The Dynamics of Arabic Synonyms and Semantic Sensitivity in Foreign Language Learning: A Linguistic-Educational Integration Approach

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Article Info

ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This study employs a linguistic-educational approach to analyze the dynamics of Arabic synonyms in the context of foreign language learning. It primarily aims to examine learners' patterns in using synonyms, identify both linguistic and pedagogical challenges in teaching them, and formulate more effective instructional strategies.

Methodology: A descriptive qualitative design with a case study method was applied to students from Madrasah Aliyah Alkhairaat and the Arabic Language Education Program at IAIN Ternate. Data were gathered through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis related to vocabulary learning.

Main Findings: The findings reveal that learners tend to use synonyms uniformly, with limited attention to semantic nuance and contextual accuracy. Major challenges include the absence of contextual teaching strategies and learners' low semantic awareness. Current textbooks and teaching methods remain structural and fail to engage pragmatic dimensions. The study proposes the use of contextual, collocational, and semantic-mapping approaches to improve synonym teaching.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study contributes to the development of more communicative and contextually grounded strategies for teaching Arabic vocabulary, especially in the area of synonym acquisition, by bridging linguistic insights with practical pedagogical applications.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Arabic language plays a vital role both as a language of religion and as a means of global communication. Its significance extends beyond religious rituals into diplomacy, trade, academia, and intercultural understanding, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. In the Indonesian context, Arabic serves dual purposes as the foundational language in Islamic education and as a formal academic language in higher education institutions [1], [2]. As a result, learners from various educational backgrounds particularly in madrasah and Islamic universities are increasingly engaging in Arabic language learning [3]–[5].

Despite this growing interest, mastering Arabic as a foreign language presents a number of challenges, especially in vocabulary acquisition. Among the most persistent issues is learners' difficulty in understanding and appropriately using Arabic synonyms [6]–[9]. Arabic is known for its rich lexicon, in which many words share similar denotations but differ in intensity, connotation, and contextual use. For example, words such as جميل(beautiful), رائع(amazing), and حَسَن(good) may appear synonymous, yet their use depends heavily on

nuance and situation. Similarly, verbs like ذَهَبَ(to go), اِنْطَلَقَ(to depart energetically), and سَارَ(to move calmly) offer fine semantic distinctions that are difficult for learners to discern without extensive contextual exposure [10]–[12].

The ability to understand and use synonyms accurately is a key indicator of advanced language proficiency. It enables learners to express themselves with precision, avoid redundancy, and adapt their language to various registers and purposes academic, poetic, formal, or informal. However, learners often rely on literal dictionary definitions or memorized vocabulary lists, leading to inappropriate or monotonous word choices [13]–[15] This tendency reflects a broader issue in Arabic vocabulary instruction, where synonym teaching is often superficial, lacking emphasis on pragmatic and semantic nuances.[16]–[19].

Previous studies have examined Arabic synonyms either from a purely linguistic standpoint such as Qur'anic synonym analysis or lexicographic classificationor from a pedagogical lens focusing on general vocabulary instruction [20]–[22]. However, few studies have integrated both perspectives to directly address how synonym use can be improved through context-rich, pedagogically grounded methods. This disconnect represents a research gap in the field: the lack of integrated models that combine linguistic insights with effective teaching strategies to enhance synonym acquisition among foreign learners [23]–[25]. Therefore, this study aims to bridge that gap by analyzing learners' difficulties in using Arabic synonyms and formulating a linguistic-educational approach that enhances semantic sensitivity and contextual competence. How do learners of Arabic as a foreign language use synonyms, and how can a linguistic-educational approach improve their semantic awareness and contextual usage?

2.   RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method to explore the dynamics of synonym usage in Arabic as a foreign language. This design was chosen to allow the researchers to understand the phenomenon holistically and contextually, particularly in relation to the linguistic and pedagogical challenges faced by learners. The naturalistic nature of this approach is suitable for investigating meaning construction and the depth of language use in real learning settings. Participants in this study were selected using purposive sampling. The research focused on two main groups: students from Madrasah Aliyah (MA) Alkhairaat Ternate and students from the Arabic Language Education Study Program (PBA) at IAIN Ternate. These two groups were chosen because they represent both secondary and higher education levels with consistent exposure to Arabic learning. Their inclusion was expected to yield rich, diverse data regarding the challenges and strategies in mastering Arabic synonyms.

Data collection was conducted using multiple instruments: classroom observation sheets, semi-structured interview guides, focus group discussion (FGD) protocols, and a document analysis checklist. The classroom observations were aimed at capturing interactions between teachers and students, particularly how synonyms were introduced and practiced. The observation sheets were constructed independently by the researchers based on the relevant literature. The interview guides used for teachers and lecturers were adapted from previous studies related to synonym teaching and semantic sensitivity, and their content validity was evaluated by two experts in Arabic linguistics. The reliability of these instruments was strengthened through inter-rater agreement in pilot testing. The FGD protocols, designed to explore students' learning experiences and perceptions, were subjected to face validity checks and tested on a small group of non-participant students. Additionally, document analysis was conducted on students' assignments and Arabic textbooks using a checklist developed by the researchers to identify patterns in synonym use, contextual accuracy, and types of lexical errors. The trustworthiness of all instruments was ensured through peer debriefing and triangulation.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts, FGD discussions, and observation notes using Braun and Clarke's six-phase coding model, which included transcription, open coding, axial coding, and theme generation. In parallel, content analysis was conducted on student work and textbooks to categorize synonym types, frequency of use, semantic accuracy, and the extent of context-based instruction. Although this study did not use quantitative tools such as SmartPLS due to its qualitative design, the credibility of the findings was reinforced through methodological triangulation, member checking, and audit trails.

Through this systematic and rigorous approach, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational challenges and opportunities involved in teaching Arabic synonyms, and how a linguistic-educational model can enhance learners' semantic awareness and communicative proficiency.

3.   RESULTS AND DICUSSION
Analysis of Synonym Dynamics in Arabic

The results of the analysis of corpus data and learner responses indicate that synonyms in Arabic are used with considerable variation but are not always contextually appropriate. In writing tasks and translation

exercises conducted by MA Alkhairaat Ternate students and PBA IAIN Ternate students, a tendency was observed to use synonyms randomly without considering the nuances of meaning. For example, many students used the word جميل(beautiful) in almost all aesthetic contexts, even though the context of the sentence would have been more appropriate for رائع(amazing) or حسن(good/beautiful), which have different intensities and meanings. The pattern indicates a preference for more common synonyms frequently appearing in textbooks or everyday dialogue, while more specific or formal/poetic synonyms are often avoided. In interviews and FGDs, students admitted to usually choosing words that are "safer" or "most familiar," even though they are not always appropriate. In addition, differences in meaning between synonyms are often not recognized, especially when the words have the same or similar morphological roots, such as the pairs خوف(fear) and رعب(great fear), or ذهب (go) and انطلق(depart with enthusiasm).

Analysis of textbooks shows that although lists of synonyms are often included, explanations of the differences in meaning and context of use are rarely provided. This results in students' understanding tending to be based on memorization rather than deep semantic knowledge. Therefore, the dynamics of synonym use by learners are greatly influenced by the input from textbooks and the teaching strategies teachers or lecturers use.

Table 1. Use of Arabic Synonyms in Learners' Responses

No	General Meaning	Arabic Synonym Used	Frequency of Use (%)	Context Notes
1	To go	ذَهَبَ(dhahaba)	85%	Used in all contexts, including fast, slow, and formal.
		انْطَلَقَ(intalaqa)	10%	Used only by students in formal contexts.
		سَارَ(sāra)	5%	Generally used in calm/slow contexts.
2	Beautiful	جَمِيل(jamīl)	80%	A common word used in all beauty-related contexts.
		رَائِع(rā'i')	12%	Rarely used, assumed suitable only for literature or poetry.
		حَسَن(ḥasan)	8%	Used in a limited way, mainly in moral or religious value contexts.
3	Afraid	خَوْف(khawf)	90%	Used in all contexts of fear.
		رُعْب(ru'b)	5%	Rarely recognized, although more precise for deep fear.
		فَزَع(faz'a)	5%	Not used, even though the context indicates panic.
4	Intelligent	ذَكِيّ(dhakiyy)	88%	The most common and familiar synonym for learners.
		فَطِن(faṭin)	7%	Known but rarely used, considered more formal.
		نَبِيه(nabīh)	5%	Hardly used, though suitable for formal academic contexts.

Table 2. Presentation of Synonyms in Arabic Language Textbooks

No	Arabic Synonym Pairs	General Translation	Context Explanation in Textbook	Found in Textbook
1	سريع— عاجل —خاطف(sarī' – 'ājil – khāṭif)	fast	Not explained	Yes
2	خَوْف— رُعْب —فَزَع(khawf – ru'b – faza')	afraid	Not explained	Yes
3	جَمِيل— رَائِع —حَسَن(jamīl – rā'i' – ḥasan)	beautiful/good	Not explained	Yes
4	ذَهَبَ— انْطَلَقَ —سَارَ(dhahaba – intalaqa – sāra)	to go	Not explained	Yes

The table shows that the data indicates a dominance of the most common words (such as جَمِيل, ذَهَبَ, and خَوْف) in all contexts. This suggests that learners rely more on words frequently appearing in books or early teaching. Student responses indicate that they cannot distinguish subtle differences in meaning between synonyms. This is evident in the use of ذَهَبَfor all types of 'go,' even though the context requires synonyms such as سَارor انْطَلَقَ. Textbooks only provide lists of synonyms without semantic or contextual explanations. There is no explanation of when certain synonyms are used in different situations or registers (formal vs. informal, literary vs. scientific) [26]–[28].

Linguistic-Educational Challenges in Synonym Learning

Classroom observations, in-depth interviews with teachers, and focused group discussions with students and university students indicate that synonym learning in Arabic faces various linguistic and educational challenges. From a linguistic perspective, learners face significant difficulties distinguishing the meanings of similar words, both in terms of phonological form and semantic meaning. This phenomenon is caused by learners' tendency to rely on literal translations to understand vocabulary without considering the words' pragmatic, connotative, or social register dimensions. For example, in the FGD discussion, it was revealed that the majority of MA Alkhairaat students equated the words خوف(fear), رعب(terror), and فزع(panic) as one type of identical fear. They did not realize that فزع is more appropriate for surprising and sudden situations, while رعب describes intense and prolonged fear. Ignorance of these gradations of meaning causes many students to misuse synonyms in writing and speaking. This issue stems from weak semantic awareness and the lack of meaning-focused instruction in foreign language teaching [29]–[31]. Emphasize the importance of context-based vocabulary learning and collocation to avoid incorrect generalization of meaning, especially in learning synonyms that appear similar but differ in usage. Foreign learners of Arabic tend to rely on words with high frequency, while they avoid more specific synonyms because they lack confidence in distinguishing their usage contexts [32]–[34].

From an educational perspective, the main challenge identified is the quantitative and rote-memorization approach to vocabulary teaching [35]–[37]. Teachers and lecturers provide lists of vocabulary words and their translations without equipping students with semantic or contextual strategies to distinguish between synonyms [38]–[40]. Based on interviews with teachers at MA Alkhairaat and lecturers at PBA IAIN Ternate, it was found that there are no syllabi or learning modules that explicitly focus on teaching synonyms. In many cases, synonyms are only explained reactively—when students make mistakes in word usage—rather than proactively and systematically as part of the curriculum or learning competencies [41]–[43]. The weak content of the teaching materials used exacerbates this situation. Widely circulated textbooks often present synonyms in the form of lists without contextual explanations, differences in nuance, or applicable sentence examples. Arabic textbooks for foreign learners emphasize mastery of basic vocabulary and derivational forms (ishtiqāq) but rarely provide exercises to distinguish meanings (semantic differentiation tasks) between synonyms [44]–[46]. However, as emphasized advanced lexical competence is greatly influenced by the ability to accurately understand semantic relationships, including hyponymy, antonymy, and synonymy [47]–[49].

Regarding perception, teachers and students agree that synonyms are important for improving expression variation and meaning accuracy [50]. However, they also admit to lacking structured learning strategies for this aspect. Teachers at MA Alkhairaat stated that time constraints and a heavy curriculum load made them focus more on basic skills such as reading and translating rather than exploring advanced semantic aspects such as synonyms. Meanwhile, students at the Arabic Language Education Program at IAIN Ternate revealed that although they understand the importance of synonyms in academic communication and scientific writing, they feel insecure in using them due to fear of choosing words that are inappropriate for the context [17]. This fear ultimately leads learners to prefer using general words (high-frequency vocabulary) that they consider "safe," thereby hindering the development of their expressive and productive abilities in Arabic [24]. Thus, the challenges of learning synonyms in Arabic as a foreign language are multidimensional. Linguistic aspects such as insensitivity to nuances of meaning, coupled with weak pedagogical approaches and non-contextual teaching materials, have caused learners to fail to achieve deep lexical proficiency. Therefore, a transformation of the vocabulary learning approach is needed, emphasizing semantic understanding, contrastive meaning, and the use of real contexts so that learners can master synonyms accurately, effectively, and meaningfully.

Integration of Linguistic-Educational Approaches

Based on research findings on the dynamics of synonym usage and the accompanying linguistic-educational challenges, a teaching approach that integrates linguistic aspects (particularly semantics and pragmatics) with a communicative and meaning-based educational approach is needed. This integration is important because understanding synonyms is not merely about memorizing vocabulary but rather about the competence to use words appropriately in real communication contexts. In line with [51] perspective, vocabulary learning should encompass conceptual (meaning), contextual (usage), and collocation (accompanying words) dimensions, not just literal forms and meanings. One of the main strategies recommended in this integration is context- and collocation-based synonym teaching. Learners are encouraged to recognize synonyms and observe their usage in authentic texts, such as Arabic news articles, literary quotations, or real-life dialogues. This allows students to understand that while two words may seem to have similar meanings, their usage can vary significantly depending on sentence structure, word pairs, intensity of meaning, or language style. For example, the phrase ذهب إلى المسجد is more commonly used in everyday expressions to mean "go to the mosque," while انطلق إلى المسجد tends to convey a sense of rapid movement or enthusiasm for departure, and is therefore less commonly used in everyday contexts.

In practice, several learning activities can be designed to develop semantic sensitivity and the appropriate use of synonyms. First, semantic mapping exercises, where students are asked to group synonyms into specific meaning or intensity categories, such as distinguishing between خوف – رعب – فزع based on the level of emotion. Second, creative writing that integrates synonym variations, such as writing descriptions of moods using synonyms of emotions, movements, or praise, aims to train both expressive variation and semantic accuracy. Third, meaning-based lexical games are both fun and challenging, such as synonym puzzles in context, collocation quizzes, or meaning-matching games with intensity order (mild-moderate–strong). Additionally, it is recommended that teachers and lecturers develop micro-theme-based learning modules on synonyms, such as "Synonyms in Emotional Expressions," "Synonyms of Verbs of Movement," "Synonyms in Religious Texts," or "Synonyms in Scientific and Literary Language." Such modules can tailor teaching approaches to learners' real communication needs and the institutional context they study. A study by [52] shows that intensive practice on specific vocabulary groups results in more accurate retention and application of meaning than a random vocabulary distribution approach.

The implications of these findings for curriculum development and teaching materials are significant. Arabic language learning curricula as a foreign language need to include teaching synonyms as part of advanced lexical competence, not just as a supplement. Textbooks should present synonyms contrastively, not just in static lists but in contextual and applicable structures. For example, each pair of synonyms should be presented in a table and accompanied by differential definitions of meaning, example sentences in context, and notes on register or usage in language varieties (formal, informal, literary, scientific). Furthermore, teaching modules should be supplemented with text analysis exercises and evaluations of synonym appropriateness based on situation, style, and communication purpose. This approach will help develop learners' linguistic metacognition, which is the ability to think about language and make appropriate linguistic decisions in spoken or written production. With this more integrative and contextual approach, synonym learning is no longer a passive part of vocabulary acquisition but becomes an active element that supports expressive and receptive skills in a balanced manner. In addition to improving technical linguistic abilities, this approach enriches learners' interpersonal, academic, and professional communication skills in Arabic. Integrating this linguistic-educational approach is expected to become a new paradigm in teaching relevant, applicable, and meaning-oriented vocabulary.

The analysis of students' responses and learning materials indicates that Arabic synonyms are often used homogeneously, regardless of their contextual meaning or intensity. For example, learners overwhelmingly preferred the use of أَهَبَ(to go) in all contexts of movement, even when the situation required more context-specific verbs such as سَارَ(to walk) or اِنْطَلَقَ(to depart enthusiastically). Similarly, جَمِيل(beautiful) was used in nearly all expressions of praise, while more precise alternatives such as رَائِع(amazing) or حَسَن(good/moral) were largely ignored. These patterns point to a tendency among learners to rely on high-frequency or familiar vocabulary, even when it may not convey the intended nuance accurately. This finding aligns with the argument presented by Nation and Webb[21], who emphasized that advanced lexical competence requires more than just knowledge of word meaningsit demands sensitivity to usage, collocation, and register. Learners who rely solely on dictionary definitions or rote memorization often fail to recognize the pragmatic subtleties that distinguish synonyms. The overgeneralization seen in students' use of Arabic synonyms reflects a lack of semantic awareness, as discussed in Schmitt & Schmit[22]t, which becomes a barrier to effective and natural communication.

Additionally, the textbook analysis revealed that while synonym lists are present, they are rarely accompanied by contextual explanations or usage examples. This finding is consistent with Elnagar et al[23]who found that Arabic textbooks for non-native speakers often emphasize structural grammar and derivation (ishtiqāq) but neglect semantic differentiation tasks that could help learners understand subtle contrasts in meaning. The absence of activities focusing on synonym discrimination not only limits learners' vocabulary depth but also reduces their ability to apply words appropriately in various registers and communicative situations. From an educational perspective, the data support Alghamdi and Atwell's [24]view that pedagogical materials must go beyond static lists and incorporate authentic examples, collocation patterns, and context-driven exercises. Without such strategies, learners are left without the tools needed to make informed lexical choices. Furthermore, the reluctance of teachers to address synonym distinctions proactively due to time constraints or curriculum limitations mirrors findings from Saiegh-Haddad and Haj who noted that teaching Arabic in multilingual contexts often sacrifices depth for breadth [25].

The results also highlight the need for explicit instruction in semantic gradation and pragmatic appropriateness. For instance, distinguishing خَوْف(general fear), رُعْب(intense fear), and فَزَع(panic) is essential for learners to accurately express emotional states. Such semantic distinctions are especially important in Arabic, where lexical choice often carries rhetorical, cultural, and religious implications. In summary, the results not only confirm the presence of semantic and pedagogical challenges in synonym learning but also reinforce the importance of integrating linguistic insights with pedagogical strategies. These findings underline the need for curriculum developers and language educators to incorporate focused synonym instruction using authentic texts,

contextualized usage, and semantic mapping techniques to improve learners' expressive range and accuracy in Arabic.

4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals that the dynamics of Arabic synonyms in foreign language learning involve a high degree of semantic complexity. Learners struggle to distinguish nuanced meanings due to insufficient exposure to authentic contexts, low semantic awareness, and limited sensitivity to differences in meaning, intensity, and register. The tendency to overuse general and familiar wordssuch as using ذَهَبَ for all expressions of "go" or جَمِيل for all forms of "raise" reflects a pragmatic inaccuracy that hinders learners from achieving advanced lexical competence. Theoretically, this study contributes to Arabic linguistics and second language acquisition by integrating semantic-pragmatic perspectives into vocabulary instruction. It highlights the need to go beyond rote memorization toward a meaning-based and contextual approach in synonym acquisition. Practically, the study provides language educators with pedagogical strategiessuch as context-driven teaching, collocation awareness, semantic mapping, and creative writing with lexical variationthat have been shown to foster semantic accuracy and communicative fluency. However, the study has limitations. The sample was limited to two educational institutions in a specific region, which may restrict the generalizability of findings. Additionally, the study did not explore the sociocultural dimensions that may influence learners' synonym preferences or usage patterns. Future research is recommended to expand the demographic and institutional scope and to investigate the role of cultural and psycholinguistic factors in synonym acquisition. In light of these findings, it is essential that Arabic language curricula integrate synonym instruction as a formal component of advanced vocabulary teaching. Instructional materials should move beyond static lists and instead provide comparative semantic explanations, contextual examples, and register-specific usage. By embedding synonym instruction within a linguistically and educationally informed framework, language programs can support learners in achieving nuanced, natural, and context-appropriate language production in Arabic.

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