Introduction to Arabic Dictation (Imlā'): A Foundational Guide to Writing Accuracy

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Abstract

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The mastery of imlā' (Arabic dictation) constitutes a fundamental component of Arabic language learning, yet it often receives less pedagogical attention compared to reading, speaking, and grammar. This study investigates the implementation of Kitāb Imlā' by Ustaz Hasan Basri as a practical instructional resource designed to improve students' spelling accuracy. Employing a qualitative case study at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah in Pasuruan, Indonesia, the research involved 32 fourth-grade (ibtidā'ī) students through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and pre- and post-test dictation tasks. Findings indicate that the systematic use of the kitab, with its step-by-step exercises and repetitive drills, effectively reduced error rates from 38% to 17%. Students demonstrated significant improvement in distinguishing tā' marbūṭah from hā' and in applying hamzah rules, while teachers confirmed that the kitab provided practical exercises rather than abstract theory. Nonetheless, certain challenges persisted, particularly in mastering hamzah rules and overcoming mother-tongue interference. The study highlights the value of localized, practice-oriented resources in enhancing imlā' pedagogy and recommends integrating Kitāb Imlā' as a central element in Arabic literacy instruction.
Keywords: Arabic dictation, Foundational Guide, Writing Accuracy.

Introduction

The mastery of imlā' (Arabic dictation) represents a fundamental aspect of Arabic language learning, yet it often receives less pedagogical attention compared to other skills such as reading (qirā'ah), speaking (kalām), and grammar (naḥw). In many Islamic educational institutions, including pesantren and madrasah in Southeast Asia, students frequently struggle with accuracy in spelling, particularly when dealing with long vowels, hamzah placement, or the distinction between tā'

marbūṭah and hā'. This issue is compounded by the influence of local languages and the absence of standardized teaching resources that are both accessible and pedagogically effective.

Research on Arabic dictation (*imlā'*) has primarily focused on spelling errors and the linguistic factors that influence writing accuracy. Shalhoub-Awwad and Cohen-Mimran (2024) demonstrated that in Arabic, phonological knowledge plays a more dominant role than morphological awareness in spelling performance, which distinguishes Arabic from other Semitic languages such as Hebrew. Similarly, Al-Shbail and Beni Diab (2018) analyzed common types of writing errors in Arabic and proposed corrective strategies, emphasizing the recurring challenges learners face in mastering accurate spelling.

Other scholars have developed tools to assess handwriting performance. Salameh-Matar et al. (2016) introduced the Arabic Handwriting Assessment Tool (A-HAT), which evaluates student performance through copying and dictation tasks. More recently, Salameh-Matar, Metanis, and Khateb (2024) highlighted that orthographic knowledge is a paramount contributor to early handwriting performance, surpassing phonological awareness, while fine-motor and graphomotor skills also play a supporting role. This finding underscores the importance of orthographic awareness in Arabic literacy.

Further research has examined dictation tasks in specific contexts. Ganayim and Dowker investigated the transcription of two-digit numbers in Arabic and found that the syntactic structure of number words influences the order of writing units and decades, thereby confirming the cognitive complexity of dictation tasks. In a more technology-driven approach, Shohieb et al. (2020) developed a serious game called *Mega Challenger* for children with dictation difficulties, which significantly improved their performance and motivation. Complementing this pedagogical innovation, Gueddah et al. (2022) explored spelling errors in digital Arabic texts and proposed a probabilistic correction model, demonstrating that orthographic challenges extend beyond the classroom into computational contexts.

Together, these studies provide valuable insights into the linguistic, cognitive, and technological dimensions of Arabic dictation. However, they predominantly focus on theoretical explanations, assessment tools, and technological interventions, with limited attention to localized, practice-oriented resources that are commonly employed in Islamic educational settings. Although numerous studies have addressed Arabic dictation and spelling errors, several important gaps remain. First, the majority of existing research has been conducted in Middle Eastern contexts, leaving the Southeast Asian setting particularly Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia largely unexplored. Second, while prior studies have focused on modern instruments, digital applications, or theoretical aspects of phonology and morphology, little attention has been given to localized instructional resources such as *Kitāb Imlā'* authored by Ustaz Hasan Basri, which is widely used

in pesantren but has not been systematically evaluated in academic research. Third, there is a noticeable theory–practice gap: previous literature emphasizes cognitive and linguistic explanations of orthographic challenges, yet few studies have examined the classroom-level implementation of dictation pedagogy using traditional texts. Finally, research has rarely considered the integration of local cultural and pedagogical traditions into Arabic literacy instruction, resulting in limited understanding of how context-specific resources can effectively support learners.

One such instructional resource is the Kitāb Imlāʾ authored by Ustaz Hasan Basri, a text that has gained considerable popularity in pesantren circles due to its practical design and step-by-step approach. Unlike classical imlāʾ references, which are often dense and linguistically demanding, this book simplifies dictation exercises into graded lessons suited to beginners, making it easier for students to internalize spelling conventions through daily practice. Despite its growing use among teachers and students, systematic academic studies assessing its pedagogical value remain scarce.

Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this gap by focusing on the implementation of Kitāb Imlāʾ in Arabic language instruction within pesantren. Specifically, this research is guided by the following questions: (1) How is the Kitāb Imlāʾ applied in classroom settings to improve students' dictation skills? (2) What are the observed outcomes and challenges of using this text compared to conventional imlāʾ teaching methods?

The scope of this research is limited to one pesantren institution in Indonesia that has adopted Kitāb Imlāʾ as part of its Arabic language curriculum. While the findings may not be generalizable to all pesantren or Islamic schools, they provide valuable insights into the role of localized instructional texts in enhancing imlāʾ pedagogy. The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform Arabic language teachers, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers about the effectiveness of contemporary, context-relevant resources in improving foundational writing skills.

In sum, by situating this study within the broader discourse on Arabic writing pedagogy, while also acknowledging the limited research on imlāʾ in Southeast Asian pesantren, this article contributes both to filling a theoretical gap and to offering practical implications for classroom practice.

Method

This study adopts a qualitative case study design (Creswell & Creswell, 2020), as it seeks to investigate the pedagogical application of the Kitāb Imlāʾ by Ustaz Hasan Basri in a natural classroom setting. The choice of this design is based on its suitability for exploring educational phenomena in depth, capturing not only the

outcomes of instruction but also the teaching practices, student engagement, and contextual challenges involved in imlā' learning.

The theoretical foundation of this research draws upon constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes active learner engagement and knowledge construction through meaningful practice. In the context of imlā', constructivism underscores the importance of repeated dictation exercises, contextualized examples, and reflective feedback in reinforcing accurate spelling. Additionally, the study refers to principles of Arabic writing pedagogy that highlight the interconnectedness of orthography, phonology, and morphology in the acquisition of imlā' skills.

The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Darullughah Wadda'wah, a well-established Islamic educational institution in Pasuruan, Indonesia, known for its strong Arabic language curriculum (Baharun & Hanifansyah, 2024). This site was selected due to its systematic use of Kitāb Imlā' in daily language instruction, availability of cooperative teaching staff, and the relevance of imlā' as a core component of literacy training. The participants consisted of 32 fourth-grade (ibtidā'ī) students, who were regularly engaged in imlā' sessions under the supervision of their Arabic language teachers. The unit of analysis in this study is the classroom interaction between teachers and students during the implementation of imlā' lessons.

The data sources consist of both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from classroom observations (Denaro et al., 2021), in which teaching sessions using Kitāb Imlā' were systematically documented; semi-structured interviews with two Arabic language instructors and fifteen students; and written tests of dictation exercises conducted before and after the instructional cycle. Secondary data include textbooks, instructional guides, and previous research articles relevant to imlā' pedagogy.

The data collection process involved three main stages. First, preliminary observations were conducted to familiarize the researcher with the teaching context. Second, classroom activities were observed and recorded over a six-week period, focusing on instructional strategies, error correction techniques, and student responses. Third, interviews and focus group discussions were carried out to gather perceptions and reflections from both teachers and students.

The data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman (1989) interactive model, which involves three concurrent activities: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The collected data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into thematic units such as "teaching strategies," "student difficulties," and "learning outcomes." Triangulation was employed by cross-checking observation notes, interview transcripts, and test results to ensure validity and reliability.

Through this methodological framework, the study aims to present a comprehensive understanding of how Kitāb Imlā' supports the development of Arabic dictation skills, the challenges encountered during its application, and its pedagogical implications for Arabic language instruction in pesantren.

Result and Discussion

The mastery of hamzah (ء) represents one of the most intricate aspects of Arabic dictation (*imlā'*). Unlike most other letters, hamzah functions both as a full consonant and as a diacritic, whose orthographic representation depends on its position within the word, the vowel preceding it, and its own vocalization. For students of Arabic in non-Arabic speaking contexts, particularly in Southeast Asia, the rules of hamzah remain a persistent challenge. Mistakes in writing hamzah often reduce the accuracy of reading and sometimes distort the meaning of words. Thus, any instructional program in *imlā'* must devote substantial attention to the teaching of hamzah, as emphasized in the *Kitāb Imlā'* authored by Ustaz Hasan Basri, which is widely used in Indonesian pesantren.

Hamzah at the beginning of a word is considered the simplest case, since it is always carried by an alif. Its placement, however, depends on its vowel. When the hamzah bears a fatḥah or a ḍammah, it is written above the alif, as in أمر (command) or أستاذ (teacher). When it carries a kasrah, it is written below the alif, as in إمام (imam) or إحسان (benevolence). While this rule is relatively straightforward, students frequently omit the hamzah in initial position, producing forms such as امر instead of أمر. Repeated practice through dictation drills reinforces the awareness that the omission of the hamzah not only constitutes an orthographic error but also disrupts meaning.

The case of hamzah in the middle of a word presents a greater degree of complexity. Its representation is governed by the principle of the "strongest vowel," which determines the supporting seat (kursī) of the hamzah. The relative strength of the vowels is ranked as kasrah, then ḍammah, then fatḥah, with sukun considered weakest. If preceded by a kasrah, the hamzah is written on a yā' (ئ), regardless of its own vowel, as in بِئْس (how evil) or سُئِل (he was asked). If preceded by a ḍammah, it is written on a wāw (ؤ), as in رُؤْيا (dream). If preceded by a fatḥah, it is written on an alif (أ), as in سَأَل (he asked). Finally, when preceded by a sukun or when no other seat is appropriate, the hamzah is written on the line, standing alone (ء), as in شيء (thing) or مِلء (fullness). Many learners, however, mistakenly write all medial hamzahs on an alif, leading to forms such as مسأل instead of مسؤول. Through the exercises in the *Kitāb Imlā'*, students gradually internalize the distinctions, learning to match vowel context with orthographic form.

Hamzah at the end of a word follows similar rules. If the preceding letter has a kasrah, the hamzah sits on a yā', as in شاطئ (shore). If preceded by a ḍammah, it rests on a wāw, as in لؤلؤ (pearl). If preceded by a fatḥah, it appears on an alif, as in

مَلْجَأ(shelter). If preceded by a sukun, it stands alone, as in شَيء(thing) or دفء (warmth). These distinctions often confuse learners, who sometimes oscillate between writing the hamzah on different seats. For instance, the word جزء(part) is often miswritten as جزؤ or جزئ. Structured drills and teacher feedback play an essential role in correcting such fossilized errors.

In addition to these positional rules, learners must also distinguish between hamzat al-waṣl and hamzat al-qaṭʿ. Hamzat al-waṣl is written but not pronounced when connected to the preceding word. It typically occurs in verbs of five or more letters, such as استغفر(to seek forgiveness), in certain nouns such as ابن(son) and اسم (name), and in the definite article الـ. In these cases, the alif appears without a hamzah sign. When standing alone, it is pronounced, but when connected, it is dropped. Students often err by marking hamzat al-waṣl with a visible hamzah, thereby confusing it with hamzat al-qaṭʿ. By contrast, hamzat al-qaṭʿ is always pronounced and always written, whether it occurs initially, medially, or finally, as in إمام أحمد or مسؤول. Differentiating the two requires continuous exposure and deliberate instruction.

From a pedagogical perspective, the teaching of hamzah requires both conceptual explanation and repetitive practice. Theoretical instruction clarifies the hierarchy of vowels and the principle of the strongest vowel in determining the hamzah's seat. Yet theory alone proves insufficient. Learners benefit most from daily dictation exercises, in which they repeatedly confront cases of initial, medial, and final hamzah. The *Kitāb Imlā'* integrates this approach by posing questions such as ما هي الهمزة؟("What is the hamzah?"), كيف ترسم الهمزة في أول الكلمة؟("How is the hamzah written at the beginning of a word?"), and بين لنا الهمزة في آخر الكلمة وأعطنا المثال("Explain the hamzah at the end of the word and give an example"). These exercises ensure that students not only memorize the rules but also apply them consistently in writing.

The analysis of student performance reveals common patterns of error. The most frequent include the omission of initial hamzah, the misplacement of medial hamzah on an incorrect seat, the confusion between hamzat al-waṣl and hamzat al-qaṭʿ, and inconsistencies in final hamzah representation. Such errors mirror the findings of Al-Khalīl (2019), who reported similar difficulties even among native Arabic learners. This suggests that hamzah is inherently problematic in Arabic orthography and demands sustained instructional focus.

The pedagogical implications are significant. First, teachers must adopt a gradual approach, beginning with initial hamzah, then moving to medial, and finally to final hamzah. Second, visual aids such as charts of hamzah seats can reinforce the hierarchy of vowels. Third, daily dictation should be institutionalized as part of the curriculum, fostering automaticity in correct spelling. Finally, modern technology offers opportunities for digital dictation exercises, where students can receive immediate corrective feedback, thus accelerating mastery.

In conclusion, hamzah instruction occupies a central place in the teaching of Arabic dictation. Its complexity arises from its dependence on position, vowel context, and categorical distinction between waṣl and qaṭʿ. While theoretical explanation is necessary, practical drills such as those provided in the *Kitāb Imlāʾ* of Ustaz Hasan Basri prove indispensable in transforming abstract rules into ingrained skills. For Southeast Asian learners in particular, this localized instructional resource bridges the gap between classical Arabic orthographic theory and the practical realities of non-native learners, thereby enhancing literacy and ensuring accuracy in written Arabic.

Classroom Implementation of Kitāb Imlāʾ

Observation data revealed that the Kitāb Imlāʾ was systematically applied in daily classroom sessions. Teachers began each lesson with short dictation passages selected from the book, followed by guided correction and explanation of common errors. Students practiced writing in stages: first word-by-word dictation, then sentence-level, and finally short paragraphs. This gradual progression was reported by both teachers and students as effective in reinforcing accurate spelling.

An interviewed teacher highlighted the pedagogical structure of the book:

"The book provides exercises in a very practical way. It begins with basic words that every student knows, and step by step it moves to sentences and longer dictations. For us as teachers, this helps a lot in making sure students are not overwhelmed." (Teacher 1, Interview, 2025)

Students also reported that the book increased their confidence in writing:

"Before using this kitab, I always made mistakes with long vowels and hamzah. After practicing daily, I feel more confident. The exercises are simple but effective." (Student 4, Interview, 2025)

Learning Outcomes and Student Challenges

The results of the pre-test and post-test dictation tasks (administered to 15 students) indicated a clear improvement. On average, students' error rates decreased from 38% in the pre-test to 17% in the post-test. The most significant improvement was in distinguishing tāʾ marbūṭah from hāʾ, and in the correct placement of long vowels.

Nevertheless, some challenges remained. Certain students continued to struggle with hamzah rules and the distinction between homophonic sounds influenced by their mother tongue. A student described this difficulty as follows:

"Sometimes I know the rule, but when I write quickly, I still confuse the hamzah. It needs more practice." (Student 9, Interview, 2025)

Teachers also acknowledged limitations:

"The kitab is useful, but students must also be guided with consistent correction. Without teacher involvement, they may repeat the same mistakes." (Teacher 2, Interview, 2025).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the *Kitāb Imlā'* by Ustaz Hasan Basri serves as an effective pedagogical tool in enhancing Arabic dictation skills among pesantren students. The structured design of the book, combined with daily practice and teacher feedback, significantly reduced common errors such as the misuse of *tā' marbūṭah*, long vowels, and hamzah placement. These findings affirm the value of localized instructional resources in addressing persistent challenges in imlā' pedagogy, thereby contributing to the limited body of research on Arabic dictation instruction in Southeast Asia. By situating the results within constructivist learning theory and previous studies on Arabic orthography, the research strengthens the argument that imlā' should be integrated more systematically into Arabic language curricula.

Nonetheless, the study acknowledges its limitations, including the small sample size and its focus on a single pesantren context. Further research is encouraged to explore the use of *Kitāb Imlā'* across different educational levels and institutions, as well as its potential integration with digital dictation tools. The practical implication of this study is that Arabic teachers are encouraged to adopt *Kitāb Imlā'* not only as a supplementary resource but as a central component of writing instruction, supported by continuous teacher guidance and corrective feedback. This approach can help build stronger foundations in Arabic literacy, paving the way for more advanced language learning.

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