

Implementing Scaffolding Strategy in Qira'atul Kutub Learning to Overcome I'rab Difficulties among Arabic Language Education Students

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Abstract

Reading unvowelled classical Arabic texts requires students to determine the grammatical position of each word and the case ending (*i'rab*) it carries, a skill that many students of Arabic Language Education find difficult, particularly when their prior schooling differs widely. This study aims to describe the forms of *i'rab* difficulty experienced by students, the stages of scaffolding applied by the lecturer in Qira'atul Kutub learning, and the students' responses to that scaffolding. The study used a descriptive qualitative approach with the researcher acting as a non-participant observer. The subjects were 30 fifth-semester students in two classes of the Qira'atul Kutub course, using the chapter on ritual purity (*Bab al-Thaharah*) of *Fath al-Qarib* as the reading text. Data were gathered through observation of three meetings, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, and were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña. The findings show three layers of difficulty: determining the final vowel of words, vowelising whole words, and understanding the technical terms of *nahwu*. The lecturer applied scaffolding through modelling, guiding questions, gradual withdrawal of support, and independent reading in the third meeting, while students also reported support from peers. Responses differed by prior ability: graduates of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) perceived the strategy as strengthening their foundations, graduates of general high schools benefited most from the explanation of grammatical terms, whereas a student who could not yet read Arabic fluently still struggled to follow the lessons. These findings suggest that scaffolding at the level of *i'rab* is effective only when the students' prerequisite reading ability falls within their zone of proximal development, so a diagnostic reading assessment and tiered support are needed in heterogeneous classes.

Keywords: Scaffolding, Qira'atul Kutub, I'rab, Classical Arabic Texts, Arabic Language Education

ملخص

تتطلب قراءة النصوص العربية التراثية غير المشكولة من الطالب أن يحدد موقع كل كلمة في الجملة وعلامة إعرابها، وهي مهارة يجد فيها كثير من طلاب قسم تعليم اللغة العربية صعوبة، ولا سيما مع تفاوت خلفياتهم الدراسية. يهدف هذا البحث إلى وصف أشكال الصعوبات الإعرابية التي يواجهها الطلاب، ومراحل استراتيجية السقالات التعليمية (Scaffolding) التي طبقها المحاضر في مادة قراءة الكتب، واستجابة الطلاب لها. استخدم البحث المنهج الوصفي النوعي، وكان الباحث ملاحظاً غير مشارك. وتكوّن أفراد البحث من ثلاثين طالباً في الفصل الدراسي الخامس موزعين على فصلين، وكان النص المقروء كتاب الطهارة من «فتح القريب». وجمعت البيانات عن طريق ملاحظة ثلاث محاضرات، والمقابلة شبه المقتنة، والتوثيق، وحُللت وفق النموذج التفاعلي لمايلز وهوبرمان وسالديانيا. وأظهرت النتائج ثلاث طبقات من الصعوبة: تحديد حركة آخر الكلمة، وضبط الكلمة كاملة، وفهم المصطلحات النحوية. وطبق المحاضر السقالات من خلال النمذجة، والأسئلة الموجهة، والتقليل التدريجي للمساعدة، ثم القراءة المستقلة في المحاضرة الثالثة، مع مساندة الأقران كما ذكر الطلاب. واختلفت

الاستجابات بحسب القدرة السابقة؛ فخرجو المعاهد رأوا أن الاستراتيجية ترسخ أساسهم، وخرجو المدارس العامة استفادوا أكثر من شرح المصطلحات النحوية، في حين بقي الطالب الذي لم يتقن القراءة بعد يجد صعوبة في متابعة الدرس. وتدل هذه النتائج على أن السقالات على مستوى الإعراب لا تؤتي ثمارها إلا إذا كانت مهارة القراءة الأساسية داخل منطقة النمو القريبة لدى الطالب، مما يستدعي تشخيصًا مبدئيًا ودعمًا متدرجًا في الفصول غير المتجانسة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السقالات التعليمية، قراءة الكتب، الإعراب، النصوص التراثية، تعليم اللغة العربية

Introduction

Reading classical Arabic texts (*kitab turath*, known locally as *kitab kuning*) is a core competence for students of Arabic Language Education in Indonesian Islamic higher education. These texts are generally printed without short vowels, so the reader must reconstruct the vowelling of every word from knowledge of morphology (*sharaf*) and syntax (*nahwu*). The decisive part of this process is *i'rab*: identifying the grammatical position of a word in the sentence and pronouncing the case or mood ending that the position demands. A student who misreads *i'rab* does not only mispronounce a word; he or she frequently misunderstands who does what to whom in the sentence, and therefore misreads the legal or theological meaning of the text.

The role of short vowels in Arabic reading has long been debated. In a critical review, Abu-Rabia (2019) shows that the evidence is divided between studies that find short vowels helpful and studies that find them unnecessary or even a hindrance for skilled readers, and he attributes part of the divergence to differences in readers' proficiency and to methodological problems. For learners of Arabic as a foreign language, however, the absence of vowels means that the burden of reconstruction falls entirely on grammatical knowledge. Consistent with this, Mariyam (2021) found that mastery of *nahwu* and *sharaf* accounted for 76.1% of the variance in the ability of pesantren students to read *kitab kuning*. Grammatical knowledge is thus a prerequisite, but knowing rules in the abstract does not automatically translate into the ability to apply them while reading a continuous text.

In Indonesian universities the problem is compounded by the heterogeneity of students' backgrounds. Some students enter the Arabic Language Education programme after years of *kitab* study in a pesantren, while others come from general senior high schools with little or no prior Arabic. At the same institution as the present study, Pamessangi (2019) identified educational

background, the lack of a basic foundation, and limited vocabulary among the main sources of students' difficulty in learning Arabic. Ubadah (2020) similarly reported that the ability of Arabic Language Education students at IAIN Palu to read unvowelled texts varied considerably and depended heavily on the techniques used by the lecturer. A single classroom may therefore contain students for whom the same text is either routine or almost inaccessible.

Scaffolding offers a conceptual tool for responding to this heterogeneity. The term was introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to describe the process by which a tutor enables a novice to carry out a task that would be beyond his or her unassisted efforts, by recruiting interest, simplifying the task, marking critical features, and demonstrating solutions. The idea is closely associated with Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD), the distance between what a learner can do alone and what he or she can do with the guidance of a more capable other. Eun (2019) argues that the ZPD should be understood as an overarching concept that ties together Vygotsky's notions of social origin, mediation, and internalisation, while Shabani (2016) emphasises that mediation through more knowledgeable others is the common thread in scaffolding-based pedagogies. In their review, van de Pol, Volman, and Beishuizen (2010) identify three defining characteristics of scaffolding: contingency (support adapted to the learner's current level), fading (gradual withdrawal of support), and transfer of responsibility to the learner.

Research on scaffolding in reading has concentrated mainly on English and on young learners. Reynolds (2017), reviewing 57 studies of interactional scaffolding for reading comprehension, found that observational studies predominated and that the populations were overwhelmingly in the early grades of primary school. In a guided-reading intervention with young adolescents, Reynolds and Goodwin (2016) further showed that the effect of scaffolding depended on the type of support: motivational scaffolding predicted growth in reading comprehension, whereas several other types did not. The question of which support helps which reader is therefore central to scaffolding research.

In Arabic language education, studies that draw on scaffolding have so far mostly addressed teaching materials and productive skills. Muzdalifah, Khasairi, and Kholisin (2021) developed a *nahwu* textbook based on *al-Ajurrumiyyah* using a scaffolding structure in which

sentence patterns taken from Qur'anic verses are presented as initial support. Nasution and Walad (2022) showed the effectiveness of a constructivism-based Arabic textbook for writing skills in higher education, and Abdel-Malek (2020) described how a genre-based teaching-learning cycle, moving from modelling to joint and then independent construction, empowered university learners of Arabic to write. Closer to the reading of unvowelled texts, Sudiarti (2015) described intensive grammar-based reading in which the lecturer first reads and explains the position of each word before students practise, a procedure that resembles scaffolding but was not analysed as such.

These studies leave a gap. Research on Qira'atul Kutub and *kitab kuning* reading has tended either to map students' difficulties (Pamessangi, 2019; Ubadah, 2020) or to test materials and methods (Muzdalifah et al., 2021; Sudiarti, 2015), while the interactional support that lecturers provide in the classroom, and the way students with different backgrounds respond to it, has received little attention. The present study addresses this gap by examining scaffolding as it unfolds in the interaction between lecturer and students in a Qira'atul Kutub class. It seeks to answer three questions: (1) What forms of *i'rab* difficulty do Arabic Language Education students experience when reading *Fath al-Qarib*? (2) What stages of scaffolding does the lecturer apply to address these difficulties? (3) How do students with different educational backgrounds respond to the scaffolding?

Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. Following Nassaji (2015), descriptive qualitative research aims to provide a rich description of a phenomenon as it occurs in its natural setting, using data that are primarily verbal and analysed interpretively. The approach was chosen because the study seeks to describe how scaffolding was implemented and experienced in a real classroom, not to measure its effect statistically.

The study was conducted in the Arabic Language Education Study Programme, Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri Palopo, in the Qira'atul Kutub course (two credit units) offered in the fifth semester. The reading text was the chapter on ritual purity (*Bab al-Thaharah*) of *Fath al-Qarib*, a widely used commentary on the Shafi'i legal primer *Matn Abi Shuja'*. The subjects were 30 students enrolled in two parallel classes: 14 students in the first

class and 16 in the second. Their educational backgrounds were diverse: 5 graduated from Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), 8 from state Islamic senior high schools (*Madrasah Aliyah Negeri*), and 17 from general senior high schools or vocational schools. Interview informants were selected purposively to represent this range of backgrounds and initial reading abilities.

The researcher acted as a non-participant observer and did not teach the course; the lessons were conducted entirely by the lecturer in charge. This position allowed the researcher to follow the interaction between lecturer and students without providing support himself, although the researcher's familiarity with the course content is acknowledged as part of the interpretive lens of the study.

Data were collected through three techniques. First, observation was carried out over three meetings, one per week, to record the stages of support provided by the lecturer and the students' responses. Second, semi-structured interviews were held with students to explore the *i'rab* difficulties they experienced and their experience of the lessons. Third, documentation included the class attendance records from the university's learning management system and students' worksheets.

The data were analysed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), consisting of data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Interview responses and field notes were coded into categories of difficulty, stages of support, and responses, and then compared across student backgrounds. Trustworthiness was established through source triangulation (students from different educational backgrounds), technique triangulation (observation, interviews, and documentation), and member checking, in which informants were asked to confirm the summaries of their interviews. To protect their identity, informants are referred to by codes (S1 to S5).

Results and Discussion

Results

1. Initial Condition and Forms of I'rab Difficulty

Observation showed that the students' initial ability to read the text of *Fath al-Qarib* was uneven and closely related to their educational background, as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Educational Background and Initial Reading Ability of Students

Educational background	Number	Initial ability to read the text
Islamic boarding school (<i>pesantren</i>)	5	Tended to read fluently
State Islamic senior high school (MAN)	8	Varied; some read fairly fluently
General senior high / vocational school	17	Varied; one student could not yet read
Total	30	

Source: Observation and interview data

Interviews and observation revealed three layers of difficulty. The first and most frequently mentioned was determining the final vowel of words. During observation, many students mispronounced the case endings of words when reading the text. Informant S1 confirmed this:

"The most difficult part is the final vowel (harakat akhir)." (S1)

This difficulty indicates that the students had not yet connected the grammatical position of a word in the sentence with the case marker that must be pronounced.

The second layer was the difficulty of vowelizing whole words. For some students the problem was not confined to word endings but extended to the reading of the word as a whole. Informant S2 stated:

"It is difficult to read all of the vowels." (S2)

This shows that for part of the class the obstacle lay not only in syntax but also in recognising the morphological form of words.

The third layer was the difficulty of understanding grammatical terminology. Informant S3 explained:

"It is difficult to understand and memorise the terms of nahwu." (S3)

Some students were therefore unable to follow explanations of *i'rab* because they had not yet mastered the terms used to express them, such as *fa'il*, *maf'ul bih*, or *mudaf ilayh*.

Beyond these three layers, the data show two contrasting positions in the same class. A *pesantren* graduate (S4) described being "quite fluent in reading", while another student (S5)

stated, "I cannot read at all because I am not yet fluent". This wide range of ability within one class formed the context in which scaffolding was applied.

2. Stages of Scaffolding Applied by the Lecturer

Observation over three meetings showed that the lecturer provided support in stages, moving from full support towards students' independence, as summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Stages of Scaffolding Observed in Qira'atul Kutub Learning

Stage	Lecturer's action	Role of students
Modelling	Reads the text of <i>Bab al-Thaharah</i> and performs its <i>i'rab</i> first	Observe how the position of a word determines its ending
Guiding questions	Asks questions that lead students to determine the position of words	Determine the position and ending with guidance
Gradual withdrawal of support	Reduces support as the meetings progress	Take a larger share of <i>i'rab</i> decisions
Independent reading	Asks students to read on their own in the third meeting	Read the text independently

Source: Observation data

At the modelling stage, the lecturer read the text and demonstrated its *i'rab* before asking students to do anything, so that they could see the complete reasoning from position to ending. At the guiding-question stage, the lecturer did not provide answers directly but asked questions that led students to determine the position of words themselves, shifting part of the thinking process from the lecturer to the students. The support was then reduced as the meetings progressed, and in the third meeting students were asked to read the text independently. In addition to the lecturer's support, students reported in interviews that they also received help from their peers during the lessons.

3. Students' Responses to Scaffolding

Students' responses differed according to their initial ability. In general, students felt helped by the lecturer's modelling and by the support of their peers. For pesantren graduates, the stages of the lesson served to strengthen the grammatical foundation they already possessed. For graduates of general senior high and vocational schools, the most valuable support was the explanation of grammatical terms, which had previously been their main obstacle. By contrast, the

student who could not yet read fluently still found it difficult to follow the flow of the lessons, even after gradual support had been provided. Table 3 summarises these responses.

Table 3. Students' Responses to Scaffolding by Initial Ability

Group	Main difficulty	Most helpful support	Condition after the lessons
Pesantren graduates	Relatively few	Reinforcement of grammatical foundations	Foundations strengthened
General high school graduates	Grammatical terms; final vowels	Explanation of terms; modelling	Helped
Student not yet able to read fluently	Reading the text in general	Support at the level of <i>i'rab</i> did not yet reach this student	Still struggling

Source: Interview and observation data

Discussion

Difficulty as a layered problem

The three layers of difficulty found in this study suggest that "difficulty in *i'rab*" is not a single problem. The first layer, determining the final vowel, is a syntactic problem in the strict sense. The second, vowelising whole words, belongs to morphology and word recognition, while the third, grammatical terminology, is a metalinguistic problem. This layering is consistent with Abu-Rabia's (2019) observation that the contribution of vowels to Arabic reading depends on the reader's proficiency: for a skilled reader, the unvowelled word is reconstructed almost automatically, whereas for a less proficient reader every word demands conscious analysis. It also supports Mariyam's (2021) finding that mastery of both *nahwu* and *sharaf* underlies the ability to read *kitab kuning*: students who struggled to vowel whole words lacked a morphological foundation that no amount of *i'rab* instruction alone could supply.

The close relationship between educational background and initial ability echoes the earlier study at the same institution by Pamelessangi (2019), which named educational background and the lack of a basic foundation as major sources of difficulty. The present study adds that this heterogeneity is not merely a background variable but shapes what kind of support each student can use, as discussed below.

Scaffolding stages and the theory of scaffolding

The stages observed in the classroom correspond closely to the functions of scaffolding described by Wood et al. (1976). Modelling the *i'rab* of the text is a form of demonstrating solutions, and guiding questions such as asking students to decide the position of a word mark the critical features of the task while leaving the decision to the learner. The sequence from modelling through guided questioning to independent reading also reflects two of the three characteristics identified by van de Pol et al. (2010), namely fading and transfer of responsibility. The same sequence underlies the genre-based teaching-learning cycle described by Abdel-Malek (2020), which moves from modelling to joint and then independent construction, suggesting that this pedagogical logic applies across receptive and productive skills in Arabic.

Compared with Sudiarti (2015), whose grammar-based reading procedure also began with the lecturer reading and explaining the position of words, the present study shows the same pattern as an interactional process rather than a fixed procedure. It also complements Muzdalifah et al. (2021), who built scaffolding into the structure of a *nahwu* textbook: in the present case, scaffolding was provided through live interaction, which Reynolds (2017) calls interactional scaffolding, the responsive in-person support that an expert reader offers to a novice. The support that students reported receiving from peers is in line with van de Pol, Mercer, and Volman (2019), who found that students' uptake of teacher support in subsequent small-group interaction mediated the effect of scaffolding on learning. Peer support can thus extend the lecturer's scaffolding beyond the moments of direct interaction.

Differential responses and the zone of proximal development

The most important finding of this study is that the same scaffolding produced different responses. For pesantren graduates it consolidated existing knowledge; for general high school graduates, explaining grammatical terms opened access to the analysis; but for the student who could not yet read fluently, support at the level of *i'rab* did not yet reach the student. This pattern can be explained through Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development. Scaffolding is effective only within the ZPD, that is, for tasks that the learner cannot yet perform alone but can perform with assistance. Determining *i'rab* in an unvowelled text presupposes the ability to decode Arabic script and recognise word forms. For a student who has not mastered this prerequisite, *i'rab*

lies beyond the current ZPD, and what is needed is support at a lower level, such as decoding vowelised text and recognising basic word patterns. Eun's (2019) view of the ZPD as an overarching concept linking social mediation and internalisation implies that the level of mediation must match the learner's developmental level.

The finding that explaining terminology helped general high school graduates most points in the same direction. For these students, grammatical terms function as mediating tools in Vygotsky's sense: until they understand what *fa'il* or *mudaf ilayh* means, the lecturer's guiding questions cannot be taken up. This is consistent with Nasution and Walad (2022), who argue that learning in higher education becomes effective when students can construct meaning from their existing knowledge, and with Reynolds and Goodwin (2016), whose results showed that only certain types of support predicted reading growth. What counts as helpful support thus depends on where each learner is.

The findings also suggest a risk in fading support according to the course schedule rather than individual readiness. In the observed lessons, independent reading was introduced in the third meeting for the whole class. van de Pol et al. (2019) found that the benefits of adaptive support were hampered when teachers withdrew support too early. In a heterogeneous Qira'atul Kutub class, uniform fading may suit fluent readers but leave less prepared students without the support they still need. Contingency, the first characteristic of scaffolding in van de Pol et al. (2010), therefore requires the lecturer to diagnose each student's reading level before and during instruction.

These findings have practical implications. Lecturers of Qira'atul Kutub may begin the course with a short diagnostic reading task to identify which students need support at the level of decoding and morphology and which are ready for *i'rab*. Support can then be tiered: a glossary of grammatical terms with examples from the text for students unfamiliar with *nahwu* terminology; structured peer pairing between pesantren graduates and less experienced students; and additional decoding practice for students who cannot yet read fluently, before they are asked to read independently.

This study has limitations. Observation covered only three meetings, and the data describe processes and students' perceptions rather than measured gains in *i'rab* accuracy, since no comparable reading tests were administered before and after the lessons. The findings should therefore be read as a description of how scaffolding was implemented and experienced, not as evidence of its effectiveness. Future studies could combine classroom observation with pre- and post-reading assessments and could follow students over a full semester.

Conclusion

This study described scaffolding in Qira'atul Kutub learning for Arabic Language Education students reading *Fath al-Qarib*. Students' *i'rab* difficulties appeared in three layers: determining the final vowel of words, vowelizing whole words, and understanding grammatical terminology. The lecturer applied scaffolding through modelling, guiding questions, gradual withdrawal of support, and independent reading, and students also drew on the help of peers. Students' responses differed by initial ability: the strategy reinforced the foundations of pesantren graduates, explanations of grammatical terms benefited general high school graduates most, and a student who could not yet read fluently continued to struggle.

The central insight of the study is that scaffolding at the level of *i'rab* works when the prerequisite skills of decoding and word recognition already lie within the student's zone of proximal development. In heterogeneous classes, lecturers are advised to conduct a diagnostic reading assessment at the start of the course, to provide tiered support including a glossary of grammatical terms and structured peer pairing, and to fade support according to individual readiness rather than a uniform schedule. Future research should measure changes in *i'rab* accuracy before and after scaffolding and observe the process over a longer period.

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