Arabic Language Learning from the Students' Perspective: A Descriptive Study on Responses, Motivation, and Learning Challenges in Madrasah

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INTRODUCTION

Arabic language education has become an integral part of the religious education system in Indonesia, particularly within madrasah, as Arabic plays a vital role as the source language of Islamic religious texts. Its significance extends beyond a means of communication, functioning also as a key tool for comprehending religious teachings contained in the Qur'an and Hadith. Consequently, Arabic is positioned as a strategic subject that is compulsory in madrasah and other Islamic educational institutions. This necessity is reinforced by curriculum policies that designate Arabic language instruction as a crucial element in fostering students' religious.[1] Theoretically, the communicative approach in foreign language teaching has become the dominant paradigm and is considered effective in enhancing overall language proficiency. This theory emphasizes the importance of meaningful interaction in the language learning process as a vehicle for developing contextual speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. In practice, this approach has gradually been adopted in Arabic language education within madrasah, although its implementation still faces various technical and cultural challenges.

From the perspective of applied linguistics in education, Arabic language learning as a second or foreign language aligns with the principles of interlanguage theory developed by Selinker. In this framework, students construct an evolving intermediary language system based on their native language background, linguistic input, and social interaction within the learning environment. For madrasah students who are not native Arabic speakers, acquiring the language involves a complex process that extends beyond grammatical memorization and requires active engagement in meaningful communication. Recent studies highlight that learning methods grounded in authentic interaction and contextualized media significantly enhance student outcomes.[2] As such, second language acquisition theories and communicative approaches serve as foundational frameworks for designing effective Arabic language teaching strategies in secondary education.

One of the undeniable phenomena in Arabic language learning within the madrasah is the gap between curricular ideals and classroom realities. Although Arabic holds a strategic role in the curriculum, many students perceive it as a difficult and demanding subject due to its unique script and complex grammatical structures. Research shows that students frequently struggle with reading Arabic texts, mastering vocabulary (mufradat), and understanding grammar comprehensively.[3] This is compounded by the limited availability of contextual learning media and the continued reliance on teacher-centered instructional methods. Consequently, even though students are religiously motivated to learn Arabic, this enthusiasm is not always matched by language proficiency. These realities highlight the need for strategic pedagogical interventions to make Arabic learning more engaging, effective, and aligned with students' actual needs.

While many previous studies have examined instructional methods or curricular frameworks for Arabic language learning in madrasah, few have delved into students' personal perceptions of their learning experiences. Most research tends to emphasize teaching techniques or academic outcomes without addressing the emotional and cognitive dimensions of students' involvement in the learning process. Yet, understanding student perceptions is critical, as it reflects the effectiveness of teaching methods and informs the refinement of instructional practices. These perceptions include students' attitudes, interests, motivation, and their views on the difficulties and ease of learning Arabic (Hamidin, 2019).[4] Prior studies, such as those by Zunoomy et al., 2019 and (Ahmid, 2020), largely focus on teacher practices or systemic barriers but do not explore reflective insights from students themselves. Hence, this study seeks to address the research gap

by providing a comprehensive examination of how students perceive, interpret, and experience Arabic language learning within the context of Madrasah Tsanawiyah.[5]

Ideally (das sollen), Arabic language learning should foster an interactive environment that supports students in speaking and writing through innovative teaching strategies led by well-trained educators. However, the actual condition (das sein) reveals that many teachers still depend on conventional lecture-based methods that limit students' opportunities to actively practice the language. Moreover, educational technology and learning media are underutilized, further hindering the development of communicative competencies. This disparity between the ideal and the real contributes to unequal learning outcomes among students. A lack of continuous professional development for teachers and insufficient classroom infrastructure, especially in rural areas, exacerbates the issue.[6] These challenges underscore the need for realistic and context-sensitive interventions to bridge the gap between pedagogical expectations and classroom practices.

This study aims to fill that gap by exploring students' perceptions of Arabic language learning, focusing on their emotional and cognitive responses, motivation, and the challenges they face. Understanding these aspects is essential to assess the effectiveness of teaching methods and media used by Arabic language teachers. This research is particularly relevant because it integrates three sources of qualitative data—interviews, observations, and documentation—to construct a holistic view from the students' perspective. Unlike previous studies such as, which focus on macro-level curricular design, or which center on instructional theory, this study offers novelty by positioning students as active subjects in the research. It contributes both theoretically and practically to efforts aimed at enhancing Arabic language learning in madrasah by ensuring that teaching strategies align with students' lived realities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student perspective in language learning refers to individuals' subjective views on the experiences, processes, and outcomes of the learning they undergo. These perspectives are shaped by several factors, including cultural background, learning environment, prior experiences, and expectations for achievement. In the context of Arabic language education, student perspectives reflect their motivation, interest, and engagement with the language. Research indicates that students form their perceptions based on the effectiveness of teaching methods, classroom atmosphere, and the relevance of material to their lives.[7] These perspectives are dynamic and may evolve over time depending on their learning experiences. Studies also suggest that students' perspectives on Arabic are often shaped by perceptions of grammatical and phonetic complexity, balanced by an appreciation for the religious and cultural values embedded in the language.[8] Understanding these perspectives allows educators to adapt their instructional approaches to better support active participation and deep comprehension, affirming the role of students as subjects rather than passive recipients in the learning process.

Student perspectives on Arabic language learning manifest in several dimensions—cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Cognitively, they reflect how students process the language, particularly their perception of Arabic as a difficult language. Affective dimensions include feelings of enjoyment or aversion, often influenced by the teacher's methods and the learning environment.[9] Behaviorally, these perspectives are observed in classroom participation, attendance, and student initiative to study independently. Students who hold positive views toward Arabic typically show greater engagement and curiosity, while those with negative views often demonstrate passive attitudes, disinterest, or excessive reliance on the teacher. Categorizing these perspectives is important to help teachers design instructional strategies that are not only didactic but also responsive to student needs.[10]

Arabic language learning is a systematic process aimed at developing linguistic competencies, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. This process involves mastering phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics, alongside the cultural elements inherently tied to the Arabic language.[11] In formal educational contexts such as madrasah, Arabic is not only taught for communicative competence but also as a tool for interpreting religious texts. Arabic as a second or foreign language presents specific challenges, particularly the phenomenon of diglossia—where formal Arabic (fusha) and colloquial varieties (amiyah) differ structurally and functionally.[12] Thus, instructional approaches must address these differences to prevent student confusion. Communicative and activity-based methods are increasingly recognized as effective in enhancing student engagement and comprehension.

Arabic language learning manifests in various forms, shaped by the pedagogical models applied in educational settings. In many Indonesian madrasah, instructional delivery still largely emphasizes structural learning through grammar translation and rote memorization. While this approach may support text interpretation, it often neglects the development of productive language skills such as speaking and writing.[13] Observations in classrooms reveal that learning activities are mostly limited to translating texts and copying vocabulary, with few opportunities for interactive or dialogical learning. Students' responses to these learning models vary depending on their exposure to engaging or traditional methods. Educators and curriculum developers are thus challenged to bridge the gap between theoretical objectives and practical classroom experiences by promoting communicative practices and contextualized content delivery.[14]

Learning motivation is defined as the internal or external drive that stimulates individuals to pursue language learning and sustain effort throughout the process. In the Arabic language learning context, motivation is often closely linked to religious, personal, and academic values. Intrinsic motivation may arise from a desire to understand the Qur'an and Hadith, while extrinsic motivation may be influenced by parental expectations or social recognition. Research indicates that motivated students are more likely to engage in learning activities, seek out additional resources, and persist through challenges.[15] Theories such as the ARCS model (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction) provide useful frameworks for understanding how to stimulate and maintain student motivation in language learning environments.

Motivation in Arabic language learning can be observed through students' consistent participation, attentiveness, homework completion, and voluntary engagement in Arabic-speaking activities. Students with high motivation often take initiative, ask questions, and seek clarification, whereas those with low motivation may exhibit passive behavior and a lack of interest in lessons. Motivation also correlates strongly with goal orientation, whether students are driven by mastery or performance outcomes. Teachers play a central role in reinforcing motivation by creating supportive, interactive, and relevant learning environments. Effective motivational strategies include providing meaningful feedback, using varied instructional media, and connecting content with students' lived experiences.[16] When these strategies are well implemented, student motivation becomes a significant factor in successful language acquisition.

METHOD

This study focuses on describing the phenomenon of Arabic language learning from the students' perspective at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah (Islamic junior secondary school) level. The primary object of investigation is the lived experience of students in learning Arabic, including their motivation and the challenges they encounter during the learning process. Despite Arabic being a compulsory subject with religious significance, many students perceive it as complex and difficult to master. They face barriers in understanding Arabic grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

These challenges are often intensified by rigid instructional practices and limited use of interactive methods. This study employs a descriptive approach to reconstruct a comprehensive picture of how students perceive and interpret their Arabic learning journey. Previous research has highlighted similar barriers, such as structural difficulties, inadequate learning media, and teacher-centered methods, but this study seeks to capture these issues from the students' own voices and perspectives.[17]

This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, aiming to provide a holistic and in-depth account of student experiences and perceptions related to Arabic language learning. Rather than testing hypotheses, this type of research seeks to explore meaning and insight through naturalistic data collection. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with key informants—namely, students and Arabic language teachers—who shared their experiences concerning the learning process, instructional methods, and motivational dynamics. Secondary data consisted of relevant literature on student perspectives in second language acquisition, Arabic language learning challenges, and motivation theories. These sources were drawn from academic journals, books, and policy documents to reinforce the study's analytical framework.[18] Combining both primary and secondary data enriched the context and depth of the findings.

The main sources of information in this study were 30 ninth-grade students from MTs Negeri 1 Boalemo who had experienced Arabic language instruction for over two years. These students were selected purposively based on their level of engagement and learning exposure. They served as the core respondents whose responses shaped the primary narrative of this research. In addition to students, the study involved one Arabic language teacher who acted as the main informant in semi-structured interviews. The teacher provided insights into instructional methods, classroom strategies, and student behavior during Arabic lessons. Including both student and teacher voices offered a well-rounded understanding of the learning environment. This aligns with the principles of qualitative research, which emphasize capturing diverse perspectives to deeply understand complex educational phenomena.[19] Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure relevance and depth in the data obtained.

Data collection involved three main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation analysis. Interviews were conducted directly with students and the teacher using open-ended questions designed around the study's objectives. This technique allowed researchers to explore emotional, motivational, and cognitive dimensions of students' learning experiences. Participant observation was conducted during Arabic lessons to capture teacher-student interactions, classroom atmosphere, and engagement patterns. Meanwhile, documentation included student assignments, teacher notes, lesson plans, and other instructional materials relevant to the subject. The combination of these techniques allowed for triangulation, providing a multifaceted understanding of the research object.[20] Data collection was conducted over two weeks, with ethical consent obtained from the school and participants.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the first step, relevant data were selected, simplified, and categorized based on thematic focus. These were then presented narratively and in tabular form to identify patterns and connections. Conclusions were drawn by interpreting recurring themes and triangulating them across data sources. To ensure validity, this study applied source triangulation by comparing student, teacher, and documentation data to confirm accuracy and consistency. This method enhanced objectivity and credibility, as multiple perspectives were considered before conclusions were finalized.[21] The analysis process ensured that interpretations were rooted in field data and reflected the realities of Arabic language learning in the classroom.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that students at MTs Negeri 1 Boalemo generally hold a positive perception toward Arabic language learning. Most students regard Arabic as an important and enjoyable subject due to its connection with religious texts and Islamic values. They believe that learning Arabic facilitates their understanding of the Qur'an and Hadith, thereby enhancing their religious literacy. Nevertheless, several students expressed difficulty in understanding the language, attributing it to complex grammar rules and unfamiliar vocabulary.[22] Observations revealed that student enthusiasm varies depending on the teaching methods employed. Interactive and practical approaches tended to engage students more actively compared to traditional lecture-based instruction. This implies that student perception is not solely influenced by the subject matter itself but is strongly shaped by the pedagogical strategies adopted by the teacher.

"Saya senang belajar bahasa Arab karena saya ingin bisa membaca Al-Qur'an tanpa terjemahan, meskipun kadang saya bingung dengan kosakatanya yang mirip-mirip."

Further analysis of the questionnaire indicates that 67% of students stated they "really like" Arabic as a subject, while 16% "like" it, and none expressed dislike. This strong preference is supported by their emotional attachment to religious content. However, the effectiveness of classroom experience appears uneven. Students who expressed satisfaction typically experienced engaging instructional methods. In contrast, dissatisfaction was linked to monotonous practices such as copying notes and memorizing grammar without contextual practice. Observations confirmed that participatory learning models—like group discussions and role-playing—were more effective in sustaining student attention and involvement. Documentation analysis also indicated that some lesson plans lacked structured speaking or listening activities, thus reducing opportunities for students to develop communicative skills.[23]

"Kalau gurunya ngajarnya cuma nyuruh nyalin dari papan tulis dan ngafal, saya jadi cepat bosan dan nggak ngerti-ngerti."

The gap between student enthusiasm and their learning experience reflects the central problem of this study. While most students approach Arabic with religious and personal motivation, their experiences in class do not consistently nurture this motivation. Rigid teaching styles and lack of communicative engagement were identified as major barriers. These findings affirm that perception is both an outcome and determinant of learning quality. Thus, understanding student perspectives becomes essential in addressing the misalignment between instructional goals and student realities. Teachers are encouraged to move beyond a one-size-fits-all model to accommodate the diversity of learners' needs and expectations.[24]

"Saya sebenarnya ingin bisa bahasa Arab, tapi cara belajarnya bikin saya jadi nggak percaya diri buat ngomong."

Arabic language learning at MTs Negeri 1 Boalemo is structured around the national curriculum, focusing on reading, writing, and understanding religious texts. However, observations indicate that instruction heavily emphasizes grammar and translation tasks. Learning activities often involve copying and translating passages rather than communicative tasks. While teachers use textbooks and worksheets as primary resources, the use of technology or interactive media remains minimal. Interviews with students reveal a desire for more varied methods that include speaking and listening practice. These issues point to a disconnect between curricular aims and classroom implementation.

"Biasanya kami cuma disuruh terjemahkan teks, kadang-kadang baca bareng, tapi jarang latihan ngomong langsung pakai bahasa Arab."

Data from interviews and classroom observations show that Arabic language teachers tend to focus on cognitive achievement, particularly in morphology and syntax. However,

communicative skills such as speaking and listening are rarely emphasized. Lesson plans reviewed during the documentation phase revealed a lack of structured oral practice activities. While a few teachers attempted to use group work and role-play, such efforts were limited due to class size and time constraints. Questionnaire responses supported these findings: only a small number of students reported being encouraged to speak Arabic in class. The lack of verbal engagement from teachers further contributed to students' passive roles in learning. As a result, students' learning outcomes were mostly centered on written grammar tasks rather than real-life language application.

"Kami jarang diminta berdialog dalam bahasa Arab, jadi lebih sering disuruh menghafal dan menerjemahkan teks."

These findings reinforce the research problem regarding the mismatch between students' motivations and instructional realities. The curriculum advocates for holistic language competence, but classroom practices continue to rely on translation-based and rote memorization techniques. Despite students' willingness to engage, their potential remains underdeveloped due to a lack of structured practice in productive skills. The observations and student responses suggest that the teaching approach fails to support the active use of Arabic, hindering the internalization of the language. Thus, the problem is not merely in the students' ability, but in the design and implementation of instructional strategies that should accommodate active participation and real-world language use.

"Kalau gurunya ngajarnya lebih sering ngajak ngobrol pakai bahasa Arab, mungkin saya lebih cepat bisa."

Students' motivation to learn Arabic is primarily rooted in religious aspirations. Most respondents stated they wanted to understand the Qur'an and Islamic teachings more deeply. Some were also influenced by family encouragement and the desire to appear knowledgeable in religious discussions. Intrinsic motivation was evident among students who enjoyed the rhythm and structure of Arabic, even without external pressure. Observation data confirmed that highly motivated students were more participative, attentive, and likely to ask questions. These findings highlight the importance of emotional engagement and personal goals in sustaining language learning motivation, especially when instructional methods fall short of expectations.

"Saya ingin belajar bahasa Arab karena ingin memahami makna Al-Qur'an dan bisa ikut menjelaskan ke orang lain."

Although students displayed strong motivation, it was not always matched by supportive learning conditions. Interviews with the teacher revealed that even highly motivated students struggled to make progress due to repetitive and uninspiring teaching methods. Many students expressed that while they were eager to learn, the class format left them unsure how to begin or improve. The lack of varied learning materials and limited opportunities for language production hindered their enthusiasm. Documentation review showed a misalignment between learning objectives and the activities provided. This illustrates that motivation alone is insufficient without a responsive and engaging instructional environment.

"Saya semangat belajar bahasa Arab, tapi kadang merasa bingung harus belajar dari mana karena yang diajarkan cuma teori."

The data on student motivation underscores that language learning outcomes are not solely determined by desire, but also by the learning systems that support or inhibit that desire. The findings validate the central research issue: despite students' readiness and religious drive to learn Arabic, they are held back by pedagogical limitations. Inadequate engagement strategies, lack of speaking practice, and static learning materials limit the potential benefits of students' intrinsic motivation. These challenges signal an urgent need for teachers to align instructional methods with the motivational profile of learners to unlock deeper engagement and more meaningful progress.

"Saya merasa sudah niat belajar, tapi kalau cara ngajarnya gak berubah, susah buat ngerti lebih dalam."

This study reveals a notable paradox: although students exhibit strong intrinsic motivation to learn Arabic, driven largely by religious values, the instructional environment often fails to support this motivation. Students encounter barriers such as monotonous teaching methods, insufficient speaking practice, and limited instructional media. These obstacles hinder the development of their communicative competence. While the curriculum promotes Arabic as a strategic subject, its implementation lacks alignment with students' real-world learning needs.[25] Students who are eager to engage with the language find themselves disengaged due to rigid pedagogical structures. The study highlights that learner motivation, although crucial, must be matched by responsive and student-centered teaching strategies.

Compared to previous studies, this research offers a more nuanced understanding by incorporating student voices as central to the analysis. Earlier works, such as those by Ahmid 2020 and Zunoomy et al. 2019, focused more on teacher strategies or institutional challenges, whereas this study foregrounds student perspectives, offering richer insight into the emotional and cognitive dimensions of language learning. Similarly, emphasized socio-cultural motivation in university settings, but this study extends the discussion to the madrasah level, which has different contextual dynamics. This shift in focus represents a valuable contribution to Arabic language education research by addressing an underexplored demographic using direct narrative accounts.[26]

The findings of this study provide clear indicators of how Arabic language instruction must evolve to meet learners' expectations and challenges. Students' enthusiasm for learning Arabic is not only a pedagogical opportunity but also a moral imperative in the context of Islamic education. When such enthusiasm is not matched by meaningful instructional engagement, it becomes a missed opportunity to deepen students' religious and linguistic literacy. Therefore, this study serves as a reflective tool for educators to reassess how well their teaching practices align with the emotional and cognitive realities of students. The emphasis on learner perspectives affirms the centrality of student agency in achieving educational goals.[27]

This study has several practical implications. First, it calls for the adoption of communicative language teaching methods that emphasize student interaction, role-play, and real-life language use. Second, it underscores the importance of incorporating diverse and engaging learning media— both visual and digital—to accommodate different learning styles. Third, it advocates for regular teacher training programs that focus on pedagogical innovation. As highlighted in the use of motivational teaching models such as ARCS significantly boosts student engagement. This research, therefore, provides a foundation for institutional reforms that integrate student needs into the design of Arabic language instruction.[28]

The results of this study point to several root causes for the gap between motivation and learning outcomes. Foremost among them is the prevalence of traditional instructional methods that do not prioritize learner participation. Teachers often resort to translation and memorization because of large class sizes, limited training, or lack of access to alternative teaching tools. These practices diminish opportunities for students to actively engage with the language. Additionally, the absence of differentiated instruction for students with varying proficiency levels contributes to learning disparities. As notes, students are more likely to succeed when instruction is personally meaningful and responsive to their goals.[29]

To address these challenges, several actions are recommended. Teachers should diversify their instructional methods, incorporating communicative tasks that simulate real-world

interactions. Schools should invest in training programs that equip educators with the tools to move beyond grammar-focused teaching. Curriculum designers must prioritize activities that allow students to speak, listen, and interact meaningfully in Arabic. Additionally, there should be mechanisms for collecting regular student feedback to inform pedagogical adjustments. Ultimately, Arabic language instruction in madrasah must transition from a teacher-centered model to a learner-driven paradigm, enabling students to develop both competence and confidence in using the language.[30]

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Perhaps unexpectedly, this study reveals that despite students' strong enthusiasm and high intrinsic motivation to learn Arabic—driven by religious commitment and personal interest—the actual learning process often acts as a barrier rather than a facilitator. Students consistently expressed frustration with rigid teaching methods, lack of speaking practice, and repetitive grammar-focused instruction. These findings underscore a significant contradiction: learners who are highly motivated are not necessarily supported by instructional environments that help them achieve communicative competence. Instead, the reality of Arabic instruction in madrasah classrooms tends to hinder the very outcomes it aims to promote. This disconnect highlights the urgent need to reform teaching approaches to be more student-centered and contextually responsive.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the expanding discourse in applied linguistics by emphasizing student agency and perception in Arabic language acquisition—an area often overshadowed by top-down curriculum reforms or teacher-centric models. It validates the importance of understanding emotional, cognitive, and behavioral factors from the learner's point of view. Practically, the research provides empirical evidence that can inform the design of Arabic language instruction tailored to the needs of students in the madrasah. By showcasing how motivation, perception, and teaching methods intersect, this study offers a framework for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking to align educational goals with real classroom conditions.

While the study presents a comprehensive view of students' learning experiences, its scope is limited to a single school and a specific student cohort. This is not a weakness, but rather an opportunity for future studies to build on this foundation by expanding to other schools and education levels. Longitudinal studies could also provide deeper insight into how student perceptions evolve. Moreover, collaborative research involving teachers, parents, and administrators would allow for a more holistic understanding of systemic barriers and enablers in Arabic language education. Such directions are essential for developing more inclusive and effective educational practices in the field.

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