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PHONETIC AND PEDAGOGICAL BARRIERS IN ARABIC READING AMONG NON-NATIVE SECONDARY STUDENTS IN PERLIS: A DESCRIPTIVE-ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract:

Reading is a fundamental phonetic skill and plays a vital role in the teaching and learning of languages. Accurate pronunciation of letters, words, and sentences is key to conveying intended meaning. However, non-native Arabic learners often face challenges in this area, reflected in frequent pronunciation errors during reading. This study aims to identify the primary difficulties faced by secondary school students in Perlis in mastering Arabic reading skills. Employing a descriptive-analytical method, the research explores the types and stages of reading, highlighting their impact on skill development. Data were collected using a questionnaire distributed among students and analyzed to determine the most significant barriers to effective reading. The findings indicate that students struggle particularly with pronouncing certain Arabic sounds due to phonetic differences between Arabic and their native languages. These difficulties hinder their comprehension and reading fluency. This study contributes to the field of Arabic language education for non-native speakers by pinpointing key obstacles and proposing targeted pedagogical solutions.

Keywords:

Arabic Reading, Pronunciation Difficulties, Non-Native Learners, Secondary School, Phonetic Challenges, Language Education, Perlis

Introduction

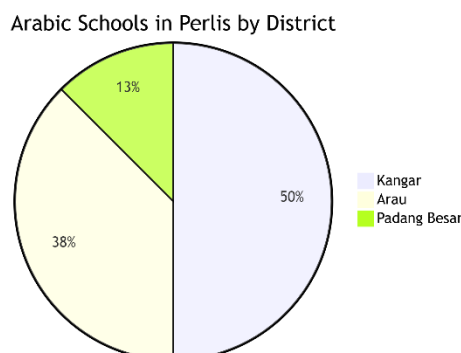
Reading (القراءة) is a gateway to linguistic competence and a foundational skill in second language acquisition. In the context of Arabic language learning, mastery of reading demands not only cognitive understanding but also precise phonetic articulation. For non-native speakers, particularly in Malaysia, acquiring Arabic reading proficiency poses unique challenges. This study focuses on secondary school students in Perlis, where Arabic is taught as a second or foreign language. Despite curriculum support, students exhibit persistent difficulties, often rooted in phonetic interference (التداخل الصوتي) and ineffective pedagogical practices.

Arabic has a long-standing presence in Malaysian education, particularly in religious and national Islamic schools. Its teaching is implemented through various streams such as Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (SMKA), Sekolah Agama Rakyat (SAR), and Maahad Tahfiz. In the state of Perlis, the Ministry of Education has integrated Arabic as a core subject in selected secondary schools, guided by the national curriculum known as Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Menengah (KSSM). The program emphasizes four language skills with reading being one of the most emphasized components in both Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) and Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) assessments.

Currently, Arabic is offered in more than 200 government secondary schools across Malaysia, with approximately 14 secondary schools in Perlis implementing structured Arabic language programs. According to the Ministry of Education's Educational Data Report (2023), an estimated 7,000 students in Perlis are enrolled in Arabic language courses. However, a 2022 state-level diagnostic report indicated that over 60% of these students struggle with reading accuracy, particularly in phonetic articulation and vocabulary recognition.

The inclusion of Arabic in the Malaysian education system as a second language subject reflects the government's aspiration to promote multilingualism and Islamic heritage. However, the lack of contextualized pedagogical strategies tailored to local learners continues to affect reading proficiency.

This article expands upon a previous thesis by exploring the broader socio-cultural and instructional dimensions that influence Arabic reading development, addressing three key gaps: (1) limited empirical data on Perlis's educational context, (2) neglect of affective and cognitive difficulties in Arabic reading, and (3) insufficient identification of core reading challenges. The primary objective of this study is to identify the specific difficulties experienced by secondary school students in Perlis in mastering Arabic reading skills.

Figure 1: Distribution of Arabic-Teaching Secondary Schools in Perlis

Literature Review

Research on Arabic reading difficulties among non-native learners has consistently highlighted the language's structural and pedagogical complexities. Unlike shallow orthographies such as Malay, Arabic is considered a **deep orthography** (الخط العميق) in which grapheme–phoneme correspondence is not straightforward. The omission of short vowels (الحركات) in most authentic texts forces learners to depend on advanced lexical inference and contextual skills, which are often underdeveloped among secondary school students (Abu-Rabiah, 2001; Saiegh-Haddad, 2007). This results in decoding errors, poor fluency, and limited comprehension, particularly for those encountering Arabic as a second or foreign language.

From a phonological perspective, Malaysian learners frequently face difficulty in articulating sounds that do not exist in their mother tongue. Letters such as ض (*dād*), ظ (*zā*), ع (*ayn*), and ح (*hā*) pose persistent challenges, leading to mispronunciations even at advanced stages of study (Hassan, 2016; Ammar & Hassan, 2020). Such errors are not trivial, as they reduce reading confidence and impede oral fluency. Studies by Al-Jarf (2005) and Rahim and Sulaiman (2021) further demonstrate that **reading anxiety** (القلق القرائي) and **fear of mistakes** (الخوف من الخطأ) compound these phonological difficulties, lowering classroom participation and reducing opportunities for practice.

Orthographic challenges also contribute significantly to students' difficulties. Arabic letters vary in shape depending on their position within the word, requiring learners to quickly recognize multiple forms of a single character. Ibrahim et al. (2021) reported that nearly 40% of Malaysian learners confused letters with similar shapes, such as ب, ت, ث (*bā*, *tā*, *thā*), especially when harakat were absent. Tibi and Kirby (2020) similarly showed that reading accuracy and comprehension drop significantly when learners are exposed to unvowelized texts, a common feature in real-world Arabic reading.

Pedagogical factors further exacerbate the problem. Classroom instruction in Malaysia often emphasizes memorization (الحفظ) and group repetition (التكرار الجماعي). While these methods introduce vocabulary, they do not adequately develop higher-order skills such as inferencing, silent reading fluency, and independent decoding (Zughoul, 2003; Ismail & Khalid, 2023). More recent research (Khrais, 2021; Malaysia MOE, 2023) has stressed that phonics-based and differentiated approaches remain underutilized, despite their proven effectiveness in international contexts.

In addition to linguistic and pedagogical issues, socio-cultural and environmental factors play a role. UNESCO (2020) and local studies (Field Study, 2018) have highlighted limited access to Arabic reading materials in libraries and homes, especially in rural areas like Perlis. Teacher training gaps and resource shortages reduce students' exposure to authentic Arabic input, weakening both fluency and comprehension.

To synthesize these findings, Table 1 categorizes the major challenges in Arabic reading faced by non-native learners. It presents the specific issues, their consequences, and representative studies that highlight each domain of difficulty.

Table 1: Summary of Key Challenges in Arabic Reading for Non-Native Learners

<i>Challenge Category</i>	<i>Specific Issues</i>	<i>Key Findings</i>	<i>Representative Studies</i>
Phonological	-Emphatic consonant confusion (e.g., /ض/ vs. /ذ/) - Vowel omission errors	Persistent mispronunciation reduces fluency; omission of harakat impairs decoding.	Abu-Rabiah (2001); Hassan (2016); Ammar & Hassan (2020)
Orthographic	-Letter shape changes by position - Non-represented short vowels	Deep orthography complicates grapheme–phoneme mapping; confusion of similar letters affects recognition.	Saiegh-Haddad (2007); Ibrahim et al. (2021); Tibi & Kirby (2020)
Cognitive-Linguistic	- Root-pattern morphological complexity - Slow decoding speed	Learners rely on contextual guessing; poor morphological awareness limits comprehension.	Abu-Rabia & Taha (2013); Coltheart (2001); Rahman & Nor (2022)
Pedagogical	- Overreliance on rote memorization - Limited phonics-based instruction	Traditional repetition methods fail to build independent reading; phonics and differentiated teaching underused.	Zughoul (2003); Ismail & Khalid (2023); Khrais (2021)
Affective/Psychological	- Reading anxiety - Fear of mistakes	Anxiety strongly predicts weak fluency; low confidence reduces participation in reading activities.	Al-Jarf (2005); Rahim & Sulaiman (2021)
Socio-Cultural/Educational	- Limited Arabic materials and reading culture - Teacher training gaps	Poor access to authentic resources and untrained teachers hinder literacy development.	UNESCO (2020); Malaysia MOE (2023); دراسة ميدانية (Field Study, 2018)

The table highlights that difficulties in Arabic reading are multidimensional, spanning phonological, orthographic, cognitive, pedagogical, affective, and socio-cultural domains. This synthesis makes clear that the challenges faced by learners in Perlis are not isolated but reflect broader global trends in second language Arabic acquisition. Nevertheless, the Malaysian

context—with its unique educational structures, policies, and sociolinguistic environment—requires context-specific investigation. This study therefore builds on the reviewed literature by examining the key reading difficulties among secondary school students in Perlis, aiming to generate both localized insights and broader pedagogical implications.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a **mixed-methods design**, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews. The quantitative strand aimed to identify the prevalence and severity of Arabic reading difficulties among students, while the qualitative strand explored in-depth explanations for these challenges from both students and teachers. This design ensured both breadth and depth of analysis, allowing triangulation of findings.

Research Setting and Timeframe

The study was conducted at **Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama Arau (SMKA Arau), Perlis, Malaysia**, which represents one of the main secondary schools offering Arabic as part of its formal curriculum. Data collection took place over a **six-month period** (January–June 2023), covering both classroom activities and extracurricular contexts.

Participants

The study was conducted at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama (SMKA) Arau, one of the primary government-funded religious secondary schools in Perlis. A total of 77 students participated in the study, selected based on two criteria: (1) at least two years of formal Arabic language instruction, and (2) current enrollment in Arabic subjects under the Malaysian national Islamic education curriculum.

The majority of participants were Malay native speakers, aged 17 years. These students represent the final stages of secondary education and have experienced the full cycle of Arabic reading instruction under the national syllabus.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Respondents

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	51	66.2%
	Female	20	26.0%
Ethnicity	Malay	76	98.7%
Location	Urban	39	50.6%

Data Sources and Instruments

- **Survey Questionnaire:** Adapted from existing diagnostic tools in Arabic literacy studies, covering domains such as phonological awareness, orthographic recognition, comprehension, and reading motivation. The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale.

- Interviews: Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences, challenges, and perceptions of Arabic reading.
- Document Analysis: Selected classroom materials (e.g., textbooks, worksheets) were reviewed to examine instructional practices.

The primary tool for data collection was a structured questionnaire, developed from key constructs identified in previous literature and aligned with the themes outlined in the theoretical framework.

The questionnaire was organized into three main sections:

Phonemic Awareness (Items V9–V11)

- V9: Letter articulation accuracy
- V10: Differentiating similar letters (e.g., ط / ظ, ص / ض)
- V11: Production of unfamiliar consonants

Reading Fluency (Items V12–V15)

- V12: Sentence reading continuity
- V13–V14: Fluency in reading familiar and unfamiliar text
- V15: Rapid word recognition in context

Reading Comprehension (Items V16–V19)

- V16: Understanding general text meaning
- V17: Grasping specific vocabulary
- V18: Interpreting abstract or inferred concepts
- V19: Linking sentence meaning within extended texts

Each item used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree) to capture both the frequency and perceived severity of reading difficulties. The instrument was validated by four Arabic language education experts and underwent pilot testing with a group of 20 students, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.83, indicating high internal reliability.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected during a two-week period in early 2024. Questionnaires were distributed in-person by the researcher with the assistance of Arabic language teachers. Ethical procedures were followed, including the acquisition of parental consent, school permission, and respondent anonymity.

Data Analysis

- Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics (percentages, mean scores, frequency distribution) were computed using SPSS v26 to identify patterns of difficulty across domains.
- Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), generating themes related to student challenges, affective factors, and pedagogical influences.
- Integration: Findings from both strands were triangulated, with quantitative results providing prevalence data and qualitative insights explaining underlying causes.

The collected responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, percentages, standard deviations) to determine the most common and severe reading difficulties. Cross-tabulations were used to observe patterns by gender and years of Arabic study.

- Analyzed using descriptive statistics (SPSS v28) - Frequencies, means, and percentages were used to identify the most common and severe reading issues.
- Calculated frequency distributions for all items
- Generated cross-tabulations by demographic variables - Patterns were examined across demographic variables such as gender, academic year, and prior Arabic exposure.

Here is Summary of Key Quantitative Findings:

Table 3 : Academic Reading Difficulties (Pronunciation & Fluency)

No.	Skill Assessed	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Weak	Very Weak
V9	Pronouncing letters correctly	45.5%	36.4%	15.6%	2.6%	0%
V10	Distinguishing similar letters (ت/ط, س/ث)	50.6%	37.7%	9.1%	2.6%	0%
V12	Reading sentences fluently	1.3%	37.7%	48.1%	13%	0%
V15	Smooth word pronunciation	18.2%	41.6%	36.4%	3.9%	0%

As shown in Table 3, 84% of students demonstrated no major academic reading difficulties, indicating that learners in higher secondary levels (Form 5) have successfully overcome basic decoding and letter recognition barriers. However, 13% still showed weakness in reading fluency, suggesting that phonological interference and limited oral practice remain problematic for a minority group. This pattern emphasizes the need for continuous training in connected and fluent reading, even for advanced learners.

Table 4 : Reading Comprehension Challenges

No.	Skill Assessed	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Weak	Very Weak
V16	Understanding general meaning	1.3%	20.8%	50.6%	27.3%	0%
V18	Grasping abstract vocabulary	1.3%	10.4%	50.6%	35.1%	2.6%
V19	Connecting sentence meanings	2.6%	14.3%	45.5%	35.1%	2.6%

Table 4 illustrates that only 30% of students achieved strong comprehension skills, while nearly half (49%) fell within the moderate range and 21% reported weak comprehension. This distribution suggests that while students may decode and recognize words, many struggle with higher-level understanding, particularly when texts include rhetorical or literary devices. The data also align with field observations that limited exposure to Arabic literature and insufficient practice in interpretive reading inhibit deeper comprehension.

Table 5: Overall Reading Proficiency Assessment

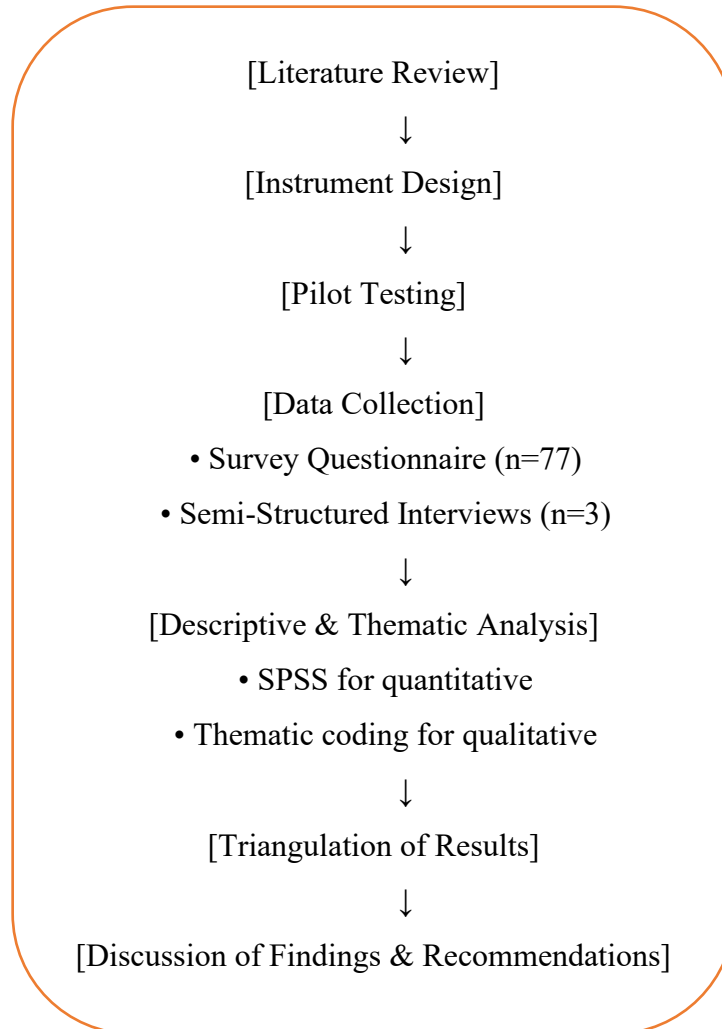
No.	Skill Assessed	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Weak	Very Weak
V31	Recognizing punctuation marks	53.2%	27.3%	19.5%	0%	0%
V32	Understanding word/sentence meanings	1.3%	16.9%	45.5%	33.8%	2.6%
V35	Reading long words without hesitation	6.5%	24.7%	41.6%	20.8%	6.5%

Table 5 presents the overall reading proficiency assessment of students. A major contrast was observed: while mechanical decoding skills such as recognizing punctuation marks (Item V31, 80.5% rated *Excellent* or *Very Good*) were strong, inferential reading and comprehension remained weaker (Item V32, with 63.6% rated *Good* or below).

Research Workflow

The following figure illustrates the sequential flow of the study:

Figure 2: Research Flow Diagram



Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines throughout the research process. Formal approval was obtained from the Malaysian Ministry of Education (Reference: KPM.600-3/2/3) prior to data collection. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving detailed explanations about the study's purpose and their rights. To protect confidentiality, all data were anonymized using coded identifiers (e.g., S01-Male-Urban) rather than personal names, and responses were stored securely on password-protected servers. These measures ensured compliance with international standards for educational research involving human subjects.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable empirical insight into Arabic reading difficulties among Perlis secondary students, the following limitations must be acknowledged:

1. **Limited Generalizability** – Data were collected from a single school (SMKA Arau), potentially limiting applicability to broader national contexts.

2. **Self-reporting Bias** – As responses were self-reported, they may not fully reflect actual reading performance due to over- or underestimation by students.
3. **Cross-sectional Design** – The study captures a single point in time and does not account for the developmental progression of reading skills.

Future research could incorporate longitudinal tracking, multi-site sampling, and direct observational tools to complement and extend these findings.

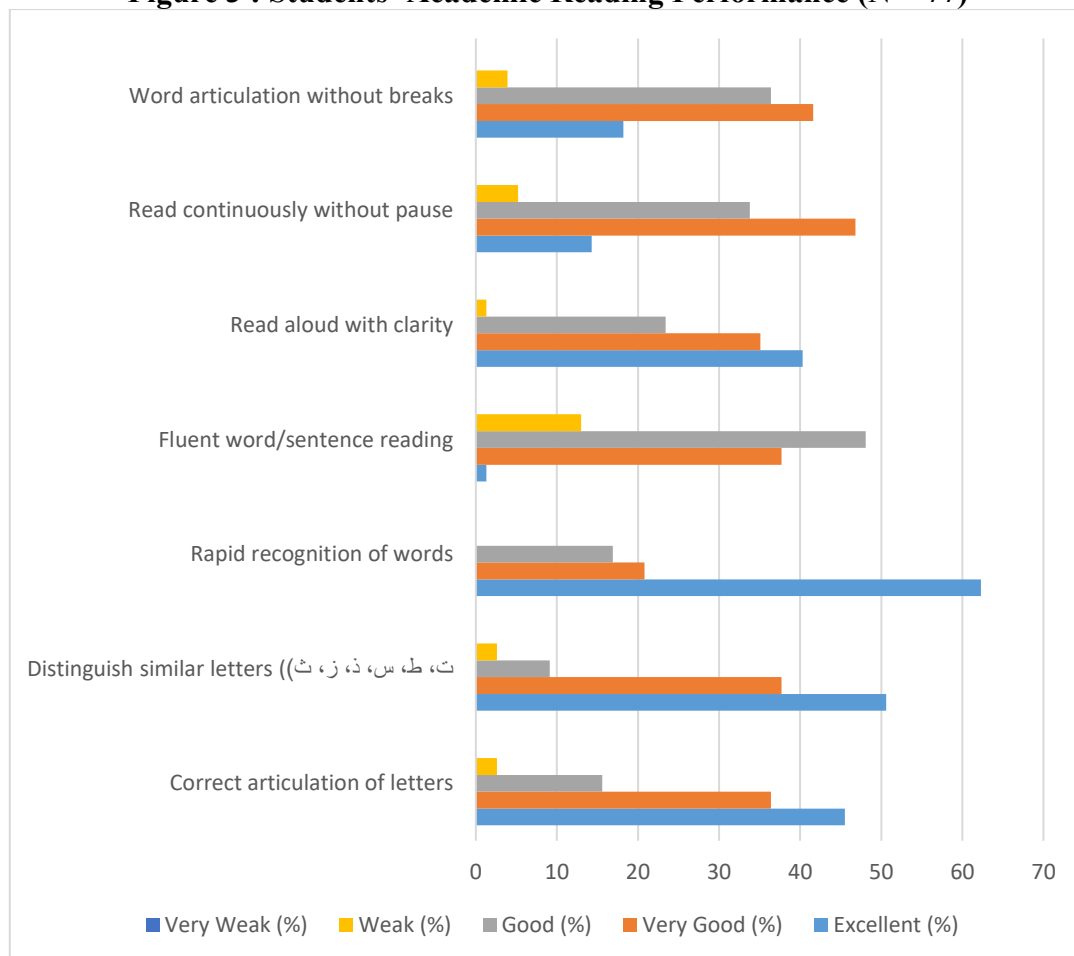
Findings and Discussion

This section presents the major findings of the study on Arabic reading difficulties among secondary school students in Perlis. Results are organized according to the main domains of reading ability: (a) academic reading performance, (b) comprehension and understanding, (c) motivational factors, and (d) overall proficiency in reading skills. All tables and figures are formatted according to APA 6th edition guidelines, with in-text discussion linking results to past research and theoretical perspectives.

Academic Reading Difficulties

Figure 3 summarizes the distribution of responses related to students' performance in academic Arabic reading tasks.

Figure 3 : Students' Academic Reading Performance (N = 77)

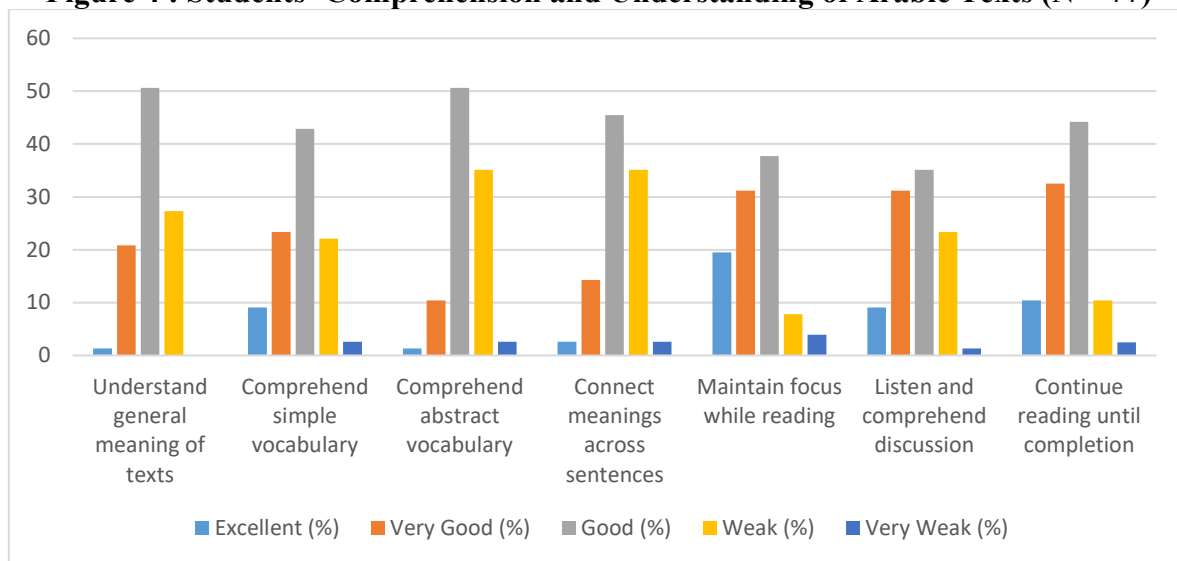


The data reveal that while many students excelled in basic articulation and distinguishing similar letters (over 80% in the top categories), only 1.3% reported reading fluently without difficulty. This suggests that while phoneme recognition is relatively strong, fluency remains a major challenge. These results echo Abu-Rabiah (2001) and Hassan (2016), who noted that non-native learners often succeed in phoneme-level tasks but struggle with connected-text fluency.

Comprehension and Understanding

Figure 4 presents the results regarding comprehension skills.

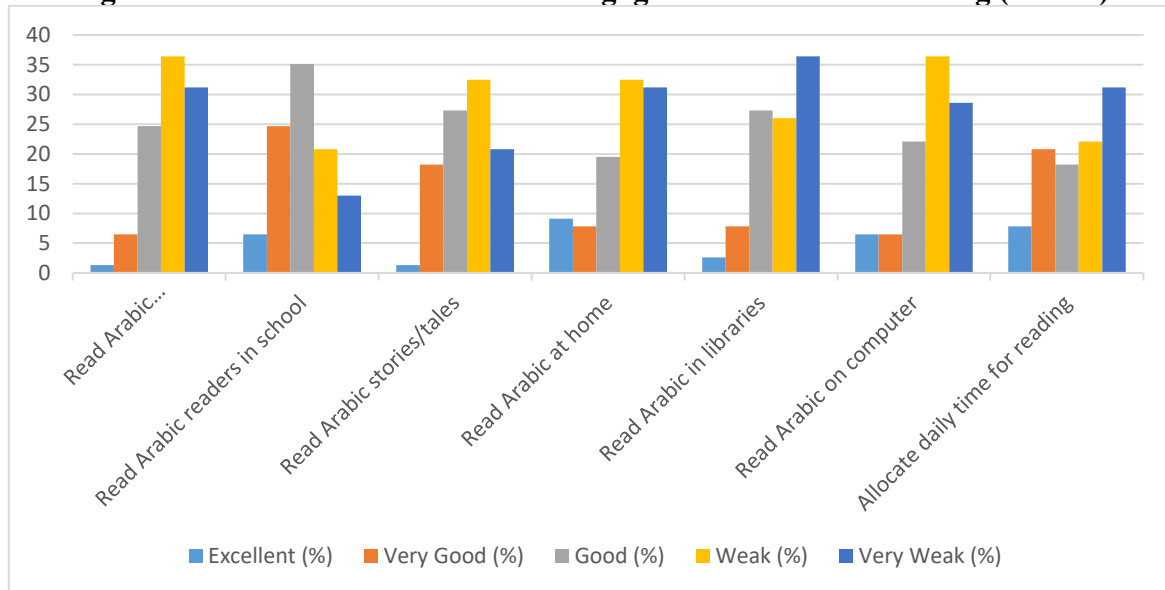
Figure 4 : Students' Comprehension and Understanding of Arabic Texts (N = 77)



Overall, only 30% of students achieved “Excellent” levels in comprehension, while nearly half remained at a “Good” or “Weak” level. Abstract vocabulary (المفردات المجردة) was particularly problematic, with 37.7% of students unable to process such terms effectively. These findings are consistent with Al-Jarf (2005), who argued that comprehension deficits stem from lack of exposure to authentic texts and low confidence in meaning-making.

Motivation and Reading Practices

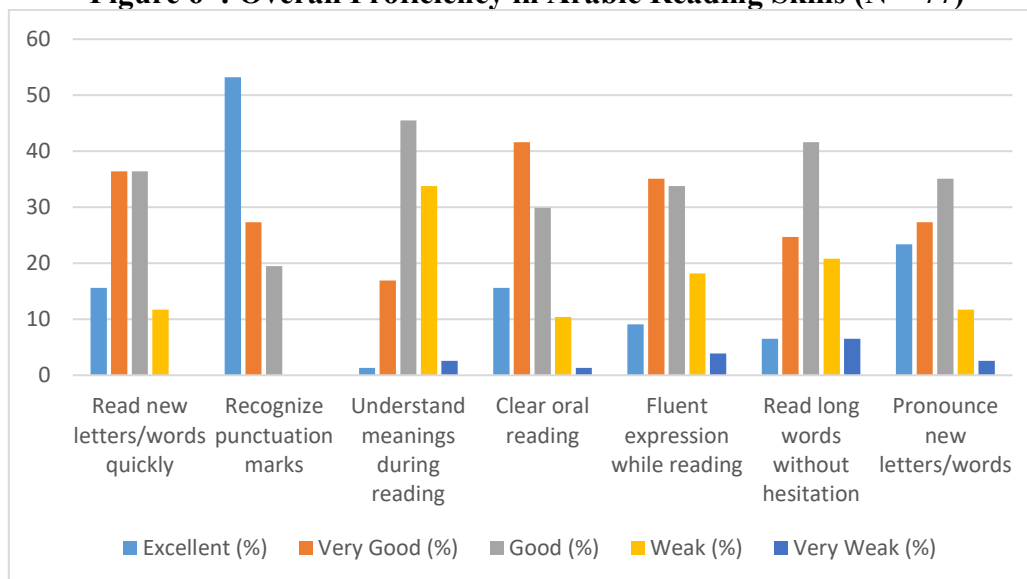
Figure 5 shows the students' motivation and frequency of engaging with Arabic reading materials.

Figure 5: Students' Motivation and Engagement in Arabic Reading (N = 77)

The data demonstrate that **58% of students rarely or never read Arabic texts outside school settings**. Only 7.8% allocated daily time for Arabic reading. These findings indicate that extrinsic reading motivation is very low, which aligns with Zughoul's (2003) assertion that traditional school-based reading does not extend into self-directed reading practices.

Overall Proficiency in Reading Skills

Figure 6 summarizes overall reading proficiency, reflecting students combined phonological, comprehension, and motivational outcomes.

Figure 6 : Overall Proficiency in Arabic Reading Skills (N = 77)

Despite strength in recognizing punctuation (80.5% in higher categories), major weaknesses were observed in oral fluency and comprehension. Only 9.1% could express themselves fluently while reading, and 33.8% reported consistent comprehension difficulty. This highlights the persistent influence of Malay phonological interference and the lack of strategy-based instruction (Khrais, 2021).

Discussion

The findings suggest that while Perlis students demonstrate partial mastery of phonological decoding, fluency and comprehension remain critical weaknesses. Three key insights emerge:

1. **Phonological vs. Connected Reading** – Students articulate letters well but fail to sustain fluency in continuous reading. This confirms the dual-route reading model (Coltheart, 2001), where phonological decoding does not necessarily translate into fluency.
2. **Comprehension Gaps** – Weak understanding of abstract vocabulary and sentence integration reflects insufficient exposure to advanced Arabic texts and lack of training in comprehension strategies.
3. **Motivational Deficits** – With less than 10% of students engaging in voluntary Arabic reading, affective and environmental factors strongly hinder reading development. This aligns with socio-cultural theories of second language acquisition, which stress the role of literacy environments (Vygotsky, 1978).

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several targeted recommendations are proposed to strengthen Arabic reading instruction for secondary school students in Perlis and similar contexts:

1. **Curriculum Enhancement**
The Arabic curriculum should be revised to integrate structured training in phonological awareness (الوعي الصوتي) and explicit instruction on Arabic orthography. Greater emphasis should be placed on decoding skills, diacritic usage, and gradual transition to unvowelized texts.
2. **Teacher Professional Development**
Teachers should receive systematic training in **phonics-based instruction** and differentiated pedagogical strategies. Workshops and continuous professional development programs can help educators move beyond traditional rote learning methods to evidence-based practices.
3. **Learning Resources and Exposure**
Schools should enrich Arabic learning environments by providing access to **graded readers, Arabic newspapers, and digital learning platforms**. Establishing Arabic reading corners in school libraries would help normalize exposure to authentic materials.
4. **Student Motivation and Engagement**
To address low motivation, schools can introduce **interactive reading activities**, such as storytelling, role-play, and reading competitions. Creating opportunities for students to practice Arabic in informal contexts—debates, drama, or cultural events—can also foster confidence and enjoyment.
5. **Parental and Community Involvement**
Parents should be encouraged to support Arabic reading at home by setting aside daily reading times, even with simple materials. Collaboration with local mosques and cultural associations can also provide authentic contexts for practice.

6. Policy-Level Interventions

At the national level, the Ministry of Education may consider integrating **reading fluency benchmarks** into assessment systems and supporting rural schools with specialized reading programs. Policies that fund teacher training and resource provision can ensure long-term sustainability.

Conclusion and Contributions

This study set out with the objective of identifying the primary difficulties faced by secondary school students in Perlis in mastering Arabic reading skills. Based on both quantitative and qualitative data, the research successfully addressed this aim by highlighting core obstacles in phonological articulation, comprehension, script recognition, and learner motivation. The findings consistently demonstrated that while many students could decode simple texts, persistent challenges remained in pronouncing Arabic sounds absent from the Malay phonological system, understanding unvowelized texts, and sustaining fluency. These results confirm that the research objectives were achieved, as the study provided a context-specific understanding of the barriers to Arabic reading for Malaysian learners.

The analysis revealed that phonological issues such as confusion between emphatic consonants (e.g., /ض/, /ظ/, /ط/, /ص/) and difficulties in pronouncing guttural sounds (e.g., /غ/, /ع/, /ح/) were widespread. Furthermore, comprehension was undermined by limited exposure to diacritics (التشكيل) and insufficient training in comprehension strategies. Students also reported low levels of motivation, with a majority indicating that they did not allocate daily time for Arabic reading or make use of school or public libraries. Pedagogically, an overreliance on rote memorization (الحفظ) and group repetition (التكرار الجماعي) restricted students' ability to develop independent reading competence.

This research contributes to the academic literature by adding an empirically grounded, region-specific perspective on Arabic reading challenges in Malaysia. While existing studies have explored general issues in second language Arabic acquisition, few have offered detailed statistical insights from secondary schools in Perlis. By documenting both academic reading difficulties and comprehension struggles, this paper bridges the gap between theoretical discussions of Arabic orthography and the lived experiences of learners in Malaysian classrooms.

From a practical standpoint, the study offers contributions to pedagogical practice. The results underscore the need for phonics-based instruction, differentiated teaching strategies, and the systematic use of vowelized texts in the early stages of learning. Teachers and curriculum planners may also benefit from the evidence that anxiety and low confidence levels strongly predict weaker oral reading performance, suggesting the importance of supportive, low-stress classroom environments.

At the policy level, the findings have implications for national curriculum development and educational planning. The persistent difficulties in reading comprehension and fluency highlight the need for policy makers to invest in teacher training programs that integrate modern reading pedagogy and evidence-based practices. Establishing Arabic resource libraries in schools and encouraging structured daily reading routines could also enhance long-term proficiency. These steps align with Malaysia's broader objectives of strengthening Arabic language education within its multilingual educational landscape.

In conclusion, this study not only achieved its primary objective but also generated significant contributions across academic, pedagogical, and policy domains. By situating the challenges of Arabic reading within the specific sociolinguistic context of Perlis, the research advances understanding of second-language Arabic literacy development and provides a foundation for future interventions. Moving forward, expanding the study to include comparative data from other Malaysian states or integrating longitudinal measures could further enrich the discourse and support national strategies for Arabic language education.

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