

Problems of learning Arabic for non-native speakers and the strategy of learning through play - The vocabulary level as an example

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Abstract:

The aim of this research is to provide a general idea of the importance of adopting the strategy of learning through play to overcome the difficulties faced by learners of Arabic as a foreign language, especially at the vocabulary level, and to learn all levels of Arabic language in general. We have presented the richness of the Arabic language in terms of the wealth of its vocabulary and the multiple meanings that a single word can convey. The traditional methods that have been used have not achieved the desired goal of facilitating the educational process of developing their vocabulary and its correct use in their communication and writing. Therefore, the method of learning through play is currently being used to enrich the linguistic repertoire of the learners, which instils in them a spirit of competition and challenge and strengthens their creative thinking.

Keywords: Educational process, Arabic language, non-native speakers, learning strategy, learning through play, vocabulary level

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INTRODUCTION

In the present era, the demand from foreigners to learn Arabic has increased greatly in most countries of the world, with different motivations and reasons from one individual to another. Some learn Arabic for religious reasons, such as understanding the Qur'an, good recitation and knowledge of Islamic Sharia in general. Others learn Arabic to learn about Arab culture. Some learn it for work or economic activities, such as trade and investment exchanges. Others learn it for political reasons, such as diplomatic relations between countries. Some learn it for tourism and visiting Arab countries, or for knowledge, or even the desire to speak it and communicate with friends, and others.

These learners face problems that hinder their understanding of Arabic at all levels: phonetic, morphological, syntactic and semantic. The vocabulary level is considered to be one of the most important levels that learners need in their speech

and communication, especially in the initial stage of learning. Accordingly, this research aims to explain the most effective pedagogical means to understand the meanings of Arabic vocabulary and then consolidate them in the minds of learners and use them in their academic and practical life, because these learners need a linguistic dictionary that enriches their knowledge base, in which they find complex difficulties morphologically, lexically or even semantically, due to the availability of the Arabic language with a very large number of individual units.

One of these means is the use of the strategy of learning through play. What are the main difficulties faced by a non-native speaker of Arabic at the vocabulary level? And to what extent is the use of the learning-through-play strategy effective in facilitating vocabulary learning in particular and Arabic language learning in general, and in enriching the learner's functional linguistic repertoire?

In order to answer this question, the research follows a descriptive approach based on the following hypotheses

- The vastness of the Arabic vocabulary and the overlap between the branches of morphology, lexicon, semantics and derivation;
- The difficulties in learning Arabic for non-native speakers are manifested in the nature of some of its sounds, the branching of the meaning of the Arabic word and the diversity of its meanings;
- The effectiveness of using the strategy of learning through play in facilitating the enrichment of the learner's vocabulary repertoire.

1. The richness of the Arabic language in terms of vocabulary

Verily, Allah the Almighty has blessed the Arabic language with vastness and richness in its vocabulary, thus distinguishing it from other languages by the richness and beauty of its expressions and the precision of its articulation. This has given it a unique character, making it a highly desirable language to learn, as it is the language of Arab civilisation and Islamic thought. Many scholars and researchers have testified to its perfection, including the German Orientalist Carl Brockelmann, who stated: "Through the Qur'an, the Arabic language has reached a level of comprehensiveness rarely found in any other language in the world" (Al-Kharfi et al., 1990: 274).

The Arabic language is rich in vocabulary and expressions that allow its speakers to express ideas and concepts with precision. This is an indication of the unique ability of the Arabic language to convey meanings clearly and precisely, as well as its structural and grammatical richness, which allows it to express details with

precision. Imam al-Shafi'i (d. 204 AH) had previously stated in his book (Al-Risalah) that "the language of the Arabs is the most expansive in its approach and the richest in its vocabulary" (al-Shafi'i, 1938: 42). It is distinguished by its lexical richness compared to other languages, as well as by its inimitability, which is manifested in "the difficulty of translating many of its words, especially those that appear in the Qur'an and its expressions, into other languages" (al-Shafi'i, 1938: 76). For example, the word "al-Firdaws" (the Paradise) can be difficult to translate or find an equivalent in other languages, and the word "aya" (sign, miracle), when translated into English as "sign", does not fully convey the precise meaning of the Arabic term, since the word "aya" is itself a miracle, suggesting an inimitability and sublimity that cannot be fully expressed.

The single Arabic word cannot always be used in a context other than its proper and appropriate place, and sometimes a single word has multiple meanings, a phenomenon known as lexical ambiguity.

The skilled speaker who masters its rules excels in the proper choice of vocabulary, and in the past, poets and writers were criticised if they did not excel in their choice of words and vocabulary, as exemplified in the account of Al-Musayab ibn Ulas, who recited a poem in the presence of Banu Qays ibn Thaalaba, and Tarafah ibn al-'Abd was present as a young man, and when he reached the verse:

"And I forget the sorrow when it surrounds me, / With a quick one upon it, the Saiariyyah is distressed".

The passage says that Tarafa said:

"وقد أنتاسى الهم عند احتضاره بناج عليه الصيعرية مكرم
قال طرفة: استنوق الجمل، وذلك لأن الصيعرية من سمات النوق دون الفحول، فغضب المسيب وقال: من هذا الغلام؟ فقالوا: طرفة بن العبد، فقال: ليقتلنه لسانه، فكان كما تفرس فيه" (الزبيدي، 2001: مادة نوق)،
وصار قول طرفة مثلاً.

"The camel has become a female camel," and this is because the characteristic of being a female camel is a characteristic of female camels, not male camels. This angered Al-Mussayib, who asked, "Who is this young man?" They replied, "Tarafa ibn Al-Abd," and he said, "His tongue will surely kill him," and it happened as he had foreseen. Tarafah's statement became a proverbial saying.

The meaning is that the camel, in his humiliation, has become like a female camel, deviating from the original. This proverb is used for a man who discusses or

describes something, then mixes it up with something else and shifts to it, as mentioned in al-Sihah (the authoritative Arabic dictionary).

There are many other such linguistic and semantic nuances in the Arabic language that have been recognised by foreign countries, which have established many institutes, universities and schools to teach the Arabic language, instead of relying on translation, which does not always convey the correct and precise meanings and does not fully capture the range of connotations a word can have.

2. The problems faced by non-native speakers of Arabic at the lexical level

Most of these difficulties faced by learners of Arabic at the lexical level manifest themselves at the level of morphology, lexicography or semantics, and may also be syntactic or phonological in nature.

2.1 Morphological problems:

Morphology is the study of the structure of words, and it is an intermediate link between the study of the sounds that make up the morphological forms of the word and the study of the structures in which these forms are organised. Arabic is characterised as a derivational and inflectional language, and this feature is not present in many languages, which makes it difficult to learn. The main reasons for this can be summarised as follows:

- The impact of phonetic difficulties that some learners have in understanding some morphological issues, because sounds are the material of morphology, for example, when they say in their pronunciation of long vowels (alif, waw and ya): (Al-matar) when they mean (maṭār), where the extension alif in the letter ṭā' has been deleted, and the same applies to many other vocabulary items where the meaning is changed due to incorrect pronunciation.

The plethora of inflectional categories and the multiplicity of their topics, as well as the complexity of their issues and questions, present a challenge. Each inflectional category has a set of rules, and each rule has ramifications, and each ramification has a set of checks and balances.

The inconsistency of the inflectional rules established by grammarians, because what is irregular in the rule may be more than what conforms to it. This may be due to the differences between the grammarians of Basra and Kufa.

There are inflectional issues that learners are not familiar with in their mother tongue, especially: derivation, the multiplicity of the inflectional measure, singularisation, dualisation, pluralisation and the distinction between verbal nouns and verbs, and the multiplicity of connotations. For example, the difficulty of

distinguishing between the meaning of the active and passive participles, such as “daribun” (the striker) and “madrubun” (the struck), or the invention of so-called “weak linguistic alternatives” such as their expression: “I need to understand about this topic” (meaning: “I want to ask about this topic”).

The association of Arabic words with inflection and their subjection to inflectional rules in terms of form or structure and inflectional measure and distribution poses a difficulty for the learner. Many learners who are not accustomed to this type in their languages believe that learning a word in the target language does not go beyond memorising it and understanding its meaning, and therefore they resort to placing words in lists and memorising their meanings in isolation from their context. As a result, learners of Arabic face problems in understanding some words and their uses, and they make mistakes as a result of generalising the rule they have learnt about the structure and connotations of the word.

- The chapters on morphology and syntax overlap, and this is a natural thing because of the similar and intertwined relationship between the two sciences.

Most of the inflectional materials and topics in books on teaching Arabic to non-native speakers are presented to learners using traditional teaching methods used in teaching native speakers.

2.2 Lexical and semantic problems:

The reasons for the difficulties faced by the learner at the lexical and semantic levels are due to this huge amount of vocabulary, the multiplicity of meanings and the difficulty of searching for them in dictionaries. This makes it difficult for the learner to control and grasp the meanings of their words, except with a lot of time and concentration. Among the most important of these difficulties are:

- The multiplicity of meanings of Arabic words, the diversity of their connotations, and the transition of the word from its literal meaning to its metaphorical meaning. This problem arises when the linguistic materials are selected and presented to the learner on unscientific bases in terms of frequency, importance and gradation and other criteria that need to be taken into account in curriculum development.

- The Arabic language is characterised by linguistic phenomena that are difficult for the Arabic learner to understand without a thorough understanding, such as the phenomenon of antonymy, as in the word “Al-Jawn”, which means both “black” and “white”, the phenomenon of synonymy, as in the saying “Asahaba, Atanaba, Asrafa”, and the phenomenon of homonymy, as in the word “Al-Ayn”, which

refers to (the eye of the well, the eye of the balance, the human eye, the eye of the spy. ...), and each of these meanings is understood in the context of the sentence in which it is used. We also find the phenomenon of derivation, as in the saying: “Daraba, Yadribu, Darib, Madhrub, Darrab, Midrob” (see: Al-Suyuti, 1986: 336. and Al-Dhamin, 2007: 78, 84, 92). All these lexical items fall within the realm of minor derivation, which is the basis of inflection and requires knowledge of the original and derived words, as well as knowledge of nouns and verbs, and requires explanation of their meanings and clarification of the intended meaning in isolation and within the sentence and text structure.

- Failure to distinguish between foreign words and proper nouns, as the learner may spend a long time searching for the meaning of a word that refers to a person, unlike some languages such as English, where proper nouns are distinguished by a capital letter (majuscule) at the beginning.

Students of Arabic as a foreign language often assume that all meanings are the same in all languages and that the only difference is in the words used to express them. They believe that for every word in the target language there is an equivalent in their mother tongue. This is often not the case. For example, the Arabic words ‘Al-Amm’ and ‘Al-Khal’ are both translated into the single English word ‘Uncle’, leading the learner to believe that the meanings they have in mind can be used in the same way as in their mother tongue, with only the pronunciation being different. The root of this problem is the reliance on translation due to the influence of the learner’s mother tongue and the difficulty of expressing Arabic meanings using Western vocabulary and structures.

To address these problems at the lexical level, in terms of morphology, semantics and lexicography, we find the widespread use of the learning-through-play strategy, adopted by both teachers and learners, as a solution to the problem of linguistic difficulties, whether for native Arabic speakers or speakers of other languages. What is the strategy of learning through play? And how does it contribute to overcoming the lexical difficulties of non-native speakers of Arabic?

3. Learning strategy through play:

The term “play” or “games” is used in language education to describe a wide range of classroom activities that provide teachers and learners with an enjoyable and engaging method of practising language elements and providing incentives for the development of various language skills. They also “use certain mental processes, such as guessing, to add communicative dimensions to these activities” (Nassef,

1983: 12). Games have been used as a purposeful teaching method to improve teaching methods and to engage learners and motivate them to learn. These “games with a defined beginning, governed by rules and systems, are an enjoyable means of training learners on language elements and providing incentives for the development of various language skills” (Nassef, 1983: 120). They are practised in the classroom according to the specific rules imposed by the nature of the game, individually, in pairs or collectively, under the supervision and guidance of the teacher. They are characterised by an element of competition, challenge, fun and entertainment and aim to stimulate the motivation to learn, which is essential for the success of the educational process. They also aim to develop the art of language and its various skills, including consolidating the lexical level in the minds of learners, developing their expressive abilities, satisfying linguistic and psychological needs, and enabling the learner to interact with the language material studied by using the language usefully in genuine real-life contexts.

4. The importance of using language games in learning Arabic vocabulary for non-native speakers:

Language games are an effective means of teaching and learning languages in general, and teaching and learning Arabic in particular, because they focus on the extent of the learner’s interaction with his environment on the one hand, and his linguistic activity on the other. The importance of using language games in Arabic language learning for non-native speakers can be summarised in the following points:

Language games work to combine language learning and entertainment at the same time, “as they invest students’ innate inclination to play to create effective and motivated learning, which effectively contributes to reducing the monotony and dryness of teaching” (Al-Wazan, 2019: 28).

They reduce the monotony and rigidity of lessons, as language games help the teacher to get rid of the rigidity of dry scientific material, and the teacher of grammar material often faces such situations, so the teacher needs interaction in the classroom, and this can only be achieved by resorting to the application of some interactive activities. Educational play “allows learners to transform their abstract experiences into tangible experiences, and gives them the opportunity to use more than one sense during learning and to eliminate routine” (Al-Hosseini, 2014: 668). This makes the learning process more enjoyable and comfortable.

Language games are an effective means of developing the oral and written skills of non-Arabic speakers, and they differ from one game to another, but they have a single purpose, which is to try to impart a specific skill to the learner. Language games have helped to overcome some of the difficulties faced by learners in the field of Arabic language teaching, such as “the difficulty of sound discrimination, the inability to visually distinguish between similar letters and words, pronunciation practice, comprehension, expression, dictation, composition and grammatical exercises” (Al-Shuwayriki, 2005: 34). This depends on the type of game, as there are: pronunciation games that clarify adjacent sounds, such as “sar” and “sar”; oral games: question and answer; reading games and training in reading from right to left; writing games; and others.

From this we understand that the strategy of using language games has become an important cornerstone in the educational process. This is due to the many benefits it provides to the learner who is learning the Arabic language. Arabic language education programmes for non-native speakers have benefited from language games and achieved several positive results in facilitating the teaching of Arabic to non-native speakers, especially considering that in our current era of technological development, these language games are now being used electronically in the form of (electronic language games). This has increased their importance in learning morphological and lexical vocabulary, as well as in learning all levels of language: phonetic, grammatical and semantic. These language games are no longer just a means of entertainment or passing time, but “have become an important tool for achieving mental and cognitive growth, and are among the effective strategies used to develop and improve the language performance of non-Arabic-speaking learners” (Akhmim, 2019: 36). Among the games that have become widely used, whether in the textbook, the teacher’s guide or the curriculum, we find, for example:

The image display game with vocabulary missing one or two letters is considered to be very useful for the foreign learner in learning Arabic language as it helps in concentration, memorisation and enhancing cognitive skills. Through this game, the meanings of the visual or auditory words are evoked and the relationship between the image (visual aid) and the linguistic expression (linguistic aid) is established, facilitating the processes of comprehension and memorisation. This is because it is one of the most effective visual aids for teaching reading skills to non-native speakers, as it serves as an illustrative tool for the meaning of words,

phrases and sentences, providing an authentic sense of the context of the text being read, outlining its background and main focus. This game also helps foreign learners to acquire several skills, the most important of which are: recognising and naming familiar objects, learning linguistic cues, pronouncing the illustrated words correctly, distinguishing between similar sounds, and linking the visual scene to the reading material for better understanding.

Nowadays, these images are presented electronically, using the technologies and multimedia of our time, such as video clips, performances and various electronic and manual games, such as crosswords, riddles and puzzles, games to find missing words in a sentence, antonyms and synonyms, etc.

Conclusion:

The strategy of learning through play is considered to be one of the most effective active techniques used by the teacher to clarify linguistic concepts and to facilitate and simplify the teaching of the Arabic language to native speakers and learners of other languages. It allows learners to immerse themselves in a sea of words that have more than one meaning, which increases their vocabulary and qualifies them to master the language. Language games play an important role as one of the strategies for teaching vocabulary, as they help to raise the learner's level in reading, writing and, in particular, spelling. They also help to embody the principle of learning through collaborative group work by creating a climate in which the learner feels comfortable, which makes academic and cognitive achievement easy and accessible. However, they must be based on a solid approach through the development of clear and simple plans, studied according to standardised scientific bases, in order to achieve the desired goal of raising the level of teaching and learning. Given the great importance of language games in facilitating the learning of Arabic vocabulary for non-native speakers in particular, and in the field of educational learning in general, we propose that:

The need to generalise the use of language games in facilitating the learning of linguistic vocabulary and all levels of language, whether for non-native speakers or even native speakers.

It is necessary to generalise the use of language games in facilitating the learning of linguistic vocabulary and all levels of language, whether for non-native speakers or even native speakers, because by understanding the vocabulary level, the grammatical, semantic and lexical levels can be understood and comprehended.

The need to select appropriate games for each educational level and defined learning objectives

It is necessary to select appropriate games for each educational level and defined learning objectives. For example, the crossword game is at a higher level than the beginner's level, and the sentence construction game is at a lower level. The same goes for translation games, electronic conversation and distinguishing between similar sounds or word meanings - each game should be designed for a specific level.

The need for teachers to give clear and detailed instructions to learners before using a game

It is necessary for the teacher to give clear and detailed instructions to the learners before they start using any of the games used, because the learners' understanding of how to use the game is a basic condition for practising it and benefiting from its results, whether in learning vocabulary or in learning any level of the target language.

The need to give learners enough time in the classroom to practise the language game to the end and to allow them to experiment and apply the new vocabulary and rules.

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