Strategies For Enhancing Arabic Speaking Proficiency Among Students In Government-Aided Religious Schools In Malaysia

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Abstract

Proficiency in Arabic has become a significant priority for pupils in Government-Aided Religious Schools, as it constitutes a fundamental objective of Arabic language education in Malaysia. Proficiency in this skill is essential and is evaluated during oral examinations. Obstacles to attaining this competency frequently stem from students' dispositions, inadequate pedagogical methods, and external influences. This study seeks to ascertain the levels of Arabic speaking competency and the tactics for mastering this talent that can be implemented, particularly by students and educators, with assistance from the surrounding environment. This study utilizes a qualitative methodology, including semi-structured interviews for data acquisition. A total of 35 students from government-aid religious Schools in peninsular Malaysia were chosen as responders by purposive sampling. The gathered data will undergo thematic analysis with Atlas.ti software. Research reveals three tiers of Arabic speaking skills among students: weak, moderate, and proficient. This study indicates that successful ways to develop Arabic speaking abilities encompass repetitive practice, environmental support, active engagement in extracurricular activities, background knowledge, and motivation. Therefore, Arabic speaking abilities must be refined to attain a proficient level of fluency using efficient and interactive mastery techniques, enhancing the capability of students to utilize Arabic successfully in everyday conversation and promoting reciprocal communication in the classroom.

Keywords: Arabic Language; Speaking Skills; Al-Lughah Al-Arabiyah Al-Mu'asirah; LAM; Strategy; Teaching Techniques

INTRODUCTION

Language learning skills are divided into four main areas: listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Speaking skills, therefore, are one of the core competencies in second language learning. The ability to articulate words to convey information, ideas, responses, and emotions is defined as speaking skills (Sri et al., 2023). Consequently, speaking skills are considered the most critical component in language mastery and hold fundamental significance in language learning. Teaching speaking skills should be conducted effectively to familiarize language students with fluent expressions and meaningful content in their speech, along with the cognitive ability to select relevant and accurate sentences or phrases based on Standard Arabic (*Fusha*) (Sri et al., 2023) to achieve spoken proficiency.

Moreover, speaking is the second most important skill in second language learning (Sri et al., 2023), as the ability to talk in Arabic enables individuals to communicate with native speakers, thereby fulfilling the objectives of Arabic language

instruction in Malaysia (Masyitoh & Kaseh, 2018). Despite the long history of Arabic instruction, challenges remain in teaching and learning processes. This has made speaking a skill many Arabic language learners struggle to master (Zakiyah & Mutiara, 2020; Siti et al., 2021). This is supported by findings that indicate low speaking proficiency among students in Government-Aided Religious Schools (Nurul & Harun, 2021; Afiqah & Harun, 2021). Accordingly, the issue of Arabic speaking skills has gained attention and become a focal point in the field of Arabic language education in Malaysia.

Arabic speaking proficiency should begin with nurturing motivation and self-confidence (Fared & Seman, 2019; Nazratul, 2021), as these are fundamental bases, without which students' fluency and focus in learning the language may be disrupted (Nor & Noor, 2021). Furthermore, parental and environmental encouragement, perseverance, and positive reinforcement can help boost students' confidence (Sueraya et al., 2016). Language practice is also one strategy for mastering Arabic speaking skills. According to Fared and Seman (2019); Sabri et al. (2020); and Nor and Noor (2021), continuous Arabic language practice can be conducted as self-learning and self-repetition exercises to apply learned vocabulary, such as question words or greetings (Cecep, 2018), and to assess its suitability in expressed sentences. Furthermore, periodic Arabic language practice facilitates direct interaction, underscoring that speaking skills are frequently used in daily life through communication (Siti et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of mastering Arabic speaking skills is further supported by implementing appropriate learning strategies (Masyitoh & Kaseh, 2018; Hazrul, 2020; Fared & Seman, 2019; Nor & Noor, 2021). This approach represents a primary dimension in achieving quality teaching outcomes, including teachers' practices and students' success. It suggests that the learning outcomes and implementation of speaking skills activities should be mastered by students (Nor & Noor, 2021) as a result of effective Arabic speaking skills instruction. Consequently, studies by Norfaezah (2021); Norhayati et al. (2013); and Ghazali et al. (2023) indicate that this approach can accelerate students' understanding of the language. For example, teachers may incorporate animated videos or teaching aids in Arabic speaking skills instruction, which has been shown to moderate challenges in students' learning (Nadilah & Nadwah, 2014; Yogia & Wahyudi, 2018; Norhayati et al., 2013; Ghazali et al., 2023; Ghani et al., 2024).

This study focuses on issues related to Arabic speaking skills among students must be studied in greater depth to identify various levels of speaking proficiency. Besides that, speaking skills are among the most commonly used skills in daily life and are essential to mastering language teaching and learning. This is because speaking serves as a rapid means of communication and as a medium for interacting with others (Siti et al., 2021; Muspika, 2017). Additionally, communication is a key component emphasized in 21st-century learning while also practicing student-centered learning (Sabri et al., 2020). Consequently, communication should occur through speaking, which plays a significant role in learning and is central to overall classroom activity (Asyikin et al., 2019), as well as being a goal in second language acquisition. Furthermore, foreign language speaking skills also involve other language skills, such as listening (Ghani & Daud, 2023; Siti et al., 2021). Thus, listening to a foreign language drives the process of two-way communication or speaking skills (Nazratul, 2021), where two-way communication involves listening and responding (Asyikin et al., 2019).

Therefore, Arabic speaking skills can help foster an effective and interactive learning environment. Nabilah and Radhwa (2019) found that foreign language speaking

skills involve transferring information and integrating verbal and cognitive processes during speech. According to Sri et al. (2023); Zakiyah and Mutiara (2020); and Muhammad and Ali (2018), teaching Arabic speaking skills should maximize *hiwar* (conversation) or conversational themes based on daily activities, be adapted to students' characteristics, and incorporate storytelling techniques. This approach encourages critical thinking skills by selecting appropriate vocabulary and relevant story themes (Muhammad & Ali, 2018). As such, students can practice using Arabic through pronunciation and speaking drills (Nor & Noor, 2021), aligning with the specific features of Arabic consonants. Furthermore, discussing daily activities in conversation can alleviate students' fears and make the topics more engaging to share with peers (Zakiyah & Mutiara, 2020).

According to Muhammad and Ali (2018) and Muspika (2017), teachers can also employ group-based speaking skills techniques by incorporating High Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (Syaubari et al., 2021). This approach fosters a collaborative learning environment (Sabri et al., 2020; Abdul et al., 2020), promotes teamwork within groups, and creates a language-rich atmosphere inside and outside the classroom (Nadwah & Nadilah, 2014; Hazrul, 2020) while applying 21st-century learning principles (Syaubari et al., 2021). Additionally, Masyitoh and Kaseh (2018) found that Arabic speaking skill instruction should follow specific guidelines to improve students' proficiency in Arabic speaking skills. Teachers should frequently use Arabic in their speech (Hazrul, 2020; Sabri et al., 2020; Asyikin et al., 2019; Abdul et al., 2020) through sermons, debates, or spontaneous talks (Churi & Nurrohmatul, 2021) and practice communicative skills, or *al-thariqah al-mubasharah* (direct skill methods) (Muspika, 2017). This is crucial as teachers serve as role models for students. Teaching methods should be teacher-led to enhance Arabic speaking proficiency, with language teaching success reflected in students' developmental outcomes (Hazrul, 2020; Nor & Noor, 2021).

In conclusion, the need for this study is to identify the level of Arabic speaking skills proficiency among Government-Aided Religious School students to develop them who are capable of speaking Arabic. Accordingly, success in Arabic speaking skills represents the achievement of oral communication proficiency, which facilitates information acquisition among students. Consequently, it is necessary to explore strategies that can be practiced by students themselves or encouraged by the environment to improve Arabic speaking proficiency. Additionally, this study aims to provide insights for teachers and students with opportunities to improve teaching and learning methods for Arabic speaking skills, implement effective strategies to enhance speaking fluency, and foster students' communicative skills mastery. Moreover, the practice of strategies for mastering Arabic speaking proficiency must be intensified as it is an effective direct medium of communication and interaction in the teaching and learning process, complemented by vocal intonation and facial expression.

METHOD

The research design employed by the researcher is a qualitative study, utilizing semi-structured interviews with the study respondents to gather detailed insights (Creswell, 2008; Goundar, 2013; Cohen et al., 2018; Cresswell & Creswell, 2018) relevant to the research issue. The population for this study involves students from Government-Aided Religious Schools in Malaysia. The study further employs cluster sampling to select the states in Malaysia. The study population area is divided into four

clusters, each represented by two states, which have the highest number of Government-Aided Religious Schools (Rathuan, 2024). This allows the researcher to select Government-Aided Religious Schools that offer the Integrated Dini Curriculum. The states involved as study locations are as follows:

1. Northern Region (Kedah and Perak)
2. Southern Region (Johor and Negeri Sembilan)
3. Eastern Coast (Kelantan and Terengganu)
4. Central Region (Selangor and Kuala Lumpur)

Next, the selection of Government-Aided Religious Schools from the states representing the clusters involved is done using random sampling. For the selection of study respondents from the states representing the involved clusters, the researcher uses purposive sampling, a common technique in qualitative research (Richey & Klein, 2007). This technique is used because the researcher has determined the necessary characteristics of the respondents, who can provide the information and data required for this study (Azlina et al., 2021). Therefore, a total of 35 students from Government-Aided Religious Schools participated in the study. The participants must meet the following criteria:

1. Senior secondary of Government-Aided Religious Schools students enrolled in the Integrated Dini Curriculum.
2. Respondents can commit throughout the study.
3. Respondents do not have a special interest in any particular stakeholder.

The research instrument for the implementation of this study is a semi-structured interview protocol. This interview technique allows the researcher to expand on the main questions to achieve the necessary findings and uncover data depth (Kamarul, 2012). The interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes, using focus groups, telephone interviews, or open-ended questions. The data will be analyzed thematically using Atlas.ti software.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study focus on two main areas: 1) the level of proficiency in Arabic speaking skills and 2) strategies for mastering speaking competence. The level of proficiency in Arabic speaking skills is categorized into three themes: good, moderate, and weak. Meanwhile, strategies for mastering speaking competence encompass five themes: extracurricular activities, environmental encouragement, repetitive practice, background, and motivation.

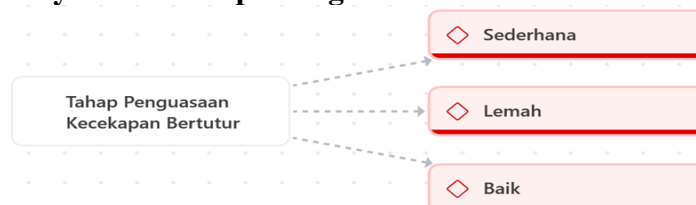**Level Of Proficiency In Arabic Speaking Skills**

Figure 1. Levels of Mastery in Arabic Speaking Skills

Knowledge of the levels of mastery in Arabic speaking skills is an essential element in determining teaching strategies and the planning and implementation of Arabic language Teaching and Learning based on student needs. Therefore, it becomes the fourth foundation for mastering Arabic speaking skills (Hazrul, 2020). Furthermore, student achievement and learning success are assessed through the level of proficiency in Arabic

speaking skills, which helps teachers identify the student's proficiency levels in Arabic speech.

1. Good

   Excellent Arabic speaking demonstrates that teachers are fulfilling the primary objective of Arabic language instruction in Malaysia (Masyitoh & Kaseh, 2018). Mastery of Arabic speaking skills at a good level is evident through the ability to converse with peers or native speakers and apply the language in communication (Masyitoh & Kaseh, 2018), as stated by respondents 20 and 16:

   > *'saya boleh cakap. Saya berada dalam keadaan baik, saya confident dalam cakap Arab, saya boleh faham orang Arab cakap.Alhamdulillah.' (R20S1)*

   > *'Kalau macam ada tugasan hiwar dengan kawan-kawan lain, kami pun boleh misalnya interaksi satu sama lain dengan baik.' (R16S1)*

   It shows that a good command of Arabic speaking skills can be enhanced by cultivating self-confidence to practice this language in daily life, aligned with the influence of the student's surrounding environment. In addition, speaking proficiency can be achieved through the responses (Sri et al., 2020) provided in speech. According to respondent 31:

   > *'Boleh respon, insyaAllah.' (R31S1)*

   Therefore, achieving a high level of competence in speaking Arabic is an essential element in language skill learning, as it demonstrates that the language can be applied by students in daily communication.

2. Moderate

   Additionally, the speaking skills in Arabic were found to still be at a moderate level, as observed in the responses given to spontaneous questions and the understanding of instructions provided. However, these responses depend on the student's level of knowledge regarding a particular topic. This is supported by respondents seven and thirty:

   > *'Kalau spontan tu kadang-kadang macam, kalau spontan yang benda yang basic-basic tu boleh lah. Tapi kalau macam nak buat ayat, so susah sikit lah. Kalau perkataan-perkataan tu insyaAllah boleh lah.' (R7S1)*

   > *'Tapi saya still boleh memahami dan juga boleh bertutur walaupun tidak berapa   fasih. Tapi still boleh fahami apa yang disuruh lah.' (R30S1)*

   Most of the respondents indicated that their level of Arabic speaking skills was at a moderate level. As a result, the respondents continue to strive for better speaking abilities and aim to change the negative stigma that speaking skills are difficult to master.

3. Weak

   Furthermore, a weak level of proficiency is also one of the stages of mastery in Arabic speaking skills among students. In this regard, it creates difficulties for individuals in learning Arabic speaking skills, such as being unable to respond to questions posed by the teacher, even when the questions are simple.

   > *'Jadi macam tak tahulah macam apa perkataan tu. Lepas tu kan ada soalan juga yang cikgu akan tanya kan. Daripada situ pun saya tak boleh.' (R20S1)*

   Therefore, this creates difficulties for students in completing more challenging tasks, such as spontaneous ones, as stated by the third respondent:

   > *'kalau spontan boleh tak?*
   > *Tak boleh, tak boleh langsung.' (R3S1)*

The weakness in speaking Arabic continually motivates teachers to assist students in achieving a higher level of proficiency. This is in line with the goal of Arabic language instruction in Malaysia, which is to master the skill of speaking Arabic effectively (Masyitoh & Kaseh, 2018). Consequently, this can help shape students who are of high quality and competence in speaking Arabic upon completing their secondary education.

Strategies For Mastering Speaking Proficiency

Figure 2. Strategies for Mastering Speaking Proficiency

According to Masyitoh and Kaseh (2018), language acquisition should be complemented by mastery of speaking skills, which represents the final or highest level. Therefore, mastery of these skills depends on four main foundations: motivation and self-confidence, knowledge of the language (Yogia & Wahyuni, 2018), language practice, and the suitability of teaching methods. Consequently, Arabic language learners should engage in all four foundational aspects of speaking skill development to improve their Arabic speaking ability and apply it as a daily language, in line with its frequency of use (Hazrul, 2020; Fared & Seman, 2019). Furthermore, Masyitoh and Kaseh (2018) found that the learning strategies implemented can influence the enhancement of Arabic speaking proficiency. Thus, these strategies play a crucial role in the teaching of Arabic speaking skills.

1. Extracurricular Activities

    The student's initiative through involvement in speaking activities outside the classroom is fundamental to mastering speaking skills, as it involves the foundation of motivation, self-confidence, and the practice of language knowledge. Thus, students can enhance their Arabic speaking skills while building confidence to speak in front of an audience through active participation in Arabic language competitions, as stated by Respondent 10:

    'Kita orang sebenarnya daripada situ juga dia boleh meningkatkan cara kita nak bertutur dalam bahasa Arab. So, tak pelik lah kalau even schooler pun. Dia orang ada pertandingan bahasa Arab banyak kan. Dia orang ada debat. Macam pelik, hebat juga dia ni cakap bahasa Arab. Sebab apa? sebab sekolah dia mengelolakan pertandingan yang banyak pasal bahasa Arab. So, sekolah ni. Bukan nak cakap apa, macam boleh tingkatkan lagi.' (P10S4)

In addition, watching Arabic media broadcasts (Yogia & Wahyudi, 2018) or live streaming by influencers is an effort that should be applied by students, alongside making use of the latest technological advancements. The use of technological facilities reflects contemporary pedagogical practices in learning Arabic speaking skills.

'Pada pengalaman saya, cara untuk meningkatkan dalam bertutur dalam bahasa Arab ialah contoh dengan menonton cerita. Tak kisahlah kartun ke movie ke. Tak kisah, apa, menggunakan sari kata bahasa Arab. Walaupun benda tu kita macam letak je, tak minat pun. So last-last time kita tengok pun, kita kadang-kadang ada ayat yang kita macam, oh ayat ni yang ni, apa yang dia cakap tu, maksudnya yang ni, macam ni.' (P6S4)

Thus, students can actively participate in Arabic language programs or competitions by utilizing technological tools through advertisements on mobile phones or social media. Furthermore, students should demonstrate a high level of commitment to improving their proficiency in Arabic speaking skills.

2. Motivation

The key foundation for mastering Arabic speaking skills is motivation and self-confidence (Fared & Seman, 2019). The acquisition of these fundamental elements in students should be enhanced through interest, coupled with positive reinforcement such as pressure, which will foster a strong determination in the students, as stated by respondents 26 and 17:

'Satu lagi, diri sendiri eh. Diri sendiri tu, kita sendiri kena belajar banyak lagi.   Maksudnya, dalam lagi dalam bahasa Arab tu. Supaya timbulkan minat. Minat   bahasa Arab tu. Kena rajin.' (P26S4)

Thus, motivation can be cultivated through personal interest in the Arabic language. Consequently, this interest drives students' motivation to consistently build self-confidence in practicing Arabic in conversations, while also stimulating their determination to enhance their spoken Arabic proficiency.

'Sebab keyakinan ni datang daripada galakan dan satu situasi dia rasa tertekan. Kalau dia rasa tertekan, dia akan try nak buat, try nak buat. At the end, dapat juga confidence tu.' (P17S2)

Motivation can also be stimulated through a condition known as pressure, which encourages students to use the Arabic language in their daily conversations. This effort is further supported by encouragement from parents as well as the surrounding environment. Additionally, both these fundamentals are essential in achieving student output success in speaking Arabic proficiently (Hazrul, 2020). This is because a lack of motivation and self-confidence can disrupt the fluency of speech in Arabic (Nor & Noor, 2021).

3. Repetitive Practice and Drills

The strategy of repetitive practice and drills plays a significant role in honing students' Arabic speaking skills. It is also the third foundation for mastering Arabic speaking proficiency. The practice of this strategy aims to integrate Arabic into daily life (Sri et al., 2020). The frequent use of Arabic helps to build a linguistic environment, allows students to practice the vocabulary they have learned (Sabri et al., 2020; Fared & Seman, 2019), and encourages those around them to learn it, as reflected in the statements of respondents 33 and 18:

'Untuk sekolah, maybe kita boleh kerapkan lagi penggunaan bahasa Arab. Nak jadikan benda tu as daily use lah, maksudnya kalau pergi tandas, cakap dengan ustazah bahasa Arab jangan cakap bahasa Melayu. Lepas tu kalau kat coop atau kat kantin, kita kena bertutur dalam bahasa Arab. Cakap dengan cikgu yang jaga kedai tu, cakap bahasa Arab, cakap nak apa.' (P33S4)

Students should practice speaking Arabic regularly to foster motivation and build self-confidence, enabling them to use the language more boldly in their daily lives. Frequent speaking exercises allow students to strengthen their memory by using the vocabulary they have learned in specific situations. Consequently, this helps students master the grammar (qawa'id) and sentence structures, enhancing the beauty of their spoken Arabic, as mentioned by the second respondent:

'Tapi bila kita belajar cakap dulu, cakap apa pun. Okay, satu hari cakap satu minit. Kita akan biasa cakap, cakap-cakap. At the end, qawa'id, oh senang. Sebab dia biasa cakap.' (P18S2)

In this regard, students can correct errors in Arabic speech based on their knowledge of *qawa'id* (Arabic grammar) and familiarize themselves with accurate Arabic pronunciation, along with appropriate intonation. Furthermore, continuous practice and drills sharpen students' listening skills and stimulate their minds to provide responses, which is also a key element of Arabic spoken communication.

4. Environmental Encouragement

Teachers play a significant role in adapting teaching strategies (Masyitoh & Kaseh, 2018; Hazrul, 2020; Fared & Seman, 2019; Nor & Noor, 2021) and creating an interactive learning environment as encouragement from the students' surroundings. According to respondent 13:

'So bahan bantu mengajar juga diperlukan macam guru mengajar kita tapi dengan cara yang kita tak suka contoh kita, kena ada bunyi kena ada suara. So jadi guru perlu mengajar macam tu bukan bagi nota sahaja. Ataupun ada budak yang kinestetik, banyak bergerak. Guru perlu masukkan macam game-game yang banyak bergerak, yang berkenaan bahasa arab. Boleh juga, lagu pun boleh juga. Macam suka nyanyi lagu tu, contoh lah yang viral, rahmatul lil alamin kan? Suka nyanyi tapi mesti akan rasa lalu dekat otak, apa maksud lagu ni, lepas tu dia akan cari-cari. Lama-lama dia minat lagu bahasa arab, dia akan macam lagi senang nak berkata kata pertuturan bahasa arab dia. Boleh juga dengan macam visual kan. Macam mengajar, guru mengajar tapi kena ada gambar. Budak tu tak tahulah apa dia kena ingat, tufah apple. So nanti budak tu pandang gambar tu dah tahu dah, itu apple, tufah. Itu lah pada pandangan saya.' (P13S4)

In this regard, the implementation of the fourth foundation of speaking skills is essential to complete the process of second language acquisition. Therefore, the chosen teaching methods must be relevant to the needs and learning styles of the students to cultivate their interest in the Arabic language, particularly in speaking skills. Thus, learning aids are seen as an essential pedagogical element for the success of teaching Arabic speaking skills and have the potential to diversify instructional strategies, thereby enhancing students' motivation to master these skills (Azlan et al., 2023). To improve the effectiveness of these learning aids, they should be utilized in conjunction with technological tools.

5. Background

Family education with a background in the Arabic language is also important in providing early exposure to students in fostering interest in the language. This is because it is closely related to the foundational knowledge of language skills that can be taught by the family from an early age, as supported by respondent number 18:

'Kalau mak bapak ni kalau kat rumah daripada kecil, senang je. Cakap siapa nama awak? tapi dalam bahasa Arab lah. Ma ismuka?. Ha senang. Ambil yang senang senang, kita start senang dulu. Saya rasa itu antara yang membantu anak-anak untuk mempelajari bahasa Arab.' (P18S3)

It shows that family background serves as a source of support and encouragement that can enhance students' motivation and self-confidence in practicing spoken Arabic or participating in language-related competitions and activities. In this regard, parents' knowledge can heighten their children's awareness of the importance of learning Arabic, especially in developing speaking skills, by providing suitable resources to achieve proficiency in communication.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are three levels of speaking proficiency among students in Government-Aided Religious Schools; good, moderate, and weak. The majority of Arabic-speaking proficiency among Government-Aided Religious Schools students remains at a moderate level. Therefore, it requires a variety of strategies to achieve fluency in Arabic. The implementation of these strategies involves all stakeholders, starting from the individual, family, school, and media. Additionally, students should strengthen their foundational speaking skills by adopting a range of appropriate strategies. Thus, strategies for mastering Arabic speaking skills include motivation and self-confidence, linguistic knowledge, as well as practice, and the appropriateness of teaching strategies employed by the teacher. By doing so, the objectives of Arabic language instruction in Malaysia can be optimally achieved, improving two dimensions of Arabic language teaching: the practices of teachers and the student outcomes, enabling students to use Arabic as a daily language.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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