

The Arabic Literature Curricula Prescribed for Students of Malaysian Religious Secondary Schools: An Analytical and Critical Study

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Abstract

The Arabic literature curricula adopted in Malaysian religious secondary schools play a central role in developing students' linguistic appreciation and encouraging a genuine interest in the Arabic language. Recognising this importance, the present study provides an analytical and critical review of these curricula, assessing their suitability for non-native speakers. The study aims to highlight the significance of Arabic literature education, clarify standards for the teaching of rhetoric, and outline appropriate criteria for designing curricula tailored to the needs of Malaysian students studying Arabic as a foreign language. Key research questions address the educational value of Arabic literature, the standards for instruction to non-native speakers, and essential benchmarks for effective curricular design. This research identifies the principal challenge as determining how closely the existing literature curricula align with established standards for teaching Arabic to non-native learners. Employing an analytical and critical approach, the study examines the selected literary materials, teaching strategies, and cultural relevance of the curricula. The findings reveal that while current curricula provide meaningful educational benefits, they require further refinement to enhance their accessibility and suitability for Malaysian learners. Simplifying content and improving contextual adaptation are recommended to make the learning experience more engaging without sacrificing ties to Arab literary and cultural traditions. The study concludes that ongoing curriculum development is essential to maintaining a balance among authenticity, educational rigour, and the unique needs of students in Malaysia, thereby optimising the outcomes of Arabic literature education in religious secondary schools.

Keywords: Arabic Literature, Curricula, Religious Education, Schools

Introduction

Arabic literature is a core component of Arabic instruction in Malaysian religious schools. It serves as a tool that helps students appreciate the beauty of the language while familiarising

themselves with Islamic heritage and its civilizational values. Malaysia has long emphasised Arabic language education, particularly in religious secondary schools, which aim to cultivate a conscious Islamic identity and proficiency in the language of the Qur'an. The overarching goal is to reinforce Islamic identity and equip students with the skills to comprehend both religious and literary texts.

The significance of teaching literature extends beyond linguistic competence; it encompasses the formation of values, the refinement of aesthetic taste, and the deepening of cultural and religious belonging. Therefore, studying the curricula of Arabic literature prescribed in Malaysian religious secondary schools provides an essential lens for understanding the philosophy of religious education in the country and its ability to balance linguistic authenticity with contemporary pedagogical needs. This underscores the importance of analysing and critically evaluating these curricula to determine their effectiveness in harmonising tradition with modernity and in achieving cognitive and skill-based objectives.

Significance of the Study

This study is essential because literature curricula serve as a vital tool for developing Arabic language proficiency and critical thinking skills among students in Malaysian religious secondary schools. Furthermore, analysing these curricula helps assess their alignment with modern educational quality standards. This research also enriches empirical studies on Arabic language curricula in Malaysian schools, an area that still requires in-depth scholarly attention.

Research Problem

Teaching Arabic literature in Malaysian religious schools forms a fundamental pillar of the curriculum, contributing to the construction of students' cultural and spiritual identity. Through their curricula, Malaysian religious secondary schools provide a dynamic environment for teaching Arabic literature within an Islamic framework, aiming to enhance linguistic and rhetorical skills and foster Islamic values among students.

At the same time, the Arabic literature curriculum faces several challenges, particularly the continued reliance on traditional text-based analysis, which does not adequately address the educational needs of students learning Arabic as a second language. This raises a critical question regarding the suitability of these curricula for non-native Arabic speakers and their ability to achieve educational and pedagogical objectives within Malaysia's specific cultural and linguistic context.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Identify the nature of the Arabic literature curricula prescribed for students in Malaysian religious secondary schools and analyse their content.
2. Evaluate the appropriateness of these curricula for students in terms of content, objectives, and teaching methods.
3. Propose strategies to develop these curricula in alignment with the needs of Malaysian religious education.

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of the Arabic literature curricula in Malaysian religious secondary schools?
2. To what extent are these curricula appropriate for students in terms of content, objectives, and teaching methods?
3. How can Arabic literature curricula be developed to better meet learners' needs?

Research Methodology

This study employs an integrative approach combining descriptive, analytical, and critical methods. The researcher describes the prescribed literature curricula, analyses their content, and evaluates them against established scientific and educational criteria.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on the Arabic literature and rhetoric textbook prescribed for fifth-year students in Malaysian religious secondary schools.

Arabic literature curricula in Malaysian religious secondary schools serve as a bridge between Arabic and Islamic heritage, fostering linguistic and value-based sensibilities among students. However, their development still requires critical review to balance tradition with modernity and to align the demands of religious education with the characteristics of Malaysian learners. This highlights the importance of the necessary analysis undertaken in this study.

Concept of Literature

In the linguistic sense, literature refers to the refinement of the soul and the beautification of speech and action. Terminologically, it is defined as "*the beautiful expression of a human experience in an influential language*" (Abdu, 2010). Literature encompasses poetry and prose, along with the aesthetic and intellectual values associated with them. Its teaching aims to cultivate linguistic taste in learners, introduce them to the nation's cultural heritage, and enhance their ability to express themselves in a refined and proper language.

Objectives of Teaching Arabic Literature

The teaching of literature in Malaysian religious schools seeks to achieve several objectives, most notably:

1. Developing students' linguistic and aesthetic sensibilities.
2. Introducing students to Arabic and Islamic literary heritage and linking it to ethical values.
3. Training students in literary analysis and critical thinking.
4. Enhancing students' oral and written expression in formal, eloquent Arabic.

Educators emphasise that literature instruction should go beyond rote memorisation and recitation to encompass comprehension, analysis, and artistic appreciation (Abdelrahman, 2020).

Curricula in Malaysian Religious Education

Religious education in Malaysia has undergone significant development since the early twentieth century. It began with *katateeb* and *pondok* schools, later evolving into a formalised system under state supervision. The Malaysian government established specialised

departments for religious education, such as the Department of Islamic Development (JAKIM), which collaborates with the Ministry of Education to design religious curricula.

The prescribed curricula in religious secondary schools include core subjects such as Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*), Hadith, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), Arabic language, literature, and rhetoric. These curricula aim to achieve proficiency in Arabic comprehension and expression, reinforce Islamic values through literary texts, and develop rhetorical skills for analysing Qur'anic and literary texts. Malaysian curricula have been influenced by Al-Azhar curricula in Egypt regarding subject division and content; however, in recent years, adjustments have been made to better align with the Malaysian linguistic and cultural context (Yunus, 2019).

Modern Educational Theories in Literature Teaching

Contemporary educational theories stress the necessity of shifting from rote learning to comprehension, critical thinking, and creativity. Several pedagogical approaches are particularly relevant in literature teaching:

1. Interactive Approach: Encourages students to participate in analysing texts, discussing them, and deriving their meanings.
2. Cultural Approach: Connects literary texts to the society's culture, history, and identity.
3. Aesthetic Approach: Aims to develop literary sensibilities and the ability to appreciate texts.
4. Communicative Approach: Utilises literature to enhance oral and written language communication skills.

Educational studies have shown that integrating these approaches into literature teaching increases curricular effectiveness and student engagement (Al-Mansouri, 2018).

Religious Education in Malaysia and the Role of Literature

Religious education is a foundational pillar of Malaysia's educational system, provided through public and private schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and JAKIM. This form of education aims to prepare a generation proficient in Arabic and capable of understanding Islamic sources in their original languages.

Secondary religious curricula include core subjects such as the Qur'an, Hadith, jurisprudence, and Arabic language, with literature constituting an integral component of the Arabic syllabus. Malaysian literature curricula have been influenced by Al-Azhar in terms of structure and content, while incorporating modifications to accommodate the Malaysian cultural context (Yunus, 2019).

The prescribed literature textbooks include selected poetic and prose texts from the classical Arabic heritage, including examples of pre-Islamic, Islamic, and Umayyad poetry, as well as moral and religious texts.

Challenges Facing Arabic Literature Curricula in Malaysian Religious Schools

Arabic literature curricula in Malaysian religious education face several challenges, notably:

- a) The difficulty of literary texts written in high formal Arabic may not align with beginner learners' proficiency levels.
- b) A lack of practical activities that enable students to apply literary language skills.

- c) The dominance of rote memorisation over analysis and aesthetic appreciation.
- d) Insufficient pedagogical training among some teachers regarding modern methods of literature instruction.

These challenges highlight the need for a critical review of these curricula, which this study seeks to address through an applied study of one of them, as discussed in the following chapter.

Adab wa Balāghah (Arabic Literature and Rhetoric) for Fifth-Year Secondary Students: Overview and Critical Analysis

The textbook *Adab wa Balāghah* (Tingkatan 5) is one of the most important literature courses in Malaysian religious secondary schools. It is published by the Malaysian Ministry of Education as part of the Integrated Religious Curriculum (*Kurikulum Bersepadu Dini*), with its first edition released in 2018. This textbook targets fifth-year students (equivalent to the third year of secondary school in some Arab countries), where Arabic literature is taught in close connection with rhetoric, literary criticism, and language.

The textbook is founded on an educational vision that seeks to integrate religious education with Arabic literature, enabling Malaysian Muslim students to understand and appreciate classical Arabic texts while connecting them to higher Islamic values. It exemplifies Malaysian religious literature curricula by combining linguistic and rhetorical approaches with moral and ethical education.

This chapter aims to provide a descriptive and critical analysis of the textbook's content, including its methodology for selecting texts, its presentation, its rhetorical and intellectual foundations, and an evaluation of its artistic and pedagogical quality in light of modern approaches to literature teaching.

Textbook Overview

Adab wa Balāghah (Tingkatan 5), published by the Malaysian Ministry of Education in 2018, is a core component of the Integrated Religious Curriculum for religious secondary schools. The textbook is designed to teach Arabic literature and rhetoric to Malaysian students learning Arabic as a second or religious language rather than as a mother tongue. Consequently, evaluating this textbook from the perspective of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers is essential to assess its alignment with accepted pedagogical and scientific standards in Arabic language textbooks.

This analysis follows criteria established by several researchers in Arabic language education (Anis, 2016; Al-Otaibi, 2018; Saleh, 2021), including:

- a) Physical design and layout
- b) Structural organization
- c) Linguistic and literary content
- d) Pedagogical methodology
- e) Activities and assessment
- f) Cultural and religious values
- g) Linguistic and communicative aspects

Physical Design and Layout

General Design and Cover: The cover is simple, dominated by dark blue and Islamic decorative elements.

Visual identity: The colours suit the religious character of the schools, but lack the visual appeal and contrast that could engage younger or intermediate learners.

Title: Presented in clear Arabic script, with translations in English and Malay on the back cover, accommodating the multilingual Malaysian environment.

Internal Layout and Visual Elements

- a) Font size: Appropriate for reading, using a clear Arabic Naskh font.
- b) Margins: Balanced, with colour-coded headings.
- c) Images and illustrations: The textbook contains very few images, mostly of traditional Arabic environments (e.g., deserts or old mosques). Educational illustrations are nearly absent, despite their usefulness for visual comprehension, especially for non-native Arabic speakers.

The artistic design is conservative and traditional, ensuring clarity but lacking modern language textbook features such as interactive visuals, icons, or mind maps.

Use of Colour: Multiple colours (blue, grey, light green) are used, with light differentiation of headings. However, colours are not used pedagogically (e.g., to distinguish vocabulary or clarify grammatical or rhetorical structures). Thus, colour use provides clarity but lacks a structured educational strategy to reinforce visual concepts, as seen in Arabic textbooks for non-native speakers (Saleh, 2021).

Descriptive Analysis of Content

Structural Organization

The textbook contains ten lessons, five in poetry and five in prose. An introduction, vocabulary, ideas, rhetorical imagery, and exercises precede each text. The texts represent primary historical stages of Arabic literature, arranged logically in chronological order. The authors adhered to the historical progression from pre-Islamic to modern literature, reflecting a traditional approach (Mohammed Noor Amin et al., 2018).

Presentation Method

Each unit follows a consistent structure:

- a) Fully vocalised literary text
- b) Brief author biography
- c) Explanation of vocabulary in Arabic and Malay
- d) Summary of main ideas
- e) Analysis of rhetorical devices (simile, metaphor, metonymy, etc.)
- f) Linguistic and expressive exercises
- g) Individual and group activities aligned with 21st-century skills (PAK21)

This organisational structure shows pedagogical clarity and aligns with modern curricular objectives that diversify learning styles. However, the content remains traditional, presenting literature primarily for explanation and analysis rather than discussion or critique.

Language and Vocabulary

The textbook uses simplified formal Arabic, with translations of difficult words into Malay. This approach balances maintaining Arabic authenticity with students' linguistic level. The lexical range is rich but not applied in a progressive or functional way, as recommended in Arabic language-teaching standards (Anis, 2016).

Critical Analysis of Content

Historical Method in Literature Presentation: The textbook arranges texts according to literary eras, following the *historical method*. While this method effectively illustrates the evolution of poetry and prose, it lacks thematic or intellectual cohesion. No unit connects the texts conceptually or artistically beyond chronological sequencing.

Evaluation: Internal organisation is systematic, but the progression from simple to complex vocabulary is not considered. Students encounter linguistically complex pre-Islamic texts (e.g., Imru' al-Qais) without adequate linguistic scaffolding. The historical method emphasises memorisation of literary facts without developing comparative or analytical skills (Al-Juwaini, 2005).

Cognitive and Ethical Objectives: Each text includes a cognitive objective (understanding and analysing imagery) and a moral objective (justice, heroism, faith). However, communicative language objectives are largely absent; there are few activities to develop writing or speaking skills. Ethical and religious objectives are clear, but linguistic and skill-based objectives are limited.

Predominant Values in Selected Texts: Selected texts emphasise clear Islamic and ethical values, such as:

- a) Faith in God and steadfastness (poem by Hassan ibn Thabit)
- b) Justice and mercy (praise of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz)
- c) Heroism and sacrifice (praise of Sayf al-Dawla)
- d) Belief in life and freedom (Abu al-Qasim al-Shabi)

This values-oriented approach reflects the nature of Malaysian religious curricula, which integrate literary knowledge with faith-based education. Critically, it may weaken aesthetic and critical sensibilities, as students learn moral judgment more than literary appreciation.

Educational Activities and Assessment: The textbook includes modern 21st-century skills (PAK21) activities, such as:

- a) Collaborative learning
- b) Group discussion
- c) Note-taking and commentary
- d) Student presentations (*Gallery Walk*)

These activities promote classroom engagement; however, their effectiveness depends on teacher training and the ability to shift from rote teaching to interaction. The issue lies not in activity design but in text selection, which may not easily support individual creativity.

Each unit concludes with a simple assessment focusing on comprehension and general meaning rather than higher-order thinking or literary criticism. The evaluation is traditional and needs to be developed to assess critical and creative understanding rather than mere comprehension.

Table 1

Summary Table of Evaluation Criteria

Criterion	Level	Notes
Physical Design & Layout	Moderate	Traditional in design and colors
Curriculum Approach	Good	Emphasizes analysis over communication
Language & Vocabulary	Good	Formal Arabic, but above student level
Progression & Integration	Weak	Sudden linguistic leaps
Activities & Assessment	Moderate	Formative, does not assess creativity
Integration of Local Culture	Absent	—
Integration of Four Skills	Weak	Few practical activities for creative writing & critical thinking
Attention to Islamic Values	Excellent	Clearly reinforces Islamic ethics

Conclusion

The present study yielded several important conclusions regarding the status and future development of Arabic literature curricula in Malaysian religious secondary schools. These curricula were found to constitute a pioneering educational effort that actively contributes to the preservation of the Arabic language and the promotion of Islamic values among students. Despite their strengths, the curricula remain in need of further development, especially in line with contemporary educational trends that prioritise the cultivation of critical and creative thinking skills. The renewal and enhancement of these curricula should not be viewed as a mere formality but as an essential step toward achieving a dynamic literary education. Such an approach would better engage students with the realities of their lived experiences while faithfully preserving the linguistic and cultural heritage intrinsic to Arabic literature.

In addition, analysis indicates that the literature curricula reflect a distinctive educational identity centred on serving the Arabic language and reinforcing Islamic values. However, there is still significant room for pedagogical advancement, particularly in balancing traditional content with modern educational practices. This calls for a thoughtful reconsideration of the selection of literary texts, the modernisation of teaching methodologies, and the improvement of assessment instruments. By making these tools more comprehensive and adaptable, literature instruction can become a genuinely effective medium for developing students' analytical, linguistic, and creative abilities.

Furthermore, the textbook "Adab wa Balāghah," used for fifth-year students, exemplifies the traditional, conservative approach to teaching Arabic literature within the Asian Islamic context. While the textbook has succeeded in reinforcing both religious and linguistic identity

among Malaysian students, it requires targeted pedagogical innovation to address the needs of modern learners. Today's students engage with literature in diverse ways, textually, digitally, and culturally, which necessitates a more flexible and interactive curricular design.

Ultimately, the study underscores the critical importance of renewing Arabic literature curricula in Malaysia. This renewal is vital not only for integrating tradition and modernity but also for harmonising aesthetic appreciation with practical utility and motivating creativity and innovation in educational pursuits.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several comprehensive recommendations are proposed to improve the effectiveness and relevance of Arabic literature curricula in Malaysian religious secondary schools. Firstly, it is imperative to enrich the content of the literature curricula by adopting more robust, inclusive criteria for selecting literary texts. Rather than limiting text selection to ethical or moral considerations, future curricula should emphasise the artistic and literary value of works, thereby offering students exposure to a broader range of genres and styles within the Arabic literary tradition. This adjustment will not only deepen students' appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the Arabic language but also foster higher-order thinking skills through the interpretation and analysis of nuanced literary texts. Moreover, the integration of multimedia resources, such as visual and audio presentations, into lesson plans is highly encouraged. Utilising various media will transform the learning process into a more engaging and interactive experience, clarifying complex stylistic or thematic elements in texts and making literature more accessible and enjoyable for contemporary learners.

Secondly, it is recommended to enhance and diversify the existing assessment tools so that they transcend conventional examinations focused solely on reproducing factual knowledge. Assessment should incorporate opportunities for personal creativity and expression, such as composing original poetry, literary essays, or creative responses to literary prompts. This approach will not only assess students' understanding of literary works but also encourage individual expression and cultivate creative talents, which are key goals in modern educational theory. The inclusion of creative elements in evaluation acknowledges the multifaceted nature of literary study. It better prepares students for both academic pursuits and real-world applications of language and literary skills.

Finally, the study underscores the critical need for the continuous professional development of teachers who deliver Arabic literature instruction. It is recommended to design and implement specialised training courses that introduce modern pedagogical techniques, innovative educational strategies, and the latest methodologies for teaching Arabic literature. Such courses should cover topics including interactive teaching practices, effective integration of technology, strategies for fostering student engagement, and current trends in literature education. By equipping educators with these advanced skills and knowledge, institutions can ensure that teachers remain adaptable and respond effectively to students' evolving needs, thereby maximising the impact of the literature curriculum.

Collectively, implementing these recommendations is expected to result in a more vibrant, relevant, and student-centred Arabic literature curriculum that harmonises tradition with

innovation and supports the holistic development of learners in Malaysia's religious educational settings.

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