning strategies. The highest means were (5.00) for item 22 (*I try to work with other students from this class to complete the course assignment*), (4.74) for item 21 (*When studying for this course, I often try to explain the material to a classmate or a friend*), and (4.59) for item 23 (*When studying for this course, I often set aside time to discuss the course material with a group of students from the class*), indicating that students used all strategies of peer learning.

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations for Students' Learning Strategies

No.	Items	Mean	SD
Elaboration			
15.	When I study for this class, I pull together information from different sources, such as lectures, readings, and discussions.	4.86	1.53
16.	I try to relate ideas in this subject to those in other courses whenever possible	5.06	1.42
17.	When reading for this class, I try to relate the material to what I already know.	5.19	1.47
18.	When I study for this course, I write brief summaries of the main ideas from the readings and the concepts from the lectures.	4.23	1.57
19.	I try to understand the material in this class by making connections between the readings and the concepts from the lectures.	4.92	1.41
20.	I try to apply ideas from course readings in other class activities such as lecture and discussion.	5.01	1.35
Overall		4.88	1.46
Peer Learning			
21.	When studying for this course, I often try to explain the material to a classmate or a friend.	4.74	1.63
22.	I try to work with other students from this class to complete the course assignment.	5.00	1.58
23.	When studying for this course, I often set aside time to discuss the course material with a group of students from the class.	4.59	1.63
Overall		4.78	1.61

Further analyses, using an independent-sample t-test, were conducted to examine if there were any statistically significant differences in students' mean scores on both learning motivational orientations and learning strategies due to gender and nationality. Table 5 shows that there were no significant differences in scores of learning

motivational orientations and learning strategies for gender, $p > .01$; whereas there were significant differences due to students' nationality, $p < .01$. This difference might be found due to discrepancy in sample size for local and international students.

Table 5. Comparison in Learning Motivational Orientations and Learning Strategies by Gender and Nationality Presented in mean \pm sd

Variable	n	Motivation		Learning strategies	
		Mean \pm SD	p	Mean \pm SD	p
Gender					
Male	141	5.1597 \pm 1.03222	.185	4.6513 \pm 1.26372	0.023
Female	188	5.3174 \pm 1.08843		4.9645 \pm 1.21016	
Nationality					
Local	289	4.9472 \pm 1.17602	.000	4.9472 \pm 1.17602	0.000
International	40	4.5740 \pm 1.33165		3.9854 \pm 1.38236	

* $p < 0.01$ is statistically significant using independent t-test

3.4 Relationship between Learning Motivational Orientations and Learning Strategies

The relationship between perceived learning motivational orientation and learning strategies was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Table 6 shows that there was a large positive correlation between the two variables, $r = .743$, $n = 329$, $p < .01$ (Pallant, 2013). This relationship explains that the students who were engaged effectively in learning strategy had high learning motivation as well.

In short, the means of both learning motivational orientations (self-efficacy and task performance and value task) and learning strategies (elaboration and peer learning) indicated that students had high motivation to learn the study circle (*halaqah*) course, and were in favor of using the above mentioned learning strategies. Furthermore, there was a large positive relationship between learning motivational orientations and learning strategies.

4. Discussion

In line with the vision and mission of the International Islamic University Malaysia, the study circle (*halaqah*) course is designed to improve undergraduate students in all aspects (intellectual, moral, spiritual, social, and physical) as well as develop their communication and critical thinking skills (Co-Curricular Activity Centre, 2007). To achieve the desired objectives, it is recommended that the study circle should be implemented through 'active' learning, including individual and group works, discussion and other more innovative activities that make the students, who come from around 100 countries with different levels of Islamic knowledge, be more motivated and be engaged in the discussions (Co-Curricular Activity Centre, 2007). Therefore, this study focused on the students' learning motivational orientations and learning strategies because they are the cornerstone of the successful implementation of the course, and in other courses in almost all fields (Zimmerman, 2000).

Overall, the findings of the study showed higher levels of learning motivational orientations (self-efficacy and task performance and task value). The highest means for items in task value (i.e., interest, importance and utility) indicated that the students were aware of the course significance in their entire life inside and outside the university (Shirin, Islam, & Islam, 2014). It seems that the course content meets their needs as Muslim students (Hashim, 1999). Task value was also found as a stronger predictor of enrollment intentions (Bong, 2001). For self-efficacy and task performance, students also scored high means showing how they positively perceived themselves in both understanding and performing the course requirements (Shirin et al., 2014). Self-efficacy determines people feeling, perception, motivation and behavior (Bandura, 1995).

With regard to the learning strategies (elaboration and peer learning), students used these strategies as indicated by the high item means scores. As a form of cooperative learning, peer learning make the students interact with each other and share ideas as proposed in the study circle course (Co-Curricular Activity Centre, 2007). In the sections of the study circle, there are students with different background, nationality, faculties, and age. Thus, by engaging the peer learning strategy in class, it is expected that the students could perform together the tasks more effectively. In their study, Shirin et al. (2014) concluded that students in study circle get more attentive and interested in preparing the assignments with the co-operation of their friends. Pintrich et al. (1991) explained that peer learning has positive effects on students' achievement through collaborating. Students help each other by clarifying course materials; and through dialogue they may reach insights that one may not have attained on

his/her own (Slavin, 1996). Study circles are 'powerful vehicles' for people from diverse cultures or communities to collaborate and inspire each other (McCoy, 2005) in a more democratic atmosphere (Richmond, 2000). Moreover, cooperative learning has been found to enhance students' achievement and influence their attitude or motivation in other learning subjects, like language (Davoudi & Mahinpo, 2012; Farzaneh & Nejadansari, 2014; Huang, Liao, Huang, & Chen, 2014; Pan & Wu, 2013; Wang, 2012; Yoshida et al., 2014). Elaboration strategy was also found very useful in students' tasks performance (Weinstein, Ridley, Dahl, & Weber, 1989).

Finally, the findings of this study revealed that there is a significant relationship between learning motivation and learning strategy among study circle (*halaqah*) course students at IIUM. This correlation is also discussed in literature (Eggen & Kauchak, 2012).

5. Conclusions and Implications

The undergraduate students showed high learning motivational orientations in taking the study circle (*halaqah*) course in terms of interest, importance and utility. They were confident in understanding and performing the course tasks. They used elaboration and peer learning strategies to perform such tasks. There was also a large positive relation between learning motivational orientations and learn strategies. The facilitators (instructors) are encouraged to be always aware about their teaching methods in study circle (*halaqah*) course which all undergraduate students, from around hundred countries, studying at IIUM are required to take.. It could be beneficial if further research includes more variables other than nationality and gender, and includes the facilitators' perception. Qualitative research is also highly recommended.

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