



Navigating The Complexity of Arabic Language Learning: A Conceptual Model of Madrasah Tsanawiyah Students' Experiences

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Abstract:

Arabic language learning remains challenging for many students due to its linguistic complexity and its influence on cognitive and emotional learning experiences. This study aims to explore how Madrasah Tsanawiyah students navigate the complexity of Arabic language learning and to develop a conceptual model based on their lived experiences. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected from 12 purposively selected ninth-grade students through in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The findings revealed four interconnected stages of experience: initial confusion (50%), adaptation process (33%), and survival strategies (17%), with *nahwu* and *sharaf* identified as the dominant learning difficulties (50%), followed by vocabulary (30%) and instructional factors (20%). Students also experienced anxiety and low self-confidence while developing coping strategies through peer discussions, vocabulary memorization, and digital learning resources. The study contributes a conceptual model integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions and recommends more adaptive and student-centered Arabic language instruction.

Keywords: *Arabic Language Learning; Student Experiences; Phenomenological Study; Conceptual Model*

Abstrak:

Pembelajaran bahasa Arab masih menjadi tantangan bagi banyak siswa karena kompleksitas linguistiknya serta pengaruhnya terhadap pengalaman belajar kognitif dan emosional. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana siswa Madrasah Tsanawiyah menavigasi kompleksitas pembelajaran bahasa Arab serta mengembangkan model konseptual berdasarkan pengalaman hidup mereka. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif fenomenologis dengan melibatkan 12 siswa kelas IX yang dipilih secara purposif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi kelas, dan analisis dokumen. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan empat tahapan pengalaman yang saling berkaitan, yaitu kebingungan awal (50%), proses adaptasi (33%), dan strategi bertahan (17%), dengan *nahwu* dan *sharaf* sebagai sumber kesulitan utama (50%), diikuti kosakata (30%) dan faktor pembelajaran (20%). Siswa juga mengalami kecemasan dan rendahnya kepercayaan diri, namun mengembangkan strategi adaptasi melalui diskusi kelompok, hafalan kosakata, dan pemanfaatan media digital. Penelitian ini berkontribusi dengan menawarkan model konseptual yang mengintegrasikan dimensi kognitif, afektif, dan perilaku serta merekomendasikan pembelajaran bahasa Arab yang lebih adaptif dan berpusat pada siswa.

Kata Kunci: *Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab; Pengalaman Siswa; Studi Fenomenologi; Model Konseptual*

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INTRODUCTION

Arabic language learning occupies a strategic position within Islamic education because it serves not only as a means of communication but also as a gateway to understanding Islamic sources, culture, and intellectual traditions. In many Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia, Arabic is taught from elementary to higher education levels to strengthen students' linguistic competence and religious literacy (Al-Rawafi et al., 2021; Alsanie et al., 2022; Sayaheen et al., 2020). Consequently, the effectiveness of Arabic language learning has broader implications for educational quality, cultural preservation, and students' academic development. However, mastering Arabic remains challenging for many learners due to its unique linguistic characteristics, including complex grammatical structures, morphological systems, and extensive vocabulary (Güler, 2021; Yazid et al., 2022). These challenges often influence students' motivation, confidence, and engagement in learning. Therefore, understanding how students experience and navigate these complexities is essential for developing more effective, inclusive, and learner-centered Arabic language education.

Despite its importance, Arabic language learning continues to present substantial difficulties for students, particularly at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level. In many classrooms, students encounter challenges related to understanding grammatical rules (*nahwu*), morphological patterns (*sharaf*), pronunciation, and vocabulary acquisition (Al-Rawafi et al., 2021; Çakin, 2022). These difficulties are often accompanied by feelings of confusion, anxiety, and reduced self-confidence, which may negatively affect learning outcomes and classroom participation. Field observations in many places indicate that students demonstrate diverse responses when facing Arabic learning challenges (Alsharaf et al., 2024; Ghoual et al., 2022; Monhem et al., 2020). Some students experience frustration and disengagement, while others attempt to adapt through independent learning, peer collaboration, and digital resources. This phenomenon suggests that Arabic language learning is not merely a cognitive process but also involves emotional, psychological, and social dimensions that shape students' overall educational experiences and influence their ability to overcome learning barriers.

The complexity of Arabic language learning has attracted considerable scholarly attention in recent years. Selim (2023) and Ali et al. (2020), through a bibliometric analysis of Arabic language learning research indexed in Scopus between 2009 and 2024, found significant growth in global publications, particularly in Indonesia, with major themes focusing on e-learning, bilingualism, and computational linguistics. Ramadan (2023), Nour et al. (2020), and Moghnm (2020) investigated challenges faced by non-native Arabic learners and reported that linguistic difficulties, instructional methods, and limited technological integration remain dominant obstacles in the learning process. Meanwhile, Budiono (2025) explored university students' experiences in learning *nahwu* and *sharaf* and identified conceptual, linguistic, and psychological challenges accompanied by various adaptive strategies. Furthermore, Ghoual et al. (2022) and Madkour et al. (2024) emphasized the effectiveness of innovative instructional methods in improving Arabic language learning outcomes. Although these studies provide valuable insights, most focus on achievement, instructional techniques, or challenge identification, leaving students' lived experiences at the secondary education level relatively underexplored.

The review of previous studies reveals a significant research gap concerning how Madrasah Tsanawiyah students subjectively experience and interpret the complexity of

Arabic language learning. Existing studies largely emphasize measurable outcomes, teaching strategies, technological interventions, or broad descriptions of learning difficulties (Kashif et al., 2024; Sokip, 2020). Limited attention has been given to understanding how students navigate learning challenges over time, construct meaning from their experiences, and develop coping mechanisms in response to academic and emotional pressures. This gap is important because students' perceptions, feelings, and adaptive responses can substantially influence learning persistence and achievement. To address this limitation, the present study adopts a phenomenological perspective that places students' lived experiences at the center of analysis. Such an approach enables a deeper exploration of how learners encounter, interpret, and respond to the complexities of Arabic language learning within the specific context of Islamic secondary education.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to develop a conceptual model of "navigating the complexity of Arabic language learning" based on the lived experiences of Madrasah Tsanawiyah students. Unlike previous studies that predominantly focus on instructional effectiveness or learning outcomes, this research examines the dynamic process through which students experience confusion, encounter challenges, adapt to learning demands, and eventually develop strategies to sustain their learning. The study also integrates cognitive and affective dimensions into a unified analytical framework, providing a more holistic understanding of Arabic language learning experiences. Furthermore, by focusing on Madrasah Tsanawiyah students, the research contributes context-specific insights that reflect the unique characteristics of Islamic secondary education. Consequently, the study offers both theoretical enrichment and practical implications for improving Arabic language instruction and learner support systems.

Based on the identified gap, this study seeks to answer the following question: How do Madrasah Tsanawiyah students experience and navigate the complexity of Arabic language learning? The study argues that students' learning experiences involve interconnected cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that shape their responses to linguistic challenges. It is further assumed that students do not merely encounter difficulties passively but actively construct adaptive strategies that enable them to persist in learning Arabic. Through a phenomenological investigation, this research aims to generate a conceptual model that explains the stages and patterns of students' experiences in navigating learning complexity. The originality of this study lies in its emphasis on lived experiences as the foundation for theory development, thereby contributing a new conceptual perspective for understanding Arabic language learning beyond conventional achievement-oriented approaches.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach (White et al., 2022). Phenomenology was selected because the primary objective of the study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of Madrasah Tsanawiyah students in navigating the complexity of Arabic language learning. Rather than measuring learning outcomes or academic achievement, phenomenology enables researchers to uncover how individuals perceive, interpret, and construct meaning from their experiences. Through this approach, the study sought to reveal the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions involved in students' encounters with linguistic challenges, adaptation processes, and learning strategies. In phenomenological inquiry, participants are viewed as individuals who possess unique and subjective experiences, while the researcher functions as the primary instrument responsible for collecting, interpreting, and

synthesizing the data.

The research was conducted at MTs Hidayatul Ummah Kedamean Gresik, Indonesia. The selection of this site was based on its implementation of intensive Arabic language instruction and the diversity of students' learning abilities and backgrounds. These characteristics provided a relevant setting for examining how students experience and respond to the complexities of Arabic language learning. The context offered rich opportunities to explore variations in students' perceptions, challenges, and adaptation processes within an authentic educational environment.

The participants of this study consisted of ninth-grade students enrolled in four classes: IXA (32 students), IXB (30 students), IXC (31 students), and IXD (33 students), totaling 126 students. From this population, approximately twelve participants were selected using purposive sampling. Participant selection was guided by criteria relevant to the research objectives, including students who experienced difficulties in learning Arabic, students demonstrating varying levels of adaptation ability (high, moderate, and low), and students with different levels of classroom participation (active and passive). Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new themes emerged from subsequent interviews. In addition, Arabic language teachers were included as supporting informants to provide contextual insights and facilitate data triangulation.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis (Lee et al., 2024). Semi-structured interviews served as the primary source of data and allowed participants to describe their experiences freely and comprehensively. The interviews focused on students' initial encounters with Arabic language learning, perceived challenges, emotional responses, adaptation processes, and strategies employed to understand instructional materials. Classroom observations were conducted using a non-participant approach to capture naturally occurring interactions, students' engagement patterns, classroom dynamics, and responses to learning activities. Observational findings were systematically recorded in detailed field notes. In addition, relevant documents, including lesson plans, learning materials, student assignments, and school records, were examined to enrich contextual understanding and support data triangulation.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis (Net et al., 2023). The analysis began with data familiarization through repeated reading of interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents. Subsequently, significant statements related to students' learning experiences were identified and coded. These codes were then clustered into broader themes reflecting recurring patterns in participants' experiences. Particular attention was given to themes associated with confusion, challenge, adaptation, resilience, and learning strategies. The emerging themes were interpreted to uncover the essential structure and meaning of students' lived experiences. Finally, relationships among the themes were synthesized into a conceptual model illustrating how Madrasah Tsanawiyah students navigate the complexity of Arabic language learning.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed several validation strategies. Credibility was established through source triangulation, technique triangulation, prolonged engagement in the research setting, and member checking. Source triangulation involved comparing information obtained from students and teachers, while technique triangulation compared findings from interviews, observations,

and document analysis. Member checking was conducted by returning interview summaries and interpretations to participants for verification. Transferability was enhanced through rich descriptions of the research context and participants. Dependability was maintained by documenting the research procedures systematically, while confirmability was strengthened through reflective notes and continuous examination of potential researcher bias throughout the research process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This study explored the lived experiences of Madrasah Tsanawiyah students in navigating the complexity of Arabic language learning. Through thematic phenomenological analysis of interviews, observations, and documentation involving twelve participants, four interconnected themes emerged: (1) Initial Confusion, (2) Learning Difficulties, (3) Adaptation Process, and (4) Survival Strategies. These themes collectively illustrate the dynamic process through which students encounter, interpret, and respond to the challenges of learning Arabic.

Initial Confusion in Encountering Arabic Language Learning

The majority of participants described their first encounters with Arabic learning as confusing and overwhelming. Students reported difficulties understanding unfamiliar vocabulary, grammatical structures, and morphological changes. Many participants perceived Arabic as fundamentally different from their native language, creating uncertainty during classroom learning activities.

Table 1. Distribution of Student Experience Themes

| Experience Theme | Number Of Informants | Percentage |
|--------------------|----------------------|------------|
| Initial Confusion | 6 | 50% |
| Adaptation Process | 4 | 33% |
| Defensive Strategy | 2 | 17% |
| Total | 12 | 100% |

Based on the distribution of student experience themes, the majority of informants were in the initial confusion phase with 6 people (50%), followed by the adaptation process phase with 4 people (33%), and the coping strategy phase with 2 people (17%). This indicates that most students are still in the early stage of understanding Arabic learning, while some others are beginning to adapt and only a few are able to cope independently. As revealed by the first informant, 'I usually study with friends to make it easier to understand.' Meanwhile, 17% of students have reached the survival strategy phase, with independent study patterns such as 'memorizing vocabulary little by little every day.'

In addition, difficulty in understanding changes in word forms (tashrif) was also expressed by another informant who stated that "tashrif is difficult because one word can have many changes in form, so it has to be memorized frequently" (S2). This indicates that the complexity of Arabic morphology also increases the cognitive load on students. From the affective side, the interview results also showed emotional responses in the form of anxiety and low self-confidence. One student stated, "I feel anxious when asked to read or translate text in front of the class because I am afraid of making mistakes" (S3). This statement confirms that students' learning experiences are not only related to cognitive aspects but also involve emotional dimensions. These findings indicate that initial

confusion represents the first stage of students' experiences in navigating Arabic language learning.

Learning Difficulties as Sources of Complexity

Participants identified several factors contributing to the complexity of Arabic language learning. The most frequently mentioned difficulties were related to *nahwu* and *sharaf*, followed by vocabulary acquisition and instructional approaches.

Table 2. Factors Causing Learning Difficulties

| Difficulty Factor | Frequency Of Appearance | Percentage |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|------------|
| <i>Nahwu & Sharaf</i> | 18 | 50% |
| Vocabulary | 11 | 30% |
| Learning Method | 7 | 20% |
| Total | 36 | 100% |

From the factors causing difficulties, *nahwu* and *sharaf* are the dominant factors (50%), followed by vocabulary (30%) and learning methods (20%). These findings confirm that the main difficulties stem from linguistic complexity, accompanied by pedagogical factors. In the adaptation process, students begin to develop various strategies to overcome these difficulties. One informant revealed that "I usually study with friends through discussions to more easily understand the material." In addition, the use of digital media has also become an alternative learning strategy, as another informant stated that "I often use educational videos from YouTube to help understand difficult material."

The findings reveal that linguistic complexity constitutes the primary source of learning difficulties. One participant explained: "Tashrif is difficult because one word can have many different forms, so I have to memorize them repeatedly." (S2) Classroom observations further revealed that students frequently hesitated when identifying grammatical patterns and translating Arabic texts. These findings suggest that Arabic morphology and grammar impose a considerable cognitive burden on learners.

Cognitive and Affective Responses to Learning Challenges

Students' experiences were not limited to cognitive difficulties but also involved significant emotional responses. Participants described feelings of anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence when participating in Arabic language activities.

Table 3. Internal Responses to Arabic Language Learning

| Student Response | Indicator |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Cognitive | Confused, hard to understand patterns |
| Affective | Anxious, lacking confidence |

Student responses include cognitive aspects (confusion in understanding patterns) and affective aspects (anxiety and low self-confidence), which indicates that learning involves intellectual and emotional dimensions. One participant stated: "I feel anxious when the teacher asks me to read or translate a text in front of the class because I am afraid of making mistakes." (S3) These findings indicate that the complexity of Arabic language learning extends beyond linguistic challenges and encompasses emotional experiences that influence students' engagement and persistence.

Adaptation and Survival Strategies

Despite experiencing various difficulties, students actively developed strategies to cope with learning challenges. Participants described several forms of adaptation,

including peer discussions, vocabulary memorization, and the utilization of digital learning resources.

Table 4. Adaptation and Survival Strategies

| Strategy | Description |
|---------------------------|---|
| Vocabulary Memorization | Memorizing new vocabulary regularly |
| Peer Discussion | Studying collaboratively with classmates |
| Digital Media Utilization | Using YouTube, applications, and online resources |

To overcome these difficulties, students use strategies such as memorizing vocabulary, group discussions, and the use of digital media. This indicates the students' ability to adapt in facing the complexities of learning the Arabic language. At the retention strategy stage, students demonstrate the ability to adjust their learning methods more effectively according to their individual needs. One informant stated, "I memorize vocabulary gradually every day to make it easier to remember and understand" (S6). This indicates the presence of an independent and continuous adaptation process.

Furthermore, the results of the interviews also revealed the meaning of Arabic learning for students. One informant stated that 'learning Arabic is important because it can help me understand the Qur'an and religious teachings more deeply.' This statement indicates that learning Arabic is not only perceived as an academic obligation but also has a religious dimension that strengthens students' intrinsic motivation.

Discussion

The findings reveal that students' experiences in learning Arabic follow a progressive process that begins with initial confusion, continues through encounters with learning difficulties, and eventually develops into adaptation and survival strategies. The predominance of the initial confusion stage among participants indicates that Arabic language learning is often perceived as a challenging educational experience due to unfamiliar linguistic structures and vocabulary. This finding supports the study of Almelhes (2024), which identified linguistic complexity as one of the main obstacles faced by non-native Arabic learners. Similarly, Reyhan et al. (2025) found that students often struggle with grammatical and morphological concepts, particularly *nahwu* and *sharaf*. However, unlike previous studies that mainly focused on identifying difficulties, the present study demonstrates how these challenges become part of a broader experiential journey in which students gradually construct meaning and develop coping mechanisms. This finding highlights that learning difficulties should not be viewed merely as barriers but also as stages within students' learning development.

The study further confirms that *nahwu* and *sharaf* constitute the most dominant sources of learning complexity, followed by vocabulary mastery and instructional approaches. These results are consistent with previous research indicating that Arabic grammar and morphology require substantial cognitive effort because learners must understand abstract rules while simultaneously applying them in authentic language use. The participants' descriptions of confusion regarding tashrif and grammatical patterns support the argument that Arabic linguistic structures impose a significant cognitive burden on learners. Nevertheless, this study extends previous findings by showing that students do not experience these difficulties uniformly. Instead, their interpretations of linguistic challenges vary according to their prior knowledge, learning habits, and personal experiences. Consequently, the complexity of Arabic language learning emerges not only

from the language itself but also from the interaction between linguistic demands and individual learner characteristics.

Another important finding concerns the affective dimension of Arabic language learning. Participants reported feelings of anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence, particularly when required to read, translate, or respond publicly in the classroom. This finding aligns with language learning theories emphasizing the influence of affective factors on learning performance and participation. It also supports the findings of Reyhan et al. (2025), who observed that psychological barriers often accompany linguistic difficulties. However, the present study provides a more comprehensive understanding by demonstrating that cognitive and affective responses are closely interconnected. Students' confusion regarding grammatical patterns often triggered emotional reactions, while anxiety subsequently influenced their willingness to participate in learning activities. This relationship suggests that successful Arabic language instruction requires attention not only to cognitive achievement but also to learners' emotional well-being and confidence development.

The findings also reveal that students actively develop adaptation and survival strategies to overcome learning difficulties. Peer discussions, vocabulary memorization, and the use of digital media emerged as the most common approaches employed by participants. These findings support Almelhes (2024), who emphasized the importance of multimedia integration and learner-centered strategies in addressing Arabic language learning challenges. However, this study contributes additional insight by illustrating how such strategies emerge organically from students' lived experiences rather than being solely imposed through instructional interventions. Furthermore, participants' references to understanding the Qur'an and Islamic teachings indicate that religious motivation plays a significant role in sustaining learning persistence. This finding suggests that students' adaptation processes are influenced not only by academic considerations but also by personal values and spiritual aspirations, which strengthen their commitment to learning Arabic despite ongoing challenges.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Arabic language education research by proposing a conceptual model of "navigating the complexity of Arabic language learning," which conceptualizes learning as a dynamic progression from confusion to adaptation and ultimately to strategic persistence. This model expands existing literature by integrating cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions into a unified framework for understanding students' experiences. Practically, the findings provide important implications for teachers and curriculum developers. Arabic language instruction should be designed to reduce initial confusion, provide emotional support, encourage collaborative learning, and integrate digital learning resources that facilitate independent study. In addition, recognizing the role of religious motivation may help educators develop more meaningful and contextually relevant learning experiences. Therefore, this study not only enriches the theoretical understanding of Arabic language learning experiences but also offers practical guidance for creating more adaptive and student-centered learning environments in Madrasah Tsanawiyah settings.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the experience of learning Arabic among Madrasah Tsanawiyah students is a dynamic and progressive process characterized by four interconnected stages: initial confusion, learning difficulties, cognitive-affective

responses, and adaptation toward survival strategies. The most important finding is that students do not merely experience Arabic language learning as a linguistic challenge but actively construct meaning and resilience through various coping mechanisms, including peer collaboration, vocabulary memorization, and digital learning resources. The study contributes theoretically by proposing a conceptual model of “navigating the complexity of Arabic language learning,” which integrates cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions into a comprehensive framework for understanding students’ experiences. However, this research is limited to a single madrasah context and a relatively small number of participants. Future studies are recommended to involve diverse educational settings, larger participant groups, and comparative investigations to validate and further refine the proposed conceptual model.

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