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From Book Completion to Skill Acquisition: Reframing Arabic Instruction for Non-Native Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT: A persistent pattern in Arabic instruction for non-native adult learners in the Indian subcontinent and comparable non-immersive contexts is that institutional and pedagogical success is measured by some prescribed book completion rather than by the development of targeted functional language skills. When practitioners discuss Arabic courses, the primary question is “which book is being covered?” — not “what competence is being developed?” This paper argues that the shift required is not from one book to a better book, but from a book-completion paradigm to a skill-acquisition paradigm. The skill argued for is intensive reading competence — the ability to engage analytically with Arabic text with full understanding, defined operationally as the capacity to derive meaning from Arabic text through functional structural understanding — identifying grammatical roles, recognising morphological forms, and processing undiacritised text with precision. Widely used Arabic instructional books are examined not to discredit them, but to show that even well-designed books often do not produce the targeted reading competence when used in contexts and for skill outcomes they were not originally designed to serve. Drawing on Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), Skill Acquisition Theory (Anderson, 1983), and instructional alignment frameworks (Biggs, 1996), the paper argues that the real variable in Arabic instruction is not the book itself, but the clarity of the targeted skill outcome, the methodology guiding instruction, the teaching approach in the classroom, and the coherence of skill delivery across the programme. The paper concludes with concrete implications for programme design, teacher training, and learner assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ask anyone involved in Arabic instruction for non-native learners in the Indian subcontinent about a programme, and the first question will almost certainly be about the book. “Are you using the Madina Books?” “Have you finished Al-Arabiyyah Bayna Yadayk?” “Do they cover Hidayat al-Nahw?” The book is the curriculum, the benchmark, and the measure of progress. Completing a prescribed book is understood as learning Arabic, completing several is understood as mastering it, and non-completion of some prescribed books is often considered a shortcoming or indication of incomplete learning.

This paper argues that this framing is pedagogically limiting. The issue is not that the wrong books are being used — several of the books most commonly deployed in this context are, within their intended purposes, valuable. The issue discussed here is not the quality of the text, but the way it is positioned within a programme. When the book is the programme, the teacher's job is reduced to content delivery, the learner's job becomes page completion, and the measure of success becomes coverage rather than competence.

The learner population this paper addresses is non-native adult learners in non-immersive contexts in the Indian subcontinent whose primary goal is reading comprehension of Arabic texts. These learners are motivated — their Arabic study is tied to religious commitment and a genuine desire to access their tradition in its original language, to genuinely understand it, and to apply it meaningfully in their lives. And they are, in large numbers, completing some prescribed books and still unable to read a page of unfamiliar Arabic text even with extensive external support, leading many to believe that such a goal is unreachable and creating further lack of clarity about the goal itself. This outcome is not incidental. It appears to be a predictable consequence of instruction organised around books rather than around skill.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 defines intensive reading competence — the skill outcome argued for. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework grounding the argument. Section 4 examines the commonly used books, acknowledging their value while identifying the mismatch between their design purposes, their targeted learner population and their deployment contexts. Section 5 analyses the three real variables that determine instructional success. Section 6 presents the GAE programme as a brief illustrative case. Section 7 draws implications for institutions, teachers, and learners. Section 8 states the paper's limitations. Section 9 provides the conclusion.

2. INTENSIVE READING COMPETENCE: AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

Before critiquing the book-centred paradigm, it is necessary to be precise about what the alternative is actually asking for. The skill argued for in this paper is intensive reading competence — a term used deliberately to distinguish the target outcome from both extensive reading and communicative fluency.

Extensive reading generally involves rapid processing of large quantities of text for overall comprehension, with the focus placed primarily on overall meaning rather than detailed structural analysis (Carrell & Carson, 1997). Intensive reading, by contrast, involves close and guided engagement with text in order to develop detailed structural understanding and strategic reading ability. As Carrell and Carson (1997) note, intensive reading aims not only at understanding what a text means, but also how that meaning is produced through linguistic and structural relationships resulting in sharper and deeper understanding of the text. Communicative fluency involves the production and reception of spoken language in real-time interaction.

Extensive reading and communicative fluency are both legitimate dimensions of language development. However, for non-Madrassa adult learners whose primary goal is access to Islamic Arabic texts, intensive reading competence constitutes the immediate and foundational requirement. What is required is the ability to read an unfamiliar undiacritised text slowly, carefully, and structurally — with precision and depth rather than approximation.

Intensive reading competence for this learner population is operationally defined as the demonstrated ability to do the following:

- (1) Identify sentence structure — distinguishing the main clause from dependent clauses and modifying phrases
- (2) Locate subject, predicate, and object — identifying the grammatical roles of all major constituents
- (3) Recognise particles and their grammatical effects — including *inna* and its sisters, *kāna* and its sisters, and conditional particles
- (4) Recognise morphological forms — identifying verb patterns, noun patterns, and the root-pattern relationship
- (5) Resolve pronoun references — tracing pronouns to their antecedents within and across sentences
- (6) Process undiacritised text — determining vowel endings from grammatical context rather than diacritical marking
- (7) Navigate nested and complex sentence structures — processing sentences with multiple embedded clauses without losing the main structural thread
- (8) Derive meaning from structure rather than isolated words — understanding that meaning in Arabic emerges from the interaction of morphological form, grammatical position, and structural relationship

As learners develop a sufficient level of structural operational understanding of the language, vocabulary acquisition increasingly proceeds contextually and continuously through engagement with progressively more complex texts.

This definition distinguishes intensive reading competence from surface familiarity with grammatical rules. A learner may be able to recite the signs of the nominative case and still be unable to determine the grammatical role of a noun in an unfamiliar

sentence. The competence defined above is functional, not declarative — it is what the learner can do with the language, not what they can state about it (Anderson, 1983; DeKeyser, 2007).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Three theoretical frameworks ground the argument of this paper: Cognitive Load Theory, Skill Acquisition Theory, and instructional alignment. Together they explain why book-centred instruction tends not to produce intensive reading competence, and what the design conditions for producing it actually are.

3.1 *Cognitive Load Theory*

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988; Paas et al., 2003) distinguishes between intrinsic load — the inherent complexity of the material being learned — and extraneous load — the cognitive demands imposed by instructional design that do not contribute to learning. Working memory capacity is limited. When extraneous load consumes it, the cognitive capacity available for processing the actual target material is reduced.

In book-centred Arabic instruction, the absence of a defined skill outcome means that no principled criterion exists for deciding what belongs in a lesson and what does not. Everything the book presents appears equally valid, and teachers add further material — vocabulary lists, morphological paradigms, grammatical rules — without a clear account of how each item contributes to reading competence. The result is systematic extraneous overload: learners' working memory is consumed by content that does not serve the target skill, leaving less cognitive capacity available for the grammatical processing required for actual reading. Because the goal is not operationally defined, the learner cannot

distinguish between what is central and what is peripheral — and neither, in many cases, can the teacher.

Skill-centred instruction addresses this directly. When intensive reading competence is defined as the goal, every instructional decision can be tested against a single question: does this contribute to the learner's ability to derive meaning from Arabic text through functional structural understanding? What does not pass that test is removed — not because it is unimportant in some absolute sense, but because it competes for cognitive resources that are needed elsewhere. This filtering is not arbitrary; it is the cognitive logic of skill-based design.

Two further mechanisms operate within this cognitive framework. First, activating prior grammatical knowledge — the conceptual structures every fluent speaker of any language already possesses — reduces the cognitive burden of encountering Arabic grammar. When instruction frames Arabic grammar not as an alien system to be memorised from scratch but as a familiar set of functional relationships expressed through an unfamiliar form, the learner's prior knowledge does part of the cognitive work, reducing the load on working memory (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Second, instructional strategies that reduce affective barriers and make the learning process feel more manageable further support learners' effective cognitive engagement with structurally complex material — an observation broadly compatible with Krashen's (1982) discussion of affective barriers in language learning. Both mechanisms serve the same cognitive purpose: maximising the working memory available for the grammatical processing that reading actually requires.

3.2 *Skill Acquisition Theory*

Anderson's (1983) Skill Acquisition Theory distinguishes between declarative knowledge — knowing that — and procedural knowledge — knowing how. Declarative knowledge about Arabic grammar (the rules, the paradigms, the categories) is a necessary but insufficient condition for reading competence. What learners need is procedural knowledge: the operational ability to apply grammatical understanding in the act of reading, eventually without conscious deliberation at each step.

The transition from declarative to procedural knowledge requires practice of the target skill under conditions that approximate the actual performance context (DeKeyser, 2007). Skill acquisition research further suggests that transfer is strongest when the cognitive operations practised during learning overlap with those required in the target performance context. Memorising paradigms and completing prescribed exercises constitutes practice of declarative knowledge. Parsing actual Arabic sentences — identifying functional grammatical roles, resolving structural ambiguity, deriving meaning from form — constitutes practice of procedural knowledge. The former does not automatically produce the latter. A learner who can recite the patterns of the verb has declarative knowledge. A learner who can read a sentence and identify which pattern is operating, and what that implies for meaning, has procedural knowledge. The distinction between these two outcomes is the distinction between book-centred and skill-centred instruction. Advanced reading competence requires a further step beyond procedural parsing: the integration

of structural analysis with active linguistic intuition — the reader's ongoing semantic and contextual reasoning. Skill-centred instruction should cultivate this interpretive capacity alongside parsing, preserving the learner's natural meaning-making cognition rather than replacing it with mechanical rule application.

3.3 Instructional Alignment

Biggs's (1996) concept of constructive alignment holds that effective instruction requires coherent alignment between learning outcomes, instructional activities, and assessment methods. When any of these three elements points in a different direction from the others, the system is misaligned and outcomes suffer.

In book-centred Arabic instruction, this misalignment is structural. The learning outcome — intensive reading competence — requires functional structural understanding to access meaning. The instructional activity — working through a book — requires content familiarity and rule recall. The assessment — completion of book exercises or examination of grammar rules — measures content recall. None of these three elements is aligned with the others, and none is aligned with the actual reading competence the learner is seeking. Skill-centred instruction realigns all three: the outcome is defined as reading performance; the instruction develops grammatical parsing as a functional tool; the assessment measures whether the learner can derive meaning from unfamiliar Arabic text through functional structural understanding.

Table 2 Theoretical Frameworks and Their Application to Arabic Skill-Based Instruction

Theory	Core Principle	Application to Arabic Instruction
Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988)	Reduce extraneous cognitive load to free working memory for target learning	Sequence instruction to direct cognitive resources toward functional structural understanding; activate prior grammatical knowledge to reduce intrinsic load; reduce affective barriers to support effective cognitive engagement
Skill Acquisition Theory (Anderson, 1983)	Declarative knowledge must become procedural through targeted practice	Practise grammatical parsing as a functional reading act, not rule recall
Constructive Alignment (Biggs, 1996)	Learning outcomes, instruction, and assessment must be coherently aligned	Define intensive reading competence as the instructional outcome; align instruction and assessment to it

4. THE BOOKS: STRENGTHS, ORIGINAL PURPOSES, AND DEPLOYMENT MISMATCH

A fair assessment of the commonly used Arabic books must begin with an honest acknowledgement: most of them have considerable value for the purposes they were designed to serve. The Madina Books were developed for an immersive Arabic-medium instructional environment (Abdur Rahim, 1983). Al-‘Arabiyyah Bayna Yadayk was designed primarily to develop communicative competence in Modern Standard Arabic within environments that provide sustained language exposure and interaction (some level of near immersion environment) (Al-Fawzan et al., 2005). Classical grammar texts such as Hidayat al-Nahw (Al-Nizami, 2016) and Sharh Mi‘at ‘Amil (Al-Jami, n.d.) were not originally designed as introductory reading-skill curricula for non-native, non-immersive learners. Rather, they function as systematic organisational texts that gather and classify grammatical rules in a structured manner for learners already engaged in grammatical study and textual analysis. Their value lies in organisation, consolidation, and reference. Al-Nahw al-Wadih similarly reflects a coherent pedagogical logic within its intended context: it was composed for native Arabic-speaking children who already possess vocabulary, intuitive grammatical competence, and continuous exposure to the language. Its examples therefore assume substantial prior linguistic familiarity, and the grammar presented often functions as an explicit description of structures the learners already use implicitly (Al-Jarim & Amin, 1933/1954). Each of these works reflects meaningful pedagogical choices within its own intended environment.

The common problem arises not from the books themselves, but from the contexts in which they are often deployed. Across the Indian subcontinent and comparable non-native, non-immersive contexts, these and similar books are frequently used as programmes for learners seeking Arabic reading comprehension — a learner population for which most of these materials were not originally designed. The result is a deployment mismatch between the instructional tool, the learner population, and the target skill.

This mismatch becomes especially visible when instructional materials designed for learners with substantial prior linguistic familiarity are used with learners who possess neither immersive exposure nor operational grammatical competence. In such situations, learners are often required to process unfamiliar vocabulary, unfamiliar grammatical structures, and abstract grammatical explanation simultaneously. The issue is therefore not that the books lack value, but that the instructional conditions required for those books to function effectively are absent.

Al-Nahw al-Wadih provides a clear example. For native-speaking children, the text formalises structures they already encounter naturally in daily language use. For many non-native learners, however, the same examples may introduce unfamiliar vocabulary and unfamiliar grammar simultaneously, creating cognitive demands very different from those originally intended by the authors. A similar distinction applies to highly systematic grammar texts such as Hidayat al-Nahw and Sharh Mi‘at ‘Amil. Such works are highly valuable for organising grammatical material comprehensively and for later-stage reference and consolidation. However, organisational completeness is not the same as instructional sequencing for initial reading-skill acquisition. A text that systematically lists grammatical categories does not necessarily provide the staged operational progression required for learners to develop functional reading competence gradually.

This does not mean that such texts should be completely avoided. Within a coherent skill-centred instructional framework, many of these works can play highly valuable roles at appropriate stages of learner development. Their grammatical organisation, scholarly continuity, and recognised place within the Arabic grammatical tradition may strengthen learner confidence and provide learners with a sense of connection to established classical sources. Exposure to such works at the appropriate stage may also help learners recognise that the grammatical structures they have acquired operationally are directly connected to the wider scholarly tradition of Arabic grammar. In a skill-centred model, the pedagogical sequence determines which materials are introduced, when they are introduced, and how they are used; the instructional framework is therefore not subordinated to the progression of a particular book, but the books themselves are selectively deployed in service of the target skill.

No book, however valuable within its intended purpose, can independently substitute for a coherent skill-delivery model aligned with the learner’s actual context, cognitive readiness, and target competence.

5. THE REAL VARIABLES: METHODOLOGY, TEACHING APPROACH, AND SKILL DELIVERY

If the book is not the determinant of instructional success, what is? The argument of this paper is that three variables play a far more important role: the pedagogical methodology guiding the instruction, the quality of the teaching in the classroom, and the coherence of skill delivery across the programme. Table 1 presents the contrast between book-centred and skill-centred instruction across six dimensions.

Table 1 Book-Centred vs Skill-Centred Instruction: A Conceptual Comparison

Book-Centred Instruction	Skill-Centred Instruction
Book completion	Demonstrable reading competence
Book sequence governs progression	Skill sequence governs progression
Rule recall as evidence of learning	Functional structural understanding to access meaning as evidence of reading competence
Assessment by content coverage	Assessment by reading performance
Teacher as content deliverer	Teacher as skill facilitator
Success = book finished	Success = learner can begin reading independently

The distinctions above represent ideal-typical orientations rather than mutually exclusive categories. Books remain valuable resources within a skill-centred framework — the distinction concerns how they are positioned and used. In a skill-centred model, the pedagogical sequence determines which materials are introduced, when they are introduced, and how they are used; the instructional framework is therefore not subordinated to the progression of a particular book, but the books themselves are selectively deployed in service of the target skill. Framework informed by Biggs's (1996) concept of instructional alignment.

Figure 1 illustrates the difference between book-centred and skill-centred pathways.

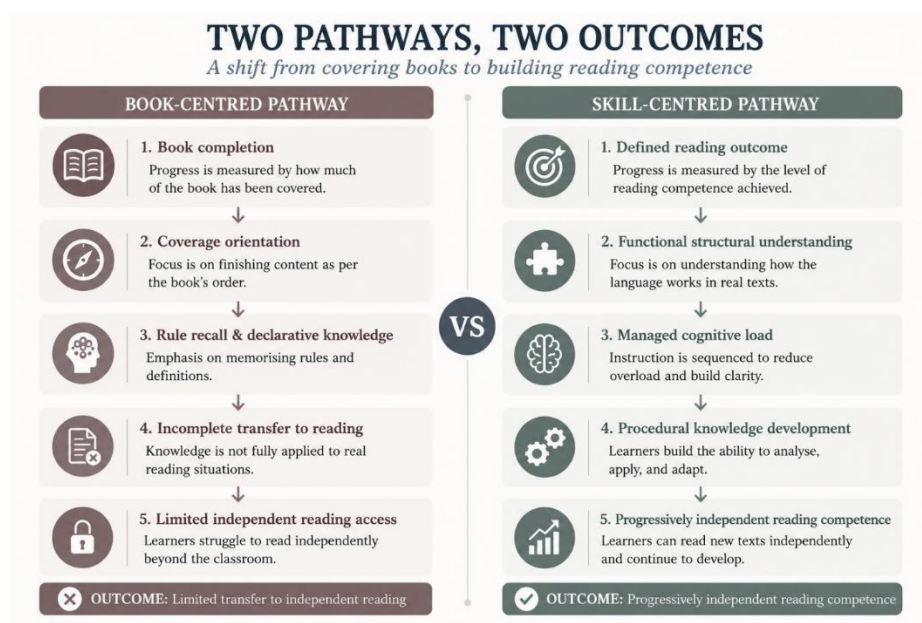


Figure 1 From Book Completion to Skill Acquisition: Two Instructional Pathways

The left pathway documents the typical book-centred instructional sequence: book completion drives coverage orientation, producing rule recall and declarative knowledge that results in incomplete transfer to reading performance and limited independent reading access. The right pathway documents the skill-centred alternative: a defined reading outcome drives functional structural understanding to access meaning under managed cognitive load, building procedural knowledge that enables progressively independent reading competence.

5.1 Methodology

Methodology — as used here — means having a principled answer to the question: what is this instruction trying to produce, and what sequence of instructional decisions produces it? In skill-centred instruction, intensive reading competence functions as the governing instructional outcome. Once that outcome is clearly defined, instructional decisions are no longer determined by the organisational order of a book but by whether particular content contributes meaningfully to the development of reading competence.

This changes the logic of sequencing itself. Content is not introduced merely because it appears in a chapter sequence or because it belongs to a traditionally complete presentation of grammar. Rather, instructional progression is governed by competence development: what the learner is ready to process, what supports the target skill at a particular stage, and what creates unnecessary cognitive competition.

Methodological misalignment becomes visible when a teacher is asked what skill their instruction is building and responds by naming a book rather than describing a competence. In a skill-centred framework, books and instructional materials are subordinated to the pedagogical sequence rather than functioning as the sequence itself. The target competence determines what material is instructionally relevant, how instructional decisions are justified, and what falls outside the scope of the programme. For example, a popular text such as Al-Nadawi's *Qasas al-Nabiyyin* may be used as content for comprehension and narrative engagement, or it may be used as a structured linguistic tool for developing functional reading competence and sentence-level structural understanding. The pedagogical function of the text therefore depends less on the book itself than on

the methodology directing the teacher in its use. Methodology therefore functions as the instructional architecture governing the relationship between competence, content, and assessment.

5.2 Teaching Approach

Teaching approach refers to the moment-by-moment enactment of that methodology in the classroom — the practical decisions through which competence-oriented methodology becomes operational learning activity. These decisions include: whether grammar is presented as information to be remembered or as a functional reading tool for accessing meaning; whether learners are guided to think structurally about sentences or merely corrected when they misunderstand them; whether vocabulary is introduced in a way that supports cognitive processing or competes with grammatical development for working memory resources; and whether learners are encouraged to operationalise grammatical knowledge during reading activity or simply reproduce the examples presented in the book.

Good methodology becomes educationally productive only when it translates into effective classroom practice — and that translation is not automatic. It requires deliberate teacher training that develops both methodological clarity and the practical instructional skills necessary to implement skill-centred instruction: sequencing instruction toward competence milestones, managing cognitive load, scaffolding learning progressively, facilitating structural thinking during reading activity, and guiding learners toward self-correction and progressively independent reading.

In skill-centred pedagogy, subject-matter expertise alone is not sufficient. The ability to transform grammatical knowledge into structured skill development may, in many cases, be more educationally consequential than the mere possession of that knowledge. This reflects a broader need within Arabic teacher preparation for clearer alignment between instructional methodology, competence-oriented curriculum design, classroom implementation, and functional learning goals — a need further supported by the growing emphasis on professionalism, teacher education, and accountability in the field (Wahba, England, & Taha, 2018).

5.3 Skill Delivery

Where methodology defines why and teaching approach defines how in the moment, skill delivery defines when and in what cumulative order across the full programme. A programme achieves skill delivery when every instructional decision — what to teach, what not to teach, in what order, at what level of complexity, and with what kind of practice — is governed by a model of what the learner needs to be able to do and what prerequisite competences that requires.

Skill delivery fails when the sequencing is driven primarily by book chapter order rather than by a competence model, or when assessment rewards content recall rather than the demonstrated ability to derive meaning independently from unfamiliar Arabic text through functional structural understanding. In such situations, instructional progression may produce extensive exposure to grammatical information without ensuring that learners can operationally use that knowledge during actual reading.

Effective skill delivery therefore requires systematic instructional sequencing and pedagogical scaffolding across the full programme arc. Earlier competences must function as foundations for increasingly complex reading tasks so that learners progressively internalise functional structural relationships rather than encountering disconnected grammatical categories in isolation. What this looks like when applied in practice is illustrated by the following pedagogical case.

6. AN ILLUSTRATIVE CASE: THE GATEWAY TO ARABIC EXCELLENCE PROGRAMME

The Gateway to Arabic Excellence (GAE) programme provides an illustrative example of what a deliberate shift from book completion to skill acquisition may look like in practice. The programme is an online Arabic instructional programme conducted by the author since 2023 for non-native adult learners in non-immersive contexts whose primary goal is Arabic text reading comprehension. The term "Gateway" reflects the programme's underlying instructional philosophy: that grammatical understanding functions primarily as an instrumental gateway for accessing meaning through Arabic text rather than as an isolated body of information to be mastered independently.

Rather than organising instruction around the completion of a particular book, the programme organises instruction around the gradual development of functional reading competence. Instruction is sequenced according to the structural competences required for intensive reading rather than according to book chapter order. The programme therefore attempts to apply skill-centred instructional principles through deliberate sequencing, cognitive load management, gradual progression of grammatical complexity, restrained early-stage vocabulary load, and the staged introduction of morphology according to learner readiness.

Vocabulary expansion is not ignored, but introduced contextually after learners develop sufficient structural operational competence to engage meaningfully with increasingly complex reading material.

Particular emphasis is placed on reducing unnecessary cognitive and affective burden during the early stages of learning. Grammatical structures are introduced progressively, beginning with simpler sentence structures before moving toward increasingly complex constructions. Reading activity is introduced once learners have developed a sufficient foundation in basic sentence structure, and thereafter proceeds in parallel with grammatical instruction throughout the programme — moving from simpler material toward complex sentence structures and eventually toward undiacritised Arabic text. Throughout this progression, the instructor functions primarily as a facilitator: prompting learners to think structurally about the text, identify functional relationships within sentences, operationalise acquired grammatical knowledge during actual reading, and move toward self-correction through structural re-analysis. When necessary, the instructor explicitly explains how a particular structure operates so that future encounters with similar constructions become progressively easier to process independently. In the later stages, instruction increasingly centres on reading itself, with grammatical, morphological, and structural nuances introduced contextually as they arise naturally within increasingly complex material.

The programme's instructional goal is not immediate mastery or complete autonomous expertise. The operational reading milestone is the learner's ability to begin engaging independently with Arabic texts using functional understanding of grammatical structure to derive meaning — a milestone treated as the continuation of the learning trajectory rather than a fully completed endpoint achieved upon programme completion.

At the time of writing, the programme has generated more than 1,900 items of voluntary learner feedback collected through routine programme feedback forms. While such feedback does not constitute controlled experimental evidence, it provides useful qualitative insight into how learners themselves perceive the effects of skill-centred instruction. The programme continues to generate learner feedback through continued instructional and reading engagement.

The testimonies cited below are drawn from the GAE programme feedback corpus and are used here for illustrative purposes only.

One recurring theme in the feedback is the distinction between duration of study and actual reading competence:

"I am studying grammar for the past 13 years and alhamdulillah many questions which were unanswered are being answered."

Student-011, Class 36

Another learner described the difference between book-centred progression and selective skill-oriented sequencing in explicitly functional terms:

"In other Arabic classes they just follow the book — there is no connection and everything gets forgotten. But in this class you take only what is necessary and show its actual purpose clearly."

Student-090, Class 40

A more detailed learner testimony explicitly describes the transition from word-for-word translation toward structural reading competence:

"When I first started learning Arabic, I relied on word-for-word translation, which often led to misinterpretation and loss of meaning. However, your teaching approach resonated with me from the beginning. By focusing on phrase-level interpretation rather than literal translation, you have significantly improved my understanding of Arabic sentences. And your method of identifying and categorising phrases into grammatical slots — such as فعل، مفعول، مبتدأ، خبر — has further deepened my understanding. Your guidance on analysing complex sentences by pinpointing key words and phrases, placing them in relevant slots, and deriving meaning has been invaluable. This skill has enabled me to read and understand Arabic texts with greater ease and confidence, Alhamdulillah."

S-010, Class 129

What this testimony describes is not merely learner satisfaction, but the acquisition of a transferable procedural reading skill: the ability to move from isolated lexical decoding toward functional structural analysis as a means of deriving meaning from increasingly complex sentences.

The same learner, writing forty classes later, documents this competence being actively deployed during reading of undiacritised Arabic text:

"Without tashkeel, one of our main challenges is determining whether a word is ism or fi'l. Even when we know it is ism, we still have to work out if it is nakirah or ma'rifah. Our in-class reading sessions have required us to apply all the rules and knowledge we have studied so far. Trying to sort these words out pushes us to think hard, and we end up learning a lot. Overall, these reading sessions are an excellent exercise that have taken our Arabic learning to a whole new level."

S-010, Class 169

This testimony is particularly significant because it reflects procedural grammatical engagement during actual reading activity rather than retrospective rule recall. The learner describes actively using grammatical knowledge to disambiguate linguistic structure and derive meaning in the absence of diacritical support — one of the central competences required for intensive reading of Arabic text. That both entries come from the same learner, forty classes apart, documents not a momentary impression but a sustained and deepening trajectory of development.

All learner testimonies were voluntarily submitted as part of routine programme feedback. No identifying information is disclosed.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONS, TEACHERS, AND LEARNERS

7.1 For Institutions

The most immediate institutional implication is a change in the question used to evaluate programmes. Rather than asking “Which book has been completed?”, institutions must ask: what level of skill acquisition is the programme designed to produce, and what will learners operationally be able to do with the language at the end of instruction? This reframing requires institutions to define skill outcomes, develop assessment methods that measure those outcomes rather than book familiarity, and evaluate teachers on the basis of learner competence development rather than content coverage.

A shift toward skill-centred instruction also requires institutions to reconsider the role of books within programme design. Books remain valuable resources, but they should function as selectively deployed instructional tools within a coherent competence-oriented framework rather than as programme-defining structures that determine the entire instructional sequence.

Critically, this shift raises an immediate structural question: what replaces the book as the organising framework of the programme? In most current settings, the book functions as the de facto syllabus. A skill-acquisition paradigm requires a skill-based syllabus in its place — one that sequences instruction toward defined competence milestones rather than toward page completion. The development of such syllabuses for this learner population therefore remains an important research and instructional design priority, and institutions cannot fully operationalise the paradigm shift without it.

7.2 For Teachers

The most important implication for teachers is the need for methodological alignment — a principled and articulable answer to the question: what skill am I building, and how does each lesson contribute to that development? A teacher with this clarity uses books selectively as instructional resources rather than following them prescriptively as programmes.

This requires teacher training that goes beyond grammatical content knowledge to include understanding of cognitive sequencing, competence development, pedagogical scaffolding, and the relationship between instructional decisions and learner outcomes. There is also an urgent need for researchers and educators to develop instructional frameworks and resources designed specifically around skill-development outcomes for non-native, non-immersive learners — frameworks in which skill acquisition, rather than book completion, functions as the organising principle of instruction.

7.3 For Learners

Learners would benefit from first clarifying what their actual goal in studying Arabic is and what level of reading competence they hope to develop. Programmes should therefore be evaluated not only by which books are used, but by what level of reading competence they are designed to produce and how that competence will be assessed. More useful questions than “which book does this programme use?” include: What will I realistically be able to do with the language at the end of this programme? How will I know whether I am progressing toward reading competence?

Many learners in this demographic have invested years in book-centred programmes without reaching their intended reading goals and have consequently concluded that Arabic is simply too difficult for them. This conclusion is, in many cases, worth questioning. The barrier may not be learner capacity itself, but the absence of instruction systematically sequenced around the actual skill the learner is trying to acquire.

8. LIMITATIONS

The present paper is primarily conceptual rather than empirical. Its argument is grounded in theoretical frameworks and supported by illustrative pedagogical evidence, but the relative effectiveness of skill-centred and book-centred instruction requires further systematic comparative research. The discussion is focused specifically on non-native adult learners in non-immersive contexts whose primary goal is intensive reading competence, and the argument may not apply equally to learners with different goals or instructional environments.

The present paper addresses the paradigm of instruction rather than the full range of skill outcomes that instruction may produce. Associated development in writing through structured sentence practice and in listening through classroom engagement may occur as natural by-products of the instructional design, while spoken fluency requires additional focused communicative effort. None of these — writing, listening, or speaking — are specifically addressed in the present analysis.

9. CONCLUSION

The central argument of this paper can be stated simply: in Arabic instruction for non-native adult learners in the Indian subcontinent and comparable non-immersive contexts, the book is not the programme. Books are valuable instructional resources, and many widely used works reflect substantial scholarship and careful pedagogical thought within their intended contexts. They are not, however, sufficient as programme-defining structures for non-native, non-immersive learners seeking intensive reading competence, because they were not originally designed for that specific instructional context or target outcome.

What determines whether learners develop meaningful reading competence is not primarily the selection of a book, but the methodology guiding instruction, the quality of classroom implementation, and the coherence of skill delivery across the programme. Learners may engage with multiple books and still remain unable to derive meaning independently from unfamiliar Arabic text if instruction is not systematically organised around competence development.

The shift required is therefore not from one book to another supposedly better book, but from a book-completion paradigm to a skill-acquisition paradigm — one in which intensive reading competence is the defined outcome, functional structural understanding to access meaning becomes the central instructional focus, and assessment measures what learners can operationally do with the language rather than merely what content they have covered.

Central to such a shift is the development of coherent skill-based syllabuses that replace the book as the organising structure of instruction. In many contexts, the book currently serves as the programme's primary organising structure. Removing it from that role without replacing it with a competence-oriented sequencing framework leaves institutions without a principled basis for instructional decision-making. The GAE programme represents one illustrative attempt at developing such a framework, and further work in this direction — by researchers, institutions, and teachers alike — remains an important priority for the field.

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