

# Teaching and Learning Arabic Vocabulary: From a Teacher's Experiences

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## Abstract

Vocabulary acquisition is a benchmark for language proficiency, which involves writing, reading, listening and speaking skills. A good command of language relies on the individual's vocabulary size and the level of understanding of a word. In fact, in order to use a language lucidly and effectively, a speaker or writer must choose the most precise words. Thus, vocabulary is a set of words known and used within a language to construct meaning in written texts and communication at large. In learning Arabic language, vocabulary acquisition becomes the main hindrance to the success of the whole language learning. Many students find it difficult to speak and write skillfully in Arabic because of a limited vocabulary. Arabic vocabulary lessons are implicitly applied in the teaching and learning process in classroom, thereby cause difficulties for students to master the language. Therefore, this paper discusses the experiences of Arabic vocabulary learning among the non-native speakers of Arabic from an Arabic teacher's perspectives. The discussion is also focused on the literature review related to vocabulary in Arabic language learning. Other than that, several recommendations are drawn to help improve the teaching and learning of Arabic vocabulary acquisition in Malaysia.

## Keywords

Arabic Vocabulary, Vocabulary Acquisition, Learning, Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary is commonly defined as a set of words within the confines of a language that are familiar to an individual language user. It serves as the foundation of a language or the underlying cause of the four basic language skills acquisition namely reading, listening, writing and speaking skills. Communication can take place lucidly and effectively with the right amount of vocabulary. Whereas, without a satisfactory acquisition of vocabulary and sufficient vocabulary knowledge, communication cannot be conveyed effectively as texts will be uncon-

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ceivable and sentences are baffling. Therefore, [McCarthy \(1988\)](#) states that no matter how good the students master the grammar of a language, it is useless without a good command of vocabulary. This is because only vocabulary will bring meanings to communication.

Several studies of vocabulary acquisition which investigates vocabulary knowledge conclusively admit that it is difficult to connect and explain different words ([Schmitt, 2000](#); [Nation, 2001](#); [Schmitt, 2014](#)). This is due to the vastness of the word to be mastered from the form, meaning and purpose, and functions based on their receptiveness and productiveness. Not surprisingly, these central elements of vocabulary learning are regarded as the major problems for most students. As for students of a second or a foreign language, it is difficult to gain control of all aspects of vocabulary knowledge ([Nation, 2001](#)). This difficulty may be due to the vast scope of knowledge of vocabulary and takes some time to acquire. According to [Harring & Montecillo \(2012\)](#); [Kieffer & Montecillo \(2012\)](#), knowledge of vocabulary takes time and is a complex process. Therefore, vocabulary knowledge can be defined as the capacity to understand words and the ability to use words automatically for productive purposes. Consequently, the knowledge is a component of a successful vocabulary acquisition.

In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education has put forward the effort to enrich the vocabulary knowledge learning in line with the national education inspiration stated in Education Development Plan (EDP) (2013-2025). In EDP, the ministry encourages students to learn a third language in addition to the national language and English. Thus, Arabic language is taught as a subject in the primary and secondary school is an effort by the Ministry of Education. It has been introduced as a subject in the Islamic National Secondary School (INSS) through the approval of the Committee of Inquiry Study Course in 1978 ([Harun & Zawawi, 2014](#)). After that, Arabic language has been taught as an elective subject Islamic-Stream Classroom (ISC) in secondary school and becomes a compulsory subject for all INSSs and Integration Boarding Schools (IBS) in Malaysia ([Rosni, 2009](#)). In primary school, Arabic language has officially taught since 1998 ([JAPIM, 2003a, 2003b](#)). In 2005, Arabic language is taught in primary school broadly as one of the subjects in the j-QAF Program ([Ahmad, 2011](#)).

In addition, Arabic language which is known as a foreign language is taught to fulfill the need of national curriculum. From the early implementation of Arabic language subject, the curriculum aspiration is to facilitate Islamic religious' needs and understandings. However, due to the global changes and demands, Arabic language is greatly desired around the world, especially for employment and continuing education in the Middle-East. The Ministry of Education provides textbooks and training for teachers in order to meet the curriculum needs. Among the main objectives of the curriculum are:

- To enable students to master the four language skills and apply in practice. The main emphasis is given to speaking skills which are considered important among the four skills.
- to provide students with a vast vocabulary acquisition and improve their ability to use it in the proper Arabic language ([Wizarah at-Tarbiyyah al-Maliziyyah, 2003](#)).

The Arabic language curriculum is similar to the curriculum of other subjects whereby the teaching and learning is planned according to the learning outcomes to be achieved by students. It is built on the learning objectives specified in the curriculum specifications ([Hassan & Muhammad, 2004](#)). Generally, language proficiency is one of the Arabic language curriculum goals written in the curriculum document. Language skills in a foreign language, which include listening, speaking, reading and writing, have become the benchmark for individual's communication skill. The language proficiency's lessons are tuned according to the students' levels of three learning domains: cognitive, psychomotor, and affective respectively. The three major levels of proficiency are high, intermediate and low. Students of all levels need to acquire the language skills according to their ability to use the language and communicate effectively and appropriately. Efficiency in the use of language skills lies on the vast and meaningful vocabulary usage, which requires both acquisition and knowledge of vocabulary.

In agreement with that, a variety of attempts have been put in place in assisting students to promote their vocabulary learning. [Sokmen \(1997\)](#) stated that the efforts implemented are able to examine the actual vocabulary elements to aid students in studying vocabulary. [Cunningsworth \(1995\)](#) and [Al-Qahtani \(2015\)](#) also found that these are great approaches in supporting students' vocabulary learning. As a result, an outline of the important elements are derived from the efforts and are connected to the target skills in learning vocabulary called Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS).

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) is a student-centered strategy for vocabulary acquisition. It is formerly regarded as one of the language learning strategies. [Gu \(2005\)](#); [Macaro \(2005\)](#); [Currie & Cain \(2015\)](#) found that, in VLS an individual uses a particular cognitive process in understanding words which correlates between word

learning techniques and individual achievement. In foreign language learning, Gu (2010); Harun & Zawawi (2014) also stated that VLS is known as a tool for learners to recognize their wise selection regarding what to learn, how to learn and understanding a new word.

## 2. Issues and Problems

The issue of Arabic writing and communication problems among learners persists ever since Arabic language was introduced as a subject in the primary and secondary schools. Most students unable to optimize Arabic language vocabulary lessons and thus it limits their ability write and communicate in Arabic. Ashinida (2012) and Ghazali et al. (2013) verified that poor knowledge of Arabic vocabulary limits the ability of students to communicate, write, read and listen to materials in Arabic. Norhayuza (2010) also acknowledged that in teaching of Arabic subject, the mastery of Arabic vocabulary among the students is still lower than satisfactory. Stæhr (2008) reported that vocabulary size contributes to the different language skills such as listening, reading and writing. Meanwhile, knowledge of a new set of vocabulary can be used to support larger communication tasks and activities (Barcroft, 2004). These findings conclude the importance of vocabulary acquisition in language learning.

The learning of Arabic vocabulary can only take place in classrooms, which utilizes textbooks. It is impossible to have an exposure to any Arabic materials unlike Malay and English that are extensively used outside classrooms. Typically, the teaching is more focused on grammar and sentence structure aspects. Nation (1990) stated that the over-emphasized and understanding of other aspects of the language by the teachers have caused difficulties in mastering this foreign language. Therefore, the teachers have forgotten to emphasize the technique of repetition and word association technique with other words in the teaching and learning of vocabulary.

In addition, Nik Mohd Rahimi et al. (2010); Harun & Zawawi (2014) found out that Arabic language teaching and learning will fail to achieve the desired curriculum goal because of the poor vocabulary acquisition among students. These problems have contributed to the declining performance of Arabic language examination at school and national levels as reported in the study. The failure to master the vocabulary of the language has melt away students interest towards the subject (Nunan, 1991; Azman & Goh, 2011).

The study of vocabulary of main languages has grown by leaps and bounds in all parts of the world. However, the study of the Arabic vocabulary especially in Malaysia is less emphasized. The lack of Arabic vocabulary study leads to inadequate input and insights to deal with vocabulary acquisition issues (Che Radiah & Norhayuza, 2011). Therefore, this study intends to view the lived experiences of a teacher who has taught Arabic subject for quite some time.

## 3. Arabic Language Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) is a method used as a language learning strategy to gain vocabulary. This strategy was originally built on language learning strategies and then being more detailed to the vocabulary learning strategies. Vocabulary Learning Strategies (VLS) is different from each other depending on the appropriateness to the individuals.

Vocabulary is not fully acquired through learning in classrooms but mostly learned through contexts as a result of reading texts. This process is called incidental vocabulary learning which indicates wide reading develops a wider vocabulary. In Arabic, vocabulary is also known as “*mufradat*” functions in constructing a complete sentence with a combination of a few words. Although vocabulary is viewed as a sub skill in language learning, it is so crucial especially in writing and speaking skills (Che Radiah 2009). In writing skills, a good “*maqal*” or essay writing will be produced with a wide vocabulary acquisition in order to form complete phrases and sentences. Arabic vocabulary comes in the forms of “*fi’il*”, “*ismu*” and “*harf*” which will form a complete sentence.

Al-Shuwairekh (2001) states three important components that need attention in learning Arabic words or so called Arabic vocabulary. The features are:

- 1) the basic knowledge of words and reference words (*wazan*);
- 2) the concept and the morphological system;
- 3) the diacritical system or short vowels (*tasykil*).

Meanwhile, Kamarulzaman (2010) in his study has classified the criteria of Arabic words used in the textbooks for Arabic language reading comprehension level in schools. Based on these criteria, Arabic words are divided into five categories namely:

- 1) custom usage (*ma’rufah al-isti’mal*);

- 2) identification (*suhulah al-ta'aruf*);
- 3) meaning (*ma'na al-kalimat*);
- 4) sentence constructions (*baniyyah al-kalimat*);
- 5) sentence forms (*syakl al-kalimat*).

The five features or criteria are to be reflected upon accordingly in order to understand Arabic words. In fact, these criteria are seen to have resemblances with the vocabulary learning strategy by Cohen (1990); Gu & Johnson (1996); Schmit (1997); Nation (2001) and Takač (2008). Although Arabic is a foreign language, the learning process is equivalent to other languages such as Malay and English. Arabic language learning strategies are also affected by the amount of acquired vocabulary and the depth of students' understanding of a word.

### 3.1. Schmitt Vocabulary Learning Strategies (1997)

Schmitt's (1997) asserted that vocabulary learning strategies (VLS) classified the analysis of the first stage vocabulary learning and acquisition into various aspects as to warrant the efficiency of use. This classification also displays the two aspects of perception and production. The system is based on the discovery and consolidation difference. VLS classifies vocabulary learning into two main groups: 1) the discovery strategy that involves learning the meaning of new words and 2) strengthening of strategy that involves learning and remembering the meaning of the words already known.

Two groups of strategy are similar to the difference between the increases in vocabulary and strengthen vocabulary by Nation (2001). The increase in vocabulary means of introducing students to start learning new words and their meaning while reinforcing vocabulary building and strengthening this prior knowledge. Under both groups this strategy, there is a second layer in addition to the two main strategies determination, social, memory, cognitive and meta-cognitive. Schmitt Taxonomy of Vocabulary Learning Strategies (1997) constructed a classification based on language learning strategies by Oxford (1990). Schmitt (1997) has divided the learning strategies of vocabulary into two main categories:

- 1) Discovery strategy - strategies that explores the meaning of the word
- 2) Consolidation strategy - strategies that consolidate the new words in which the words found are strengthened by memorizing technique

Then, the two main categories are divided into five sub-categories:

- 1) Determination strategy - individual self-study that tried to find the meaning of a word without the help of others;
- 2) Social strategy - the process of learning new words through social interaction;
- 3) Memory strategy - the students associate the learning new words with the existing knowledge or background of new words using mental process;
- 4) Cognitive strategy - strategy that does not involve students in mental processing, but using a more mechanical way;
- 5) Metacognitive strategy - strategy that involves monitoring and evaluating the outcome of the progress made.

This taxonomy framework is often used by the proponents of vocabulary learning such as Schmitt (1997); Kudo (1999) and Catalan (2003). The use of Schmitt's (1997) VLS taxonomy has several advantages including: 1) can be made uniform and standardized as a test; 2) can be easily used to collect student data; 3) it is based on the theory of learning strategies and memory theory; 4) it is easy and practical arrangements coding, classification and management of data; 5) applies to students who have different backgrounds; 6) is comprehensive and sensitive to a variety of learning strategies and 7) allows for comparison with other studies (Catalan, 2003). The usage of Schmitt Vocabulary Learning Strategies (1997) is considered to be holistic in learning vocabulary. The application of VLS classification is actually divided into a number of aspects for instance productivity, inspiration and the culture. This is due to the environment that may influence students' vocabulary learning strategies (Schmitt, 2000).

### 3.2. Takač Vocabulary Learning Strategies (2008)

Takač's (2008) vocabulary learning strategies are found to be the latest vocabulary learning strategies in the century. From his string of studies, an inventory questionnaire to measure the frequency of foreign language learning strategies was developed. The Vocabulary Learning Strategy for Elementary School Questionnaire

(VOLSQES) was widely used as result of the increasing demands on vocabulary studies. It is a questionnaire on vocabulary learning strategies that targeted the primary school students. Takač (2008) has classified learning strategies of vocabulary into three classifications:

1) The formal learning vocabulary memorization technique, remembering and met a cognitive.

2) Self-study of vocabulary that is the strategy that exposes students directly to the target language with their own efforts such as checking dictionary, taking notes while reading, associating the word with a physical object or environment, imagining the meaning of the word and use new words in sentences.

3) Learning incidental or spontaneous vocabulary in situations that occur in the natural learning.

As proposed in Takač classification model, students in general tend to use English vocabulary learning strategies spontaneously like remembering words from books, magazines, the internet, use of synonyms in conversation, listen to songs in the target language. Whereas the German language students tend to use formal vocabulary learning strategies such as self-revision outside classroom, self-test, self-test with a list of words, study groups, associating the word with physical objects. Therefore, Takač concluded that in the learning of foreign languages, selection and use of vocabulary learning strategies are important. Thus, although there are many vocabulary learning strategies, the cognitive reasoning and determination of students in vocabulary acquisition are the key elements in the strategy of learning a foreign language vocabulary (L3) or second language (L2).

## 4. Reflections and Suggestions

The author's experiences as a teacher of Arabic language at the lower secondary school level in ordinary secondary schools have revealed a range of issues with regards to vocabulary learning. Normally, students who took the Arabic language subject is placed in a special class called Islamic-Stream Classroom (ISC).

### 4.1. Reflections and Suggestions: Experience 1 (Students' Attitude)

Students who took Arabic subjects usually get either good or excellent results in Primary School Assessment Test (PSAT). They studied Arabic since primary school through j-QAF program. It is no doubt that they have a good basic command of Arabic and a good vocabulary skill. Those who showed the meager attitude were probably because of weak vocabulary acquisition despite their high interest in the language as approved by (Ismail, Wan Maizatul Akmar, & Azman, 2013). Their "cannot be bothered" attitude and boredom due to the inability to understand vocabulary are also among the factors not to have dictionaries in Arabic classes which could be helpful for their learning (Rosni, 2009).

According to Ghazali Yusri, Nik Mohd Rahimi, Parilah, Wan Haslina, & Ahmed Thalal (2010) estimated students' own ability to determine their attitudes and efforts to learn Arabic. Students who have low self-efficacy will be easily discouraged when encounter stress in their learning. Azhar (2004) explained that the motivation factor is closely related to students' interest in learning Arabic. Meanwhile, Ismail et al. (2013) have found that students' attitudes in learning and self-factor towards the learning of Arabic at primary school level are positive and encouraging. In this context, the creativity of the teachers in fostering student interest in learning the Arabic language is very important in order to obtain optimum learning (Mohamad Sani, 2005).

The attitudes and interests of the students towards the Arabic subject should be fueled by the creativity and ingenuity of teachers in manipulating their pedagogical skills when teaching. When students learn in ways that are more meaningful, intrinsic motivation for learning will become more sophisticated than when they impartially emphasize on examinations and grades (Muhamad Suhaimi, Mohd Yusof, Baharom, Roslee, Abdul Said and Shukri, 2012).

### 4.2. Reflections and Suggestions: Experience 2 (Communication Skills)

The students' unsatisfactory ability to communicate in Arabic is clearly attributed to the lack of mastery of the vocabulary. Reportedly, the oral skill tests' performances in School Based Assessment (SBA) of form 1 to form 3 hardly exceed Band 4 and 5. Only a small number of students who have skillful use of vocabulary can achieve Band 6. Involvement of students in *muhawarah* was also limited due to the limited vocabulary. Unless when there is the guidance from teachers, texts provided by the teachers, or the sources from textbooks.

Realizing the setback in Arabic language learning, the communicative approach was introduced in the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (ISSC) to increase the Arabic language proficiency among the students

who are viewed to be bounded by grammar translation method (Rosni, 2009). However, Ghazali Yusri et al. (2010) realized that this approach did not achieve its objectives because of the lack of vocabulary acquisition among students. The poor level of vocabulary acquisition among students makes the aspirations and goals of the Arabic language curriculum hardly achievable as envisaged by the Ministry of Education. This scenario clearly demonstrates that the level of speaking skills is not at the level stated in the objectives of the Arabic Language Curriculum. The curriculum aims to produce students who can speak eloquently and fluently and able to express opinions and arguments in certain situations (JAPIM, 2003).

As we know, the learning of Arabic vocabulary is not taught as its own and occurred implicitly within teaching and learning of the language skills itself. Normally, Arabic vocabulary lessons occur subtly through text reading comprehension. This scenario is consistent with Mat Taib's (2005), which suggested that teaching and learning of vocabulary should be planned properly without neglecting other language skills. However, Goh & Azman (2010); Saini & Mohamad (2011); Nadwah & Nadhilah (2014); Nik Mohd Rahimi et al. (2014) stated that students, especially among non-native speakers can speak, write and read effectively only if they acquire an extensive vocabulary size and depth. This is contrary to other findings that the size and depth of a person's vocabulary do not influence speaking skills (Tuaiymah et al. 1990). In conclusion, vocabulary acquisition is the key to the successful language skills than other factors in language learning.

#### 4.3. Reflections and Suggestions: Experience 3 (Examination)

2013 marks the final year for the Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR) before it was replaced by the Form 3 Examination (PT3) that is a school-based examination. The construct and item patterns in Arabic subject questions undergo a few changes. The questions must be answered by using writing skills. As a teacher, I have faced a number of students who had difficulties in written composition (*insya'*) and the use of corresponding Arabic words to words given in Malay language (*tahwil' ibarat*).

Since, Arabic language is taught at the primary level and an elective subject at the secondary school level, there should not be a problem for them to write well in this language. The students were also taught to construct proper Arabic sentences and it is one of the goals of the subject. Accordingly, they were expected to be able to write a proper short essay or to construct sentences. Unfortunately, they have been reported to encounter difficulties in writing due to vocabulary shortage (Nik Mohd Rahimi et al., 2010). The habit of memorizing essays prior to examination also impedes students' writing skills.

Mat Taib (2008) also found a clear disadvantage in terms of morphological and collocation stemming from a lack Arabic vocabulary acquisition. While Rosni (2013) and Harun & Zawawi (2014) believed that the teaching and learning of Arabic vocabulary should be given a serious attention by all parties in order to improve the performance of students in examinations. In addition, the size and depth of vocabulary acquired greatly influence the examination achievement Arabic.

#### 4.4. Reflections and Suggestions: Experience 4 (Teacher's Teaching Strategies)

As a foreign language teacher, to foster the interest in Arabic language is a huge task. Challenges and problems faced must be dealt with wisely. ISC students normally have too much in during Arabic subjects class. This could be due to their timetable begins as early as 7:30 am and ends at 3.30pm. They too need to learn other subjects such as the core subjects. The factors such as "went home late" and "staying too long in school" lead to boredom and tiredness among students.

Most teachers only used conventional teaching techniques such as lectures, translation and explaining without the use of any interesting teaching aids and ascribed their decisions to time constraints and excessive amount tasks. Old-fashioned techniques and low inventory situations are detrimental to the interest of students in Arabic. After all, the Arabic language is already being labeled a difficult subject. Thus, as a means to grow student's interest in Arabic language, the teachers must be creative in presenting their lessons. Mehta (2009) also supposed that learning a foreign language's vocabulary is difficult; learning should be executed in interesting, relaxing and enjoyable manners by providing appropriate vocabulary exercises.

Che Radiah & Norhayuza (2011) encourage the teachers integrate the language game in the teaching and learning. Games are particularly helpful in memorizing vocabulary and expressions which involve other language skills such as speaking, writing and reading. Mehta (2009) also states that teachers need to be creative in building activities and vocabulary exercises that can help students to create vocabulary learning strategies inde-

pendently. According to Adenan & Khairuddin (2012), a versatile teacher is a teacher who is able to use the minimum teaching aids effectively, maximized and organized under any circumstances

## 5. Discussion

The teaching of vocabulary of a foreign language is not an easy task as they involve the first language of the speakers, the words and the patterns of the language itself. Three key areas should be looked into when pondering the teaching and learning of vocabulary namely word forms, meanings of the words and distributions of words. Teachers must be wise in choosing words for students and consider the frequency of occurrences, and are easy to pronounce and a new word association with existing knowledge in order to optimize the learning process. In order to improve the mastery of Arabic vocabulary in students, Rosni (2013) suggests that teachers:

- 1) Choose the correct and appropriate level for the students;
- 2) Translating new words through descriptions in Arabic, giving the meaning of antonyms, or synonyms, using pictures or objects, referring dictionaries and eventually translating into the native language;
- 3) Read the entire text and explain the meaning of new words in the text;
- 4) Strengthen the words by reviewing several times;
- 5) Apply the new word in T&L by encouraging the students to communicate in Arabic.

In conclusion, Arabic language learning must begin with vocabulary learning to serve the basics. The mastery of Arabic vocabulary will ensure the mastery of other language skills such as reading, listening, writing and speaking as well as to answer examination questions with the right content. Finally, it can enhance students' ability to construct and write sentences in any situations. By and large, they will be able to apply the skills in any activities that require Arabic language proficiency either inside or outside of school.

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