

An Interlanguage Analysis of Predicate Form and Position in Arabic Nominal Sentences Constructed by Malay Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Predicate (*khavar*) selection in Arabic nominal sentences (*jumlaḥ ismiyyah*) requires learners to coordinate predicate form, word order, and licensing conditions, making it a persistent difficulty in Arabic as a foreign language. This study examined the recurring response patterns produced by 22 Malay-speaking undergraduates across four sentence-construction tasks and considered their implications for Arabic writing instruction and assessment. Guided by interlanguage theory, the study employed a qualitative, document-based error-analysis design supported by descriptive frequencies. A total of 88 handwritten responses were analysed against the grammatical requirement of each task and the lecturer's corrective annotations. Responses were classified according to target-structure compliance rather than general grammatical acceptability. The findings revealed a consistent but uneven pattern of difficulty. Only one learner (4.5%) produced the required fronted predicate containing an element with *haqq al-sadaraḥ*, while seven (31.8%) realised the predicate as a complete nominal clause. Two learners (9.1%) produced a fronted *shibḥ jumlaḥ* predicate followed by an indefinite *mubtada'*, whereas 11 (50.0%) constructed a *masdar mu'awwal* functioning as the *mubtada'*. The frequent reproduction of the same *masdar mu'awwal* example suggested reliance on a familiar model, although the data could not establish memorisation as the underlying cognitive process. Across the four tasks, learners commonly simplified, conflated, or avoided structures that required marked predicate forms or positions. These recurring choices support an interlanguage interpretation while remaining consistent with multiple possible influences, including prior linguistic knowledge, limited productive practice, and task-related difficulty. The study concludes that Arabic writing instruction should distinguish predicate type from predicate position, provide progressively varied sentence-construction practice, and assess target-structure compliance separately from general accuracy. These measures would offer a more precise account of learners' productive syntactic competence and strengthen the connection between explicit *nahw* knowledge and its application in writing.

Keywords: Arabic nominal sentences, error analysis, interlanguage, predicate fronting, syntactic competence.

INTRODUCTION

The nominal sentence (*jumlaḥ ismiyyah*) is the structural core of Arabic syntax and the first major predication pattern encountered by learners of Arabic as a foreign language (AFL). Its two obligatory constituents, *mubtada'* (subject) and *khavar* (predicate), appear straightforward in citation-form examples, yet the *khavar* itself is not a single, monolithic category (Astia et al., 2025; Abu Dosh & Al-Mahameed, 2024). Classical and contemporary *nahwu* scholarship distinguishes *khavar mufrad* (a single word), *khavar jumlaḥ* (an embedded nominal or verbal clause), and *khavar shibḥ jumlaḥ* (a prepositional or adverbial phrase). Each type interacts with independent rules governing word order—most notably *taqdim al-khavar* (predicate fronting)—which is triggered when the *mubtada'* contains a word with *haqq al-sadaraḥ* (obligatory sentence-initial status), when the *mubtada'* is *nakirah* (indefinite) and the *khavar* is *shibḥ jumlaḥ*, or when the *masdar mu'awwal* functions as the *mubtada'* (Najah et al., 2022).

For Malay-speaking learners, whose native language (Bahasa Melayu) does not mark predicate types morphologically and tolerates a comparatively fixed subject-predicate order, this multi-way syntactic system

creates a genuine acquisition burden (Ghani, 2020). Recent syntactic studies confirm that a fundamental weakness in Arabic writing stems from the failure to master syntax (*nahw*) and morphology (*sarf*), often resulting in confusion between nominal (*jumlah ismiyyah*) and verbal sentences (*jumlah fi'liyyah*) (Awang, Ali, Mustafa, et al., 2025). It is a common misconception, often inferred from poor academic grades, that undergraduate learners are encountering the concepts of *mubtada'* and *khavar* for the first time upon entering university. Contrary to this assumption, these students have formally studied Arabic nominal sentence structures since secondary school. However, a significant gap exists between theory and practice: most learners possess a theoretical grasp of grammar rules but fail to apply them accurately in grammatical writing (Awang, Ali, Mustafa, et al., 2025; Mhd Rusdi et al., 2023).

This application gap is further compounded by the limited instructional time allocated to Arabic language instruction in higher education. Mastery of the *mubtada'-khavar* structure is fundamental to learning in Arabic-medium courses. It also provides the grammatical foundation for interpreting complex Islamic and academic texts encountered throughout students' university studies (Astia et al., 2025; Mat Noor et al., 2025).

This study addresses this gap by analysing 22 authentic, lecturer-marked answer scripts produced through a sentence-construction task in which learners independently formulated sentences according to the grammatical requirements specified in each question. The study addresses three central research questions: (1) What recurring patterns of predicate-related errors emerge across the four target structures? (2) To what extent do these patterns represent systematic features of the learners' interlanguage rather than isolated performance errors? and (3) What pedagogical implications do the findings offer for the teaching and assessment of Arabic writing skills (*maharah al-kitabah*)?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interlanguage theory and error analysis in Arabic as a foreign language

The concept of interlanguage describes the linguistically autonomous system that second-language learners construct at any given stage of acquisition (Derakhshan & Karimi, 2015). Corder (1967) reframed learner errors as systematic evidence of this internal grammar rather than as mere performance failures, grounding the Error Analysis (EA) tradition. Typological contrasts between Malay and Arabic provide a structural basis for persistent interlingual transfer, often causing learners to superimpose L1 syntactic frames onto Arabic sentences (Darman et al., 2026). Malaysian-context studies consistently report classifiable error types among undergraduates, reinforcing the necessity of treating classroom writing samples as legitimate interlanguage data (A Rahman et al., 2024).

The syntax of *khavar* in Arabic nominal sentences

Contemporary *nahw* scholarship treats the *mubtada'-khavar* relationship as a syntactic-semantic predication system that encodes information focus (Astia et al., 2025). Three conditions are especially relevant: First, *khavar-muqaddam* becomes obligatory when the *mubtada'* contains a word with *haqq al-sadarah*. Second, Arabic grammar restricts the licensing of an indefinite (*nakirah*) *mubtada'* to specific contexts, including when the *khavar* is a fronted *shibh jumlah*. Third, *khavar* subdivides into *mufrad*, *jumlah*, and *shibh jumlah*. Because Malay predicate structures do not demand this rigorous three-way categorical distinction, this cluster of rules constitutes a major site of cross-linguistic difficulty (Abu Dosh & Al-Mahameed, 2024; Suja et al., 2024).

Writing skills (*maharah al-kitabah*) and formulaic language

Writing (*maharah al-kitabah*) is widely regarded as the most cognitively demanding Arabic language skill. Previous studies report that linguistic barriers—such as vocabulary deficits and syntactic errors—alongside psychological factors like low motivation, severely hinder writing proficiency (Awang, Ali, & Noruddin@Che Ahmad, 2025). Furthermore, traditional teacher-centered pedagogical approaches often emphasize rote memorization of grammatical rules without providing contextual writing applications, preventing students from internalising syntax for real-world communication (Awang, Ali, Mustafa, et al., 2025).

Consequently, SLA research on formulaic language shows that pre-assembled multi-word units are stored and retrieved holistically, independently of a learner's underlying rule knowledge. Thus, correctly reproducing a formulaic sequence often reflects successful retrieval from rote memory rather than the active generative application of syntactic rules (Nasirudeen, 2025), a phenomenon with direct implications for assessing genuine productive competence.

METHODOLOGY

Research design, context and participants

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based error-analysis design, analysing naturally occurring examination scripts to uncover the underlying cognitive strategies of the learners. The data were generated within an undergraduate Arabic syntax course (*Al-Qawā'id al-Nahwiyyah*, DWB10302). A total of 22 respondents enrolled in this course formed the sample size. It is critical to note the strict temporal limitations of this syllabus. The total learning duration for the course is 14 weeks. However, the specific allocation for the topic of *mubtada'* and *khavar* is limited to approximately two weeks. Given that the course meets for only two hours per week, a total of merely four hours of instructional time is dedicated to mastering the complexities of the nominal sentence. This brevity forces learners to rely heavily on prior secondary school knowledge and independent study.

Instrument and data analysis procedure

The instrument was a four-item constructed-sentence task (اكتب جملة مفيدة من عندك) requiring learners to compose original sentences illustrating a specified structure: (a) a fronted *khavar* due to *haqq al-sadarah*; (b) a full nominal clause *khavar*; (c) a fronted *shibh jumlah* before a *nakirah mubtada'*; and (d) a *masdar mu'awwal* as *mubtada'*.

Each of the 88 individual responses (22 scripts $\times$ 4 items) was transcribed and evaluated. The assessment criteria used to determine the accuracy of the learners' sentences strictly evaluate target-structure compliance rather than general grammatical well-formedness. A sentence was considered correct only when it followed the specific syntactic rule required by the question. A grammatically correct Arabic sentence was still considered incorrect if it did not use the required structure. For example, a learner who produced a simple verbal sentence (*jumlah fi'liyyah*) when a nominal sentence was required did not fulfil the task requirement. Such a response was therefore treated as avoidance of the target structure rather than evidence of the learner's ability to apply the rule independently. Incorrect responses were inductively categorised into error typologies (structural simplification, *khavar*-type conflation, rule avoidance, and formulaic-sequence substitution).

RESULTS

The empirical data across the 22 scripts revealed a distinctly asymmetric error profile. Table 1 summarises the precise frequencies, percentages, and dominant response patterns for each of the four target items.

Table 1. Distribution of responses according to target-structure compliance (N = 22 scripts)

Item	Target structure	grammatical	Target-compliant responses, n (%)	Target-non-compliant responses, n (%)	Dominant response pattern
(a)	<i>Khavar</i> containing an element with <i>haqq al-sadarah</i>	<i>muqaddam</i>	1 (4.5%)	21 (95.5%)	Structural simplification: Learners generally produced simple declarative or verbal sentences that did not demonstrate the required predicate-fronting rule.

(b)	<i>Khabar</i> realised as a complete nominal clause (<i>jumlaḥ ismiyyah</i>)	7 (31.8%)	15 (68.2%)	Khabar-type conflation: Learners commonly used a non-clausal or adjectival predicate instead of the required nominal clause.
(c)	An indefinite <i>mubtada'</i> preceded by a fronted <i>shibh jumlaḥ khabar</i>	2 (9.1%)	20 (90.9%)	Avoidance of the target structure: Learners commonly used a definite <i>mubtada'</i> or retained subject-first order, thereby avoiding the required structure.
(d)	<i>Masdar mu'awwal</i> functioning as <i>mubtada'</i>	11 (50.0%)	11 (50.0%)	Formulaic reproduction: The compliant responses showed substantial repetition of the same familiar formula, indicating reliance on a memorised model.

Item (a): *Khabar-muqaddam* and *haqq al-sadarah*

Only one of the 22 responses (4.5%) fulfilled the target requirement. A representative target-compliant response was *مَنْ طَالِبٌ جَيِّدٌ؟*, in which the interrogative pronoun *مَنْ* functions as a fronted predicate and carries *haqq al-sadarah*, while *طَالِبٌ* functions as the delayed subject. By contrast, *فَإَمَّ زَيْدٌ* is a grammatically acceptable verbal sentence but does not contain a fronted predicate. The response was therefore classified as target-non-compliant rather than grammatically incorrect. This pattern indicates that learners frequently avoided the required nominal structure by producing a simpler verbal sentence.

Item (b): *Khabar* realised as a nominal clause

Seven responses (31.8%) realised the predicate as a complete nominal clause. For example, in *الْمَدْرَسَةُ سَاحَتْهَا وَاسِعَةٌ*, the embedded nominal clause *سَاحَتْهَا وَاسِعَةٌ* functions as the predicate of *الْمَدْرَسَةُ*. In contrast, *الْعِلْمُ نُورٌ* contains a non-clausal predicate, *نُورٌ*. Although the sentence is grammatically correct, it does not demonstrate the type of predicate required by the task. The response consequently reflects *khabar-type* conflation rather than general grammatical failure.

Item (c): *Nakirah mubtada'* and fronted *shibh jumlaḥ*

For this structure, only two responses (9.1%) were initially classified as target-compliant. One example was *عِنْدَكَ رَبٌّ*, in which *عِنْدَكَ* functions as a fronted quasi-sentential predicate and *رَبٌّ* as an indefinite delayed subject. By comparison, *طَالِبٌ أَمَامَ الْفَصْلِ* retains the subject-first order and therefore does not demonstrate the required predicate-fronting rule. The response is grammatically interpretable but does not fulfil the structural condition specified in the question.

Item (d): *Masdar mu'awwal* as *mubtada'*

This item recorded the highest target-compliance rate, with 11 of the 22 responses (50.0%) meeting the required structure. The most frequently reproduced response was *أَنْ تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ*, in which *أَنْ تَصُومُوا* forms a *masdar mu'awwal* functioning as the *mubtada'*, while *خَيْرٌ* functions as its *khabar*. By contrast, *أُرِيدُ أَنْ يَشْرَبَ* does not fulfil the target requirement because it is a verbal sentence in which *أَنْ يَشْرَبَ* complements the verb *أُرِيدُ* rather than functioning as the subject of a nominal sentence. Although Item (d) achieved the highest compliance rate, the frequent reproduction of the same sentence pattern suggests that some learners may have relied on a familiar model instead of independently constructing a new sentence. Nevertheless, this interpretation is based on the observable similarity among the responses and should not be regarded as direct evidence of the learners' memorisation or cognitive retrieval processes.

DISCUSSION

Systematic patterns in learners' interlanguage

The four items reveal a coherent pattern in the learners' production of Arabic nominal sentences. The highest levels of target non-compliance occurred in Items (a) and (c), both of which required learners to depart from the more familiar subject-first order. In Item (a), 21 of the 22 learners (95.5%) did not produce a nominal sentence containing a fronted predicate with *haqq al-sadarah*. Similarly, 20 learners (90.9%) did not produce the configuration required in Item (c), namely a fronted *shibh jumlah khabar* followed by an indefinite *mubtada'*. Many responses instead adopted simpler verbal, declarative, or subject-first structures.

The recurrence of these substitutions across two structurally related items suggests that the responses were not merely isolated performance mistakes. Rather, they indicate a developing interlanguage system in which learners relied on syntactic configurations that were more accessible to them. This interpretation is consistent with interlanguage theory, which regards repeated learner errors as evidence of an evolving linguistic system shaped by prior knowledge, developmental processes, instructional input, and cross-linguistic influence (Corder, 1967; Darman et al., 2026). The preference for relatively unmarked sentence patterns may also be associated with the influence of Malay, which does not encode the same interaction between predicate type, definiteness, and obligatory predicate fronting found in Arabic (Ghani, 2020).

Nevertheless, the present findings do not establish first-language transfer as the sole cause of the observed responses. Incomplete understanding of the task limited productive practice, avoidance of unfamiliar structures, and reliance on familiar sentence patterns may have contributed to the same outcomes. The findings therefore support a multi-factor interpretation of the learners' interlanguage rather than a direct causal claim based exclusively on L1 influence.

Item (b) provides further evidence of partial rather than absent grammatical knowledge. Fifteen learners (68.2%) did not produce the required nominal-clause predicate, although many retained the general *mubtada'*-*khabar* relationship. Their responses commonly employed a non-clausal or adjectival predicate instead of a complete *jumlah ismiyyah*. This pattern suggests that the learners recognised the need for a predicate but had not fully differentiated among its structural realisations. Predicate selection therefore appears to be a categorical difficulty involving the form of the *khabar*, whereas Items (a) and (c) primarily expose difficulty with predicate position and its licensing conditions.

The gap between grammatical knowledge and productive application

The findings also highlight a distinction between familiarity with a grammatical rule and the ability to apply it independently. The learners had previously encountered *mubtada'* and *khabar* during their secondary education. However, their responses indicate that prior exposure did not consistently translate into accurate production when they were required to construct original sentences according to specific grammatical conditions. This result corresponds with previous studies reporting a persistent gap between explicit knowledge of Arabic grammar and its application in writing among non-native learners (Awang, Ali, Mustafa, et al., 2025; Mhd Rusdi et al., 2023).

Item (d) illustrates this distinction particularly clearly. Eleven responses (50.0%) met the target requirement, representing the highest compliance rate across the four items. The most frequently reproduced response was *أَنْ تَصُومُوا خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ*, in which *أَنْ تَصُومُوا* forms a *masdar mu'awwal* functioning as the *mubtada'*, while *خَيْرٌ* functions as its *khabar*. Although the sentence satisfies the required structure, its frequent repetition across the scripts suggests that some learners may have relied on a familiar model rather than independently generating a new construction.

This interpretation should be treated cautiously. Similarity among the responses provides evidence of formulaic reproduction but does not directly establish that the sentence was memorised or retrieved through a particular cognitive process. Nevertheless, the limited lexical and structural variation raises an important assessment issue: the accurate reproduction of a familiar example does not necessarily demonstrate flexible control of the

grammatical rule. A more convincing indication of productive competence would be the ability to apply the same structure using different verbs, subjects, predicates, and semantic contexts.

The instructional context may have contributed to the difficulty of converting grammatical knowledge into productive competence. Although the course was conducted over 14 weeks, approximately four contact hours were allocated specifically to *mubtada'* and *khavar*. This limited allocation should be understood as a contextual constraint rather than a proven cause of the learners' errors. Given the number of predicate types and word-order conditions covered, however, the available time may not provide sufficient opportunities for repeated sentence construction, corrective feedback, structural comparison, and application in extended writing.

Implications for *maharah al-kitabah* instruction and assessment

The findings indicate that the teaching of *mubtada'* and *khavar* should distinguish between two related dimensions: predicate type and predicate position. Item (b) primarily assessed whether learners could produce a *khavar* in the form of a complete nominal clause, whereas Items (a) and (c) assessed whether they could position the predicate according to particular syntactic conditions. Teaching and assessing these dimensions simultaneously may obscure the precise source of difficulty. A staged approach would allow learners to master the structural forms of *khavar mufrad*, *khavar jumlah*, and *khavar shibh jumlah* before applying rules governing *taqdim al-khavar*.

Instruction should also progress beyond rule explanation and model recognition. Learners require opportunities to compare minimally different sentences, transform subject-first structures into predicate-first structures, correct target-non-compliant responses, and construct new examples using varied lexical content. Systematic and interactive learning modules may support this progression by connecting explicit grammatical explanation with controlled sentence construction and contextualised writing activities (Awang, Ali, & Noruddin@Che Ahmad, 2025). Collaborative comparison and peer discussion may provide additional opportunities for learners to explain why a sentence meets or does not meet the required structure (Awang, Ali, Mustafa, et al., 2025; Nadzri & Baharudin, 2025).

The findings also have implications for assessment design. A response should be evaluated not only for general grammatical acceptability but also for compliance with the specific structure required by the question. For example, a well-formed verbal sentence should not be treated as evidence of mastery when the task requires a nominal sentence with a fronted predicate. Assessment rubrics should therefore distinguish among general grammatical accuracy, target-structure compliance, and the learner's ability to construct an original example.

Finally, assessment tasks should include several prompts testing the same grammatical rule with different lexical and semantic requirements. This would reduce the possibility that a familiar formula is interpreted as evidence of flexible syntactic competence. Learners who can maintain the target structure across varied examples provide stronger evidence of productive knowledge than those who reproduce only one previously encountered sentence. Accordingly, the pedagogical objective should not be limited to recognising or recalling grammatical patterns; it should focus on enabling learners to apply those patterns accurately and independently in Arabic writing.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how Malay-speaking undergraduates applied four predicate structures in Arabic nominal sentences and found that their responses reflected systematic difficulties in coordinating predicate form, position, and licensing conditions. The recurrent use of simpler verbal, declarative, and subject-first constructions indicates that many learners possessed some awareness of nominal-sentence grammar but were unable to apply marked Arabic structures consistently in independent sentence construction. The frequent reproduction of a familiar *masdar mu'awwal* example further demonstrates the importance of distinguishing target-structure compliance from flexible grammatical competence, although response similarity alone cannot confirm the learners' cognitive reliance on memorisation. These findings contribute to Arabic interlanguage research by showing that learner performance should be interpreted not only through general grammatical accuracy but also through structural compliance, avoidance patterns, and variation in sentence production. Accordingly, the teaching of *maharah al-kitabah* should separate predicate-type selection from predicate-position rules and

provide progressively structured opportunities for comparison, transformation, correction, and original sentence construction. Assessment should likewise employ varied prompts that require learners to apply the same rule across different lexical and semantic contexts. Such an approach would provide a more accurate representation of learners' productive syntactic competence while strengthening the connection between explicit *nahw* knowledge and its practical application in Arabic writing.

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