

The Readability of the Arabic Prose Text

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Abstract: This study measures the readability level of Arabic prose texts among students from the Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Cloze test is used as an instrument to collect data. A review of previous studies shows that the cloze test is recognised as a tool for measuring readability for its high level of validity and reliability. The 22 respondents of the study are third-year degree students from the Department of Arabic Studies and Islamic Civilization who registered for the course of Arabic Literature in Andalusia. The texts used to measure the readability were taken from the notes by the lecturer teaching course. Research findings shows that a majority of the respondents scored poorly in the cloze test. Findings from the study suggest the readability level of the Arabic prose texts are at a very difficult level which challenges the readability level of the respondents. This shows that the texts are not suitable to be used as teaching material for the course.

Key words: Readability • Arabic prose text • Cloze test

INTRODUCTION

In a foreign language or a second-language learning setting, it is important that careful selection and use of appropriate reading texts are made to match the needs and level of the students. Students who are given difficult reading material will not only hinder their learning process but it will also cause them to become demotivated [1]. This matter can be solved by addressing the importance of readability of language texts for foreign language learning [2]. Readability is a concept that refers to the level of ease and difficulty of a reading material [3] According to Klare, Chall and Khadijah Rohani, there is a lack of studies on readability conducted on languages other than English, with past studies focusing mostly on English texts in American second-language or foreign-language classrooms [4-6]. Meanwhile, in the Malaysian context,

there is also a lack of study on the readability of Arabic texts thus far. With a gap in the research and literature review, it is thus important that this study attempts to offer insight into the readability level of texts that is of current practice in an Arabic learning setting in Malaysia. This study has pedagogical implications whereby Arabic instructors can use the knowledge to make an informed choice in the future of teaching by producing reading materials that are suitable for non-Arabic students.

This study is intended to measure the readability of Arabic reading texts to non-Arabic readers using respondents who are third-year students from the Department of Arabic and Islamic Civilisation Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The focus reading texts in this study are lecture notes for the course entitled Arabic Literature in Andalusia.

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Definition and Readability Factor: In the field of research, readability is concerned with determining the difficulty level of a particular reading text. According to Klare and Jones, the term readability in academic research refers to studies that encompass text comprehension. This involves measuring whether the text is easy or difficult for the learners [4, 7]. Meanwhile, Pikulski and Yujing state that readability is the ease or difficulty of the text that is meant to be understood by the readers who are reading a particular text for a particular purpose [8, 9].

Although research on readability focuses on the texts itself, past studies also examined the readers' background. According to Gilliland, he believes that a research on readability seeks to solve the problem of compatibility of reader with text. For example, it can study how a reader with a particular reading skill with specific interests can adapt to reading texts which are written in various ways, containing diverse content and structure. [10].

Other factors that influence readability were also studied which involved finding the indicator and benchmark for readability and the construction of a readability formula [11, 3, 8]. The aforementioned factors could be grouped into two main factors which are text factor and reader factor [12, 13].

Reading Text Factor: Past studies have listed various sub-factors in reading texts that influence readability. Harrison states that there are many variables that contribute to the level of readability and comprehension [12]. According to past studies, these factors fall into two major categories which are linguistics (or conceptual) and format and design [8].

The linguistic factors include word choice, syntax, depth of content and concepts. Meanwhile, the format also plays a role in readability such as text organisation, typography, colour and illustration, graphic materials and type-setting [14].

Reader Factor: As stated above, many researchers have considered the reader factor (background of the reader) as the second most important variable in measuring the readability of a text. Other sub factors were also identified that include motivation and interest [4, 15], language ability [16, 17] and previous knowledge or schemata related to the reading materials [8].

Literature Review: This section provides a brief review of several past researches on the measurement of the readability level of an Arabic reading text using the cloze test as a measuring tool.

A study by Tu'aymah employed the cloze test to measure the ability to read Arabic text passage among students of non-Arabic speakers at three universities in the United States. Among his most significant findings is that a cloze test is a suitable instrument for measuring the readability of Arabic text as a second or foreign language [18]. This research was the first ever study of the readability of Arabic reading materials that involves the use of cloze test [19].

Abanami also opted for cloze tests to measure the readability of science textbooks in Arabic. His research, involving students in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia also found that cloze tests can be used to measure the students' reading comprehension [20]. Cloze tests was again used in another study on Arabic reading materials by al-Sisi in Baghdad which proved that cloze tests is a valid and reliable measuring tool to measure the readability level of Arabic reading materials [21].

Meanwhile, a study conducted by Da'na on the readability of science textbooks for primary school students in Jordan also employed the cloze test. Like Abanami, his research demonstrated that cloze tests can be used to measure the readability of science text books in Arabic [22].

Furthermore, al-Huwaydi used the cloze tests to examine the readability of footnotes for an annual financial report of a corporate company in Kuwait. His findings support previous studies conducted in the West that proves that the readability level of financial reports of corporate companies are low which means that it is difficult to understand [23].

In Malaysia, Kamarulzaman studied the readability of a Form Four Advanced Arabic Language textbook among students from a religious Secondary School. His study which also used the cloze test as one of the measuring instruments found out that readability of the book was at a disappointingly poor level [14].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This readability study on Arabic literary text is a case study that employs the quantitative descriptive method. This part of the discussion will explain how the data was

collected and analysed to achieve the research objectives. The aspects that will be covered are the design of the study, the subject of study, the sample, research locations and the instrument used.

According to Chua, the findings are determined by the design of the study and the research design is determined by the purpose of the study [24]. As previously stated, the purposes or objectives of the study are: i) to measure the level of the Arabic literary texts studied by the students and ii) to determine whether it is a suitable teaching material for the respondents in the study. To achieve the first objective, the cloze test is selected as a measuring instrument based on its validity and reliability factors [10, 13, 15, 18, 19, 21, 25-29] as well as the recommendation of past studies. To achieve the second objective, the data collected through the cloze test is compared with the table of the readability level of the reading text which was proposed by Rye [30]. The findings of these matches are further explained in the results of this study.

The subject of this study are the *imla'* texts in the classroom based on Arabic Literature textbooks in Andalusia. *Imla'* are simplified notes prepared by the lecturers who then dictated the notes to the students. The 22 participants are third-year degree students at the Department of Arabic and Islamic Civilization Studies, Faculty of Islamic Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia who are taking Andalusia Arabic Literature.

The instrument used to collect the data is a set of cloze tests. Cloze test is a test that consists of strategically placed blanks where a few words are taken out of the passage in the test and test takers are required to fill in the blanks based on the context of the phrase or the sentence [30]. This technique was first discovered by the German scholar Ebbinghaus in 1897 and only become widely used as a tool for measuring readability in 1953 after it was used by Wilson Taylor in his study [31, 32].

The procedures used to build and conduct this test is based on the guidelines proposed by Rye, Tu'aymah and Kamarulzaman [30, 19, 14]. The procedures this study undertook were as follows:

- Five texts were randomly selected out of 20 topics from the Arabic Literature in Andalusia subjects. According to Rye, the article that is suitable for a cloze test should be texts containing 250 words,

while Tu'aymah recommended 300 words and above [30, 19]. Based on this, only seven topics had a total word count exceeding 140 words. From the seven topics, the text samples were selected, with five of the selected texts containing a variety of text themes.

- The deletion of the word in the text can be either the fifth, sixth or seventh word. The first sentence is left intact but counting begins from the first word in the second sentence. In this study, the fixed deletion was done on every seventh word. This is in line with Tu'aymah's recommendation where he stated that this technique is widely used to test a foreign language text [19]. Klare *et al.* however, asserts that deleting every seventh word is suitable for students with poor language ability or for texts that are difficult [28]. Tu'aymah also stated that a total of 30 words for deletion are sufficient for secondary school texts [19]. The researchers in this study opted for this method for the university students.
- From the selected text, text (A) contained 17 blanks, text (B), (C), (D) have 20 blanks and text (E) has 23 blanks. This totalled to 100 deleted words from the five texts. This meets the requirement proposed by Tu'aymah where he recommended 30 as the minimum deletion of words [19]. When this is multiplied by three texts, the number of words deleted becomes 90 words.
- In the implementation of a cloze test, two formats of a test are usually utilised which is the multiple-choice or open-ended. In this study, the technique used is multiple-choice answers which is based on a study by Kamarulzaman [14]. For a multiple-choice answer, three distractors are provided for each blank whereby there is only one correct answer. According to Guthrie, three choices for an answer is sufficient [33].
- To ensure that respondents fully understood the purpose and method of testing, they were given an oral briefing as well as clear instructions in the question booklet.
- Each blank was replaced with a line that is of equal length to avoid giving away clues on the types of words that have been deleted which would affect the students' answers
- Each blank space were underlined and numbered in sequence for marking purpose.

The Following Is a Sample of the Cloze Test:

الأدب العربي في فترة تأسيس الإمارة

تتمثل هذه الفترة في عهد عبدالرحمن الداخل وابنه هشام وحفيده الحكم. لقد استقر المجتمع الأندلسي في هذه _____ {الوقت، الفترة، المدة} (1) إجتماعيا وسياسيا واقتصاديا. و _____ {قد، في، عن} (2) وفد كثير من الأمويين وأنصارهم _____ {عن، في، على} (3) الأندلس. وكذلك رجع أول فوج _____ {أو، و، من} (4) الأندلسيين الذين سافروا إلى المشرق للدراسة. _____ {و، أو، من} (5) لهذا السبب نرى أن هذه الفترة _____ {ظهر، بدأ، خلق} (6) ظهور أول جيل من الأدباء الأندلسيين _____ {الأصليين، الحقيقي، الحقيقيين} (7) وكذلك ظهرت جماعة من أبيات _____ {الأندلس، الأندلسيون، الأندلسيات} (8) وفي مجال الشعر ظهر شعراء _____ {كثير، كثير، كثرة} (9) أكثرهم الأندلسيون مولدا ومنشأ و _____ {ثقافات، ثقف، ثقافة} (10)، فمنهم أبو المحشي والحكم ابن _____ {هشام، هاشم، هشيم} (11) وعباس بن ناصح ومن _____ {الآبيات، البيت، البيوت} (12) حسانة التميمية وغيرها. ويعرف _____ {عابد، عبيد، عبد} (13) الرحمن الداخل وهو مؤسس لدولة _____ {أموية، أموي، أمية} (14) في الأندلس كشاعر وأديب. و _____ {عن، على، أما} (15) في مجال النثر ظهر عدد كبير _____ {أو، من، ثم} (16) الكتاب البارزين منهم خطاب بن _____ {يارد، يزيد، تيزيد} (17) وفطيش بن عيسى وغيرهم.

Data Analysis: To get the readability level of the reviewed Arab literary texts from the Andalusia era, the overall mean readability scores obtained were matched with the readability level of the reading material as in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the readability level of the reading material based on a cloze test with multiple choice answers. At the disappointing level is the level of reading material that indicates difficulty for the reader. The instructional level is the level of reading materials that can be understood but with the assistance of others, whilst the independent level is the level of reading material that can be read and understood easily without the help and assistance of a third person [30]. According to Tu'aymah, if the average score falls on the independent level, it shows that the text book used in the study had a high level of readability and is thus appropriate for the use of students [15].

The following Table 2 shows the frequency distribution (f) and percentage (%) scores of the readability level based on the texts and the overall score. The table shows that a majority of the respondents scored at the disappointing level except for text A. These results

affect the frequency and percentage of the respondents' overall score. The majority of the respondents who scored at the disappointing level are 15 respondents or 68.2% over the instructional level, whilst at the independent level, there were only 31.8%, or a total of 7 respondents.

The following Table 3 shows the mean scores from the readability scores based on the text and the overall score. The mean scores of the readability shows no significant differences. Text A obtained a mean score of = 76.82, which is 77% readability scores, text B obtained the mean score of = 63.41 (63% readability scores), text C obtained the mean score of = 71.59 (72% readability scores), text D obtained the mean score of = 74.41 (74% readability scores) and text E obtained the mean score of = 67.5 (68% readability scores). This shows that the two texts are on the instructional level and the remaining text is at the disappointing level. However, the determination of the readability level of the studied texts is based on the readability scores of the entire test. It was found that the mean score of the overall readability test was at the mean = 70.63 (71% readability scores).

Table 1: Readability level of reading text [30]

Readability Level	Multiple Choice Answers
Independent	90% -100%
Instructional	75% - 89%
Disappointing	0% - 74%

Table 2: Distribution of frequency and percentage score of readability level

Readability Level	Text A		Text B		Text C		Text D		Text E		Overall Score	
	F	%	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	F	%
Independent	0	0	3	13.6	5	22.7	7	31.8	2	9.1	1	4.5
Instructional	14	63.6	3	13.6	6	27.3	2	9.1	6	27.3	6	27.3
Disappointing	8	36.4	16	72.8	11	50	13	59.1	14	63.6	15	68.2

Table 3: Mean score readability

Text	Mean
Text A	76.82
Text B	63.41
Text C	71.59
Text D	74.41
Text E	67.5
Overall Score	70.63

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It is evident that from the above analysis that the overall readability score obtained is 71%. When it was matched with the readability level of the reading material as in Table 1, it is found to be at the disappointing level. This finding indicates that the readability level of the Arabic literary texts in imla' for the Andalusia era were difficult and not suitable to be used as teaching materials for the respondents.

The findings of the test also shows that the respondents' weaknesses in Arabic is very high. This is because the cloze test texts were already from simplified reading texts prepared by the lecturers teaching the course. The cloze test did not involve authentic texts from the literature books on the Andalusia era which were reference books in the course. Instead, not only had the lecturer simplified the texts but also dictated the notes in class. The copied notes are then used as the students' learning text.

CONCLUSION

With reference to the findings of previous studies that measure the level of readability of the Arabic text using the cloze tests for Malaysian students, a study by Zamri et. Al on the literary text from the Abbasiah era found that the readability level was not up to par to the students[34]. Similarly, a study by Kamarulzaman revealed that the Form Four Advanced Arabic Language textbook

was also at a very disappointing level [14]. The same findings were also found in a study by Zulazhan [35]. This study suggests that the Arabic instructors have put in substantial effort to provide reading materials that match the reading ability of the students through simplifying the notes, but more effort is needed to provide better texts that match the students' ability. This is very important because a suitable readability level of the text can improve the students' skills in Arabic.

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