



## Obstacles to learning speaking skills among non-Arabic speaking learners in Indonesia

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### Abstract:

The pinnacle of success in language learning lies in mastering speaking skills, as weakness in speaking often indicates a general weakness in the entire language. This study aims to: (1) describe the types of obstacles faced in learning Arabic speaking skills among students at Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University, Malang, Indonesia; (2) identify the causes of these obstacles; and (3) analyze the impact of these challenges on students' learning. This research adopts a qualitative approach using a case study method. Data were collected through interviews, field observations, and document analysis. Data analysis was conducted through data collection, categorization, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal: first, that the main types of obstacles include difficulties in pronunciation, vocabulary selection, and sentence formation. Second, the causes of these obstacles are both internal—such as lack of self-confidence, limited vocabulary, fear of making mistakes, and low speaking courage—and external, such as native language interference and the absence of an adequate Arabic-speaking environment. Third, these obstacles lead to poor academic performance, weak speaking ability, language anxiety, negative behaviors during speaking activities, and unfavorable perceptions of the Arabic language. In conclusion, successful mastery of Arabic speaking skills requires overcoming these barriers, enhancing motivation, and strengthening self-confidence.

**Keywords:** *obstacles, learning, speaking skills, Arabic language*

### Abstrak:

Puncak keberhasilan dalam pembelajaran bahasa terletak pada penguasaan keterampilan berbicara, karena kelemahan dalam berbicara sering mencerminkan kelemahan dalam penguasaan bahasa secara keseluruhan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk: (1) mendeskripsikan jenis-jenis hambatan yang dihadapi dalam pembelajaran keterampilan berbicara bahasa Arab pada mahasiswa Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia; (2) mengidentifikasi penyebab munculnya hambatan-hambatan tersebut; dan (3) menganalisis dampak hambatan tersebut terhadap proses belajar mahasiswa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode studi kasus. Teknik pengumpulan data meliputi wawancara, observasi lapangan, dan analisis dokumen. Analisis data dilakukan melalui tahapan pengumpulan, klasifikasi, penyajian, dan penarikan kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan: pertama, jenis hambatan utama yang dihadapi mahasiswa mencakup kesulitan dalam pelafalan, pemilihan kosakata, dan pembentukan kalimat. Kedua, penyebab hambatan bersifat internal, seperti kurangnya rasa percaya diri, keterbatasan kosakata, rasa takut melakukan kesalahan, dan keberanian berbicara yang rendah; serta eksternal, seperti pengaruh bahasa ibu dan tidak tersedianya lingkungan berbahasa Arab yang mendukung. Ketiga, hambatan-hambatan ini berdampak pada rendahnya prestasi akademik, lemahnya keterampilan berbicara, munculnya kecemasan berbahasa, perilaku negatif saat proses berbicara, serta terbentuknya persepsi negatif terhadap bahasa Arab. Simpulan dari penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa keberhasilan dalam penguasaan keterampilan berbicara bahasa Arab dapat dicapai dengan mengatasi hambatan-hambatan tersebut, membangkitkan motivasi, dan memperkuat rasa percaya diri.

**Kata Kunci:** *hambatan, pembelajaran, keterampilan berbicara, bahasa Arab*

## INTRODUCTION / المقدمة

The social reality in Indonesia shows that if a student wishes to master the Arabic language comprehensively, it requires a very long period of time (Marlina, 2013). Many students have spent years studying Arabic, yet they still do not reach proficiency in speaking skills. Most of them have only mastered reading skills without a corresponding mastery of other language skills. This phenomenon may be attributed to a misalignment in learning objectives, where the majority of Indonesian learners study Arabic merely to understand written texts rather than to engage in spoken communication (Fatkhurrohman, 2017).

On the other hand, Indonesian society views Arabic as a special language that holds a unique place in their hearts, as it is the language of the Qur'an and of religious worship (Alhirtani, 2018). This affection should serve as a strong motivation to learn Arabic. However, in reality, learners continue to face various challenges in the learning process, particularly in mastering speaking skills. This situation is also evident in the intensive Arabic language program at the State Islamic University (UIN) Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia.

This intensive program is the result of long-term efforts to find solutions to problems in Arabic language instruction in Indonesia, especially in educational institutions under the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The university views Arabic language proficiency as an essential requirement for anyone who wishes to delve into Islamic sciences such as Qur'anic exegesis, Hadith, jurisprudence, and other related fields. Therefore, since 1997, the university has implemented an intensive Arabic language program for its students. The program runs for a full year, spanning two semesters, and takes place daily from 2:00 PM to 5:00 PM, five days a week, from Monday to Friday. Due to this structured format, the program is considered one of the most successful intensive Arabic learning initiatives (Rusydi, 2020).

Language experts agree that the essence of language is speaking, as speaking is the primary indicator of language mastery. Hence, it is not surprising that speaking skills receive more attention than other language skills. Nevertheless, speaking is considered one of the most difficult skills to acquire. Several studies have shown that the difficulty in mastering Arabic for non-native speakers stems from differences between Arabic and their native languages (Al-Busaidi, 2015). Another study indicates that spoken language errors made by non-native speakers fall into three categories: pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence structure (Bahrudin & Halomoan, 2019). Other research highlights obstacles such as lack of motivation, difficulty in understanding vocabulary, and lack of variety in teaching methods (Fuadi, 2019). However, most of these studies still focus on general language errors or the challenges of learning Arabic overall. This study, in contrast, focuses specifically on the barriers in learning and mastering speaking skills.

Based on the above background, this study aims to answer three main questions:  
(1) What are the types of obstacles faced by students at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang

in learning speaking skills? (2) What are the causes of these obstacles? (3) How do these obstacles affect students' academic achievement? These three questions are expected to describe the challenges learners face, identify their root causes, and highlight their impact on the learning process.

The urgency of this study is reflected in several aspects. First, understanding the obstacles or problems helps in finding solutions. If teachers are aware of the types of obstacles their students face, they will be better equipped to address and overcome them. Second, identifying obstacles clearly can prevent them from spreading. A student who is unaware that they are making mistakes will continue to repeat those mistakes and may even pass them on to future students if they become teachers. Third, the results of this study will benefit not only Arabic language students at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim but also help address similar problems in other institutions, both within and outside Indonesia. Therefore, this topic is important and the findings are expected to contribute to improving Arabic language education for non-native speakers.

## RESEARCH METHOD / المنهجية

The selection of this research topic was motivated by the evident difficulty many non-native Arabic learners face in mastering speaking skills. This phenomenon requires proper attention and correction to prevent the emergence of further learning obstacles and complications. Understanding these learning difficulties is seen as a crucial step toward improving and correcting the overall direction of language instruction.

This study adopted a qualitative approach, as the data involved are descriptive and do not require numerical or statistical analysis. The research method employed is a case study, focusing on the actual learning conditions within the intensive Arabic language program at the State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, Indonesia. The study aims to describe the specific phenomenon occurring in this context.

The data consist of obstacles experienced by students enrolled in the university's intensive program, particularly in acquiring speaking skills. Eight students were selected as research participants from four beginner-level classes. Each class contributed two students, specifically those who received the lowest scores in speaking skills during the final examination of the first semester in the 2021–2022 academic year.

Data were collected through three primary techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with the eight selected students. The researcher prepared nine questions, which were divided equally to address the study's three central research questions. Second, field observations were carried out to directly observe the students' behavior and performance in speaking classes. Third, document analysis was employed by reviewing the results of the students' final exams from the first semester to support the findings.

Data analysis followed a systematic process, beginning with data collection, followed by sorting, organizing, and presenting the data, and culminating in drawing conclusions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues investigated in this study.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION / نتائج البحث و المناقشة

### Types of Obstacles in Learning Speaking Skills among Students of Maulana Malik Ibrahim State Islamic University

Some students experienced difficulty in pronouncing correct Arabic sounds. For example, they pronounced the letter 'Ayn (ع)' as a glottal stop like Hamzah (ء), Hā' (ح) as

**Hā'** (هـ), and **Dhāl** (ذ) as **Sīn** (س). The researcher observed this during an interview with a student who said, "As-salāmu (')alaykum yā ustādh(')" – replacing 'Ayn with a Hamzah and Dhāl with Sīn. When asked, "Kayfa ḥāluka?" (How are you?), he responded, "al-ḥ(◌)amdu lillāh," again replacing **Hā'** with **Hā'**. Another student, when asked the same question, responded with "bikh(ḥ)ayr," articulating **Khā'** as a sound close to **Hā'**.

Students also struggled with vocabulary retrieval. Although they had learned some Arabic words, they could not recall them when trying to speak. One student said (in Indonesian): "Honestly, I memorized some Arabic words and learned them from books, but those words don't come to mind when I want to speak" (Student 1, interview). Another affirmed: "I knew the word *kitāb* in Arabic, but I forgot it unless someone reminded me" (Student 2, interview). A third added: "I don't know why, but I feel it's difficult to memorize Arabic vocabulary, and I forget a lot" (Student 3, interview).

Furthermore, students faced difficulty forming correct sentences. For instance, one student said, "*Ista'dhin yā ustādh*" (in imperative form) when trying to report that his friend had asked for permission to miss class, which should have been in the past tense. Another said, "*Anā khalāṣ qirā'ah*," instead of saying "*Intahaytu min al-qirā'ah*" (I finished reading). The researcher also noted a male student saying to a female student, "*Udkhul*," instead of using the feminine form "*Udkhulī*." Another example was a student saying, "*Anā ṣalāh fī al-ḥujrah*," meaning to say, "*Ṣallaytu al-ḥujrah fī al-ghurfah*" (I performed the ḥujrah prayer in the room).

These findings indicate that the students encountered various difficulties in speaking Arabic. The first difficulty was in pronouncing certain Arabic sounds correctly. Instead of producing accurate sounds for '**Ayn**, **Hā'**, and **Khā'**, they often substituted them with incorrect or similar sounds like **Hamzah**, **Hā'**, or a softened **Khā'**. The second issue was in vocabulary acquisition—students had trouble not only in learning and retaining vocabulary but also in recalling and applying it when needed for sentence construction. The third problem was in sentence formation. As demonstrated in the data, students made errors such as using the imperative instead of the past tense, using infinitives instead of past-tense verbs, or using masculine pronouns instead of feminine ones.

In conclusion, the findings reveal three main types of obstacles encountered by students in the university's intensive Arabic language program: difficulties in accurate pronunciation, challenges in acquiring and using vocabulary, and problems in forming grammatically correct sentences.

### **Causes of the Obstacles in Learning Speaking Skills among University Students**

As for the causes of difficulty in learning speaking skills, one of the program's students stated (in Indonesian): "I cannot speak Arabic" (Student 4, interview). Another female student remarked (in Indonesian): "I don't have the vocabulary; it's hard for me to speak in Arabic" (Student 1, interview). Another student said (in Indonesian): "I can't speak Arabic because I'm afraid" (Student 5, interview). A female student added (in Indonesian): "I feel embarrassed when I make mistakes speaking Arabic, so I'd rather stay silent" (Student 2, interview).

Another reason for the difficulty in learning and mastering speaking skills is the influence of the mother tongue on Arabic. For example, the student who said: "*Anā khalāṣ qirā'ah*" is clearly influenced by his native language. What he intended to say was, "I have finished reading." Similarly, the phrase "*As-salāmu 'alayka ustādh*" was meant to be "*As-salāmu 'alaykum yā ustādh*." These examples demonstrate that the influence of the mother tongue is evident.

It was also observed that students did not seem to have ample opportunity to practice speaking Arabic. Although speaking Arabic is required both in the university and in the dormitories, only a few students actually use it in daily communication with their peers. Moreover, students are not sufficiently accustomed to listening to spoken Arabic or to seeing Arabic texts and signs in their learning environment.

From the above data, it can be concluded that the causes of difficulty in learning speaking skills include a lack of self-confidence, leading students to choose silence over speaking. The limited vocabulary repertoire, especially in terms of word acquisition, has a significant effect on their ability to speak. The data also reveal a lack of courage among students—some of them are afraid of making mistakes, and they feel embarrassed when they do.

Additionally, the mother tongue plays a significant role in creating these obstacles. Some students try to express themselves in Arabic, but their native language strongly influences their speech. On top of that, the absence of a supportive Arabic-speaking environment further hinders students from practicing their speaking skills on a daily basis.

These findings indicate that the causes of obstacles in learning speaking skills are varied. They can be categorized into internal and external factors. The internal factors include lack of self-confidence, limited vocabulary, lack of courage, and fear of making mistakes. The external factors consist of the influence of the mother tongue and the absence of a suitable Arabic-speaking environment.

### **The Impact of Obstacles on Students' Academic Achievement**

It is clear that the obstacles faced in learning speaking skills lead to negative outcomes and attitudes toward learning Arabic, especially in the area of speaking. From the documents analyzed, students' academic performance is notably weak, as evidenced by their low scores in speaking skills. It is also evident that these obstacles affect their oral proficiency. From the interviews conducted by the researcher, it became apparent that students were unable to respond in Arabic and instead answered the researcher's questions in Indonesian. These interviews also revealed that students experienced anxiety when attempting to speak in Arabic.

Additionally, the researcher's observations showed that students tended to arrive late and delay settling into their seats. One student mentioned (in Indonesian): "I come late so that I don't have to participate much in the lesson" (Student 6, interview). These patterns suggest that the obstacles also contribute to a negative perception of the Arabic language, with students viewing it as a difficult language to learn.

The data indicates that obstacles in learning speaking skills negatively impact students' academic achievement, resulting in lower grades and weaker speaking abilities. These obstacles also contribute to the development of negative behaviors toward learning speaking skills—such as lateness and disengagement during lessons. Unfortunately, they also lead to the emergence of a negative perception of Arabic as a difficult language.

Based on the findings, the effects of the obstacles in learning Arabic include a decline in academic performance, weak speaking proficiency, language-related anxiety, the emergence of negative behaviors in learning speaking skills, and the development of a negative attitude toward the Arabic language.

### **Discussion**

The types of obstacles in learning speaking skills among university learners are primarily difficulties in pronouncing sounds, choosing vocabulary, and constructing sentences. These challenges stem from internal factors such as lack of self-confidence,

limited vocabulary, lack of courage, and fear of making mistakes; as well as external factors such as the influence of the mother tongue and the absence of an appropriate Arabic-speaking environment. These obstacles have negatively impacted students' academic performance and speaking skills, caused linguistic anxiety, and led to negative behaviors and perceptions toward learning Arabic. Thus, the success of teaching and mastering speaking skills depends on removing these obstacles, stimulating motivation, and strengthening students' confidence.

A key takeaway from the research findings is that the process of teaching Arabic should primarily focus on speaking skills. To succeed in teaching speaking, teachers must consider the obstacles students have faced to prevent their recurrence. In speaking classes, teachers should play a supervisory and motivational role, boosting students' confidence. This means students should be given more opportunities to speak than the teacher. The findings of this research highlighted negative aspects which, at the same time, point toward the positives that must be addressed: the underlying causes of learning barriers that guide the development of appropriate strategies. The study also detailed the specific types of obstacles in learning speaking skills and, more broadly, in learning Arabic.

To transform these negative aspects into positive outcomes, they must be addressed and avoided in the teaching of speaking skills. Several previous studies support these findings. For example, some research has shown that Arabic learners face obstacles across all four language skills, and to overcome these, efforts such as enriching vocabulary and training learners in dialogue have been recommended (Syamsudar, 2019). Another study suggested that Arabic language teachers should stimulate motivation and use extracurricular activities to create an enjoyable learning atmosphere. Similarly, research has shown that instructional materials derived from the texts of Surah Al-Kahf can be used to enhance speaking skills through dialogue-based lessons (Hamim, 2021).

Contrarily, the findings of Ismail Zawawi and others indicated a relationship between language anxiety and linguistic performance, but not between language anxiety and learner motivation. Their research recommended reducing students' language anxiety independently (Ismail, Rasit, Zailaini, & Hussin, 2020).

Based on this research, the researcher proposes a project for Arabic language teachers to begin by teaching Arabic sounds before introducing other language elements. This approach represents the most effective entry point for learning and mastering a foreign language. A student cannot perform well in a second language without mastering its sounds. In addition, using dialogue in teaching speaking skills—especially for beginners—is highly effective, as dialogue serves both as a method and a goal in language education (Al-Faozan, 1435).

## CONCLUSION / الخلاصة

Based on the data, its analysis, and the discussion, this study concludes that the types of obstacles in learning speaking skills among students in the intensive Arabic language program at the State Islamic University of Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang include difficulties in pronouncing correct Arabic sounds, selecting appropriate vocabulary and using it within sentences, as well as forming grammatically correct Arabic sentences. The causes of these obstacles are divided into two categories: internal and external. Internal causes include lack of self-confidence, limited vocabulary, lack of courage, and fear of making mistakes. External causes include the influence of the mother tongue and the absence of an appropriate Arabic-speaking environment.



The impact of these obstacles on university students includes poor academic performance, weak speaking skills, the presence of language anxiety, the emergence of negative behavior during speaking skill acquisition, and the development of a negative perception of the Arabic language.

The theoretical conclusion drawn from this study is that successful learning and mastery of speaking skills can be achieved by overcoming these obstacles, stimulating learners' motivation, and strengthening their self-confidence.

It is worth noting that this study is limited to describing the obstacles faced by the students, their causes, and their effects. It does not provide a detailed analysis of all the components within each type of obstacle. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to conduct in-depth diagnoses of the subtypes within each obstacle category in order to track and understand all elements related to each type.

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