

Teaching and Studying Arabic Literature: Motivations, Significance, and Instructional Methods (A Field Study in Al-Mahmoud Library, Kedah, Malaysia, as a Model)

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Abstract

Arabic literature occupies a distinctive position in Arabic-language education because it brings together linguistic competence, cultural knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, intellectual development, and engagement with the historical experience of Arabic-speaking societies. However, teaching Arabic literature in non-Arab educational environments may remain dominated by translation, explanation, memorisation, and grammar-oriented exercises, limiting students' opportunities to engage with literary texts as artistic and intellectual works. This study examines the motivations for studying Arabic literature, its educational and humanistic significance, and the pedagogical approaches relevant to non-native Arabic learners, with particular attention to Islamic educational settings in Malaysia. Drawing on a descriptive-analytical reading of classical and modern Arabic literary and pedagogical scholarship, the study synthesises four dimensions: the conceptual foundations of adab, the significance of literary study, the principal motivations and objectives of learning literature, and existing instructional approaches. The analysis indicates that Arabic literature can support language development, aesthetic taste, critical thinking, cultural understanding, moral reflection, and engagement with Islamic intellectual heritage. It also shows that a predominantly direct-instruction model may underuse these functions when literary texts are treated mainly as sources of vocabulary and grammatical structures. For non-Arab learners, the study therefore proposes a contextualised pedagogical framework combining guided close reading, linguistic scaffolding, interactive discussion, comparative activities, reflective response, and appropriate use of digital resources. The framework seeks to preserve the linguistic and cultural value of the classical heritage while making literary learning more accessible, dialogic, and relevant to contemporary learners.

Keywords: Arabic Literature, Teaching Arabic Literature, Non-Native Arabic Learners, Literary Pedagogy, Literary Appreciation, Arabic Rhetoric, Malaysia

Introduction

Arabic literature is both a body of artistic expression and a major repository of linguistic, cultural, intellectual, and historical knowledge. Its texts preserve experiences, ideas, values, rhetorical practices, and representations of social life across different periods. For learners of Arabic, literature consequently offers more than exposure to vocabulary and grammatical structures: it provides a context in which language is encountered as meaningful discourse shaped by imagination, emotion, argument, and cultural memory. (Al-Fākhūrī, 1978; Al-Jundī, n.d.)

The educational value of literature is particularly relevant in contexts where Arabic is learned as a non-native language. Students in Malaysian Islamic institutions may encounter Arabic primarily through religious texts, classroom instruction, and formal learning. Their limited exposure to Arabic in everyday conversation can make literary language appear distant, difficult, or overly dependent on unfamiliar vocabulary. The source study identifies precisely this gap between formal al-fuṣḥā taught in educational settings and the linguistic reality of learners who do not routinely use Arabic outside the classroom. (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020; Ṭaʿīmah, n.d.)

Traditional approaches to literary instruction often rely on reading a text, explaining vocabulary, identifying rhetorical devices, translating passages, and requiring students to memorise or summarise the material. Such practices can provide useful linguistic scaffolding, especially for learners with limited proficiency, but they may also reduce literature to an instrument for grammar and vocabulary instruction. The source study explicitly identifies this tension and argues for pedagogies that restore aesthetic appreciation, critical analysis, dialogue, and emotional engagement. (Aḥmad, 1979; Al-Jambalāṭī & Al-Tūnisī, n.d.; Samak, 1979)

This article therefore addresses four questions: (1) What is meant by Arabic literature and what are its principal educational functions? (2) Why do learners study Arabic literature, particularly in Islamic and non-Arab contexts? (3) What limitations characterise traditional approaches to literary instruction? (4) What pedagogical framework can better integrate linguistic, aesthetic, cultural, critical, and affective objectives?

The study aims to synthesise the conceptual and pedagogical arguments contained in the source material and to translate them into a coherent academic framework for teaching Arabic literature to non-native learners. The article is especially attentive to Malaysian Islamic educational settings while recognising that the proposed principles may have wider relevance for Arabic-language education. (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020; Ṭaʿīmah, n.d.)

Conceptual Foundations of Arabic Literature

The Linguistic Meaning of Adab

The Arabic term *adab* has undergone semantic development. Ibn Manẓūr's discussion in *Lisān al-ʿArab* connects *adab* with refinement, moral cultivation, commendable conduct, and education. The semantic field therefore extends beyond literary production to include

personal formation and behavioural refinement. The source material emphasises this relationship between adab and tarbiyah, etiquette, and intellectual cultivation. (Ibn Manẓūr, n.d.; Ḍayf, n.d.; Al-Rāfiʿī, n.d.)

Shawqī Ḍayf similarly explains that the meaning of adab developed alongside changes in Arab social life, moving from an early emphasis on moral refinement toward broader intellectual and literary meanings. Al-Rāfiʿī likewise discusses historical phases in the term's semantic development. These observations matter pedagogically because they remind educators that Arabic literature is historically connected to cultivating language, character, taste, and intellectual formation. (Ḍayf, n.d.; Al-Rāfiʿī, n.d.)

Terminological Understanding of Arabic Literature

Modern definitions cited in the source study emphasise literature's artistic and expressive dimensions. Ḥannā al-Fākhūrī defines literature through written works in which human thought is manifested through creative composition. At the same time, ʿAbd al-Munʿim Khafājī emphasises beautiful poetry and eloquent prose that move the soul and awaken emotion. Rushdī Ṭaʿīmah approaches literary texts as sources from which the characteristics of writing in particular historical periods can be inferred. (Al-Fākhūrī, 1978; Khafājī, 1972; Ṭaʿīmah, n.d.)

Taken together, these definitions suggest that Arabic literature is artistic expression in Arabic that integrates language, style, imagination, thought, and human experience. Literary study therefore cannot be reduced to memorisation. It should develop linguistic capability while also cultivating aesthetic judgment, interpretation, intellectual curiosity, and sensitivity to the cultural contexts in which texts were produced. (Al-Fākhūrī, 1978; Khafājī, 1972; Ṭaʿīmah, n.d.)

Significance of Studying Arabic Literature

Linguistic and Communicative Development

Literary texts expose learners to vocabulary, syntax, morphology, rhetorical structures, and patterns of expression that may not appear with the same richness in ordinary instructional dialogues. The source study notes that literary and rhetorical texts have historically served speakers seeking accuracy in expression and provided models for orators, writers, and public communicators. (Aḥmad, 1979; Samak, 1979)

For learners of Arabic as a second or additional language, literature can consequently function as a high-level linguistic resource. However, the pedagogical objective should not be the accumulation of difficult vocabulary alone. Learners need opportunities to infer meaning from context, observe stylistic choices, paraphrase passages, discuss interpretations, and reuse literary language in appropriate communicative situations. (Ṭaʿīmah, n.d.; Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020)

Cultural and Civilizational Understanding

Literature records a people's intellectual and social experience. The source material describes literature as a mirror of life and as an expression of a nation's emotions, thoughts, visions, and values. Studying Arabic literature therefore introduces learners to historical modes of thought and to the cultural worlds represented in Arabic texts. (Al-Jundī, n.d.; Al-Zayyāt, n.d.) For Malaysian learners, this dimension is particularly relevant because Arabic is closely connected with Islamic religious learning. Literary study can help students develop the

cultural competence needed to approach later religious, legal, historical, and intellectual texts. The source study consequently identifies the development of cultural self-sufficiency and the bridging of Arab and Malay values as important objectives in non-Arab environments. (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020; Ṭa'imah, n.d.)

Intellectual and Critical Development

Literature presents students with ambiguity, perspective, argument, symbolism, narrative situations, and competing interpretations. These features create opportunities for critical thinking. The source material identifies a critical and analytical objective: evaluating poems, orations, and epistles through rhetorical and literary analysis. (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020; Al-Ḥakīm, n.d.)

A contemporary classroom can extend this objective by asking students to justify interpretations with textual evidence, compare alternative readings, identify assumptions, and distinguish between description and evaluation. In this way, literary study becomes an exercise in disciplined interpretation rather than a reproduction of predetermined teacher explanations.

Aesthetic and Affective Development

The source study gives considerable attention to the affective objective of literary learning. Enjoyment of Arabic literature, sensitivity to musicality and imagery, and engagement with emotionally meaningful texts can contribute to psychological comfort and the development of literary taste. (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020). This dimension is frequently weakened when students encounter literature exclusively through translation and examination-oriented memorisation. A balanced pedagogy should therefore allow learners to hear literary language, experience rhythm and imagery, respond personally to texts, and discuss how particular linguistic choices create emotional effects.

Religious and Devotional Significance

The study also identifies a religious motivation for learning Arabic. The Arabic language sciences developed in close relation to the need to understand the Qur'an, its eloquence, its meanings, and its rhetorical features. Knowledge of Arabic rhetoric consequently became connected with reflection on Qur'anic i'jāz and the broader Islamic intellectual tradition. In Islamic educational settings, this relationship can strengthen students' motivation to study Arabic. Nevertheless, the pedagogical presentation should distinguish literary analysis from theological conclusions and should provide students with appropriate linguistic and historical tools. This allows religious motivation to complement rather than replace academic literary inquiry. (Al-'Askarī, n.d.; Maṭlūb, n.d.).

Motivations and Objectives for Studying Arabic Literature

Instructional and Educational Motivation

The first major motivation is educational: literature provides models of accurate, eloquent, and effective Arabic expression. Historically, rhetorical and literary knowledge was associated with the ability to speak, write, argue, and communicate persuasively. For learners, literary texts can therefore serve as advanced models through which they encounter vocabulary, structures, stylistic patterns, and rhetorical choices in meaningful contexts. (Al-Jambalāṭī & Al-Tūnisī, n.d.; Aḥmad, 1979).

Religious Motivation

In Muslim educational contexts, Arabic literature can be motivated by the desire to understand the language of the Qur'an, Prophetic traditions, and classical Islamic scholarship. The source material links rhetorical study to appreciating Qur'anic eloquence and the intellectual tradition surrounding i'jāz. This motivation is particularly relevant to institutions whose Arabic curriculum is closely connected to Islamic studies. (Al-'Askarī, n.d.; Maṭlūb, n.d.).

Critical and Analytical Motivation

Literature also provides a structured environment for developing interpretive judgment. Students learn to distinguish strong from weak expression, identify literary devices, examine the relationship between form and meaning, and evaluate texts within historical and stylistic contexts. This objective transforms the learner from a passive recipient into an active reader. (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020; Al-Ḥakīm, n.d.).

Affective and Aesthetic Motivation

The affective objective involves enjoying literature, developing artistic sensitivity, appreciating imagery and musicality, and cultivating a sustained interest in Arabic cultural expression. This motivation is especially important for maintaining learner engagement because students are more likely to continue studying a difficult language when they experience intellectual and emotional reward from the texts. (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020).

Challenges in Teaching Arabic Literature to Non-Native Learners*Linguistic Distance and Limited Exposure*

Non-native learners may encounter literary vocabulary, syntactic structures, rhetorical devices, and historical references that are absent from their everyday linguistic environment. The source study specifically identifies the gap between formal al-fuṣḥā and learners who do not use Arabic in daily conversation. This gap can make literature appear inaccessible even when students possess a basic command of Arabic. (Ṭa'īmah, n.d.; Qabāwah, 1999).

Dominance of Translation, Memorisation, and Explanation

Direct instruction remains useful for clarifying difficult vocabulary and concepts, particularly at lower proficiency levels. The difficulty arises when it becomes the dominant mode of learning. A lesson organised almost entirely around teacher explanation, translation, and memorisation may leave little room for student interpretation, discussion, or aesthetic response. The source study identifies this as a major limitation of traditional practice. (Aḥmad, 1979; Samak, 1979).

Reduction of Literature to Grammar

The functional-linguistic approach uses literature to teach grammar and morphology. This can be effective for language acquisition because literary texts contain rich examples of structures, lexical items, and stylistic patterns. However, when the linguistic function becomes the only objective, the literary text loses its artistic status. Students may learn how a sentence is constructed without asking why the author constructed it in that particular way. (Aḥmad, 1979; Samak, 1979).

Complexity of Rhetorical Heritage

The source material draws on Sa'd Maşlūḥ's criticism of the historical narrowing of Arabic rhetoric and asks how literary studies can move beyond rigid historical frameworks while retaining the substance of the classical heritage. The pedagogical implication is not to abandon classical rhetoric, but to present it through clearer linguistic, stylistic, and contextual frameworks that allow contemporary learners to understand its analytical value. (Maşlūḥ, 2003).

Teacher, Curriculum, and Assessment Factors

Effective literary instruction depends not only on the method used during a lesson but also on teacher preparation, curriculum design, learner proficiency, institutional expectations, and assessment. If examinations reward memorisation of definitions and predetermined interpretations, teachers and students have limited incentives to engage in exploratory reading. Curriculum reform therefore needs corresponding changes in classroom practice and assessment. (Ṭa'īmah, n.d.; Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020).

Existing Pedagogical Approaches*Traditional Direct-Instruction Approach*

The traditional direct-instruction model typically involves reading the text, explaining vocabulary, identifying rhetorical features, translating or paraphrasing the passage, and requiring memorisation or summary. Its strengths include clarity, efficiency, and usefulness for learners who need substantial linguistic support. Its principal limitation is that students can become dependent on the teacher's interpretation. (Aḥmad, 1979; Samak, 1979).

Functional-Linguistic Approach

The functional-linguistic approach uses literary texts as sources for grammar, morphology, vocabulary, sentence formation, summarisation, and rhetorical exercises. It is valuable when the principal goal is language development. However, the source study warns that it can move away from aesthetic appreciation if literary texts are treated merely as raw linguistic material. (Aḥmad, 1979; Samak, 1979).

Toward an Integrated Approach

The limitations of the two approaches suggest integration rather than simple rejection. Linguistic explanation remains necessary, particularly for non-native learners, but it should serve interpretation rather than replace it. Similarly, educators should encourage aesthetic response without abandoning systematic language learning. The pedagogical objective is therefore to move from 'explaining the text to students' toward 'equipping students to engage with the text.' (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020; Ṭa'īmah, n.d.).

A Proposed Integrated Pedagogical Framework for Malaysian Islamic Institutions

Based on the conceptual and pedagogical issues identified in the source study, this article proposes an integrated framework consisting of six interconnected stages. The framework is designed for non-native Arabic learners and can be adapted to secondary, pre-university, or higher-education settings.

Stage	Core activity	Primary objective	Possible output
1. Preparation	Contextual introduction, key vocabulary, historical background	Reduce linguistic and cultural barriers	Concept map/vocabulary notes
2. Guided reading	Teacher-supported close reading	Build comprehension and textual awareness	Annotated text
3. Linguistic analysis	Selected grammar, morphology, rhetoric and style	Strengthen language competence	Language analysis
4. Literary response	Discussion of imagery, emotion, themes and structure	Develop aesthetic and affective response	Reflective response
5. Critical-comparative activity	Compare interpretations, texts or Malay/Arabic expressions	Develop critical and intercultural thinking	Short presentation / comparative analysis
6. Digital extension and assessment	Digital resources, collaborative tasks, portfolio or project	Transfer learning beyond the classroom	Portfolio/project/presentation

Stage 1: Contextual Preparation

Before reading, the teacher introduces the author, historical period, genre, key concepts, and a limited set of essential vocabulary. The purpose is not to explain the whole text in advance but to remove barriers that would prevent students from reading independently.

Stage 2: Guided Close Reading

Students read the original Arabic text with graduated support. The teacher models strategies for inferring meaning, identifying textual relationships, and recognising stylistic signals. Students should gradually move from teacher-supported reading toward independent interpretation.

Stage 3: Linguistic and Rhetorical Analysis

Grammar, morphology, vocabulary, and rhetoric are selected according to their contribution to understanding the text. Rather than extracting every possible grammatical feature, the teacher focuses on forms that illuminate meaning or style. This preserves the functional benefits of linguistic analysis without reducing literature to grammar.

Stage 4: Literary and Affective Response

Students are invited to describe the emotional effect of the text, identify significant imagery, discuss the author's representation of human experience, and explain which passages they find most powerful. Responses may initially be expressed in Malay or a mixed linguistic format and gradually move toward Arabic as proficiency develops.

Stage 5: Critical and Comparative Learning

Students compare interpretations, literary forms, or selected Arabic and Malay expressions. Comparative work is especially suitable for Malaysian learners because it connects Arabic literary concepts with the learners' existing linguistic and cultural knowledge. The objective is not to declare one tradition superior but to develop intercultural understanding and analytical awareness.

Stage 6: Digital and Project-Based Extension

Digital resources can extend literary learning through audio recitation, annotated texts, searchable dictionaries, collaborative documents, recorded presentations, and student portfolios. Technology should support interpretation and interaction rather than reproduce teacher lectures in digital form.

Assessment of Arabic Literature Learning

Assessment of Arabic literature learning should reflect the multidimensional nature of literary education, rather than be confined to memorising meanings, definitions, and isolated literary concepts. An assessment model that focuses excessively on memorisation may reproduce the limitations of traditional approaches, particularly by restricting students' opportunities to engage with literary texts analytically, aesthetically, critically, and communicatively. Therefore, a balanced assessment framework should evaluate students' linguistic comprehension, textual analysis, aesthetic appreciation, critical reasoning, and ability to communicate their interpretations effectively (Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020; Zaqūt, 2004).

First, textual comprehension should constitute a fundamental component of assessment. Students should be able to identify the main ideas of a literary passage, recognise relationships among its elements, and explain meanings according to the textual and contextual circumstances in which they occur. Such assessment enables teachers to determine whether students have moved beyond merely understanding individual words towards comprehending the overall message and significance of the literary text.

Second, assessment should measure linguistic competence as demonstrated through students' understanding and appropriate use of vocabulary, grammatical structures, and rhetorical features encountered in the text. Arabic literature provides a meaningful context in which learners can develop their linguistic competence because vocabulary, syntax, morphology, and rhetoric are presented within authentic textual structures. Assessment should therefore examine not only whether students can recall linguistic rules, but also whether they can recognise and apply them appropriately when interpreting literary texts.

Third, the assessment process should incorporate literary analysis. Students should be encouraged to explain how literary form, imagery, diction, textual structure, and rhetorical choices contribute to the meaning and overall effect of a passage. This component is

particularly important because literary learning should develop students' ability to understand how language functions artistically, rather than treating a literary text merely as a source of vocabulary or grammatical examples. Through such assessment, students can demonstrate their ability to move from basic comprehension towards a deeper appreciation of literary construction.

Fourth, assessment should include students' critical response to literary texts. Students should be given opportunities to formulate their own interpretations and support their arguments with appropriate evidence drawn from the text. This approach encourages analytical thinking and prevents literary learning from becoming a process of reproducing predetermined interpretations provided by the teacher. A critical response may take the form of a written interpretation, a structured discussion, or a comparative analysis in which students justify their views through textual evidence.

Fifth, affective and aesthetic responses should also be recognised as an important dimension of Arabic literature assessment. Literary texts are capable of generating emotional, imaginative, and artistic responses, and students should therefore be encouraged to articulate the feelings, impressions, and aesthetic effects produced by a particular text. Assessment in this area does not necessarily require students to produce identical responses; rather, it should assess their ability to express and explain their emotional or artistic engagement with the text in a meaningful and coherent manner.

Finally, communicative performance should form part of the assessment framework. Students should be given opportunities to present their interpretations orally or in writing, either individually or collaboratively. Oral presentations, group discussions, written reflections, and collaborative literary projects can provide evidence of students' ability to communicate their understanding of Arabic literary texts. This dimension also connects literary learning with practical language use, enabling students to transform their comprehension and analysis into meaningful communication.

Taken together, these assessment components provide a more comprehensive evaluation of Arabic literature learning. Such an approach recognises that literary competence involves more than remembering information; it encompasses the ability to comprehend, analyse, appreciate, interpret, critically evaluate, and communicate ideas derived from literary texts. Consequently, assessment should function not merely as a mechanism for measuring students' achievement, but also as an integral part of the learning process that encourages deeper engagement with Arabic literature.

Conclusion

Arabic literature should be understood as a multidimensional educational resource rather than merely a collection of texts intended for translation, explanation, or memorisation. As a form of linguistic and intellectual expression, literature provides learners with opportunities to encounter Arabic in meaningful and sophisticated contexts while simultaneously engaging with cultural values, intellectual traditions, aesthetic expression, and human experience. Its educational value therefore extends beyond the acquisition of vocabulary and grammatical structures to include the development of linguistic competence, cultural understanding, critical thinking, aesthetic appreciation, emotional awareness, and engagement with the

Arabic and Islamic intellectual heritage (Al-Fākhūrī, 1978; Al-Jundī, n.d.; Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020). From this perspective, literary education should not treat the literary text merely as an auxiliary material for language instruction, but as an integrated educational medium capable of contributing to the intellectual and personal development of learners.

For non-native Arabic learners in Malaysia, however, the effective teaching of Arabic literature presents particular pedagogical challenges. One of the central challenges lies in establishing a meaningful bridge between formal Arabic, particularly fuṣḥā, and the linguistic reality of learners who acquire Arabic as a second or foreign language. While students need sufficient linguistic support to access literary texts, excessive simplification may deprive those texts of their original linguistic, rhetorical, and aesthetic richness. The distinction between traditional direct instruction and functional-linguistic approaches highlighted in the present study demonstrates that neither memorisation-oriented instruction nor the exclusive use of literary texts as linguistic exercises is sufficient to realise the full educational potential of Arabic literature. A more balanced approach is therefore required, one that combines linguistic accessibility with literary appreciation, interpretation, and critical engagement (Ṭa'īmāh, n.d.; Al-Sawāḥilī, 2020).

In response to these challenges, this article proposes an integrated pedagogical framework that brings together several complementary dimensions of literary learning. The framework begins with appropriate linguistic preparation and guided reading to facilitate students' access to the text. It then progresses towards linguistic and literary interpretation, aesthetic response, critical comparison, and digital or project-based extension. The purpose of this integration is to ensure that linguistic analysis does not become detached from literary appreciation and that literary interpretation remains grounded in the actual language and structure of the text. In this model, technology and interactive learning activities are not intended to replace the teacher or the classical text; rather, they serve as additional means of facilitating students' engagement, collaboration, reflection, and communication.

Importantly, adopting a contemporary pedagogical framework does not require the abandonment or rejection of the classical Arabic literary heritage. On the contrary, the proposed approach seeks to make this heritage more accessible to contemporary non-native learners while preserving its linguistic, intellectual, rhetorical, and artistic richness. The classical heritage can continue to function as the primary source of literary and cultural knowledge. At the same time, modern pedagogical strategies offer learners more appropriate ways to approach, interpret, discuss, and respond to that heritage. Such an approach also addresses the tension between preserving established literary traditions and responding to the educational needs of present-day learners.

The long-term objective of Arabic literary education should therefore be the formation of independent and critically engaged readers who are capable of understanding Arabic texts, appreciating their artistic qualities, analysing their linguistic and rhetorical structures, formulating evidence-based interpretations, and relating literary meanings to their own cultural and intellectual experiences. The achievement of this objective requires a shift from teacher-centred transmission towards a learning environment in which students actively interact with literary texts and participate in the construction of meaning. Assessment should likewise reflect this multidimensional conception by evaluating not only textual

comprehension and linguistic competence, but also literary analysis, critical reasoning, aesthetic response, and communicative performance.

Within the context of Malaysian Islamic education, such an approach has particular significance. Arabic literature can provide a productive space for connecting Arabic linguistic proficiency with the broader intellectual and cultural objectives of Islamic education. At the same time, it can create opportunities for meaningful dialogue between the Arab-Islamic literary heritage and the Malay cultural and educational experience. Rather than viewing these traditions as separate or competing domains, literary education can encourage students to recognise points of connection, comparison, and mutual understanding. Ultimately, the effective teaching of Arabic literature in Malaysia should aim not merely to produce students who can translate or memorise literary texts, but learners who can read with understanding, appreciate with sensitivity, analyse with critical awareness, and communicate with confidence. This represents a more comprehensive vision of Arabic literary education and provides a stronger foundation for developing sustainable and meaningful Arabic learning among non-native speakers.

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