Problems of teaching Arabic in Indonesian Islamic Schools

Ahmad Maghfurin

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo- Semarang
Ahmad_maghfurin@walisongo.ac.id

ABSTRACT

There must always be problems in learning any foreign language in this world. Foreign language learners may feel more complexity if they have little to do with the language they are learning. Some influential factors include the distance between the native and target language, the lack of interference between the two, and the low motivation and need to learn it. Therefore, in my opinion, Arabic should not be as difficult as English or other foreign languages for Indonesians. In actual learning practices, it is found that there is low proficiency in Arabic among Indonesian students. That is why there should be further studies to investigate the causes. This research is conducted at MAN 1 Semarang selected purposively. It aims to analyze the source of the problems encountered in learning Arabic in madrasahs and find the best solutions. This research involves some Arabic teachers and students from a selected sample of classes. To ensure data credibility, I use document studies, interviews, and observations to collect relevant data. The collected data are analyzed qualitatively. The findings of this research conclude that the learning problems at MAN 1 Semarang led to low students' entry behavior, disorientation of learning which gives excessive portions of the reading aspect, the teachers who are too dominant in the class so that students play less of a role in the learning process, and minimal use of the target language as a learning medium.

Introduction

In the last few years, I have established good communication with some Arabic teachers in *madrasah*s (Islamic high schools) in Central Java. We have participated in various activities organized by the university where I work, the Central Java Ministry of Religion office, and other institutions. Here, I notice there are many difficulties faced by students and teachers in teaching and learning Arabic as a foreign language. The product of this learning process then becomes raw inputs for Islamic tertiary institutions which make Arabic a compulsory subject for every student regardless of the study program.

The main problem in learning Arabic is the low scores of Islamic higher education enrolment tests from year to year. This is partly due to the traditional methods teachers use in the class (Jauhar, 2008). Another factor is the teachers' lack of attention to their language skills. Most *madrasah*s still emphasize *award* aspects in learning Arabic (2007).

There have been many studies to investigate the linguistic complexity of Arabic in terms of phonology, morphology, and syntax. However, the findings still do not provide the best solutions to overcome the challenges in teaching and learning Arabic. Often these studies have built an image that Arabic is indeed difficult to surpass other foreign languages. Some teachers sometimes think and act as if Arabic is complex. This issue adds to the impression that Arabic is difficult for students to understand, thereby the students are afraid of learning it deeply.

It should be understood that linguistic complexity does not merely belong to Arabic (Arsyad, 2023). It exists in all languages, especially for foreigners who want to learn it. There must always be linguistic problems in learning any foreign language. Complexity feels even more complicated for foreign language learners who have little to do with the language. It is because of the distance between the native and target language, lack of interference between the two, and low motivation and needs to learn it.

For Indonesians, Arabic is the religious language for most people. This religious factor has motivated Indonesian Muslims to learn Arabic for reading and understanding the holy Qur'an and carrying out daily worship. Learning Islam feels incomplete without learning Arabic. It is because Al-Qur'an and hadith are written in Arabic. Islamic books from classical to modern times are generally also written in Arabic. Even in ancient times, Arabic was a very important part of the cultural expressions of ethnic groups in this country. Arabic letters (read: Arabic *pegon*) had become a written medium for the ancient Indonesian people at that time (Effendi, 2005).

Another factor that makes Arabic easier for Indonesian students is the large number of Arabic vocabulary included in Indonesian words. **Majlis** Per**musyawarat**an **Rakyat,** Dewan Per**wakil**an **Rakyat, Mahkamah** Agung, **bab, pasal, ayat, mufakat, wali** kota, **wilayah, kursi** jabatan, tahun **takwim** are ome examples of Indonesian words in the government field derived from Arabic. There are more words in the religious area. However, this paper will not need to explain or describe them all.

In practice, there is still low proficiency in Arabic among Indonesian students who have studied Arabic for many years. Therefore, there must be more profound studies to investigate the reasons for this issue. The research must go beyond classical studies to focus on linguistic complexity. It should also cover other factors that affect learning and teaching Arabic like psychological, sociological, and pedagogical factors.

For this reason, this research does not try to repeat language analysis. Instead, it will investigate some factors that influence learning and teaching Arabic. In particular, this research explores the problems students and teachers face in learning Arabic. This research cannot cover all the factors that have been mentioned but is limited to pedagogical factors.

This research can unravel the sources of the problems encountered in learning Arabic at *a madrasah*. This research also tries to investigate some factors that impede learning and teaching Arabic and look for potential solutions to solve them. Therefore, this research is crucial because it covers some areas that have not received attention in the past. From a practical perspective, this research will highlight the students' most basic things, including their background and their readiness to learn Arabic. This will help *madrasah* management and teachers to take the right steps according to the student's initial conditions.

This research will also show whether the teachers have been aware that the learning strategies they apply have been following the latest trends in foreign language learning. I believe that the image that the Arabic language is difficult to learn will end soon if the learning process runs properly. Finally, Arabic learning can be in line with many factors that make it easier to learn for Indonesian Muslims.

Method

The research was conducted at MAN 1 Semarang selected purposively. It is because this school is relatively large in Semarang City. It has about ten classes for each grade, and the age is relatively old, and The Ministry of Religion now names it as one of the Pilot *Madrasah*s in Central Java. Besides its advantages, this *madrasah* still also has some problems, especially those related to learning Arabic which is the concern of this research. This low score on the test indicates that there are problems in learning Arabic that must be solved to get the best possible solutions.

This research will engage all Arabic language teachers and students from the selected class sample. The selection is based on an agreement between the researcher and the Arabic teachers. Each teacher will observe their

learning in at least one class regarding linguistic competencies discussed in their class. The observation follows the regular schedule made by the curriculum section. To ensure data credibility, I use document studies, interviews, and observations to collect relevant data. The data related to the students' backgrounds will be analyzed quantitatively using statistical software to determine the percentage. Meanwhile, other kinds of data will be analyzed qualitatively.

Result and Discussion
The problem of Students' Entry Behavior

Switching from regular school to *madrasah* or vice versa is commonplace for Indonesians. From the documents of the student affairs section, I have found that the students of MAN 1 Semarang not only come from *MTs* (Islamic junior high schools), but many also come from regular junior high schools.

As a sample, in the 2022/2023 academic year, MAN 1 Semarang accepts 490 students consisting of 196 junior high school graduates (40%) and 294 MTs graduates (60%). This percentage illustrates that MAN 1 Semarang is not only in demand by *MTs* graduates but also by those coming from regular schools. This is a challenge for MAN 1 Semarang managers to manage the learning well so that it will fit various raw inputs.

Various backgrounds of the students mean also the diversity of their initial abilities in the Arabic subject. This is because Arabic is only taught in *madrasah*s under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion. On the other hand, the Ministry of Education and Culture does not make Arabic a compulsory subject in schools under its auspices. Arabic is only a local content subject in some schools that carry the name of Islam.

Ignoring entry behavior is one source of problems in learning. The students from junior high schools, in this case, have not experienced learning Arabic previously. Therefore, they do not yet have sufficient initial skills to take Arabic lessons at this *madrasah*. The student's original schools do not reflect their initial ability in learning Arabic. The best way to obtain accurate information on this matter is to carry out an initial assessment. It aims to determine their readiness level before taking the Arabic language subject at MAN 1 Semarang. This assessment or commonly called *iktibar tahdid al-mustawa* aims to identify the existing gaps (lacks). It is the gaps between what should be mastered and what they have mastered in terms of the Arabic language (Nation and Macalister, 2005).

However, if there is no initial assessment, the student's original schools can be a benchmark with the assumption that they have achieved the minimum completeness required to graduate from the *madrasah* at the previous level. If the information about new students through report cards and certificate grades is invalid, of course, this is beyond *the madrasah's* capabilities and powers. Thus, the student's original schools are the only source of information owned by MAN 1 Semarang to identify their initial abilities.

The entry behavior in Arabic lessons for *madrasah* students is a classic problem. There is always this issue every year until it becomes a routine. *Madrasah* teachers have been used to this matter that they are ready to deal with it, but they still let it go unresolved. That is why learning Arabic has become a scourge for most students.

Arabic, which should be easy for Indonesians to learn, is difficult. Even if it is more difficult than English. There are many supporting factors for the convenience of Arabic for Indonesian Muslims. However, these factors do not work in learning Arabic in *a madrasah*. The qualified teaching staff is not enough to solve this problem.

From my observations in the classes and interviews with Arabic teachers, it seems so hard and difficult to see the process of teaching and learning Arabic at MAN 1 Semarang for the students and the teachers. One main problem is that the students do not have the initial readiness to take this subject at the *Madrasah Aliyah* level. There is no guarantee that the students who graduate from MTs are better than those from regular schools. However, my research doesn't cover this issue. My concern is limited only to the aspect of sustainability of the Arabic language subject according to the

mandate of the curriculum. This sustainability clause requires *Madrasah Aliyah* students to be MTs graduates. At least, they should have equivalent abilities to MTs graduates. If they don't, it will be difficult for them to learn this lesson.

The problem of Teacher-Students Participation

From my direct observations in classes where the Arabic learning process takes place, Arabic learning is still dominated by the teacher. The teacher spends most of the learning time and only occasionally gives time for the students to ask or answer questions. The teacher spends all the time telling and explaining the materials. This asymmetrical (unbalanced) role relationship between teacher and student is partly due to an old and popular opinion that the teacher is smarter and older than the students.

Another asymmetric teacher-student relationship is the ratio between the teachers and students. The class ratio of 1:40 makes the learning process ineffective. The classrooms run conventionally. It makes the teacher the central point of the class and allows him to control all the students. Big classes and conventional class arrangements negatively influence the movement and interaction among the learning participants.

I did not find any significant process differences in the classes I observed, even though they discussed different elements and skills of the Arabic language. In *nahwu* learning, it is clear that the teacher is the most dominant party in the class. He positions himself as the main source of knowledge (teacher-centered). The teacher gives, while the students only receive. The teacher transfers knowledge, while the students just listen to his explanation while taking notes on things considered important. The teacher explains thoroughly a theme, from the rules to the examples.

The teachers prefer the deductive method (*qiyasi*) to teach *qawaid*. The flow of learning begins with the explanation of the rules. The teachers then clarify the necessary examples. The learning does not focus on *qawaid* only because the students almost always cannot answer the teacher's questions about past material. The teacher must review it again because it is a prerequisite for the material being studied.

The student's inability to answer the questions shows that the previous material was incomplete. The mastery problem has been recognized by the Arabic language teachers of MAN 1 Semarang. They see it as a dilemma. Pursuing material completeness results in learning delays. Following the fixed learning schedule will trigger material incompleteness. Because learning is limited in time, the teacher consciously chooses to carry out learning according to the semester program, although they also realize that material mastery is vital in sustainable learning.

Jika materi lama adalah prasyarat untuk memahami materi baru, maka ketuntasannya menjadi sangat penting. Pengabaian ketuntasan materi akan menjadi tumpukan masalah bagi pembelajaran bahasa Arab pada waktu-waktu berikutnya. Tumpukan masalah itulah yang menjadikan materi bahasa Arab terasa berat bagi siswa. Hal ini tampak dari jawaban siswa atas pertanyaan yang saya lontarkan.

If old material is a prerequisite for understanding new material, then its thoroughness becomes very important. Ignoring the completeness of the material will be a pile of problems for learning Arabic in the future. It is this pile of problems that make Arabic language material difficult for students. This can be seen from the students' answers to the questions I asked.

At the end of the lesson, I asked the teacher about the students' impressions of learning Arabic. I was surprised to hear their unanimous answer that Arabic was difficult and the material was too heavy for them. Even though it was difficult, when I asked about attitude, most students said that they were happy with this lesson. This pleasure feeling should be a foundation for the teacher to create a fun and exciting learning atmosphere so that the students can understand the materials easily.

The problem of Learning Orientation

I have conducted a document review, class observations, and interviews with the Arabic teachers of MAN 1 Semarang. This aims

to get an overview of the real conditions of Arabic learning and what the students think about it. From my observations, I know that learning Arabic at MAN 1 Semarang aims to provide the students with four integrated language skills, namely listening (*istima'*), speaking (*kalam*), reading (*qira'ah*), and writing (*kitabah*). However, I also found that the learning process was not oriented toward these skills in a balanced way. The teacher's focus on the reading aspect exceeds others.

Too much attention to this aspect is a result of the classical method they apply in learning with a relatively uniform flow, namely:
- The teacher translates the text into Indonesian.
- The students listen to the teacher's explanation of difficult vocabulary and then write in their books.
- The teacher repeats the reading of the text, then the students imitate him.

This is the standard flow of learning Arabic at MAN 1 Semarang. Learning in this way only makes the students rely on other parties and does not motivate them to be independent. Learning in this situation should not only be about loading the materials into the students' minds, but it should be about making them learn independently. Independent learning means a process that allows the students to depend on themselves on an ongoing basis to gain knowledge and language skills. This learning independence can be achieved if they have a better opportunity to perform their abilities. The main role of the teachers is only to provide an atmosphere that is conducive to this independence. They should not always give but also encourage the students to find and explore knowledge by themselves. The teachers should not only demonstrate their abilities in front of the students but also train them to improve their skills (Sayyid, 1998). This method of learning Arabic which tends to spoil the students contributes to the non-development of their Arabic language skills from the primary level, even though they already have a basic knowledge at *the madrasah aliyah* level.

To explore this issue, I have had some interviews with some teachers about the reasons behind their choice of this all-reading activity flow. They realize that this model is not ideal for learning Arabic. However, they have to apply this method, bearing in mind that the students cannot be allowed to study independently even under the guidance of a teacher. This is closely related to their low initial readiness as a prerequisite for the Arabic language learning level at this level. Most students of MAN 1 Semarang are still at the *ibtidaiyah*/elementary level, even though their formal level is at the *aliyah*/advanced level. Their reading ability is limited to matching sounds with written letters. This is the lowest level of reading which is mechanistic in nature as is usually done by *TPQ* students. Our common people have clearly understood this reference so that the expression "reading the Qur'an" means voicing the text of the Qur'an which is always written in full in dead Arabic script (consonant/*harf shamitah*) and living script/*harakat* (vowel/ *harf shaitah*). Meanwhile, real reading means seeing and understanding the writings verbally or only within the heart (Hidayat, 1990).

Regarding most students who are slow learners or even do not completely understand Arabic materials, the teachers do not complain about the lack of class hours. Time is balanced with the materials according to the current curriculum and textbooks. Learning progress becomes slow because the process is stuck on reading texts that shouldn't need to be done most of the time.

The problem of Using the Target Language

The target language is the most effective medium for learning a foreign language. This does not mean that the mother tongue should not be used, but must only be limited. The target language should be used according to the student's level and ability. Based on their levels, the Arabic subject in MA is the third level after that in MI and MTs.

According to the nature and purpose of the subject, learning Arabic in *a madrasah* can be categorized as learning Arabic for general purposes. According to some experts, learning Arabic for general purposes up to the advanced level (*mutaqaddim*) takes approximately 300 hours (@45 minutes) or the equivalent of 225

hours effectively. Abd Rahman Al-Fauzan, et al., have compiled *Al-Arabiyyah Baina Yadaik* in three volumes (Al-Fauzan,2002). Each volume requires 100 learning hours. This book is intended for non-Arabic speakers who want to learn Arabic from zero to proficient. Prof. Ekehard Schulz of the University of Leipzig in Germany also designed this general-purpose Arabic course within 224 hours (Schulz,2010). In the introduction to his book, al-*Lughah al-Arabiyah al-Muashirah*, he described his success in teaching Arabic to his students at the Oriental Institute at the University of Leipzig.

If our *madrasah* allocates an average of 80 minutes each week, then the students have studied the Arabic language for 2400 minutes (40 effective hours) in one year. If current MTs graduates start learning Arabic in grade four of MI (Islamic elementary school), it means that grade 1 MA students have studied Arabic for 6 years (3 years at MI and 3 years at MTs). During this time, they have learned Arabic for 240 effective hours. With this assumption, the teacher-student and student-student interactions in the classroom should use Arabic more as the target language.

However, I have found a contradictive fact. Arabic is very minimally spoken by the teachers and the students in communication in the class. Apart from opening and closing remarks, the language of the class is entirely Indonesian. Such a class situation seems to deprive the students of the opportunity to gain experiences using the Arabic language they want to master. They also lose the artificial environment that is most likely to be presented in the process of learning and acquiring a foreign language

The role of the formal environment is reinforced by the "input hypothesis" proposed by Krashen. This hypothesis states that learning to acquire a second language is only accomplished in one way, namely by understanding the meaning of the message that reaches it. In other words, the students can speak a second language because they have received inputs that their meaning can be understood by others. They can understand some discourses that contain grammar not presented in sequence because of the help of

context, knowledge about life and the natural surroundings, and linguistic abilities that they have mastered before.

The formal situations within the classrooms have an advantage in learning foreign languages compared to the natural environment. The advantage lies precisely in the provision of input by the teachers. Based on their acquisition of a foreign language at the elementary to intermediate level, it is difficult to find comprehensible input in a natural learning environment.

Conclusions

The main disrupting issue in the achievement of the learning objectives of Arabic at MAN 1 Semarang starts from the low entry behavior. It is because there have been many students coming from educational programs that are not linear. Meanwhile, Arabic is a subject designed sustainably from MI, MTs, to MA. This factor results in low student participation in class learning and learning misorientation which gives excessive portions of the reading aspect. The language used in learning is also almost entirely Indonesian interspersed with Javanese. Arabic only appears in the opening and closing sections. The very minimal use of the target language also means the loss of the reference model for using the language being studied. It also shows the loss of opportunities for the students to practice speaking the target language as a requirement in the language acquisition process.

References

1. Jauhar, Narsuddin (2008), تعليم اللغة العربية على المستوى الجامعي في إندونيسيا في ضوء مناهج تعليم اللغة العربية للناطقين بغيره, Sudan: Neilin University Press.
2. Sholih, Syuhadak (2007), مناهج تعليم اللغة العربية في المدارس الابتدائية بإندونيسيا, Sudan: Neilin University Press.
3. Arsyad, Azhar (2003), *Bahasa Arab dan Metode Pengajarannya: Beberapa Pokok Pikiran,* Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.
4. Effendi, Ahmad Fuad (2005), *Metodologi Pengajaran Bahasa Arab,* Malang: Misykat.

5. Nation, I.S.P. and Macalister, John (2010), *Language Curriculum Design,* London: Routledge.

6. Sayyid, Mahmud Ahmad (1988), اللغة تدريسا واكتسابا, Riyadh: Dar al-Faishal.

7. Hidayat, Rahayu S (1990), Pengetesan Kemampuan Membaca secara Komunikatif, Jakarta: Intermasa.

8. Al-Fauzan, Abd. Rahman (2002), العربية بين يديك, Riyadh, Arabic For All

9. Schulz, Eckehard (2010), اللغة العربية المعاصرة, (Yogyakarta, LKiS