

## IS ARABIC WORTH TO TEACH?

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### Abstract

This research is a form of literature review that is part of my research that aims to investigate the views of Muslims in West Sumatra (Minangkabau Society) towards the Arabic language and how it drives their motivation to learn it. The lack of research on this issue in Indonesia, especially in the West Sumatran region, is the starting point of this study. In fact, a series of studies with the same theme have been conducted in various parts of the world such as in the United States (Belnap, 1987; Brosh, 2013; Husseinali, 2005, 2006; Nichols, 2014; Seymour-Jorn, 2004; Taha, 2007), Canada (Belnap, 1987), Malaysia (Abu et al., 2010; Aladin, 2010, 2013), Saudi Arabia (Al-Osaimi & Wedell, 2014), and the United Kingdom (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). In terms of identity background, learners who establish some form of connection with the Arabic language are referred to as heritage learners (Brosh, 2013). I can conclude that religious identity is the strongest background that maintains Muslims' close relationship with Arabic.

**Keywords:** *religious identity, motivation, modern standard arabic, classical arabic*

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini merupakan bentuk kajian pustaka yang merupakan bagian dari penelitian saya yang bertujuan untuk menyelidiki pandangan umat Islam di Sumatera Barat (Masyarakat Minangkabau) terhadap bahasa Arab dan bagaimana hal tersebut mendorong motivasi mereka untuk mempelajarinya. Minimnya penelitian tentang isu ini di Indonesia, khususnya di wilayah Sumatera Barat, menjadi titik tolak penelitian ini. Padahal, serangkaian penelitian dengan tema yang sama telah dilakukan di berbagai belahan dunia seperti di Amerika Serikat (Belnap, 1987; Brosh, 2013; Husseinali, 2005, 2006; Nichols, 2014; Seymour-Jorn, 2004; Taha, 2007), Kanada (Belnap, 1987), Malaysia (Abu dkk., 2010; Aladin, 2010, 2013), Arab Saudi (Al-Osaimi & Wedell, 2014), dan Inggris (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010). Dalam hal latar belakang identitas, pelajar yang menjalin hubungan dengan bahasa Arab disebut sebagai pelajar warisan (Brosh, 2013). Saya dapat menyimpulkan bahwa identitas agama merupakan latar belakang terkuat yang mempertabkan hubungan erat umat Islam dengan bahasa Arab.

**Kata Kunci:** *identitas keagamaan, motivasi, bahasa arab standar modern, bahasa arab klasik*

## 1. Introduction

Taking a glimpse into the Indonesian national curriculum of Arabic learning issued by the Ministry of Religious Affair, the implementation of Arabic learning in Indonesia is by virtue of viewing Arabic as the language of communication, besides concerning it as the language for understanding Islam. Hence, the Arabic is taught in madrasa with the same approach the teaching of English in which communicative approach is widely implemented.

In the case of English language learning in Indonesia, the language is important because of its pragmatic importance (Jon et al., 2021). English is widely regarded as a means to increase Indonesia's prosperity by opening wider doors of opportunity in various sectors, such as economic, social, and political. Recognizing this urgency, English is taught as a compulsory subject in all secondary and tertiary level schools.

The different case is happened in Arabic. The language is socially attributed as the language of Islam which makes it only a compulsory subject in madrasah and Islamic universities: the type of Islamic formal school and higher degree that run under the supervision and regulation of the Ministry of Religious Affair. Another Islamic educational institution that make Arabic as a compulsory subject is Pesantren; another Islamic institution that focuses on Islamic sciences.

Since its introduction to Indonesian society through Islamic educational institutions, Arabic has never become obtained a wide social acceptance as English has claimed. The language is identical as the language of religion rather than the language of communication. However, Arabic is taught in madrasa and Islamic higher institution as if it has the same social acceptance as English had. Studies within about three decades span of time have indicated that attitude and motivation of learning Arabic is more associated with its status as the language of religion, not the as the means of communication that allows reaching pragmatically things..

## 2. Method

This study is an epistemological effort to revisit how Muslims actually think about Arabic and how their motivation is shaped. If Muslim views Arabic as the language of religion it is worth to teach it as the language of communication as English?

## 3. Results and Discussion

### Rethinking about Arabic and People Learn it

Studies showed that learning Arabic is more about strengthening religious identity rather than to take its pragmatically benefit. The earliest data that showed indications of the role of religious identity in determining student motivation to learn Arabic was provided by (Belnap, 1987). Survey, that was conducted at several universities in the US and Canada, involved 568 students who taking Arabic courses as respondents. Majority of students came from US and Canada, which -according to Belnap (1987)- was as he expected due to the location of the survey. The number of students from these two countries was 444 students (78.2%), of which 397 students (69.9%) were from the US and 47 students (8.3%) were Canadian. Unfortunately, the survey did not clearly include religious background when profiling the respondents. At the beginning, we likely may use their origin countries to generate an assumption on their religious background, such as students from Southeast Asia, who are likely to be Muslims because there are there two countries with large populations; Indonesia and Malaysia, and Muslims constitute as the majority.

The data showed that students from Southeast Asia constitute 5.8% (33 students) of total number of respondents. This number outperformed the number of European students which constitute 3.1% of respondents (17 students). The number of South East Asia students is only less than the number of students with Middle Eastern (Arabic descents and Middle Eastern ancestries) backgrounds which contribute 10% of the total number of students (57 people). The data also showed that the students that come from physics, sciences, engineering and math constituted as the highest proportion of respondents in terms of major background which was 12.5% (71 students). According to Belnap (1987, p. 32)), religious reasons was the determining factor that encouraged them to take the Arabic courses which means there were 40 students taking the course encouraged by their religious identity or background. Looking into more detail, students that were

mentioned taking the courses encouraged by religious reasons came from Middle Eastern (12 students), Southeast Asia (12 students), and 16 students were Arab descents.

More interesting fact is revealed when we take look in more detail to the data of the survey, that is 95 students (16.7%) took the Arabic courses in order to be able to read the Quran and religious texts. It means the number of students that come to the courses due to the religious reasons exclude the 40-student were 55 students. This to say that the religious reasons in taking the Arabic courses is not exclusively belong to the students that came from region where Muslims constitute as the majority.

The data already provided an indication that one of the determining factors that forms and shapes student motivation to learn Arabic is religious reasons which is could be concerned as an outcome from their religious identity. Other studies related to student motivation to learn Arabic which were established in about three decades consistently providing similar findings, particularly if the religious background of students is to be taken into account.

The research conducted by Husseinali (2005) as well showed a finding that indicate the role of religious identity in forming and shaping motivation of learning Arabic. Donia -a female Muslim student acted as a participant- explained that her purpose to learn Arabic was to be able to understand recitations she often read and hear during prayers (shalat). The ability -according to her explanation- would make her more comfortable in worshipping. According to Donia, her reason and motivation for studying Arabic is spiritual matter. However, Husseinali classified that kind of reasons as something relate to cultural identity (Husseinali, 2005, pp. 7-9). In a following research conducted using quantitative approach, Hussenailli (2006) showed the religiosity behind student motivation in learning Arabic. The study involved 120 participants who were divided into two major groups of learners; heritage learners and non-heritage learners.

Heritage learners is a term for referring to students who has maintained a particular affiliation with Arabic such as cultural and religious affiliation, while non-Heritage learners is a term for describing students without any affiliation with Arabic (Husseinali, 2006, p. 401).

It is found the amount of heritage learners was 50 students or 41.5% (23 students or 19% are Arabs and 27 students or 22.5% are Muslims), while the amount of non-heritage learners was 70 students or 58.5%. Data showed that 74% of heritage learners stated that they agree that learning Arabic was directly related to their identity as Muslims, while only 66% stated that their purpose of learning relates to maintaining their Arabic culture which is their background of culture (Husseinali, 2006, p. 406). It is revealed that for most heritage learners, religious intentions likely become more prominent compared to cultural intentions. I think this finding as well clearly indicated the role of religious identity behind the motivation in learning Arabic. Viewing from this side, this study is in line with the research by Belnap (1987).

Several other qualitative studies also managed to show a similar trend in terms of the influence of religious identity on the formation of student motivation in learning Arabic. One of the listed studies was conducted by Brosh (2013) which involved 229 respondents from 6 universities in the U.S. In terms of student religious identity, the research revealed that Muslim students constituted 10% of the total participants (29 students). Behind Muslims, among participants were Christians, Atheists, Jews, and followers of other religions, they respectively constituted 63%, 7%, 6% and 14% of participants. Concerning aspects that encouraged students

to learn Arabic, the interest to Arabic is the most chosen reason (59.8%), followed by major language requirement (36.7%), then learning other languages (23.6%).

In addition to that, learning Arabic for reading the Quran and religious texts also come in the list since 12.2% of students marked it as their purpose. This seems to have a close relationship with the existence of 10% of Muslim students in this sample. This study provided the other indication, that religious identity as a Muslim is one of the important factors that shape student motivation in learning Arabic. In addition to the research, a study conducted by Al-Osaimi & Wedell (2014) concluded that students of Arabic course believe that learning the language is regarded as their devotion to God. The reasons behind this is that concerning Arabic as the language of the Quran and Islamic worships. Realising the striking role of religious identity in influencing and shaping student motivation in learning Arabic, it is proposed to be a sub-dimension of statistics that needs to be taken into account (Abu et al., 2010).

Research conducted by Seymour-Jorn (2004) -in my point of view- is regarded in line with the above; the role of religious identity among heritage learners is more prominent rather than of non-heritage learners. The research found that Muslim-Arab descendants in Milwaukee showed a better attitude for Arabic compared to Arab descendants who were Christians. In regards with this, they -the Muslim-Arab community- already have established an Islamic school, namely Salaam School- where learning Arabic is considered as one of the main subjects, something that have not been found among Arab-Christian community (Seymour-Jorn, 2004, p. 113). As she explained, one of the main purposes of establishing the subject is assisting the youngsters to be able reading Quran and understanding it. Muslim-Arab attitude on Arabic also can be indicated from that they constituted the biggest proportion of students who take the Arabic courses established at University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (UWM). It is found that 50% respondents state that their purpose of learning Arabic is to understand the Quran and 60% of respondents said that their decision of taking the Arabic course mostly relate to their religious identity as Muslim (Seymour-Jorn, 2004, p. 113). To confirm the quantitative data, interview was also conducted, one of respondents said "I have been struggling with religion and I feel a lot of pressure to be Muslim. However, I will not go down that path until I can interpret the Quran for myself ". I think this publication can be regarded in line with previous research that also managed to reveal the role of religious identity in learning Arabic. In same time, this research opens up new insights that studying Arabic for Muslims can also be seen as their effort in maintaining, establishing, and shaping their religious identity.

Learning Arabic for developing, maintaining and establishing religious identity is likely fit with research conducted by Peek (2005). It is found that there are three stages of Muslim identity development. It begin with (1) "religion as ascribed identity", then turning to (2) "religion as chosen identity", and finally attain a circumstance called (3) "religion as declared identity ", which is a stage where a Muslim has confidently introduced himself as a Muslim and actively takes part in conducting advocacy on Muslims community and also stands to face all forms of Islamophobia. According to this study, the shift from one stage of identity to another stage is characterized by the increase of self-awareness as Muslim which is the result of the increase of knowledge and understanding on Islam. By using this framework, Muslims student effort in learning Arabic is concerned as a process in which a Muslim is managing to develop, maintain and establish their religious identity.

Thus, it is not surprising that the main purposes of Muslim students in studying Arabic mainly include four things, which are to be able for (1) reading the Quran, (2) understanding the Quran, (3) reading religious texts, (4) understanding the prayer readings.

A brief review on the Arabic curriculum published by the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia leads to a conclusion that the establishment of Arabic learning basically to fulfil the need of Muslims to strengthen their religious identity as what is previously explained. This can be seen on the definition of Arabic subjects that is found in the curriculum document (Kementerian Agama RI, 2014), namely as follows:

"Arabic is a language subject that is directed for encouraging, guiding, and developing student abilities to use the language and fostering a positive attitude towards it. In terms of ability to use Arabic, it is designed to assist students to gain both receptive and productive skill, which lead the student to use the language in oral and writing form of communication. The ability to speak Arabic and positive attitude toward it are very important in assisting students to understand the Quran as primary source of Islam and to comprehend Hadith as the secondary source of Islam, following by understanding Arabic sources of Islamic teachings"

Up to this point, this discussion may lead us at least to two conclusions. The first is that previous reviewed study consistently showed indications of the role of religious identity in forming and shaping student motivation to learn Arabic. The second is that there is such as reciprocal relationship between religious identity and learning Arabic. Religious identity may be regarded as the one of the most prominent factors in determining student motivation, while learning Arabic is concerned as student effort in strengthening their religious identity. This can happen because Arabic is an Islamic sacred language that is highly respected by Muslims (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010), due to the use of it as language of Quran - a book that Muslims believe it as God revelation - and in the Islamic daily prayer (shalat).

Religious identity has acted as a link that connects most Muslims with Arabic. Basically, Arabic is regarded as a language used in Arabic World or Arabic speaking countries, including several countries from the Arabian Gulf to North Africa, which are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Mauretania, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrein, Qatar, UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen (Ryding, 2005, p. 5). However, religious identity as Muslims lead million people around the world to have affiliation with Arabic, even though they come from variety of nationalities, of cultures and of languages. For example, Muslims living in West Sumatra (Minangkabau) do not basically have any relationship with Arabic. The language they use – Minangkabau language- is concerned as a part of the Malay-Polynesian family of languages which is part of the Australian phylum of language (Adelaar & Himmelmann, 2013), while Arabic is part of the Semitic family of Language which is a branch of the Afro-Asian phylum of language (Al-Salih, 2009; Tawwab, 1999; Wāfi, 2004). However, Minangkabau Muslims ultimately stay connected with Arabic because of religious identity. All Muslims around the world basically connect to Arabic in a same way such as previously explained.

Speaking more about Arabic as a sacred language of Islam leads to another question; Which Arabic can be seen as a sacred language? This question arises in connection with the existence of two variants of the Arabic Formal (al-Fus{ha>), namely the Modern Standard Arabic and Classical

Arabic. In order to answer this question properly, we have to look into both of Arabic in more detail, as I will do in subsequent paragraphs.

al-Fusḥa, later known as Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic, was a result of a discourse that occurred in the literacy history of the Arab world, and Mecca is the place where the crystallization of the al-Fusḥa primarily took place. The 6th CE is regarded as one of the most important moments of the history of al-Fusḥa because it was a time when the Qur'an was revealed in this variety. Arabs are a nation that have lived in the Arabia Peninsula, covering the Hijaz and Najd regions (Wāfi, 2004, p. 78). They had lived in the absence of a government system that unites all Arab tribes (Armstrong, 2011:3; Lapidus, 2022:14-15). The circumstance is considered as one of the factors of the emergence of an era in which most of the pre-Islamic Arabic tribes committed to a long cycle of inter-tribe warfare, which is called *Ayyam al 'Arab* (Wāfi, 2004, p. 78); Dayf, 1960, p. 62). Nevertheless, these tribes agreed in several respects; accepting Mecca as the place where their common holy site had taken place, accepting Mecca as the centre of development of Arabic and its literary tradition (Abd al-Tawwab, 1999; Wafi, 2004; Dayf, 1960). Experts note that in certain months, tribes in Arabia always visit the city of Mecca to perform their traditional common rituals (Wafi, 2004, p. 87; Dayf, 1960, p. 92; Versteegh, 1997:25-26). In this case, even though they were involved in disputes, the time they visited Mecca was agreed to be the period of peace when all disputes must be abandoned (Armstrong, 2002, p. 11). The interaction that took place in Mecca during this routine visit transformed the city into a melting pot for the formation of the al-Fusḥa, whereby the Quraysh tribal dialect, the native of Mecca, was used as the main cornerstone (Al-Salih, 2009, p. 111; Tawwab, 1999, p. 77).

According to scholars, pilgrims used the Quraysh dialect to communicate during their religious visits in Mecca, at the same time the Quraysh, too, had adopted that everything is regarded as the best linguistic features practiced in other dialects. This interaction had led to the emergence of a new variant called al-Fusḥa, acted as *al-Lughat al-Mushtarikat* or the lingua franca used by all tribes in Arabia to communicate. The emergence of this lingua franca had allowed Arabs in maintaining their literary tradition, especially poetry, which had been applied in other Semitic languages. Through poetry, they recorded all aspects of their lives including wars they were involved in which made the Arabic pre-Islamic poetry being called as *Diwan al 'Arab*, or the main reference of the pre-Islamic Arabs tradition. The poems were performed in Mecca on various literacy conferences which were usually located in markets. This had positioned Mecca as a significant city, not only in terms of religion but also in language and literature. When the Qur'an revealed with al-Fusḥa, this variety then acquired a new role beside the language of literacy; the language of revelation. al-Fusḥa that came from this era is well-known as the Classical Arabic.

Modern Standard Arabic is regarded as an updated and modernised version of Classical Arabic in favour of satisfying the needs of the speakers. The evolution of language—as what can be seen in Classical Arabic—is a common phenomenon in all languages in the world. Modern Standard Arabic is a result of the adaptation by the Arabic speakers, triggered by several major changes, in the field of education, sciences, communication, etc., that occurred especially after the 18th CE, when a more intensive contact with the Western culture had been established (Kaye, 1991:4).

Badawi (Badawi et al., 2016, p. 17) suggested the term *فصحى العصر* *Fusḥa al-‘Asr* (Modern *Fusḥa*) to describe the Modern Standard Arabic and the term *فصحى التراث* *Fusḥa al-Tura>th* (Heritage *Fusḥa*) for Classical Arabic. The terms suggested by Badawi have led to a conclusion that Classical Arabic is the standardised Arabic that is presently found in classical literatures, mainly in the Qur'an and Pre-Islamic Poetry, whereas Modern Standard Arabic is the standardised Arabic which is used in the modern literature and purposes. Nevertheless, Classical Arabic does not necessarily disappear but still being used together with Modern Standard Arabic. In terms of history of the Arabic evolution, Classical Arabic is unique since previous varieties of Arabic had become fossil even completely disappeared after one step of evolution had been completed.

Sabacan, Minacan and Qatabanian are among the varieties that were no longer in use after the evolutionary process that had taken place long time before Islam (Versteegh, 1997, p. 23). The efforts of Muslims in conducting intensive studies on the Quran had triggered by the flourishing of various branches of science, is one of the main factors in, as by Kaye's word (1991, p. 572), freezing the existence of Classical Arabic to last up to 1400 years after the revelation of Quran.

Though not fundamental, there are several differences between Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic, spanning over several aspects, such as the style of language and lexical. The lexical aspect is one of the easiest aspects to look at in recognising the differences in Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic. It is found in Modern Standard Arabic several developments that had produced new vocabularies, acronyms and meanings. In terms of vocabularies, some new vocabularies were invented such as the word *رسكلة* *raskalat*, adopted from the English word "recycling", with the same meaning, as well the word *تكتالك* *takathalak* which adopted from the word "Catholic", referring to "become Catholic" (E. S. Badawi, Carter, & Gully, 2015, p. 823). Modern Standard Arabic has numerous acronyms that are not found in Classical Arabic, such as *اليونيسكو* for UNESCO or *اليونيسيف* for UNICEF (Ryding, 2005, p. 96). Besides that, new meanings are included to existing words such as the word *سيارة* *sayya>rat* which in Classical Arabic means "a caravan", whereas in Modern Standard Arabic, it can be interpreted as "a car" (Mukhtar, 2008, p. 2/1148). In terms of language style, in Modern Standard there are several modifications which, although they appear to perform as a novelty, but -in principle- do not conflict with the grammar rules contained in the Classical Arabic. For instance, a modification in the use of the word *البعض* *al-ba'd}u* which means "some". In Classical Arabic, the word is used in formats such as the following sentences; *يعتمدون بعضهم على بعض* *ya'tamidu>na ba'd}uhum 'ala ba'd}in* (they rely each other), while in the Modern Standard Arabic, it is *يعتمدون على بعضهم البعض* *ya'tamidu>na 'ala ba'd}ihim al-ba'd}u* (E. S. Badawi et al., 2015, p. 443).

#### 4. Conclusion

Which Arabic type can meet the natural demands of a Muslim religious identity; is that Modern Arabic or Classical Arabic? If we go back to the various publications discussed at the beginning of this paper, it can be seen that the main purpose of Muslims to learn Arabic is to be able to read the Quran, translate themselves and comprehend it, to read religious texts and to understand the recitations. All the religious purposes closely connected to Classical Arabic. Classical Arabic is a variant of Arabic that is used in the Quran, hadith (prophetic traditions) and Islamic classical references which is known as Turath. This type Arabic is considered as fossilised

Arabic since it is only found in mainly in Quran, Hadith and Turath, and no longer use in daily communication in the Arabic world. Thus, if we admit the need of Muslims student to learn Arabic only covered four aspect; (1) Reading the Quran, (2) understanding the Quran, (3) reading religious texts, (4) understand prayer readings, Classical Arabic is a proper kind of Arabic that can be taught to help student reaching the listed purposes.

Learning Modern Standard Arabic is considered have less relationship with the need to maintain Muslim religious identity. Despite the fact Muslims student learned Modern Standard Arabic for religious reasons (Belnap, 1987; Brosh, 2013). If this conclusion is accepted -teaching Classical Arabic is more appropriate in terms of strengthening religious identity-, it will certainly come an impact on the way we teach Arabic in schools. It then should be fully relies on the fact that teaching Classical Arabic means teaching a language that is only used in sacred texts and Islamic classical texts, (Quran and Hadith and Turath).

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