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Arabic as an Instrument of Tajdid: Ahmad Dahlan's Reform of Language Education and Textual Authority in Early Muhammadiyah

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the thought of K.H. Ahmad Dahlan (1868–1923), founder of Muhammadiyah, on the position of Arabic as an instrument of Tajdid (renewal) in Islam and its implications for the shifting authority over Islamic texts in early twentieth-century Indonesia. At that time, interpretive authority over religious texts was concentrated among traditional ulama who mastered Arabic through sanad (chains of transmission) and oral inheritance, while lay Muslims depended entirely on their explanations. Using a qualitative library-research approach combined with historical-hermeneutical analysis and source triangulation, this study traces how Ahmad Dahlan separated Arabic into an independent subject within the Muhammadiyah educational system, promoted the principle of interpreting the Qur'an through the Qur'an itself, and integrated Arabic instruction with general sciences. The findings indicate that active mastery of Arabic, rather than mere memorization of letter sounds, functioned as an instrument for democratizing religious authority: shifting it from a closed model resting on taqlid and clerical mediation toward an open model enabling direct textual access and contextual ijtihad. The article concludes that Ahmad Dahlan's reform of Arabic-language pedagogy was not merely a pedagogical policy but an epistemological strategy positioning language as a bridge between revelation and reason within the project of progressive Islamic renewal.

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Keyword

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ملخص

تناول هذه المقالة فكر الشيخ أحمد دحلان (1868-1923)، مؤسس محمدية، حول مكانة اللغة العربية بوصفها أداة للتجديد في الإسلام، وانعكاسات ذلك على تحول سلطة تفسير النصوص الإسلامية في أوائل القرن العشرين بإندونيسيا. في تلك الحقبة، كانت سلطة تفسير النصوص الدينية منحصرة في العلماء التقليديين الذين أتقنوا اللغة العربية عبر السند والتوارث الشفهي، بينما كان عامة المسلمين يعتمدون كلياً على تفسيراتهم. وباستخدام منهج البحث المكتبي النوعي المقترن بالتحليل التاريخي الهيرمينوطيقي وتثليث المصادر، يتتبع هذا البحث كيف جعل أحمد دحلان اللغة العربية مادة مستقلة ضمن النظام التعليمي لمحمدية، ورسخ مبدأ تفسير القرآن بالقرآن، ودمج تعليم العربية بالعلوم العامة. وتشير النتائج إلى أن الإلتقان الفعلي للغة العربية، لا مجرد حفظ أصوات الحروف، كان أداة لدمقرطة السلطة الدينية بالانتقال من نموذج مغلق قائم على التقليد والوساطة العلمائية إلى نموذج منفتح يتيح الوصول المباشر إلى النصوص والاجتهاد السياقي. وتخلص المقالة إلى أن إصلاح أحمد دحلان لتعليم اللغة العربية لم يكن مجرد سياسة تربوية، بل استراتيجية معرفية تضع اللغة جسراً بين الوحي والعقل ضمن مشروع التجديد الإسلامي التقدمي.

اللغة العربية: التجديد؛ أحمد دحلان؛ سلطة النص؛ إصلاح التعليم الإسلامي

الكلمات الرئيسية

INTRODUCTION

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Islamic world experienced what many historians describe as a *Nahdah* (awakening): a collective recognition among Muslims of their lagging position vis-à-vis Western modernity, paired with a yearning to return to the original sources of the faith. The *Tajdid* (renewal) ideas championed by Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida in Egypt travelled across the Islamic world, including the Malay Archipelago, and found one of their most concrete local expressions in K.H. Ahmad Dahlan, who founded Muhammadiyah on 18 November 1912 in Kauman, Yogyakarta (Nakamura, 1983).

Much of the scholarship on Ahmad Dahlan's thought concentrates on his purification of creed, his correction of the qibla, or his establishment of Muhammadiyah's social and educational institutions. Comparatively little attention has been paid to a further dimension of his reform: the position of the Arabic language within the structure of Islamic education. Ahmad Dahlan departed from prevailing practice by establishing Arabic as a distinct subject in the schools he founded, from the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Diniyah Islamiyah (1911) to the Kweekschool and Mu'allimin Muhammadiyah (Susilo, 2025). On the surface this looks like a matter of pedagogical technique; underneath, it carried a deeper epistemological consequence, shifting the locus of religious authority from the ulama, who had previously mediated textual meaning, toward the individual Muslim capable of engaging Arabic-language texts directly. This article treats that shift as the function of Arabic as an instrument of *Tajdid*.

Etymologically, *Tajdid* signifies renewal, the revitalization of something inherited from the past. In Islamic discourse the term denotes the effort to restore religious understanding and practice to their fundamental spirit as enshrined in the Qur'an and Sunnah, filtering out cultural accretions and interpretations judged to have drifted from that original intent (Rahman, 1982). The modernist *Tajdid* movement formulated by

Muhammad Abduh, and carried forward by his successors across the Islamic world, positions Ijtihad (independent reasoning applied to revelatory sources) against Taqlid (unreflective adherence to the opinions of earlier scholars) .

In this study, textual authority refers to who holds the social and epistemic legitimacy to interpret a religious text, and how that legitimacy is acquired. In the classical Islamic scholarly tradition, such authority was generally obtained through sanad, a teacher-student chain of transmission, with advanced mastery of Arabic functioning as a prerequisite for access to classical texts (turats). This structure produced a comparatively narrow interpretive elite, while the majority of the Ummah occupied the position of passive recipients of scholarly explanation (Zayd, 2003). Where mastery of Arabic, the language of revelation and of classical Islamic literature, is confined to a select few, religious authority tends toward centralization and insulation from correction.

Read this way, language is not a neutral instrument of communication but, following Michel Foucault, a site where power and knowledge are intertwined (Foucault, 2002). Whoever controls the source language exercises substantial control over meaning, and by extension over what counts as valid religious practice. Reform of language education can therefore function as a strategy for redistributing authority, a thesis that anchors this article's reading of Ahmad Dahlan's thought.

Two adjacent bodies of literature bear on this argument. The first concerns Ahmad Dahlan and Muhammadiyah's educational reform directly. Marlini, Fakhrurazi, and Shofiyah (2024) describe how Dahlan integrated spirituality and rationality within the Muhammadiyah school curriculum, while Asman, Wantini, and Bustam (2021) trace the implications of his educational philosophy for contemporary Islamic pedagogy, and Ismail (2023) situates his reforms within the broader modernization of Islamic education in Indonesia. Zaini (2022) extends this reading to Indonesia's wider modernization of Islamic schooling, arguing that curricular integration, rather than doctrinal change alone, was the primary mechanism of reform. These studies converge on a shared observation, that the integration of religious and general knowledge was the hallmark of Dahlan's project, yet they treat Arabic-language instruction as one curricular item among several rather than as an analytical object in its own right; none examines it as a mechanism through which interpretive authority itself was reorganized.

The second body of literature concerns Arabic proficiency and religious authority more generally. Almelhes (2024) documents persistent structural obstacles non-native learners face in acquiring functional Arabic, obstacles that historically confined active competence to a narrow circle. Studies on religious authority in the digital era, including Whyte (2022) on religious actors in cyberspace, Rusli and Nurdin (2022) on Indonesian ulama's use of online sources in fatwa-making, and Ichwan and Pabbajah (2024) on the erosion of established interpretive authority under digitization, describe a contemporary fragmentation of who may legitimately interpret religious texts. What these studies do not offer is a historical account of how such authority was deliberately reorganized through language pedagogy prior to the digital era; they document the contemporary condition without an account of its genealogy.

Taken together, the literature on Ahmad Dahlan supplies rich curricular detail but stops short of theorizing Arabic instruction as an instrument of authority, while the literature on religious authority supplies a theory of contested legitimacy but lacks a historical case that shows how formal language education produced that contestation in the first place. This article addresses that gap by reading Ahmad Dahlan's Arabic-language reform specifically through the lens of textual authority, treating pedagogy not as background but as the mechanism of change.

Accordingly, this article asks: (1) what were the conceptions and practices of Arabic-language instruction within Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought; (2) how did these reforms contribute to a shift in the authority to interpret Islamic texts during his time; and (3) what relevance do these ideas hold for contemporary discourse on Arabic-language education and religious literacy? The inquiry is significant because the question of who may legitimately interpret sacred texts, and on what grounds of competence, remains unsettled amid the present flood of digital religious information, a context in which mastery of source languages has again become a pressing concern.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative library-research design combined with historical-hermeneutical analysis. The design was chosen because the object of inquiry, Ahmad Dahlan's thought as expressed through institutional practice rather than a single authored text, is reconstructed most reliably from dispersed historical and biographical sources rather than from a single primary corpus; a historical-hermeneutical design allows those sources to be read both contextually, against the conditions of early twentieth-century Java, and theoretically, against the framework of textual authority developed above.

Primary data consist of biographical records and documented accounts of Ahmad Dahlan's thought and educational practice, produced by Muhammadiyah figures and institutional historians, including Soedja (1993) and Mulkhan (2007), together with archival material on the early curricula of the Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Diniyah Islamiyah, the Kweekschool, and the Madrasah Mu'allimin. Secondary data comprise scholarly literature on the history of Muhammadiyah and Indonesian Islamic modernism, together with nationally and internationally indexed journal articles on Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought published over the past decade.

Because biographical accounts of a movement's founder are prone to hagiographic framing, sources were subjected to basic historical criticism before use. Internal criticism assessed the internal consistency of each account and its proximity to the events described, weighting institutional histories written by contemporaries more heavily than later commemorative accounts; external criticism cross-checked factual claims, dates, and institutional details against independent sources wherever more than one account existed. Sources containing claims that could not be corroborated by at least one independent account were used only for interpretive or illustrative purposes, not as the basis for factual claims.

Data collection proceeded through documentation: the systematic retrieval and recording of information from written sources relevant to the research focus, organized around the three research questions.

Analysis followed a descriptive-analytical method within a historical-hermeneutic approach, carried out in three steps. First, historical data on Arabic-language educational practice during Ahmad Dahlan's era were reconstructed, establishing what was taught, to whom, and through what institutional structures. Second, this reconstruction was interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of textual authority and Tajdid outlined in the Introduction, to identify the epistemological significance of the reforms rather than only their curricular content. Third, conclusions were drawn inductively, moving from patterns identified in the data toward broader propositions about the relationship between language, education, and religious authority.

Data validity was addressed through source triangulation: findings on a given practice or claim were accepted only where they could be traced across at least two independent sources of different provenance, for instance a primary institutional record checked against a secondary historical account, or an early biographical source checked against a more recent scholarly reconstruction. Where sources diverged, the discrepancy is noted in the analysis rather than resolved silently in favor of one account.

RESULTS&DISCUSSION

Arabic Instruction in Ahmad Dahlan's Educational Thought

Ahmad Dahlan, born Muhammad Darwisy on 1 August 1868 in Kauman, Yogyakarta, grew up in a family of ulama attached to the Yogyakarta palace. His Arabic education began early, under his father K.H. Abu Bakar, and continued with several Yogyakarta scholars who deepened his grasp of nahwu, sharaf, tafsir, hadith, and fiqh (Wibowo, Nurhakim, & Romelah, 2024). While still young he performed the Hajj and settled for a time in Mecca, where he sharpened his command of qira'at, tafsir, tauhid, fiqh, Sufism, and astronomy alongside Arabic, and where he first encountered the reformist ideas of Muhammad Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Ibn Taimiyah then circulating among Indonesian students in the city (Soedja, 1993).

This linguistic training set Dahlan apart from most kyai of his generation. For him, Arabic was more than a passive tool for reading the kitab kuning; it became a means of re-examining religious claims that had long gone unquestioned. That competence underwrote his critical reading of Javanese religious practice, much of it entangled with mysticism and syncretism, letting him test such practice directly against its textual basis in the Qur'an and Hadith rather than defer to inherited explanation.

His clearest innovation was to make Arabic a standalone subject in the Muhammadiyah school curriculum, a step later Islamic educational reformers would treat as pivotal. In the pesantren and mushala of the period, Arabic functioned only as an instrument of Qur'anic literacy: once students had learned the shapes and sounds of the letters, they moved straight to sequential recitation, without grounding in grammar, while meaning was explained unilaterally by the kyai in Javanese.

Dahlan restructured this. Arabic, comprising nahwu (grammar), sharaf (morphology), and mufradat (vocabulary), became a distinct subject taught systematically across graded levels, in a classroom that sat alongside arithmetic and geography and used desks, chairs, and a blackboard in place of students seated in a circle around the kyai (Mulkhan, 2007). The secondary institutions that followed, the Muhammadiyah Kweekschool, the Normal School, and the Madrasah Mu'allimin, reinforced this by training teachers with active command of Arabic rather than the ability to recite it.

More was at stake here than pedagogical efficiency. By teaching structure explicitly, Dahlan gave students the tools to work out meaning for themselves instead of accepting it ready-made from the kyai. That shift, from learning sounds to learning structure and meaning, marks the point at which Arabic began to function as an instrument of Tajdid, opening the sacred texts to anyone who completed an adequate education rather than keeping them behind a wall only a scholarly few could cross.

A related methodological commitment ran through Dahlan's teaching: letting the Qur'an interpret itself, tafsir al-Qur'an bi al-Qur'an, reading one verse against another, before turning to secondary commentary (Aulia, 2014). This is a rational-functional use of Islamic sources, in which reason examines the text directly and its findings are then turned toward concrete social action. It also presupposes real command of Arabic; without it, a reader cannot compare verses independently and remains dependent on a translator.

From Passive Recitation to Active Interpretation: The Shift in Textual Authority

The call to return to the Qur'an and Sunnah, Dahlan's rejection of taqlid, bid'ah, and khurafat, was not just a normative appeal; it rested on the practical precondition of linguistic competence. A call to return to scripture without the ability to read it directly risks merely transferring authority from traditional scholars to a new set of reformist spokesmen, and Dahlan's investment in Arabic instruction can be read as an attempt to close that gap.

His linguistic reform did not stand alone. It was part of a wider project to fold religious and secular knowledge into one educational system, rejecting the sharp separation then drawn between pesantren and the "general schools" run by the colonial government or Christian missions. Arabic, Qur'an, tauhid, and ethics sat alongside arithmetic, geography, and other languages in a single curriculum (Marlini, Fakhurrazi, & Shofiyah, 2024), guided by the maxim al-muhafazhah 'ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadid al-ashlah, preserving what is sound in the old while adopting what is better in the new.

This integration had two consequences for religious authority. First, it kept Arabic competence from becoming an isolated skill detached from modern reasoning, so that linguistic ability came paired with a critical-analytical habit of mind drawn from general disciplines. Second, teaching Arabic in modern classrooms, open to far more students than the exclusive pesantren system, widened the base of people potentially capable of ijtihad, beyond the small circle of senior students who had spent years attached to a single kyai.

Set against the framework of textual authority sketched earlier, three related shifts follow from Dahlan's reform. Authority no longer rested solely on personal chains of transmission (sanad); it could now also be earned through competence verified by formal

education open to a wider public. Teaching itself changed shape, moving away from a one-directional model in which the kyai explained and the student received, toward a more dialogic classroom where students equipped with the necessary linguistic tools could question, or even correct, what they were taught. The clearest evidence of this came from practice rather than pedagogy: Dahlan's own decision to correct the qibla direction of the Great Mosque of Yogyakarta on astronomical grounds, a step that pushed religious life from passive taqlid toward active, contextual ijtihad and drew sharp opposition from defenders of the existing authority structure.

None of this made the shift anarchic or a rejection of the ulama. Dahlan continued to respect scholarly lineage and saw himself as heir to the scholarly tradition of the Yogyakarta palace passed down from his father; what he opposed was a form of religious authority that was closed to correction because ordinary believers had no direct access to the source texts (Sakirman, 2012). Arabic, in his view, was meant to hold scholarly authority accountable through wider community participation in interpretation, not to dismantle it.

Relevance to Contemporary Arabic Education and Religious Literacy

Dahlan's model of Arabic as an instrument of Tajdid speaks directly to present debates on Arabic education and religious literacy. Digitalization has multiplied access to the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical turats, including translations and exegesis applications, in ways Dahlan could not have anticipated. But recent work on religious authority in the digital era suggests that easier access does not by itself guarantee responsible interpretation. Whyte (2022) documents how religious actors in cyberspace acquire authority through means only loosely tied to traditional scholarly credentials; Rusli and Nurdin (2022) show Indonesian ulama increasingly drawing on online sources when issuing everyday fatwas, often without the source criticism classical training would demand; and Ichwan and Pabbajah (2024) describe an erosion of established interpretive authority as tafsir moves online. Together, these studies point to a risk Dahlan's model was designed to prevent: authority becoming more, not less, fragmented, and harder to correct because it is dispersed across a digital landscape with no shared methodological anchor.

The obstacle is institutional as much as linguistic. Almelhes (2024) documents the structural difficulties non-native learners face in acquiring functional Arabic, difficulties that, if unaddressed, reproduce exactly the narrow circle of active competence Dahlan's reform sought to widen (Ritonga et.al, 2021). Given that persistent gap, his approach, treating Arabic as a discipline taught systematically, tied to critical reasoning, and oriented toward independent textual analysis, still provides a workable model for Arabic curricula today, whether in Muhammadiyah institutions or Islamic education more broadly. Combining structural mastery of grammar and morphology with communicative competence and a hermeneutic orientation toward Islamic texts charts a middle path between rigid textual literalism and an interpretive relativism cut loose from linguistic discipline.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to trace how Arabic-language instruction figured in Ahmad Dahlan's educational thought and how that instruction reshaped the authority to interpret Islamic texts. The evidence indicates that Dahlan turned Arabic from a tool of passive recitation into a standalone academic subject built around grammar, morphology, and vocabulary, taught alongside general sciences in a modern classroom setting. Combined with his emphasis on interpreting verses through other verses, this reform shifted textual authority away from a closed model resting solely on scholarly mediation and sanad, toward a more open one in which a wider circle of Muslims could access and examine source texts directly, without discarding respect for scholarly lineage.

In relation to the third research question, this reading suggests that Dahlan's reform was not merely a period piece. Its core commitment, that structural mastery of Arabic should underwrite independent, critically grounded engagement with religious texts, offers a concrete design principle for contemporary Arabic curricula: language instruction that stops at recitation or vocabulary drilling reproduces the narrow, closed model of authority Dahlan sought to move away from, while instruction that builds toward independent textual analysis extends his project into a digital environment where interpretive authority is once again being renegotiated.

This study has clear limits. It relies on library and documentary sources rather than archival curricular materials from the schools Dahlan founded, which restricts how precisely the actual content and sequencing of early Arabic instruction can be reconstructed. The analysis is also confined to Dahlan's own writings and institutional record as read through secondary historical accounts, and does not draw on comparative material from other reformers of the period, which limits how far the argument can be generalized beyond the Muhammadiyah case.

Further research could usefully examine the specific Arabic teaching materials used in early Muhammadiyah schools, where such materials survive, and undertake comparative studies of Dahlan's linguistic thought alongside that of other Islamic reformers in the Nusantara and the wider Islamic world. Such work would extend this study's central finding, that language pedagogy can function as a mechanism of authority redistribution, beyond a single reformer and a single institutional setting.

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