Teaching Applied Grammar to Enhance Arabic Language Skills for Non-Native Speakers

Abdulwasiu Isiaq Nasirudeen

Faculty of Languages- Al-Madinah International University (MEDIU) Malaysia

Corresponding author Email: abdul.wasiu@mediu.edu.my

Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of teaching applied grammar as a means to improve Arabic language skills among non-native speakers. Recognizing the challenges faced by learners in mastering Arabic grammar, the research investigates a targeted pedagogical approach that emphasizes practical application of grammatical structures in communicative contexts. A mixed-methods design was employed, involving pre- and post-assessments of language proficiency and qualitative feedback from participants. The findings indicate that integrating applied grammar activities significantly enhances learners' grammatical accuracy, fluency, and confidence in using Arabic. The results suggest that instructional strategies focusing on real-life applications of grammar can facilitate more effective language acquisition for non-native speakers. This study contributes to the field of Arabic language education by providing evidence-based insights for curriculum developers and language instructors aiming to optimize teaching methodologies for non-native learners.

Keywords: *Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL), Applied Grammar, Communicative Language Teaching, Non-Native Speakers, Language Skills, Naḥw and Ṣarf.*

ملخص البحث

تستكشف هذه الدراسة فعالية تدريس القواعد التطبيقية كوسيلة لتحسين مهارات اللغة العربية لدى الناطقين بغيرها. وإدراكًا للتحديات التي يواجهها المتعلمون في إتقان قواعد اللغة العربية، يبحث البحث في نهج تربوي مُستهدف يُركز على التطبيق العملي للتراكيب النحوية في السياقات التواصلية. وقد استُخدم تصميمٌ مُختلط الأساليب، يتضمن تقييماتٍ قبليةً ولاحقةً لإتقان اللغة، وتغذيةً راجعةً نوعيةً من المشاركين. وتشير النتائج إلى أن دمج أنشطة القواعد التطبيقية يُعزز بشكل ملحوظ دقة المتعلمين النحوية، وطلاقتهم، وثقتهم في استخدام اللغة العربية. كما تُشير النتائج إلى أن استراتيجيات التدريس التي تُركز على التطبيقات العملية للقواعد تُسهّل اكتساب اللغة بشكل أكثر فعاليةً لدى الناطقين بغيرها. تُساهم هذه الدراسة في مجال تعليم اللغة العربية من خلال توفير رؤئً قائمة على الأدلة لمطوري المناهج ومعلمي اللغات بهدف تحسين منهجيات التدريس للمتعلمين بغيرها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: *اللغة العربية كلغة أجنبية، القواعد التطبيقية، تدريس اللغة التواصلية، الناطقون بغير اللغة الأم، المهارات اللغوية، النحو والصرف.*

Introduction

Background and Significance of the Study

Arabic is one of the world's major languages, with deep historical, cultural, and religious significance. As globalization increases cross-cultural communication, the demand for learning Arabic as a foreign language has grown significantly among students, professionals, and researchers. Mastery of Arabic requires not only vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension but also strong grammatical competence, which is fundamental to accurate expression and interpretation. Grammar plays a central role in structuring meaning in Arabic, and weaknesses in grammatical knowledge can hinder learners' overall language development. Therefore, identifying effective methods for teaching Arabic grammar has become an important area of research in language pedagogy.

Overview of Arabic Language Learning Challenges for Non-Native Speakers

Non-native speakers often encounter substantial challenges when learning Arabic due to its unique linguistic features. The language's root-and-pattern morphology, complex verb conjugation system, case endings (iʿrāb), and flexible yet rule-governed syntax present difficulties for learners whose first languages differ structurally. Additionally, the diglossic situation—where Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) coexists with regional dialects—creates further confusion regarding appropriate grammatical use in written and spoken contexts. Many learners also struggle with limited exposure to authentic language use and insufficient instructional approaches that fail to bridge the gap between theoretical grammar knowledge and practical language skills.

Rationale for Focusing on Applied Grammar Instruction

Traditional approaches to grammar instruction in Arabic often rely heavily on memorization and rule-based explanations, with limited opportunities for meaningful practice. Such methods may help students recognize grammatical forms but do not always support their ability to apply grammar accurately in communicative situations. Applied grammar instruction, in contrast, integrates explicit grammar teaching with contextualized activities that promote language use in real-life scenarios. This pedagogical approach enhances learner engagement, improves retention, and strengthens the connection between grammatical knowledge and communicative competence. Therefore, examining applied grammar as a means to

enhance Arabic language skills is both timely and necessary.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to investigate how applied grammar instruction can improve the linguistic performance of non-native speakers learning Arabic. The specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the major grammatical difficulties faced by non-native learners of Arabic.
2. Evaluate the effectiveness of applied grammar teaching strategies in enhancing learners' language skills.
3. Determine how applied grammar activities influence learners' ability to use grammar accurately in both written and spoken contexts.

Based on these objectives, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the common grammatical challenges experienced by non-native learners of Arabic?
2. How does applied grammar instruction affect learners' mastery and practical use of grammatical structures?
3. Which applied grammar strategies are most effective in improving overall Arabic language skills?

Scope and Limitations

This research focuses on non-native learners of Modern Standard Arabic at the beginner to intermediate levels. It examines selected grammatical structures that are typically challenging, such as verb patterns, sentence formation, and case endings. The study does not address dialectal Arabic or advanced grammatical topics. Limitations include the diversity of learners' linguistic backgrounds, potential differences in instructional environments, and the availability of consistent assessment tools across learning contexts. Additional constraints involve the relatively limited sample size and the reliance on self-reported data, which may affect the generalizability of the findings.

Literature Review

This literature review explores previous research on Arabic language acquisition, theories of language learning, grammar instruction in second-language (L2) contexts, and identifies gaps in the literature that the present study addresses.

1. Arabic Language Acquisition

Arabic presents unique challenges for non-native learners due to its complex morphology, root-and-pattern system, and diglossic nature. Several studies have highlighted common learner difficulties. Al-Jarf (2007) found that non-native speakers struggle with verb conjugation,

noun-adjective agreement, and case endings when learning Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Similarly, Abu-Rabia (2013) emphasized the impact of diglossia, noting that learners often confuse grammatical rules between MSA and colloquial dialects. Limited exposure to authentic Arabic input further complicates acquisition, as learners may understand rules theoretically but fail to apply them in communication (Holes, 2004).

2. Theories of Language Teaching and Learning

Several theoretical frameworks inform effective grammar instruction:

- **Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985):** Language acquisition occurs through comprehensible input slightly above the learner's current level (i+1), suggesting that exposure to grammatically rich input is essential.
- **Output Hypothesis (Swain, 2005):** Producing language encourages learners to notice gaps in their knowledge and test hypotheses, highlighting the importance of output-focused activities in grammar learning.
- **Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1996):** Interaction and negotiation for meaning provide opportunities to notice and process target forms.
- **Noticing Hypothesis (Schmidt, 1990):** Learners must consciously notice grammatical forms for acquisition to occur, supporting the use of form-focused instruction.
- **Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978):** Scaffolding and collaborative activities mediate learning, emphasizing guided practice in grammar instruction.

These frameworks suggest that grammar instruction should combine explicit teaching with opportunities for meaningful use, guided practice, and feedback.

3. Grammar Instruction in Second-Language Learning

Empirical research in L2 pedagogy has examined how different approaches to grammar instruction affect learner outcomes. Ellis (2006) and Nassaji and Fotos (2011) demonstrated that **explicit, form-focused instruction integrated into communicative activities** improves both accuracy and fluency more effectively than traditional rule-based methods. Task-based learning (TBL) has been shown to push learners to produce target structures in meaningful contexts, enhancing retention and transfer of grammatical knowledge

(Bygate, 2010). Feedback strategies, including recasts and elicitation, have been found to support learners' ability to self-correct and internalize grammatical rules (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Applied grammar instruction, which combines explicit explanation, contextualized practice, and communicative output, aligns with these findings. Studies on other languages suggest that such an approach promotes learner engagement, confidence, and practical application of grammar in authentic communication (Fotos & Ellis, 1991).

4. Applied Grammar Instruction in Arabic
Research specific to Arabic indicates that applied grammar interventions improve learners' linguistic competence. Watson (2016) reported that intermediate Arabic learners exposed to communicative grammar tasks demonstrated higher gains in both written and spoken accuracy than peers receiving traditional instruction. Al-Jarf and Al-Khresheh (2011) found that task-based activities, guided by explicit grammar instruction, significantly reduced common errors in verb patterns and agreement. However, most Arabic-focused studies are small-scale or short-term, highlighting the need for more robust empirical evidence.

5. Gaps in the Literature
Despite advances in L2 grammar pedagogy and emerging research in Arabic instruction, several gaps remain:

1. **Limited longitudinal and experimental studies** examining the long-term effects of applied grammar instruction in Arabic.
2. **Underrepresentation of communicative outcomes**, as most research focuses on discrete grammar test scores rather than performance in authentic tasks.
3. **Lack of diverse learner samples**, with few studies addressing learners from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds.
4. **Insufficient research on specific grammatical challenges**, such as case endings, cliticization, and complex verb patterns.
5. **Limited exploration of technology-enhanced applied grammar instruction** in Arabic contexts.

The current study addresses these gaps by implementing applied grammar instruction for intermediate non-native Arabic learners, measuring both accuracy and communicative competence through pre-

and post-tests, written and oral tasks, and learner feedback.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a **quasi-experimental mixed-methods design** to examine the impact of applied grammar instruction on the Arabic language performance of non-native learners. The quantitative component involved pre- and post-tests measuring grammatical accuracy and overall language proficiency, while the qualitative component included classroom observations and learner reflections to capture perceptions of instructional effectiveness. The quasi-experimental design was chosen because participants were drawn from intact classes, making random assignment impractical. A control group received traditional grammar instruction, while an experimental group received applied grammar instruction integrated with communicative activities.

Participants

Participants were **40 non-native speakers of Modern Standard Arabic** enrolled in an intermediate-level Arabic course at a university language center.

- **Age range:** 18–26 years
- **Proficiency level:** Intermediate (B1 according to CEFR guidelines),

confirmed through a placement test administered at the beginning of the semester

- **Group distribution:**
  - Experimental group: 20 students
  - Control group: 20 students
- **L1 backgrounds:** English, French, Turkish, and Malay Participants had at least one year of prior formal Arabic study. All participants provided informed consent and were assured that their academic standing would not be affected by participation.

Instruments and Materials
1. Grammar Achievement Tests

Two parallel tests—a **pre-test** and **post-test**—were designed to assess:

- Mastery of selected grammatical structures (verb patterns, agreement, case endings)
- Ability to apply grammar in context through sentence completion and short writing tasks The tests were validated by two experts in Arabic linguistics and language pedagogy.

2. Communicative Language Tasks

Participants completed oral and written tasks that required the use of target grammatical forms in meaningful contexts. These tasks included:

- Short dialogues
- Role-play scenarios
- Paragraph writing prompts
  Performance was evaluated with an analytic rubric measuring accuracy, fluency, and appropriateness.

3. Teaching Modules

The instructional materials for the experimental group included:

- Applied grammar lessons integrating explicit explanation with communicative tasks
- Authentic texts (paragraphs, videos, dialogues) illustrating grammar use
- Practice worksheets designed to transition from controlled to free production
  The control group received traditional rule-based instruction with textbook exercises.

4. Questionnaires

A post-intervention questionnaire gathered student perceptions on:

- Clarity of instruction
- Ease of applying grammatical rules
- Engagement during lessons
  Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

5. Observation Checklists

An observation checklist documented:

- Student participation
- Use of target forms during interactions
- Teacher techniques for feedback and scaffolding

Procedures

1. Preparation Phase

- Development and expert validation of tests, rubrics, and lesson plans
- Pilot testing instruments with a small group of learners not included in the study
- Training the instructor delivering applied grammar lessons to ensure consistent implementation

2. Intervention Phase (8 weeks)

Both groups received two 60-minute grammar sessions per week.

Experimental Group: Applied Grammar Instruction

Instruction followed a structured three-stage sequence:

1. **Explicit awareness stage:** Brief explanation of the target structure using meaningful examples.

2. **Guided practice:** Communicative tasks (information-gap activities, collaborative dialogues).

3. **Application stage:** Free production tasks integrating grammar into real-life scenarios.

Corrective feedback was provided using elicitation, metalinguistic prompts, and clarification requests.

Control Group: Traditional Grammar Instruction

- Rule explanation followed by textbook exercises
- Emphasis on memorization and sentence-level translation
- Limited communicative practice and minimal interaction

3. Data Collection

- **Week 1:** Administration of pre-tests and communicative tasks
- **Weeks 2–7:** Instructional intervention and classroom observations
- **Week 8:** Administration of post-tests, communicative performance tasks, and questionnaires
- All oral tasks were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data from the grammar tests and communicative tasks were analyzed using:

- **Descriptive statistics:** Mean scores, standard deviations, frequency counts
- **Paired-sample t-tests:** To compare pre- and post-test results within each group
- **Independent-sample t-tests:** To compare improvements between the experimental and control groups
- **Effect size (Cohen's d):** To evaluate the magnitude of instructional impact Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from observations and student questionnaires were examined using **thematic analysis**, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Themes focused on learner engagement, perceptions of difficulty, use of target forms, and the perceived effectiveness of instructional strategies.

Results

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study. Quantitative results include pre- and post-test scores measuring grammatical accuracy and communicative performance, while qualitative data are derived from student feedback and classroom observation notes. The results are organized to highlight differences between the experimental group (applied grammar instruction) and the control group (traditional instruction).

1. Quantitative Findings

1.1 Grammar Test Scores

Both groups completed grammar tests before and after the instructional intervention. As shown below, the experimental group demonstrated greater improvement in overall grammatical accuracy.

Table 1. Pre- and Post-Test Grammar Scores

Group	n	Pre-Test Mean (SD)	Post-Test Mean (SD)	Mean Gain
Experimental	20	54.10 (8.21)	78.45 (7.32)	**24.35**
Control	20	53.75 (7.89)	62.30 (8.15)	8.55

Statistical Analysis

- **Experimental group:** A paired-sample t-test revealed a significant increase in scores ($t(19) = 12.48$, $p < .001$).

- **Control group:** The improvement was statistically smaller ($t(19) = 3.95$, $p = .001$).

- **Between-group comparison:**
  - Independent-sample t-test on gain scores confirmed significantly higher improvement in the experimental group ($t(38) = 7.21$, $p < .001$).

- **Effect size:** Cohen's $d = $ **1.85**, indicating a very large effect of applied grammar instruction.

1.2 Communicative Performance (Oral and Written Tasks)

Performance was evaluated using an analytic rubric measuring accuracy, fluency, and appropriateness. The experimental group outperformed the control group in all categories.

Table 2. Communicative Performance Scores

Group	Oral Pre-Test	Oral Post-Test	Writing Pre-Test	Writing Post-Test
Experimental	61.2	81.5	58.7	79.4
Control	60.8	67.1	57.9	65.4

Interpretation

- The experimental group improved by **20+ points** in both oral and written performance.

- The control group improved only **~6–7 points**, suggesting limited transfer from traditional instruction.

- The applied grammar approach resulted in more accurate and fluent production of target structures during communicative tasks.

2. Qualitative Findings

2.1 Student Feedback

Analysis of post-intervention questionnaires identified several recurring themes:

Theme 1: Increased Confidence in Using Grammar

Most students in the experimental group reported higher confidence in producing sentences and participating in conversations.

"The activities helped me use grammar without overthinking the rules."
"I finally understand verb patterns because I practiced them in real-life situations."

Theme 2: Positive Perception of Applied Activities

Students valued interactive and contextualized tasks.

"Role-play and dialogue tasks made grammar easier to apply."
"I liked learning grammar through communication, not just memorizing rules."

Theme 3: Greater Engagement and Motivation

Learners found applied lessons more enjoyable and engaging.

"The lessons were more interesting than the usual grammar drills."

In contrast, students in the control group expressed that:

"The rules were clear, but difficult to use in speaking or writing."
"I still make errors because we didn't practice enough."

2.2 Classroom Observations

Observation notes highlighted consistent differences between the two groups:

Experimental Group

- Active participation during pair and group tasks
- Frequent attempts to use target structures spontaneously
- Higher degree of self-correction and peer correction
- Visible improvement in fluency and reduced hesitation during oral tasks

Control Group

- Limited interaction; most communication occurred between teacher and students
- Heavy reliance on rule memorization
- Frequent errors repeated across lessons
- Learners avoided complex structures during open-ended tasks

3. Summary of Key Findings

1. **Grammar accuracy improved significantly** in the experimental group, with gains nearly *three times larger* than the control group.

2. **Communicative skills improved notably** in the experimental group, with strong gains in both oral and written performance.

3. **Qualitative data support the quantitative results**, indicating increased engagement, confidence, and practical use of grammar among students receiving applied instruction.

4. **Applied grammar instruction had a strong effect size**, demonstrating both statistical and practical significance.

Discussion

1. Interpretation of Results in Relation to Research Questions

The study investigated the impact of applied grammar instruction on Arabic language learning among non-native speakers. The research questions focused on:

1. The grammatical challenges faced by non-native learners

2. The effect of applied grammar instruction on mastery and use of grammatical structures

3. The most effective instructional strategies for enhancing language skills

1.1 Grammatical Challenges

The pre-test results and classroom observations confirmed that learners struggled with verb patterns, agreement, and case endings. These findings align with prior research showing that Arabic morphosyntactic features pose significant difficulties for non-native speakers due to their structural complexity and differences

from learners' L1s. Learners exhibited errors in both written and oral production, particularly when required to apply rules in context, highlighting the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical use.

1.2 Effectiveness of Applied Grammar Instruction

Post-test results revealed that the experimental group improved significantly more than the control group in grammar accuracy and communicative performance. This suggests that applied grammar instruction effectively bridged the gap between knowing rules and using them in meaningful contexts. Qualitative data from questionnaires and observations reinforced these findings, showing enhanced learner confidence, engagement, and willingness to use target structures spontaneously.

1.3 Effective Instructional Strategies

The applied grammar approach, which combined explicit explanation, guided practice, and communicative tasks, proved most effective. Interactive activities such as role-plays, dialogues, and contextualized writing tasks allowed learners to notice and practice target structures repeatedly, fostering both accuracy and fluency. Feedback strategies, including elicitation and metalinguistic prompts, further supported correct usage and reinforced learning.

2. Implications for Teaching Arabic Grammar

The study offers several pedagogical implications:

1. **Integration of form and meaning:** Grammar instruction should not be purely rule-based. Embedding grammatical structures in communicative tasks enhances retention and application.

2. **Focus on high-impact structures:** Teachers should prioritize problematic features, such as verb patterns, agreement, and case endings, with structured practice moving from controlled to free production.

3. **Active learner engagement:** Pair and group activities, guided discovery, and feedback mechanisms increase learner participation and motivation.

4. **Scaffolded feedback:** Immediate and context-sensitive correction supports accurate usage without discouraging learners.

5. **Teacher preparation:** Instructors need training in applied grammar pedagogy to design effective tasks and balance explicit instruction with communicative practice.

3. Comparison with Previous Research

The findings are consistent with prior L2 research demonstrating the advantages of explicit, form-focused instruction integrated into communicative activities. Like studies in other second languages, applied grammar teaching produced higher gains in accuracy, fluency, and learner confidence compared to traditional rule-based approaches. Arabic-specific research on applied or task-based grammar instruction (e.g., focused studies on verb patterns and agreement) also reported similar improvements, confirming the transferability of these approaches to non-native Arabic learners. However, this study contributes new evidence by combining quantitative and qualitative measures, demonstrating gains not only in controlled test environments but also in authentic communicative performance.

4. Limitations of the Study

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations:

1. **Sample size and diversity:** The study involved 40 learners from a single institution, limiting generalizability to broader populations.

2. **Duration of intervention:** The 8-week instructional period may not capture long-term retention or mastery of complex grammatical structures.

3. **L1 influence:** Participants' linguistic backgrounds varied, potentially affecting learning outcomes, though this variable was not systematically analyzed.

4. **Focus on selected structures:** The study targeted specific grammatical areas; results may differ with other linguistic features, such as derivational morphology or sentence cohesion.

5. **Limited technological integration:** The intervention relied primarily on face-to-face activities; CALL or digital tools were not extensively employed.

5. Recommendations for Educators and Future Research

Based on the findings and limitations, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **For educators:**
   o Incorporate applied grammar instruction into regular Arabic curricula, emphasizing contextualized, communicative tasks.
   o Provide varied opportunities for guided and independent practice, balancing explicit

explanation with interactive use.

- o Use scaffolding techniques and feedback to support accurate application of target structures.

2. **For curriculum designers:**
   - o Develop teaching modules that integrate applied grammar with authentic texts and real-life communication scenarios.
   - o Consider sequencing instruction to gradually move from controlled drills to free production.

3. **For future research:**
   - o Conduct longitudinal studies to assess long-term retention of applied grammar skills.
   - o Investigate the role of L1 backgrounds, age, and prior exposure in mediating applied grammar effectiveness.
   - o Explore the integration of technology-enhanced learning tools (e.g., CALL, online interactive exercises)

in applied grammar pedagogy.

- o Expand studies to include advanced learners, dialectal Arabic, and broader grammatical structures.

Conclusion:

Overall, the study provides strong evidence that applied grammar instruction enhances both the accuracy and communicative ability of non-native Arabic learners. By moving beyond rote memorization to contextualized, interactive practice, teachers can significantly improve learners' competence and confidence in using Arabic grammar in meaningful communication.

Conclusion

Summary of Main Findings

This study examined the effect of applied grammar instruction on the Arabic language skills of non-native learners. The findings indicate that:

1. **Learners face persistent grammatical challenges**, particularly with verb patterns, agreement, and case endings, which hinder both accuracy and fluency.

2. **Applied grammar instruction significantly improved learners' performance** compared to traditional rule-based teaching. Participants in the experimental

group demonstrated greater gains in grammar test scores, oral production, and written tasks.

3. **Interactive, communicative, and context-based activities** fostered deeper understanding and practical application of grammatical rules. Learners reported increased confidence, engagement, and motivation during lessons.

4. **Explicit feedback and scaffolded practice** supported learners in self-correcting errors and transferring grammatical knowledge to meaningful communication.

Educational Significance

The study provides clear pedagogical implications:

- Applied grammar instruction bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical language use, making lessons more effective and engaging.

- Teachers can enhance learner competence by integrating structured, contextualized exercises that move from controlled practice to free production.

- The approach can be adapted to a variety of classroom contexts, proficiency levels, and linguistic backgrounds, offering a flexible and

evidence-based strategy for Arabic language instruction.

Final Thoughts and Future Directions

Overall, the research highlights that teaching grammar in isolation is less effective than embedding grammatical instruction within authentic communicative contexts. Applied grammar not only improves accuracy but also fosters confidence, fluency, and the ability to use Arabic creatively and meaningfully.

Future research could expand on this study by:

- Conducting **longitudinal studies** to examine long-term retention of applied grammar skills.

- Exploring the role of **learner L1 backgrounds, age, and proficiency level** in moderating outcomes.

- Integrating **technology-enhanced interventions** (e.g., interactive apps, corpus-based exercises) to supplement classroom instruction.

- Investigating the effectiveness of applied grammar for **advanced learners and dialectal Arabic**, broadening the scope of pedagogical applications.

In conclusion, applied grammar instruction represents a powerful and practical approach to enhancing Arabic language

skills for non-native speakers, offering meaningful benefits that extend beyond the classroom to authentic communication.

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