ASJP Algerian Scientific Journal Platform
EL-TAWASOLIA JOURNAL
ISSN 2437-0894- EISSN 6202-X537
HTTPS://WWW.ASJP.CERIST.DZ/EN/PRESENTATIONREVUE/294



Volume: 11/ N°: 04 (2025) p 11 /33

Designing an Educational Dictionary for Beginner-Level Learners of Arabic as a Foreign Language: A Proposed Framework

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Abstract ;*(not more than 10 Lines)*

This study proposes a vision for the development of an educational dictionary specifically designed for beginner-level non-native learners of Arabic. It argues that existing monolingual Arabic dictionaries, while valuable, fail to adequately address the unique needs of this learner group due to the absence of pedagogical features and level-appropriate content. The proposed vision emphasizes aligning the dictionary with learners' proficiency levels by selecting essential vocabulary organized according to semantic fields and thematic categories. Meanings are conveyed primarily through images, translations, and clear, context-based example sentences. The study distinguishes educational dictionaries from traditional reference works, underscoring the necessity of specialized tools and structures to enhance learning outcomes. Ultimately, it advocates for the creation of an educational dictionary that supports beginner learners through carefully curated entries and effective explanatory techniques.

Article info

Received
17/ 10/ 2025
Accepted
17/11/2025

Keyword:
- ✓ *Arabic*
- ✓ *Beginner level*
- ✓ *Educational dictionary*
- ✓ *Lexicography*

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1. *Introduction*

The dictionary is considered one of the most essential educational tools employed by learners of Arabic as a foreign language. It provides them with the most critical component needed in acquiring a new language—vocabulary. Moreover, using a dictionary constitutes a form of autonomous learning, fostering learner independence, reducing reliance on the teacher, placing the learner at the center of the educational process, and enhancing their confidence in their linguistic abilities. Over nearly fifteen years of experience in teaching Arabic to non-native speakers, I have observed that learners rely heavily and extensively on dictionaries. They turn to them when seeking to expand their vocabulary, when encountering unfamiliar words, or when faced with a word used in an unexpected context. The dictionary accompanies them both inside and outside the classroom and is instrumental in completing daily assignments. This observation has driven my interest in studying dictionaries designed for non-native speakers, assessing their current state, and evaluating how effectively they meet learners' needs.

1.1 *Research Problem*

Traditional Arabic dictionaries are primarily designed for native speakers, making them unsuitable for learners who are new to Arabic as a foreign language. These dictionaries tend to be comprehensive, covering a broad spectrum of Arabic vocabulary—ranging from common to rare, and from simple to obscure terms. They list all derivatives of a given root, even when those derivatives differ significantly in meaning, which complicates the task for learners trying to identify the most frequently used or contextually relevant sense.

More importantly, searching for a word in these dictionaries requires familiarity with the word's root form and morphological patterns, including processes such as elision and substitution. This represents a major challenge for non-native learners who often lack the linguistic foundation needed to perform such analyses. Consequently, they struggle to use traditional Arabic dictionaries effectively and instead rely heavily on bilingual dictionaries, which typically provide only word-for-word translations without catering to the pedagogical needs essential for language acquisition.

1.2 *Research Objective*

Learners need an educational dictionary specifically designed to address their needs, matched to their language proficiency level, and limited to relevant and useful entries. Such a dictionary should be organized in an accessible way, with entries explained using appropriate pedagogical methods. I argue that, to date, no such educational dictionary exists.

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Therefore, the aim of this study is to help fill this gap by proposing a clear vision for developing an educational dictionary tailored to beginner-level non-native Arabic learners.

1.3 *Research Questions*

This study seeks to answer the following key research questions:

- What are the differences between an educational dictionary and a traditional dictionary?

- What characteristics qualify a dictionary as "educational"?

- What is the most suitable way to organize the entries?

- How should lexical entries be selected for inclusion in such a dictionary?

- What are the most effective methods for defining entries in an educational dictionary designed for beginners?

2. *The Educational Dictionary*

Methods Learners of Arabic as a foreign language rely on dictionaries more heavily and frequently than native speakers do. This reality highlights the urgent need to produce a greater number of dictionaries specifically designed for this learner group. However, in practice, the number of dictionaries developed for non-native Arabic speakers remains limited, especially when compared to the growing diversity, number, and proficiency levels of these learners. Moreover, the available dictionaries often lack practical value, falling short of meeting the expectations of both learners and specialists in the field.[1]

Consequently, many researchers have called for advancements in Arabic lexicography tailored specifically to the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language.[2] In fact, learners of Arabic as a foreign language exhibit linguistic characteristics that differ significantly from those of native speakers. This necessitates a distinct approach to dictionary design—one that

[1] Waheeb, Wahiba, "Khaṣā'iṣ Mu'ajim al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ghayr al-'Arabiyya wa Ahammiyyatuhā al-Ta'līmiyya" (Characteristics of Dictionaries for Non-Native Arabic Speakers and Their Educational Importance), *Numerus Academic Journal* 1/1 (2020), 27; Rima Khalifi - Rashidi, Salima Bounaeja, "Binyat al-Madākhil fī al-Muʿjam al-Wāḥid al-Lugha li-al-Nāṭiqīn bighayr al-ʿArabiyya: al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī Unmūdhajan" (The Structure of Entries in a Monolingual Dictionary for Non-Native Arabic Speakers: The Basic Arabic Dictionary as a Model), *Journal of Communication in Languages and Literature* 23/52 (2017), 148.

[2] Dreem, Nour Al-Din - Bin Zeina, Safiya, "Muwāṣafāt al-Muʿjam al-Taʿlīmī al-Muwajjah ilā al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ġayr al-ʿArabiyya fī Ḍawʾ al-Dirāsāt al-Bayniyya" (Specifications of the Educational Dictionary Directed to Non-Native Arabic Speakers in Light of Interdisciplinary Studies), *Mawazin Journal* 3/2 (2021), 29.

differs from traditional dictionaries in structure, organization, objectives, and lexical selection.

Accordingly, this study proposes a novel conceptualization of an educational dictionary intended for beginner learners. The author argues that such a dictionary should be developed with a clearly defined language proficiency level in mind. It is hoped that the proposed vision will meet the needs of beginner learners, align with their language level, and serve as an effective educational tool.

2.*1 Definition of the Dictionary*

Linguistically, the word (مُعْجَمٌ) is derived from the root (ع–ج–م), which conveys the meaning of obscurity or lack of clarity. The term (الأعْجَمُ) refers to someone who cannot articulate speech clearly, while (الأَعْجَمِيُّ) describes a person whose tongue lacks fluency.[1] When the hamza (ء) is prefixed to the verb (عَجَمَ), it introduces the meaning of removal or negation—thus, (أَعْجَمَ) means to remove obscurity or ambiguity. The noun (المُعْجَم) is a passive participle derived from the verb (أُعْجِمَ), meaning "that which has been clarified" or "made unambiguous".[2] For example, (أَعْجَمْتُ الكِتابَ) means "I clarified and explained the book."[3]

Terminologically, the dictionary has been defined in various ways. One common definition describes it as a book containing the words of a language, providing information about their pronunciation, meanings, usage, synonyms, and derivations, usually arranged either alphabetically or thematically.[4] Another definition states that it is "a book that includes all or most of the vocabulary of a language, typically organized in alphabetical order, with explanations provided for each entry, where the word serves as the core unit of the entry."[5] A third definition views the dictionary as a work presenting each word of the language along

[1] Ibn Manzur, *Qāmūs Lisan Al-Arab (Lisan Al-Arab Dictionary)* (Beirut: Dar Sader, n.d.) 12/385; Ibn Jinni, *Sirr Ṣināʿat al-Iʿrāb (The Secret of the Art of Parsing)* Edited by Muhammad Hasan Ismail (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, 2000), 48.

[2] Khalil ibn Ahmad Al-Farahidi, *Muʿjam al-ʿAyn (al-ʿAyn Dictionary),* Edited by Mahdi Al-Makhzoumi and Ibrahim Al-Samarrai. (Baghdad: Dar Al-Rasheed, 1981), 284.

[3] Ibn Jinni, *Al-Khasais (Characteristics)* Edited by Ali Al-Najjar (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, n.d.) 3/76.

[4] Omar Suleiman Muhammad, *Dalīl al-Ṭālib fī Istikhdām al-Maʻājim al-ʻArabīyah (Student's Guide to Using Arabic Dictionaries)* (Riyadh: International Publishing and Distribution House, 1992), 190; Ahmad Mukhtar Omar, *Ṣināʿat al-Muʿjam al-Ḥadīth (The Making of the Modern Dictionary)* (Egypt: Alam Al-Kutub, 1998), 19.

[5] Riyadh Zaki Qasim, *Al-Muʻjam al-ʻArabī (The Arabic Dictionary)* (Beirut: Dar Al-Ma'rifa, 1987), 12.

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with its meaning, derivation, pronunciation, and illustrative usage examples.[1] It is worth noting that some definitions omit any mention of the order in which entries are presented, while others do not address the inclusion of usage examples.

Based on the above, a concise and comprehensive definition of a dictionary can be formulated as follows: A dictionary is a book that collects linguistic entries, arranges them in a specific order, and explains them using appropriate methods.

2.2 *The Concept of the Educational Dictionary*

The educational dictionary is a distinct type of dictionary. Like other dictionaries, it contains lexical entries arranged in a specific order and accompanied by explanations. However, what sets it apart is its educational purpose, which requires it to meet certain pedagogical criteria that qualify it as an educational dictionary. Some scholars define the educational dictionary as "a dictionary characterized by its small size, light weight, and ease of use, specifically designed for a targeted group of learners and aligned with their proficiency level."[2] However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that such definitions often refer merely to abridged or simplified dictionaries aimed at school-age learners, rather than dictionaries that fulfill a fully educational function. In contrast, this study adopts the position that what fundamentally distinguishes an educational dictionary is, as the term implies, its explicit role as a pedagogical tool. It is not simply a resource for looking up unfamiliar words; rather, it is systematically integrated with the learner's textbook. Learners are encouraged to consult it regularly to support their language acquisition and vocabulary development.

In other words, the educational dictionary forms an integral part of the instructional curriculum. It supports learners continuously throughout the language learning process and is not intended for occasional reference only. Moreover, it is designed for a clearly defined learner group—similar to any educational textbook—tailored to their proficiency level, responsive to their needs, and aligned with the goals of the instructional program.

Several scholars have offered definitions aligned with this perspective, describing the educational dictionary as "a specialized or targeted dictionary aimed at learners—whether

[1] Ismail ibn Hammad Al-Jawhari, *Taj Al-Lugha wa Sahah Al-Arabiya (The Crown of Language and the Correct Arabic)* Edited by Ahmad Abd Al-Ghafoor Attar (Beirut: Dar Al-Ilm Lil-Malayeen, 1979), 38.
[2] Hayat Lashhab, "Al-Ab'ād al-Ta'līmīyah fī Mu'jam al-Rā'id al-Ṣaghīr li-Jibrān Mas'ūd: Dirāsah Waṣfīyah Taḥlīlīyah" (Educational Dimensions in Al-Raed Al-Saghir Dictionary by Jibran Masoud: A Descriptive Analytical Study), *Al-Muruth Journal* 10/2 (2023), 139.

students or young people—according to their educational stage. Its primary function is to help learners understand, clarify, and simplify difficult vocabulary. Additionally, it provides learners with a range of useful information, including grammatical, morphological, phonological, orthographic, semantic, and encyclopedic data."[1] This definition rightly emphasizes that such dictionaries are designed specifically for a targeted group of learners.

Some scholars have also emphasized the importance of distinguishing between a dictionary used merely as a supplementary tool and one that functions as a genuine teaching instrument. They pose the question: "To what extent can existing dictionaries truly be considered educational in the strict sense of the term?"[2] This inquiry, in turn, calls for a clear articulation of the principles and features that qualify a dictionary as educational. These features can be summarized as follows:

- Targeted audience: The dictionary must be designed for a specific group of learners with a clearly defined language proficiency level. Consequently, a dictionary created for non-native speakers cannot be considered educational unless it is tailored to a particular stage of language learning.

- Level-appropriate entries: The lexical items included should correspond to the proficiency level of the intended users. Thus, an educational dictionary is not an exhaustive reference covering the entire vocabulary of the language.

- Comprehensible definitions: Entries should be explained using methods appropriate to the learners' linguistic abilities. For example, a dictionary aimed at beginners should avoid relying solely on linguistic definitions that assume prior knowledge of the language.

- Accessible arrangement: The entries should be organized in a manner that is easy for the target group to navigate. For beginner learners, this means avoiding root-based (morphological) arrangements that presuppose familiarity with word roots and patterns.

[1] Jomou'i Tarsh, "Al-Muʿjam al-Taʿlīmī: Mafhūmuhu wa Mawāṣifātuhu" (The Educational Dictionary: Its Concept and Characteristics), *Journal of Arabic Language Sciences and Literature* 12/1 (2020), 1141.
[2] Fathi Bahha, "Athar al-Maṭwiyyāt wa-l-Maʿājim al-Muṣaġġara fī Taʿlīm al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ġayrihā" (The Effect of Brochures and Mini Dictionaries on Teaching Arabic to Non-Native Speakers), *Journal of Arabic Language Sciences and Literature - University of Al-Wadi* 11/2 (2019), 225.

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- Pedagogical function: The dictionary should serve as an instructional resource that complements the curriculum rather than merely a tool for occasional word lookup. It must be designed for frequent consultation and to fulfill various educational purposes.

Based on these foundational principles, an educational dictionary can be defined as follows:

An educational dictionary is a resource designed for a specific group of learners, containing level-appropriate lexical entries organized accessibly, providing clear explanations, usage examples, and various types of linguistic information. It functions as an instructional tool that complements the formal curriculum and supports learners throughout their language acquisition journey.

2.3 The Importance of Educational Dictionary for Non-Native Arabic Speakers

It is rare to find students in Arab schools who regularly use dictionaries. Even in literature classes, where texts often include challenging vocabulary, unfamiliar words are typically explained in a section titled "Glossary" following the passage, making dictionary consultation unnecessary. However, the situation is quite different in the context of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers. Learners of Arabic as a second language rely heavily on dictionaries throughout their language learning journey. It is uncommon to find a student who has not downloaded one or more dictionaries on their mobile device. These tools are frequently used both during lessons and while completing homework, highlighting the crucial role dictionaries play for this group of learners. As has been noted, "the dictionary is a fundamental tool upon which non-native Arabic learners rely."[1]

This reality underscores the urgent need to create a wide range of dictionaries tailored to the needs of this learner demographic. However, despite the clear demand, Arabic libraries remain largely lacking in monolingual (Arabic-Arabic) dictionaries specifically designed for non-native speakers.[2] Although many bilingual dictionaries offer direct translations into learners' native languages, these do not qualify as true educational dictionaries. They fail to provide the comprehensive linguistic information necessary for effective language acquisition. Consequently, numerous experts have called for the development of Arabic monolingual dictionaries that are tailored to the abilities, needs, and vocabulary levels of

[1] Khalifi - Rashidi, "Binyat al-Madākhil fī al-Muʿjam al-Wāḥid al-Lugha li-al-Nāṭiqīn bighayr al-ʿArabiyya: al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī Unmūdhajan", 148; Ahmad ibn Muhammad Al-Nashwan, "Ittijāhāt mutaʻallimī al-lugha al-ʻArabiyya ghayr al-nāṭiqīn bihā naḥw istiʻmāl al-maʻjam" (Attitudes of Non-Native Arabic Learners towards Using the Dictionary), *Umm Al-Qura University Journal for Sharia and Arabic Language Sciences and Literature* 18/38 (1427 A.H.), 534.

[2] Dreem - Bin Zeina, "Muwāṣafāt al-Muʿjam al-Taʿlīmī al-Muwajjah ilā al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ġayr al-ʿArabiyya fī Ḍawʾ al-Dirāsāt al-Bayniyya", 29.

non-native learners. While a few such dictionaries do exist, their use remains limited, as this study will demonstrate.[1]

Widely used monolingual Arabic dictionaries—such as Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ, al-Wasīṭ, al-Munjid, and others—are fundamentally designed for native-speaking students and are therefore unsuitable for non-native learners for several reasons.[2] Chief among these is the method of searching for entries, which often requires stripping affixes to identify root forms, restoring long vowels to their original letters, and managing cases of gemination or other morphological modifications. These tasks demand a level of linguistic proficiency that most non-native learners have yet to develop. Additionally, many non-native learners lack the vocabulary base necessary to fully understand the definitions and explanations provided in standard Arabic dictionaries.

Therefore, an educational dictionary specifically designed for non-native speakers must differ significantly from those intended for native users. It should incorporate features tailored to the target audience,[3] considering their needs in the selection, classification, and organization of lexical entries. Furthermore, the methods used to define and explain entries must be innovative and adapted to the learners' proficiency levels.

To develop such a dictionary, it is essential first to examine the linguistic characteristics of non-native learners. The following table highlights key differences between native Arabic-speaking students and non-native learners:

[1] Ali Al-Qasimi, *Al-Muʻjamiyya al-ʻArabiyya Bayna al-Nazariyya wa al-Tatbīq (Arabic Lexicography: Between Theory and Practice)* (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnan, 2003), 113.

[2] Ali Abdulvahitoğlu, "Muʻjam Taʻlīmī Muḥūṣab lil-Nāṭiqīn bighayr al-ʻArabiyya: Ruʼyah Mustaqbaliyya" (A Computerized Educational Dictionary for Non-Native Arabic Speakers: A Future Vision), *Rumelideh Journal for Linguistic and Literary Studies* 37 (2023), 1033.

[3] Ahmad Mukhtar Al-Sharif, "Ṣināʿat Maʿājim al-Alfāẓ Aḥādiyyat al-Lugha li-Ghayr al-Nāṭiqīn bi-al-ʿArabiyya" (The Making of Monolingual Word Dictionaries for Non-Native Arabic Speakers), *Journal of Linguistic Communication* 8/1-2 (1998), 47.

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Table 1. Comparison between Arab and non-Arab learners

Native Arabic Learners	Non-Native Arabic Learners
Arabic is their mother tongue.	Arabic is a foreign language for them.
They recognize the pronunciation of the solar (shamsiyyah) and lunar (qamariyyah) lam, distinguish between the tied tā' (tā' marbūṭah) and the open tā' (tā' maftūḥah), and understand which letters are written but not pronounced.	They face difficulties reading these orthographic phenomena.
They can read most vocabulary without diacritical marks.	They require diacritical marks on most letters to read them correctly.
They are proficient in the sounds and their articulation points.	They experience difficulties in articulating certain phonemes.
They are familiar with Arabic morphological patterns and forms.	The morphological patterns and forms in Arabic differ from those they are accustomed to in their native languages.
They know both singular and broken plural forms intuitively.	They may recognize singular forms but not their plural counterparts, or vice versa.
They understand gender distinctions (masculine and feminine) naturally.	They may err in converting masculine words to feminine forms.
They have a solid grasp of Arabic sentence structure.	They are unfamiliar with the Arabic sentence structure system, which often differs from that of their native languages.
They possess a very extensive lexical repertoire.	They know a limited number of vocabulary items.
They comprehend both literal and figurative meanings.	They struggle to comprehend the lexical meanings of words, let alone their figurative meanings.
They can instinctively use words correctly in context.	They may use words incorrectly despite understanding their meanings.

This table clearly demonstrates that non-native learners cannot effectively use dictionaries designed for native speakers. The significant and fundamental linguistic differences between

these two groups necessitate the adoption of new approaches in dictionary design and entry explanations.[1]

It is also important to recognize that non-native Arabic learners progress through multiple proficiency levels throughout their language learning journey. At each stage, they require a dictionary tailored to their current level—particularly at the beginner stage, where learners often lack even the most basic vocabulary and have yet to master Arabic sentence structure.[2] At this point, they may be unable to comprehend dictionary definitions, regardless of how simplified they are.

Therefore, creative and innovative methods are required to define entries effectively. These may include the incorporation of visual aids such as pictures, illustrations, and icons; the use of simple language and sentence structures; and frequent reliance on contextual examples.

3. Lexical Entries

Lexical entries are the fundamental linguistic units that constitute the core content of a dictionary. These entries are systematically organized, defined, and supplemented with relevant linguistic information. Some linguists refer to these entries as (اللكسيمات) a term derived from the English word (lexis).[3] Lexical entries can be broadly classified into two main categories:

- **Simple Entries**: These constitute the majority of dictionary entries and consist of single-word units, including nouns, verbs, verbal nouns (maṣdar), and function words such as interrogatives, negatives, and conditional particles. Due to their composition of a single word, they are commonly referred to as "simple entries".

- **Compound Entries**: These consist of two or more words and are therefore called "compound entries." They often appear as fixed expressions or idiomatic phrases, including noun or adjective constructions, nominal or verbal sentences, and other linguistic patterns.[4]

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[1] Khalifi - Rashidi, "Binyat al-Madākhil fī al-Muʿjam al-Wāḥid al-Lugha li-al-Nāṭiqīn bighayr al-ʿArabiyya: al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī Unmūdhajan", 148.
[2] Ali Al-Qasimi, *Al-Muʻjamiyya al-ʻArabiyya Bayna al-Nazariyya wa al-Tatbīq*, 113.
[3] Omar, *Ṣināʿat al-Muʿjam al-Ḥadīth,* 24.
[4] Hani Ismail Ramadan, "Al-Kafā'ah al-Mu'jamiyya li-l-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ghayr al-'Arabiyya – al-Qiyās wa al-Taqwīm" (Lexical Competence of Non-Native Arabic Speakers – Measurement and Evaluation), *Lexical Competence of Non-Native Arabic Speakers* (Giresun: Arab-Turkish Forum for Linguistic Exchange Publications, 2023), 22-23.

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Examples include expressions such as لَيلًا نهارًا (day and night), اِبْن السَّبيل (wayfarer), صَباحُ الخَيْر (good morning), بِلا شَكّ (without a doubt), عَلى سَبيل المِثال (for example), نَزْلَة بَرْد (common cold), and في أمانِ الله (in God's protection). Compound entries also encompass verb patterns such as يَبْحَثُ عَنْ (search for), يَشْعُر بِـ (feel), يَسْتَمِعُ إلى (listen to), يَفوزُ بِـ (win), يَقْتَرِبُ مِنْ (approach), يَتَّصِلُ بِـ (call), يَسْأَلُ عَنْ (ask about), يَعْتَذِرُ مِنْ (apologize to), يَحْتَاجُ إلى (need to), among many others.[1]

In a beginner-level educational dictionary, entries consist of simple or compound linguistic units that learners require at this stage. These entries must be carefully selected, organized, and explained with close attention to the linguistic proficiency and specific needs of the target audience.

3.1 Entry Arrangement

It is well known that most traditional Arabic dictionaries arrange entries alphabetically according to root derivation. For example, the word المُعَلّمون (teachers) is indexed under the root (علم). However, reducing words to their roots is a complex process that requires a thorough understanding of their structure and recognition of their morphological patterns—something that can be challenging even for native speakers familiar with the word's meaning.

For non-native learners—who frequently encounter unfamiliar words without knowledge of their meanings, roots, or patterns—locating a word by its root is virtually impossible.[2] This difficulty has led the authors of educational dictionaries to adopt alternative methods of organizing entries. For example, المعجم العربيّ بين يديك (The Arabic Dictionary at Your Hands)[3] arranges entries without reducing them to their roots. The word معرفة (knowledge), for instance, is listed under the letter mīm (م) rather than ʿayn (ع). This system is more suitable for non-Arabic-speaking users who may lack the skills to extract roots, particularly when a

[1] Shifa Hamad, "Al-Mudkhal al-Muʿjamī wa-Dawruhu fī Taʿlīm al-Lughāt al-Ajnabiyyah wa-Taʿallumihā" (The Lexical Entry and Its Role in Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages), *Journal of Humanities and Natural Sciences, Al-Abrar Center for Research and Human Studies - Khartoum* 4/1 (2023), 372.

[2] Soumaya Harnafi, "Dawr al-Muʿjam fī Taʿallum al-Lughah al-ʿArabiyyah – al-Muʿjam ar-Rāʾid li-Jubrān Masʿūd Unmūdhajan" (The Role of the Dictionary in Learning Arabic – Al-Raed Dictionary by Jibran Masoud as a Model), *Phonetics Journal* 18/1 (2022), 340.

[3] Abdul Rahman ibn Ibrahim Al-Fawzan et al., *Al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī Bayna Yadayk (The Arabic Dictionary at Your Hands)* (Riyadh: Arabic for All, 2014).

word involves substitution, inversion, or deletion.[1] It certainly makes it easier for learners to locate words. However, this approach is not without drawbacks. One issue is that related

words sharing the same root—and therefore expressing related meanings—are scattered across different entries. For instance, دراسة (study), دَرَسَ (he studied), دَرْسٌ (lesson), and مَدْرَسة (school) appear in separate parts of the dictionary. Another issue is the imbalance in the number of entries under different letters. For example, the section for hamza (ء) spans 62 pages, mīm (م) pages, and tāʾ (ت) 21 pages. These three sections alone account for 133 pages out of the dictionary's total 385 pages—more than one-third of the content.

Some have proposed organizing dictionaries by semantic fields rather than alphabetically. In this approach, sections are grouped by topics instead of letters. Rather than having a section for the letter bāʾ (ب) or sīn (س), the dictionary would feature sections dedicated to themes such as travel, education, food, or clothing.[2]

This thematic arrangement offers both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, grouping vocabulary by domain helps learners acquire the words they need within specific contexts. On the other hand, it complicates the process of looking up individual words—especially those that span multiple fields. For example, the word ṭāwila (table) might appear under sections related to the home, school, or restaurants. Similarly, words like ṣūra (picture), ṭawīl (tall), shāriʿ (street), or risāla (message) can be difficult to categorize predictably within a single semantic field. Given these challenges, it is clear that the question of how to arrange entries in educational dictionaries remains unresolved. Further research and development are needed to create an optimal system that simplifies word lookup for language learners.

Fundamentally, the arrangement of entries in a dictionary is a technical matter rather than a core linguistic one. While important, it does not carry the same significance as selecting which entries to include or how they are defined. Its main purpose is to help users find the words they need. However, I argue that this issue becomes much more critical for educational dictionaries aimed at beginner-level non-native Arabic speakers. For these users, the arrangement of entries is a central design feature that requires special attention

[1] Hani Ismail Ramadan, "Al-Muʿjam al-Siyāqī li-Alfāẓ al-Qur'ān al-Karīm: al-Marjaʿiyya wa-l-Manhajiyya" (Contextual Dictionary of The Holy Qur'an's Vocabulary: Reference and Methodology), *Journal of Markaz Jīl al-Baḥth al-ʿIlmī* 107 (2024), 71.

[2] Abdel Nasser Sbeer, "Ṣināʿat Muʿjam Taʿlīmī li-al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ghayr al-ʿArabiyya bi-Istikhdām Naẓarīyat al-Ḥuqūl al-Dalāliyya" (Creating an Educational Dictionary for Non-Native Arabic Speakers Using Semantic Field Theory), *Journal of the Islamic University for Arabic Language and Literature* 5/2 (2022), 796.

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because they often lack the linguistic tools to navigate traditional dictionaries, making independent word lookup extremely challenging.

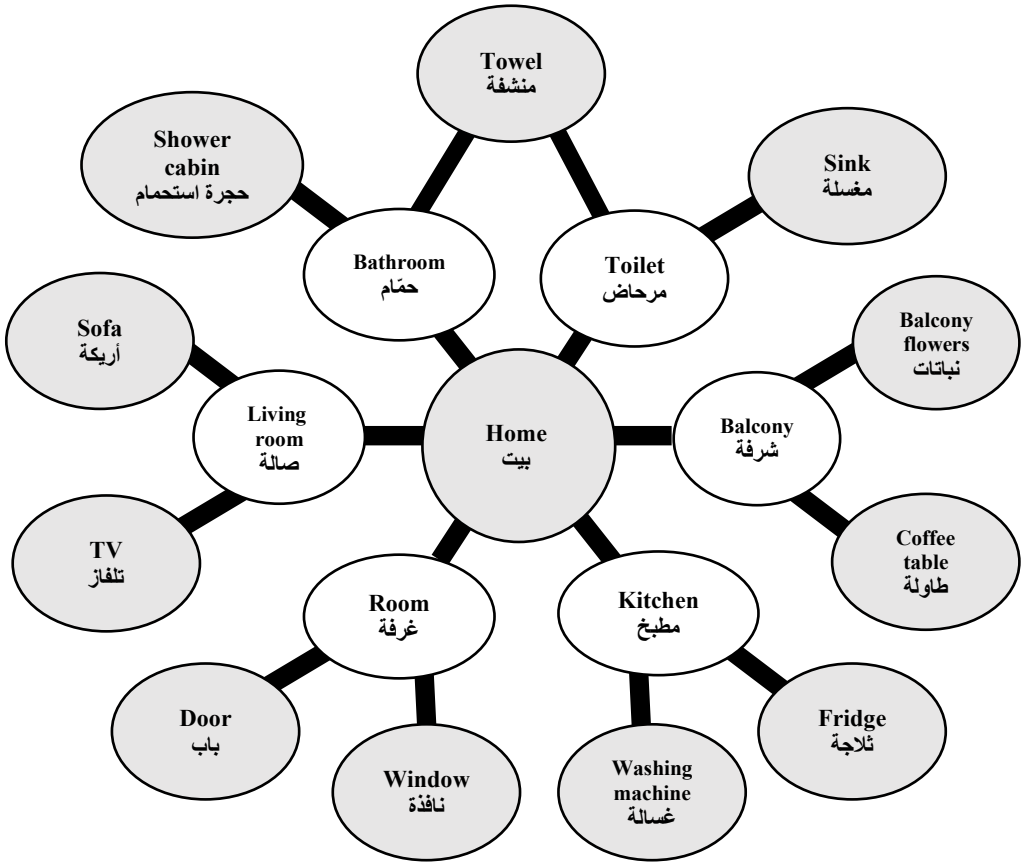
In my view, selecting the most suitable arrangement becomes easier when a dictionary is tailored to a specific proficiency level. Since the goal of any arrangement is to facilitate access to vocabulary, it should directly correspond to the learner's language proficiency. This study focuses on the beginner level, where learners primarily aim to understand individual words rather than to acquire detailed grammatical or lexical information.

In this study, learners need to focus on understanding basic, high-frequency words such as water, cup, food, door, friend, teacher, brother, and family. At this stage, learning synonyms, antonyms, singular and plural forms, or gender distinctions is not yet a priority. Such knowledge becomes relevant only later, once learners have built a sufficient lexical foundation that allows them to construct sentences. Put simply, beginner learners tend to ask questions like: "What does jamīl (beautiful) mean?", "What does shams (sun) mean?", or "What does liʾanna (because) mean?". It is only at more advanced stages that they begin to inquire: "What is the plural of hātif (phone)?" or "Is shams masculine or feminine?" This observation suggests that the primary goal of a dictionary for beginner learners is to provide a core vocabulary, and that the most effective way to achieve this is by organizing entries thematically—that is, by semantic field—rather than alphabetically. Accordingly, the dictionary would be structured into sections such as clothing, food, beverages, weather conditions, travel, housing, health, sports, and education. Each section could be further divided into subcategories. For instance, the "Clothing" section might include subcategories for summer and winter clothing, men's and women's attire, children's wear, traditional versus urban styles, athletic wear, and formal dress.

This dictionary is designed to serve as a pedagogical tool, to be used alongside an existing language curriculum. Organizing it by semantic field naturally aligns with the structure of most Arabic language textbooks, which are themselves arranged by topic. Therefore, this thematic organization is particularly effective for beginner learners aiming to expand their vocabulary within specific subject areas. For example, in the "School" section, learners would find related terms such as kitāb (book), daftar (notebook), mimḥāh (eraser), mibrah (sharpener), miṣṭarah (ruler), maqlamah (pencil case), muʿallim (teacher), mudīr (principal), ṣaff (classroom), and dars (lesson). Exposure to multiple words within the same semantic domain supports better retention and practical use.[1]

[1] Sbeer, "Ṣināʿat Muʿjam Taʿlīmī li-al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ghayr al-ʿArabiyya bi-Istikhdām Naẓarīyat al-Ḥuqūl al-Dalāliyya", 785.

Fig.1. Vocabulary categorization within a semantic field



In addition, this type of thematic organization enhances learner motivation by presenting vocabulary in meaningful and coherent clusters. Examples of such clusters include body parts, family members, professions, foods, fruits, animals, colors, days of the week, months, seasons, numbers, pronouns, question words, and demonstratives. The thematic arrangement also complements language textbooks. For instance, a natural text in a textbook about travel cannot cover every commonly used word related to that topic. The same limitation applies to subjects such as food or clothing. Learners will inevitably encounter gaps where essential vocabulary is missing from the textbook. The educational dictionary fills these gaps by providing a more comprehensive collection of topic-relevant vocabulary, thereby reinforcing and expanding the learner's exposure. In this way, the educational dictionary works alongside textbook series, offering learners a rich resource of additional vocabulary related to the themes they are studying.[1]

[1] Sbeer, "Ṣināʿat Muʿjam Taʿlīmī li-al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ghayr al-ʿArabiyya bi-Istikhdām Naẓarīyat al-Ḥuqūl al-Dalāliyya", 784.

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The only potential drawback of thematic organization is that it may make searching for specific words more difficult. However, within the context of the proposed dictionary model,

this is not considered a disadvantage. The purpose of this beginner-level educational dictionary is not primarily to serve as a tool for looking up unknown or obscure words, but rather to act as an instructional resource that provides learners with essential, high-frequency vocabulary connected to the subjects they are studying.

3.2 Selection of Entries

Traditional dictionaries are characterized by their comprehensiveness, and their value often increases with the number of entries included. As a result, traditional dictionaries tend to be large and multi-volume works, which is generally seen as an advantage. However, the situation is different for learner's dictionaries, which cannot be comprehensive. Instead, their entries must be carefully limited and selected to meet learners' specific needs, since a large, overwhelming dictionary may confuse learners and discourage its use.[1]

Selecting appropriate entries is a challenging task due to the vast richness of the Arabic vocabulary. Research suggests that learner's dictionaries should take the learner's proficiency level into account and include words appropriate for each stage of language learning. But where are the studies that identify the most common vocabulary suitable for each level? The researcher has found no studies that provide specific word lists for beginners, intermediate learners, or advanced learners. As a result, authors of learner dictionaries have tended to compile resources that cover all proficiency levels in a single volume. Examples include المعجم العربيّ بين يديك (The Arabic Dictionary at Your Hands), المعجم السياقيّ (The contextual dictionary), and معجم الطلاب (Student Dictionary). Although these dictionaries are well designed, they target non-native Arabic speakers of all proficiency levels without limiting themselves to a particular stage, making them less suitable for beginner learners. This approach stems from two combined factors: first, the richness of Arabic vocabulary and the necessity of selecting suitable vocabulary for non-native learners; and second, the lack of scientific studies that clearly define the vocabulary needs of learners at each proficiency level. However, compiling a dictionary that combines common vocabulary from all levels without distinguishing between beginners and advanced learners is not an ideal solution. While such dictionaries may be useful for intermediate or advanced learners, they are not appropriate for beginners. Therefore, there remains a clear need for

[1] Bahha, "Athar al-Maṭwiyyāt wa-l-Maʿājim al-Muṣaġġara fī Taʿlīm al-Lugha al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ġayrihā", 227.

one or more dictionaries specifically designed for non-native learners at particular proficiency levels. These dictionaries should be based on scientific research, include

common vocabulary relevant to each level, and not be limited to any specific instructional series. The absence of such targeted dictionaries represents a significant gap in this field.[1]

The selection of entries in a learner's dictionary designed for beginners and organized by semantic fields must begin with the identification of the main headings of the semantic fields to be included. This is essential, as organizing the dictionary thematically requires each entry to be categorized under a specific semantic domain. Without first defining these fields, the selection of appropriate entries is not feasible. The semantic field headings can be established by consulting various Arabic language teaching series and drawing on the titles of their lesson units to guide the categorization in the proposed learner's dictionary. Once the relevant semantic fields have been identified, suitable vocabulary items for each category—those that are both common and appropriate for beginner learners—can be selected. These entries should be drawn from beginner-level textbooks, graded readers, and established frequency lists such as the Makkah List of Frequent Words. It is important to acknowledge that the proposed dictionary cannot encompass all common vocabulary, as each word must be assignable to a specific semantic field. Words that do not clearly belong to any defined field cannot be included, even if they are frequent in usage. However, this limitation does not undermine the value of the proposed dictionary. Its primary objective is to enrich the learner's vocabulary with words related to the themes they encounter in their language studies.

3.3 Definition of Entries

Defining entries remains one of the greatest challenges facing lexicographers involved in compiling dictionaries for non-native speakers of Arabic. Words that seem simple and self-explanatory to native speakers can, in fact, be extremely difficult to define for learners.[2] Even the most basic phrases may appear ambiguous or unclear to non-native users. Therefore, the design of a monolingual dictionary for non-native speakers necessitates the use of all available strategies for explanation and clarification to ensure that meaning is conveyed effectively.[3]

[1] Al-Nashwan, "Ittijāhāt mutaʻallimī al-lugha al-ʻArabiyya ghayr al-nāṭiqīn bihā naḥw istiʻmāl al-maʻjam", 521-522.
[2] Khalifi - Rashidi, "Binyat al-Madākhil fī al-Muʿjam al-Wāḥid al-Lugha li-al-Nāṭiqīn bighayr al-ʿArabiyya: al-Muʿjam al-ʿArabī al-Asāsī Unmūdhajan", 149.
[3] Dreem - Bin Zeina, "Muwāṣafāt al-Muʿjam al-Taʿlīmī al-Muwajjah ilā al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ġayr al-ʿArabiyya fī Ḍawʾ al-Dirāsāt al-Bayniyya", 29-30.

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One of the most effective methods for accurately conveying meaning is the use of images that visually illustrate the word being defined. Pictures provide highly precise and immediate representations of meaning—especially for concrete nouns such as pen, table, house, tree, car, phone, bag, glass, and apple. This approach is particularly appropriate for beginner learners for two main reasons. First, beginners often lack a sufficient vocabulary base, which makes linguistic explanations challenging or inaccessible. Second, most vocabulary at the beginner level consists of tangible and perceptible objects, making visual representation an ideal and accessible explanatory tool.[1]

A second highly effective method is translation. Rendering the word into the learner's native language—or into a widely known lingua franca—is a fast and efficient way to clarify meaning. This approach is particularly useful for defining verbs, function words, and abstract terms that cannot be easily illustrated with images. Examples include verbs like yakhruju (he goes out), yadrusu (he studies), and adjectives or abstract terms like sa'b (difficult), intaqala (he moved), mujtahid (diligent), as well as functional words such as sifah (adjective), lakinna (but), mundhu (since), faqat (only), and ayḍan (also). Although these words are frequent and seemingly simple, they are not amenable to visual explanation. Thus, translation becomes one of the most suitable strategies for conveying their meanings.

Many lexicographic experts have recognized the value of translation when necessary,[2] noting that "it was used both by early Arabic lexicographers and by contemporary dictionary compilers."[3] Some scholars object to the use of translation in learner dictionaries, primarily on the grounds that it is difficult to identify a single reference language that would be familiar to all users. While this objection is generally valid, exceptions can and should be made. Since this discussion pertains to dictionaries designed specifically for non-native learners, the effectiveness of a learner's dictionary should be measured not by its theoretical purity but by its practical value—namely, its usefulness to learners and its ability to meet their linguistic needs. A crucial distinction should be made between translation as the main tool in bilingual dictionaries, and translation as one of several methods available in monolingual learner dictionaries. The failure to recognize this difference has prevented many existing learner dictionaries, such as Al-Mu'jam al-'Arabī Bayna Yadayk, from fully

[1] Al-Nashwan, "Ittijāhāt muta'allimī al-lugha al-'Arabiyya ghayr al-nāṭiqīn bihā naḥw isti'māl al-ma'jam", 546.
[2] Sbeer, "Ṣinā'at Mu'jam Ta'līmī li-al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ghayr al-'Arabiyya bi-Istikhdām Naẓarīyat al-Ḥuqūl al-Dalāliyya", 796; Abdulvahitoğlu, "Mu'jam Ta'līmī Muḥūṣab lil-Nāṭiqīn bighayr al-'Arabiyya: Ru'yah Mustaqbaliyya", 1031-1032.
[3] Muhammad Khamees Al-Qutaiti, *Al-Binā' al-Mu'jamī fī Ma'ājim al-Nāṭiqīn bi-Ghayr al-'Arabīyah (Lexical Structure in Dictionaries for Non-Native Arabic Speakers)* (Amman: Dar Jarir, 2013), 34.

leveraging the advantages of translation. In our view, dictionaries designed for non-native learners must employ all possible methods to support comprehension.

Other effective strategies for defining entries include simple linguistic explanations supported by clear and relevant examples. For instance, the word العطلة (holiday) could be defined as "a day when we do not work," followed by illustrative examples such as, العطلة الأسبوعيّة عند المسلمين يوم الجمعة "The weekly holiday for Muslims is on Friday," or, في يوم العطلة سأذهب إلى القرية "On the holiday, I will go to the village." This method is particularly valuable when definitions can be expressed in straightforward language accessible to the learner. As such, it should be prioritized whenever it aligns with the learner's proficiency level. It may, however, be less appropriate for absolute beginners whose linguistic repertoire is insufficient to process even basic definitions.

Finally, entries can also be defined through lexical relationships, including the use of synonyms, antonyms, singular and plural forms. This method is best suited for learners who already possess a moderate level of vocabulary. For example, the word فتاة (girl) can be explained using the more familiar synonym بنت, while قبيح (ugly) can be defined via its antonym جميل (beautiful).

Defining entries for beginner learners who are non-native speakers of Arabic presents a significant challenge due to their limited knowledge of even the most basic and frequently used vocabulary. For this reason, we propose that definitions in a beginner-level dictionary be restricted to two primary methods: visual illustrations (pictures) and translation, both of which should be consistently supported by a range of illustrative examples. Among these methods, pictures should take precedence, while translation should be employed when images alone are insufficient for conveying the intended meaning—particularly in the case of abstract terms, functional words, and verbs. The use of numerous examples is essential in all cases, as they help demonstrate the contextual usage of the word, reinforce understanding, and contribute to retention. On the other hand, linguistic explanations—which often require a broader vocabulary and familiarity with grammatical structures—should be excluded from dictionaries intended for beginners, as such users typically lack the linguistic proficiency necessary to comprehend detailed explanations.

Certain entries can be effectively illustrated without any need for translation. Examples include tangible nouns such as chicken, cow, eye, nose, blue, red, car, train, phone, computer, window, door, pen, book, tree, clock, television, refrigerator, table, pants, and shirt. In contrast, other entries—particularly abstract or grammatical terms—are far more difficult to depict accurately through imagery. These include words such as how, where,

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then, age, and go, where translation becomes the preferred and more effective explanatory tool.

Furthermore, in cases where a picture provides only a partial or general indication of meaning, it should not relied upon alone. Instead, the image must be accompanied by translation to ensure clarity. For example, a picture depicting a person on a bus or bicycle may be intended to illustrate the verb يَرْكَبُ (he rides), but the image alone may lead the learner to mistakenly associate the word with bus, bicycle, or transportation in general. In such cases, translation helps disambiguate the meaning, while the image continues to play a supportive role in anchoring the word visually in the learner's memory. Then come the numerous and varied examples, which serve to firmly embed the vocabulary item in the learner's mind.

4. *Conclusion*

This study has highlighted the significance of learner's dictionaries for non-native speakers of Arabic and underscored their frequent use by this group, thereby emphasizing the need to compile dictionaries that are tailored to their specific needs. The study proposed a redefined concept of the learner's dictionary, distinguishing it from traditional dictionaries and outlining the characteristics that grant it an educational function. It affirmed that a learner's dictionary should be designed for a specific proficiency level and employed as a pedagogical tool alongside language curricula.

The discussion then turned to the selection and organization of entries, stressing that entries must be chosen based on the learner's linguistic level, arranged in a manner that reflects their cognitive and linguistic capacities, and defined using all methods appropriate to their level of proficiency. The study offered a proposed vision for the compilation of learner's dictionaries specifically for beginner-level non-native speakers of Arabic, recommending that entries be organized thematically according to semantic fields. It argued that frequency alone is insufficient as a selection criterion; rather, the selected vocabulary must also fall within one of the dictionary's designated semantic fields. In terms of defining entries, the study concluded that two primary tools—visual illustrations and translation—should be employed, both reinforced with numerous and varied examples to demonstrate contextual usage and enhance retention.

Ultimately, the study calls for further research on learner's dictionaries for non-native Arabic speakers and urges educational institutions to support scholarly inquiry and practical experimentation in this domain. It stresses the need for a genuine transformation in the field of lexicographic production aimed at non-native learners of Arabic.

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