

Implementation of the Functional Approach to Arabic Language Learning at the Fathimah Al Batul Islamic Boarding School, Pekalongan

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Abstract

Many Islamic boarding schools indicate that students' active Arabic proficiency is still relatively low, especially in speaking and listening comprehension. This suggests the presence of problems in the approaches and methods used in instruction. The purpose of this study is to examine in depth the implementation of the functional approach in Arabic language learning at Pondok Pesantren Fathimah Al Batul Pekalongan. This research is qualitative in nature, employing a descriptive qualitative approach. The subjects of the study are members of the Arabic Language Division and the students. Data collection was carried out using three main methods: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. The collected data were analyzed through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings of this study show that the implementation of this approach is able to enhance students' motivation and active participation in using Arabic communicatively, although their grammatical structure remains limited. The students' response to this approach is very positive, as indicated by increased participation in learning activities, higher learning motivation, and greater confidence in speaking Arabic. However, the implementation also faces several challenges, such as disparities in language proficiency among students, limited vocabulary, and a social environment that does not fully support the use of Arabic. Despite these challenges, the approach has generally succeeded in shifting the learning paradigm from a structural orientation to one that is more contextual and applicable.

Keywords: : functional approach; Arabic language learning; Islamic Boarding School

Introduction

The Arabic language holds a very important position in Islamic education, particularly within the pesantren (Islamic boarding school) environment. As the language of the Qur'an and the primary source of Islamic literature, mastery of Arabic becomes a fundamental necessity for students (santri) so they can fully and deeply understand Islamic teachings (Sofyan et al., 2022). Therefore, learning Arabic is not merely an additional component but a central part of the pesantren curriculum. Nevertheless, the reality in many pesantren educational institutions shows that students' active Arabic language skills remain relatively low, especially in speaking and listening comprehension. This indicates the existence of problems in the approaches and methods used in the learning process (Z. & Burhanuddin, 2022).

The dominant approaches used in Arabic language instruction in pesantren tend to be structural and grammatical (R. Hasibuan et al., 2023). Students are focused on mastering the theoretical aspects of “nahwu” and “sharaf”, yet given minimal opportunities to practice real communication. As a result, Arabic is perceived as a foreign language detached from the students’ daily lives. Such learning models fail to accommodate the practical function of language as a tool for communication, even though what students need is the ability to use Arabic in everyday contexts—such as in book discussions, interactions among students, and worship (Kawar et al., 2024). As a solution to these problems, a functional approach to Arabic language learning has emerged. This approach emphasizes the use of language in meaningful and real-life contexts. Language is not taught merely as a structure but as a medium for interaction (Ariwibowo et al., 2020).

In the functional approach, learning is directed so that students can use Arabic in its social functions: greeting others, asking for directions, engaging in discussions, casual communication, and so on (Nofal, 2023). This approach also seeks to create contextual learning experiences, enabling language not only to be studied but actively used. Pondok Pesantren Fathimah Al Batul Pekalongan is one of the pesantren that has begun adopting the functional approach in Arabic language instruction. Through various programs such as daily “muhadatsah” (conversation), announcements in Arabic, speech competitions, and contextual dialogue practice, this pesantren strives to create an active Arabic-speaking environment outside the classroom. However, the effectiveness of this implementation still needs scientific examination. Do the strategies applied truly improve students’ Arabic proficiency? How do the implementation dynamics unfold, and how do students respond to this approach?

A previous study by Tur’aeni E., titled “Implementation of the Functional Approach in Arabic Language Learning at MTsN Al-Hilal”, explains that Arabic language learning within the communicative approach is aimed at improving communication skills, both oral and written, using the Arabic language. A key feature of Arabic language learning in the communicative approach is the systematic attention given to both functional and structural aspects of language. Mastery of language skills in real communication situations is deemed more important for students than mere knowledge of linguistic rules. Characteristics of the communicative approach include: (a) presenting realistic activities to stimulate learners, (b) preparing syllabus materials based on needs analysis, (c) learner-oriented material presentation and classroom activities, and (d) teachers functioning as facilitators, needs analysts, and group managers to support communication in both oral and written forms (Tur’aeni, 2019).

Another study by Hanum and Rahmawati titled “Implementation of the Functional Approach in Arabic Language Learning Through the Community Language Learning Method” provides a detailed description of Arabic language learning instruments using the Community Language Learning method viewed through the lens of the functional approach. The study aims to realize the goals of modern Arabic language learning, namely factual communication, meaning that learners are able to use the foreign language they are learning as a tool of communication—in this case, Arabic (Hanum & Rahmawati, 2020).

Based on this background, the present study aims to examine in depth the implementation of the functional approach in Arabic language learning at Pondok Pesantren Fathimah Al Batul Pekalongan. This research not only describes the strategies and methods applied but also analyzes the challenges and successes of this approach within the context of pesantren education. Thus, the findings are expected to contribute to the development of a more

contextual, communicative Arabic language learning model that aligns with the needs of today's students.

Methods

This study is a qualitative research. A qualitative approach was chosen because it is capable of describing naturally occurring phenomena in the field and uncovering the deeper meanings behind the experiences, perspectives, and interactions of the research subjects (Fadli, 2021). The aim is to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the implementation of the functional approach in Arabic language learning at Pondok Pesantren Fathimah Al Batul Pekalongan. This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach (Murdiyanto, 2020). This approach is used to systematically, factually, and accurately depict the facts and characteristics of the implementation of the functional approach in the learning process. The researcher serves as the main instrument in observing, recording, and analyzing learning activities and the responses that emerge within the pesantren environment (Hayati, 2022).

The research design used is a case study (Assyakurrohim et al., 2022). The case study design was chosen because this research focuses on a single location or specific educational institution, namely Pondok Pesantren Fathimah Al Batul, to explore in depth how the functional approach is implemented within this particular context. The researcher conducted intensive observations of real situations in the Arabic language learning process at the pesantren (Rashed Alkatheery, 2023). The research subjects consist of members of the Arabic Language Division and students (santri) at Pondok Pesantren Fathimah Al Batul Pekalongan. Subjects were selected purposively, based on their direct involvement in Arabic language learning activities and the implementation of the functional approach. The total number of informants includes 3 Arabic teachers and 10 students who are actively involved in the Arabic language programs.

The procedure of the research began with a preliminary observation phase to understand the learning context in the pesantren (Z. Hasibuan, 2020). This was followed by interviews with teachers and curriculum managers, along with documentation of various ongoing learning activities. The research was conducted over a period of two months to obtain a comprehensive picture of the implementation of the functional approach in various teaching and learning activities. The tools and instruments used in this study include observation guidelines, semi-structured interview guidelines, a camera for visual documentation, and an audio recorder (Kusumayanti et al., 2023). In addition, the researcher also used a field journal to record non-verbal data or unexpected events relevant to the learning process.

The data collection techniques were carried out through three main methods: participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation. Observation was used to record learning practices directly; in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives of teachers and students. Documentation included the collection of schedules, modules, activity recordings, and notes from Arabic extracurricular activities. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model of Miles and Huberman (Huberman & Miles, 1992), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Abdul, 2020). Data reduction was conducted to filter relevant information, data display was presented in the form of narratives and direct quotations from informants, and conclusions were drawn to answer the focus and objectives of the research (Hartono, 2021).

Results and Discussion

The Functional Approach to Arabic Language Learning

The functional approach is an approach that emphasizes the usefulness of what is being taught to learners (Sulistiawati & Nasution, 2022). The methods used include demonstrations and experiments supported by specific techniques or strategies. The demonstration method is a way of presenting learning material by showing or displaying to learners a particular process, condition, or object being studied, whether real or simulated, often accompanied by verbal explanation. The purpose of using the demonstration method is to enable learners to understand how to arrange, create, or construct something through the appropriate procedures (Ghani & Daud, 2023). Given the various advantages of the demonstration method, many aspects of Arabic language studies can be demonstrated, particularly in achieving the functional roles of language, namely: As a tool for self-expression, As a tool for communication, As a tool for social integration and adaptation, and As a tool for social control (Safitri & Mujianto, 2021).

Language learning through the functional approach is carried out to allow direct contact with communities of language users (Ali et al., 2022). Thus, learners are directly exposed to a living language and attempt to use it according to their daily communication needs. Learners naturally experience the functions of the language in direct communication. Furthermore, language learning methods based on the functional approach include the direct method, language restriction method, intensive method, audiovisual method, and linguistic method (Oktaviani, 2021). The implementation of functionalism in learning activities depends on several factors, such as learning objectives, the nature of the learning material, learner characteristics, and available media and facilities. Learning designed on the basis of functionalist theory views knowledge as objective, certain, fixed, and unchanging. Knowledge is tightly structured; therefore, learning is the acquisition of knowledge, while teaching is the transfer of knowledge to learners (Rosyid, R & Baroroh, 2020). The function of the mind is to replicate existing knowledge structures through a process of thinking that can be analyzed and sorted, so the meaning produced from this thinking process is determined by the characteristics of those knowledge structures.

The Contextual-Interactional Theory is a conceptual approach in Arabic language learning within pesantren that emphasizes the importance of active student participation in real-life contexts and social interactions to develop language competence (Alang, 2018). This theory argues that the effectiveness of the functional approach lies in strengthening a contextual and participatory language environment, rather than relying solely on classroom teaching methods. Language is learned meaningfully when it is used in real contexts (Jiao et al., 2022). Social interaction is the main foundation of language acquisition. Language skills develop through courage, not merely through mastery of structure.

The main components of the Contextual Language Environment include the use of Arabic in the real-life spaces of students, such as during meals, shopping, discussions, and socializing (Mulyati, 2018). Learning does not occur solely in the classroom but also in the dormitory and public areas of the pesantren. Peer and teacher interaction (Sociolinguistic Engagement) emphasizes the crucial role of peers and teachers in building confidence and speaking skills (Kolzow et al., 2021). Consistent interaction fosters self-confidence and accelerates language acquisition. Adaptive instructional support strategies include assessing students' abilities, using visual media, employing language games, providing pocket dictionaries, and reinforcing

Arabic-only areas (Arabic Area). All of these strategies help address challenges such as uneven language abilities and limited language exposure (Logemann et al., 2022).

Strategies for Implementing the Functional Approach to Arabic Language Learning in Islamic Boarding Schools (Pesantren)

The implementation strategies of the functional approach in Arabic language learning are carried out through the habituation of using Arabic in daily activities. These activities are not limited to the classroom but are also applied in students' daily lives within the dormitory complex and the broader pesantren environment. Every Saturday evening, before beginning formal lessons, students are required to participate in Arabic language training in pairs or small groups, separated between male and female students. Observations show that these interactions foster students' confidence in speaking, even though errors in sentence structure still occur (Kolzow et al., 2021). An interview with a member of the Arabic Language Division, Kang Sholah, revealed that the functional approach is implemented by aligning learning materials with contexts from students' daily lives. "We no longer teach vocabulary in isolation, but directly within context. For example, if today's theme is students' humor ("dagelan santri"), then students practice dialogue by incorporating vocabulary into jokes in Arabic," he explained. This strategy encourages students to connect the language they learn with jokes, making it easier for them to remember and use vocabulary in appropriate contexts (Modrzyk, 2018).

Another strategy used is the incorporation of visual media and language games. Based on observations, teachers often use group singing activities and student demonstrations to reinforce learners' understanding of specific language functions. Games such as word guessing and content guessing in Arabic are used to strengthen communicative aspects and enrich learning experiences (Kashogi & Kholiq Hasan, 2023). This aligns with the principles of the functional approach, which promotes learning based on experience, meaning, and social interaction. In an interview, one of the students, Mba Chayatu, stated that the new method makes Arabic lessons more enjoyable. "Previously, we memorized many "isim" and "fi'il", but now we more often practice by observing vocabulary around the pesantren," she said with a smile. This statement supports the finding that habituation and contextual implementation strategies positively impact students' confidence and functional use of Arabic.

Theoretically, these implementations are consistent with the views of Richards and Rodgers regarding communicative and functional approaches, which assert that language is learned to be used socially in real-life situations (Naimah, 2016). The pesantren has succeeded in creating an environment that closely resembles authentic situations, where students do not merely learn about the language but experience the language itself through daily interactions. These strategies not only create meaningful learning experiences but also serve as the foundation for developing natural habits and an Arabic-speaking culture within the pesantren environment.

Students' Responses to the Functional Approach

Students demonstrated high enthusiasm for Arabic language learning activities that are functional in nature. They appeared more active when asked to role-play or engage in dialogues in specific situations. During Arabic language training sessions, most students actively participated and responded to one another, even though they frequently made grammatical mistakes (Akmaliyah et al., 2021). However, these errors did not prevent them from continuing

to speak, indicating that this approach has fostered their confidence in using Arabic. An interview with one student, Rima, revealed that she found it easier to remember vocabulary and sentence structures when the material was linked to daily activities. “Previously, we only memorized mufrodat, but we quickly forgot. Now, because we use it directly during practice, I remember it better (Alharbi & Lee, 2020). For example, when I want to borrow something, I automatically want to use Arabic,” she explained. This statement suggests that the functional approach has a positive effect on internalizing Arabic more naturally compared to conventional methods that focus solely on rote memorization.

Additionally, in interviews with two other students, Shinta and Dinda, they stated that learning feels more enjoyable and less boring. “Playing word guessing keeps us awake. It feels like learning but also like playing,” said Dinda. Meanwhile, Shinta added, “At first, I was shy to speak in Arabic, but because we keep practicing and my friends also speak Arabic, I gradually got used to it.” These positive responses indicate that the functional approach can reduce psychological barriers such as shyness and fear of making mistakes, which often arise in foreign language learning (Fuad et al., 2022).

However, observations also showed that not all students could participate with the same level of enthusiasm. Some students with lower vocabulary mastery appeared passive and reluctant to engage. In such cases, teachers actively encouraged students to speak despite limited vocabulary and provided positive reinforcement for every attempt to use Arabic (Salih et al., 2023). This shows that while the functional approach is generally well-received, specific strategies are still needed to reach students with lower proficiency levels.

Theoretically, students’ positive responses align with communicative language learning theory, which emphasizes the role of motivation, social context, and emotional engagement in the language learning process (Arsyad, 2019). The functional approach has proven effective in enhancing students’ intrinsic motivation, as they perceive Arabic not as an academic burden but as a useful communication tool in their own environment. With the support of a conducive pesantren environment and creative teaching strategies, this approach provides meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences for students.

Challenges and Solutions in Implementing the Functional Approach

The implementation of the functional approach in Arabic language learning at Pondok Pesantren Fathimah Al Batul Pekalongan has shown positive results; however, it is not without challenges. Based on observations, one of the main obstacles is the limited vocabulary and sentence structure mastery among some students. During Arabic language training activities, students often stop speaking due to difficulty finding the right words or constructing sentences (Al Mukarromah et al., 2023). This situation leads some students to lack confidence in actively participating in oral communication practice.

An interview with Mba Azka, a member of the Arabic Language Division, revealed, “The biggest challenge is the uneven basic abilities of the students. Some can speak fluently, but others haven’t even memorized basic vocabulary (Munir, 2021). When mixed in one class, the weaker ones feel insecure and reluctant to speak.” This variation in skill levels requires teachers to design adaptive and differentiated learning so that all students can engage effectively.

Additionally, the pesantren environment does not fully support the consistent use of Arabic. Although some official activities and lessons use Arabic, in daily life, most students are more comfortable using Indonesian or regional languages (“Analysis of M-Learning

Requirements in Arabic Language Learning,” 2019). This condition weakens the habit of using Arabic outside the classroom. As student Khofi expressed, “We use Arabic in class, but in the dormitory, we go back to using Javanese. Everyone does that.”

To address these challenges, the pesantren has implemented several practical solutions: Arabic Day and Arabic Area programs – Students are only allowed to use Arabic in designated areas and on certain days to strengthen language habits. Use of pocket dictionaries and daily vocabulary lists – Vocabulary is posted in the dormitory for easy access and memorization. Peer tutoring – Students who are more proficient in Arabic assist their peers in practicing speaking, helping increase the confidence and participation of initially passive students (Uhlmann, 2022).

Theoretically, these efforts align with the constructivist approach in language learning, where social interaction and collaboration play an essential role in developing language competence (Nasution et al., 2023). The strategies implemented by the pesantren emphasize strengthening the learning environment and the role of the community as supporting factors for success. By creating a comprehensive Arabic language culture involving both teachers and students, the functional approach can be implemented more effectively and sustainably.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that the implementation of the functional approach in Arabic language learning at Pondok Pesantren Fathimah Al Batul Pekalongan is carried out through strategies such as habituating daily communication, language games, and context-based activities. These strategies successfully create a more lively and communicative learning environment and encourage students to actively use Arabic, even with limited grammatical structure.

Students’ responses to this approach are highly positive, as evidenced by increased participation in learning activities, enhanced motivation, and greater confidence in speaking Arabic. However, the implementation of this approach also faces several challenges, such as uneven language proficiency among students, limited vocabulary, and a social environment that does not fully support the consistent use of Arabic. To address these issues, the pesantren has implemented various adaptive solutions, including strengthening the Arabic Day program, establishing Arabic Areas, providing pocket dictionaries, and involving peer tutors.

These findings support the formulation of the Contextual-Interactional Theory, which suggests that the effectiveness of functional Arabic language learning depends on the presence of a contextual, participatory, and interactive environment. This approach is recommended for broader development in Arabic language learning models in other pesantrens. Recommendations for institutions include expanding opportunities for using Arabic outside the classroom, enhancing teacher training, and systematically integrating this approach into both formal and non-formal curricula.

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