The Readability of Arabic Texts in Malaysia: A Need for a Suitable Measurement Instrument

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Abstract
Readability is the degree of difficulty or ease in understanding of a reading material, which may affect the reader's comprehension level. This study focuses on two main issues: (1) the need to determine the Arabic text readability level and (2) the use of appropriate instruments to gauge the readability level. A reading material needs to be selected in accordance of the students' readability level. An appropriate reading material eases the teaching and learning (T&L) process. A recent surge in the instruments to gauge Arabic text readability level bodes well to the dynamism of the field that often relies upon cloze and comprehension tests in determining the readability level.
Keywords: Readability; Readability Formula, Cloze Test, Arabic Language

1.0 Introduction

The influence of good reading material or textbooks amongst students is evident through a broad spectrum of literature. According to Coleman (1962), if a text book can be read and well-understood by students, it can act as an effective learning tool. On the other hand, Fulcher (1997) stresses that a difficult reading text may impede a learning process and contribute to a lack of motivation to the students.

Therefore, teaching and learning (henceforth T&L) experts such as Nuttal (1985) recommended to account the students' readability level in choosing the right reading material. Suitable reading materials would promote a reader's language development while too easy texts would bore readers and too difficult texts could diminish learners' motivation (Carrell, 1987; Adlina & Normah, 2016). Text readability is defined as "…*the level of ease or difficulty with which text material can be understood by a particular reader who is reading that text for a specific purpose*" (Pikulski, 2002, p. 1). Specifically, in Arabic language, it is called

"maqru'iyyah" or *"inqira'iyyah"* (Tuʿaymah & al-Thuʿaybi, 2006). This study will therefore investigate two pertinent issues regarding Arabic texts used in T&L, i.e. to identify the level of text readability and the use of appropriate instrument for measurement purposes.

2.0 The need to identify the text readability level

Studies on Arabic text readability in Malaysia show that students have low-level of reading comprehension. Kamarulzaman (2010) finds that text readability of Advanced Arabic amongst National Islamic Secondary School (*Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Agama*) in Malaysia are at the 'frustrational' level. 'Frustrational' level is defined as a reading material that is difficult to be comprehended by the readers. Apart from that, a 'frustrational' level reader tends to has slower reading fluency, frequently stumble and needs more time to analyse the reading material (Rye, 1982; Gillet & Temple, 1994). In a study of text readability of *Miftah* al-*balaghah*, which is being used as a text book for Malaysian Higher Religious Certificate (STAM) also finds that most students are at the 'frustrational' level. In fact, another text book used for STAM—*al-Balaghah al-wadihah a*lso reveals the same result. In addition, Zamri et al. (2013, 2012) examined the text readability of Arabic literary texts on Andalusian and Abbasid historic era respectively, and found that the students are at the 'frustrational' level as well.

The issue of textual understanding of Arabic text amongst the Malaysian students as proved in the above-mentioned studies reveal an urgent need to provide reading materials that are both simple and appropriate according to the students' collective level of understanding. By doing so, it will inadvertently eases the T&L process as well as ensuring effective lateral or even bilateral knowledge transfer to occur. Hence, there is a need for Arabic language instructors to know the best way to select the text that is going to be used by the students especially while conducting reading class. Therefore, this study proposes two approaches in selecting an appropriate reading material—cloze test and readability formula.

3.0 The use of effective instrumentation in reading text selection

There are two methods that can be used to determine text readability level, which are qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative method in the determination of the text readability level refers to evaluation and expert opinions from academicians, librarians and teachers based on a predetermined set of criteria. On the other hand, quantitative method is defined as a measurement method that includes the use of specific formulae (or formula) using charts, graphs and data in the form of statistics through specific tests such as comprehension and cloze tests (Klare, 1969; Gilliland, 1972; Chall, 1974; Hull, 1979; Harrison, 1980; Haris & Sipay, 1980; Schulz, 1981; Meyer, 2003).

Gilliland (1972) argues that qualitative-based instrumentation in gauging readability has low reliability and is incapable of systematic and accurate measurement of readability level. Although its implementation is not time-consuming as its quantitative counterpart, authors such as Harris and Sipay (1980) argues that such measurement tool lacks validity as it does not involve the students during the measurement process. Apart from that, Chall (1974) further adds that qualitative-based measuring instruments are often influenced by the preliminary evaluations that were carried out by the author(s) and/or the publisher. In addition, there are numerous studies which have shown that students find it difficult even though initial qualitative-based assessments by experts prove that the text is at the 'instructional' level. However, Moon and Raban (1980) are of the opinion that this method is more suitable for early-childhood development reading material as supposed to the adult

reading material for a simple fact that they have yet to achieve the intellectual capacity to partake in such assessment tests.

4.0 Cloze test

Past literature has shown that cloze test remains the most dominant instrument in determining the Arabic text readability level (Dawud, 1977; Tu'aymah, 1978, 1984, 1985; al-Sisi, 1982; Jad'an, 1989; Hassan Basri, 2002). In fact, during face-to-face interviews with three (3) experts on Arabic text readability, i.e. Tu'aymah, Khadijah Rohani and Yunus, Kamarulzaman (2010) recorded their positive testimonies regarding the suitability of cloze test as the instrument of choice especially amongst non-native Arabic speakers.

Cloze test is defined as a form of 'fill in the blank' test (A'ishah & Kamarulzaman, 2013; Zulazhan et al, 2011). According to Rye (1982, p.1), Bullock Report in 1975 defines this test as *"the use of a piece of writing in which certain words have been deleted and the pupil has to make maximum possible use of context clues available in predicting the missing word".* Cloze test was developed by retracting few words in a paragraph and students will have to fill in the blanks through contextual guessing strategy.

Readability experts such as (1984, 1985), al-Naji (n.d), Klare et. al (1972), Harrison (1980), Rye (1982), Hughes (1989) and Marohaini (1999) have suggested the necessary steps in administrating the test. For a start, the assessor retracts the seventh word of each sentence regardless of its structures and/or its type of word. The retracted portion will then be filled with a blank space. The assessor has the option to either place the answer options immediately after the blank space or otherwise. Prior the test, a detailed explanation must be made to ensure the respondents clearly understands the objective of the test as well as its operationalisations. This is because, even a simple misunderstanding by the respondents may affect the score and ultimately, on validity of the study itself.

5.0 Readability formula

Apart from cloze test, another instrument that is gaining popularity is the readability formula. Prior to 2010, cloze and comprehension tests are the most widely-used instruments. However, from 2010 onwards, the readability formula developed by al-Khalifa and al-Ajlan (2010) has been the impetus within the text readability literature. Then, Nuraihan et al. (2013), developed a prototype formula in determining Arabic text readability in Malaysia. A year later, al-Tamimi et al. (2014), developed another formula called Automatic Arabic Readability Index (AARI). With the advent of these three formula, studies on Arabic text readability has certainly improved, though they are still lagging behind to more prominent languages to non-native speakers such as English. However, these formula are opening more avenues for further research within the Arabic text readability literature.

Therefore, in order to select the most appropriate reading texts in accordance to the students' comprehension ability, the instructors may opt for the above-mentioned instruments of cloze test and readability formula. The steps are as follow:

i. Prior starting the reading class, the instructors need to thoroughly familiarise themselves with several reading materials.

ii. After deciding on which material to be used as the instrument, the instructors will then gauge the readability level using the Arabic text's readability formula.

iii. Subsequently, the instructors will administer the cloze test on the selected material. If the cloze score ranges in between 'instructional level' (75% to 89%)

and 'independent level' (90% and above) the instructors can then proceed to use the text as a T&L material.

6.0 Cloze Test and its application in readability studies

This study applied the cloze test to gauge the readability level of *al-Balaghah al-wadihah* textbook amongst Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) and Kolej Antarabangsa Sultan Ismail Petra (KIAS) students. *Al-Balaghah al-wadihah* is one of the most widely used textbooks on *balaghah* (language) in Arabic language studies in Malaysia. This book was edited by al-Jarim and Amin (2008). According to al-Sayih (2000), who carried out a study of *balaghah*-related textbooks from 1900 to 1950 finds that this book uses a different approach as compared to the more popular textbooks penned by Al-Azhar scholars within the same period. Unlike the widely-practised approach at that time (descriptive approach), this book uses a rather innovative approach of using poems and proses as working examples. Subsequently, the authors will give detailed explanations and only then the students were introduced with the methods and rules of Arabic language. This approach is contemporaneously termed as *tariqah istiqra'iyyah* (prescriptive approach) (al-Sumayli, 1998). Currently, the front page of this book contains a certification from the Ministry of Education and Techinal Education that the book is in accordance with the news standards to be used by secondary schools in Egypt.

This study utilised samples obtained from 45 students (25 students of Bachelor of Islamic Education Studies, Faculty of Contemporary Islamic Studies, UniSZA and 20 students of Diploma in Arabic Language, Arabic Language Department, KIAS). Both sets of students are homogenous in nature, i.e. they are non-native Arabic speakers studies in courses that primarily delivered in Arabic, and have used *al-Balaghah al-wadihah* during the course of their studies.

The cloze test in this study used texts from '*ilm ma'ani*, '*ilm bayan* and '*ilm badi'* in *al-Balaghah al-wadihah.* The procedures in building and carrying out this study was done accordance to recommendations and suggestions by Tu'aymah (1984, 1985), al-Naji (n.d), Klare et al. (1972), Harrison (1980), Rye (1982), Hughes (1989), and Marohaini (1999). The procedures are as follow: (1) randomly select few texts from the chosen chapters; (2) every seventh word is taken out regardless of its type and/or sentence structure; (3) the students will then choose one word that seems appropriate for each blank from a set of options (Kamarulzaman, 2010; Zulazhan 2012); (4) prior the administrating the test, students will be briefed upon the objectives and the operationalisation of the test.

In order to determine the readability of *al-Balaghah al-wadihah* text, its means are then compared to the readability level as suggested by Rye (1982):

Table 1.0
Readability level of reading material

Readability Level	Score Range
Independent	90% - 100%
Instructional	75% - 89%
Frustrational	0% - 74%

Source: Rye, 1982

If more than 90% of the blanks are filled in correctly by the students, then the text is considered to be easy reading as they can independently learn the reading materials themselves. If 75% to 89% of the blanks are filled in correctly, then the text is considered

"instructional" reading for the students. In other words, the text is right for an audience which is learning the material contained in the text. If 74% or less of the blanks are filled in correctly, then the text is considered difficult for the students. According the analysis from the answers, the mean is 46.9%. Table 2.0 exhibits the total mean and the overall cloze score from the study sample.

Table 2.0
Mean score for cloze test

Student Number	Text 1 (x/50)	Text 2 (x/50)	Text 3 (x/50)	Total	% (Total/150 x 100)
1	19	25	22	66	44
2	28	35	24	87	58
3	22	24	18	64	42.6
4	21	21	15	57	38
5	23	30	15	68	45.3
6	21	32	16	69	46
7	35	34	28	97	64.7
8	22	30	24	76	50.7
9	21	27	25	73	48.7
10	26	29	23	78	52
11	20	19	15	54	36
12	21	27	26	74	49.3
13	19	14	11	44	29.3
14	25	26	24	75	50
15	16	25	16	57	38
16	22	27	19	68	45.3
17	27	34	26	87	58
18	28	32	28	88	58.7
19	25	30	19	74	49.3
20	22	13	19	54	36
21	13	23	18	54	36
22	17	32	21	70	46.7
23	22	28	20	70	46.7
24	17	22	14	53	35.3
25	25	25	21	71	47.3
26	29	21	26	76	50.7
27	19	32	19	70	46.7
28	22	31	26	79	52.7
29	24	24	21	69	46
30	26	35	19	80	53.3
31	28	32	21	81	54
32	25	30	15	70	46.7
33	27	29	24	80	53.3
34	25	31	19	75	50
35	17	29	20	66	40
36	18	28	19	65	43.3

37	25	32	12	69	46
38	18	26	20	64	42.7
39	19	31	20	70	46.7
40	23	24	23	70	46.7
41	25	28	21	74	49.3
42	17	29	22	68	45.3
43	24	27	26	77	51.3
44	22	29	21	72	48
45	20	26	20	66	44
				Total	**2108.6**
				Mean	**46.9**

The above scores, when compared against the readability table by Rye (1982) shows that the readability level of the book is at the 'frustrational' level. Therefore, *al-Balaghah al-wadihah* text book does not match the readability level of the sample taken as its use was found to be unsuitable for non-native speakers. One of the main reasons is that the book was written by Arabic authors with Arabic native speakers in mind.

7.0 Conclusion

The selection of appropriate reading materials will ease as well as enrich the process of T&L. Previously, the conventional wisdom is to grant full authority to the instructor in determining the correct reading material—without accounting the students' readability level. However, this process needs to be complemented with text readability assessment on the students. In the case of non-Arabic native speakers, instructors may opt to use Automatic Arabic Readability Index (AARI) for example and subsequently administrating cloze test to determine the targeted readers' readability level. It is hoped that with these initiatives, the T&L of Arabic language will reach new heights in the future.

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