



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i1/12038> DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v12-i1/12038

Received: 13 November 2021, **Revised:** 16 December 2021, **Accepted:** 07 January 2022

Published Online: 27 January 2022

In-Text Citation: (Daud et al., 2022)

To Cite this Article: Daud, A. F. C., Mustapha, N. F., Toklubok, P. H. @ P., Jabar, M. A. A., & Mohamad, A. H. (2022). Problems in Arabic Writing Skills among Malay Students in Malaysia: A Review. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 12(1), 2028–2039.

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Vol. 12, No. 1, 2022, Pg. 2028– 2039

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www.hrmars.com

ISSN: 2222-6990

Problems in Arabic Writing Skills among Malay Students in Malaysia: A Review

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Abstract

The findings of various studies on the Arabic writing skills of Malay students in Malaysia, whether in secondary school or tertiary education, have shown that these students face various problems in mastering this skill even if they have learned Arabic since primary school. Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate the students' proficiency level and the problems they face. To achieve this objective, a qualitative approach was adopted in which 22 previous research articles related to writing skills in particular and language skills in general were analysed using content analysis. The documents analysed were all articles published within the last ten (10) years. These articles were obtained from "Google Scholar" and "Dimensions" databases using 13 keywords: "*masalah*" [problem], "*kesalahan*" [error], "*kelemahan*" [weakness], "*tahap*" [level], "*penguasaan*" [mastery], "*menulis*" [write], "*penulisan*" [writing], "*mengarang*" [composing], "*karangan*" [composition], "*insya*" [composition], "*ajar*" [teach], "*ayat*" [sentence] and "*asas*" [basic] which relate to Arabic in Malaysia. The results showed that the majority of the study revealed that the students' Arabic writing is at an average and weak level, and the main problem they face is related to the lexical aspect, such as errors in choosing vocabulary based on sentence context, errors in using verbs as well as particles. Errors also occur in word and phrase construction, as well as sentence structure. These results show the importance of finding a solution to ensure that these two (2) main errors, namely lexical and sentence structure, can be overcome so that students are able to use accurate vocabulary when writing and construct good and correct Arabic sentences.

Keywords: Writing Problem, Arabic Writing Skills, Vocabulary, Sentence Structure

Introduction

Writing skills are the highest level in the structure of the four (4) language skills, which include listening and reading for the receptive skills and speaking and writing for the productive skills. Although both writing and speaking require the language learner to express ideas clearly and engagingly, these skills are different. An unclear text leads to the reader not understanding

the meaning that the writer wants to convey because the reader is only confronted with what is written without the writer being present. Such a situation is definitely different in speaking. When learning a language, and even more so when learning a foreign language, writing is often the last skill to be learned and is often considered difficult ('Abd al-Bari, 2010) as it requires the application of several other skills, such as a good use of vocabulary and grammar (Etemadzadeh et al., 2013), before the idea can be translated into the form of writing. Although writing is a challenging skill as it involves the internal and cognitive difficulties of the writer (Rahmat et al., 2017), it needs to be well mastered as writing is a process to accurately convey an idea or opinion (Abd Aziz, 2015), and is also included in the public examinations in Malaysia, including in the learning of Arabic (Zailani et al., 2015).

Literature Review

Weak writing skills are among the problems and issues that Arabic students in Malaysia often face. Arabic scholars have discussed various issues on this topic. Students' weakness is not only a problem for secondary school teachers, but also for lecturers in higher educational institutions.

Teaching and learning Arabic writing skills becomes a special challenge. This is because students do not understand the aspects of concepts and contexts related to the basics of the language, i.e. vocabulary and grammar. A student with weak vocabulary and grammar results in his writing being difficult for the reader to understand (Mokhtar et al., 2018). Therefore, teachers and lecturers must ensure that students master the basics of vocabulary so that they do not face problems in writing. Students should also understand and master the concept of the basics of Arabic grammar to ensure that their writing can be clearly communicated and easily understood.

In addition to mastering the basics of vocabulary and grammar, writing skills are also closely related to other language skills, especially reading skills. Therefore, the teaching and learning process for writing becomes even more complicated for teachers and lecturers (Yahaya et al., 2014). However, reading is particularly important and has a good effect because the inputs gained from reading, such as vocabulary and sentence structure, can help students in writing. Given the problems faced by Malay students in learning Arabic in Malaysia, this also applies to the teachers and lecturers who guide the students. Therefore, this research review is conducted with the aim of investigating the weaknesses in writing identified in previous studies from two perspectives as below:

- 1) the students' proficiency level;
- 2) the problems they face.

Research Design

This study reviews several previous research articles that address the problems and issues related to the weak Arabic writing skills among Malay students in Malaysia. This study adopts a qualitative approach by using a content analysis design. Data were obtained by analysing previous research articles related to Arabic writing skills in Malaysia from 2010 to 2020. Articles were searched using the main keyword "Arab" and the keywords "*masalah*" [problem], "*kesalahan*" [error], "*kelemahan*" [weakness], "*tahap*" [level], "*penguasaan*" [mastery], "*menulis*" [write], "*penulisan*" [writing], "*mengarang*" [composing], "*karangan*" [composition], "*insya*" [composition], "*ajar*" [teach], "*ayat*" [sentence], and "*asas*" [basic]. The search was conducted through the "Google Scholar" and "Dimensions" databases, which contain many articles on the Arabic language related to Malay students in Malaysia.

The search focused on articles specifically related to Arabic writing skills and articles related to other language skills in general. The researchers then conducted a screening by selecting only those articles that dealt with Arabic language learning among Malay students in Malaysia. The selection of local articles was based on the requirements of this research, which deals exclusively with the problem of writing skills that hinder students of Arabic as a foreign language in Malaysia. As a result of the targeted search, the researchers were able to locate 36 articles that were related to this study.

In order to further narrow the scope of this study, these articles were screened again to select only articles that addressed students' writing difficulties in secondary schools and institutions of higher education only. After this second screening, the researchers obtained only 22 articles that were closely related to the focus of this study. The data obtained from the review of these articles were analysed descriptively and discussed in two related subtopics which are students' proficiency level, and the problems they face.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the review of previous research articles and the research design, the researchers will discuss the following subtopics in detail, as below:

- 1) Students' proficiency level in writing
- 2) Problems they face in writing

Findings on Students' Proficiency Level in Writing

A review of the 11 previous research articles that addressed the issue of students' level of writing skills revealed that students' mastery of Arabic writing at secondary school and university level was "disappointing". It was as if the students had just learned Arabic and were only now learning it (Awang et al., 2014). The research conducted revealed that on average, the students' level of writing was only "weak" and "average".

In five (5) of the 11 previous research articles, the students were found to have "very weak" writing skills in Arabic. Their writing skills were at an "unsatisfactory" level even though they had been learning Arabic since primary school (Awang et al., 2014). The students were not only "weak" in essay writing (Samah, 2012), but also unable to construct Arabic sentences well (Abdul Karim & Husaini, 2016). Among the aspects of students' writing weakness is grammar (Hamid et al., 2017). They also showed weakness in other aspects such as spelling, *mudhakar-mu'annath* gender compatibility, personal pronouns in verbs and phrase construction such as *idāfat* (Sopian, 2019).

There were also five (5) other previous research articles that showed that the students' writing level was "average". Three (3) of these research articles were related to the study of students' perception of their Arabic writing skills. Mukhtar and Muhammed's (2012) study was about students' perception of writing words in Arabic, while Ismail et al (2018) study was about students' perception of writing texts. The study of Abdul Ghani et al (2019) was about students' perception regarding their problems in constructing Arabic sentences. These three (3) studies revealed that students' Arabic writing skills were generally "average".

In addition, Wan Mokhtar et al (2018) test of writing skills on students who had completed the SPM (Malaysian Certificate of Education) and continued their studies at the undergraduate level of public universities in Malaysia showed that their writing level in terms of grammar was also "average". In fact, the students still had problems in writing even though they had already mastered the grammar theoretically. Similarly, Mahmood and Zailaini's (2017) Arabic sentence construction test on grade two secondary school students revealed

that their level was “average” although according to them, these students should already be able to write simple Arabic sentences with subject and predicate. Their statement was confirmed by the results of the research that only 6.33% of the 300 students had not yet reached the minimum level of mastery in constructing Arabic sentences.

There were also other previous research articles that showed that the level of students’ writing was “high”. This was the research conducted by Ku Azizan, Abd Rahman, and Jamali (2014) on 397 students who took Arabic classes at International Islamic University College Selangor (KUIS), Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM), Sultan Zainal Abidin University (UNISZA) and International Islamic University Malaysia (UIAM). However, these findings can be discussed in more detail. In reviewing the research findings, it was found that the results obtained did not exactly match the true criteria for assessing the level of students’ writing skills. The researchers found two (2) aspects of the study that could be further investigated. They were related to the construction of the questionnaire items which did not fully meet the objective of the study and the respondents' errors in understanding the constructed items. The researchers believe that Ku Azizan et al (2014) study, which used the instructor's items to assess students’ writing skills, did not fully meet the study’s objective of showing the level of students’ writing skills. It seemed that the item in question was designed to examine the lecturer's teaching methods. Therefore, the study cannot be used to measure the level of students’ writing skills. Moreover, the study by Ku Azizan et al (2014) used questionnaires that were more focused on students' perceptions.

Based on the review of the above previous research articles, the researchers found that the accuracy of measuring the level of students’ writing skills depends on the data collection method used in the research. In summary, the researchers believe that research conducted in the form of questionnaires and based on students’ perceptions, such as the research conducted by Mukhtar and Muhammed (2012); Ku Azizan et al (2014); Ismail et al (2018), and the research conducted by Abdul Ghani et al (2019), have difficulties in accurately measuring the level of students’ writing skills. This is because the research was conducted in the form of a questionnaire, which depends on the respondents’ interpretation and understanding of the questionnaire items. Moreover, perception is only an assumption and it is possible that the data obtained may not reflect the true reality of the level of students’ writing skills.

Similarly, the scope of the research also affects the findings obtained. Although the results of Mahmood and Zailaini's (2017) research show that the level of Arabic students’ writing skills is “average”, the researchers can state that the findings obtained only refer to the construction of sentences and only include aspects of the basics of grammar such as the use of nouns and verbs, the construction of nominal and verbal sentences, and the construction of *iḍāfat* and *naʿt* phrases. In the study by Wan Mokhtar et al (2018), although the level of students’ writing was found to be “average”, upon closer examination, the aspect of using verbs and constructing the structure of verbal phrases was actually at a “weak” level.

This is in contrast to the previous research article which used the writing test instrument which better fulfilled the aim of measuring the level of students’ writing. The studies by Samah (2012); Awang et al (2014); Abdul Karim and Husaini (2016); Ab Hamid et al (2017); Sopian (2019) who used writing test instruments found that the level of students’ writing was “weak”. This result is more realistic to accept because the studies that used the writing test instrument provided the researchers with the opportunity to examine and evaluate the level of students’ writing compared to the questionnaire instrument which depended solely on students’ interpretation.

Findings on Problems Students Face in Writing

The analysis revealed that eight (8) of the 22 previous research articles reviewed used the approach of analysing student error, namely the studies of (Ismail et al., 2014; Awang et al., 2014; Baharum and Samah, 2015; Sokri and Ismail, 2017; Sulaiman et al., 2018; Sopian, 2019; Misnan and Ghazali, 2019; Mokhtar et al., 2020). In these studies, different types of errors were found in students' texts.

Based on the review of the eight (8) previous research articles mentioned above, the researchers can conclude that the errors occurred in the following cases:

- i- The use of vocabulary in the element of meaning.
- ii- The use of the verb in the element of the personal pronoun (*dhamīr*), which resulted in changes in the conjugation of the verb (*taṣrīf af'āl*).
- iii- The use of accurate particle according to the Arabic context.
- iv- *Mudhakkār-mu'annath* gender compatibility in the construction of sentences and the construction of *na't* phrases.
- v- Confusion between the construction of *na't* and *iḍāfat* phrases.
- vi- The construction of sentences in the element of subject-predicate compatibility, whether in a nominal sentence or a verbal sentence.
- vii- The signs of the *i'rab*.
- viii- The spelling.

However, among the important aspects that the researchers observed while reviewing the analysis of students' writing errors in these studies is the confusion in the terms used to refer to the element of these errors. Therefore, the researchers have attempted to standardise these errors and summarise them briefly in the subtopic "Aspect of Writing Errors".

Writing Error Terms

In reviewing the studies, it was noted that different terms were used for the error elements discussed in these studies, which were sometimes unclear and confusing. For example, according to Sokri and Ismail (2017), the element of word error (المكولات) in sentences (أي تعد المأكولات والشرايات في عيد الفطر) is an error in the "use of vocabulary". However, according to the researchers, this type of error is more likely to be classified under the element of "spelling" error. This is because there is no such word (المكولات) that exists in the construction of words in Arabic. The closest and most appropriate word in this context is (المأكولات). However, how accurate the view of these researchers actually is, they need to ask the respondent to get confirmation.

There are also previous research articles that have placed multiple errors in different aspects even though they refer to the same error element. See Table 1 & 2 below.

Table 1. Error in "spelling" (Awang et al., 2014)

Incorrect sentence	Correct sentence
	الدين النصيحة
الدين النصحة	

Table 2. Error in “use of vocabulary” (Sokri and Ismail, 2017)

Incorrect sentence	Correct sentence
أمي نعدّ <u>المكولات</u> و <u>الشرابات</u> في عيد الفطر.	أمي نعدّ <u>المأكولات</u> و <u>المشروبات</u> في عيد الفطر.

Based on the above two tables, the research review has shown that (الدين النصحة) and (المكولات) errors refer to the same error element. However, according to Awang et al (2014), the (الدين النصحة) error is a “spelling error”, but according to Sokri and Ismail (2017), the error for the word (المكولات) is an error in the “use of vocabulary”. However, based on the review of the research results, the researchers agree with Awang et al (2014) that this error is an error related to “spelling”.

Similarly, the error term is “use of verb” in Sopian's (2019) research. According to the researchers, the error in “use of verb” according to Sopian (2019) is quite general and does not clearly show the error element. See Table 3 below.

Table 3. Error in “use of verbs” (Sopian, 2019)

No	Incorrect sentences	Correct sentences
1	كل يوم اناقش الدروس وتكتب التدريبات	كل يوم اناقش الدروس واكتب التدريبات
2	كل يوم ادعو الله وتصلى الحاجة وتقرأ القرآن	كل يوم ادعوا الله واصلي الحاجة واقراء القرآن
3	ارجع الدروس في الليل	اراجع الدروس في الليل
4	يجب أن ندرس بجد لتحقيق أهدافنا ويصبحوا ناجحين	يجب أن ندرس بجد لتحقيق أهدافنا ونصبح ناجحين

Based on Table 3 above, the investigation has revealed that the errors in sentence 1: (وتكتب); sentence 2: (وتصلى); and sentence 4: (ويصبحوا), are more likely to be classified under the element of the error “use of the personal pronoun in the verb”, which causes changes in the conjugation of the verb (*taṣrīf af'āl*). The error in sentence 3: (أرجع) can be categorised under the error element “spelling”.

Based on the review of the previous research articles, the researchers believe that the error elements that occurred in students’ writing need to be standardised to ensure that the error elements and aspects are appropriate and easier to understand. Therefore, the researchers categorised students’ writing errors into three (3) main aspects, which are explained in the following subtopics.

Aspect of Writing Errors

Based on the review of previous research articles, most analyses of students’ writing errors tend to focus on spelling errors, errors in the use of vocabulary such as verbs, and sentence construction errors such as *mudhakkār-mu'annath* gender compatibility in nominal sentences and verbal sentences and the construction error of *na't* and *iḍāfat* phrases.

However, there were differences in the terms used for the same error element. Therefore, the researchers attempted to standardise the use of these terms. Accordingly, based on

the review of these previous studies, the researchers concluded and grouped the errors that occur in students' writing into three (3) aspects, namely: "word and sentence construction", "sentence construction", and "lexical". All of these error aspects are errors in linguistic elements.

The errors that occurred in the aspect of "word and phrase construction" show that the student's knowledge of morphology is poor. Errors in this aspect include (1) word spelling errors; (2) errors in the construction of *iḍāfat* and *na't* phrases; (3) errors in gender compatibility *mudhakkār-mu'annath* in the construction of *na't* phrase; and (4) errors in the use of the particle *jarr* or *ẓarf* paired with verbs. Errors in this area are due to students' disinterest in reading Arabic reading materials (Sopian, 2019), lack of writing practise, and inability to understand the method of Arabic grammar (Baharum & Samah, 2015). Mokhtar et al (2020) found that the weakness in mastering Arabic grammar has dire effects on students' writing skills.

Errors in the area of "sentence construction" include (1) errors in the correct arrangement of words based on the structure of nominal and verbal sentences; (2) errors in *i'rab* signs; and (3) errors in gender compatibility *mudhakkār-mu'annath* in the construction of sentences involving the compatibility of *mubtada'-khabar* in nominal sentences as well as compatibility of *fi'l-fā'il* in verbal sentences. The weakness in this area is also influenced by the native language - Malay - which does not have a very detailed grammatical system like Arabic grammar (Sokri & Ismail, 2017). Errors such as the incompatibility of *mubtada'-khabar* in nominal sentences and *fi'l-fā'il* in verbal sentences are due to this factor. The students' weakness in this area may also be related to the factor that the students have not read much Arabic reading materials (Sulaiman et al., 2018).

The errors in the "lexical" aspect consist of (1) errors in using vocabulary that corresponds to both the context of the sentence and its function in the sentence, (2) errors in using personal pronouns in verbs (verb conjugation @ *taṣrif af'āl*), and (3) errors in using particles that correspond to the grammatical system of Arabic. The errors that occurred in this "lexical" aspect showed that the student is "weak" in mastering the vocabulary in relation to the function and context of its use in the sentence structure. The students' weakness in using the correct word in relation to the function and context of its use is the main cause of the obvious errors that occur in the students' writing. In other words, their vocabulary is actually very limited. It can be said that students have mastered their vocabulary at the level of a toddler who can only pronounce a few words. This child can express sentences by using the same words in different contexts and functions in the sentence. As a result, the sentence the child expresses is incorrect and difficult to understand.

The summary of this research on student writing errors based on the review of previous research articles is shown in Table 4 below:

Table 4. Summary of student writing errors based on review of previous research

Error aspect	Error elements	Ismail et al. (2014)	Awang et al. (2014)	Shaiful Baharum & Samah (2015)	Ahmad Sokri, & Ismail (2017)	Sulaiman et al. (2018)	Sopian (2019)	Misnan & Ghazali (2019)	Wan Mokhtar et al. (2021)
		Word & phrase construction	Spelling	/	/	/	/	/	/
	Phrase	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/
Sentence construction	<i>Mubtada'-khabar</i>		/	/	/	/		/	/
	<i>Fi'l-fail</i>			/		/		/	/
	<i>I'rab</i>		/						/
Lexical	Meaning	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	
	Personal pronoun in verb	/	/		/	/	/	/	/
	Particles		/					/	/

The summary presented in Table 3 proves that errors in “word and phrase construction” and errors in “lexical” aspect are the two (2) main error aspects in students’ writing that were the focus of most of these studies.

Based on the review of the eight (8) previous research articles dealing with the analysis of students’ writing errors, it can be said that most of these studies found that students’ weakness was often in the area of word and phrase construction. Weaknesses were also frequently found in the lexical area, such as the use of incorrect vocabulary in the meaning element or the use of personal pronouns in the verb.

In reviewing the research findings, it was also found that two (2) previous research articles revealed that students did not have major problems in the area of basic “sentence construction” which includes nominal and verbal sentences. In Ismail et al (2014) study, it was found that students made the least errors in the “sentence construction” aspect compared to the “word and phrase construction” aspect and the “lexical” aspect. Similarly, Sopian's (2019) research found that the students’ main weakness in writing involved elements of spelling, *mudhakkār-mu'annath* gender compatibility in constructing the *na't* phrase, the use of the verb, and the use of the *iḍāfat* phrase.

The researchers believe that the results of these two studies have shown that the students have mastered at least the aspect of the basics of “sentence construction” which consists of subject and predicate which are *mubtada'-khabar* in nominal sentences and *fi'l-fā'il* in verbal sentences. This finding is in line with Samah's (2012) research on the construction of Arabic sentences among students who graduated from an Arabic school, according to which the level of students in arranging words to construct sentences is good. Only a small number of students’ writing errors were found in this aspect of “sentence construction” (Samah, 2012).

According to Misnan and Ghazali (2019), errors in the use of *mubtada'-khabar* are the least found errors by the students compared to errors in the “lexical” aspect, i.e. in the use of vocabulary as well as gender compatibility *mudhakkar-mu'annath* in the construction of *na't* phrases. This finding is in line with Mahmood and Zailaini's (2017) study of grade two secondary school students who concluded that they were already able to construct sentences consisting of subject and predicate.

Summary

The review revealed that the level of students' writing skills in Arabic in Malaysia is at a “weak” and “average” level. Students' weakness in writing can be identified from various aspects. The main error in students' writing based on the review of previous research articles is the “lexical” aspect, such as errors in choosing vocabulary based on sentence context, errors in using verbs from the element of the personal pronoun, and errors in using particles. There are also errors in the “construction of words and phrases” and in the “construction of sentences”. These errors are due to the difference between the grammatical system of Arabic and the native language, Malay. A lack of vocabulary is also a factor in students' errors under the aspect of “lexical”. In addition, other factors such as the student's own self and attitude of not making an effort to master Arabic writing also influence the weakness of Arabic writing. Students also did not apply the correct and effective language learning strategy in learning writing. Teachers, learning materials, and the lack of an Arabic environment also play a role in students' weakness in Arabic writing.

Several suggestions have been made in previous studies to overcome writing weakness and further improve students' writing skills. The suggestions from these studies are related to different elements such as (1) students' learning strategy, (2) teacher's approach, methods and teaching techniques, (3) diversification of activities in teaching and learning, (4) curriculum, (5) learning support materials, and (6) creating an Arabic environment inside or outside the classroom. Findings of reviewing the previous research show that improving the methods and techniques of learning Arabic writing skills is necessary to overcome the problem of students' weakness. Methods and techniques that are active and fully involve students through the use of various appropriate learning aids are needed to ensure that they acquire writing skills naturally under the guidance of the teacher. These efforts should be made by the students themselves as well as by the teachers and the appropriate institutions to ensure that effective and collective action can be targeted. As a further addition to these suggestions, this study proposes that the relevant parties emphasise two (2) important aspects of writing skills. These aspects are the “lexical” and the “sentence structure” aspect. Syntactic skills do not need special attention but should be related to “sentence structure”. Therefore, among the skills that should also be given attention to solve the problem of Arabic writing skills in students are reading and comprehension skills. By mastering the reading and comprehension of texts from lexical (use of vocabulary) and sentence structure (sentence construction) points of view, the student will no longer have to rely on syntax analysis, which is tedious to learn and master, to ensure that he or she can master Arabic writing naturally.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the research grant from Universiti Putra Malaysia (GP-IPS/2021/9700900).

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