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DEVELOPING THE FOUR ARABIC LANGUAGE SKILLS AND THEIR ROLE IN ENHANCING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG NON-NATIVE LEARNERS

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Abstract:

This study investigates methods for developing the four fundamental Arabic language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - and their role in enhancing communicative competence among non-native Arabic learners. Despite years of formal instruction, many learners continue to experience difficulties in using Arabic effectively for real-life communication, particularly due to fragmented skill instruction and limited emphasis on communicative practice. This gap highlights the need for instructional approaches that integrate language skills in a meaningful and communicative manner. The purpose of this study is to identify effective teaching strategies that support the development of communicative competence through the integrated acquisition of the four language skills. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed through a systematic literature review of academic journals, books, and previous research related to Arabic language education. The findings reveal that the integrated development of the four language skills significantly improves learners' fluency, confidence, and accuracy in communication. Listening and speaking activities play a particularly crucial role in fostering real-time communicative ability while reading and writing contribute to vocabulary development and structural accuracy. The study concludes that effective Arabic language instruction should adopt an integrated, communicative, and learner-centred approach, as this approach directly addresses learners' communicative challenges and enhances their ability to use Arabic meaningfully in authentic communication contexts.

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Arabic Language Skills, Communicative Competence, Non-Native Learners, Teaching Strategies, Integrated Skills



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Introduction

In Malaysia, the development of the Arabic language has evolved alongside the spread of Islam in the region. Since the arrival of Islam through Arab traders and scholars during the seventh and eighth centuries, Arabic has assumed an important role within religious and educational contexts. As key Islamic sources such as the Qur'an and Hadith require an understanding of Arabic, the language has become a core subject in Islamic educational institutions. Consequently, many religious schools emphasize Arabic instruction to enable students to attain a deeper understanding of their faith (Mohd Sharifuddin, 2021).

In line with national educational goals, the second shift of the Malaysian Education Blueprint (PPPM) 2013–2025 encourages students to acquire an additional language alongside Malay and English in order to enhance their participation in the global community (Malaysia Education Blueprint, 2019). As a result, Arabic is offered across various educational streams, including Religious National Secondary Schools (SMKA), Government-Aided Religious Schools (SABK), Integrated Boarding Schools (SBPI), Federal Religious Secondary Schools (SMAP), National Primary Schools (SK) through the j-QAF programme, and National Secondary Schools (SMK) implementing Religious Stream Classes (KAA). The Arabic language is further reinforced through the Integrated Religious Curriculum (KBD) and the Integrated Tahfiz Curriculum (KBT), in which Arabic serves as a primary medium of instruction. In addition, the Ulul Albab Higher Certificate Curriculum (SUUA), which integrates memorisation, science, and heritage, represents one of the Ministry of Education's initiatives to strengthen students' communicative and linguistic abilities, as well as their capacity to engage with classical Arabic texts at the school level (Mohd Sharifuddin, 2021).

The teaching and learning of Arabic in Malaysia is not limited to academic achievement but also aims to develop learners' communicative ability. This objective is explicitly stated in the Primary School Standard Curriculum (KSSR) and the Arabic Curriculum and Assessment Standard Document, which emphasize the mastery of basic Arabic language skills and the ability to communicate using simple sentences while upholding noble values (KSSR, 2015). Similarly, the Secondary School Standard Curriculum (KSSM) focuses on developing learners' linguistic competencies to enhance social interaction, knowledge acquisition, and accurate language use in speaking, reading, and writing. One of the key aims of the KSSM Arabic curriculum is to produce students who are able to speak fluently and accurately in various communicative contexts (KSSM, 2018). This reflects the Ministry of Education's broader

aspiration to cultivate learners with strong communicative competence after several years of Arabic language instruction.

This commitment is evident in the standardized Arabic curriculum, which emphasizes mastery of the four fundamental language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The acquisition of these skills enhances learners' readiness to interact and communicate effectively in Arabic (KSSM, 2018). For language knowledge and skills to be considered meaningfully acquired, they must be transferable and applicable in authentic communicative situations. In the context of Arabic language learning, this requires the four skills to be developed in ways that support communicative competence, autonomous learning, and problem-solving abilities. Communicative competence involves interaction between speakers and listeners through the application of linguistic knowledge and skills, leading to increased confidence and effectiveness in communication. In addition to self-confidence, language proficiency plays a critical role in shaping communicative competence. Previous studies indicate that the four Arabic language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - contribute significantly to learners' communicative confidence and performance (Maromar et al., 2018). Language therefore functions not only as a tool for learning and self-expression, but also as a vital medium for social interaction, making its acquisition a fundamental human need (Muslih, 2016).

Against this backdrop, the present study explores various methods and strategies for developing the four Arabic language skills among non-native learners, with particular attention to their role in enhancing communicative competence. By analysing instructional practices and reported outcomes in previous research, the study seeks to identify effective approaches that facilitate language acquisition and promote meaningful communication. Furthermore, it highlights the broader role of Arabic language proficiency in bridging communicative gaps and fostering intercultural understanding.

To achieve these aims, a descriptive qualitative approach is employed to provide a comprehensive overview of practices and challenges in teaching Arabic as a second or foreign language. The study offers insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policy makers by emphasizing the relationship between language skill development and communicative competence, thereby contributing to more effective and engaging Arabic language learning experiences for non-native learners.

Research Background

Language serves as the primary medium through which individuals communicate, exchange ideas, and build social relationships. Arabic, as one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, holds a significant position in global cultural, religious, and intellectual heritage. As language represents one of humanity's greatest achievements and distinguishes human beings from other living creatures, it reflects the highest level of human cognitive capability. Humans possess the ability to acquire linguistic sounds, articulate them meaningfully, and employ them to achieve communication. Language is therefore not merely a tool for expressing thoughts, but also the voice of a nation, deeply rooted in its historical and cultural identity (Boudouda, 2021). In this regard, mastery of language - particularly Arabic for non-native speakers - is of considerable importance.

Beyond mastering the four fundamental language skills -listening, speaking, reading, and writing - learners must also be evaluated in terms of their ability to use the language effectively in everyday communication. Language learning is only meaningful when learners are able to transfer acquired knowledge and skills into authentic communicative contexts. Accordingly, this study first presents key conceptual foundations related to language skills before proceeding to a deeper discussion of their role in communicative competence.

The Concept of “Skill”

From a linguistic perspective, a skill refers to proficiency in performing a particular task, and a skilled individual is one who demonstrates mastery in a given activity. It is commonly stated that “he mastered this matter,” meaning that he became proficient in it. From a technical or terminological perspective, scholars have defined a skill as the ability to perform tasks effectively whenever required. A skill is generally regarded as a learned activity that develops through continuous practice supported by feedback (Cottrell, 2013). Rihab (1996) further defines skill as an ability that can be learned, acquired, and developed within learners through imitation and training, with variations depending on the nature, characteristics, and objectives of the subject matter.

Types of the Four Language Skills

The four fundamental language skills consist of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, along with their respective sub-skills (Boudouda, 2021).

Listening Skill

Listening is the first channel through which humans connect with others, particularly in the early stages of life. Through listening, learners acquire vocabulary, internalize sentence structures, and absorb ideas and concepts. It also serves as the foundation upon which other language skills—speaking, reading, and writing—are developed (Al-Ṭa‘īmah, 1987).

Listening ability can be observed through several indicators, including knowledge of Arabic sounds, vocabulary, and grammatical structures, as well as the ability to use language appropriately in different situations. It also involves familiarity with the topic of discourse, awareness of the cultural context that shapes meaning, and sensitivity to the speaker’s attitudes and shared experiences. In addition, effective listening requires the ability to interpret contextual factors and paralinguistic cues such as speech rate, pauses, intonation patterns, stress, facial expressions, gestures, and voice quality, all of which contribute meaning beyond literal words.

Speaking Skill

Speaking is defined as spontaneous and natural verbal interaction that occurs between individuals on a particular topic (Al-Ṭa‘īmah, 1987). It plays a central role in facilitating mutual understanding, as it enables the clear expression of ideas, thoughts, and emotions. Effective speaking enhances communication efficiency and reduces misunderstanding, making it a crucial component of communicative competence.

Reading Skill

Reading is a cognitive activity that involves four interrelated processes: recognition, comprehension, evaluation, and interaction (Al-Ta'īmah, 1987). Recognition refers to the ability to decode written symbols and relate sounds to their written forms. Comprehension involves understanding relationships between words and sentence structures, as well as grasping both explicit and implicit meanings. Evaluation enables readers to judge the validity of ideas, compare them with prior knowledge, and form opinions. Interaction reflects the reader's intellectual engagement with the text, encompassing emotional, cognitive, and reflective responses that lead to decision-making.

Writing Skill

Writing skill refers to learners' ability to express ideas accurately and appropriately through written language, including correct spelling and handwriting (Al-Ta'īmah, 1987). It involves selecting suitable vocabulary, organizing ideas within appropriate grammatical structures, and adhering to conventions accepted by native language communities. Writing allows learners to consolidate language knowledge and articulate mean.

The Relationship Between the Four Language Skills and Communicative Competence

The development of communicative competence is closely linked to mastery of the four fundamental language skills. Listening and speaking form the basis of oral communication, while reading and writing support comprehension and meaning production in written communication. The integration of these skills enables learners to participate actively in communicative situations, express ideas accurately, and respond appropriately across diverse contexts (Muslih, 2016; Pradhani, 2025). Consequently, effective communication cannot be achieved without the systematic and integrated development of all four language skills, particularly in second or foreign language learning environments.

Problem Statement

Language functions primarily as a tool for communication; therefore, a direct and practical relationship exists between linguistic skills and communicative competence. Based on this conceptual connection, the present study examines how the four fundamental Arabic language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - contribute to the development of communicative competence among non-native learners.

In the Malaysian context, the Arabic language curriculum formulated by the Ministry of Education aims to develop students' oral communication abilities through mastery of the four language skills, with particular emphasis on communicative competence. However, despite structured curricula and prolonged exposure to Arabic instruction, many students continue to experience difficulties in mastering these skills, especially in terms of communicative performance. Empirical studies indicate that students in religious secondary schools demonstrate noticeable weaknesses in Arabic communication, even though Arabic is used regularly as a medium of instruction. Many learners also exhibit fear, hesitation, and reluctance to speak Arabic in classroom settings (Maromar et al., 2018).

Similar challenges persist at the tertiary level, where students who have studied Arabic for several years still struggle to achieve communicative proficiency, particularly in speaking. Previous research attributes these difficulties to instructional practices that prioritise grammatical drills and rote memorisation of vocabulary over communicative activities such as guided listening, interactive dialogue, and role-play tasks that promote authentic language use (Ali et al., 2017). As reaffirmed by Maromar et al. (2018), these issues affect both secondary and university learners, indicating a persistent gap between curricular intentions and actual communicative outcomes.

Further studies reveal that affective factors such as shyness, low self-confidence, fear of making errors, and anxiety about peer evaluation significantly hinder learners' willingness to communicate in Arabic (Jamali et al., 2018). These psychological barriers, combined with limited opportunities for meaningful interaction, constrain learners' ability to apply linguistic knowledge in real-life communication contexts.

While the ultimate goal of foreign language learning is widely recognised as the attainment of communicative competence—the ability to convey and interpret meaning effectively (Shutuh, 2021) - the literature consistently emphasises that such competence cannot be achieved without the integrated development of the four language skills. Communicative performance varies according to learners' linguistic proficiency, learning environment, personal characteristics, and communicative contexts (al-Janadbah & Sharef, 2024). Although some perspectives suggest that an excessive focus on communication may marginalise other aspects of language learning, this study argues that balanced and integrated instruction of listening, speaking, reading, and writing is essential for addressing communicative challenges.

Therefore, the core problem addressed in this study lies in the persistent weakness of communicative competence among non-native Arabic learners despite extensive exposure to Arabic instruction. This weakness highlights the need to examine effective strategies for integrating the four language skills in ways that meaningfully support communicative competence. Addressing this gap is crucial for ensuring that Arabic language education achieves its intended communicative objectives.

Literature Review

A number of previous studies addressing the development of the four language skills were reviewed, particularly those that demonstrated the impact of training and practice on enhancing communicative competence

Development of The Four Core Language Skills

Studies such as Boudouda (2021) emphasized that mastery of listening, speaking, reading, and writing is essential for linguistic creativity and for strengthening learners' awareness of the Arabic language. Similarly, Muslih (2016) highlighted the importance of addressing common linguistic weaknesses through integrated skill-based instruction, demonstrating how coordinated teaching of the four skills contributes fundamentally to communicative proficiency.

Interactive, Innovative, And Communicative Approaches in Language Instruction

Research by Jamali et al. (2018) showed that the use of interactive classroom activities and innovative teaching strategies produced substantial improvements in learners' linguistic performance. Che Haron et al. (2012) further expanded this perspective by focusing on speaking skills, recommending strategies such as repetition, imitation, and media-supported vocabulary practice through songs and films, all of which strengthen oral competence. Reinforcing this communicative orientation, Mat Daud et al. (2021) stressed the importance of integrating the four skills within communicative language teaching (CLT), illustrating how meaningful tasks and classroom interaction contribute to authentic language use.

Challenges, Learner Strategies, And Emerging Pedagogical Directions in Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers

Mukhlisin (2017) discussed the difficulties faced by educators, noting the need for varied and learner-centred methods that consider students' cognitive styles and individual differences. Meanwhile, Fauzi et al. (2024) examined learners' use of indirect and cognitive strategies - such as planning and self-monitoring - and found similar patterns across genders, indicating consistent learning behaviours among non-native learners. Extending these discussions, Ma et al. (2025) provided a forward-looking perspective through a systematic review of Arabic language teaching within STEM contexts, highlighting the importance of integrating sociocultural and linguistic dimensions, strengthening teacher professional development, and adopting tools such as concept maps to enhance interactive learning.

Previous studies show a diversity of methods and strategies aimed at developing the four language skills, especially in the context of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. These skills have been shown to be an essential pillar in achieving learner communication proficiency, whether through interactive methods or field applications. However, there is still a need to unify efforts and develop effective teaching practices that take into account the cultural and linguistic context of non-Arabic speaking learners.

Methodology

This article uses a literature study approach by analyzing scholarly sources related to strategies for enhancing basic language skills (listening, reading, writing, and speaking) and their role in developing communication skills. Data were collected from academic journals, reference books, and research reports that addressed theories and approaches in language education.

Discussion and Recommendations

The synthesis of the reviewed literature highlights several important insights regarding the development of Arabic language skills and their contribution to communicative competence among non-native learners. The findings consistently indicate that effective communication in Arabic cannot be achieved through isolated instruction of individual skills, but rather through an integrated and communicative approach that aligns listening, speaking, reading, and writing within meaningful learning contexts.

Arabic Language Development Strategies

Listening Skill

Listening skill plays a foundational role in Arabic language acquisition, as it forms the basis for the development of other language skills (Al-Ta'imah, 1987). The literature suggests several strategies that teachers can employ to enhance learners' listening abilities during classroom instruction.

One effective strategy involves the diversification of instructional materials. Teachers are encouraged to utilise a range of audio resources, such as recordings and authentic audio clips, to expose learners to different accents, speech rates, and communicative styles. Such exposure enhances learners' ability to comprehend spoken Arabic in varied contexts. Listening activities may also be followed by summarisation or transcription exercises, allowing learners to reinforce comprehension through writing. Importantly, instructional materials should be aligned with lesson objectives and tailored to learners' proficiency levels to ensure effective skill development.

Another key strategy is the application of interactive listening activities. Encouraging learners to engage in discussions after listening tasks promotes deeper understanding and collaborative interpretation of meaning. Interaction with teachers or peers provides learners with opportunities to receive feedback on pronunciation and comprehension. In addition, note-taking during listening activities enables learners to identify key ideas and vocabulary, thereby supporting information processing and retention. These activities may be reinforced through guided questioning related to the instructional goals.

Che Ali and Mohammed Al-Ramadin (2023) emphasised the importance of questioning strategies as a core component of active and cooperative learning. By encouraging learners to respond to questions, teachers transform students from passive recipients into active participants, fostering autonomy, knowledge construction, skill development, and positive learning attitudes.

Innovative assessment practices also play a role in enhancing listening skills. Teachers may assess comprehension through activities such as content summarisation or interactive questioning, which not only measure understanding but also promote critical thinking. Focusing listening tasks on specific themes further supports contextual vocabulary development and facilitates comprehension during real-life communication.

Collectively, these strategies contribute to the creation of a supportive learning environment that enhances learners' listening proficiency, fluency, and confidence in Arabic language use.

Speaking Skill

Speaking skill is essential for effective communication and represents one of the most challenging skills for non-native Arabic learners to master. The literature highlights several strategies that support the development of speaking proficiency through structured practice, interaction, and learner engagement.

Effective dialogue interaction is a central strategy for improving speaking skills. Group discussions encourage learners to exchange ideas, express opinions, and build confidence in using Arabic (Che Ali & Mohammed Al-Ramadin, 2023). Face-to-face instructional activities, in which teachers model correct speech and engage learners in dialogue, provide immediate practice and feedback that are crucial for language acquisition. Regular question-and-answer sessions further stimulate participation and enhance learners' fluency. As noted by Al-Ṭa'īmah (1983), short dialogues related to daily life situations - such as greetings, inquiries, and responses - are particularly effective in facilitating memorisation and spontaneous language use.

The use of dramatic and role-play activities is another strategy shown to enhance speaking skills. Such activities motivate learners to use language creatively while simulating real-life communicative situations. Acting-based tasks encourage experiential learning and allow learners to practise Arabic in meaningful contexts. Abu Umairah (2024) observed that integrating elements of play into educational materials increases motivation, creativity, and learning efficiency. Similarly, Al-Sini et al. (1990) highlighted that role-play activities help internalise language patterns and bring lessons to life through active engagement.

Story-based learning also contributes to speaking development. Through storytelling and retelling activities, learners enhance their oral expression, linguistic understanding, and ability to organise ideas. Teachers' constructive feedback during these activities helps learners identify strengths and areas for improvement. Al-Ṭa'īmah (1983) further noted that storytelling expands learners' vocabulary and enhances their ability to interpret words across different contexts.

Overall, integrating these strategies into Arabic instruction promotes not only speaking proficiency but also learners' confidence and motivation to communicate

Reading Skill

The development of Arabic reading skills requires a comprehensive instructional approach that addresses the unique characteristics of the Arabic language. Several effective strategies have been identified in the literature (Al-Basis, 2011).

Direct teacher guidance plays a crucial role in supporting learners during the reading process. Teachers guide learners in decoding written symbols, linking sounds to written forms, and distinguishing words accurately (Al-Ṭa'īmah, 1983). Reading activities with specific objectives - such as identifying grammatical structures or vocabulary - help maintain learner focus and enhance comprehension.

Collaborative learning is another effective strategy, as it encourages learners to work together in analysing texts. Providing diverse reading materials, including narratives, essays, and academic texts, accommodates varying interests and proficiency levels while exposing learners to different writing styles and communicative contexts. Such variation fosters positive reading attitudes and sustained engagement.

Reading aloud activities further enhance pronunciation, intonation, and comprehension. By actively engaging learners in oral reading and summarisation tasks, teachers support interaction and reinforce understanding. Compared to silent reading, reading aloud boosts learners' confidence and facilitates immediate feedback.

These strategies collectively support vocabulary acquisition, grammatical development, and critical thinking, all of which are essential for communicative competence.

Writing Skill

Writing skill enables learners to consolidate language knowledge and express ideas systematically. The literature highlights several strategies that support the development of Arabic writing skills.

Collaborative writing activities encourage learners to work in groups to produce shared texts, fostering communication, idea exchange, and peer feedback (Al-Basis, 2011). Regular implementation of such activities enhances vocabulary retention and syntactic accuracy. Teachers' feedback further supports learners' awareness of strengths and areas for improvement, contributing to a positive learning mindset (Al-Ta'imah, 1983).

The integration of technology also plays a significant role in developing writing skills. Language learning applications, word-processing tools, and interactive platforms increase learner engagement and address challenges related to vocabulary and grammar. Technological tools that provide features such as autocorrection and formatting assist learners in improving writing accuracy in an interactive manner (Al-Jad'ani, 2024).

By implementing these strategies, teachers can establish a comprehensive framework for developing confident and competent writers in Arabic

The Role of Language Skills in Achieving Communication Skills

Language skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - are fundamental to effective communication. Mastery of these skills facilitates personal expression and professional interaction across cultures (Mat Daud et al., 2021). For non-native Arabic learners, communicative competence enables meaningful participation in real-life contexts and bridges the gap between linguistic knowledge and practical language use (al-Janadbah & Sharef, 2024).

Scholarly perspectives differ regarding the sequencing of language skills. While some researchers prioritise speaking due to its frequent use in daily communication (Mohd Nor et al., 2021), others argue that listening should precede all other skills, as it provides the phonological foundation necessary for accurate speech production (Mohd Din & Seman, 2019; Jamali et al., 2018). An intermediate view suggests integrating listening and speaking within the same instructional phase to reinforce pronunciation through repeated exposure and practice (Mohd et al., 2025).

Despite these differing views, the literature consistently emphasises that communicative competence cannot be achieved through mastery of a single skill. Instead, it requires the integrated development of all four language skills. Learners must listen to comprehend meaning, speak to express ideas, read to acquire knowledge, and write to consolidate learning. Regular practice through communicative tasks - such as role-play, discussion, collaborative reading, and peer writing - supports holistic language development and enhances communicative performance.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance communicative competence among non-native Arabic learners:

1. The sequencing of language skills in instructional materials should be aligned with programme objectives and learners' needs rather than rigid traditional models. Within a communicative approach, listening may serve as a primary foundation for skill integration.
2. Teachers should emphasise the integration of language skills as they naturally occur in real-life communication, enabling learners to practise listening, speaking, reading, and writing in interconnected ways.
3. Vocabulary selection during instruction should be closely related to communicative contexts to support functional language use.
4. Learners should be provided with ample opportunities to participate in authentic communicative activities that simulate real-life situations within the classroom.

Communicative classroom activities may include daily peer interaction, instructional exchanges, simulations, dialogues, presentations, language-based events, extensive reading, and exposure to audio materials such as news broadcasts, interviews, and seminars.

Conclusion

In today's globalised world, language proficiency has become increasingly important not only for academic achievement but also for the professional success of learners across disciplines. Individuals are required to navigate diverse linguistic and cultural environments, making effective cross-cultural communication a critical necessity. Strong language skills contribute to the development of professional networks, enhance negotiation processes, and facilitate collaboration with individuals from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Based on the discussion presented in this study, it can be concluded that the achievement of communicative competence in Arabic requires balanced and integrated development of the four fundamental language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Each skill plays a distinct yet complementary role in enabling learners to comprehend meaning, express ideas accurately, and participate effectively in communicative interactions. Emphasising one skill in isolation is insufficient to produce meaningful communicative outcomes.

The findings of this literature-based study further demonstrate that instructional approaches which integrate the four language skills within communicative and learner-centred frameworks are more effective in addressing learners' communicative challenges. Regular practice through interactive and authentic learning activities allows learners to apply linguistic knowledge in real-life contexts, thereby enhancing fluency, confidence, and accuracy in Arabic communication. In conclusion, the integrated development of the four Arabic language skills represents a fundamental pathway towards achieving communicative competence among non-native learners. By adopting instructional practices that prioritise meaningful communication and skill integration, Arabic language education can better fulfil its intended communicative objectives and prepare learners to engage successfully in both academic and real-world communication contexts.

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