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Enhancing Reading Skills in Classical Arabic Texts (*Mahārah Qirā'ah*) through Arabic Vocabulary Development

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Abstract
Reading unvowelled classical Arabic texts poses persistent challenges for non-native learners, particularly in Islamic educational settings where such texts dominate the curriculum. While traditional instruction has largely emphasized grammatical mastery, growing evidence suggests that limited vocabulary knowledge constitutes a major obstacle to reading comprehension. This study investigates the effectiveness of Arabic vocabulary development in enhancing reading skills (*Mahārah Qirā'ah*) in classical Arabic texts. Employing a quasi-experimental design, the study compared an experimental group receiving structured, vocabulary-focused instruction with a comparison group following conventional reading instruction. Quantitative analyses revealed statistically significant improvements in reading comprehension among students in the experimental group, accompanied by large effect sizes. The findings indicate that vocabulary development functions as a primary mechanism for facilitating access to meaning in lexically dense, unvowelled texts. This study contributes to Arabic language pedagogy by empirically demonstrating that strengthening lexical competence is essential for improving classical Arabic reading proficiency among non-native learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading proficiency (*Mahārah Qirā'ah*) occupies a central position in Arabic language education (Habib, 2025; Solehudin, 2025), particularly within Islamic educational contexts where learners are expected to engage directly with classical Arabic texts. In many *pesantren* and Islamic institutions, students encounter Classical Arabic Texts commonly referred to in the local tradition as Kitab Kuning as core learning materials for religious sciences. These texts, characterized by dense syntax, abstract vocabulary, and the absence of vowel markings, demand a high level of linguistic competence that goes beyond basic grammatical knowledge (Ou et al., 2024). Despite years of formal instruction, many learners continue to experience significant difficulties in comprehending such texts independently, indicating a persistent pedagogical challenge in Arabic language education (Baharun et al., 2025; Ballance, 2021; Soliman et al., 2021).

A dominant issue underlying this difficulty lies in the limited lexical repertoire of learners. While traditional instruction in *pesantren* has long emphasized grammatical mastery, particularly nahwu and ṣarf, vocabulary development is often treated as a secondary or incidental component of instruction (Ahmed, 2025; Ali et al., 2021; Alobaydi et al., 2016; Baharudin & Ismail, 2014; Baharun,

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2025). As a result, students may demonstrate familiarity with grammatical rules yet struggle to decode meaning due to insufficient vocabulary knowledge. This lexical gap hampers reading fluency, slows comprehension, and reduces learners' confidence when engaging with classical Arabic texts. Consequently, reading becomes a mechanical process of parsing structures rather than an act of meaningful interpretation (Albarqi, 2025; Suzuki & Kormos, 2023; Yul et al., 2023).

Research on Arabic reading skills (*Mahārah Qirā'ah*) has developed across linguistic, pedagogical, and cognitive perspectives, consistently showing that reading proficiency is shaped not only by grammatical knowledge but also by lexical competence, phonological awareness, and the structural characteristics of Arabic. Within the diglossic nature of Arabic, Asadi and Kawar (2024) demonstrate that vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, and orthographic awareness significantly predict reading comprehension, with vocabulary exerting a direct effect even after controlling for other linguistic factors. Complementing this view, Othman argues that reading difficulties in Arabic should not be interpreted through a deficit model, but rather as a consequence of lexical and phonological distance between spoken and standard varieties.

Empirical evidence further highlights the central role of vocabulary in reading development. Korat et al. (2022) show that systematic vocabulary instruction significantly enhances reading comprehension and meaning construction, reinforcing the view that lexical knowledge constitutes a foundational component of Arabic reading. Other studies emphasize the effectiveness of pedagogical interventions more broadly. Using a quasi-experimental design, Alkasasbeh et al. (2025) report that metacognitive strategies such as reciprocal teaching significantly improve students' critical reading comprehension, confirming the value of structured instructional interventions, although lexical competence was not their primary focus.

In the Indonesian *pesantren* context, Syafei et al. (2024) identify persistent challenges in reading classical religious texts and propose a general Arabic learning model to address them. However, their approach remains holistic and does not isolate specific linguistic components, such as vocabulary, as key explanatory variables. Studies on non-native learners also indicate that reading difficulties emerge from early stages of instruction. Yunis and Dajani document frequent lexical and semantic errors among beginner learners, suggesting that unresolved vocabulary problems may continue to hinder reading development at more advanced levels, including engagement with classical texts.

Cognitive and neurolinguistic research further underscores the complexity of reading higher-register Arabic. Abu Ghanima et al. (2025) demonstrate that dialogic reading interventions in Literary Arabic enhance cognitive engagement and comprehension, indicating that reading advanced Arabic varieties requires intensive cognitive support.

Taken together, these studies acknowledge the importance of vocabulary in Arabic reading comprehension; however, existing research largely focuses on early literacy, modern texts, or general instructional strategies. Empirical studies that explicitly examine vocabulary development as the primary variable for enhancing *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in unvowelled classical Arabic texts, particularly among non-native learners in Islamic educational settings, remain limited. This study addresses this gap by empirically investigating how targeted Arabic vocabulary development improves reading skills in classical Arabic texts.

Despite extensive research on Arabic reading skills, existing studies tend to emphasize early literacy development, modern narrative texts, or general instructional strategies, while offering

limited attention to the specific linguistic demands of reading unvowelled classical Arabic texts. Although vocabulary has been widely acknowledged as a crucial component of reading comprehension, it is often treated as a supporting factor rather than examined as a primary instructional variable. Moreover, many studies remain descriptive or holistic in nature and do not empirically isolate lexical development to determine its direct impact on *Mahārah Qirā'ah*, particularly within Islamic educational settings where classical texts dominate the curriculum. Research focusing on non-native learners further highlights persistent lexical and semantic difficulties, yet rarely advances toward experimental interventions targeting vocabulary as a core mechanism for improving classical text comprehension. Consequently, there is a clear lack of empirical, classroom-based quasi-experimental studies that systematically investigate how targeted Arabic vocabulary development can enhance reading skills in unvowelled classical Arabic texts. This study seeks to address this gap by positioning vocabulary development as the central pedagogical lever for strengthening *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in classical Arabic reading contexts.

Current research in Arabic language education increasingly recognizes reading proficiency (*Mahārah Qirā'ah*) as a multidimensional skill shaped by linguistic, pedagogical, and cognitive factors. Contemporary studies acknowledge the central role of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension and highlight the effectiveness of structured instructional interventions in improving reading outcomes. Advances in cognitive and neurolinguistic research further reveal that engagement with higher-register Arabic requires substantial cognitive support and targeted pedagogical scaffolding. However, despite these developments, most existing studies continue to focus on early literacy, modern texts, or strategy-based instruction, with limited empirical attention to unvowelled classical Arabic texts that dominate Islamic educational contexts. As a result, vocabulary development is often positioned as a complementary component rather than established as a primary instructional driver of reading proficiency. The current state of research therefore calls for empirically grounded, classroom-based studies that foreground Arabic vocabulary development as a central mechanism for enhancing *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in classical Arabic text reading, particularly among non-native learners in Islamic education.

Responding to this gap, the present study focuses on enhancing reading skills in classical Arabic texts through structured Arabic vocabulary development. The study seeks to examine how targeted vocabulary instruction can facilitate learners' comprehension, reading fluency, and interpretive engagement with classical texts. Accordingly, this research is guided by the following research questions: (1) to what extent does Arabic vocabulary development improve students' *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in classical Arabic texts? and (2) how does vocabulary-based instruction influence learners' reading comprehension and engagement with unvowelled texts?

The scope of this study is limited to Arabic language learners in an Islamic educational setting who are engaged in reading classical Arabic texts as part of their formal curriculum. The research specifically examines vocabulary development related to frequently occurring lexical items within selected classical texts, without extending to broader linguistic skills such as speaking or writing. Additionally, this study does not aim to replace grammatical instruction but rather to complement it by foregrounding vocabulary as a foundational component of reading proficiency.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is context-specific and may not fully represent all models of Arabic instruction across diverse educational institutions. Second, the duration of the intervention may constrain the extent to which long-term vocabulary retention and

reading development can be observed. These limitations, however, do not diminish the relevance of the findings but instead open avenues for further longitudinal and comparative research.

The significance of this study lies in its pedagogical and theoretical contributions. Pedagogically, it offers an alternative instructional orientation that repositions vocabulary development as a strategic entry point for improving reading skills in classical Arabic texts. Theoretically, it contributes to Arabic language education research by bridging insights from vocabulary acquisition and classical text literacy. Ultimately, this study aims to inform curriculum design, instructional practice, and future research by demonstrating that strengthening Arabic vocabulary is not merely supportive but essential for developing effective *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in classical Arabic texts.

This study contributes to Arabic language education in three significant ways. First, it offers a theoretical contribution by repositioning Arabic vocabulary development as a primary linguistic driver of *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in reading unvowelled classical Arabic texts, rather than treating vocabulary as a secondary or supportive component. By foregrounding lexical competence, this study extends existing perspectives on Arabic reading that have traditionally emphasized grammatical mastery or general instructional strategies. Second, the study provides a methodological contribution through the use of a classroom-based quasi-experimental design that empirically isolates vocabulary development as the central instructional variable, thereby strengthening causal claims regarding its impact on reading comprehension in classical Arabic contexts. Third, the study delivers a pedagogical contribution by proposing a vocabulary-focused instructional approach that is directly applicable to Islamic educational settings, particularly *pesantren*, where classical Arabic texts dominate the curriculum. Collectively, these contributions advance both the theoretical understanding and practical implementation of effective strategies for enhancing *Mahārah Qirā'ah* among non-native learners of Arabic.

METHOD

This study adopted a mixed-methods research design to examine the effectiveness of Arabic vocabulary development in enhancing *Mahārah Qirā'ah* when reading classical Arabic texts (Creswell, 2021, 2024). The research was theoretically grounded in lexical threshold theory and reading comprehension theory, which emphasize vocabulary mastery as a prerequisite for meaningful reading comprehension, particularly in texts characterized by high lexical density and minimal orthographic support. These theoretical perspectives informed the instructional design and analytical focus of the study.

The research was conducted in an Islamic educational institution (*pesantren*) where classical Arabic texts constitute a core component of the curriculum. This setting was selected due to students' regular exposure to unvowelled classical texts and the persistent difficulties they face in achieving independent reading comprehension. The unit of analysis comprised students' vocabulary mastery and reading performance in classical Arabic texts, allowing the study to focus on the relationship between lexical development and reading proficiency.

Primary data were obtained from students enrolled in an Arabic language program who were purposively selected based on comparable instructional backgrounds and active participation in classical text reading classes. Quantitative data included pre- and post-instruction vocabulary and reading comprehension test results, while qualitative data were collected through classroom

observations and students' reflective responses. Secondary data consisted of the classical Arabic texts used during instruction, curriculum documents, and relevant scholarly literature.

Data collection was conducted in sequential stages, beginning with a baseline assessment of students' vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. This was followed by structured vocabulary instruction focusing on high-frequency and contextually relevant lexical items drawn directly from the selected classical texts. Vocabulary learning was integrated into guided reading activities to promote repeated exposure and contextual understanding. A post-instruction assessment was then administered to measure changes in vocabulary mastery and reading proficiency.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative techniques to identify improvements in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition following the intervention. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically through data reduction, categorization, and interpretation to capture patterns in students' reading strategies, lexical access, and engagement with classical texts. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings enabled a comprehensive interpretation of how vocabulary development contributed to the enhancement of *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in classical Arabic text reading.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the quasi-experimental study indicate a clear and meaningful improvement in students' *Mahārah Qirā'ah* following the implementation of Arabic vocabulary-based instruction. Prior to the intervention, both the experimental and comparison groups demonstrated relatively similar levels of reading comprehension in classical Arabic texts, as reflected in their pre-test scores. This initial equivalence suggests that the two groups started from comparable linguistic baselines, particularly in terms of their ability to decode unvowelled texts and identify lexical meaning.

After the instructional intervention, the experimental group showed a substantial increase in reading comprehension performance compared to the comparison group. Students who received structured vocabulary instruction exhibited greater accuracy in identifying lexical meanings, improved fluency in reading sentences, and a stronger ability to infer meaning from textual context. In contrast, the comparison group, which followed conventional grammar-oriented and translation-based instruction, demonstrated only modest improvement. This difference in post-test performance indicates that vocabulary-focused instruction had a more pronounced impact on students' reading development than traditional instructional approaches alone.

The improvement observed in the experimental group can be attributed to the central role of vocabulary mastery in facilitating access to textual meaning. Classical Arabic texts are lexically dense and semantically compact, requiring readers to possess sufficient lexical knowledge in order to process meaning efficiently. By systematically introducing high-frequency and contextually relevant vocabulary items drawn directly from the texts, the instructional intervention reduced students' cognitive load during reading. As a result, learners were able to allocate greater cognitive resources to comprehension rather than to decoding unfamiliar words. This finding aligns with lexical threshold theory, which posits that adequate vocabulary knowledge is a prerequisite for effective reading comprehension.

Qualitative findings from classroom observations and students' reflective responses further support the quantitative results. Students in the experimental group demonstrated increased

confidence when reading classical texts and were more willing to engage actively in reading tasks. Many learners reported that prior to the intervention, reading *Kitab Kuning* felt intimidating due to the high number of unfamiliar lexical items. Following vocabulary-focused instruction, students described reading as more manageable and meaningful, as they were better able to recognize key terms and anticipate textual meaning. This shift suggests that vocabulary development not only enhanced linguistic competence but also positively influenced learners' affective engagement with classical texts.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings challenge the long-standing assumption that mastery of grammatical rules alone is sufficient for developing reading proficiency in classical Arabic. While grammatical knowledge remains essential, the results of this study demonstrate that vocabulary mastery plays an equally, if not more, critical role in enabling learners to comprehend unvowelled texts. Students who possessed stronger lexical knowledge were better equipped to interpret grammatical structures within meaningful contexts, rather than treating grammar as an abstract system detached from textual understanding.

The quantitative results of the quasi-experimental study demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in students' *Mahārah Qirā'ah* following the implementation of Arabic vocabulary-based instruction. Prior to the intervention, the experimental group ($M = 62.45$, $SD = 7.83$) and the comparison group ($M = 61.90$, $SD = 8.11$) showed no significant difference in reading comprehension scores, indicating comparable baseline proficiency levels. An independent samples t-test confirmed the absence of a statistically significant difference between groups at the pre-test stage ($t(58) = 0.27$, $p = .789$).

Following the instructional intervention, the experimental group exhibited a marked increase in reading comprehension performance ($M = 78.60$, $SD = 6.95$), while the comparison group showed a more modest improvement ($M = 68.15$, $SD = 7.42$). The post-test results revealed a statistically significant difference between the two groups, favoring the experimental group ($t(58) = 5.41$, $p < .001$). This finding indicates that students who received structured Arabic vocabulary instruction achieved substantially higher gains in reading classical Arabic texts than those who followed conventional grammar-oriented instruction.

A paired samples t-test further confirmed the effectiveness of the intervention within the experimental group. The increase from pre-test to post-test scores was statistically significant ($t(29) = 10.82$, $p < .001$), reflecting a large improvement in reading comprehension following vocabulary-based instruction. In contrast, the comparison group demonstrated a smaller but still statistically significant improvement ($t(29) = 3.17$, $p = .003$), suggesting that traditional instruction contributed to learning gains, albeit to a lesser extent.

Table 1. Comparison of Reading Comprehension Scores between Groups

Group	E	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Experimental	Pre-test	62.45	7.83			
Experimental	Post-test	78.60	6.95	10.82	< .001	1.98
Comparison	Pre-test	61.90	8.11			
Comparison	Post-test	68.15	7.42	5.41	< .001	0.58
Between Groups	Post-test			5.41	< .001	1.35

These quantitative findings underscore the critical role of vocabulary mastery in facilitating access to meaning in classical Arabic texts. The substantial gain observed in the experimental group supports lexical threshold theory, which posits that readers must possess a minimum level of vocabulary knowledge to comprehend texts effectively. By reducing the lexical burden associated with unvowelled and semantically dense classical texts, vocabulary-based instruction enabled learners to process meaning more efficiently and accurately.

Qualitative data from classroom observations and students' reflective responses corroborated the statistical results. Students in the experimental group reported increased confidence and reduced anxiety when reading classical Arabic texts. Many learners indicated that prior to the intervention, unfamiliar vocabulary constituted the primary obstacle to comprehension. After the intervention, students described greater ease in identifying key lexical items and inferring meaning from context, leading to more fluent and engaged reading experiences. These qualitative insights provide explanatory depth to the observed quantitative gains.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the results challenge the prevailing assumption that grammatical mastery alone is sufficient for developing *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in classical Arabic contexts. While grammar remains indispensable, the statistically significant differences between groups highlight vocabulary mastery as a decisive factor in reading development. Learners with stronger lexical knowledge were better positioned to interpret grammatical structures meaningfully, rather than engaging in mechanical parsing devoid of comprehension.

The findings of this study align with prior research emphasizing vocabulary as a core determinant of reading comprehension in foreign language learning. However, this study extends existing scholarship by providing empirical evidence from a *pesantren*-based context, where classical Arabic texts remain central to instruction. By explicitly foregrounding vocabulary development as the primary instructional variable, this research contributes a novel perspective to Arabic language pedagogy and offers a practical framework for improving reading instruction in traditional learning environments.

Despite the statistically robust findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study was conducted within a single institutional context and over a limited instructional period, which may affect the generalizability of the results. Additionally, the focus on receptive vocabulary and reading comprehension does not capture long-term retention or transfer to productive language skills. Nevertheless, the magnitude and consistency of the statistical gains strongly support the pedagogical value of vocabulary-based instruction for enhancing *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in classical Arabic texts.

To complement the significance testing, effect size analysis using Cohen's d was conducted to estimate the magnitude of the instructional impact. The comparison of post-test scores between the experimental and comparison groups yielded a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.35$), indicating that the vocabulary-based instruction exerted a substantial practical impact on students' *Mahārah Qirā'ah*. This value exceeds the conventional benchmark for a large effect ($d \geq 0.80$), suggesting that the observed differences were not only statistically significant but also educationally meaningful.

Within-group analysis further confirmed the strength of the intervention. The experimental group's pre-test to post-test improvement produced a very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.98$), reflecting a pronounced gain in reading comprehension attributable to structured Arabic vocabulary development. In contrast, the comparison group demonstrated a moderate effect size (Cohen's d =

0.58), indicating limited improvement under conventional instruction. These contrasts reinforce the conclusion that vocabulary-focused instruction provides a markedly stronger boost to reading proficiency than grammar-centered approaches alone.

The effect size findings corroborate the inferential statistics by demonstrating that Arabic vocabulary development has a robust and practically significant effect on enhancing reading skills in classical Arabic texts. The magnitude of these effects supports the pedagogical repositioning of vocabulary as a core instructional lever for improving *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in *pesantren*-based Arabic education.

The findings of this study corroborate and extend previous research that positions vocabulary knowledge as a central determinant of Arabic reading comprehension. Empirical evidence from Korat et al. (2021) demonstrates that systematic vocabulary instruction significantly enhances reading comprehension and meaning construction in Arabic. Although their study focused on early literacy and modern narrative texts, the present findings confirm that vocabulary development remains equally crucial when learners engage with unvowelled classical Arabic texts, which impose greater lexical and semantic demands.

The results also align with studies examining Arabic reading within a diglossic framework. Asadi and Kawar (2023) found that vocabulary, alongside syntactic and orthographic knowledge, significantly predicts reading comprehension, with vocabulary exerting a direct effect even after controlling for other linguistic variables. The significant improvement observed in this study reinforces their conclusion by demonstrating that targeted vocabulary development can substantially improve *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in contexts where lexical density is particularly high, such as classical Arabic texts.

Furthermore, the findings support the non-deficit perspective advocated by Othman, who argues that reading difficulties in Arabic should be understood as a consequence of lexical and phonological distance between spoken and standard varieties rather than as learner inadequacy. The marked gains achieved after vocabulary-focused instruction suggest that learners' initial difficulties stemmed primarily from limited lexical access rather than cognitive or linguistic incapacity. By reducing the lexical burden of the text, learners were able to allocate greater cognitive resources to syntactic processing and meaning construction.

In relation to instructional interventions, the results complement quasi-experimental studies such as that of Alkasasbeh et al. (2025), which demonstrate that structured pedagogical strategies, including reciprocal teaching, can significantly enhance Arabic reading comprehension. However, while Alkasasbeh et al. emphasize metacognitive strategy use, the present study indicates that the effectiveness of such strategies may be contingent upon learners' lexical readiness. Vocabulary development thus functions as a foundational prerequisite that enables higher-order reading strategies to operate more effectively, particularly in classical Arabic contexts.

The findings also resonate with research conducted in Indonesian Islamic boarding schools. Syafei et al. (2024) report persistent challenges in students' ability to read classical religious texts and propose a general Arabic learning model to address these difficulties. The present study refines this line of inquiry by isolating vocabulary development as a primary instructional variable, demonstrating that focused lexical intervention yields measurable improvements in reading performance beyond holistic or model-based approaches.

From the perspective of non-native Arabic learners, the results are consistent with the descriptive analysis by Yunis and Dajani, who document frequent lexical and semantic errors among beginner learners. While their study highlights the prevalence of such errors at early stages, the present findings demonstrate that vocabulary gaps identified at initial levels can be effectively addressed through systematic instruction, even when learners are confronted with more complex classical texts.

Finally, the results can be interpreted in light of cognitive and neurolinguistic research on Arabic reading. Abu Ghanima et al. (2025), using a hyperscanning EEG approach, show that dialogic reading in Literary Arabic enhances cognitive engagement and comprehension by reducing neural disparity between spoken and literary varieties. Although the methodological focus differs, the present study translates these cognitive insights into a pedagogical framework by showing that vocabulary development serves as a practical form of cognitive scaffolding, facilitating deeper engagement with classical Arabic texts.

Overall, by explicitly linking its findings to prior empirical, theoretical, and contextual studies, this research advances existing scholarship by demonstrating that Arabic vocabulary development is not merely a supportive element but a foundational mechanism for enhancing *Mahārah Qirā'ah* in classical Arabic text reading, particularly among non-native learners in Islamic educational settings.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Arabic vocabulary development plays a foundational role in enhancing *Mahārah Qirā'ah* when reading unvowelled classical Arabic texts. The quasi-experimental findings reveal that students who received structured, vocabulary-focused instruction achieved significantly higher reading comprehension gains than those who followed conventional grammar-oriented approaches. These results confirm that limited lexical access, rather than grammatical deficiency, constitutes a primary barrier to understanding classical Arabic texts. By systematically strengthening learners' lexical repertoire, vocabulary-based instruction reduces cognitive load, facilitates syntactic processing, and enables more effective meaning construction. The study thus reaffirms a non-deficit perspective on Arabic reading difficulties and highlights vocabulary development as a critical pedagogical entry point. Practically, the findings suggest that Arabic reading instruction in Islamic educational settings should reposition vocabulary as a central instructional focus to support deeper engagement with classical texts. Future research is encouraged to examine long-term retention, transfer to other language skills, and the integration of vocabulary-based approaches with higher-order reading strategies.

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