

## **Linguistic Needs of Non-Native Students of Arabic Language at Saudi Universities**

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### **Abstract**

Arabic language is taught to several students. Some of them are learning Arabic as a foreign language. Therefore, it is important to design programs that fit their needs. This study aimed at analyzing the learning needs of students of Arabic as a foreign language in Saudi Universities. The participants of this study include 150 students from four countries (i.e., Malaysia, Thailand, China, and Indonesia). The students were selected from three different disciplines (i.e., Arabic Language, Islamic Finance, and Usuluddin). The study used a questionnaire adapted from previous studies on this topic. The questionnaire contains 49 items: 26 items ask about the difficulties in learning Arabic language, and 23 items ask about the students' needs in learning Arabic language. The results of this study revealed different difficulties in learning Arabic language. The students also reported their need to improve their proficiency in Arabic language. The students mentioned difficulties and needs related to productive skills such as writing and speaking. They also reported difficulties and needs to receptive skills but with more focus on the academic context. Based on the results of this study, some recommendations for future research have been provided.

**Keywords:** Needs analysis; Arabic language; speakers of other languages; King Khalid University

### **Introduction**

Arabic language is spoken by more than 400 million people in different parts of the world. Abu Irmies (2014) also indicated that more than 1.3 billion Muslims around the world use Arabic language to perform prayers and religious rituals. Arabic language belongs to the Semitic languages with Hebrew, Amharic, and Aramaic (Dawood, 2008). Arabic is considered one of the most important languages in all fields and many reasons motivate learners to learn this language. Arabic is important to cope with the academic work for students, others are motivated to learn Arabic language to learn about the culture of it, and get jobs with international agencies located in Arabic-speaking countries (Chejne, 1969).

Taha (2007) Indicates the reasons for the learning growth of Arabic language in the United States of America; first, the lack of bilinguals of both Arabic and English languages especially after September 11, 2001; second, it is important in international business and trade, especially with Arabic-speaking countries; third, it is the language of Quran and it is necessary to be learned for Muslims to perform their religious rituals; and last, Arabic language is necessary to develop diplomatic relations with Arabic-speaking countries to create a solid base for comprehensive and fair peace.

The importance of Arabic language leads to paying more attention to teaching this language, especially in non-Arabic speaking countries. Dajani, Mubaideen, and Omari (2016) point out that the effectiveness of teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages depends on several factors: the characteristics of teachers, the characteristics of learners, the Arabic curriculum, and its ability to suit learners' needs, and the audio-visual aids. Arabic shares some similarities with other languages such as English, both languages have lingual forms such as verbs, nouns, and sentences that express similar functions. However, Arabic language includes varied morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology (Dajani, Mubaideen & Omari 2016).

Non-native speakers of Arabic language experience some challenges in learning Arabic. Shamsuddin and Ahmad (2019) argue that teaching Arabic in Arab countries is much different than teaching it in non-Arab countries due to the difference in the environment. They also added that Arabic is taught in the Arab world as a national language, while the case is different in non-Arab countries; it is taught as a second or a foreign language. Most speakers of other languages study Arabic for religious purposes as it is the Islamic heritage language written in standard Arabic. Many students especially from South-East Asia travel to Arab countries to major in Arabic language, Islamic studies, or Islamic Banking. Jordan hosts many of those students from Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and China. However, many of these students face difficulties in learning Arabic language due to many factors. The Arabic grammar is seen as complicated by many non-Arabic speakers as it has many weights for masculine, feminine, broken plurals, collective nouns, collective plurals, and a wide range of preferences, formulas, and variation. Arabic language contains many words that represent different meanings because of their plural form (Shamsuddin & Ahmad, 2019). According to the researcher's best knowledge, there is a scarcity of the studies that studied the needs for Arabic language among speakers of other languages. Most of the previous studies focused on the need for English language among EFL learners. Therefore, the present study aims at analyzing the Arabic language needs of speakers of other languages.

#### Research objectives

The present study aims at achieving the following research objectives:

1. To explore the linguistic challenges of learning Arabic encountered by the speakers of other languages at Saudi Universities.
2. To identify Arabic language needs for speakers of other languages at Saudi Universities.

#### Research questions

The current study aims at providing answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the problems of learning Arabic encountered by the speakers of other languages at Saudi Universities?
2. What are Arabic language needs for speakers of other languages at Saudi Universities?

#### Significance of the study

This study has a theoretical and a practical significance. The study provides a review of the difficulties students of Arabic as a foreign language face and their nature. The study also provided a review of the literature conducted on similar topics. The results of the study will benefit teachers, educators, and curriculum designers. The results also will help in understanding the needs of learners before designing teaching materials, which will help in increasing the students' academic achievement and reducing the challenges they face.

### **Literature review**

Non-native speakers of Arabic face many difficulties in learning Arabic language. The most important difficulty is related to diglossia. Oweini et al (2020) argued that Arabic language has a specific diglossic nature because of the variation that exists in the language. They also stressed the existence of three varieties of Arabic language: the standard variety, the moderate variety, and the vernacular. Among the challenges, learners face when learning Arabic are the grammatical difficulty and the interference of dialects in the formation of semantic structures. Each Arabic country uses a specific dialect that is different from the other, which creates challenges for learners of Arabic as a foreign language to learn one dialect that can be used in all Arab countries (Songhori, 2008).

In the sphere of education, Lappalainen (2011) mentioned the problems that arise when designing textbooks to teach Arabic language. The first problem is the focus of these materials on the grammar part of the language rather than the spoken aspect of the language. The second is related to the application part, where learners are supposed to apply the grammatical rules, they have learned to real-life situations. The third problem is the quality of the designed textbooks and their comprehensiveness. Al-Khresheh (2020) also indicated another problem that appears when teaching the cultural part of the language separately from the linguistic part. He argued that it is very important to integrate the cultural aspects of the language with the linguistic part. This means teaching language as a social practice and activity.

To provide a well-designed curriculum for students of Arabic as a foreign language, educators must first conduct a need analysis to identify the areas of focus. Sönmez (2019) argued that the need analysis in the process of teaching and learning is to identify the level of knowledge students require to become at a specific level of proficiency in the language. This process is based on collecting data and information about the learning needs and desires. Elsaid Mohammed and Nur (2018) emphasized that analyzing the need of students is to identify the categories of these students and the purposes of learning a new language. Therefore, it is important to acquire a comprehensive input to create suitable content. The designed materials should include activities linked to the needs of the learners. In addition, any needed analysis should be conducted professionally to match the designed materials and textbooks with the desired results (Pochakorn, 2012).

Conducting need analysis could be done using several methods. First, researchers could conduct interviews with students to identify their needs. An interview is a powerful tool that allows any person to express their wants and desires directly, without just anticipating what learners want (Al-Khresheh, 2020). Another important method is observation. Educators and teachers can help in providing input into the needs of learners through their daily observation in classrooms. This is also a very important tool because it allows teachers to generate ideas about common behavior and wants of students to generalize basic needs (Boon-long, 1999).

### **Previous studies**

Al-Asaf (2021) explored the challenges facing non-native students of Arabic language while taking online classes during the Corona pandemic at the University of Jordan. The study implemented the descriptive approach. A questionnaire was distributed to students who study Arabic as a second language. The results showed that several challenges influence the students' academic achievements, such as technical issues as well as the academic materials presented online. The study provided solutions to reduce these challenges by modifying the teaching methods and introducing new techniques.

Hassan et al (2021) investigated the challenges, needs, and problems teachers of Arabic, who are non-Arabic speakers, face while selecting the appropriate methods to teach Arabic language. The study used the descriptive method. The study analyzed the teaching methods according to four dimensions, strategy, significance, criteria, and results. The findings revealed that choosing the teaching methods depends on the students' needs and their levels. It is very important to pay attention to the students' cultural backgrounds to help them learn in a better way.

Roslan and Sahrir (2020) explored the impact of using ThingLink as a new solution to teach Arabic vocabulary to students at a public university in Malaysia. The study implemented an experimental design. This tool was implemented in the direct teaching of Arabic language, and a test was designed to measure students' progress. The results revealed an increase in students' levels of vocabulary after using the ThingLink solution.

Al-Busaidi (2019) examined the sociocultural factors that impact learners of Arabic as a foreign language in the Sultanate of Oman. The study used the qualitative inquiry approach by conducting interviews with students. The interviews were done with 22 students. The findings revealed that the lack of encouragement and the nature of Arabic language are among the basic challenges the students face. The students also find difficulties in adapting to the new cultural and linguistic environment. The study suggested creating special teaching programs based on students' linguistic needs to adapt to the new environment.

Ritonga et al (2020) conducted a SWOT analysis on the academic institutions that provide Arabic language programs to non-native speakers. The study implemented a qualitative approach by collecting data from lecturers, universities' policies and instructions, and curricula. The findings showed that the availability of good quality lectures in Arabic language is a strength. The weaknesses included the lack of materials in some faculties. The study suggested focusing on the opportunities of creating comprehensive programs to teach Arabic language to non-native speakers, which will bring attraction to the academic institutions and allow students from different countries to enroll in these programs.

## **Research methodology**

### **Research design**

The study used the quantitative methodology to investigate the linguistic needs of learning Arabic language among speakers of other languages. The study developed a questionnaire to satisfy this purpose and to collect data for analysis.

### **Research setting**

The present study was conducted in a public university in Saudi Arabia (King Khalid University) located in Abha. The selection process was done based on the number of students who use Arabic language as the main language of instruction. The students were selected from three disciplines: Arabic Language, Islamic Finance, and Usuluddin.

### Participants

The participants of this study included 150 non-native students who enrolled in three different disciplines at King Khalid University. The students came from four different countries: Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and China. The demographic information of the participants is shown in Table (1).

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

| Gender     | Academic Discipline | Nationality   |
|------------|---------------------|---------------|
| Males=70   | Arabic Language=50  | Malaysian=60  |
| Females=80 | Islamic Finance=48  | Thai=20       |
|            | Usuluddin=52        | Indonesian=30 |
|            |                     | Chinese=40    |

### Data collection

The present study employed the questionnaire as the main instrument for data collection. This instrument was chosen because it is a convenient means for collecting data from a big number of participants in a limited time. The questionnaire contained 49 items categorized into two sections: the first section asked about the difficulties that encounter students in learning Arabic language (26 items), and the second section asked about the learners' needs to improve their proficiency in Arabic language (23 items). The questionnaire was written in Arabic and translated into English and the participants were free to choose the language of the questionnaire. The participants have been informed about the purpose of the study and the results will be used for research purposes only. They have been asked to provide their answers based on a five-point-Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1). The participants have also been told to return the questionnaire at their convenience. Most of the questionnaires were received within three days from the administration date. The researcher used the (SPSS) software to analyze the data obtained from this study.

## Results and discussion

### Results of the first research question

*What are the problems of learning Arabic encountered by the speakers of other languages at Saudi Universities?* Mean scores and Std. Deviation of each item of the questionnaire were presented in Table (2).

Table 2. Difficulties of learning Arabic among speakers of other languages

| Listening Related Difficulties                             | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|-----|------|----------------|
| Receiving spoken instructions                              | 150 | 2.64 | .996           |
| Listening to presentations and discussions                 | 150 | 2.43 | .930           |
| Listening to teachers                                      | 150 | 2.81 | 1.03           |
| Listening to the radio and other Arabic media              | 150 | 1.52 | .500           |
| Listening to students                                      | 150 | 1.57 | 1.16           |
| Speaking Related Difficulties                              |     |      |                |
| Talking to a variety of audiences                          | 150 | 3.00 | 1.09           |
| Asking and answering questions during the group or class   | 150 | 4.56 | .729           |
| Introducing yourself and others in a variety of situations | 150 | 4.04 | .947           |

|   |     |      |       |
|---|-----|------|-------|
| Giving a presentation   | 150 | 3.10 | 1.29  |
| Stating opinions or ideas about different topics during class | 150 | 4.43 | .871  |
| Making requests   | 150 | 4.30 | .871  |
| Talking over the phone  | 150 | 4.49 | .741  |
| Pronunciation problems  | 150 | 4.43 | .917  |
| <b>Reading Related Difficulties</b>                           |     |      |       |
| Reading exercise/test questions                               | 150 | 3.88 | 1.27  |
| Reading textbooks   | 150 | 2.62 | 1.02  |
| Reading academic journals / publications                      | 150 | 2.43 | .961  |
| Reading manuals, instructions, or product descriptions        | 150 | 2.83 | 1.08  |
| Searching Arabic Internet sources                             | 150 | 1.50 | .501  |
| Reading office documents                                      | 150 | 1.57 | 1.13  |
| Reading signs, rules, and notices                             | 150 | 2.92 | 1.12  |
| <b>Writing Related Difficulties</b>                           |     |      |       |
| Writing examination answers                                   | 150 | 4.54 | .739  |
| Writing emails  | 150 | 4.08 | .924  |
| Taking notes  | 150 | 3.12 | 1.346 |
| Filling out forms   | 150 | 4.39 | .913  |
| Describing diagrams, tables, and graphs                       | 150 | 4.33 | .828  |
| Writing research papers                                       | 150 | 4.47 | .748  |
| Valid N (listwise)  | 150 |      |       |

The results above showed the difficulties of learning Arabic language among speakers of other languages. The results also illustrated the difficulties encountered by non-native speakers of Arabic in each language skill. The students indicated that “*listening to teachers*” and “*receiving spoken instructions*” as the most important difficulties they face in their listening skills. The students seem to have serious problems in the speaking skill since most of the items related to this category got very high mean scores such as “*Asking and answering questions during the group or class*”, “*Talking over the phone*”, “*Stating opinion or ideas about different topics during class*”, “*Pronunciation problems*”, and “*Making requests*”. The students indicated that “*Reading exercise/test questions*”, and “*Reading signs, rules, and notices*” are very difficult for them regarding reading skills. In respect of writing skills, the students find it very difficult to “*Writing examination answers*”, “*writing research papers*” and “*Filling out forms*”.

#### Results of the second research question

*What are Arabic language needs for speakers of other languages at Saudi Universities?*  
Mean scores and Std. Deviation was used to get answers to this question (see table 3).

Table 3. Arabic language needs speakers of other languages

| Reading Needs                                     | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|-----|------|----------------|
| Reading articles and research papers              | 150 | 4.39 | .907           |
| Reading manuals in my study                       | 150 | 4.22 | 1.02           |
| Reading course handouts in my field               | 150 | 3.50 | 1.30           |
| Reading instructions for assignments and projects | 150 | 3.91 | .993           |
| Reading general instructions                      | 150 | 2.91 | 1.13           |
| Reading study notes of the courses                | 150 | 2.33 | 1.49           |
| Reading books                                     | 150 | 2.91 | 1.16           |

| Writing Needs                                      |     |      |      |
|--|-----|------|------|
| Writing assignments                                | 150 | 4.53 | .748 |
| Writing projects                                   | 150 | 4.17 | .888 |
| Note-taking from lectures and other spoken sources | 150 | 3.55 | 1.36 |
| Note making from written sources                   | 150 | 4.39 | .939 |
| Answering comprehension questions                  | 150 | 3.84 | 1.29 |
| Listening Needs                                    |     |      |      |
| Listening to lectures and other spoken sources     | 150 | 3.84 | 1.19 |
| Listening to oral presentations                    | 150 | 2.97 | 1.44 |
| Listening to instructions for assignments          | 150 | 3.26 | 1.45 |
| Listening to audio and video sources               | 150 | 2.84 | 1.16 |
| Listening to drama, role play, etc.                | 150 | 2.31 | 1.46 |
| Speaking Needs                                     |     |      |      |
| Asking questions in the class                      | 150 | 2.26 | 1.55 |
| Giving spoken presentation                         | 150 | 2.92 | 1.22 |
| Talking with a friend                              | 150 | 4.48 | .802 |
| Sharing ideas with classmates                      | 150 | 4.20 | .851 |
| Speaking to a public                               | 150 | 3.62 | 1.31 |
| Learning conversational Arabic                     | 150 | 2.68 | 1.46 |

The Arabic language needs of speakers of other languages have been presented according to language skills and its priority to the students. Concerning reading skills, the students reported the need for “*Reading articles and research papers*”, “*Reading manuals in my study*”, “*Reading instructions of assignments and projects*”, “*Reading course handouts in my field*”, “*Reading general instructions*”, “*Reading books*” and “*Reading study notes of the courses*”. Concerning the writing needs, the students mentioned that they need to “*Writing assignments*”, “*Note making from written sources*”, “*Writing projects*”, “*Answering comprehension questions*”, and “*Note taking from lecture and other spoken sources*”.

The results showed that non-native speakers of Arabic language face many difficulties in learning Arabic. It is obvious from the results that the students encountered a high level of difficulty in the productive skills (i.e., speaking and writing). The items related to these two skills got the highest mean scores among other items. The students also faced a high level of difficulty in some items of receptive skills such as “*Reading articles and research papers*”, “*Reading manuals in my study*”, “*Listening to lectures and other spoken sources*”, and “*Listening to instructions for assignments*”. These results are consistent with other studies (Al-Asaf, 2021; Hassan et al., 2021; Roslan and Sahrir, 2020).

The results of the present study also revealed the Arabic language needs of speakers of other languages. These needs include both receptive and productive skills. This implies that some language skills cannot be appropriately learned unless a more academic attitude is embedded in the language courses (Ulum, 2015). Vinuesa (2015) points out the need to offer more precise and academic Arabic teaching courses to meet the necessities, demands, and needs of language learners. This implies the need for an Arabic language preparatory class for speakers of other languages since it would be satisfactory for Arabic learners to know exactly when, where, how, and whom they will use the language.

## Conclusion and recommendations

The present study aimed at exploring the difficulties encountered by non-native speakers of Arabic when learning Arabic language. It also aimed at investigating the Arabic language needs of speakers of other languages who are studying at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia. The results of the present study revealed that students reported many difficulties and needs concerning learning Arabic language. Based on the results of this study, a preparatory Arabic language course could be proposed for speakers of other languages. It is hoped that the proposed course would shed light on how to improve the students' skills in learning Arabic language having known their language needs. Hence, the present study would contribute toward preparing non-native speakers of Arabic for their academic life, where their success would be highly dependent on their Arabic language proficiency.

The present study has obtained findings related to the problems and the needs of Arabic language as reported by non-native speakers of Arabic language. Based on these findings, some recommendations could be considered for future research. First, it is recommended to apply a triangulation method in future research in which both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews are used. It is also recommended to collect the data from students and teachers to get a clearer picture of this topic. It is also recommended to include students and teachers from different universities in Saudi Arabia. Collecting data from a larger population could help in getting more comprehensive results. In addition, future research could conduct a need analysis to determine the effectiveness of the suggested preparatory Arabic course on speakers of other languages.

#### Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

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