



Digitalizing Arabic Teaching for Non-Native Speakers in Sri Lanka: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

Arabic is an important language for Muslims, as it is the language of the Quran and essential religious texts. In Sri Lanka, the Muslim community prioritizes teaching and learning Arabic to ensure a deep connection with their faith. Arabic teaching is integrated across various sectors, including Madrasas, schools, universities, and community programs. However, in Sri Lanka, Arabic teaching traditionally depends on conventional methods, but there's a pressing need for digitalization. This study aims to find the challenges associated with integrating digital technologies in Arabic language teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka, to confirm the effectiveness of existing digital tools and resources in facilitating Arabic language learning in Sri Lanka, and to explore opportunities for enhancing Arabic language teaching through digital platforms in the Sri Lankan context. The researcher used descriptive and analytical methods to complete this study. To meet the objectives of the study, primary and secondary data were used with qualitative and quantitative approaches. This study addresses the challenges and opportunities in digitalizing Arabic teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka. This study concluded that, by developing vast online resources and interactive platforms, suitable materials for local needs, and integrating digital assessment tools, the research highlights how digital transformation can enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of Arabic language teaching in Sri Lanka. The findings aim to provide actionable insights for policymakers, teachers, and technology developers to overcome barriers and maximize the benefits of digital learning in this context.

Keywords: Digitizing, Teaching, Non-Native Speakers, Sri Lanka, Arabic Language

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Introduction

“Arabic language occupies a great position in the thoughts of native and non-native Muslim speakers who seek to learn it because it is related to the Holy Qur'an, the last holy book that was revealed to the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and because it is the language used to worship Allah. Non-Muslims seek to learn Arabic to achieve social, economic, or political purposes. Thus, countries exert more efforts to disseminate their learning and establish institutes and specialized departments for two purposes: a. As a response to the need of the market to get a financial income from the educational institution; b. for a religious need, where learning Arabic is the means of performing worship, such as: reciting the Holy Qur'an, some quoted zekr, and reading and understanding the Holy Sunnah.” (Abubaker et al., 2015).

Arabic is highly valued among Sri Lankan Muslims, prompting the establishment of many educational institutions since the late 20th century. The studies examine Arabic's impact on Sri Lankan culture, highlighting its role in the country's multicultural development. The Arabic language in Sri Lanka holds a prominent place among the Muslims. Since the end of the past century, Muslims in Sri Lanka paid great attention and special interest in teaching Arabic whereby many schools and institutions have been opened in the country. The study uses a multi-disciplinary approach to understand the impact of Arabic Language on Sri Lankan Culture. Such an approach would assist in understanding the historical process that led to the formation of a multicultural society in Sri Lanka (Amrina et al., 2022).

(Huda et al., 2016); (Bsoul et al., 2022) confirms it. “For the cultural advancement of the Muslims, their knowledge and use of Arabic is imperative. As far as Muslims are concerned, their culture is not derived from the race to which they belong but from the Holy Qur'an to which they have to commit themselves. In other words, the culture of the Muslims to whatever race they may belong is Qur'anic culture. Adoption of the Arabic language by the Sri Lanka Muslims will therefore, not only provide for their cultural advancement but also arrest falling into three streams of language and thought and bring about oneness of outlook. Presently Muslim children are taught to read the Holy Qur'an without understanding the meaning. When the Arabic language becomes popular and every home speaks Arabic, the Muslims will understand the meaning of the contents of the Holy Qur'an and whatever they recite in their prayers.” (Zikriah & Mauludiyah, 2024).

This significance is common for all languages. “In this digital teaching era, English teachers believe that digital technology has a positive effect on English teaching, it helps the English teachers to create an interesting atmosphere in the teaching and learning process, and the digital tools facilitate the teachers in applying digital teaching. Some challenges for teachers in the digital age are: a teacher has to improve teaching methods and develop professional learning continually along with new developments and to comprehend that change flows so fast and must accept and prepare for the growth of technology.” (Anggeraini, 2020).

“The aim of digitalization in language education should be understood by attaching importance to improving the changing and distinctive nature of language teaching. To achieve this approaches to language teaching should employ digital educational sources. In classroom teaching, both students and teachers opt for using information and communication technologies. The ultimate aim of language teaching for educators or teachers which is to enable learners to master the target language via improving the quality of their teaching through digitalizing the content or using the digital content in the proper ways remains the topic of continuous professional development.” (Dwivedi et al., 2023).

“In the Arab world, many countries have adopted new strategies and policies to increase Arabic content on the web because of its potential impact on the economic and social status of the country. Despite a global content market estimated at around \$3,000 billion in 2011 and expected to rise to \$3,800 billion by 2015, the quantity and quality of Arabic content is not sufficient to preserve the heritage of centuries of knowledge documented in Arabic language but not accessible to web users.” (Nisa & Jatmika, 2023).

Statement of Research Problem

Despite the increasing global trend towards digital learning, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of how these technologies can be effectively integrated into the context of Arabic language teaching in Sri Lanka (Hennessy et al., 2022). Key challenges include technological infrastructure limitations, variable levels of digital literacy among teachers and students, and the cultural and pedagogical adjustments required for effective digital learning (Major et al., 2021); (Kamalov et al., 2023). Additionally, there is a need to assess the availability and quality of digital resources suitable specifically for Arabic language learners in this region. The study also aims to explore the opportunities that digitalization presents, such as enhanced access to diverse and authentic Arabic content, the potential for personalized and adaptive learning experiences, and the ability to connect learners with native speakers and global Arabic-speaking communities. By addressing these challenges and opportunities, this research seeks to provide practical insights and recommendations for policymakers, teachers, and technology developers to improve the effectiveness and accessibility of Arabic language teaching and learning through digital resources in Sri Lanka.

Research Objectives

This study is formulated with the following objectives:

1. To find the challenges associated with integrating digital technologies in Arabic language teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka.
2. To confirm the effectiveness of existing digital tools and resources in facilitating Arabic language learning in Sri Lanka.
3. To explore opportunities for enhancing Arabic language education through digital platforms in the Sri Lankan context.

Methodology

The nature of this research requires the researcher to use descriptive and analytical methods to complete this study and reach the required results. To meet the objectives of the study, primary and secondary data were used. Generally, the research is done under a qualitative approach. The researcher used descriptive and analytical methods to complete this study. To meet the objectives of the study, primary and secondary data were used with qualitative and quantitative approaches. This study addresses the challenges and opportunities in digitalizing Arabic teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka. This study concluded that, by developing vast online resources and interactive platforms, suitable materials for local needs, and integrating digital assessment tools, the research highlights how digital transformation can enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of Arabic language teaching in Sri Lanka.

Results and Discussion

1. Arabic in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's historical and cultural ties with the Arabic-speaking world go back to ancient times, largely due to early trade and oceanic travel connections. Arab traders and sailors frequently visited the island, establishing strong economic and cultural relationships. Dr. MAM. Shukri (1986) states that there is a long history of contact with Ceylon on the part of the Arab traders, going back to dry zone civilization, and it seems clear that communities of them gathered in seaports and elsewhere. In due course, the visiting Arabs had become Muslims. As nautical techniques were utilized to exploit the monsoons for oceanic traffic and Ceylon itself was a haven in times of foul weather, the island assumed unusual significance, and her precious stones, pearls, spices, and other items of merchandise made Arab visits regular. This commercial intercourse of Arabs burst into activity after Islam under the Caliphate. Arab trading settlements along the coast of the Sub-Continent, Far Eastern Archipelagos, and China preceded the 6th century. And that by the 7th century, such settlements had made their appearance even in Sri Lanka is manifestly clear from the incident related by Al-Baladhuri. So between the 7th century and the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16th century, the Arabs were well established and in control of the island's trade. The progeny of the early Arabs had consolidated their position in practically most coastal towns on the western seaboard and had subsequently, penetrated to the interior of the Kandyan Kingdom dominating the inter- and external trade of the country towards the end of the 15th century.

These interactions facilitated the introduction and spread of Islam, as Arab merchants often brought their religious beliefs along with their goods. Consequently, the Arabic language also began to influence the region, initially through trade and religious practices. Over time, this led to the integration of Arabic into the local culture, significantly impacting the religious and linguistic side of Sri Lanka. This relationship promoted an environment conducive to the Arabic language, resulting in its inclusion in various educational backgrounds. Arabic began to be taught in both government and non-government institutions, reflecting its cultural and religious significance and ensuring its continued importance in Sri Lanka's education system.

“The Arab merchants’ relationship with the Sri Lankan empire has become a major turning point for the Arabic verbal communication development in the early period. Before the colonial era, the Arabic language was commonly used, which led to the establishment of institutes for Arabic language teaching and learning even after independence. Today there are five types of institutions offering Arabic language courses in Sri Lanka. The Government schools conduct two types of examination certification in Arabic language subjects. While Madrasas (Religious base schools) offer eight years of sharia certificate courses in the Arabic language, government-established universities offer such courses at degree level. The Jamia Naleemia, a private university also offers degree courses in Arabic Language.” (Gafoordeen, Arifin & Abu Bakar, 2013).

The Arabic language has held a significant position in Sri Lanka's government education system for a long time, primarily due to the country's historical connections with Arab traders and its considerable Muslim population. These factors have led to the incorporation of Arabic in the curriculum to preserve cultural and religious heritage, particularly for Muslim students. Indika Liyanage (2019) states that movements from other language communities located to the east and west of Sri Lanka included Moorish traders and settlers from the Persian Gulf region who, at least 1,500 years ago, introduced Arabic, used today primarily for religious purposes by the small but significant Muslim community; the community of Moorish decent are generally Tamil users, but less ethnically attached to that language than the predominantly Hindu Tamil community. Some formal language education, which included Portuguese, Arabic, Greek, and Latin was conducted in Portuguese-MOI schools attached to the Roman Catholic churches established in Portuguese-controlled territory, and thus language education continued as the preserve of religious institutions.

Several other modern/foreign/international and classical languages apart from English are offered in Sri Lanka's school education system – for example, French, German, Japanese, Pali, Sanskrit, and Latin and the Ministry of Education supports activities in Muslim schools to encourage Arabic language learning. (Liyanage, 2019)

Researchers have strongly criticized the curricula and teaching methods of institutions teaching Arabic in Sri Lanka. They argue that the current approaches are outdated, lack practical application, and do not effectively meet the needs of students. This criticism highlights the need for modernization and improvement in teaching strategies to enhance language proficiency and relevance. “However, with all these establishments, language skills among the students specifically are very much inadequate. Lack of developed Arabic Language curriculum, teaching material, teacher capacity, and good learning environment are some of the reasons hindering the progress.” (Gafoordeen, Arifin & Abu Bakar, 2013). “Lack of capable teachers to teach Arabic language, lack of proper syllabus for Arabic language, lack of Arabic language textbooks and library facilities and non-conducive learning environment were the key factors contributing to this falloff. As such, there is a strong need to appoint capable teachers to teach the Arabic language in government schools, to establish a proper syllabus for the Arabic language, and to create awareness among the Muslim students and teachers.” (Husain, 2017) Prof. MZM. Nafeel (2021) identifies the difficulties in teaching Arabic in the Sri Lankan context; designing teaching materials due to lack of agreement among the institutions, difficulties in appointing efficient teachers since the salaries are not attractive, unavailability of good environment for education and the lack of modern equipment. (Nafeel, 2021)

These criticisms emphasize the urgent need to modernize the Arabic language curricula in Sri Lanka. They highlight the importance of updating the teaching methods and materials to align with contemporary educational standards and the practical needs of students. This modernization is essential for improving language proficiency and ensuring that the education system remains relevant and effective.

2. Challenges in Digitalizing Arabic Teaching for Non-Native Speakers in Sri Lanka

Digitalizing Arabic teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka presents several challenges similar to those faced with other languages.

2.1. Technological infrastructure limitations

Like other languages, Arabic faces significant challenges in technological infrastructure when it comes to digitalizing its teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka. The primary issues include a lack of sufficient digital resources suitable for Arabic language learning, limited access to high-speed internet in many regions, and the lack of specialized software and applications that support Arabic script and phonetics. This is mostly found in non-governmental institutes. They mostly teach the Arabic language in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the digital divide improves the problem, as not all students and teachers have equal access to modern devices and reliable connectivity. These limitations delay the effective integration of technology in Arabic language teaching, making it difficult to provide interactive and engaging learning experiences for students in Sri Lanka.

2.2. Socioeconomic differences and digital divide

Many students, especially those from rural or needy backgrounds, lack access to essential digital tools like computers, reliable internet connections, and modern educational resources. This gap limits their ability to benefit from online learning platforms and digital resources, which are increasingly vital in the contemporary education system. Additionally, there is often a shortage of trained teachers proficient in using digital tools for teaching Arabic, further improving the issue. These challenges reflect wider global issues but are particularly pronounced in contexts where economic inequalities and limited technological infrastructure prevail. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions to improve digital access and resources, ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all students regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds.

2.3. Lack of digital literacy among Arabic language teachers and learners

The challenge of digital literacy among Arabic language teachers and learners significantly limits the digitalization of Arabic teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka. Many teachers and students lack the necessary skills to effectively use digital tools and resources, which are essential for modern language teaching. This gap in digital proficiency limits the adoption of online platforms, educational software, and other digital resources that can enhance learning and teaching experiences. As a result, the potential benefits of technology in providing interactive, engaging, and flexible language teaching remain underutilized, creating a major challenge to the progress of Arabic language education in the digital age in Sri Lanka.

2.4. Pedagogical challenges in adapting traditional Arabic teaching methods to digital platforms

Adapting traditional Arabic teaching methods to digital platforms for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka presents significant pedagogical challenges. While the Arabic language is rich and complicated, its teaching traditionally depends heavily on face-to-face interaction, handwriting, and immersive cultural experiences. Digitalizing this process requires overcoming hurdles such as maintaining the interactive nature of learning, ensuring accurate pronunciation guidance, and integrating cultural context effectively. Additionally, addressing the diverse learning needs and technological access among non-native speakers adds difficulty to the digitalization efforts. Despite these challenges, innovative approaches leveraging multimedia resources, interactive exercises, and personalized feedback can enhance the efficacy of digital Arabic language teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka.

2.5. Cultural barriers and resistance to digitalization

Digitalizing Arabic teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka faces significant challenges due to cultural barriers and resistance to digitalization within the Arabic language teaching and learning process. The Arabic language holds deep cultural significance, and its traditional teaching methods often emphasize interpersonal interactions and face-to-face communication, making the shift to digital platforms intimidating for both teachers and learners. Moreover, the conservative nature of Arabic teaching may lead to setbacks or failure in adopting digital tools and online learning platforms. Overcoming these challenges requires a reliable or most suitable approach that respects cultural traditions while limiting opportunities for technology to enhance accessibility and effectiveness in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers in Sri Lanka.

While government agencies in Sri Lanka offer a somewhat conducive environment for modern digital education, the Madrasa education in the country is in urgent need of similar support. (Hajiannor et al., 2023) this context. “There's a lack of educational awareness among many Madrasa founders, delaying the integration of modern teaching methods. The focus of Arabic

language teaching in these Madrasas is often more religious than linguistic, neglecting the larger aspects of language learning. The content taught to non-native speakers often fails to resonate with their environment, further delaying effective learning. Moreover, restrictive educational policies in some Madrasa limit access to modern resources like newspapers and electronic media, while modern teaching aids remain rare across most institutions. Resistance to technological advancements, such as television and radio, continues due to concerns about their perceived negative influences. Furthermore, the absence of educational institutes to train Arabic language teachers for non-native speakers improves the lack of qualified teachers, compounded by financial crises affecting teacher salaries. Importantly, the absence of a supervisory body to oversee and improve the educational process within these Madrasa limits progress. Additionally, the lack of Arabic media in Sri Lanka denies students opportunities to engage with the language outside the classroom, further isolating them from immersive learning experiences (Mahfuz Rizqi Mubarak et al., 2024).

3. Opportunities in Digitalizing Arabic Teaching for Non-Native Speakers in Sri Lanka

3.1. Access to vast online Arabic language resources

Access to vast online Arabic language resources is facilitated through various platforms providing different aspects of learning, research, and cultural immersion (Garlinska et al., 2023). Language learning platforms like Duolingo, Rosetta Stone, and Babbel offer interactive lessons, while online dictionaries and translation tools such as Google Translate, Almaany, and Reverso Context provide essential vocabulary and contextual usage. Digital libraries like Al-Mawrid and academic resources such as JSTOR and Google Scholar offer extensive literature and scholarly articles. News and media websites like Al Jazeera Arabic and BBC Arabic provide current events content in Arabic, enhancing comprehension skills. Online courses from Coursera and edX, as well as mobile apps like Memrise and HelloTalk, offer structured and flexible learning options. Social media communities, YouTube channels, and e-book platforms like Kindle and Google Books contribute additional practical language practice and access to contemporary and classical Arabic literature. Moreover, cultural resources like Quran.com and Arabian Heritage, along with educational websites and blogs, enrich the learning experience by providing deeper insights into the cultural context of the Arabic language. Combining these resources enables learners to develop a comprehensive understanding and mastery of Arabic. These all platforms are accessible in Sri Lanka.

3.2. Interactive and immersive learning experiences through digital platforms

In Sri Lanka, the possibilities for interactive and immersive Arabic language learning through digital platforms are expanding, offering a wide range of tools and resources. Language learning apps engage users with gamified lessons and real-time feedback. Virtual classrooms via Zoom and Microsoft Teams allow for live, personalized instruction from local schools and tutors. Language exchange platforms connect learners with native speakers for real-time practice, and emerging technologies create immersive environments for hands-on learning. Online tutoring services offer suitable one-on-one lessons, while social media, YouTube, and streaming services provide rich Arabic content for cultural immersion and language practice. Digital libraries offer access to extensive Arabic literature, enhancing reading skills and cultural understanding. These digital platforms make high-quality Arabic teaching accessible, flexible, and engaging for learners in Sri Lanka, facilitating comprehensive language mastery and cultural appreciation.

3.3. Suitable learning materials to the specific needs and interests of Sri Lankan Arabic learners

Suitable learning materials to the specific needs and interests of Sri Lankan Arabic learners involve creating culturally relevant and engaging content that reflects local traditions and daily life, integrating bilingual resources in Arabic and Sinhala or Tamil for better comprehension. For professional or academic purposes, incorporating sector-specific vocabulary and classical Arabic studies can enhance relevance. Materials should be customized to different proficiency levels with progressive challenges, regular assessments, and personalized feedback (Shemshack & Spector, 2020); (Hellín et al., 2023). Incorporating learners' interests along with multimedia resources like videos and interactive apps boosts motivation and engagement. Providing various learning styles with visual, auditory, and kinesthetic materials, and using interactive tools like language learning apps and virtual reality experiences, ensures effective learning. Promoting community and social learning through group activities and engaging with local Arabic-speaking communities provides practical language practice. Additionally, ensuring resources are accessible both online and offline and well-suited with mobile devices makes learning flexible and convenient.

3.4. Potential for collaboration and exchange with Arabic-speaking countries and institutions

Collaboration with Arabic-speaking countries and institutions holds immense potential for digitalizing Arabic teaching in Sri Lanka, promoting a mutually beneficial partnership that enriches language education. This partnership can lead to the development of culturally relevant curricula, advanced e-learning platforms, and educational tools suitable to Sri Lankan learners. Teacher training programs and virtual exchange initiatives can empower teachers and enhance practical language practice for students. Joint research projects can advance academic understanding and enhance the global visibility of Sri Lankan Arabic programs. Financial support from Arabic-speaking countries can strengthen digital infrastructure and provide scholarships, enhancing accessibility and affordability. Engagement with online communities and virtual cultural events further promotes collaboration, creating supportive spaces for learners and educators.

3.5. Integration of digital assessment tools for more efficient and objective evaluation

The integration of digital assessment tools aims to enhance the efficiency and objectivity of evaluations in the digitalization of Arabic teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka. By incorporating technology-based tools such as online quizzes, automated grading systems, and digital portfolios, the evaluation process becomes more efficient and less prone to human bias. This approach not only saves time but also ensures reasonable assessments based on standard criteria. Digitalizing Arabic teaching involves utilizing digital resources like online courses, interactive software, and virtual classrooms, which can significantly improve the learning experience for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka. Overall, this integration is set to transform the traditional methods of teaching and assessment, making the educational process more effective and accessible.

Their study conducted across Sri Lanka on the Commonwealth Digital Education Leadership Training in Action (C-DELTA) program of the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), highlights this possibility. They find that the adoption of the C-DELTA Programme has been a novel experience embraced by the participant teachers who were very motivated to implement it in their schools. However, the implementation of C-DELTA has been hindered in some schools, due to various practical issues faced by the teachers, such as time constraints, limitations in English language competencies, and inadequate ICT facilities. Despite such challenges, many teachers willingly implemented the C-DELTA Programme in their schools with commitment, managing the constraints as much as possible. The findings portray how the adoption of C-DELTA has

impacted the teaching-learning process by developing and enhancing digital learning skills among teachers and students and changing their thinking and practices (M. Alshehri, 2024). It was evident that the intervention has supported the participant teachers to become effective professionals who can cater to the digital education environments in their institutions. Overall, the implementation of the C-DELTA program has helped enhance participant teachers' digital education leadership skills, and provided them with an avenue to promote digital education in their schools through innovative thinking and the application of novel teaching-learning strategies to create digital learning environments (Karunanayaka & Weerakoon, 2020); (Sunu, 2022); (Abakah, 2023).

Conclusion

This study has concluded that to effectively overcome challenges and maximize opportunities in digitalizing Arabic teaching for non-native speakers in Sri Lanka, several strategies may be implemented to improve technological infrastructure and internet accessibility: Enhancing the technological infrastructure is fundamental to supporting digital learning. This includes expanding internet coverage to rural and underserved areas and ensuring that educational institutions are equipped with modern technology. Reliable internet access will enable students and teachers to participate in digital learning without disruptions. Implementing training programs for teachers on digital teaching methods and tools: Teachers need to be proficient in using digital tools and methods. Offering comprehensive training programs will empower teachers with the skills necessary to effectively deliver digital lessons. These programs can cover a range of topics, from basic computer literacy to advanced digital pedagogies. Promoting digital literacy among learners through targeted initiatives: To ensure that students can fully benefit from digital learning, targeted initiatives should be launched to improve their digital literacy. This could include workshops, online courses, and interactive sessions designed to teach students how to navigate digital platforms, use educational software, and stay safe online. Developing culturally sensitive and contextually relevant digital learning materials: It is important to create digital learning materials that are suitable to the cultural context and learning needs of Sri Lankan students. This means developing resources that respect local traditions and languages while also being relevant to the learners' daily lives and experiences. Such materials will be more engaging and effective in teaching Arabic. Developing partnerships between Sri Lankan educational institutions and Arabic-speaking countries: Establishing partnerships with educational institutions in Arabic-speaking countries can enhance the quality of Arabic teaching in Sri Lanka. These collaborations can lead to exchange programs, joint projects, and the sharing of resources and best practices. Such partnerships will provide learners with authentic language exposure and cultural exchange opportunities. By implementing these strategies, Sri Lanka can address the challenges associated with digitalizing Arabic teaching and create a more effective and inclusive learning environment for non-native speakers.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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