

# Arabic Language for the Indonesian Migrant Workers in Arabic Countries

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**Annotation:** The Arabic language came to Indonesia at the same time as the arrival of Islamic teachings (Suryanegara, 1995). Like its entry, Arabic also spread together with the spread of Islam. Because it is directly related to religion, Arabic is the most widely studied foreign language by Indonesian people in formal and informal institutions. Formally, this language is studied by kindergarten to university students. Meanwhile, in informal institutions, Arabic is also studied in mosques, *majlis ta'lim*, and even in the family

**Key words:** Arabic language, Islamic teachings

## 1. Introduction

The Arabic language came to Indonesia at the same time as the arrival of Islamic teachings (Suryanegara, 1995). Like its entry, Arabic also spread together with the spread of Islam. Because it is directly related to religion, Arabic is the most widely studied foreign language by Indonesian people in formal and informal institutions. Formally, this language is studied by kindergarten to university students. Meanwhile, in informal institutions, Arabic is also studied in mosques, *majlis ta'lim*, and even in the family.

In terms of its objectives, language learning has two main types. First, the language is learned for general purposes or daily activities (Tuaimah, 1989) Although there is an academic nuance to studying Islamic teachings from their sources, Arabic learning in our *madrassahs* is more orientated towards this general goal. The aim is to provide students with the four language skills (*istima'*, *kalam*, *qira'ah*, and *kitabah*) in an integrative manner which are useful for communicating in Arabic receptively and productively.

Second, the language is used for certain intentions based on the needs of the learners (Tuaimah, 1989). This category includes learning for academic purposes and other pragmatic orientations. The intended academic goal is to study Islamic sciences and Arabic linguistics itself. Another pragmatic goal is for the benefit of certain professions such as translators, diplomacy, and working in various fields that require Arabic like working in various regions of Arab countries. This paper will discuss this last purpose

## 2. Method

This research uses a qualitative research method that is descriptive and analytic. This type describes the causes and effects of a particular phenomenon, idea, or symptom. The data collection technique includes taking or searching for secondary data from books, journals, theses, articles, and reports. The data are taken from references or sources that are related to the problem to be examined. The research stage is to identify the problem and analyze the data and facts.

## 3. Results and Discussions

### 3.1. Working in a foreign country: a profession or a compulsion?

Indonesia is one of the countries in the Southeast Asian region that sends a large number of workers abroad. On the one hand, the sending of Indonesian migrant workers is a source of state revenue, apart from tourism and other economic sectors. From the internal side of workers, many people want to become migrant workers because they have fewer opportunities to work in their own country. However, deciding to become a migrant worker who leaves their family for a distant place and for a long time is a tough choice that one must take.

Becoming a migrant worker, especially a less-skilled person, is the last option out of all other ones. The difficulty of finding a job in the country is generally the reason for some uneducated workers to try their luck in other countries. In addition, working as a farmer as a traditional livelihood is increasingly dragging

them into poverty. This poverty issue is not caused by a lazy attitude as suspected by some parties, but rather due to the slow responses of relevant bureaucracy to overcome it (Valentine, 1986).

Sending workers abroad is one way to solve this unemployment issue. It is undeniable that sending migrant workers abroad has opened up opportunities for domestic job seekers to find the best jobs. Meanwhile, for the government, this program will trigger opportunities to empower human resources and an effort to reduce poverty by opening jobs abroad. Thus, the Indonesian government always takes various ways to tackle the unemployment problem in Indonesia. One of which is sending migrant workers to Saudi Arabia. It is one of the countries for placing Indonesian migrant workers in the Middle East region because Saudi Arabia is very dependent on foreign workers to work in informal sectors.

Saudi Arabia is continuously experiencing rapid economic development and progress after the discovery of petroleum as the newest source of income. This requires many skilled workforces. Also, economic progress and democratization in Saudi Arabia have had an impact on its people's social life and lifestyle, so domestic work is seen as a low-level job. Saudi Arabian people prefer to employ workers from abroad to do domestic jobs, whereas Indonesian workers dominate this sector.

The large number of migrant workers coming to Saudi Arabia is also facilitated by the existence of close religious ties and good bilateral relations between the two countries. Therefore, they can adapt more easily when working there. The bilateral relations between the two countries are also being further enhanced through various fields of cooperation, including employment cooperation. The workforce field is mostly occupied by Indonesian workers and is most needed in Saudi Arabia. Specifically, most of them work as household assistants because it can accommodate workers with low educational levels so this sector contributes the most foreign exchange to the country.

Those working in this field generally only hold an elementary or junior high school diploma and do not get decent jobs in the country. This is the reason why many workers are placed as household assistants in Saudi Arabia (Ismail, 2019). Although migrant workers are considered Indonesia's biggest foreign exchange earners, they often face problems in the forms of violence, being accused of murder, physical abuse from employers, the death penalty, and even problems related to the illegal status for those who do not have a residence permit (Overstayers).

This problem of migrant workers then becomes homework for the Government of Indonesia to find a solution so that this problem of migrant workers can be resolved. Migrant workers, whether they have high or low educational status, must still be given the same protection. The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Article 27 paragraph (2) states that "every citizen has the right to work and a decent living for humanity" (Al Hasmi, *et.al* 2022) The Indonesian government has made many efforts to solve the problems faced by Indonesian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia, one of which is protection diplomacy. Protection diplomacy is a method to protect its citizens through negotiating or non-violent means.

### **3.2. Analyzing the Migrant Workers' Needs**

Today, many Indonesian citizens try their luck abroad to find the best jobs. Most of them get good jobs and treatment from the people around them. However, some get inappropriate jobs and treatment from their surroundings. Many migrant workers experience this unfair situation, whether it is published in the media or not. Many heartbreaking cases that befell Indonesian workers abroad often adorn our newspapers.

The problems faced by Indonesian workers abroad are due to several ignored things related to their jobs. Many of them only possess makeshift supplies without adequate knowledge and skills regarding their field of work. Therefore, to prevent other similar cases in the future, prospective migrant workers must prepare the best possible provisions independently supported by related parties in terms of their departure to another country. For those who want to work in Arab countries, there are two crucial things to consider: 1) understanding Arabic culture, and; 2) being able to speak Arabic. Of course, they must not forget the most important matter, namely having adequate skills to perform the best performance out in the country they want to go to. However, it is not my concern to discuss this last factor in this limited working paper.

#### **3.2.1. Provision of Arabic Cultural Knowledge**

For many Indonesians, 'Arab' is always associated with wealth and violence. For Arabs, 'Indonesia' has always been associated with overpopulation and poverty. On both sides, there is prejudice, ignorance, and misinformation. Nonetheless, contacts between the two nations are increasingly developing in all aspects along with better progress in communication and greater cooperation efforts based on various interests.

Based on the facts above, every Indonesian who wants to interact with Arab people for any business, including for work, should pay attention to their culture and traditions to avoid misunderstandings that often lead to unwanted things. Some Arabic traditions that they must pay attention to include:

- Arabic style of communication; the communication style of the Arabs is different from Western people who speak directly and clearly. Generally, Arabs like to talk excessively and have a lot of small talks (*mujamalah*). For example, when an Arab meets his friend, he will not just ask how he is doing. It is not enough to just express one phrase. The word `la` (no) told by the guest is not enough to stop the extra food and drink. To make sure that the guest is full, the guest must repeat `la` several times, adding an oath (*Wallah*) if necessary.
- Arabic non-verbal gestures; in speaking, Arabs don't just use their mouths, but also their hands. There are many typical Arabic sign languages that Indonesians need to understand. For example, as a substitute for or accompanying the words, `Wait a moment!` or `Be patient!` when called or crossing the road (while a vehicle is approaching), Arabs will place all their fingers together facing upwards. If someone does not understand this sign language, there might be a misunderstanding or even an accident.
- Since childhood, Arabs are trained to express feelings as they are, for example by crying or screaming. They are used to loud voices to express something. However, their loud voices might be interpreted as anger by someone who doesn't understand this style of speech. Many Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia who do not understand this thing may identify their employer's loud voice with anger, even though they are not angry. On the other hand, the smiles of female migrant workers towards Arab men, which are intended as an expression of politeness, may be considered a 'temptation'. This kind of intercultural misunderstanding can lead to something more serious.
- The traffic rules or signs that apply in Saudi Arabia are different from those that apply in our country. In Indonesia, every public road user must be on the left lane of the road. This is different from what applies in Saudi Arabia, where they ride their vehicles on the right side. The high frequency of traffic accidents by Indonesian drivers is allegedly due to their misunderstanding of these traffic signs.
- For Arabs, the house is truly a part of privacy that not everyone can access easily. The design of the house, which is generally in the form of a rectangular terraced building, describes the building of a fortress that is difficult to penetrate. Every house is always closed with a high wall fence and the gate can be multi-layered. What's behind the wall is privacy that should not be consumed by the public. Therefore, one cannot look around and observe the front doors of Saudi houses or just look at the top of the building. Someone who breaches their house can be accused of `harami/ali baba` alias `thief` or kidnapper who is stalking his prey. Even more, so if the perpetrator does not speak Arabic, he will explain the real reasons for his actions.

### 3.2.2. Provision of Arabic Language

Many negative cases experienced by migrant workers in Arab countries are mostly because they cannot speak Arabic well to communicate. Because of the deadlock in communication between the two parties (employers and workers), there are often unexpected things happen. Therefore, it is important for prospective workers who want to work in Arab countries to master Arabic for building good communication.

Those working in Arab countries have different needs from *madrasahs* or *pesantren* students for the Arabic language. Thus, current learning materials applied by formal and informal educational institutions have so far not been following the needs of Indonesian migrant workers. What they need is a language of communication, not theories. Because most migrant workers in Arabia usually work in informal sectors, they also need to learn daily Arabic language (*amiyah*), and it is often different from the formal one (*fusha*).

Arabic is one of the major languages in the world spoken by more than 200 million people. It is used officially in more than 22 countries that are members of the Arab League. In general, Arabic has two varieties. The first is *Fusha* (standard Arabic) and the second is *Amiyyah* (informal Arabic). The first is generally used in official communications like in schools, offices, seminars, diplomas, news, books, magazines, official documents, and so on. However, this kind of language is also sometimes used to communicate in daily activities. This variety is much studied in Indonesia as the language of the Qoran and hadith, the sources of the Islamic religion embraced by the majority of the Indonesian population (Musgamy, 2014).

Meanwhile, the second type is often used for communication purposes or daily conversations by most citizens, even if they are educated or illiterate. *Amiyah* Arabic is inseparable from the official one (*fusha*) that we learn in *madrasahs*. It's just that it doesn't fully comply with Arabic rules or grammar. Almost all Arab countries have their own *Amiyah* language (slang). In other words, the *amiyah* language used by Egyptians is slightly different from those in Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Algeria, Morocco, and others. The language of '*amiyah*' even varies within the same country. However, they can be quickly adapted, because these dialects are not completely different from Arabic which they both understand and use. In other words, they understand each other, even though they cannot use other nations' dialects.

The '*amiyah*' language is usually a pronunciation of the official Arabic language with certain patterns that are relatively fixed. Speech lightening in informal communication is a common phenomenon that occurs in all languages in the world. Such a way of speaking is normal for language owners because it is part of pragmatic principles and efficiency in communicating (Hindun, 2012). However, this will become strange for foreigners who study it for the first time.

To find out where a friend is going, the Javanese can simply ask "*ngondi*"? Foreigners who learn the official variety of Javanese will not understand this question. There are also no Javanese dictionaries that contain it, so it seems as if it does not come from the original Javanese language. This expression is an abbreviation and lightening of the pronunciation of the Javanese *fusha* "*arep lungo menyang endi*?"

The same thing also applies in Arabic. The *amiyah* language, which is considered strange for Indonesians who have studied Arabic *fusha* for decades, can usually be traced to its *fusha* roots. The Egyptians, for example, pronounce "q" with an "a" sound, and j with a "g" sound. Algerians value the *hamza* as half of a consonant so that when it comes to life after another letter that dies, the two vowels are swapped. Some phrases that seem strange also usually come from the *fusha* language where the pronunciation is lightened and accelerated. *Elli gabak hina?* in Egyptian *amiyah*, can be traced from *ma al-ladzi jabaka huna* (What brought you here)?. *Wasy rack?* in Algerian dialect is from *wa ayyu syai araka* (how are you)?. *Sylunkum?* that is commonly spoken by Syrians and Lebanese from *ayyu syai launukum* (how are you)?. and *Dahin* in the Saudi Arabian dialect stands for *hadza al-hin* (this time). Because the two varieties of Arabic belong to the same family, Indonesian workers must master both of them, even if with a portion that fits their work needs. Sentences in Arabic are not a pile of words, but a series of words arranged systematically with certain rules to express meanings according to the speaker' will. Thus, knowledge of *the fusha* language will accelerate people learning *amiyah*. *Amiyah* Arabic is a complementary requirement for Indonesian migrant workers in Arabia as well as Indonesian pilgrims who live in Saudi Arabia for a limited period of time (Maknun, 2016).

### 3.3. Arabic curriculum for prospective migrant workers

As has been described previously, migrant workers in Arab countries must prepare two things to be able to communicate at work. They relate to the language and communication culture of the Arabs which are often different from the Indonesian culture. To accurately determine what specific competencies they must master in learning Arabic, there must be a proper assessment need.

Hutchinson and Waters proposed three ways to find out the target language learning needs for specific purposes (Nation & Macalister, 2010), namely:

1. necessities, including what must be mastered by students to be able to use the language learned in certain situations that they will experience
2. Gaps, namely the gaps between what should be mastered and what the learner has mastered in terms of the language being studied
3. Wants, namely what the learner of a foreign language wants to learn

The prediction of the basic needs of Indonesian migrant workers is determined by experts based on their research and experience by taking an inventory of the vocabulary, structures, and expressions needed by Indonesian migrant workers to communicate in places and linguistic situations that they may encounter while working in other countries. Thus, the Arabic language learning curriculum for migrant workers can be developed using a notional-situational model. Even though there are many drawbacks like insufficient knowledge of the language being studied, this model curriculum is the best for foreign language learning with special purposes (Richard, 2001). The reason is that this curriculum presents language in context and teaches its use in a practical, communicative, and fast way.

The gap between students' real competencies and idealized ones can be identified through proficiency tests. This aims to check where the student is and from what point learning they can begin. Another consideration for determining the learning curriculum is the special desires of the students. This can be revealed if students already have good basic Arabic skills and know what their needs will be in the workplace later. If not, this option can be ignored in the design of the Arabic learning curriculum for them.

The following are some places and language situations that migrant workers may experience in Arab countries. This can be taken into consideration in preparing an Arabic language learning curriculum: Introduction and greeting, employment contract, numbers and money, food and drink, patterns of asking, hints and help, time and day, profession designation, house and its furnishings, shops and markets, and airport

#### 4. Conclusion

Some descriptions above are the basic materials for reference in developing a learning curriculum for Indonesian migrant workers. As an initial idea, of course, there are still many things to discuss that do not yet exist in this paper. Therefore, there should be constructive criticism and input from various parties for further improvements.

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