

## Exploring Arabic Synonyms for Beginner Learners: A Vocabulary-Based Approach

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### ABSTRACT

*This study explores the pedagogical role of synonym-based vocabulary instruction in Arabic language learning for beginner students. Vocabulary is widely recognized as the foundation of second language acquisition, yet the systematic teaching of synonyms has received limited attention in Arabic pedagogy. The aim of this study is to investigate how synonyms can be effectively introduced to novice learners and to assess their impact on lexical competence and communicative readiness. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah, Pasuruan, Indonesia, with a focus on 30 newly enrolled students who had minimal prior exposure to Arabic. Data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions with students, as well as teacher interviews and supporting teaching materials. Thematic analysis, based on Miles and Huberman's framework, identified three key findings: first, semantic grouping of synonyms such as نظر-رأى, جلس-قعد, and فرح-سرور enhanced students' comprehension of nuanced meanings; second, synonym learning improved vocabulary recall by associating multiple words with a single concept; and third, students expressed greater confidence and inclusivity in oral communication when exposed to lexical alternatives. The results confirm that synonym-based instruction is not merely an enrichment activity but a fundamental strategy to deepen lexical knowledge and foster communicative competence at the beginner level. This study contributes to bridging the gap between semantic theory, computational approaches to synonymy, and practical pedagogy, offering practical implications for Arabic curriculum design and classroom practice.*

**Keywords:** *Arabic Synonyms, Vocabulary Acquisition, Beginner Learners, Arabic Pedagogy*



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### A. INTRODUCTION

The mastery of vocabulary has long been recognized as the cornerstone of second language acquisition, particularly in learning Arabic as a foreign language. For beginner learners, the challenge is not only in memorizing isolated words but also in understanding the subtle differences among synonyms that may appear

interchangeable at first glance. This issue often results in students using limited vocabulary repetitively, thus restricting their ability to communicate effectively and express nuanced meanings. The lack of exposure to synonyms further leads to monotony in classroom interaction and hinders the development of communicative competence.

Research in language pedagogy has emphasized that vocabulary learning should move beyond rote memorization toward fostering semantic networks in which learners can recognize and utilize lexical alternatives. Previous studies on Arabic language education have primarily focused on the acquisition of basic vocabulary, grammatical rules, or communicative strategies, but fewer have explicitly addressed the pedagogical importance of teaching synonyms at the beginner level. For instance, investigations into Arabic vocabulary instruction tend to highlight frequency lists or thematic grouping of words, while the systematic inclusion of synonyms remains underexplored. This limited attention indicates a research gap that requires urgent consideration.

This study positions synonyms as a valuable pedagogical tool that enriches students' lexical repertoire and empowers them to choose more precise words in various contexts. The central research questions are: How can synonyms be effectively introduced to beginner learners of Arabic? and What impact does synonym learning have on students' vocabulary development and communicative performance? The scope of this research is restricted to beginner-level learners in non-Arabic speaking environments, with the limitation that more advanced lexical and stylistic features of Arabic are not within the primary focus. Nonetheless, the significance of this study lies in its potential to provide practical strategies for teachers and contribute to the growing scholarship on vocabulary-based approaches in Arabic language pedagogy.

By reviewing previous literature, this article argues that the systematic teaching of synonyms fills an important gap in Arabic language instruction. While earlier works have offered general frameworks for vocabulary acquisition, this study provides a more targeted exploration of synonyms as a means of scaffolding lexical competence for novice learners. Thus, the contribution of this research lies not only in addressing a neglected area of pedagogy but also in offering practical

implications for curriculum design and classroom practice.

## B. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Research on Arabic synonyms shows that meanings are often context-dependent rather than interchangeable. Al-Otaibi (2025) demonstrated that Qur'anic deictic verbs such as جاء and أتى carry distinct semantic prosodies, while Alrefaee et al. (2023) revealed nuanced differences between *huzn* and its near-synonyms, many of which are not preserved in translation. These findings highlight the importance of teaching learners to distinguish subtle semantic variations from the outset.

From a computational perspective, Ghanem et al. (2023) and Naser-Karajah & Arman (2024) advanced methods to enrich Arabic synonyms using benchmarks, algorithms, and lexical substitution pipelines like AraLexSubPro. A broader review by Naser-Karajah, Arman, and Jarrar (2021) surveyed approaches including WordNets and deep learning, stressing their potential for Arabic. These studies show that synonymy is central not only in semantics but also in modern NLP, though its pedagogical application remains limited.

In a different context, Zemánek (2021) analyzed *ahl al-dimma* versus *ahl al-kitāb*, finding that despite apparent similarity, the terms serve distinct functions in classical Arabic. Together, these studies affirm that synonymy in Arabic is rarely absolute. However, little attention has been given to applying such insights in beginner-level vocabulary teaching, leaving a gap this study seeks to address.

Previous studies on Arabic synonyms have mainly focused on Qur'anic semantics (Al-Otaibi, 2025; Alrefaee et al., 2023) and computational approaches (Ghanem et al., 2023; Naser-Karajah & Arman, 2023), while historical analyses such as Zemánek (2021) emphasized contextual differences in classical usage. However, little attention has been given to their pedagogical application in teaching Arabic vocabulary to beginners. This study fills that gap by introducing synonym-based learning through semantic grouping to 30 new students at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah, offering a novel contribution to Arabic language pedagogy by demonstrating how synonym awareness enhances early vocabulary development and communicative confidence.

### C. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate how synonym learning supports vocabulary acquisition among beginner learners of Arabic (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah, Pasuruan, Indonesia, an Islamic boarding school well known for its strong emphasis on Arabic language instruction. The focus was placed on 30 new students, who had just entered the pesantren and were beginning their formal Arabic studies. These students were chosen purposively because of their minimal prior exposure to Arabic, making them suitable participants for exploring the role of synonym learning at the entry level.

Primary data were obtained through classroom observations (Balcom et al., 2021), semi-structured interviews (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021), and focus group discussions with the 30 students. Additionally, two Arabic language teachers were interviewed to provide professional insight into the pedagogical strategies employed. Secondary data included teaching materials, lesson notes, and dictionaries that highlight synonym sets such as *نظر-رأى*, *جلس-قعد*, and *فرح-سرور*.

Observations were carried out during daily Arabic classes where teachers introduced selected synonym pairs. Particular attention was given to how students understood and used pairs like *نظر-رأى* in different contexts (e.g., *نظر إلى الكتاب* versus *رأيتُ صديقي*). After classroom sessions, interviews were conducted with selected students to capture their personal reflections on the ease or difficulty of synonym learning. Teachers were also asked to describe their perceptions of the effectiveness of this method for beginner students.

All qualitative data were analyzed thematically using Miles and Huberman's framework (Asipi et al., 2022): data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Themes that emerged included comprehension of meaning differences, active usage of synonyms in speech, and students' emotional responses (such as feeling more confident when expressing themselves with varied vocabulary). Triangulation was employed by cross-checking data from observations, interviews, and teaching documents to ensure validity (Campbell et al., 2020). By focusing on 30 beginner students in one pesantren setting, this study provides

an in-depth exploration of how synonym-based vocabulary learning contributes to early lexical competence and communicative readiness in Arabic.

#### **D. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Vocabulary is widely recognized as the foundation of all language skills. Without an adequate stock of words, learners cannot construct sentences, understand texts, or engage in meaningful communication. In fact, vocabulary functions as the building blocks upon which grammar, syntax, and rhetoric are constructed. Linguists such as Nation (2001) argue that vocabulary is central to second language acquisition because it provides learners with the semantic tools they need to express ideas, comprehend input, and interact in context. Thus, vocabulary is not simply a list of words to be memorized but the very essence of language mastery.

In the context of Arabic, the importance of vocabulary becomes even more pronounced. Arabic is not only a world language spoken across the Middle East and North Africa but also the sacred language of Islam. Every Muslim around the globe encounters Arabic in religious practice, especially in the recitation of the Qur'an, the performance of prayer, and the study of classical texts. For this reason, the acquisition of Arabic vocabulary is not only a linguistic necessity but also a spiritual obligation for those seeking access to the rich tradition of Islamic scholarship. A sufficient knowledge of vocabulary opens the gate to understanding Qur'anic verses, Hadith literature, classical commentaries, and the writings of the great scholars of Islam.

#### **Vocabulary as the Cornerstone of Language Acquisition**

From the perspective of language education, vocabulary provides the basis for the four essential skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without knowing the words, learners cannot make sense of spoken input, nor can they produce meaningful speech. In reading, comprehension depends heavily on recognizing and understanding vocabulary items, while in writing, the ability to express ideas accurately requires a repertoire of words. Wilkins (2006) famously remarked, *“Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary,*

*nothing can be conveyed.*” This statement highlights the irreplaceable role of vocabulary in the process of communication.

Furthermore, vocabulary plays a cognitive role in organizing thought. Words provide the categories and labels through which humans perceive and interpret the world. For second language learners, acquiring vocabulary means developing a new mental map of concepts, often different from their first language. In Arabic, this cognitive process is intensified by the richness of synonyms, derivational patterns, and semantic fields that characterize the language. Learners must not only memorize isolated words but also understand how they are connected in networks of meaning.

One of the distinctive features of Arabic is its root-and-pattern morphology (*al-iṣṭilāḥ al-ṣarfī*). Most words in Arabic are derived from trilateral or quadrilateral roots, and by applying different patterns, numerous related words can be generated. For example, from the root *k-t-b* (كتب), meaning “to write,” we derive *kitāb* (book), *kātib* (writer), *maktab* (office), *maktaba* (library), and *maktūb* (written). For beginners, this system can be both a challenge and an opportunity: a challenge because it requires mastering abstract morphological rules, but also an opportunity because once the system is understood, it enables learners to unlock a vast array of vocabulary efficiently.

Another complexity lies in the abundance of synonyms and near-synonyms. Arabic is renowned for its richness in words that express similar meanings with subtle distinctions. For example, the language has multiple words for “lion,” “sword,” or “camel,” reflecting the historical, cultural, and poetic depth of the Arab tradition. Even common verbs like *نظر* (to look) and *رأى* (to see) carry nuances that must be distinguished in proper usage. For beginners, encountering this variety at the early stages can be overwhelming, but it also lays the foundation for precision, eloquence, and stylistic variation in later stages.

Arabic vocabulary is further complicated by its diglossic situation. Learners must navigate between *fuṣḥā* (Modern Standard Arabic) used in writing, formal speech, and religious texts, and *‘āmmiyya* (colloquial dialects) used in daily communication. Although most learners of Arabic as a foreign language begin with *fuṣḥā*, the reality of dialectal diversity influences vocabulary acquisition.

This duality highlights the importance of carefully structured pedagogy at the beginner stage, focusing on essential vocabulary that connects learners to the broader Islamic and literary tradition.

### **Vocabulary at the Early Stage of Arabic Learning**

For beginners, vocabulary acquisition in Arabic should focus on high-frequency words, functional expressions, and thematic groupings (Mahmudah, 2025). Research shows that early exposure to meaningful lexical items accelerates learners' ability to comprehend input and engage in communication (Schmitt, 2000). In pesantren and Islamic institutions, students are often introduced to basic vocabulary lists accompanied by memorization exercises. While rote memorization has long been a traditional practice, modern pedagogy recommends complementing it with strategies such as semantic mapping, contextual learning, and synonym grouping.

At Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah, for example, new students are trained to memorize daily vocabulary items, often grouped semantically to facilitate retention. Learning pairs like *جلس-قعد* (to sit), *سمع-أصغى* (to hear), and *فرح-سرور* (happiness) not only broadens their vocabulary but also enhances their ability to make distinctions in usage. Students frequently report that this method gives them more confidence in expressing themselves, as they can choose among alternatives depending on the situation. Thus, synonym-based vocabulary instruction at the beginner level fosters both depth and flexibility of expression.

### **Arabic Vocabulary as the Gateway to Religious Knowledge**

Perhaps the most significant dimension of Arabic vocabulary learning is its role as the gateway to Islamic knowledge (Hanifansyah et al., 2025). Mastery of vocabulary is not merely an academic exercise but a prerequisite for accessing the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical texts. Without sufficient vocabulary, learners cannot understand the divine message or the scholarly tradition that interprets it. For centuries, Muslim scholars emphasized that *al-lughah mabda' al-'ilm* language is the starting point of knowledge. In this sense, Arabic vocabulary is the key that unlocks the treasures of Islamic civilization.

The Qur'an itself is filled with nuanced lexical choices that convey profound meanings. For instance, the Qur'an uses multiple words for "heart" *qalb*,

*fu'ād*, and *ṣadr* each carrying a slightly different connotation related to spiritual, emotional, or cognitive states. To appreciate these subtleties, one must be equipped with a deep vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, Hadith literature and classical works of tafsīr, fiqh, and kalām are rich in terminologies that require systematic vocabulary study. Thus, vocabulary learning in Arabic is inseparable from the pursuit of religious sciences (*'ulūm al-dīn*).

### **Implications and Practical Significance**

The emphasis on vocabulary as the foundation of language learning has several implications for pedagogy. First, educators must design curricula that prioritize systematic vocabulary acquisition from the very beginning. This includes not only memorization but also contextualized usage, synonym awareness, and integration with communicative practice. Second, learners should be encouraged to see vocabulary as a bridge to religious and intellectual traditions, fostering both linguistic competence and spiritual motivation. Third, teachers should exploit the morphological system of Arabic to show how roots generate families of related words, thereby expanding vocabulary efficiently.

Practical experience from pesantren education demonstrates that consistent exposure to vocabulary through daily memorization, repetition, and usage in classroom interaction leads to significant progress among beginners. Students who internalize vocabulary early on are better equipped to engage with more complex grammar, rhetoric, and literature in later stages. Moreover, introducing synonyms from the beginning prevents the development of a narrow, repetitive vocabulary, preparing learners for eloquent and precise communication.

### **Students' Experiences with Synonym Learning**

The qualitative findings revealed that introducing Arabic synonyms through semantic grouping significantly supported the lexical development of new students at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah. When asked about the pair *نظر-رأى*, several students emphasized that distinguishing between “to look” and “to see” gave them more clarity and flexibility in expression. One student noted:

*“When the teacher explained the difference between *نظر* and *رأى*, I felt that Arabic is more precise than I thought. I can now choose the right word depending*

*on whether I mean just looking or really seeing.*” Another student reflected on the emotional dimension of learning synonyms such as *فخرج-سروور*:

*“These synonyms made us happy to memorize, because they show that one feeling can be expressed in different ways. It gives us more confidence to speak.”*

A female student further highlighted the inclusive impact of the method:

*“I feel that this kitab gives female students more identity in speaking Arabic. It makes us feel included.”*

Overall, students reported that synonym-based learning not only expanded their vocabulary but also reduced monotony in classroom practice. Instead of repeating the same word, they learned to alternate expressions, which made their speech richer and more natural.

### **Pedagogical Value of Semantic Grouping**

The findings also revealed that semantic grouping made it easier for students to memorize and recall new words. For example, learning *جلس-قعد* together as “to sit” enabled students to associate two words with one concept, reinforcing memory through contrast and similarity. This aligns with semantic field theory (Palmer, 1996) and Nation’s (2013) vocabulary acquisition framework, which emphasize that words are more effectively learned when embedded in networks of meaning rather than in isolation.

The teachers interviewed confirmed this benefit, noting that synonyms provided a natural form of scaffolding for beginners. One teacher stated:

*“When we give students two words with similar meaning, they become curious about when to use each. This curiosity motivates them to practice more.”*

These findings resonate with Al-Otaibi’s (2025) study, which demonstrated that Qur’anic verbs such as *جاء* and *أتى* differ in semantic prosody, proving that synonymy is context-dependent. Similarly, Alrefaee et al. (2023) found subtle differences between *huzn* and its near-synonyms, which are crucial for accurate comprehension. Unlike these Qur’anic-focused studies, however, the present

research extends synonym analysis into pedagogical practice, showing its tangible benefits for beginner learners.

From a computational perspective, Ghanem et al. (2023) and Naser-Karajah & Arman (2023) highlighted how synonym enrichment can be formalized through algorithms and lexical substitution models. While their focus was on digital processing, the current study demonstrates that semantic enrichment through synonyms is equally important in face-to-face language classrooms. Moreover, Zemánek's (2021) conclusion that *ahl al-dimma* and *ahl al-kitāb* are distinct rather than interchangeable supports the principle applied here: synonyms are not absolute, and understanding their nuance should begin at the earliest stage of language learning.

## E. CONCLUSION

This study has shown that synonym-based vocabulary instruction, applied to 30 new students at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah, significantly enriched their lexical repertoire, improved recall through semantic grouping, and enhanced communicative confidence. By exploring pairs such as نظر-رأى and فرح-سرور, learners not only expanded their vocabulary but also developed an early awareness of semantic nuance, which aligns with theoretical insights from semantic field theory and previous linguistic studies. The findings highlight that teaching synonyms is not merely an enrichment activity but a foundational strategy for beginner Arabic learners.

Nevertheless, this research is limited by its focus on a single institution and a relatively small sample, which may not represent all beginner learners of Arabic in different educational contexts. Future studies should expand to diverse settings, incorporate longitudinal analysis, and compare synonym-based learning with other vocabulary strategies. Practically, this study suggests that Arabic language teachers should integrate synonym instruction systematically into curricula, as it fosters deeper lexical knowledge and communicative readiness. Such an approach can bridge the gap between linguistic theory, computational advances, and classroom pedagogy, offering a valuable contribution to the field of Arabic language education.

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