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BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN PERCEPTIONS AND REALITY IN ARABIC WRITING PROFICIENCY AMONG MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS: A TRIANGULATION APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to assess the writing proficiency in Arabic among students at higher education institutions in Malaysia, focusing on their perceptions and actual performance through diagnostic testing. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed with instrument triangulation, involving a questionnaire to evaluate students' perceptions and a diagnostic test to measure actual proficiency. The sample comprised 140 second-year students from four universities, selected through stratified random sampling. Findings revealed that students' perceived ability was at a moderate level, with an overall mean score of 3.44. Certain foundational skills, such as constructing simple sentences, were rated as high. However, the diagnostic test indicated a low level of writing proficiency, with an overall mean score of 2.34, highlighting a significant gap between students' self-assessment and their actual performance. Further analysis identified weaknesses in syntax, idea cohesion, and paragraph development. The study underscores the need for a more holistic teaching approach, including intensive practical training, systematic guidance, and the integration of technology in Arabic language instruction. These findings provide valuable insights into students' challenges and needs, serving as a foundation for developing more effective teaching and learning strategies.

Keywords: *Arabic Writing, Student Perceptions, Triangulation, Higher Education*

INTRODUCTION

Arabic writing skills are crucial for tertiary education, significantly impacting academic success. Despite its importance, numerous studies (Al-Farisi, 2022; Damulawan et al., 2023; Ekawati et al., 2024) consistently highlight the persistent challenges faced by students in Malaysian HEIs. These challenges hinder their ability to effectively articulate ideas within academic contexts, creating barriers to overall performance.

One of the primary reasons behind these difficulties lies in the underlying linguistic and pedagogical issues. Research points to several contributing factors, such as weak vocabulary, grammatical deficiencies (Hastang and R., 2023), and limited exposure to technology-based learning (Ekawati et al., 2024). Additionally, students struggle with constructing complex sentences and face particular difficulties with grammatical elements like prepositions (Abd Rahman and Salleh, 2006) and particles (Mezah, 2010). As a result, these linguistic barriers exacerbate the overall struggle with Arabic writing.

The manifestation of these linguistic challenges is evident in the errors students frequently make. Spelling mistakes, incorrect grammatical structures (Abd Aziz & Nur Hafizah, 2015), and morphological issues, including the misapplication of Hamzah Wasal (Ahmad et al., 2015), are common. Such errors not only complicate the instructor's task of evaluating student work but also point to deeper inadequacies in Arabic writing instruction at the university level.

In addition to linguistic and pedagogical factors, student attitudes and motivation significantly influence writing proficiency. Studies by Yahya and Suzanawaty (2014) and Samah (2014) demonstrate that students with positive attitudes and intrinsic motivation tend to excel in Arabic writing. Conversely, negative attitudes serve as obstacles to progress. Needs analysis (Dudley, as referenced in Nurman, 2019; Mahbub, 2021) further highlights the gap between students' desired skills and their actual performance, particularly in areas like grammar, syntax, and translation.

A closer examination of existing research (Samah, 2013; Fadiyana, 2017; Mohd Yusoff, 2017; Baharum, 2013; Musa, 2018) sheds light on additional contributing factors. Errors in morphology, syntax (including pronouns and gender structures), and vocabulary frequently occur, often influenced by native language interference. Moreover, ineffective teaching strategies, reliance on textbook-centric learning, and insufficient practical exercises exacerbate these issues, underscoring the need for pedagogical reform.

To address these multifaceted challenges, a holistic approach is essential. Implementing active teaching strategies that incorporate practical exercises can significantly enhance morphological and syntactic proficiency. Furthermore, providing supplementary reading and writing activities can bridge existing gaps, fostering both skill development and confidence. Encouraging intrinsic motivation through academic support and collaborative learning initiatives will further empower students. By integrating theoretical knowledge with practical application and ensuring robust educator support, the education system can make significant strides in enhancing Arabic writing proficiency among Malaysian students (Al-Basri et al., 2021; Abd Aziz & Nur Hafizah, 2015; Yahya & Suzanawaty, 2014).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design to evaluate Arabic writing proficiency among higher education students in Malaysia. This approach was selected as it provides objective data and systematic descriptive statistical analysis. The study sample comprised 140 second-year students with prior experience in learning Arabic at the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) level and in higher education institutions. Respondents were selected through stratified random sampling from four universities: Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (90 participants), Universiti Islam Selangor (25 participants), Universiti Islam Pahang Sultan Ahmad Shah (9 participants), and Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (16 participants). This sampling ensured balanced representation in terms of academic backgrounds and Arabic learning experiences at their respective institutions.

The instruments utilized in this study were a questionnaire and a diagnostic test. The questionnaire was adapted from Karim and Husaini (2017) and modified to align with the

study's objectives. It included questions on writing proficiency, teaching and learning strategies, and essay development skills. The validity of the questionnaire was established through content validation, where Arabic language experts reviewed the items to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha analysis, yielding a coefficient of 0.987, indicating high data consistency.

In addition to the questionnaire, a diagnostic test was specifically designed to assess students' mastery of Arabic writing skills. The test evaluated elements such as sentence construction, sentence linking, and paragraph writing. Each response was assessed for structural accuracy, syntax, and spelling. The scores obtained were converted into mean scores, and proficiency levels were determined based on the mean score interpretation scale established by Ahmad (1993). By employing this triangulated approach, combining the questionnaire and diagnostic test, the study ensured that the data collected were robust, valid, and reliable.

Data collected through both instruments were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22.0. Descriptive analyses such as mean scores, medians, and standard deviations were used to describe students' writing proficiency. The mean score interpretation scale by Ahmad (1993) was employed to classify writing proficiency into three levels: low (1.00–2.33), moderate (2.34–3.66), and high (3.67–5.00). This approach provided a comprehensive overview of Arabic writing proficiency among students, aiding educators in designing effective and practical teaching strategies and enhancing the efficacy of Arabic language instruction in Malaysian higher education institutions (Sugiyono, 2016; Creswell, 2014). Figure 1.1 illustrates the interpretation of mean scores across three Likert scale levels.

Table 1.1: Interpretation of Mean Scores into Three Likert Scale Levels

Range	Mean Score Level
1.00 – 2.33	Low
2.34 – 3.66	Moderate
3.67 – 5.00	High

Source: Ahmad (1993)

DATA ANALYSIS

The study's analysis focuses on the comparative analysis of mean scores and standard deviations between students' perceptions and the writing skill diagnostic test in Arabic. It examines the extent to which students' perceptions influence their Arabic writing skills. Table 1.2 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and levels for students' perceptions, while Table 1.3 displays the results of the Arabic writing skill diagnostic test.

Table 1.2: Mean Scores, Standard Deviations, and Levels for Students' Perceptions

Question Item	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Level
I can construct simple Arabic sentences.	3.91	0.77	High
I use vocabulary learned when constructing Arabic sentences.	3.95	0.73	High
I can write in Arabic using correct Arabic grammar.	3.44	0.79	Moderate

I can develop Arabic sentences using the correct style (*uslub*).	3.41	0.79	Moderate
I can use discourse markers in Arabic sentence construction.	3.56	0.82	Moderate
I can diversify writing styles in Arabic.	3.29	0.77	Moderate
I can produce basic/main ideas in Arabic essay writing.	3.39	0.77	Moderate
I can generate supporting ideas in Arabic essay writing.	3.34	0.80	Moderate
I can write introductory and concluding paragraphs in a short amount of time.	3.17	0.82	Moderate
I do not take a long time to write an Arabic essay.	2.90	0.92	Moderate
Overall Total	**3.44**	**0.80**	**Moderate**

Table 1.3: Diagnostic Test for Arabic Writing Skills

Question Item	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Level
Diagnostic Test for Arabic Writing Skills	2.34	1.02	Low

Analysis of Table 1.2 (Students' Perceptions of Arabic Writing Skills)

The analysis of students' perceptions of their Arabic writing ability indicates a moderate overall level, with a mean score of 3.44 and a standard deviation of 0.80. While some areas show a high level of proficiency, such as constructing simple Arabic sentences (Mean = 3.91, SD = 0.77) and effectively using learned vocabulary (Mean = 3.95, SD = 0.73), most other elements fall within a moderate range. For example:

- The ability to expand sentences with the correct stylistic expression received a mean score of 3.41.
- The capacity to generate main ideas in an essay also shows a mean of 3.39, indicating room for improvement.

The area with the lowest student confidence is the ability to write essays in a short timeframe, which has a mean score of 2.90 and a standard deviation of 0.92. This suggests significant challenges in efficiency, speed, and fluency during the writing process.

Overall, these findings suggest that while foundational writing skills are well-developed, there is a need to enhance more advanced competencies, such as time management and the ability to quickly organize and express ideas cohesively in Arabic writing tasks.

Analysis of Table 1.3 (Arabic Writing Skills Detection Test)

The detection test results indicate that students' writing skills are at a low level, with an overall mean score of 2.34 and a standard deviation of 1.02. This suggests a significant gap between students' self-perceptions of their writing abilities and the reality of their actual writing skills as demonstrated by the test. These scores reflect students' challenges in technical areas such as:

- Grammar usage
- Sentence structure
- Coherence and continuity of ideas in essay writing

Addressing these areas will require targeted instructional strategies and interventions to bridge this gap, such as focused grammar exercises, structured writing workshops, and activities that emphasize logical coherence and content development in Arabic writing.

Comparison and Conclusion

There is a significant difference between the survey findings and the detection test results. In the survey, students tend to rate their writing abilities at a moderate to high level, reflecting a sense of self-confidence in their skills. However, the actual performance shown in the detection test reveals low-level proficiency.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study provide a clear comparison between students' self-perception, as reflected in the survey, and their actual performance in the detection test. The survey results indicate that students tend to rate their Arabic writing abilities at a moderate to high level. For instance, the mean scores for items such as constructing simple Arabic sentences (3.91) and using learned vocabulary (3.95) suggest a strong self-confidence in basic writing skills, particularly in forming sentences and selecting appropriate words.

However, the detection test results present a more challenging reality, with an overall mean score of only 2.34, categorized as low. This outcome highlights a significant gap between students' perceived writing abilities and their actual proficiency. For example, aspects such as constructing complex sentences, connecting ideas cohesively, and composing paragraphs show notable weaknesses that need greater attention in instruction. This discrepancy not only underscores the necessity of enhancing practical training sessions but also calls for continuous assessment methods through a more formative approach.

Alignment with Previous Research

Several previous studies support these findings. For example, Al-Basri et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of structured instruction in Arabic writing, particularly focusing on complex syntax. Similarly, Mohd Noor et al. (2020) recommended integrating analytical training on syntax and sentence structure as a primary strategy to improve writing skills. These suggestions align with Yahya and Suzanawaty (2014), who highlighted the significance of fostering positive student attitudes combined with systematic writing training approaches.

Recommendations for Improvement.

To address these challenges, a triangulation approach to instrument design should be strengthened. While surveys identify students' perceptions and attitudes, the detection test

provides an objective view of their technical writing skills. Additionally, incorporating supplementary activities such as:

- Writing Workshops focused on advanced sentence construction and coherence
- Collaborative Writing Sessions where peer interactions foster constructive feedback
- Mentorship Programs involving senior students or instructors who provide guidance and insights can enhance both the theoretical understanding and practical application of Arabic writing skills.

By implementing these strategies, the gap between perceived and actual writing abilities can be minimized, ultimately benefiting the students and enhancing the overall effectiveness of Arabic language instruction programs in higher education institutions.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SOLUTIONS

The findings of this study reveal a significant gap between students' self-perceived Arabic writing abilities and their actual performance, as measured by the detection test. While survey responses indicate a moderate self-perception with an overall mean score of 3.44, with areas such as constructing simple sentences and using learned vocabulary showing high-level competence, the detection test results show an overall mean score of 2.34, categorized as low.

This discrepancy may be attributed to students' self-confidence not aligning with their actual skills or a lack of effective practical training opportunities. To address this issue, it is recommended to implement structured practical training programs that focus on mastering Arabic syntax and constructing compositions step-by-step. Such programs should begin with basic concepts and progress to more complex sentence structures, ensuring a comprehensive and gradual mastery of Arabic writing skills.

Integrating technology into the learning process can also play a crucial role. Grammar correction applications and interactive online learning platforms can provide real-time feedback and personalized suggestions, enabling students to improve their grammar and syntax independently. As noted by Zaid and Harun (2023), this technological integration accelerates second-language acquisition. Additionally, collaborative learning activities, such as group discussions and writing workshops, can foster creativity, teamwork, and the application of theoretical knowledge. These activities, as recommended by Al-Basri et al. (2021), strengthen students' understanding of Arabic writing structures and coherence.

Continuous assessment and formative feedback are essential to monitor students' progress and address areas of weakness. Regular weekly assessments focusing on grammar, coherence, and syntax, along with portfolio-based learning, provide insights into individual strengths and areas requiring improvement. Personalized tutoring sessions also allow instructors to offer targeted strategies tailored to each student's needs. A triangulation approach, combining survey data (students' self-perception) and detection test results (actual performance), ensures a more accurate evaluation of writing skills and offers a well-rounded intervention plan.

By adopting these recommendations, the educational system can bridge the gap between self-perceived and actual Arabic writing abilities. These strategies will not only enhance technical writing skills but also build self-confidence in mastering the Arabic language. Such approaches are supported by studies like Yahya and Suzanawaty (2014), which emphasize the importance of combining positive attitudes with systematic training to achieve significant improvements in student writing skills.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study successfully provides a comprehensive understanding of Arabic writing skills among higher education students in Malaysia. The analysis conducted through surveys and detection tests highlights a significant gap between students' self-perceived writing abilities and their actual proficiency levels. While students' perceptions of basic skills, such as constructing simple sentences and vocabulary usage, were high, the detection test results revealed notable weaknesses in technical aspects, including complex sentence structure, continuity of ideas, and paragraph organization.

These findings underscore the need to enhance teaching and learning approaches, particularly in areas such as syntax, style, and writing practice. Suggestions such as implementing a triangulation approach, organizing writing workshops, and providing focused guidance can help bridge this gap. Additionally, integrating technology through interactive learning applications and collaborative teaching methods can further improve the effectiveness of Arabic language instruction.

This study contributes significantly to understanding the challenges and needs of students in mastering Arabic writing skills. It also serves as a foundation for developing more holistic and effective teaching strategies. The insights gained are not only valuable for enhancing student competencies but also for shaping curricula that meet current educational needs and expectations.

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