

Teachers' Knowledge Level of Alternative Approaches in Teaching Arabic Speaking Skills at Government-Aided Religious Schools (SABK) : Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study was executed to evaluate the usability and reliability of a questionnaire instrument developed to measure the knowledge level of teachers concerning alternative approaches in the teaching of Arabic speaking skills. A total of 19 Arabic Language teachers from four Government-Aided Religious Secondary Schools (SABK) in the Tangkak district of Johor voluntarily participated. The subsequent analysis yielded a Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.98 for the entire instrument, indicating a high degree of internal consistency. Based on the preliminary Cronbach's Alpha finding, several items were subsequently subjected to structural and linguistic revisions within the questionnaire. This study, therefore, confirms that the instrument is deemed appropriate for deployment in the main research study.

Keywords: pilot study, teacher knowledge, alternative approaches, Arabic Language, speaking skills.

INTRODUCTION

The instruction of the Arabic language as a second or foreign language in Malaysia plays a crucial role in fulfilling religious educational requirements and strengthening cultural identity among students, particularly in Government-Aided Religious Schools (SABK). Speaking skills, as a primary component of language mastery, serve as a benchmark for success in Arabic language learning because they reflect the students' capacity to communicate orally and effectively (Ismail, 2015). However, the implementation of speaking skills instruction frequently encounters challenges, such as the use of conventional teaching approaches, limited exposure to communicative techniques, and restricted teacher knowledge regarding innovative alternative approaches (Hassan & Abdullah, 2019). Alternative approaches, including the utilisation of role-play activities, the dialogue (hiwar) method, and multimedia-based technology, have been demonstrated to be capable of enhancing student interest and proficiency in speaking skills (Ismail, 2018; Al-Batal, 2020; Othman & Kassim, 2018).

The efficacy of Arabic language instruction is contingent upon the teacher's capability to integrate student-centred approaches that foster two-way interaction and the practical use of the language in real-life contexts. Recent studies indicate that alternative approaches, which emphasise activities such as group discussions, simulations, and language games, are capable of enhancing student fluency and confidence (Mohamed & Ismail, 2022). Furthermore, the integration of technology, such as mobile applications and interactive learning platforms, has established new avenues for enriching the Arabic language learning experience (Hussein et al., 2020; Ismail et al., 2021). Nevertheless, the successful adoption of these approaches is dependent upon the level of knowledge and proficiency of teachers in implementing them within the classroom setting. Consequently, this pilot study aims to identify the knowledge level of SABK teachers regarding alternative approaches in the teaching of Arabic speaking skills, with the anticipation of contributing to the development of more effective instructional strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While numerous studies discuss the implementation of alternative approaches in Arabic language instruction, the majority focus predominantly on the impact of these approaches on students, rather than the knowledge level or competence of teachers in utilising them. This deficit in in-depth research impedes efforts to ascertain the extent to which SABK teachers are equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to effectively integrate alternative approaches, which may ultimately compromise the quality of speaking skills instruction.

A study by Zainuddin and Mokhtar (2020) found that teachers possessed a moderate readiness to employ student-centred approaches, yet their knowledge regarding the practical implementation of these approaches was not investigated in depth, thereby leaving a scope for further research. Furthermore, Ismail & Hassan (2022) and Al-Hoorie (2023) underscored the efficacy of the gamification approach in enhancing students' speaking skills, but neglected to address the teachers' knowledge level concerning this approach or their preparedness for its utilisation, indicating a significant deficiency in research on teacher competency.

A study by Ismail & Ahmad (2023) and Mohamed (2022) revealed that teachers encountered challenges in applying the communicative approach due to a lack of specific training and in-depth knowledge of this methodology. Nevertheless, these studies did not strictly investigate the teachers' level of knowledge, focusing instead primarily on the implementation challenges.

According to Ismail et al. (2023) and Aladin (2023), teachers exhibit a positive perception towards technology, such as language learning applications, yet the lack of technical and pedagogical knowledge impedes their effective utilisation. These studies did not quantitatively measure the teachers' level of knowledge, indicating a research gap in this particular aspect. The investigation into the teachers' knowledge level is also informed by the study of Mohamed & Hassan (2023), which found a deficiency in knowledge concerning the pedagogical integration of this media. This latter study also did not systematically investigate the teachers' level of knowledge, underscoring the necessity for a more focused inquiry.

The studies mentioned earlier demonstrate that despite an interest in alternative approaches for teaching Arabic speaking skills, research specifically measuring teachers' level of knowledge concerning these approaches remains limited. Most inquiries have primarily focused on the impact of the approaches on students or the implementation challenges, without delving into teachers' understanding and preparedness. Consequently, a pilot study investigating the knowledge level of teachers in \text{SABK} is pertinent to address this research lacuna and contribute to teacher professionalism in Arabic language instruction. Prior to conducting the main study, this pilot investigation is being executed to ensure that the developed questionnaire instrument is valid, reliable, and appropriate in terms of both content and administration.

Objective

A pilot study must be conducted prior to the main research as it serves as a trial run to ensure that all study aspects operate smoothly (Azmi et al., 2023). Without a pilot study, researchers risk utilising an inaccurate instrument, encountering unforeseen implementation challenges, or generating unreliable data, which could compromise the quality and credibility of the findings (Ismail & Ahmad (2023) and Mohamed (2022); and Ismail et al. (2023) and Aladin (2023)). The pilot study ensures the instrument's suitability for the \text{SABK} context and teacher population, and helps to identify specific challenges, such as a lack of respondent cooperation or the ambiguity of technical terms in the questionnaire.

Therefore, the objective of this pilot study is:

To evaluate the comprehensibility and suitability of the items within the questionnaire.

To test the reliability of the instrument using the Cronbach's Alpha value.

To identify any implementation issues that require refinement prior to the main study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a quantitative approach utilizing a descriptive survey design. According to Saunders & Thornhill (2019), a descriptive design enables researchers to generate rich data concerning the characteristics of the study's subjects, such as their attitudes, behaviours, or specific conditions. The research instrument consisted of a quantitative data collection tool, namely a questionnaire. Saunders et al. (2020) state that the selection of an appropriate instrument is critical to ensuring that the collected data can effectively address the research questions. Furthermore, Schoonenboom & Johnson (2017) and Tashakkori & Teddlie (2021) underscore that a meticulously developed instrument, inclusive of validity and reliability testing, is fundamental to research quality.

Research Sample

A total of 19 teachers currently instructing the subject of al-Lughah al-Arabiah al-Muasirah at four SABK secondary schools in the Tangkak District were selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included a minimum teaching experience of 2 years and active involvement in speaking skills instruction. According to Ismail et al. (2021), the selection of samples based on specific criteria, such as teaching experience, is crucial in educational research to ensure that the data accurately reflect the actual context. Furthermore, Hashim et al. (2023) posit that sampling from uniform institutions, such as government-aided religious schools, helps to control extraneous variables and enhance the validity of the findings.

Research Procedure

This questionnaire was administered online using the online platform to facilitate the distribution, collection, and management of data. The online implementation simplified dissemination to respondents dispersed across the Tangkak district. According to Regmi et al. (2021), online questionnaires enhance data collection efficiency and reduce processing time, making it an ideal choice for studies involving geographically disparate respondents. Furthermore, online questionnaires allow respondents to complete the survey at their convenience in terms of time and location, which is expected to increase the response rate, particularly among teachers with demanding schedules. Lefever et al. (2022) note that online platforms support ease of access and respondent comfort, which is crucial for ensuring maximum participation in educational research.

RESULT OF THE STUDY

The data obtained in this study were analysed using Cronbach's Alpha, a widely used statistical method for determining the internal consistency or reliability of a research instrument. This technique is particularly suitable for questionnaires that employ Likert scales or consist of multiple related items measuring a single construct (Sijtsma & Pfadt, 2020). The resulting Cronbach's Alpha coefficient reflects the degree to which the items within the instrument are interrelated and consistently measure the same underlying variable. According to Taber (2018), a coefficient value of 0.70 or higher is generally regarded as acceptable, indicating a satisfactory level of reliability. Nevertheless, for exploratory or pilot studies, lower thresholds such as 0.60, may still be considered adequate depending on the instrument and research context (Ibrahim et al., 2024). Higher coefficients, particularly those exceeding 0.80, denote excellent reliability, demonstrating a high level of stability and consistency across the items. Employing Cronbach's Alpha in this study ensures that the instrument yields dependable results and minimises measurement error. A high reliability score also strengthens the validity of subsequent analyses by confirming that the collected data accurately represent the construct being investigated. This, in turn, enhances the credibility of the study's conclusions and supports their potential generalisability. By establishing strong internal consistency at this stage, the instrument is proven suitable for broader application in future research.

Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Table (Taber, 2018)

Cronbach's Alpha Value	Reliability Level	General Interpretation
≥ 0.90	Excellent	Very reliable instrument

0.80 – 0.89	Good	A good reliable instrument
0.70 – 0.79	Acceptable	The instrument is acceptable in most social studies
0.60 – 0.69	Questionable	Acceptable for pilot study
< 0.60	Poor	This instrument needs to be repaired or rebuild

RESEARCH FINDING

In the conducted pilot study, the internal reliability analysis using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient for the tested construct yielded a value of 1.00. While this value suggests a perfect level of reliability, it also indicates the potential for redundant or overlapping questions within the instrument that measure the same matter, which could compromise content validity and lead to measurement inefficiency (Boateng et al., 2021). To counter measure this problem, several redundant, repetitive, or near-identical questions were consequently removed, and the resulting Cronbach's Alpha value transformed to a more valid figure.

According to Atkins et al, (2017), the removal of redundant items is a critical step for enhancing construct validity. An excessively high Alpha value may suggest that the items do not encompass the full dimensionality of the construct, but rather repeatedly measure only a single aspect. This study is supported by McNeish (2018), who specifically cautioned against the misinterpretation of an excessively high Cronbach's Alpha value. The scholar argued that an alpha value approaching 1.0 may indicate an undesirable level of item redundancy rather than genuinely good internal consistency. They proposed that researchers should evaluate the dimensionality structure and consider deleting items with overly high item-total correlations to prevent measurement bias.

This questionnaire instrument is divided into four sections:

Respondent Demographics

Teachers' General Knowledge of Alternative Approaches

Teachers' Knowledge of Alternative Approaches as a Pedagogical Tool

Teachers' Knowledge of Alternative Approaches as an Assessment Tool

Result of the Cronbach's Alpha analysis were conducted Section B, C and D:

Section	Previous Item	Cronbach' Alpha value	Removed Items	New Cronbach' Alpha value
B	12	0.97	0	0.97
C	36	1.00	9	0.98
D	18	1.00	4	0.98

RESPONDENT'S FEEDBACK

Based on the feedback received from the respondents during the pilot study, there were no comments indicating that the instrument's items were considered overly lengthy or difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, several respondents reported a need for further clarification on the meaning of certain words or contexts deemed new or less familiar to them, namely (alternative), (authentic), (active), and (collaborative). To ensure enhanced understanding and improve the instrument's usability, providing explanations for the meaning of these terms, along with relevant examples, is necessary. This feedback suggests that while the instrument's items are clear in terms of length and difficulty, there is a requirement to enhance the clarity of specific vocabulary.

To address this issue, recommendations include providing a brief glossary within the instrument or offering contextual explanations for the less familiar terms before respondents proceed to answer the questions. This approach will ensure uniform comprehension among respondents, consequently enhancing the validity and reliability of the collected data (Boateng et al., 2021). This action also aligns with best practices in instrument development, which emphasise the importance of ensuring that the language used is accessible to the target population. This clarification ensures a more user-friendly instrument without altering the item structure, thereby preserving the integrity of the study.

Instrument Improvement

Questionnaire refinement after the pilot study was essential to ensure the main study's high quality, primarily involving the deletion of redundant items based on inter-item correlation analysis. This modification reduced the Cronbach's Alpha from an overly high value to a more realistic 0.98, signifying a more compact and robust instrument. Removing redundant items is crucial because their high correlation can make the measured variable too homogeneous, limiting the instrument's ability to capture the construct's full complexity (Boateng et al., 2021) and potentially increasing respondent fatigue. This step thus enhances the instrument's efficiency, usability, and content validity while preserving high reliability (Taber, 2023), aligning with best practices to eliminate items that do not uniquely contribute to the construct and avoid analysis bias (Yong & Pearce, 2020).

The researcher's decision to retain the questionnaire without providing a glossary for specific terms and contexts is predicated on the study's objective to evaluate the respondents' genuine level of comprehension of the concepts under investigation. By withholding a glossary, the researcher is able to capture the respondents' organic understanding uninfluenced by external definitions, which is paramount to ensuring the content validity of the collected data. This approach permits the direct measurement of respondents' knowledge or perceptions without intervention that could potentially bias their responses, thereby providing a more authentic depiction of their awareness or literacy regarding the constructs being examined (Bolarinwa, 2020).

Furthermore, the inclusion of a glossary could introduce response bias, wherein respondents might select answers based on the provided definitions rather than their own internalised understanding. This is a potential threat to the study's internal validity, particularly if the goal is to assess knowledge or attitudes that are not influenced by external aid (Knekta et al., 2021).

The no-glossary approach is also consistent with instrument development principles that emphasise the importance of employing language anticipated to be understood by the target population, where the very lack of comprehension of specific terminology constitutes valuable data for identifying knowledge gaps (Tsang et al., 2017). Consequently, maintaining the questionnaire in its original form without a glossary is justified to ensure that the data obtained accurately reflects the authentic state of the respondents, which is a crucial element in studies assessing understanding or perception.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study successfully assessed the instrument's internal reliability via Cronbach's Alpha analysis. The initial value of 1.00 suggested potential item redundancy but was subsequently improved to 0.98 after the removal of overlapping questions, resulting in a more concise and high-quality instrument. Respondent feedback highlighted a need for clarification on terms such as "alternative," "authentic," "active," and "collaborative." However, the decision to proceed without a glossary was made to capture the respondents' uninfluenced understanding, aligning with the study's objective to measure their genuine knowledge or perception. This method, consistent with best practices in instrument development, ensures the validity and authenticity of the data, thus confirming the instrument's readiness for the main, full-scale study with minimal further refinement.

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