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CHALLENGES IN LEARNING ARABIC POETRY AND PROSE AMONG MALAY STUDENTS: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYTICAL STUDY IN ARABIC AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract:

Arabic poetry and prose occupy a central position in Arabic language and literature programmes, serving as key vehicles for linguistic development, cultural transmission, and aesthetic appreciation. However, for non-native learners of Arabic, particularly Malay students in Malaysian higher education institutions, literary texts often represent a significant pedagogical challenge. While previous research on Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) has focused largely on grammar, vocabulary, and communicative competence, comparatively limited attention has been given to learners' engagement with Arabic literary genres. This study addresses that gap by examining the challenges faced by Malay students in learning Arabic poetry and prose. Adopting a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, the study draws on semi-structured interviews and classroom observations to explore students' and instructors' experiences in an Arabic language and literature programme. The findings reveal that students' difficulties are multidimensional, encompassing linguistic complexity, limited cultural and historical knowledge, and pedagogical practices that insufficiently scaffold literary interpretation.

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The study further demonstrates that these challenges vary according to learners' proficiency levels and stages of literary development. In particular, challenges related to figurative language, rhetorical devices, and culturally embedded meanings hinder students' progression from surface comprehension to analytical literary engagement. The study argues that effective Arabic literature pedagogy for non-native speakers requires an integrated approach that combines linguistic support, cultural contextualisation, and learner-centred instructional strategies. By explicitly foregrounding learner experience, this research contributes an empirically grounded perspective to AFL literary pedagogy and offers pedagogical implications for non-Arab contexts.

Keywords:

Arabic As a Foreign Language; Arabic Poetry; Arabic Prose; Literary Competence; Malay Learners; Arabic Literature Pedagogy; Cultural Context; Higher Education

Introduction

Arabic literature, encompassing both poetry and prose, represents one of the most influential and enduring literary traditions in the world. Beyond its aesthetic value, Arabic literary heritage plays a crucial role in shaping linguistic competence, cultural literacy, and intellectual formation among students of the Arabic language. Within university-level Arabic language and literature programmes, poetry and prose are therefore regarded as essential components for developing advanced reading skills, interpretive ability, and critical thinking.

For learners of Arabic as a foreign language, however, engagement with literary texts often presents substantial challenges. Unlike functional or communicative texts, Arabic poetry and prose are characterised by dense vocabulary, complex syntactic structures, figurative language, and deep cultural embeddedness. Research in Arabic language pedagogy indicates that these features pose significant difficulties for non-native learners, particularly those whose first languages differ typologically and culturally from Arabic, such as Malay (Ryding, 2014; Al-Batal, 2017).

Despite the central role of literature in Arabic curricula, existing scholarship has tended to prioritise general language acquisition skills, including grammar, vocabulary learning, and speaking proficiency, while giving relatively limited attention to literary competence as a pedagogical construct (Nation, 2013). Studies that do address Arabic literature learning often focus on theoretical issues or instructional ideals, rather than on learners' lived experiences and the concrete challenges they face in classrooms (Al-Sharah, 2020). As a result, there remains an incomplete understanding of how students navigate the linguistic, cultural, and instructional demands of Arabic poetry and prose.

This gap is particularly evident in the Malaysian context, where Arabic is studied as a foreign language within higher education institutions. Malay students bring with them linguistic structures, literary traditions, and cultural references that differ markedly from those presupposed in Arabic literary texts. Without sufficient mediation, these differences can impede comprehension and limit students' ability to engage meaningfully with literary works (Suleiman, 2013; Ismail & Abdullah, 2019).

In response to these concerns, the present study investigates the challenges faced by Malay students in learning Arabic poetry and prose. By adopting a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach and foregrounding students' and instructors' perspectives, the study seeks to illuminate the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical factors shaping literary learning in Arabic as a foreign language. The study further aims to clarify its original contribution by offering an empirically grounded, context-sensitive account of literary learning challenges in a non-Arab setting.

Literature Review

Research on Arabic language learning consistently identifies linguistic complexity as a major challenge for non-native speakers. Arabic's rich morphological system, extensive derivational patterns, and syntactic flexibility pose significant learning demands, particularly for learners whose first languages differ typologically from Arabic, such as Malay (Ryding, 2014). These challenges are intensified in literary texts, where language is often dense, metaphorical, and stylistically marked.

Scholars have noted that Arabic poetry presents particular difficulties due to its reliance on figurative language, rhetorical devices, and prosodic structures that are unfamiliar to many learners of Arabic as a foreign language (Al-Sharah, 2020). Poetry often compresses meaning into a limited number of lines, requiring readers to infer implicit meanings and interpret symbolic expressions. Classical prose texts similarly demand high levels of linguistic competence and cultural knowledge, as they frequently reference historical events, religious concepts, and social norms that may not be immediately accessible to non-native readers (Suleiman, 2013).

From a pedagogical perspective, studies suggest that traditional teacher-centred approaches to teaching Arabic literature may exacerbate students' difficulties by prioritising explanation over interaction and limiting opportunities for guided interpretation (Ismail & Abdullah, 2019). In response, scholars advocate for learner-centred and scaffolded instructional approaches that integrate vocabulary support, cultural background knowledge, and critical discussion to enhance literary comprehension (Nation, 2013; Warschauer & Kern, 2000).

While these studies offer valuable insights, they largely treat learner difficulty as a general phenomenon rather than examining how linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical factors interact in specific learning contexts. Moreover, relatively few studies focus explicitly on Malay learners' experiences with Arabic poetry and prose. This study builds on existing scholarship by addressing this gap and by offering a context-specific analysis that foregrounds learners' voices and instructional realities.

Research Problem

Arabic poetry and prose constitute a core component of Arabic language and literature programmes, serving not only as linguistic artefacts but also as repositories of cultural memory, aesthetic tradition, and intellectual heritage. For learners of Arabic as a foreign language, engagement with literary texts is expected to facilitate advanced linguistic competence, interpretive skills, and cultural literacy. However, for many non-native learners, particularly Malay students studying Arabic in Malaysian higher education institutions, Arabic literary texts often represent one of the most challenging aspects of the curriculum.

Previous research indicates that learners of Arabic as a foreign language frequently struggle with complex morphology, dense syntactic structures, and extensive lexical variation, challenges that become more pronounced in literary genres such as poetry and classical prose (Ryding, 2014; Al-Batal, 2017). Arabic poetry, in particular, relies heavily on figurative language and rhetorical condensation, while prose texts often presuppose historical, religious, and cultural knowledge that non-native learners may not possess (Suleiman, 2013). As a result, students often experience difficulty moving beyond literal comprehension toward interpretive literary analysis.

Despite the centrality of Arabic literature in university curricula, there remains a limited empirical understanding of the specific challenges faced by Malay learners when studying Arabic poetry and prose. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on general language acquisition skills, with comparatively little attention given to literary learning as a distinct pedagogical domain (Nation, 2013). Consequently, pedagogical responses risk being insufficiently targeted and theoretically under-anchored.

This study addresses this gap by providing a descriptive and analytical account of the challenges encountered by Malay students, grounded in interview data and classroom observations and interpreted through relevant pedagogical literature.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate and analyse the challenges encountered by Malay students in learning Arabic poetry and prose within a university-level Arabic language and literature programme. The study aims to identify the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical factors that contribute to students' difficulties in comprehending, analysing, and appreciating Arabic literary texts.

In addition, the study seeks to examine whether these challenges differ according to students' levels of study and linguistic proficiency, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of literary learning as a developmental process. Another objective is to explore students' and instructors' perceptions of existing teaching approaches and to identify pedagogical strategies that may facilitate more effective engagement with Arabic poetry and prose. Through these objectives, the study aims to generate insights that can inform curriculum design, instructional practice, and future research in Arabic literature education for non-native speakers.

Significance of the Study

This study holds significance at pedagogical, academic, and cultural levels. From a pedagogical perspective, it provides educators with empirically grounded insights into the specific obstacles faced by Malay students when engaging with Arabic literary texts. By clarifying the nature of these challenges, the study supports the development of more responsive teaching strategies that integrate linguistic scaffolding, cultural contextualisation, and guided literary analysis. Such insights are particularly valuable in higher education contexts, where students are often expected to engage with complex texts without sufficient instructional support.

Academically, the study contributes to the field of Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) by extending scholarly attention beyond general language skills to the domain of literary competence. While applied linguistics research has made significant advances in understanding vocabulary acquisition and grammar instruction, literary learning remains comparatively

underexplored, especially in non-Arab contexts (Al-Batal, 2017; Ryding, 2014). By focusing on poetry and prose, this study addresses an important gap in AFL research.

Culturally, the study highlights the importance of mediating between Arabic literary heritage and learners' cultural backgrounds. Arabic literature is deeply embedded in Arab history, Islamic thought, and socio-cultural conventions. Understanding how cultural distance affects literary comprehension can help educators bridge interpretive gaps and foster more meaningful intercultural engagement with Arabic texts (Suleiman, 2013). In this way, the study contributes to broader discussions on cross-cultural literary education and language learning.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical research design, which is well suited to exploring educational challenges as they are experienced by learners and instructors in real academic settings. Qualitative methods allow for in-depth examination of perceptions, experiences, and contextual factors that cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative approaches (Creswell, 2014).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving students and instructors in an Arabic language and literature programme at a Malaysian university. Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to articulate their experiences, difficulties, and learning strategies in their own words, while classroom observations provided insight into instructional practices, student engagement, and patterns of interaction during literature lessons. This combination of data sources allowed for methodological triangulation, enhancing the credibility and richness of the findings.

The data were analysed thematically, following established qualitative analysis procedures. Recurring patterns and themes related to linguistic difficulty, cultural comprehension, and pedagogical practice were identified and interpreted in light of existing theoretical and empirical literature on Arabic language learning and literary pedagogy (Creswell, 2014). This analytical approach ensured that findings were both grounded in participants' experiences and situated within broader scholarly debates.

Findings

The findings of this study reveal that Malay students studying Arabic poetry and prose encounter a range of challenges that emerge consistently across interview data and classroom observations. The findings reported in this section are presented descriptively, based on participants' accounts and observed classroom practices, without interpretive or theoretical elaboration.

One prominent area of difficulty relates to linguistic complexity in Arabic literary texts. Students frequently reported difficulty in processing dense vocabulary, complex syntactic structures, and morphologically rich word forms commonly found in classical poetry and prose. Interview data indicate that many students struggled to recognise root-pattern relationships and contextual meanings simultaneously, particularly when encountering low-frequency or archaic lexical items. Classroom observations further showed that students often paused during reading activities to seek clarification on individual words, which disrupted overall textual comprehension. These linguistic challenges were observed to affect students' ability to follow the progression of meaning across verses and prose passages.

In addition to general linguistic difficulty, students experienced notable challenges in understanding figurative language and rhetorical devices. Participants reported that metaphors, similes, symbolism, and stylistic expressions were difficult to interpret, even when the literal meaning of words was understood. Several students indicated that poetic lines appeared ambiguous or opaque, requiring repeated explanation from instructors. Classroom observations revealed that instructional time was frequently spent paraphrasing lines rather than engaging in extended discussion of imagery or stylistic meaning. As a result, students' engagement with poetic texts often remained focused on surface-level comprehension rather than deeper textual exploration.

Another recurring challenge concerns cultural and contextual knowledge embedded in Arabic literary texts. Students consistently noted limited familiarity with historical references, tribal customs, religious allusions, and socio-cultural values presupposed by many poems and prose passages. Interview responses indicate that when such references were not explicitly explained, students found it difficult to situate texts within an appropriate historical or cultural framework. Classroom observations showed that contextual background was sometimes provided briefly but not systematically integrated into lesson activities. This limited contextual grounding contributed to fragmented understanding of textual meaning.

Pedagogical practices were also found to shape students' learning experiences. Observations revealed a predominance of teacher-centred instructional approaches, with lessons largely organised around explanation, translation, and instructor-led clarification. Opportunities for student-led discussion, collaborative interpretation, or guided analytical activities were limited. Students reported relying heavily on instructors' explanations to understand texts and expressed uncertainty when asked to interpret passages independently. This instructional pattern was consistently observed across multiple classes and learning sessions.

The findings further indicate variation in the nature of challenges across proficiency levels. Beginner-level students primarily reported difficulty with basic comprehension, vocabulary recognition, and sentence structure., whereas more advanced students described challenges related to interpretation, thematic understanding, and analytical engagement with texts. Classroom observations supported this distinction, showing that advanced students were able to follow textual meaning but hesitated when required to articulate interpretive or evaluative responses. These differences suggest that challenges evolve alongside students' linguistic development.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insight into the nature of the challenges faced by Malay students in learning Arabic poetry and prose and situate these challenges within broader discussions in Arabic as a Foreign Language (AFL) pedagogy. Rather than indicating isolated linguistic weakness, the findings point to a convergence of linguistic demands, cultural distance, and instructional practices that collectively shape students' literary learning experiences.

From a linguistic perspective, the reported difficulties with dense vocabulary, syntactic complexity, and morphological variation are consistent with established research on Arabic as a foreign language. Arabic's root-pattern system and syntactic flexibility place considerable processing demands on learners, particularly in literary texts where lexical choices are

stylistically marked and meaning is often compressed (Ryding, 2014; Al-Batal, 2017). The findings suggest that when such linguistic demands are encountered in poetry and classical prose, students' cognitive resources are primarily directed toward decoding form, leaving limited capacity for interpretive engagement. This aligns with previous studies indicating that non-native learners often struggle to progress beyond literal comprehension in literary reading tasks.

The challenges students faced in interpreting figurative language and rhetorical devices further highlight the distinction between general language proficiency and literary competence. While learners may develop grammatical and lexical knowledge through sustained exposure, interpretive skills related to metaphor, symbolism, and imagery require explicit instructional mediation (Al-Sharah, 2020). The findings indicate that students' difficulty in engaging with figurative language is not merely a function of vocabulary gaps but reflects limited familiarity with literary conventions and interpretive strategies. This supports the view that literary competence constitutes a distinct dimension of language learning that must be intentionally cultivated.

Cultural and contextual distance emerged as another significant factor shaping students' engagement with Arabic literary texts. Arabic poetry and prose are deeply embedded in historical, religious, and socio-cultural frameworks that may not be readily accessible to Malay learners. As Suleiman (2013) argues, literary meaning is inseparable from cultural knowledge, and the absence of such knowledge can constrain interpretation. The findings of this study reinforce this argument by showing that limited contextual grounding restricts students' ability to construct coherent interpretations, even when linguistic comprehension is partially achieved. This suggests that cultural mediation should be treated as an integral component of Arabic literature instruction rather than as supplementary background information.

Pedagogically, the predominance of teacher-centred instructional practices observed in this study reflects a common pattern in foreign language literature classrooms. While explanation and translation may provide short-term support for comprehension, they may also limit opportunities for students to develop independent interpretive skills. Nation (2013) and Warschauer and Kern (2000) emphasise that meaningful engagement with literary texts requires interactive, scaffolded learning environments that encourage discussion, hypothesis-building, and collaborative meaning-making. The findings suggest that when instruction remains primarily explanatory, students become dependent on instructor interpretation and exhibit reduced confidence in engaging analytically with texts.

The variation in challenges across proficiency levels further underscores the developmental nature of literary learning. Beginner students' focus on decoding and comprehension contrasts with advanced students' difficulty in analysis and thematic interpretation. This pattern supports developmental models of literary competence, which propose that learners move gradually from surface-level understanding toward interpretive and evaluative engagement. The findings therefore indicate that uniform instructional approaches may be insufficient to address the evolving needs of learners at different stages of linguistic development.

Taken together, the discussion highlights the need for a pedagogical shift in the teaching of Arabic poetry and prose to non-native learners. Addressing linguistic complexity, cultural distance, and instructional design in isolation is unlikely to produce sustained improvement.

Instead, an integrated approach that combines linguistic scaffolding, cultural contextualisation, and learner-centred pedagogy appears necessary to support deeper literary engagement among Malay students studying Arabic as a foreign language.

Conclusion

This study has examined the challenges encountered by Malay students in learning Arabic poetry and prose and has demonstrated that these challenges are complex, interrelated, and pedagogically significant. The findings indicate that students' difficulties extend beyond limited language proficiency to include challenges associated with figurative language, culturally embedded meanings, and instructional practices that provide limited support for literary interpretation. Taken together, these challenges highlight that literary learning in Arabic as a foreign language involves distinct cognitive, cultural, and pedagogical demands that require targeted instructional attention.

From a linguistic perspective, the study confirms that the morphological richness and syntactic flexibility of Arabic place substantial processing demand on non-native learners, particularly in literary contexts where language is condensed and stylistically marked (Ryding, 2014; Al-Batal, 2017). Difficulties with figurative language further underscore that literary competence does not develop automatically alongside grammatical proficiency. Rather, interpretive skills related to metaphor, symbolism, and rhetorical expression require explicit instructional mediation and sustained pedagogical support (Al-Sharah, 2020).

Culturally, the findings emphasise the importance of contextual mediation in Arabic literature instruction. Arabic poetry and prose are deeply rooted in historical, social, and religious frameworks that may be unfamiliar to Malay learners. Without systematic cultural contextualisation, students are likely to engage with texts at a surface level, limiting both comprehension and appreciation (Suleiman, 2013). This suggests that cultural literacy should be integrated into literary instruction as a core pedagogical component rather than treated as ancillary background knowledge.

Pedagogically, the study highlights the limitations of teacher-centred instructional approaches that prioritise explanation and translation over interaction and guided interpretation. Consistent with research in applied linguistics, the findings suggest that learner-centred and scaffolded approaches, incorporating discussion, collaborative interpretation, and staged analytical tasks are better aligned with the cognitive demands of literary learning (Nation, 2013; Warschauer & Kern, 2000). Such approaches may also support students' confidence and autonomy when engaging with complex literary texts.

In conclusion, improving the teaching and learning of Arabic poetry and prose for Malay students requires a holistic pedagogical orientation that integrates linguistic scaffolding, cultural contextualisation, and interactive instructional practices. Future research should extend this line of inquiry by examining the effectiveness of specific pedagogical interventions across different proficiency levels and institutional contexts. By addressing literary learning as a distinct and developmentally structured domain within Arabic as a foreign language, educators can better support students' progression from basic comprehension to critical literary engagement and appreciation.

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