



Al-Ta'rib

Jurnal Ilmiah Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Arab

IAIN Palangka Raya

Vol. 9, No. 1, June 2021, 35-48

p-ISSN 2354-5887 | e-ISSN 2655-5867

<https://doi.org/10.23971/altarib.v9i1.2585>



THE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE STUDENTS' ARABIC SPEAKING SKILLS THROUGH LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT ACTIVATION: A STUDY OF PHENOMENOLOGY

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Abstract

Maharah al-kalam or Arabic speaking skills have an essential role for students, especially students who take Arabic courses. Ironically, maharah al-kalam's urgency is not always accompanied by the efforts to actualize maharah al-kalam's activeness. Although several institutions have attempted to realize these efforts, it has not been exposed extensively so that other institutions cannot adopt the methods or technics used by these institutions. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the efforts to improve maharah al-kalam, one of the Muhammadiyah universities implemented in Indonesia, through the language environment activation. This study used a qualitative-phenomenology approach. The data collection techniques used were observation, interview, and documentation study. This study indicated three patterns of the Arabic language environment activation implemented in the tertiary institution: the display of pamphlets with an instruction to speak Arabic, vocabulary boards, and Arabic today. This study's findings also emphasized the importance of cooperation among the institution managers, lecturers, and students to comply with the mutually agreed rules. Without collaboration and commitment between the parties, the desired results will not be achieved.

Keywords: Arabic language; language environment; Arabic Speaking Skills

Abstrak

Maharah al-kalam memiliki peran yang penting terhadap para mahasiswa terutama mahasiswa yang mengambil program studi yang terkait dengan bahasa Arab. namun ironisnya, urgensi dari maharah al-kalam tidak selalu disertai dengan upaya dalam mewujudkan keaktifan dari maharah al-kalam tersebut. walaupun beberapa lembaga telah berupaya mewujudkan upaya tersebut namun belum terekspos secara luar sehingga lembaga lainnya tidak dapat mengadopsi upaya yang dilakukan oleh lembaga tersebut. maka dari itu, penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi upaya peningkatan maharah al-kalam yang diterapkan oleh salah satu Perguruan Tinggi Muhammadiyah di Indonesia melalui aktivasi lingkungan bahasa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis fenomenologi. Teknik pengumpulan data yang digunakan adalah observasi, wawancara dan studi dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa pola aktivasi lingkungan bahasa Arab yang diterapkan di Perguruan Tinggi tersebut menggunakan tiga pola yakni pemasangan

pamflet berbentuk perintah untuk berbicara menggunakan bahasa Arab, papan kosakata, dan *Arabic today*. Temuan penelitian ini juga menekankan pentingnya kerjasama antar pengelola lembaga, dosen dan mahasiswa untuk mematuhi aturan yang disepakati. Tanpa adanya kerjasama dan komitmen yang sama antar pihak-pihak terkait maka hasil yang diinginkan tidak akan tercapai.

Kata kunci: bahasa Arab; lingkungan bahasa; maharah al-kalam

Introduction

Arabic speaking skills (*maharah al-kalam*) can express thoughts, ideas, or opinions verbally. Being proficient in speaking skills means that someone can relate to sound conformity, articulation, and *makharij al-huruf* (Eliya, 2019). Non-Arab Arabic learners are faced with various problems, especially in the aspect of speaking skills, such as mistakes in *makhraj* and *tajwid*, as well as the discrepancy between the message and the intonation in speaking (Muflihah, 2017).

Researchers who are interested in Arabic and Arabic learning have attempted to overcome the problem of speaking difficulties. Among the efforts that have been made are conducting experiments on learning methods (Nalole, 2018) and the application of specific techniques that have an impact on improving Arabic speaking skills (Sulthan, 2019). Researchers' effort is to use specific learning media that can improve speaking skills (Muthmainnah & Annas, 2020).

Based on several previous studies, it is known that improving speaking skills can be done by applying methods and using media. However, what needs to be considered is that language function is a means of communication. It means that language must be used naturally and continuously in everyday life (Dastpak et al., 2017). According to behaviorism theory, the appropriate approach to making the target language becomes simple communication is applying a language environment (Shormani, 2014). Anyone who learns language according to behaviorism theory will not achieve communication skills without being supported by the language environment (Ahmad et al., 2020).

Etymologically, environment (*bi'ah*) is defined as a place that affects human growth (Faiqoh, 2018), whereas environment in English means something related to the environment or atmosphere (Kiatkheeree, 2018). If those two definitions are combined, the environment can be interpreted as a place or atmosphere and condition (Rusticus et al., 2021), affecting human growth and development (Ridlo, 2019). From the above understanding, what is meant by the language environment (*bi'ah lughawiyah*) is everything that learners hear or see related to the target language being studied.

Arabic language environment (*bi'ah al-arabiyah*) can generally be divided into two types, which are formal environment and informal environment. A formal environment is a language learning environment that focuses on mastering the language rules in the target language consciously (Artini, 2017). A proper environment is implemented through learning activities in the classroom where language learners are focused on doing language activities demonstrating the language rules that have been learned. The teacher provides feedback by correcting mistakes made by the learners. Meanwhile, an informal environment is an Arabic-speaking environment naturally (Bahrani & Sim, 2012). A casual language environment is carried out through peers' language, by caregivers or parents, by

learning groups, and by the teachers in the teaching and learning process, whether it happens in or outside language class.

As seen from the behaviorism theory viewpoint, the existence of the Arabic speaking environment is an obligation to manifest communication skills. As aligned with the behaviorism theory mentioned above, the head of the Arabic Education Department at Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Barat confirmed several interview results. It is affirmed that several research results have proven the critical role of language environment in improving speaking skills. The head of the department's statement was based on various research results conducted by observers and language education practitioners. They emphasized that the language environment has had an impact on improving the speaking skills of students (Koran, 2015), (Musyafa'ah, 2016), (Greenhill, 2016), (Mabrurah, 2018), (Faiqoh, 2018), (Rao, 2019). Learning a second language transfers something new and requires a unique environment to help the learners achieve oral language skills (Wang & Wu, 2020), (Ritonga et al., 2021).

Meanwhile, the reality occurring in the field is not aligned with the theory. Many alumni from Arabic Education have studied Arabic and even participated in various programs on Arabic language training. Yet, they were unable to apply their learning outcomes to the teaching process. A few alumni teach Arabic using non-Arabic languages (Ansyah et al., 2020). The graduates cannot deliver speeches or seminar materials and guide pilgrims to worship Mecca's holy land (Sarbaini, 2018). This inability can also be observed from their failure to guide people who visit historical places, especially in the Middle East, such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and other countries that conduct Arabic lessons. It isn't easy to find Arabic graduates willing to open language course institutions to develop and enhance Arabic language skills.

The Arabic Education Department students (*Pendidikan Bahasa Arab/PBA*), Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah University Sumatra Barat come from various backgrounds. It means that not all the students in this department come from an Islamic education background. Some of them came from vocational school and senior high school (Fauziah et al., 2020), (Ritonga et al., 2020). Reflecting on this reality, the head of the department instructed all lecturers to increase the language environment's activation so that the program is expected to balance Arabic language skills for all students.

As expressed in several research results above, the urgency of the language environment existence has inspired Arabic Education to enact an extracurricular program. This activity has been conducted since 2019. Therefore, this article will describe the Arabic language environment's activation, which the Arabic Education Department implements to improve students' Arabic speaking skills.

Method

This research used a qualitative-phenomenology approach. The primary reason for using this type was that the obtained data and the analyses were phenomena or facts at the research location. This research was conducted in the Arabic Education Department, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas

Muhammadiyah Sumatra Barat. The decision to choose this location was due to the implementation of the Arabic language environment extracurricular program that has been implemented since 2019. It was done during the first semester of the Academic Year of 2019/2020.

The data sources of this research were events and people. The event was the activities that occurred in the Arabic language environment, and the involved people were the students, lecturers, and head of Arabic Education. The students acted as the informants since they experienced the improvement of Arabic speaking skills in the program, so it could be considered that they knew how the Arabic language environment activation was implemented. The lecturers also acted as informants as they provided additional information related to the data related to the research. The head of the department acted as an informant due to the information about extracurricular policies, such as the language environment.

Data collection techniques used in this study were observation, interview, and documentation. The observation was used to discover how the Arabic language environment's implementation and activation were implemented at the location. The interview was intended to get information from the informants about their viewpoints on specific questions and avoid misunderstandings between researchers and informants. Documentation study was aimed to obtain data in documents related to Arabic language environment activation. The document used was the policy related to the language environment activation.

All data obtained from the observation, interview, and documentation study were analyzed qualitatively by conducting interactive analysis. It meant that justification would be provided when the research data was considered sufficient. Therefore, this research data was validated through triangulation of source, time, and technique. Source triangulation was done by validating the data obtained from the head of the department and the students. Meanwhile, time triangulation was carried out by collecting data at a particular time and then being verified with the data obtained at another time. Technical triangulation was conducted by getting data through observation, interview, or documentation to confirm its conformity.

Result and Discussion

The activation of the Arabic language environment at Arabic Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Barat, was done in three activities: using pamphlets of obligation rules on Arabic, using *law mufradat* (vocabulary board), and implementing *yawm arabi* (Arabic day). These three things are described as followed.

Pamphlet of Obligation Rules on Using Arabic

The policy regarding Arabic language environment Arabic Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Barat has been implemented since 2019. The result of documents' tracing showed that the head of the department's documents contained instructions regarding an appeal that all lecturers and students who entered the office were obligated to communicate using Arabic. Those who shared in languages other than Arabic would not get the proper services in the office.

The data obtained from the document were also aligned with what the head of the department conveyed. The interview result showed that this instruction was a mutual agreement between the head of the department, permanent lecturers, and

HIMA PBA (Arabic Education Department's Students Association). The result was also emphasized by the lecturer, who mentioned that it started from the anxiety of the head of the department and the lecturers concerning the poor spoken language skills of the students. It was agreed to implement *bi'ah 'arabiyyah* in one of the initial meetings to solve this problem. The chairman of HIMA PBA, who was also involved in the meeting, stated that all the members appreciated the discussion regarding the implementation of the Arabic language environment.

From the observation, there were at least three places provided with a written sign لا تتكلم إلا بالعربية (Please only speak in Arabic). As expressed by the department head, these written signs served as an affirmation for all the students and lecturers to be committed to using Arabic. The symbols on the door, wall, and room of the department head indicated that it was crucial to obey the mutual agreement. The students added that the signs on the fence initially made them awkward and afraid to speak. Some of them even chose to stay outside of the office, even though they had important matters that had to be done.

Some of the lecturers also revealed that the signs initially seemed to hinder their communication with other parties, for example, the conversation between the lecturers and the head of the department or the students and the head of the department. However, after the program had been run for several months, there was a change in the academic community, especially on the students and the lecturers in Arabic Education Department. This change could be seen from students who were initially passive became gradually active in communicating using Arabic.

The explanation above proved that the written policies and pamphlets displayed in three places around the department environment changed and new habits among the students and the lecturers. This finding was aligned with a notion that language learning required habituation according to the language's purpose (Ramadhan, 2016). If the goal was communication, then the learners had to familiarize themselves by using the language to communicate (Eliya, 2019).

The obligation of displaying pamphlets in Arabic was a part of the steps to realize the activation of a language environment that was able to help students in their Arabic speaking skills. The pamphlets' existence raised awareness to everyone who read them to follow the pamphlet's instructions (Yaqub, 2012).

Arabic language obligatory pamphlet was also a part of the students' attention focus and the lecturers. All resources to follow the instructions were written in the pamphlet. This phenomenon led to an improvement in the ability to use Arabic as a tool for daily communication. The pamphlets' effectiveness was based on the clarity of the instructions in it (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). The activation pattern of language environment using pamphlets was conducted not only by the observers and practitioners of Arabic but also in learning other languages. (Umar, 2017).

According to the data and the discussion described above, it can be emphasized that displaying pamphlets is an initial step to activate the language environment. The clarity of the instructions on the pamphlets is the basis to manifest its effectiveness. Pamphlets indirectly help the students and the lecturers in enhancing *maharah al-kalam* or Arabic speaking skills. At first, it seemed like they

were forced to do it. However, as time went by, the pamphlet became a suggestion for those who wish to communicate using Arabic.

Vocabulary Board as Arabic Language Environment Activation

The interview result showed that the department head made a particular schedule for all permanent lecturers to take turns writing ten new vocabularies. They would be displayed for three days (*lawh mufradat*) in the office. From the observation, it could be seen that the office certainly had a special board to display Arabic vocabularies, and the words changed in three days. According to the department head, this activity aimed to encourage every student and lecturer who visited the study program to gain new vocabulary.

The objectives appeared to have been achieved. The interview with students revealed that the vocabulary board could help them find new words. They helped to relay what they wanted to express in communication. A lecturer also said that all lecturers' readiness and commitment to write or send the required vocabulary to be displayed in the office assisted the activation of the language environment.

As seen from the observation, the vocabulary board (*lawh mufradat*) in the office environment also contributed to the Arabic Education Department's bustling atmosphere. The students seemed to have high enthusiasm to memorize the new vocabulary. Furthermore, an interview with a student revealed that he attempted to memorize the new vocabulary set displayed in the office before another set of new vocabulary replaced it. In another case, it was also found that some students noted the new vocabulary in a special notebook, and they would memorize the new vocabulary in the dormitory.

The head of the department mentioned that after three days, the vocabulary would be replaced with a different vocabulary set. However, the old vocabulary was still archived in a particular book. So far, there had been 135 words documented in the book since *lawh mufradat* program was implemented. According to the informant, the recorded vocabulary started after *bi'ah arabiyah* policy was agreed upon.

Other informants also informed that for the continuity of vocabulary change in *lawh mufradat* in the office, each lecturer was scheduled to write or send the new vocabulary to the head of the department before publication in *lawh mufradat*. The head of the department emphasized that even if the lecturers were pursuing their study abroad, they also had an obligation to send the new vocabulary according to the agreed schedule. The documentation results also showed that Arabic Education had a particular plan for the lecturers to fill out the *lawh mufradat*. The lecturers were expected to write or send 5-10 new words to *lawh mufradat* in the office.

On another occasion, the department head also informed that it was necessary to continuously remind the lecturers to compile the new vocabulary according to the schedule that had been arranged. The lecturers supported this statement. They said that the department head constantly reminded them to send new words through WhatsApp group or private chat according to the specified schedule. It indicated that all the human resources committed to manifesting sustainability so that the vocabulary boards were continuously filled. It was also understandable that the students and the lecturers showed their enthusiasm to memorize vocabulary found in *lawh mufradat*.

A solid commitment from the department's head and the lecturers in realizing environment activation and its continuity was evident. Despite the Covid-19 situation, the vocabulary board was still changed even though the students and the lecturers rarely visited the office. According to the department head, the set of new vocabulary written on the board during the Covid-19 period was photographed and sent to the students via WhatsApp group.

Vocabulary is the basis to build speaking skills. Foreign language learners can't be able to speak well without enriching their vocabulary. Therefore, efforts to improve Arabic learners' vocabulary must be made (Hakim & Shodiqin, 2018). Arabic Education Department, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Barat has strived to implement a vocabulary board (*lawh mufradat*). The vocabulary board was part of an effort to activate the language environment (Mursyidah et al., 2019).

It was discovered from the data that the Arabic language environment's activation had not been executed optimally. This statement was based on the office objects that have not been labeled according to their Arabic pronunciation. As a matter of course, the labeling of objects corresponding to their pronunciation in the target language was part of the language environment's activation (Callanan & Sabbagh, 2004). This viewpoint proved that Arabic speaking environment could work as expected to strengthen vocabulary mastery. It meant that the activation could be learned not only through vocabulary boards but also through other means.

The Implementation of *Yawm 'Arabi* as Arabic Environment Activation

Activation of language environment in Arabic Education Department, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Barat was also carried out by implementing *yawm al-'arabiyyah* (Arabic language day). As stated by the head of the department, this program served to provide direct training in the communicative use of Arabic. Based on observations, it was known that *yawm al-'arabiyyah* implemented in Arabic Education was performed by gathering students on the campus yard every Tuesday after dawn until 07.00 Western Indonesia Time. In this activity, it was seen that the instructors taught the students how to speak Arabic as the native speakers told it. After that, all students repeated the pronunciation and were asked to do *hiwar* (an interactive conversation between two or more people) in pairs according to what they experienced using the Arabic language.

The interview result showed that *yawm al-'arabiyyah* helped the students be familiar and be more confident in using Arabic to convey a message they wanted to express. The instructors, one of the lecturers of Arabic Education, also stated that *yawm al-'arabiyyah* aimed to familiarize students with Arabic. Arabic Education students had stored several vocabularies in their memory. However, since they were not accustomed to communicating, it makes them feel awkward speaking Arabic.

According to the observation done, *yawm al-'arabiyyah* began when the instructor mentioned 5 words accompanied by their use in particular sentences. The students then repeated the instructor's examples 2-3 times. It was evident that the students showed their motivation in following *yawm al-'arabiyyah*. On the other hand, from the interview one of the students stated that the mosque he lived in was far from the campus. However, specifically on Tuesdays, this particular student tried to do the dawn prayer at the campus mosque to participate in the *yawm al-'arabiyyah* activity.

From the interview done with instructors, *yawm al-'arabiyyah* activity has been abolished since April 2020 to prevent Corona Virus Disease's spread (Covid-19). Consequently, *yawm al-'arabiyyah* activity and even teaching-learning activity could not be held face-to-face. The head of the department also emphasized that the Arabic environment's activation could not run optimally as both students and lecturers rarely visited the office. However, the office's vocabulary boards were still implemented by sending the latest vocabulary through student groups based on each year. A determination on certain days to improve language speaking skills has been widely administered at other institutions. These particular days to use the target language in everyday life impacted increasing the ability of learners (Yaqub, 2012).

The activation pattern carried out in Arabic Education, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Barat showed an impact on improving students' speaking skills. This success could not be separated from various factors, such as the solid commitment of all lecturers and students. Speaking (*al-kalam*) is a skill learned by humans and has an essential role in human life. In daily life, humans face various activities that require speaking skills, whether in the family environment, at school, or in society in general. (Sartika & Ritonga, 2020). There were several obstacles in enhancing speaking skill activities; for instance, learners felt nervous about speaking because they were worried about the mistakes they made, the fear of being criticized, the lack of motivation to express what they felt, the lack of participation from other students and the frequent use of their mother tongues (Aprianto et al., 2020).

Speaking skill (*maharah al-kalam*) can express vocalized sounds or words to express thoughts, such as ideas, opinions, desires, or feelings, to the speech partner. Talking is a combination of physical, psychological, neurological, semantical (Ghania et al., 2011), and linguistical factors widely. It could be considered a means of social control for humans (Mahfudz, 2017).

The learning process of speaking skills (*maharah al-kalam*) in the Arabic language environment (*al-bi'ah al-arabiyyah*) involved vocabulary and sentence structure (*mufradat* and *tarkib*) *nahu-shorf*, and the ability to practice spoken Arabic. Learning vocabulary could not be separated from the activation of the Arabic language environment. Without having a wide range of vocabulary, someone couldn't have good speaking skills. (Sartika & Ritonga, 2020), (Putri & Refnaldi, 2020).

To discover to what extent the influence of Arabic language environment for Arabic Education students, research was conducted using interview technique with the first-, second-, and third-year students respectively on the second term of the academic year. It was found that some students who enrolled in Arabic Education did not dare to speak Arabic due to their educational backgrounds. The students were graduated from public school, whether it was public senior high school or vocational school. On the other hand, the students who dared to speak Arabic were graduates of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) or Islamic private or public senior high school. From the observations conducted in the field, it was shown that the students had attended the Arabic language lecture program and interacted with others in various activities in the Arabic language environment, both formal and non-formal. It was clear that there was a significant improvement in the Arabic

language skills of these students. This indication could be seen from the accretion in vocabulary and the modern standard Arabic sentence structure (*fushah*). Moreover, the system's system was also supported to familiarize the students with speaking Arabic.

The courage to speak Arabic was an important thing to support *maharah kalam*. However, in the research conducted, it was found that most Arabic Education students initially did not have enough courage to speak Arabic. When they joined the department and attended lectures, some of them found their courage and began to speak Arabic. It was on account of an exemplary set by the lecturers and the courses taught, which supported the students to speak Arabic. After the extracurricular activity of *muhadasah usbu'i* (communication training) had been implemented, almost all students had the courage to speak Arabic. They were motivated, disciplined, and taught proper vocabulary and sentence structures for communicating in Arabic.

In every educational activity, especially in learning activities in the classroom, the Arabic language environment (*bi'ah al-arabiyah*) implied a significant influence on learning Arabic, particularly in improving Arabic speaking skills. The language environment would make language learners accustomed to using the language continuously.

Conclusion

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of Arabic language environment activation in Arabic Education, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatra Barat is seen in three patterns. The following is: first, creating pamphlets containing the obligation to use Arabic in campus environment; second, *lawh mufradat* (vocabulary board) which function is to update new vocabularies; third, the establishment of *yawm 'arabiyyah* (Arabic speaking days) intended to train students to use Arabic as spoken by native speakers.

The contribution of this study's findings is that the speaking ability of foreign language learners can be improved through language environment activation. This study also emphasizes the importance of cooperation between the institution managers, lecturers, and students to comply with the agreed rules. Without collaboration and commitment between the parties involved, the desired results will not be achieved.

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