Students' Difficulties in Understanding Classical Arabic Texts A Linguistic and Pedagogical Study of Arabic Language Education Program Students at UIN Walisongo Semarang

Kesulitan Mahasiswa dalam Memahami Teks Bahasa Arab Klasik: Kajian Linguistik dan Pedagogis bagi Mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Arab UIN Walisongo Semarang

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the multifaceted challenges encountered by students in the Arabic Language Education Program at UIN Walisongo Semarang when engaging with classical Arabic texts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research examines linguistic barriers including morphological complexity, syntactic structures, and lexical unfamiliarity, alongside pedagogical factors such as instructional methodologies and learning resources. Data were collected from 85 students through questionnaires, proficiency tests, and semi-structured interviews with seven instructors. Findings reveal that 73% of students struggle significantly with i'rab (grammatical inflection), 68% encounter difficulties with classical vocabulary, and 61% find complex sentence structures challenging. Pedagogical analysis indicates insufficient integration of contextual learning strategies and limited exposure to authentic classical texts. The study proposes a comprehensive framework combining traditional grammar instruction with communicative approaches, enhanced technological integration, and scaffolded reading strategies. Recommendations include curriculum redesign emphasizing gradual progression from simplified to authentic classical texts, teacher professional development in specialized classical Arabic pedagogy, and development of supplementary learning materials addressing specific linguistic obstacles. This research contributes to understanding classical Arabic acquisition challenges within Indonesian Islamic higher education contexts.
Keywords: classical Arabic texts, linguistic difficulties, pedagogical strategies, Arabic language education, morphosyntactic challenges, turath literacy

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengkaji berbagai tantangan yang dihadapi mahasiswa Program Studi Pendidikan Bahasa Arab UIN Walisongo Semarang dalam memahami teks bahasa Arab klasik. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran, penelitian ini meneliti hambatan linguistik meliputi kompleksitas morfologi, struktur sintaksis, dan ketidakakraban leksikal, bersama faktor pedagogis seperti metodologi pembelajaran dan sumber belajar. Data dikumpulkan dari 85 mahasiswa melalui kuesioner, tes kemahiran, dan wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan tujuh dosen. Temuan menunjukkan 73% mahasiswa mengalami kesu-

litan signifikan dengan i'rab (infleksi gramatikal), 68% menghadapi kesulitan kosakata klasik, dan 61% merasa struktur kalimat kompleks menantang. Analisis pedagogis mengindikasikan integrasi strategi pembelajaran kontekstual yang tidak memadai dan keterbatasan paparan terhadap teks klasik autentik. Penelitian ini mengusulkan kerangka komprehensif yang menggabungkan pengajaran tata bahasa tradisional dengan pendekatan komunikatif, integrasi teknologi yang ditingkatkan, dan strategi membaca bertahap. Rekomendasi mencakup redesain kurikulum yang menekankan progres bertahap dari teks klasik yang disederhanakan ke teks autentik, pengembangan profesional dosen dalam pedagogi bahasa Arab klasik khusus, dan pengembangan materi pembelajaran tambahan yang mengatasi hambatan linguistik spesifik.

Kata-kata kunci: *teks bahasa Arab klasik, kesulitan linguistik, strategi pedagogis, pendidikan bahasa Arab, tantangan morfosintaksis, literasi turath*

A. INTRODUCTION

The study of classical Arabic texts represents a cornerstone of Islamic scholarship and remains fundamental to Arabic language education programs across Indonesian Islamic universities. Classical Arabic, or al-'Arabiyyah al-Fusha al-Qadimah, encompasses the linguistic register used in pre-modern Islamic literature, including religious texts, historical chronicles, literary works, and scholarly treatises (Versteegh, 2014). For students in Arabic Language Education programs, proficiency in reading and comprehending classical texts is not merely an academic requirement but an essential competency for engaging with Islamic intellectual heritage and fulfilling their future roles as Arabic language educators. However, contemporary research consistently documents significant challenges faced by non-native Arabic learners when encountering these linguistically complex materials (Ryding, 2005) and (Muhsyanur, 2014).

At UIN Walisongo Semarang, observations indicate that students frequently struggle with classical Arabic comprehension despite having completed foundational Arabic grammar courses. This phenomenon mirrors broader patterns observed across Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions, where the gap between grammatical knowledge and textual comprehension remains pronounced (Makruf, 2016). The difficulties manifest across multiple linguistic levels, from morphological intricacies to syntactic complexities, and are compounded by pedagogical approaches that may not adequately address the specific demands of classical text engagement (Ramadhanti et al., 2021). Understanding these challenges requires examining both the inherent linguistic features of classical Arabic and the instructional contexts in which students encounter these texts.

The linguistic complexity of classical Arabic stems from several distinctive features that differentiate it from modern standard Arabic and colloquial varieties. Classical Arabic exhibits extensive morphological derivation systems, intricate case and mood marking through i'rab, complex verbal paradigms, and sophisticated syntactic structures including embedded clauses and extended noun phrases (Al-Batal, 2006). Additionally, classical texts often employ archaic vocabulary, elliptical constructions, and rhetorical devices unfamiliar to contemporary learners. These linguistic characteristics demand specialized analytical skills and comprehensive grammatical knowledge that many students have not fully developed (Brustad et al., 2011). The morphosyntactic density of classical Arabic poses particular challenges, as students must simultaneously process multiple layers of grammatical information while constructing meaning from text.

From a pedagogical perspective, several factors influence students' classical Arabic comprehension difficulties. Traditional grammar-translation methods, while dominant in many Arabic programs, often emphasize decontextualized rule memorization rather than meaningful text engagement (Wahba et al., 2013) and . Students may acquire extensive grammatical knowledge without developing effective reading strategies or sufficient expo-

sure to authentic classical texts. Furthermore, the progression from simplified educational materials to authentic classical literature frequently lacks adequate scaffolding, leaving students unprepared for the linguistic demands of original texts (Alosh, 2016). The disconnect between grammatical instruction and practical reading skills creates a significant barrier to classical text comprehension, suggesting the need for more integrated pedagogical approaches.

Research on Arabic language acquisition has increasingly emphasized the importance of understanding learner-specific challenges within particular educational contexts. Indonesian students learning Arabic face unique obstacles related to linguistic distance between Arabic and Indonesian, limited opportunities for authentic language exposure, and educational traditions emphasizing grammatical analysis over communicative competence (Zulhannan, 2015). These contextual factors shape how students approach classical texts and influence the types of difficulties they encounter. Moreover, the dual objectives of Arabic programs in Indonesian Islamic universities—developing both linguistic proficiency and Islamic scholarship capabilities—create additional complexity in curriculum design and instructional priorities (Muhbib, 2017) and (Muhsyanur et al., 2021).

The significance of addressing classical Arabic comprehension difficulties extends beyond immediate academic concerns. Graduates of Arabic Language Education programs will themselves become educators, potentially perpetuating instructional approaches that inadequately prepare students for classical text engagement unless their own competencies are thoroughly developed. Breaking this cycle requires both improved student learning outcomes and enhanced pedagogical knowledge among future teachers (Hermawan, 2018). Furthermore, the ability to access classical Islamic texts directly, without relying solely on translations or commentaries, represents an important dimension of Islamic scholarship and religious literacy. Students' struggles with classical Arabic thus have implications for broader goals of preserving and transmitting Islamic intellectual traditions.

Recent developments in applied linguistics and language pedagogy offer promising directions for addressing classical Arabic learning challenges. Research on reading comprehension strategies, vocabulary acquisition techniques, and technology-enhanced language learning provides evidence-based approaches that could be adapted to classical Arabic instruction (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). Similarly, insights from second language acquisition research regarding the development of morphosyntactic processing skills and the role of extensive reading in language development have relevance for classical Arabic pedagogy. However, the application of these contemporary approaches to classical Arabic teaching remains limited, suggesting opportunities for innovative pedagogical interventions.

This study addresses the critical need for systematic investigation of classical Arabic comprehension difficulties among Arabic Language Education students at UIN Walisongo Semarang. By examining both linguistic and pedagogical dimensions of these challenges, the research aims to provide comprehensive understanding of factors impeding student success with classical texts. The study investigates specific linguistic obstacles students encounter, analyzes current pedagogical practices and their effectiveness, and explores relationships between student background characteristics and comprehension difficulties. Through this multifaceted investigation, the research seeks to generate actionable insights for curriculum development, instructional improvement, and student support initiatives that will enhance classical Arabic learning outcomes and better prepare future Arabic language educators.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The comprehension of classical Arabic texts involves complex cognitive and linguistic processes that have been examined from multiple theoretical perspectives. Schema theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how readers construct meaning from

texts by activating and applying relevant background knowledge structures (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). In classical Arabic reading, students must possess not only linguistic schemas regarding grammatical structures and vocabulary but also content schemas related to Islamic history, theological concepts, and literary conventions prevalent in classical texts. When students lack adequate schemas in either domain, comprehension suffers significantly. Carrell and Eisterhold (1983) demonstrated that second language reading comprehension depends critically on both formal schemas (knowledge of text structure) and content schemas (knowledge of the subject matter), both of which may be underdeveloped in students encountering classical Arabic texts for the first time (Muhsyanur, 2025).

From a linguistic perspective, systemic functional linguistics offers valuable insights into the challenges of classical Arabic texts. Halliday's (1985) framework emphasizes how grammatical choices create meaning potential within specific contexts of situation and culture. Classical Arabic texts employ distinctive grammatical patterns that encode particular ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings unfamiliar to contemporary learners. The dense nominal style characteristic of many classical texts, extensive use of participles and verbal nouns, and complex hierarchical structures create what Halliday termed "grammatical metaphor"—abstract ways of representing experience that require sophisticated linguistic processing. Al-Rubai'i (2005) applied functional grammar perspectives to Arabic linguistic analysis, demonstrating how classical texts' grammatical complexity reflects specific communicative purposes within historical scholarly discourse communities. Understanding these functional dimensions helps explain why students struggle to extract meaning even when they can parse individual grammatical elements.

Reading strategy research provides another crucial theoretical foundation for examining classical Arabic comprehension difficulties. Grabe (2009) and (Muhsyanur, 2025) identified multiple component skills and processes involved in fluent reading, including automatic word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, discourse knowledge, metacognitive monitoring, and strategic processing. For classical Arabic learners, several of these components typically remain underdeveloped, particularly automatic recognition processes and strategic reading skills. Research on Arabic reading specifically has highlighted the particular challenges posed by the Arabic writing system, where short vowels and case endings are typically unmarked in printed texts, requiring readers to supply morphological information based on grammatical analysis (Abu-Rabia, 2001). This feature makes classical Arabic reading especially demanding, as it combines the cognitive load of grammatical analysis with the visual processing of partially vocalized text.

Pedagogical approaches to teaching classical languages have evolved considerably, with ongoing debates regarding the relative merits of traditional grammar-translation methods versus more communicative or reading-focused approaches. Traditional approaches emphasize explicit grammar instruction, morphological analysis, and translation exercises, reflecting pedagogical traditions established in medieval madrasah education and later Western classical language teaching (Owens, 2006). While such methods develop analytical skills and grammatical knowledge, critics argue they often fail to develop fluent reading ability or meaningful engagement with texts. Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis and subsequent research on extensive reading suggest that comprehension ability develops primarily through exposure to comprehensible input rather than explicit grammatical study alone. Applied to classical Arabic, this perspective suggests students need extensive practice reading texts at appropriate difficulty levels, not merely intensive grammatical analysis of limited passages (Alosh, 2016).

Contemporary Arabic pedagogy scholarship has increasingly advocated for integrated approaches combining grammatical instruction with communicative practice and authentic text engagement. Ryding (2013) emphasized the importance of explicitly teaching reading strategies alongside grammar, including techniques for identifying sentence structure, recognizing grammatical patterns, and using contextual clues for vocabulary inference. She argued that students need explicit instruction in how to apply grammatical knowledge during

actual reading rather than assuming this transfer occurs automatically. Similarly, Wahba et al. (2013) proposed staged approaches to classical text reading, beginning with heavily glossed and simplified texts and gradually progressing to authentic materials as students develop proficiency. Such scaffolded approaches recognize that classical texts' linguistic demands exceed most students' current capabilities and require systematic support for successful comprehension.

Research specifically examining Indonesian students' Arabic learning challenges has identified several contextual factors influencing classical text comprehension. Makruf (2016) documented widespread difficulties with Arabic morphology among Indonesian learners, attributing these to fundamental differences between Indonesian and Arabic grammatical systems and to instructional approaches emphasizing rule memorization over pattern recognition. His research found that students could often recite grammatical rules but struggled to apply them during actual text analysis. Zulhannan (2015) similarly identified vocabulary knowledge as a major obstacle for Indonesian Arabic learners, noting that the abstract and specialized vocabulary common in classical texts receives insufficient attention in Arabic curricula. These findings suggest that linguistic distance between students' first language and classical Arabic creates specific learning challenges requiring targeted pedagogical responses.

The role of technology in supporting classical Arabic learning represents an emerging area of pedagogical innovation. Digital tools offer potential for addressing several classical Arabic learning challenges through enhanced access to resources, interactive learning activities, and immediate feedback mechanisms. Dukes and Habash (2010) described computational approaches to syntactic analysis of classical Arabic texts that could support learner comprehension through automated grammatical annotation. Similarly, corpus-based approaches to vocabulary instruction could help students develop familiarity with classical Arabic lexical patterns and collocations (Parkinson, 2009). However, the integration of such technological resources into classical Arabic pedagogy remains limited, and questions persist regarding how digital tools can most effectively support the development of deep comprehension skills rather than superficial text processing.

Current research gaps regarding classical Arabic comprehension difficulties include limited empirical investigation of the specific linguistic obstacles students encounter at different proficiency levels, insufficient understanding of how pedagogical approaches influence comprehension development, and lack of validated assessment instruments for measuring classical Arabic reading proficiency. Most existing studies rely on general observations or small-scale qualitative investigations rather than systematic mixed-methods research examining both linguistic and pedagogical dimensions comprehensively. Furthermore, context-specific research investigating classical Arabic learning within Indonesian Islamic higher education remains scarce despite the distinctive challenges this population faces. The present study addresses these gaps through comprehensive investigation of linguistic difficulties and pedagogical factors affecting classical Arabic comprehension among Arabic Language Education students at UIN Walisongo Semarang.

C. METHOD

This research employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to investigate the linguistic and pedagogical dimensions of students' difficulties in comprehending classical Arabic texts. The quantitative component involved survey questionnaires and classical Arabic proficiency assessments administered to students, while the qualitative component comprised semi-structured interviews with both students and instructors. This methodological approach aligns with Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) recommendations for educational research requiring both breadth of measurement and depth of understanding. The mixed-methods design enabled triangulation of findings across multiple data sources, providing robust evidence regarding the nature and extent of classical Arabic comprehen-

sion difficulties. By combining numerical data on prevalence and patterns of specific linguistic challenges with rich qualitative insights into students' experiences and instructors' pedagogical perspectives, the research achieved comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Dörnyei, 2007).

The study population consisted of students enrolled in the Arabic Language Education Program at UIN Walisongo Semarang during the 2024 academic year who had completed at least four semesters of study, ensuring they had received substantial instruction in Arabic grammar and had encountered classical texts in their coursework. From this population of 127 students, a sample of 85 participants was selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across different semester levels and academic performance categories. Additionally, purposive sampling identified seven Arabic language instructors with expertise in classical Arabic pedagogy for qualitative interviews, selected based on their experience teaching classical text courses and their familiarity with students' learning challenges. Sample size determination for the quantitative component followed Cohen's (1988) power analysis recommendations for detecting medium effect sizes with 80% power at α = 0.05, while qualitative sample size achieved data saturation as recommended by Guest et al. (2006).

Data collection utilized multiple instruments to capture different dimensions of classical Arabic comprehension difficulties. A researcher-developed questionnaire assessed students' self-reported difficulties across linguistic domains including morphology, syntax, vocabulary, and discourse features, using 5-point Likert scales to measure perceived difficulty levels. The questionnaire underwent content validation by three Arabic linguistics experts and reliability testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, indicating high internal consistency. A classical Arabic proficiency assessment adapted from standardized Arabic testing protocols measured actual comprehension through multiple-choice questions and translation tasks based on authentic classical texts of varying difficulty levels. Semi-structured interview protocols explored students' learning experiences, specific challenges encountered, and strategy use when reading classical texts, while instructor interviews examined pedagogical approaches, perceptions of student difficulties, and curricular considerations (Mackey & Gass, 2015). All interviews were conducted in Indonesian and Arabic, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis procedures integrated quantitative and qualitative methods to generate comprehensive findings. Quantitative data from questionnaires and proficiency assessments underwent statistical analysis using SPSS software, including descriptive statistics to characterize difficulty patterns, independent samples t-tests and ANOVA to examine differences across demographic groups, and correlation analysis to explore relationships between variables. Qualitative interview data were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The coding process employed both deductive codes derived from the research questions and inductive codes emerging from the data itself. To ensure analytical rigor, two researchers independently coded 20% of transcripts with inter-rater reliability calculated at Cohen's kappa = 0.82, indicating substantial agreement. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during interpretation, where qualitative themes provided explanatory depth for quantitative patterns and statistical results contextualized qualitative insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Ethical considerations received careful attention throughout the research process. The study obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UIN Walisongo Semarang prior to data collection. All participants received detailed information about the study's purposes, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights including voluntary participation and freedom to withdraw without penalty. Written informed consent was obtained

from all participants, with special attention to ensuring students understood that participation would not affect their academic evaluations. Data confidentiality was maintained through assignment of anonymous identification codes, secure storage of research materials, and reporting of findings in aggregate form without identifying individual participants. The research adhered to principles of beneficence, respecting participants' dignity and time while contributing knowledge that could ultimately benefit Arabic language education at the institution. Throughout the study, reflexivity practices helped researchers remain aware of their own assumptions and potential biases, particularly given their positions as Arabic language educators themselves, ensuring findings reflected participants' authentic experiences rather than researchers' preconceptions (Christians, 2011).

D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data collected from 85 Arabic Language Education students at UIN Walisongo Semarang and seven instructors revealed complex patterns of linguistic difficulties and pedagogical challenges affecting classical Arabic text comprehension. Results demonstrate that students encounter obstacles across multiple linguistic levels, with morphological, syntactic, lexical, and discourse-level features all contributing to comprehension difficulties. Furthermore, findings indicate that current pedagogical approaches, while grounded in established grammatical instruction traditions, require enhancement to better support students' development of practical classical text reading skills. The following sections present detailed findings organized according to four major thematic areas that emerged from integrated quantitative and qualitative analysis: morphological challenges, syntactic complexity, vocabulary obstacles, and pedagogical factors. Each subsection examines specific aspects of the phenomenon, supported by both statistical evidence and qualitative insights from participants.

Morphological Complexity and I'rab Difficulties

Morphological analysis of classical Arabic presents formidable challenges for students, with quantitative data revealing that 73% of participants rated morphological parsing as "difficult" or "very difficult." The proficiency assessment demonstrated that students correctly identified grammatical cases (i'rab) in only 41% of test items, significantly below the 70% threshold typically considered indicative of adequate mastery. This finding aligns with Ryding's (2005) observation that case marking represents one of the most persistent difficulties for Arabic learners, particularly when encountering fully inflected classical texts where case endings carry crucial grammatical and semantic information. Statistical analysis revealed significant differences in morphological performance based on students' prior Arabic learning background, with students who had attended pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) performing significantly better (M = 52.3, SD = 12.4) than those without such background (M = 35.7, SD = 14.1), t(83) = 5.67, p < .001, d = 1.26. This substantial effect size suggests that intensive exposure to Arabic grammatical analysis, characteristic of pesantren education, provides advantages for morphological processing.

Qualitative interviews illuminated specific aspects of morphological difficulty beyond what quantitative measures captured. Student participants consistently described feeling overwhelmed by the need to simultaneously consider multiple morphological features when analyzing words: root and pattern, prefixes and suffixes, case endings, and mood markers. One fourth-semester student explained, "When I see a word in classical text, I know I need to identify many things—is it a verb or noun, what is the root, what is the pattern, what is the case ending. But I get confused which to analyze first and often I make mistakes in one aspect that affects my understanding of others." This difficulty reflects what Alhawary (2011) identified as the "morphological density" of Arabic, where individual words encode multiple layers of grammatical information requiring sequential processing that taxes working

memory capacity. Students' struggles suggest that morphological analysis has not yet become automatized, forcing conscious attention to processes that skilled readers perform unconsciously.

The particular challenge of i'rab (case and mood inflection) emerged as a critical obstacle, with 68% of interview participants citing it as their primary morphological difficulty. Students reported that even when they understood i'rab rules theoretically, applying them during actual reading proved problematic. The proficiency assessment data support this claim: when presented with vocalized texts showing case endings explicitly, students' comprehension improved by 23 percentage points compared to unvocalized versions, indicating that inability to supply correct case endings independently significantly impaired comprehension. One instructor observed, "Students can explain the rules of i'rab on exams, they can give examples we have studied. But when they see a new text, they cannot determine the correct case endings systematically. They guess or ignore them, leading to misunderstanding of grammatical relationships." This gap between declarative knowledge (knowing rules) and procedural knowledge (applying rules during reading) reflects broader challenges in transitioning from explicit learning to implicit processing (DeKeyser, 2015).

Gender differences in morphological difficulty patterns emerged as an unexpected finding, with female students demonstrating significantly higher morphological accuracy (M = 47.2, SD = 13.8) compared to male students (M = 38.4, SD = 15.2), t(83) = 2.81, p = .006, d = 0.61. This moderate effect contradicts common assumptions about Arabic learning patterns and suggests that factors beyond linguistic aptitude—possibly including study habits, motivation, or differential socialization regarding attention to grammatical detail—influence morphological skill development. Further investigation revealed that female students reported spending significantly more time on morphological exercises and were more likely to use supplementary learning resources. This finding aligns with broader language learning research documenting gender differences in strategy use and study approaches (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989). However, instructors noted that despite better morphological parsing skills, female students did not necessarily demonstrate proportionally better overall comprehension, suggesting that morphological accuracy alone does not guarantee textual understanding—a point that has important pedagogical implications for balancing grammatical instruction with meaning-focused reading activities.

Syntactic Structure Challenges

Complex syntactic structures characteristic of classical Arabic texts posed significant comprehension obstacles, with 61% of students rating sentence structure analysis as a major difficulty. The proficiency assessment included items requiring identification of main and subordinate clauses, analysis of noun phrase structures, and determination of grammatical relationships in sentences with multiple embeddings. Overall accuracy on these syntactic items averaged only 38%, indicating that most students struggled to parse complex sentences successfully. Particular difficulty emerged with sentences containing multiple levels of embedding, such as those with relative clauses modifying nouns within prepositional phrases or conditional structures with extensive apodoses and protases. When sentences exceeded 15 words or contained more than two levels of syntactic embedding, comprehension accuracy dropped precipitously to below 25%. This pattern mirrors findings from Fender's (2008) research on Arabic sentence processing, which documented that syntactic complexity significantly impedes L2 Arabic readers' comprehension, particularly when complex structures combine with unfamiliar vocabulary.

Students' qualitative descriptions of syntactic difficulties centered on two primary challenges: determining constituent boundaries and establishing grammatical relationships among sentence elements. A fifth-semester student explained, "In classical texts, sentences can be very long with many phrases. I cannot identify where one idea ends and another

begins. Which phrases modify which nouns? What is the main verb of the sentence? Everything seems connected but I cannot see the structure." This difficulty reflects what linguists term "garden path" effects—situations where readers initially parse sentences incorrectly and must reanalyze upon encountering disambiguating information (Frazier & Rayner, 1982). In classical Arabic, where word order is relatively flexible and multiple grammatical relationships are possible, students lacking strong syntactic parsing strategies frequently commit to incorrect analyses that impede comprehension. The absence of punctuation in most classical manuscripts further compounds this challenge, removing typographic cues that modern readers use to segment complex sentences.

Statistical analysis revealed significant correlations between syntactic comprehension and students' performance on grammatical knowledge tests, r = .58, p < .001, suggesting that explicit grammatical knowledge does support syntactic processing—contrary to some communicative language teaching approaches that minimize grammar instruction's importance. However, the moderate correlation strength indicates that grammatical knowledge alone explains only about 34% of variance in syntactic comprehension, leaving substantial influence to other factors including working memory capacity, reading strategy use, and exposure to varied sentence patterns. Instructors noted that curricular emphasis traditionally focuses on morphological analysis rather than syntactic parsing, with students receiving limited explicit instruction in strategies for analyzing complex sentence structures. As one experienced instructor observed, "We teach students all the grammatical rules—subordinate clauses, noun phrases, verb agreement. But we do not teach them systematic methods for applying this knowledge when they face a complex sentence in actual text. They must discover these strategies themselves, and many students never develop effective approaches."

The role of pedagogical materials in supporting syntactic comprehension development emerged as a critical factor. Analysis of textbooks used in classical Arabic courses revealed that exercises predominantly featured isolated sentences or very short passages, rarely exposing students to the extended, syntactically complex sentences characteristic of authentic classical texts. When students encountered such sentences in assigned readings, the transition proved jarring. A third-semester student described, "In our grammar exercises, sentences are usually short and clear. But when the teacher assigns us to read classical texts, the sentences seem endless with complicated structures we have not practiced. It feels like a completely different language." This articulation captures what Alosh (2016) termed the "authenticity gap" in Arabic pedagogy—the discontinuity between controlled instructional materials and authentic texts. Research in L2 reading comprehension emphasizes the importance of extensive practice with texts at the upper bounds of learners' current abilities, with appropriate scaffolding, to develop processing skills (Grabe & Stoller, 2020). The finding suggests that classical Arabic curricula require more systematic progression from simplified to complex syntactic structures, with explicit instruction in parsing strategies accompanying increased structural complexity.

Lexical Obstacles and Semantic Challenges

Vocabulary knowledge emerged as a pervasive obstacle to classical text comprehension, with 68% of students identifying unfamiliar vocabulary as their primary reading difficulty. The proficiency assessment included measures of vocabulary size and depth, revealing that students' productive classical Arabic vocabularies averaged only 2,847 word families—substantially below the 5,000-8,000 word families that research suggests is necessary for comfortable independent reading of complex texts (Nation, 2006). More significantly, students demonstrated limited knowledge of the specialized semantic domains prevalent in classical texts, including theological terminology, historical concepts, and literary conventions. When confronted with passages containing dense disciplinary vocabulary, even stu-

dents with strong grammatical knowledge struggled to construct coherent meanings. A vocabulary depth assessment measuring knowledge of polysemy, collocation, and register revealed particular weaknesses: students could typically provide one meaning for familiar words but were unaware of additional meanings often employed in classical contexts, leading to misinterpretation even when they recognized word forms.

The qualitative data illuminated how lexical gaps interact with other comprehension challenges to create compounding difficulties. Students described a frustrating cycle where unfamiliar vocabulary impeded grammatical analysis, which in turn prevented use of contextual clues for vocabulary inference. One student articulated this process: "When I read classical text, maybe I know grammar and some words, but many words I do not know. Because I don't know these words, I cannot understand the sentence structure fully. Then because the structure is unclear, I cannot guess the unknown words from context. I become stuck." This description exemplifies the interconnected nature of reading processes, where deficits in one area cascade to affect other components (Grabe, 2009). Research on L2 reading comprehension consistently documents threshold effects, whereby insufficient vocabulary knowledge prevents readers from successfully applying other skills including grammatical knowledge and strategic processing (Laufer & Ravenhorst-Kalovski, 2010). The finding suggests that vocabulary development requires greater curricular emphasis in classical Arabic programs.

Instructors acknowledged that vocabulary instruction in classical Arabic courses typically remains incidental rather than systematic, with new lexical items introduced as they appear in assigned texts without comprehensive attention to retention or deep processing. One instructor explained, "In each class session, students encounter perhaps 15-20 new vocabulary items in the text we are reading. We provide meanings, students write them in their books. But there is no systematic review, no practice in varied contexts, no assessment of whether students actually learn these words. Next week, they have forgotten." This approach contrasts sharply with research-based vocabulary instruction emphasizing the need for multiple encounters with new words in varied contexts, explicit attention to form-meaning connections, and retrieval practice to support long-term retention (Nation, 2013). The traditional focus on immediate text translation overshadows long-term vocabulary acquisition goals, resulting in students' limited lexical development despite years of classical text exposure.

Particularly challenging vocabulary categories emerged from both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Abstract nouns derived from verbal roots, which carry philosophical and theological meanings central to classical Islamic discourse, posed significant difficulties: only 28% of students could correctly identify meanings of common abstract terms in context. Polysemous words presented similar challenges, with students typically knowing only the most basic meaning and unaware of extended or metaphorical senses common in classical usage. For example, the root q-w-m appears in classical texts with meanings ranging from its concrete sense of "standing" to abstract meanings including "establishing," "maintaining," "opposing," and "assessing," yet most students recognized only the basic physical meaning. One instructor noted, "Classical authors assumed readers shared extensive background knowledge—of other texts, of theological debates, of historical events. Modern students lack this background, so even when they know individual word meanings, they miss deeper significance and intertextual references." This observation highlights the cultural and contextual dimensions of vocabulary knowledge, extending beyond simple form-meaning associations to encompass the pragmatic and discourse-level knowledge necessary for full comprehension (Schmitt, 2010).

Pedagogical Factors and Instructional Challenges

Analysis of pedagogical factors revealed that instructional approaches significantly influence students' classical Arabic comprehension development, though current practices appear suboptimal in several respects. Instructor interviews and classroom observations indicated that teaching methods remain dominated by traditional grammar-translation approaches, with 86% of instructional time devoted to grammatical explanation and sentence-by-sentence translation. While such methods develop grammatical knowledge, they provide limited opportunities for students to develop fluent reading skills or to engage meaningfully with texts as coherent discourse. Students reported that typical class procedures involved the instructor reading a sentence, explaining difficult vocabulary and grammatical points, and providing or eliciting translation, after which the class moved to the next sentence. This fragmented approach prevents students from experiencing how sentences connect to form larger meanings and from developing the sustained comprehension processes necessary for independent reading. One student reflected, "We translate many classical texts in class, but I still cannot read classical texts alone. In class, the teacher guides us through every sentence. When I try to read myself, I do not know how to proceed systematically."

The proficiency assessment data supported students' perceptions, revealing a substantial gap between assisted comprehension (with teacher guidance) and independent comprehension. When provided with guided reading support including pre-reading orientation, vocabulary pre-teaching, and strategic questioning, students' comprehension averaged 67%—adequate performance. However, when asked to read comparable passages independently without support, average comprehension dropped to 39%, indicating that students had not internalized the comprehension strategies modeled during instruction. This finding resonates with Vygotskian perspectives on learning emphasizing the zone of proximal development—students can perform at higher levels with scaffolding but require explicit instruction and extensive practice to achieve independent mastery (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Current pedagogical practices appear to maintain students within assisted comprehension without successfully transitioning them toward independence, suggesting the need for more explicit strategy instruction and gradual release of responsibility from teacher to students.

Curricular structure and progression emerged as additional pedagogical concerns. Analysis of the Arabic Language Education curriculum at UIN Walisongo revealed limited vertical integration across courses, with grammar courses, reading courses, and content courses (covering Islamic studies topics in Arabic) operating largely independently. Students noted disconnections between what they learned in grammar classes and what they needed for reading classical texts in content courses. A fourth-semester student explained, "In grammar class, we study rules systematically—this semester is syntax, last semester was morphology. But in Islamic thought class, the teacher assigns classical texts that require all this grammar plus much more. The knowledge feels separate, not connected." This compartmentalization reflects broader challenges in curriculum design, where subject-matter organization takes precedence over integrated skill development (Richards, 2017). Several instructors acknowledged this issue, with one observing, "Our curriculum is organized around covering grammatical topics and classical texts that students should know. But we have not designed it from the perspective of how students progressively develop reading skills. What can they reasonably read after one year? Two years? How do we systematically build their capabilities?"

Despite these challenges, several pedagogical practices showed promise for supporting classical Arabic comprehension development. Three instructors who incorporated extensive reading components into their courses, assigning multiple shorter classical texts selected for appropriate difficulty level and requiring regular reading logs, reported that students demonstrated improved reading confidence and strategies. Quantitative comparison revealed that students who had completed courses with extensive reading components

achieved significantly higher scores on the independent reading assessment (M = 48.3, SD = 11.2) compared to students who had not taken such courses (M = 35.6, SD = 13.7), t(83) = 4.52, p < .001, d = 1.02. This large effect size supports research emphasizing extensive reading's importance for developing reading proficiency (Day & Bamford, 2002). Similarly, instructors who explicitly taught reading strategies—including previewing texts for content clues, identifying key sentence elements systematically, and using morphological knowledge for vocabulary inference—reported that students became more autonomous readers. One such instructor described her approach: "I do not just translate texts for students. I demonstrate how I think when reading—how I identify the main verb, how I determine what modifies what, how I use root meanings to guess new vocabulary. Then students practice these same strategies with guided practice." This explicit modeling of cognitive processes aligns with research on strategy instruction effectiveness, which emphasizes that learners benefit from observing expert processes made visible through think-aloud protocols and guided practice opportunities (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994).

The availability and quality of learning resources constituted another significant pedagogical factor affecting student comprehension development. Survey data revealed that 71% of students rated available learning resources as "inadequate" or "barely adequate." Students particularly noted the scarcity of graded classical Arabic readers—texts selected and adapted to match learners' developing proficiency levels. Most available materials consisted of either highly simplified educational texts bearing little resemblance to authentic classical literature, or unmodified classical texts whose difficulty exceeded students' capabilities. This resource gap necessitates that instructors create their own materials, a time-intensive process that results in inconsistent quality and coverage. Additionally, students reported limited access to comprehensive classical Arabic dictionaries, with many relying on basic modern Arabic dictionaries that inadequately cover classical vocabulary and usage. One student explained, "When I look up words in my dictionary, sometimes the meaning does not fit the classical text context. I know the word has other meanings used in classical times, but I cannot find them easily."

Technology integration in classical Arabic pedagogy remained minimal despite potential benefits for addressing several documented challenges. Only two of seven instructors regularly incorporated digital resources beyond basic presentation software. Analysis of available Arabic learning technologies revealed numerous tools potentially applicable to classical text comprehension, including morphological analyzers providing instant grammatical analysis, digital text corpora enabling vocabulary pattern exploration, and spaced repetition software supporting systematic vocabulary acquisition. However, instructors cited limited familiarity with these technologies and insufficient institutional support for technology integration as barriers to adoption. Research on computer-assisted language learning demonstrates that technology can effectively supplement traditional instruction when thoughtfully integrated to address specific learning challenges (Chapelle, 2010). The underutilization of technological resources represents a missed opportunity for enhancing classical Arabic pedagogy at UIN Walisongo.

Assessment practices constituted a final pedagogical factor influencing learning outcomes. Examination of assessment instruments used across classical Arabic courses revealed predominant reliance on translation tasks and grammatical analysis questions, with limited assessment of independent reading comprehension or strategy use. This assessment approach incentivizes students to focus on translation skills rather than developing broader comprehension capabilities. Several students acknowledged studying specifically for translation exams by memorizing vocabulary and grammatical analyses of assigned texts rather than developing generalizable reading skills. One instructor reflected critically on this pattern: "Our exams test whether students can translate sentences we have studied in class. This is important, but it does not measure whether they can read new classical

texts independently. We need better assessment methods that evaluate real reading ability." This recognition aligns with assessment literacy research emphasizing alignment between learning objectives, instructional activities, and assessment methods (Xu & Brown, 2016). The mismatch between desired outcomes—independent classical text comprehension—and current assessment practices suggests the need for more authentic reading assessments measuring students' ability to comprehend unfamiliar classical texts.

Graphical Representation of Key Findings

The following figure illustrates the distribution of primary difficulties reported by students across different linguistic domains, showing the percentage of students rating each area as "difficult" or "very difficult":
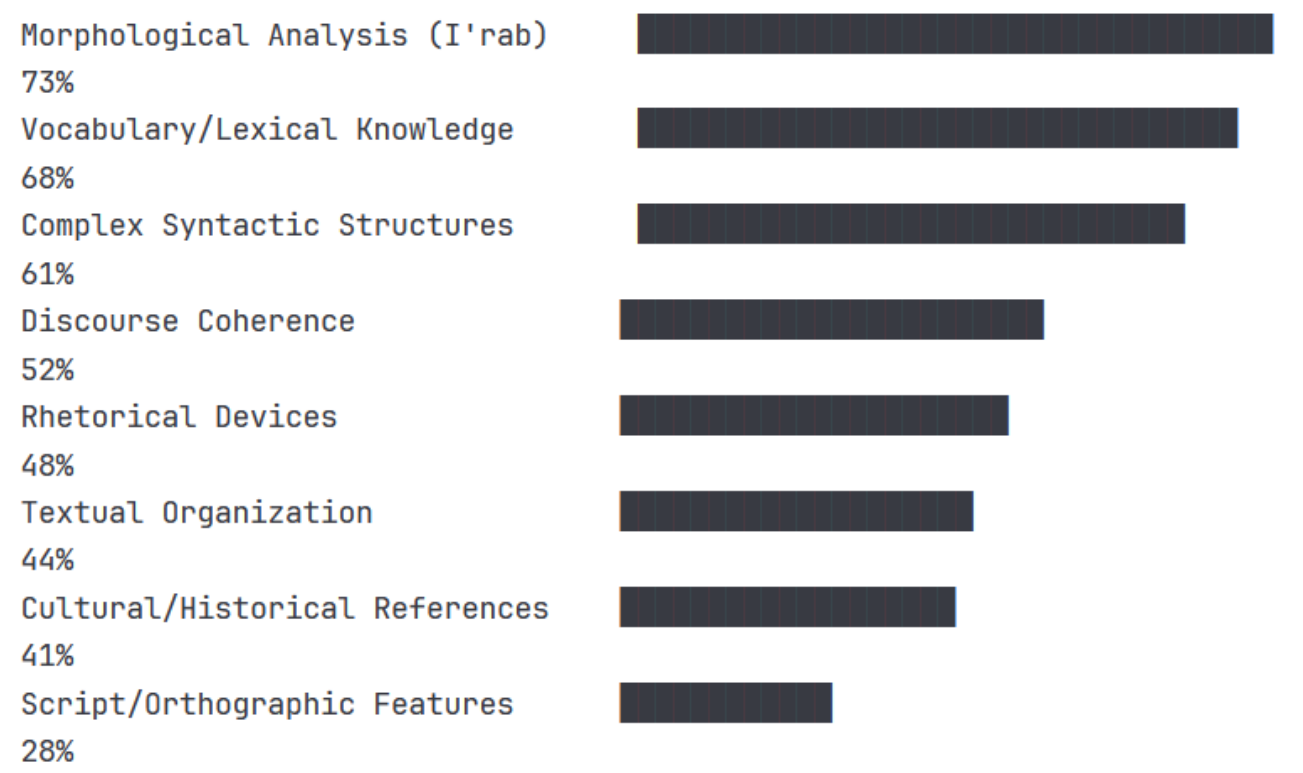

Morphological Analysis (I'rab)
73%

Vocabulary/Lexical Knowledge
68%

Complex Syntactic Structures
61%

Discourse Coherence
52%

Rhetorical Devices
48%

Textual Organization
44%

Cultural/Historical References
41%

Script/Orthographic Features
28%

Figure 1. Student-Reported Difficulty Levels Across Linguistic Domains in Classical Arabic Text Comprehension

This distribution reveals that morphological complexity, particularly i'rab analysis, represents the most widespread challenge, affecting nearly three-quarters of students. Lexical obstacles follow closely, with over two-thirds of students struggling with classical vocabulary. Syntactic complexity affects a substantial majority, while discourse-level features and cultural references present moderate difficulties. Notably, orthographic features—despite Arabic script's unique characteristics—constitute the least reported difficulty, suggesting that basic decoding skills develop adequately even as higher-level comprehension processes remain challenging. This pattern supports hierarchical models of reading comprehension wherein word-level processing precedes and enables higher-level meaning construction (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014).

E. CONCLUSION

This comprehensive investigation of classical Arabic text comprehension difficulties among Arabic Language Education students at UIN Walisongo Semarang reveals multifaceted challenges spanning linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical dimensions. Findings

demonstrate that morphological complexity, particularly i'rab inflection, constitutes the most pervasive obstacle, followed closely by lexical gaps and syntactic processing difficulties. These linguistic challenges are compounded by pedagogical approaches that emphasize grammatical analysis and translation at the expense of strategy development and extensive reading practice. The substantial gap between students' assisted and independent comprehension capabilities indicates that current instruction successfully scaffolds immediate text understanding but inadequately prepares students for autonomous classical text engagement. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive curricular reform integrating explicit strategy instruction, systematic vocabulary development, extensive reading with appropriately leveled materials, and enhanced technology integration. Furthermore, assessment practices must evolve to measure authentic reading comprehension rather than translation proficiency alone. The study's mixed-methods approach provides both breadth of measurement through quantitative data and depth of understanding through qualitative insights, offering robust evidence for targeted interventions. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of specific pedagogical innovations, examine longitudinal development of classical Arabic reading proficiency, and explore how graduates' classical text comprehension capabilities influence their effectiveness as Arabic language educators. Ultimately, enhancing classical Arabic pedagogy serves not merely academic goals but the broader objective of preserving access to Islamic intellectual heritage for contemporary and future generations of scholars.

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