



Measuring Arabic Reading Skills of New Students in Islamic Senior High School during the Pandemic Era

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Abstract:

This study investigates the post-pandemic Arabic reading proficiency of newly enrolled students at an Islamic senior high school, with a focus on identifying disparities in comprehension and decoding skills. Using a quantitative descriptive design, the research assessed 118 students through a structured performance test measuring four core components: letter recognition, vocabulary understanding, sentence comprehension, and short discourse interpretation. Data were supported by observation logs and documentation. Results show that while 84% of students demonstrated strong decoding abilities, only 38% could comprehend simple sentences, and less than 25% could understand short texts. The analysis further revealed a stark proficiency gap between students from Madrasah Aliyah (MA) and those from senior high schools (SMA), indicating that prior exposure and institutional background significantly affect reading competence. This study contributes to Arabic education research by providing diagnostic insight into the cognitive impact of pandemic-era learning and the need for targeted remediation. However, its limitation lies in the single-site context and lack of longitudinal tracking, suggesting a need for future multi-phase studies to explore intervention outcomes.

Keywords: Arabic Reading Proficiency, Islamic Secondary Education, Diagnostic Assessment, Post-Pandemic Learning, Educational Disparity.

Abstrak:

Studi ini membahas kemahiran membaca bahasa Arab pascapandemi dari siswa yang baru terdaftar di sebuah sekolah menengah atas Islam, dengan fokus pada mengidentifikasi kesenjangan dalam keterampilan pemahaman dan decoding. Dengan menggunakan desain deskriptif kuantitatif, penelitian ini menilai 118 siswa melalui tes kinerja terstruktur yang mengukur empat komponen inti: pengenalan huruf, pemahaman kosakata, pemahaman kalimat, dan interpretasi wacana pendek. Data didukung oleh catatan observasi dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa sementara 84% siswa menunjukkan kemampuan decoding yang kuat, hanya 38% yang dapat memahami kalimat sederhana, dan kurang dari 25% dapat memahami teks pendek. Analisis lebih lanjut mengungkapkan kesenjangan kemahiran yang mencolok antara siswa dari Madrasah Aliyah (MA) dan mereka yang dari sekolah menengah atas (SMA), yang menunjukkan bahwa paparan sebelumnya dan latar belakang kelembagaan secara signifikan memengaruhi kompetensi membaca. Studi ini berkontribusi pada penelitian pendidikan bahasa Arab dengan memberikan wawasan diagnostik tentang dampak kognitif dari pembelajaran era pandemi dan perlunya perbaikan yang ditargetkan. Namun, keterbatasannya terletak pada konteks situs tunggal dan kurangnya pelacakan longitudinal, yang menunjukkan perlunya studi multi-fase di masa mendatang untuk mengeksplorasi hasil intervensi.

Kata Kunci: Kemampuan Membaca Bahasa Arab, Pendidikan Menengah Islam, Penilaian Diagnostik, Pembelajaran Pascapandemi, Kesenjangan Pendidikan.

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INTRODUCTION / المقدمة

Islamic Senior High Schools (Madrasah Aliyah) play a critical role in shaping students who are not only religiously literate but also linguistically competent, especially in Arabic, which is the language of the Qur'an and Islamic sciences. In the context of global education, Arabic language proficiency, particularly reading skills, remains a key component of Islamic education. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted conventional education systems globally, including Arabic learning processes in madrasahs (Alkahtani, 2022; A. W. Ritonga et al., 2020; Shorman et al., 2022). The shift from face-to-face instruction to online or hybrid learning models significantly impacted students' ability to access, comprehend, and practice Arabic reading, especially among new students transitioning from junior Islamic education levels. These disruptions necessitate an urgent evaluation of students' reading skills to realign learning strategies with post-pandemic needs (Maulia et al., 2020; Suhaimi et al., 2020; Yazid et al., 2022).

The pandemic era introduced several learning barriers, including limited interaction with native or fluent Arabic speakers, inconsistent access to digital learning platforms, and the absence of structured diagnostic assessments to measure students' language competencies upon school entry (Kamis et al., 2020; Selim, 2023). Consequently, many first-year students in Islamic Senior High Schools struggle with reading comprehension, decoding Arabic script, and understanding grammatical structures, all of which are fundamental for further learning. This challenge is exacerbated in institutions with inadequate technological infrastructure or pedagogical support (Akmalia et al., 2023; Ali et al., 2020; M. Ritonga et al., 2023). As reading skills are foundational to accessing broader Islamic texts and academic content, the need for reliable and valid measurement tools becomes paramount in this post-pandemic recovery phase.

Recent studies in language acquisition emphasize the importance of early diagnostic testing to guide instructional planning and ensure targeted interventions (Basheer et al., 2022; M. Ritonga et al., 2021). In the Arabic language learning context, however, such diagnostic practices are often underdeveloped or inconsistently applied, especially during the pandemic, when informal assessments replaced structured tools. Understanding students' reading proficiency from the outset can inform teachers, curriculum developers, and school leaders about gaps that must be addressed through differentiated instruction and resource allocation (Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020; Gharaibeh et al., 2021; Sella et al., 2020). Additionally, assessment outcomes provide insights into how distance learning affected foundational language skills, particularly in non-native Arabic-speaking countries where Arabic is taught as a second or foreign language.

This study addresses a critical research gap by focusing specifically on the Arabic reading proficiency of new students at Islamic Senior High Schools in the pandemic context. While prior studies have explored online Arabic instruction effectiveness or general language learning attitudes, few have centered on measurable reading skills among newly enrolled students. Therefore, the objectives of this research are twofold: first, to measure the Arabic reading skills of new Islamic Senior High School students after pandemic-induced learning disruptions; and second, to analyze how these measurements can inform teaching strategies and curriculum design in the post-pandemic period. By identifying current proficiency levels, the study contributes not only to the theoretical discourse on language assessment in disrupted learning environments but also provides practical implications for improving Arabic pedagogy in Islamic schools. The originality of

this research lies in its empirical approach to quantitatively measure Arabic reading skills using adapted tools suitable for the constraints of post-pandemic learning environments. Furthermore, this study offers contextualized data from the madrasah education system, which is often overlooked in mainstream educational research, especially in Southeast Asia.

RESEARCH METHOD / المنهجية

This study was conducted at Madrasah Aliyah Negeri 4 Banyuwangi which became the main unit of analysis due to its representative experience in handling Arabic language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The school was selected based on its documented transition to online and hybrid learning models, and its reception of new students who came from various junior Islamic schools with differing exposure to Arabic reading instruction. The aim was to assess the Arabic reading proficiency of newly enrolled students and to understand the broader impact of pandemic-era learning on foundational language skills.

This research employed a qualitative descriptive and case study design. This design was chosen to systematically measure and describe the Arabic reading skills of new students using objective, standardized instruments (Cole, 2024; Scharp, 2021; Tasçi et al., 2020). The focus was not on intervention or experimentation but rather on capturing the current level of student ability as a diagnostic step. The results are intended to provide data-driven insights into students' reading performance, which can inform curriculum planning and teaching strategies in the post-pandemic recovery period. The population of this study consisted of first-year students at the madrasah in the 2023/2024 academic year. A total of 64 students participated in the study. The sample was selected using a total sampling technique, considering that all new students were the target of the baseline measurement.

Data were collected using a pre-structured Arabic reading skills test administered in a controlled classroom setting. To accommodate students' varying technological readiness and learning exposure, the test was conducted in printed form and supervised directly by the Arabic department teachers (Byrne, 2022; Campbell et al., 2021; Kiger & Varpio, 2020). The students' responses were scored based on a rubric that assigned points to each correct answer, with total scores ranging from 0 to 100. The assessment lasted for 60 minutes and was completed in one session. After the data were collected, the researchers used descriptive statistical analysis, including mean, median, standard deviation, and frequency distribution, to describe the general pattern of students' Arabic reading skills.

The strength of this method lies in its ability to provide empirical evidence on the real-time reading abilities of students following an educational disruption (Ikotun et al., 2023; Saura, 2021; Yang et al., 2020). The originality of this research also lies in its development of a contextualized Arabic reading assessment tool specifically suited for new madrasah students in the pandemic aftermath. The results are expected to support the design of tailored Arabic language programs and bridge learning gaps caused by pandemic-induced educational interruptions.

FINDINGS

Disparity in Arabic Reading Proficiency Based on Students' Educational Background

The results of the standardized Arabic reading test conducted during the first semester of the academic year revealed a clear proficiency gap between students based on their junior high school background. From a total of 64 first-year students assessed, those who graduated from Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs), particularly with exposure to diniyah or tahfidz programs, achieved an average score of 81 out of 100. In contrast, students from general public junior high schools (SMP) recorded a significantly lower average score of 65. This gap was consistently observed across all four tested components: letter and harakat recognition, vocabulary identification, sentence-level comprehension, and short passage understanding. These findings indicate that students from Islamic-based schools entered with a more solid foundation in Arabic reading skills, whereas their counterparts from SMPs faced fundamental difficulties even in decoding basic texts.

This discrepancy was further supported by cross-tabulation analysis using SPSS, which revealed that prior Arabic learning background was strongly correlated with test performance across indicators. Students from MTs had fewer errors in harakat usage and demonstrated better fluency in reading comprehension sections. According to one supervising teacher, "The results show what we already observe in class, those from MTs read naturally, while others pause even at simple words."

Although this research employed a quantitative approach, additional field notes and teacher reflections helped contextualize the data. Teachers reported that the learning disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic played a crucial role in widening the gap. While some MTs managed to continue Arabic lessons through online diniyah programs, most SMPs did not offer structured Arabic instruction. One Arabic curriculum coordinator noted, "After school closures, MTs still had Qur'an and Arabic sessions online. SMPs had almost nothing in terms of Arabic, so their students arrived here with very limited skills." These contextual insights align with the statistical disparity, emphasizing how pandemic-era inequality in access to subject-specific education impacted student readiness.

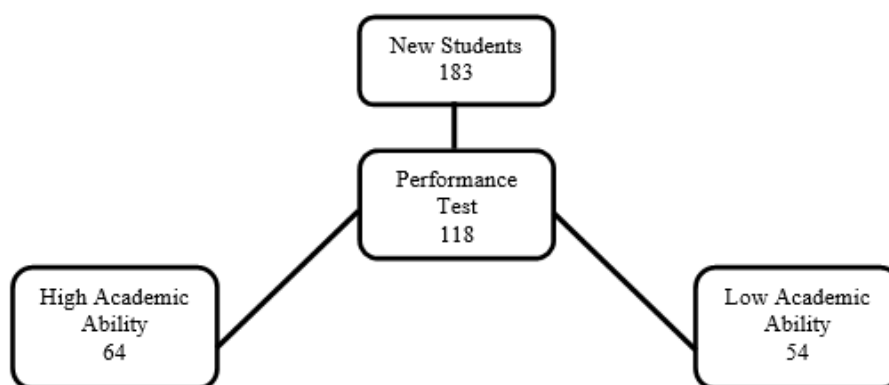


Figure 1. Chart of Performance Test in Arabic Reading Proficiency Based on Students' Educational Background

The implications of this finding are significant for program planning at the madrasah level. With such a wide range of reading proficiency among incoming students, Arabic teachers expressed the need for initial diagnostic mapping and differentiated instructional strategies. The test results served not only to measure student ability but also to inform possible remedial interventions. Some teachers recommended establishing bridging

programs or extra classes specifically for students without formal Arabic backgrounds. However, as noted in the school's internal report, such interventions were not yet systematized during the period of study.

Overall, this finding highlights the urgency of addressing foundational disparities in Arabic reading skills through structured, data-informed strategies. By identifying gaps early in the academic year using valid assessment instruments, the madrasah can take strategic steps to ensure that all students, regardless of their previous schooling, receive equitable opportunities to succeed in Arabic language learning.

Decline in Sentence- and Discourse-Level Reading Comprehension Post-Pandemic

Classroom observations conducted during early Arabic reading sessions revealed a consistent pattern in students' reading behaviors. Most students showed a high level of automaticity in recognizing Arabic letters and correctly applying harakat, aligning with the previously recorded 84% decoding accuracy. Their confidence appeared stable when reading isolated words or syllables, indicating that the technical aspect of reading phonetic decoding remained relatively intact despite the disruptions caused by pandemic-era learning. Teachers noted that students generally completed letter-level and short-word reading tasks fluently and with minimal hesitation, particularly during the initial drills and guided reading activities.

However, significant difficulties emerged when students were asked to extract meaning from complete sentences or short Arabic passages. In one observed session, a prose excerpt was selected from a classical text emphasizing the virtues of seeking knowledge, a theme deemed familiar to students. Despite this contextual familiarity, fewer than 40% of students were able to articulate the meaning of the sentences, and less than 25% grasped the overall message of the short passage. Many appeared to decode individual words correctly, yet failed to integrate them into a coherent understanding. This gap between surface-level decoding and deeper comprehension highlights the enduring impact of pandemic-induced learning loss, particularly in higher-order reading skills such as contextual interpretation and inferencing.

Table 1. Items of Assessment of Decline in Sentence- and Discourse-Level Reading Comprehension Post-Pandemic

Score	Tartil	Punctuation	Fluent	Tajweed
100	Calm and/or the speed is standard	Exactly all	Pronunciation right all	The Law of Tajweed is all right
90	Quiet and/or moderate	1-3 improper	1-3 improper	1-3 improper
80	Not quiet and/or slow/fast	4-6 improper	4-6 improper	4-6 improper
70	Not quiet and/or very slow/very fast	≥ 7 improper	≥ 7 improper	≥ 7 improper

The range of rating scales used is:

Score 86 - 100: High Academic Ability

Score 70 - 85: Low Academic Ability

When detailed, of the 118 students who took the performance test, 19 students scored 100, 16 students scored 98, 9 students scored 95, 8 students scored 93, 9 students scored received a score of 90, 3 students got a score of 88, 17 students got a score of 85, 10 students got a score of 83, 10 students got a score of 80, 6 students got a score of 78, 7 students got a score 75, and 4 students who got a score of 73. If the details are shown in a

chart shape, the chart is as follows.

Observational field notes consistently recorded that students would often complete phonetic reading drills with ease but falter when transitioning to comprehension tasks. These observational findings imply that while foundational phonological skills appear resilient to online instruction, comprehension, especially at sentence and discourse levels, requires rich interaction, scaffolding, and contextual immersion, all of which were limited during school closures. Teachers emphasized the urgent need for post-pandemic reading interventions that go beyond phonics, integrating tasks that require students to predict, infer, and reflect.

Low Curriculum Readiness in Accommodating Initial Diagnostic Results

Direct classroom observations and interviews with Arabic language teachers at the studied madrasah revealed a clear disconnect between the results of early diagnostic reading assessments and the instructional practices implemented afterward. Although the diagnostic data indicated that a significant number of incoming students struggled to reach the expected reading proficiency for Grade X, particularly in comprehension and sentence-level understanding, there was no evident adjustment made to the curriculum or instructional strategies in response. Teachers continued to follow the national Arabic syllabus rigidly, with little to no differentiation in the pacing or complexity of materials during the initial weeks of instruction.

Observational logs from Arabic classes during the first month of the academic year showed that lessons proceeded with the assumption of uniform student readiness. In one documented instance, a teacher introduced a lesson on jumlah ismiyyah using full Arabic texts from the standard textbook, despite more than half the students having scored below 70 in the diagnostic reading test. Several students displayed confusion, hesitated during reading tasks, and failed to respond to comprehension questions posed orally. The teacher did not provide scaffolding or adapted materials but continued with the pre-set lesson plan. One note read: "The students appeared disengaged; many were flipping back to earlier pages for vocabulary help, yet no support materials or pre-teaching of vocabulary were provided."

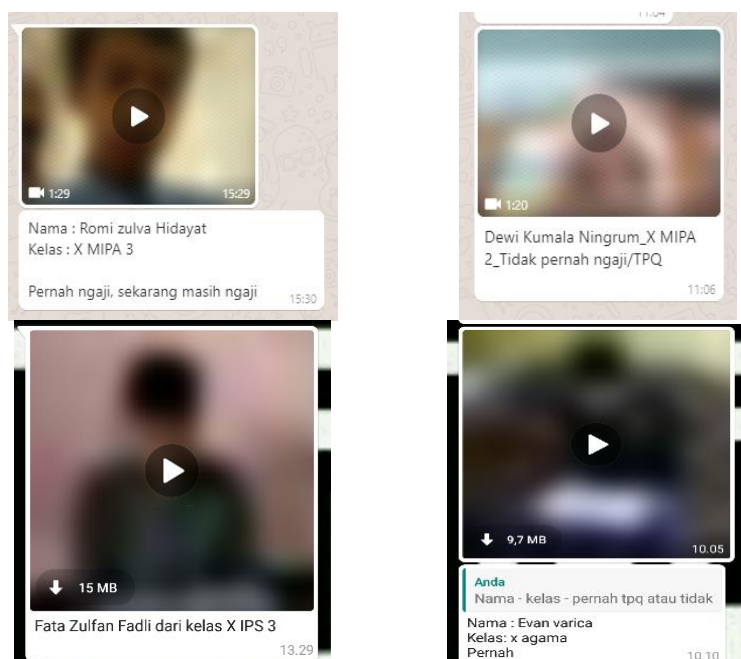


Figure 2. Half of the Performance Test Documentation

Further interviews reinforced these observations from Figure 2 above. When asked about curriculum flexibility, one Arabic teacher stated, “Kami memang tahu kemampuan membaca siswa masih banyak yang rendah, tapi karena tidak ada modul khusus atau kebijakan madrasah, kami tetap harus mengikuti jadwal buku ajar dan target kurikulum.” This suggests that although teachers are aware of the challenges, they are constrained by structural and policy-level limitations. There is no institutionalized protocol to translate diagnostic data into responsive teaching plans, such as tiered modules, remedial groups, or modified assessments. Besides, for female students who are menstruating and are prohibited from reading the Qur'an, a special Arabic text has been chosen instead, which is taken from the prose of *Mawlidul Barzanji* by Syekh Ja'far bin Hasan al-Barzanji. The text is the 13th topic, which contains information about anyone who is classified as *assabiqun al-awwalun*, or the first people to convert to Islam.

Discussion

This study presents empirical evidence on the challenges of Arabic reading comprehension among new students at an Islamic senior high school in the post-pandemic context by analyzing three core findings: (1) the disparity in reading proficiency based on students' educational background, (2) the decline in higher-order reading comprehension, and (3) the absence of institutional response to diagnostic results. These findings collectively uncover the intersection of prior learning exposure, cognitive disruption caused by pandemic-era instruction, and the critical need for responsive pedagogical strategies in Arabic language education.

First, the proficiency gap between students from Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) and those from general junior high schools (SMP) reflects a structural inequality that significantly influences student readiness. Quantitative results show that MTs graduates, particularly those who had diniyah or tahfidz backgrounds, performed better across decoding and comprehension tasks, while SMP graduates struggled even with basic phonological tasks. This echoes prior research that highlights how religious-based schooling environments tend to provide more consistent Arabic language exposure (Alkadhi et al., 2020; Layes, 2022). Teacher interviews confirmed that these differences were compounded by the pandemic, which saw MTs sustaining Arabic instruction through online diniyah classes, whereas SMPs often discontinued Arabic subjects altogether. The findings illustrate how students' past educational trajectories become strong predictors of future performance, reinforcing the importance of curriculum continuity and exposure in formative years.

The second finding reveals a post-pandemic learning loss concentrated in higher-order comprehension abilities. While the majority of students retained decoding skills evident from the 84% accuracy in letter and harakat recognition, only 38% could understand sentence-level meaning, and fewer than 25% could comprehend short passages. Observational data supported this, as students exhibited fluency in pronunciation but struggled with extracting meaning from texts, even when the content was thematically familiar (e.g., prose on the virtue of knowledge). This aligns with global literature on pandemic learning disruptions, which suggests that cognitive and inferential skills are more difficult to sustain without interactive and scaffolded instruction (El-Mneizel et al., 2023; González-Valenzuela et al., 2023; Langsten et al., 2022). In the context of Arabic as a second language, this distinction is critical, as comprehension is not merely

linguistic but also cultural and inferential, requiring continuous and guided practice.

The third major finding concerns the disconnect between assessment and instructional adaptation. Despite clear diagnostic evidence identifying a substantial group of students with low reading proficiency, no structured remediation or differentiated instruction was implemented at the school level (Basahel et al., 2022; Egerhag et al., 2023; Ismail et al., 2023). While the Arabic department made procedural accommodations, such as providing Barzanji text for menstruating female students, there was no pedagogical adjustment to address comprehension gaps. Teachers acknowledged the need for leveling classes or bridging programs but cited institutional constraints and rigid curriculum structures as obstacles. This disconnect reflects a broader issue in post-pandemic recovery: schools may collect data but lack the mechanisms to respond to it effectively (Mansour, 2020; Sarid et al., 2022). In contrast, effective education systems utilize diagnostic results as the foundation for curriculum responsiveness, ensuring that learning loss is not merely identified but also remediated through structured intervention.

Thematically, the three findings converge on the urgent need for adaptive, equity-driven, and data-informed approaches in Arabic instruction at the secondary Islamic level. Bridging programs tailored for students with no prior Arabic exposure, comprehension-based instructional design, and institutional mechanisms for data utilization must become central to the curriculum framework. The findings challenge the notion that decoding proficiency alone is a sufficient indicator of reading success, emphasizing instead the importance of comprehension as the ultimate goal of literacy education.

In conclusion, this study contributes both to the empirical understanding of Arabic reading challenges in post-pandemic Islamic schooling and to the conceptual discourse on equitable language instruction. It underscores the importance of curriculum responsiveness, the strategic use of diagnostic data, and the integration of comprehension-oriented pedagogy in overcoming educational disruptions. These insights provide a model for Islamic schools seeking to rebuild and reimagine Arabic education in a way that is inclusive, cognitively robust, and aligned with students' diverse learning trajectories.

CCONCLUSION / الخلاصة

The findings of this study reveal that Arabic reading proficiency among new students in Islamic senior high schools during the pandemic era is marked by a preserved ability in basic decoding, such as recognizing letters and applying harakat, while comprehension at the sentence and discourse levels significantly declined, especially among students from non-madrasah backgrounds. This highlights the lasting impact of unequal exposure to Arabic instruction and disrupted cognitive development during remote learning. The key lesson is that while surface-level fluency may endure, deeper comprehension skills require consistent, scaffolded instruction, which was lacking during the pandemic. Scientifically, this study contributes to Arabic language education by emphasizing the need for diagnostic-based, comprehension-oriented pedagogy and offers insights into how instructional inequities manifest in post-pandemic learning contexts. However, the research is limited to a single institution and one testing phase, indicating a gap in understanding the longitudinal progression of reading skills and the effectiveness of remediation strategies, which future studies should address through broader and more sustained data collection.

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