



Rethinking the Challenges of Arabic Learning among Indonesian Madrasah Tsanawiyah Students: A Literature-Based Inquiry

Moh. Zulkifli Papatungan

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Sultan Amai Gorontalo

zulkiflipapatungan@iaingorontalo.ac.id

Masruddin

Institut Agama Islam Darussalam Martapura

Ceysi Yuliana Hasan

Institut Agama Islam Negeri Sultan Amai Gorontalo

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Abstract

This study synthesizes recent empirical research on Arabic language learning difficulties among students at the Islamic junior secondary school or Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) level in Indonesia. Drawing upon peer-reviewed journal publications, the analysis identifies three interrelated domains shaping students' learning challenges: linguistic barriers, pedagogical practices, and affective conditions. The findings indicate that limited vocabulary mastery and weak morphological awareness significantly constrain reading comprehension, while insufficient integration of grammatical knowledge into meaningful contexts perpetuates the gap between declarative understanding and procedural competence. Teacher-centered instructional approaches and assessment misalignment further intensify these difficulties by promoting surface learning rather than communicative engagement. In addition, affective factors such as anxiety and fluctuating motivation mediate students' capacity to cope with structural linguistic complexity. The study argues that Arabic learning difficulties in Indonesian madrasahs are systemic rather than student-deficit phenomena, emerging from the interaction of language structure, instructional, and classroom climate. The paper concludes by emphasizing the necessity of integrated reform encompassing contextualized vocabulary development, applied grammar instruction, constructive assessment alignment, and affective support mechanisms to improve learning outcomes sustainably.

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Introduction

Arabic language instruction occupies a central position within the curriculum of Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) in Indonesia, as it is not only a foreign language subject but also a key to understanding Islamic primary sources and classical scholarship. Despite its institutional importance, a substantial body of research indexed in Google Scholar indicates that Indonesian students continue to experience persistent difficulties in mastering Arabic, particularly at the lower secondary level. These challenges are multidimensional, encompassing linguistic, pedagogical, psychological, and sociocultural dimensions. The complexity of Arabic morphology (*şarf*), syntax (*naħw*), and phonology often leads to cognitive overload among learners who are simultaneously adjusting to adolescence and formal academic demands (Alghazali & Alzyoudi, 2025). Furthermore, the diglossic nature of Arabic, in which Modern Standard Arabic differs from colloquial



varieties, adds an additional layer of difficulty for non-native learners (Gardner et al., 1997).

Empirical findings from studies published in international language education journals highlight that foreign language difficulty is frequently associated with limited vocabulary acquisition, weak grammatical awareness, and low exposure to authentic communicative contexts (Schmitt, 2000). In the Indonesian Islamic school context, these issues are compounded by limited instructional hours, teacher-centered methodologies, and insufficient integration of communicative approaches. Research in second language acquisition theory emphasizes that meaningful input, interaction, and learner engagement are crucial for successful language development (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991). However, several Indonesian-based studies have shown that Arabic instruction in MTs often remains focused on rote memorization and translation-based techniques, resulting in low motivation and minimal communicative competence.

Theoretical perspectives from Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and constructivist learning theory suggest that language acquisition is most effective when learners actively construct knowledge through interaction and contextualized tasks (Qasserras, 2023). Krashen's Input Hypothesis further posits that comprehensible input slightly above the learner's current proficiency level ($i+1$) is essential for progress (Gong, 2023). Classroom realities in many Indonesian MTs reveal a gap between theoretical ideals and pedagogical practice. Teachers frequently rely on grammar-translation methods, which may strengthen declarative knowledge but often fail to develop procedural language skills such as reading fluency and contextual comprehension (Zhao & Ellis, 2020). This discrepancy between theory and practice signals a need for systematic investigation into the specific learning barriers faced by MTs students.

Although numerous studies have explored Arabic language pedagogy in Indonesia, the existing body of knowledge remains fragmented. Much of the literature focuses either on curriculum analysis or on isolated instructional interventions, rather than offering a comprehensive synthesis of the recurring learning difficulties experienced by MTs students across regions. Moreover, while quantitative data frequently report low achievement scores, fewer studies analyze the underlying cognitive and affective factors contributing to these outcomes. Thus, there remains an incomplete understanding of how linguistic complexity, instructional design, learner motivation, and institutional context interact to shape students' learning experiences. This gap underscores the necessity of a literature-based analytical study that systematically examines findings from peer-reviewed research to identify dominant patterns of difficulty and their pedagogical implications.

Accordingly, the primary objective of this study is to analyze and synthesize empirical findings from scholarly articles indexed in Google Scholar in order to identify the principal challenges encountered by MTs students in learning Arabic. Specifically, the study aims (1) to categorize the linguistic, psychological, and pedagogical barriers documented in previous research; (2) to examine theoretical explanations proposed



within second language acquisition frameworks; and (3) to identify areas where empirical evidence remains insufficient or inconsistent. By doing so, this research seeks to provide a clearer conceptual map of the problem and to establish a foundation for more targeted instructional innovation.

Based on preliminary review and theoretical grounding, this study predicts that the dominant difficulties experienced by MTs students will revolve around limited vocabulary mastery, inadequate grammatical competence, low reading comprehension ability, and diminished learning motivation. Drawing upon constructivist and communicative theories, it is hypothesized that these challenges are not solely linguistic in nature but are significantly influenced by instructional strategies that do not sufficiently promote active engagement and contextualized learning. Furthermore, it is anticipated that affective factors play a mediating role in students' academic performance.

This study positions itself at the intersection of theory and empirical evidence in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of Arabic language learning difficulties among Indonesian MTs students. By synthesizing findings from credible scholarly sources and grounding the discussion in established language acquisition theories, the research aims to clarify unresolved issues and propose directions for pedagogical reform. A deeper understanding of these challenges is expected to inform more effective curriculum design and instructional innovation in Arabic language education within Indonesia's Islamic secondary schools.

Literature Review

The discussion of Arabic language learning difficulties among MTs students in Indonesia cannot be separated from broader theoretical and empirical developments in second language acquisition (SLA) research. Arabic, as a Semitic language with a complex morphological system and diglossic characteristics, presents structural challenges distinct from Indo-European and Austronesian languages. Rubin and Versteegh emphasizes that Arabic morphology is built upon a root-and-pattern system that requires learners to recognize non-linear word formation processes, which may be cognitively demanding for beginners (Rubin & Versteegh, 2015). For Indonesian learners whose first language lacks such morphological structures, this linguistic distance often results in difficulty understanding word derivation, verb conjugation, and syntactic agreement.

From the perspective of SLA theory, language difficulty is not solely determined by structural differences but also by the quality of input and interaction. Krashen's Input Hypothesis posits that learners acquire language effectively when exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level of competence ($i+1$) (Loschky, 1994). This instructional pattern tends to emphasize declarative grammatical knowledge rather than communicative competence, which may explain why students often struggle with reading comprehension and contextual interpretation despite memorizing grammatical rules (Putri MD et al., 2023).

Reading comprehension, in particular, has emerged as one of the most persistent challenges in Arabic language education at the secondary level. Schmitt argues that insufficient lexical knowledge significantly constrains learners' ability to infer meaning from context, leading to slow reading speed and fragmented understanding (Schmitt, 2000). Studies conducted in Indonesian consistently report limited vocabulary acquisition as a primary barrier to comprehension of Arabic texts, especially those containing classical or religious terminology (Ayatullah & Farhana, 2024). The morphological richness of Arabic further compounds this issue, as a single root may generate multiple derived forms with nuanced meanings.

In addition to cognitive and linguistic barriers, affective factors also play a crucial role in shaping students' learning experiences. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope introduced the concept of Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), describing it as a distinct psychological construct that negatively correlates with language achievement (Horwitz et al., 1986). Subsequent research has confirmed that anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of making mistakes can significantly hinder language performance (Dewaele et al., 2022). Within the Indonesian MTs context, classroom observations reported in several journal articles reveal that students often feel intimidated when required to read Arabic texts aloud or analyze grammatical structures in front of peers. This emotional tension may reduce willingness to participate and impede internalization of linguistic input.

Motivation is another central theme in the literature. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System highlights the importance of learners' future-oriented goals and self-perceptions in sustaining engagement (Amrullah et al., 2025). While Arabic holds religious significance for many Indonesian students, this intrinsic value does not automatically translate into academic motivation. Empirical findings suggest that when instructional approaches lack variation and interactive elements, students' interest declines, even if they recognize the importance of the language. Consequently, motivation in Arabic classrooms appears to be strongly influenced by pedagogical strategies rather than solely by ideological or religious commitment.

Pedagogical approaches to Arabic instruction have evolved globally toward communicative and task-based frameworks. Nunan emphasizes that task-based language teaching encourages authentic language use and contextualized learning, promoting deeper processing and retention (Nunan, 2004). Nevertheless, literature examining Indonesian MTs classrooms indicates limited implementation of such approaches. Instead, instruction often centers on textbook exercises and structural drills, with minimal integration of collaborative activities or multimedia resources (Zhao & Ellis, 2020). This gap between theoretical recommendations and classroom practice reinforces the argument that methodological rigidity contributes to persistent learning difficulties.

Another dimension addressed in the literature concerns teacher competence and professional development. Effective language teaching requires not only linguistic mastery but also pedagogical and technological proficiency. Studies indexed in



ScienceDirect highlight that teachers' beliefs about language learning significantly influence classroom practices (Borg, 2003). When educators adhere to traditional views emphasizing grammar mastery as the primary goal, innovation and communicative experimentation may be constrained. In Indonesian madrasahs, professional training opportunities in modern Arabic pedagogy are sometimes limited, which may affect instructional quality and students' learning outcomes.

Collectively, the reviewed literature demonstrates that the difficulties faced by MTs students in learning Arabic are multidimensional and interconnected. Linguistic complexity, insufficient vocabulary exposure, teacher-centered pedagogy, limited communicative practice, affective barriers, and curriculum misalignment converge to create systemic challenges. While prior studies have illuminated individual aspects of the problem, fewer have attempted to synthesize these factors within an integrated analytical framework. Therefore, the present study builds upon existing scholarship by consolidating empirical findings and theoretical perspectives to offer a comprehensive understanding of Arabic language learning difficulties in Indonesian MTs contexts.

Method

This study employed a qualitative library research design aimed at systematically analyzing and synthesizing scholarly publications related to the difficulties of learning Arabic among MTs students in Indonesia. The research focused on peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in Google Scholar to ensure academic credibility and relevance. The selected literature primarily consisted of empirical studies, theoretical discussions, and review articles addressing linguistic, pedagogical, and psychological challenges in Arabic language learning within Islamic secondary school contexts.

The data collection process was conducted through a systematic search using specific keywords, including "Arabic language learning difficulties," "Indonesian madrasah students," "Arabic reading problems," "foreign language anxiety," and "Arabic pedagogy in Indonesia." Inclusion criteria were established to maintain the quality of sources, (1) articles published in reputable academic journals, (2) studies with clear research methodologies, and (3) publications within the last fifteen years to ensure relevance. Studies that did not directly address the MTs level or lacked methodological clarity were excluded from the analysis.

The data analysis procedure followed a thematic analysis approach. Selected articles were carefully reviewed, coded, and categorized based on recurring themes such as linguistic complexity, vocabulary mastery, instructional methods, learner motivation, and affective factors. The findings from different studies were then compared and synthesized to identify dominant patterns, theoretical explanations, and research gaps. This analytical strategy enabled the researcher to construct an integrated understanding of the multifaceted challenges faced by MTs students in learning Arabic.

Result and Discussion

Linguistic Barriers: Vocabulary Limitation and Reading Comprehension

Empirical studies conducted in Indonesian Islamic junior secondary schools (MTs) consistently identify limited vocabulary mastery as the most dominant linguistic obstacle in Arabic language learning. Research by Karmila, Fatirawahidah, and Wahyuni (2023) at MTs Negeri 2 Muna demonstrates that ninth-grade students experience substantial reading comprehension difficulties primarily due to restricted lexical knowledge, confusion in distinguishing orthographically similar Arabic letters, and limited exposure to contextualized vocabulary practice. Students frequently fail to infer meaning from passages because their vocabulary repertoire does not reach the threshold required for autonomous comprehension.

Similarly, Aldias et al. (2025), in their investigation at Sekolah Islam Terpadu Darul Fikri Makassar, report that eighth-grade learners struggle with fluency, accurate pronunciation, and syntactic decoding when engaging with Arabic texts. Although many students are capable of reading aloud mechanically, they demonstrate weak semantic integration, indicating a disconnect between decoding skills and meaningful comprehension. This phenomenon suggests that vocabulary deficiency not only affects lexical recognition but also undermines higher-level interpretive processes.

Across Indonesian journal publications, a recurring pattern emerges: students tend to rely on word-by-word translation strategies rather than contextual inference. Such strategies indicate insufficient lexical depth and limited morphological awareness, particularly in recognizing derived word forms. Consequently, reading difficulty in MTs contexts is multidimensional, involving phonological processing, vocabulary limitation, and syntactic interpretation simultaneously. The linguistic distance between Arabic and Bahasa Indonesia further intensifies this challenge, especially in the absence of systematic lexical reinforcement within classroom instruction.

Grammatical Competence and the Theory–Practice Discrepancy

Beyond vocabulary constraints, grammatical mastery remains a persistent concern in Indonesian madrasahs. Afjalurrahmansyah et al. (2025), in a qualitative study at MTs Al-Mutmainah, reveal that students encounter significant difficulty in understanding nominal and verbal sentence structures, identifying syntactic functions, and applying case-ending rules (*i'rāb*) within authentic texts. Learners often memorize grammatical definitions without fully comprehending their functional application in discourse contexts.

Iskandart et al. (Iskandar & Syifa'unnnufus, 2025), examining seventh-grade students at MTs Darussalam al-Kubro, similarly report that students struggle to integrate grammatical knowledge with actual language use. Instructional practices frequently emphasize isolated rule explanation and vocabulary memorization without embedding them into meaningful textual practice. As a result, students demonstrate declarative knowledge of rules but lack procedural competence in applying them during reading or sentence construction tasks.



Indonesian scholarship further indicates that traditional lecture-based grammar instruction contributes to students' perception of Arabic as structurally rigid and cognitively demanding. When grammatical concepts are presented abstractly without contextual scaffolding, learners fail to internalize patterns effectively. Thus, grammatical difficulty in Indonesian MTs settings reflects not only the inherent structural complexity of Arabic but also a pedagogical gap between theoretical explanation and communicative implementation.

Pedagogical Practices and Instructional

Pedagogical variables play a crucial role in shaping Arabic learning outcomes in Indonesian Islamic schools. Oktavian et al. (2026), in their study at MTs Taswirul Afkar Surabaya, identify teacher-centered instruction as a major contributing factor to students' disengagement. Classroom practices are frequently dominated by explanation and textbook translation, limiting opportunities for interaction and collaborative meaning-making. Linguistic challenges are exacerbated by restricted instructional time, minimal use of learning media, and limited communicative practice.

Complementary findings from other Indonesian studies suggest that when teachers adopt contextualized strategies student participation and comprehension improve considerably. These observations indicate that linguistic difficulties are not static learner deficits but are mediated by instructional design and classroom environment. Therefore, Arabic learning challenges in MTs contexts are embedded within a broader instructional that includes teaching methodology, classroom interaction patterns, learning resources, and curriculum implementation. The persistence of teacher-centered paradigms appears to amplify rather than mitigate linguistic complexity.

Affective Dimensions: Motivation, Anxiety, and Learning Support

Affective factors consistently emerge as influential mediators in Indonesian Arabic learning research. Multiple studies report that MTs students often perceive Arabic as difficult and rule-heavy, which negatively affects intrinsic motivation. Oktavian et al. (2026) demonstrate that when teachers introduce incremental grammar scaffolding, language games, and structured daily vocabulary practice, student engagement increases and classroom participation becomes more active.

National-level research further confirms that language anxiety, low confidence, and limited supportive interaction significantly influence students' performance. In rigid classroom environments characterized by evaluative pressure and limited feedback variation, students exhibit heightened anxiety and reduced willingness to participate. Conversely, supportive teacher–student interaction and communicative activities contribute to improved reading comprehension and grammatical application.

Although Arabic possesses strong religious and cultural significance in Indonesia, motivational orientation alone does not guarantee learning success. Instead, classroom climate and instructional responsiveness significantly shape learners' emotional

engagement and persistence. Affective variables therefore function as critical mediating factors between structural linguistic complexity and measurable academic achievement.

Discussion

The present synthesis of Indonesian empirical studies reveals that Arabic learning difficulties at the MTs level are neither incidental nor isolated phenomena. Rather, they represent a structurally embedded challenge shaped by the interaction of linguistic complexity, pedagogical practices, and affective dynamics within Islamic secondary education contexts. From a linguistic perspective, the dominance of vocabulary-related obstacles confirms that lexical threshold plays a decisive role in reading comprehension (Lazuardi, 2025). Indonesian learners encounter Arabic as a typologically distant language, characterized by a root-and-pattern morphological system and inflectional case marking that differ fundamentally from Bahasa Indonesia. Empirical findings indicate that students often fail to move beyond mechanical decoding because lexical recognition remains limited and morphological awareness underdeveloped. In practical terms, insufficient vocabulary depth prevents learners from integrating semantic cues across clauses and sentences, thereby restricting inferential comprehension. This supports the view that vocabulary acquisition must move from surface memorization toward contextualized and repetitive exposure embedded within meaningful discourse (Saepudin et al., 2024).

Grammatical complexity further intensifies these challenges. The reviewed studies consistently demonstrate a gap between declarative knowledge of grammatical rules and procedural competence in authentic language use. Students frequently memorize *naḥw* and *ṣarf* rules but struggle to apply them when interpreting connected texts. This discrepancy suggests that grammar instruction in many Indonesian madrasahs remains cognitively abstract and insufficiently contextualized. The persistence of rule-oriented and translation-heavy pedagogy appears to hinder the internalization of syntactic patterns.

Pedagogical practices emerge as a mediating variable that can either exacerbate or alleviate linguistic difficulty. Teacher-centered instruction, limited interactive engagement, and restricted exposure to communicative tasks collectively reduce opportunities for meaningful language processing. When students are positioned primarily as passive recipients of information, their cognitive engagement remains shallow. Conversely, evidence from classrooms employing structured scaffolding, guided reading strategies, and interactive reinforcement demonstrates improved participation and comprehension. These findings imply that instructional plays a decisive role in transforming structural linguistic complexity into manageable learning experiences (Alam & Mohanty, 2024).

The affective dimension further complicates this dynamic. Anxiety, low confidence, and reduced intrinsic motivation repeatedly appear in Indonesian studies as influential barriers. Although Arabic holds religious significance, symbolic value does not automatically translate into sustained academic motivation. Students who perceive



instruction as rigid and error-focused tend to experience heightened classroom anxiety, which in turn suppresses active participation and risk-taking in language use. Conversely, supportive classroom interaction and incremental instructional design foster confidence and persistence. Thus, affective conditions function not merely as supplementary variables but as central mediators between instructional design and measurable learning outcomes.

The empirical evidence reviewed in this study carries significant implications for policy formulation and curriculum reform in Indonesian Islamic secondary education, particularly at the MTs level. The persistence of Arabic learning difficulties suggests that structural improvement must extend beyond classroom-level intervention toward systemic alignment involving curriculum design, teacher development, and assessment policy.

First, curriculum development should prioritize lexical threshold attainment as a foundational objective in early Arabic instruction. Given the centrality of vocabulary limitation in shaping reading comprehension outcomes, national and institutional curricula should specify staged lexical benchmarks that correspond to reading proficiency levels. Vocabulary instruction must move beyond isolated memorization toward contextualized exposure through graded texts, thematic units, and repetitive lexical recycling. Integrating morphological awareness training into curriculum frameworks would strengthen students' ability to decode unfamiliar words independently.

Second, grammar instruction requires pedagogical reorientation from rule-dominant explanation toward functional integration within communicative contexts. The findings demonstrate that students often acquire declarative knowledge without procedural competence. Curriculum guidelines should therefore encourage applied grammar learning through text-based analysis, guided discovery approaches, collaborative sentence construction, and structured scaffolding. Rather than treating *naḥw* and *ṣarf* as abstract theoretical domains, curriculum reform should frame grammar as a tool for meaning-making and textual interpretation. This shift would reduce the cognitive distance between structural explanation and authentic language use.

Third, assessment practices must be realigned with stated communicative objectives. Current evidence indicates that evaluation frequently emphasizes discrete grammar recall and translation accuracy, potentially reinforcing surface learning strategies. Constructive alignment between learning outcomes, instructional activities, and assessment tasks is essential. If curriculum objectives prioritize reading comprehension and functional language ability, then assessment instruments must measure integrative skills such as contextual inference, syntactic interpretation within discourse, and applied vocabulary usage. Portfolio-based evaluation, text interpretation tasks, and performance-based assessments may offer more valid indicators of learning progress than isolated rule testing.

At a broader systemic level, reform efforts should acknowledge the unique position of Arabic within Indonesian Islamic education. While Arabic holds religious significance, symbolic value alone does not ensure effective acquisition. Policy must therefore balance its theological function with evidence-based language pedagogy. Integrating insights from applied linguistics, psycholinguistics, and second language acquisition research into national Arabic education guidelines would enhance theoretical coherence and instructional effectiveness.

The findings suggest that meaningful improvement in Arabic learning outcomes requires multidimensional reform such as structured vocabulary progression, contextualized grammar integration, constructive assessment alignment, sustained teacher development, and affective support embedded within classroom practice. Policy and curriculum reform that addresses these interconnected domains simultaneously is more likely to generate sustainable enhancement in students' reading proficiency and overall linguistic competence at the MTs level.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Arabic learning difficulties among MTs students in Indonesia are systemic rather than incidental, emerging from the dynamic interaction between linguistic complexity, instructional practices, and affective classroom conditions. Limited vocabulary mastery and insufficient grammatical integration constrain reading comprehension, while teacher-centered pedagogy and assessment misalignment further reinforce surface-level learning. Affective variables mediate the extent to which structural challenges become persistent barriers. The findings therefore underscore that improving Arabic language outcomes requires integrated reform across lexical development, contextualized grammar instruction, pedagogical design, and classroom climate. Sustainable progress will depend not on isolated intervention, but on systemic alignment between curriculum objectives, teaching strategies, and learner engagement mechanisms.

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