

The Weak Academic Achievement in Arabic Literature among Secondary Religious Students in Malaysia and its Causes: A Descriptive Field Study

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Abstract

The teaching of Arabic literature in religious schools in Malaysia is a reality that warrants a quick review to achieve the desired outcomes. It has been observed, through reviewing the curricula for teaching Arabic literature in these schools, that there is a significant gap between the objective and the means. The method used barely helps achieve the desired goal for several reasons, some related to the curriculum, others to the students' level, and sometimes even to the teachers. There are several academic objectives that this study seeks to achieve to address its subject matter: To identify the main difficulties and underlying causes behind the weakness of students at *Maktab Mahmood* in learning Arabic literature, and to propose comprehensive and practical solutions to remedy these apparent shortcomings among the students in their study of Arabic literature. To adopt and integrate all Arabic linguistic disciplines related to Arabic literature, such as literary criticism and Qur'anic rhetoric. The research problem lies in the lack of harmony between the Arabic literature curricula taught at the secondary level in Malaysia's religious education system, particularly at *Maktab Mahmood*. This issue is evident in students' weak performance in Arabic literature and their limited grasp of its poetic and prose texts, stemming from the wide gap between students and the prescribed curricula. The study will adopt a descriptive and inductive approach to identify the reasons behind the weakness of *Maktab Mahmood* students in Kedah in understanding and comprehending Arabic literature, as well as the role of the curriculum in contributing to this issue.

Keywords: Arabic Literature, Literary Text, Academic Achievement, Poetry, Prose

Introduction

Arabic literature is considered one of the core subjects in religious institutes in Malaysia, given

its vital role in strengthening the Arabic language and deepening the understanding of Islamic culture. However, the noticeable decline in students' academic performance in this subject at the secondary level has become a matter of concern for educators and those involved in Islamic education. *Al-Mahmood Religious Institute* is regarded as one of the leading institutions in Malaysia, which makes it a suitable model for examining this phenomenon.

For all these reasons, this study seeks to uncover the underlying causes, peel away the superficial layers to reach the essence, and clarify the most effective approaches to engaging with Arabic literature and grasping its meanings, experiencing its poetry, and appreciating the eloquence of its prose.

The General Framework of the Study

Arabic literature is considered one of the most important sources of Islamic and Arab culture, as it reflects profound humanistic and intellectual values. With Arabic becoming the language of the Holy Qur'an, the teaching of Arabic literature has become an essential part of curricula in many Islamic institutions around the world. Among these is *Maktab Mahmud* in Malaysia, specifically, Maktab Mahmud Sik, Batu 8, 08200 Sik, Kedah, which serves as the case study for this research.

This study aims to analyse the current state of teaching Arabic literature at Maktab Mahmud Sik (Sekolah Agama Bantuan Kerajaan, Maktab Mahmud Sik Batu 8, 08200 Sik Kedah), identify the challenges facing this process, and propose recommendations for improvement.

Research Problem

The teaching of Arabic literature at Maktab Mahmud faces several challenges, including the difficulty of Arabic for non-native speakers, a shortage of qualified teaching staff, and limited educational resources. These challenges negatively affect the quality of instruction and students' ability to comprehend literary texts.

The research problem lies in the lack of alignment between the Arabic literature curricula taught at the secondary level in Malaysia's religious education system, particularly at Maktab Mahmud. This misalignment is reflected in students' poor performance in Arabic literature and their limited understanding of its poetic and prose texts, mainly due to the significant gap between students and the prescribed curricula.

Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- I. What is the nature of the curricula used in teaching Arabic literature at Maktab Mahmud Sik, Kedah?
- II. What challenges do students and teachers face in teaching Arabic literature?
- III. How can the teaching of Arabic literature at the institute be improved?

Research Objectives

- a) To analyse the current state of Arabic literature teaching at Maktab Mahmud Sik, Kedah.
- b) To identify the challenges facing the educational process.
- c) To provide recommendations for improving the teaching of Arabic literature at the institute.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the development of Arabic literature teaching in Malaysian educational institutions, thereby enhancing cultural exchange between the Arab world and Malaysia. Additionally, the study provides practical insights for improving curricula and teaching methodologies.

Accordingly, the study aims to achieve a set of academic objectives to address its subject matter:

- a) To identify the main difficulties and underlying causes that have led to the weakness of Maktab Mahmud Sik, Kedah students in learning Arabic literature.
- b) To consider comprehensive and practical solutions to address the apparent shortcomings of these students in mastering Arabic literature.
- c) To adopt and integrate all Arabic disciplines related to Arabic literature, such as literary criticism and Qur'anic rhetoric.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on Maktab Mahmud Sik, Kedah as a case study and covers the period from 2020 to 2025. The research relies on data obtained through questionnaires and interviews with both students and teachers.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive-analytical approach. Data were collected through questionnaires distributed to the institute's students and interviews with the teachers. The curricula and available educational resources were also analysed.

Theoretical Framework

The Arabic language has, throughout the ages, undergone numerous stages of development and has kept pace with the world's tremendous scientific progress. It has managed to engage with this progress, elevating the nation that had neglected it and restoring its position among the advanced countries. Media channels have flourished, education in all fields has expanded in Arabic, and language academies have been established across Arab countries. As a result, Arabic remains one of the strongest languages in the world, if not the strongest (Shehada, 2004).

However, the reality is that numerous obstacles prevent non-Arab students from fully engaging with the study of Arabic literature and related fields. Chief among these is the dominance of colloquial dialects over Modern Standard Arabic, even among Arabs themselves, who often claim the language is too difficult to speak because of its many unfamiliar synonyms. Fakhr al-Din Qabāwa points to this issue, stating: "It is what circulates among people, branding Arabic as difficult and sterile, accusing its sciences of complexity, being captivated by various European languages, and focusing on them, despite Arabic being the source of knowledge and civilisation (Kuppawa, 1999).

From a rational perspective, however, several underlying factors affect the learning of literary subjects. These causes can be traced back to the student, the teacher, the curriculum, the teaching method, the language proficiency, the study system, the assessment methods, and other related factors.

Literary Studies (Rhetoric, Literature, Criticism): Reality and Challenges. Regarding the state of literary studies and their current condition, Masluh (2003) states:

"As for Arabic rhetoric, ever since the great Imam Abu Ya'qub Yusuf ibn Muhammad ibn Ali al-Sakkaki (d. 626 AH) codified its rules and organised its sciences, the field has become so intricate that finding a clear way through it is nearly impossible. When some scholars realized that the problem had become deeply entrenched and that remedies were scarce, two responses emerged among them: one group clung to the remnants and fragments, holding on to whatever could be salvaged, while another group, overcome by despair, suggested abandoning the field entirely, burying it under layers of neglect, amid tears of compassion and sighs of sympathy.

Moreover, now, the paramount question arises: how may we open, within this dark tunnel, a breach through which literary studies might emerge from the narrow confines of their limited historical circumstance into the vast expanse of the modern age? How may their springs once more flow freely, finding their course within our contemporary culture, and return, as they once were, revealing anew the vitality and discernment of the Arab literary taste?

The Term 'Literature' Signify

Regarding literature in its broadest sense, it includes everything produced by the human mind and all that reflects human thought, akin to what is called culture. Therefore, philosophical, mathematical, natural, social, and linguistic sciences, along with all branches of the fine arts such as poetry and prose, and indeed everything that aims to nurture the intellect, fall within the expansive realm of literature. The general idea of literature is illustrated by the definition of al-Hasan ibn Sahl (d. 236 AH), who stated: 'There are ten branches of the arts: three of them are Shahrajānian, three Anushrōanian, three Arabian, and one overarching. The Shahrajānian include playing the lute, chess, and swordsmanship; the Anushrōanian encompass medicine, engineering, and horsemanship; the Arabian consist of poetry, genealogy, and Arab chronicles; and the single overarching category comprises selections of hadith, evening discourse, and what people learn from one another in gatherings (Sedik, 2011)."

The Significance of Studying Literature

The Arabic literature, which lies before us today, from the pre-Islamic era to the age of decline, is exceedingly rich, for it belongs to numerous peoples. It inherits the civilisations of many nations, each with its own conceptions, imaginations, thoughts, wisdom, philosophy, and social theories. Indeed, the Islamic conquests resembled a crucible in which diverse elements were melted together, thereby producing a formation stamped with its own distinctive character. The study of Arabic literature holds genuine significance, which may be summarised as follows;

First: Intellectual and Artistic Significance; "For the study and comprehension of literary and rhetorical texts serves as a guidance and instruction for those who aspire to eloquence in speech, and as a model and method for orators, leaders of sectarian groups, advocates of political doctrines, and those who address large assemblies (Elgumbalati, 1981).

Second: Religious and Intellectual Significance; "After the revelation of the Qur'an, with its eloquence that astonished minds, the Arabs began to study the secrets of their language, its mastery of composition and imagery, the purity of its expressions, and the sweetness, simplicity, and grandeur of its diction, in order to demonstrate the inimitability of the Qur'an, elucidate its rulings, and comprehend its meanings. "Thus, the study of literature endows its student with refined expression and contributes to the formation and cultivation of literary taste"(Samak, 1979).

"There is no doubt that the memorisation of literary texts aids in the cultivation of the artistic sensibility that appreciates literature, broadens the imagination of students, and develops in them the ability to speak well and correctly. In the course of life, a person finds it necessary to cite the verses of the Holy Qur'an, the Prophetic traditions, eloquent poetry, and enchanting rhetoric" (Abdulkader, 1979).

The Objectives of Studying Arabic Literature

There are several objectives underlying the study of Arabic literature, among which are the following:

A Religious Objective Related to the Qur'an

The study of literature necessarily entails the study of rhetoric, which is the surest path to understanding the Qur'an and reflecting upon its meanings.

In this regard, Abu Hilal al-Askari says: "It is known to us that if a man neglects the knowledge of Arabic and fails to acquire mastery of eloquence, he cannot truly comprehend the inimitability of the Qur'an regarding what Allah has endowed it with of exquisite composition and skillful arrangement, the wondrous brevity and delicate conciseness it contains, its sweetness, grandeur, radiance, the ease and majesty of its words, their elegance and fluency, and other such excellences which surpass human capability and confound the intellects of men. The inimitability of the Qur'an is recognised precisely in the inability of the Arabs to match it, and their shortcoming in reaching its ultimate excellence in beauty, skill, fluency, and clarity, and in the perfection of its meanings and purity of its expressions. It is shameful, whether for the unlettered Arab or the plain Qurayshi, not to recognise the inimitability of the Book of Allah except from the perspective by which the Negro or the Nabatean might perceive it, or by means of the argument used by the ignorant and foolish. Therefore, from this standpoint, the acquisition of this knowledge should be prioritised above all other sciences, after the acknowledgement of the oneness of Allah, recognition of His justice, and belief in His promise and threat, for the knowledge of the truth of prophethood follows the knowledge of Allah, Glorified be His Name" (Alaskari, 1998).

The Educational Objective

Matloub (1999) refers to this objective in his statement: the instruction of youth in Arabic and the knowledge of its styles, especially after the Arabs came into contact with diverse nations, which led to the corruption of the language and the intrusion of linguistic errors. Moreover, many Muslims needed learning Arabic and its eloquence to understand the Qur'an and to live within a state whose language was Arabic. Thus, the young Arab, growing up in an environment where languages were intermixed, needed to learn his own tongue, becoming capable of refined expression, elegant composition, and letter drafting.

The Critical Objective

It is the discernment of fine speech from the inferior, and the comparison and evaluation of poems, speeches, and letters. There is no doubt that the study of literature heightens the critical sensibility of its student, enabling him to discern, judge, and compare various texts, and to issue literary judgments characterised by soundness and objectivity.

Difficulties and Solutions

It becomes difficult for the student, after his mind has been filled with technical terms that even the Arabs themselves find hard to comprehend. This is what Nassar (1981) meant when he said: 'The teacher of the Arabic language directs all his attention to having the student memorise rules, rather than to the student's ability to express himself orally or in writing. However, this ability is the true aim of education. Teaching methods must be modified to enable the student to attain this goal with ease, as is done with students of other languages. In this way, the teaching of Arabic transcends the mere instruction of unused grammatical rules, formalistic phenomena, and the disputable causes introduced by formal logic, which modern curricula in language instruction often contrive.'

Specific problems and difficulties confront the teacher, the student, the curricula, and the method of presentation alike, which may be summarised as follows:

Difficulties Facing the Teacher

1. The teacher's lack of understanding of the instructional objectives in Arabic Literature.
2. A lack of refined sensibility, through which one can perceive and appreciate the beauty of texts.
3. The inadequate training of Arabic literature teachers and their lack of preparedness to teach it.
4. The failure to utilise modern technological means, such as language laboratories and audio recordings.

Challenges and Problems Facing the Student

1. The student's weakness in linguistic and literary skills creates a formidable barrier, a solid obstacle to his comprehension of Arabic literature.
2. The student's lack of literary and aesthetic appreciation for texts, arising from linguistic-cultural weakness and a lack of an Arabic environment, often prevents the student from fully grasping the vocabulary.
3. The neglect of imagination and its significance in understanding Arabic literature.

Difficulties Related to the Subject of Arabic Literature

1. Reliance on the examples provided by the textbooks, adhering strictly to their explanation and analysis.
2. Emphasis on the theoretical aspect at the expense of the practical application

To overcome this problem, we propose a set of practical solutions.

Curriculum Development:

- a) Restructuring the curriculum to be more gradual, linking classical texts with contemporary explanations, and balancing them with texts from modern literature.
- b) Incorporating diverse literary texts (stories, plays, essays) alongside poetry.

- c) Allocating sessions to support essential linguistic skills (syntax and vocabulary) in parallel with the study of texts.

Teaching Methods Development

- a) Training teachers to employ active learning strategies (discussion, brainstorming, cooperative learning).
- b) Utilising technology in education (PowerPoint presentations, audio and visual clips, interactive applications).
- c) Focusing on the analysis of meaning, ideas, and aesthetics before grammatical analysis.

Enhancing the Educational Environment

- a) Establishing an Arabic Literature Club to organise competitions in poetry, oratory, and creative writing.
- b) Equipping the library with simplified references, literary biographies, and contemporary commentaries.
- c) Organising trips and seminars with specialists in Arabic literature from local universities.

Increasing Student Motivation

- a) Clarifying the practical and moral objectives of studying Arabic literature and its impact on shaping an intellectual personality.
- b) Using a reward and encouragement system for outstanding students.
- c) Connecting the course content to contemporary intellectual issues that concern youth.

Supporting Teachers

- a) Holding continuous training courses for teachers to develop their skills in teaching literature and language.
- b) Encouraging scientific research and innovation in teaching methods.

Research Result

The issue of weak academic performance in Arabic literature among secondary school students in Malaysian religious institutes, including those at the Al-Mahmood Office in Kedah, is a real and serious problem with deep, complex roots.

1. It cannot be resolved through individual efforts alone; instead, it requires the collective efforts of the institute administration, teachers, students, parents, and curriculum developers.
2. Addressing this issue is not an intellectual luxury but an investment in students' identity and their ability to understand their heritage and engage with the world eloquently.
3. The development of Arabic literature education is, at its core, the development of thought, critique, and refined taste for the generation of the future.

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