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An Analysis of the Arabic Calligraphy Skills of Students at the Al-Haramain Qur'an Academy, Terengganu, Malaysia

Mohamad Danuarta Ibrahim [1*], Ratni Bt. Hj. Bahri[2], Musdelifa Abu Samad[3], Abdul Rahim Bin Ismail[4]

[1,2,3]Institut Agama Islam Negeri Sultan Amai, Gorontalo, Indonesia
[4]University Sultan Zainal Abidin, Terengganu, Malaysia
danuartaibrahim1140@gmail.com[1], ratnibahri@iaingorontalo.ac.id[2], musdelifaabusamad@iaingorontalo.ac.id[3], himvespa007@gmail.com[4]
*Correspondence

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Abstract

This study examined students' proficiency in writing Arabic calligraphy, particularly Naskh script, at the Al-Haramain Qur'an Academy in Terengganu, Malaysia, and identified the instructional and learner-related factors associated with variation in performance. A qualitative descriptive design was used because the inquiry focused on observable characteristics of students' written products and participants' accounts of the learning process. Data were generated through classroom observation, in-depth interviews with the calligraphy teacher and participating students, and analysis of students' Naskh writing samples. The samples were examined across five interrelated dimensions: dot placement, individual letter formation, connected-letter formation, proportionality and spacing, and stroke fluency and overall composition. Data collection, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing were conducted iteratively, while source and technique triangulation was used to compare observations, interviews, and documents. The findings show three patterns of proficiency: advanced, intermediate, and basic.

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Advanced writing displayed relatively consistent letter proportions, connections, dots, and visual balance; intermediate writing remained readable but showed instability in connected forms, spacing, and stroke control; and basic writing showed persistent difficulties with proportionality, dot consistency, connection fluency, and composition. Differences in proficiency were associated with interest, motivation, practice intensity, access to additional guidance, teacher modelling, corrective feedback, and learning facilities. The study concludes that Naskh proficiency develops through the interaction of technical knowledge, sustained deliberate practice, and scaffolded feedback. It recommends criterion-referenced assessment, differentiated practice, and systematic documentation of students' progress in calligraphy instruction.

***Keywords**: Arabic calligraphy; Naskh script; Khat Araby; writing proficiency; Islamic education; qualitative description*

Introduction

Arabic calligraphy occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of writing, visual art, religious expression, and Islamic education. Its use in Qur'anic manuscripts, mosques, and public architecture has preserved Arabic script as both a communicative system and an aesthetic tradition (Baydoun et al., 2024). In educational contexts, calligraphy is equally relevant to maharah al-kitabah because learners must coordinate knowledge of letter forms with fine-motor control, spatial organisation, and accuracy. Calligraphy instruction can therefore reinforce the legibility and discipline of Arabic writing while cultivating patience, precision, and aesthetic sensitivity (Hasanah & Triastuti, 2024).

Naskh is particularly important in introductory and Qur'anic writing because its forms are comparatively clear and widely used. Competent Naskh writing nevertheless requires more than copying recognisable letters. Learners must regulate the relative height and width of letters, distinguish letters through consistent dots, join letters according to their positional forms, control pen direction and pressure, and organise words within a balanced visual field.(Abidah et al., 2026) These requirements explain why students who can read Arabic or reproduce hijaiyah letters do not automatically produce calligraphy that conforms to Naskh conventions.(Aqil et al., 2025)

Previous studies have established several relevant points. Research on calligraphy and Arabic writing has linked structured calligraphy practice with improved writing

interest and skill (Mario Bagus Sanjaya et al., 2024). Studies of calligraphy-learning systems in Islamic institutions also underline the importance of teacher modelling, direct practice, correction, and institutional support (Insani & Anam, 2023). Research on university students' calligraphy skills has shown that learners differ in their command of form, proportion, and composition (Hartono & Al Ghozi, 2024). Collectively, this literature confirms that calligraphy learning is simultaneously technical, pedagogical, and cultural.(Baharun, 2025)

However, three limitations remain. First, much of the literature discusses the history, cultural value, or instructional potential of calligraphy without closely linking visible features of students' writing to their reported learning experiences.(Bahri et al., 2026) Second, broad claims about improvement are often made without an explicit set of analytic dimensions for distinguishing levels of Naskh performance.(Baihaqi et al., 2025) Third, evidence from Qur'anic academies in Malaysia, where calligraphy is embedded within a religious learning environment, remains limited. Consequently, there is a need for a contextual analysis that treats students' written products as primary evidence and interprets them alongside classroom practice and participant perspectives.(Fahmi et al., 2026)

The present study addresses this gap by integrating product analysis with observations and interviews at the Al-Haramain Qur'an Academy in Terengganu.(Fauzah et al., 2025) Its contribution lies in using five connected dimensions—dot placement, individual letter formation, connected-letter formation, proportionality and spacing, and stroke fluency and composition—to describe proficiency patterns and relate them to pedagogical conditions. Rather than assuming that talent alone determines quality, the study examines how interest, practice, guidance, feedback, and facilities jointly shape performance.(Hubbabah et al., 2025)

Accordingly, the study sought to answer two questions: (1) How is students' proficiency in Naskh calligraphy manifested across basic, intermediate, and advanced patterns? and (2) What internal and external factors help explain the observed variation in proficiency? By answering these questions, the study aims to provide an empirical basis for more transparent assessment and differentiated calligraphy instruction in Islamic educational settings.(Huwaiza et al., 2025)

Method

Research design. This study used a qualitative descriptive design. This design was selected because the purpose was to provide an evidence-based account of the characteristics of students' Naskh writing and the learning conditions associated with those characteristics, rather than to test a causal effect or generate a formal grounded theory. Qualitative description enables researchers to remain close to participants' accounts and observable data while organising findings into practically meaningful categories (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024).

Research setting and participants. The study was conducted at the Al-Haramain Qur'an Academy in Terengganu, Malaysia. The research involved the calligraphy teacher and students participating in Khat Araby learning. Participants were selected purposively because they were directly involved in Naskh instruction and could provide information about teaching practices, learning experiences, practice routines, and challenges. Students' names are not reported in the revised analysis; representative works are identified by proficiency code to protect participants' privacy.(Kodasseri & Kp, 2025)

Data sources and collection. Three complementary sources were used. First, classroom observation documented teacher demonstrations, practice activities, teacher–student interaction, correction, students' responses, and the availability of learning resources. Second, in-depth interviews explored the teacher's instructional goals, methods, and assessment practices and students' interest, motivation, practice intensity, additional learning experiences, and perceived difficulties. Third, documentation consisted of students' Naskh writing samples and institutional materials related to the calligraphy programme. The use of multiple sources allowed statements made in interviews to be checked against classroom behaviour and visible characteristics of the written products.(Lazuardi & Syaheed, 2025)

Analytic framework for writing samples. Each sample was examined holistically and then compared across five dimensions. Dot placement concerned the size, form, number, and location of dots. Individual letter formation concerned recognisability and conformity to characteristic Naskh shapes. Connected-letter formation concerned the accuracy and fluency of initial, medial, and final connections. Proportionality and spacing

concerned relative letter dimensions, baseline control, and spacing between letters, words, and lines. Stroke fluency and composition concerned pen control, consistency of thick and thin strokes, cleanliness, balance, and overall visual coherence. The categories were interpretive proficiency patterns rather than psychometric scores. An advanced pattern required consistently strong performance across most dimensions; an intermediate pattern showed general readability and partial rule application with recurring inconsistencies; and a basic pattern showed persistent difficulty across several dimensions.(Mahmudah et al., 2025)

Data analysis. Analysis followed the interactive model of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Observation notes and interview accounts were organised by recurring factors, including interest, motivation, practice, instructional modelling, correction, and facilities. Writing samples were analysed using the five dimensions and compared to identify recurring performance patterns. Product evidence was then connected with observation and interview evidence. For example, claims about practice intensity were considered meaningful only when supported by participant accounts and compatible with the relative control visible in the samples.(Maulana, 2025)

Trustworthiness and ethics. Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation among the teacher, students, and documents and technique triangulation across observation, interviews, and product analysis. Negative or inconsistent evidence was retained when it complicated an initial interpretation. An audit trail was maintained through observation records, interview notes, photographs, and analytic matrices. The report avoids causal language because the design did not manipulate instruction or statistically test relationships. Student identities were anonymised in the revised manuscript, and writing samples were used solely for educational analysis.(Meilizia et al., 2025)

Results And Discussion

Proficiency Patterns in Naskh Writing

The analysis revealed three recurring proficiency patterns: advanced, intermediate, and basic. These patterns do not label fixed student ability; they describe the quality demonstrated in the collected writing samples at the time of the study.

Variation was visible not only in the beauty of the final product but also in the technical coordination of dots, letter forms, connections, proportion, and strokes.

Advanced Pattern

The advanced sample demonstrated comparatively accurate individual letter forms, stable dot placement, fluid connections, controlled spacing, and a coherent overall composition. Letter height and width were generally proportional, and the baseline was maintained across most of the text. The connections between letters appeared continuous rather than mechanically assembled, indicating growing control of pen direction and pressure. The work remained readable while displaying an aesthetic rhythm characteristic of Naskh. Minor inconsistencies were still visible in inter-letter spacing and balance in several segments; the classification therefore indicates strong developing proficiency rather than mastery without error. Interview evidence associated this performance with repeated practice, sustained personal interest, and additional learning beyond regular classroom time.

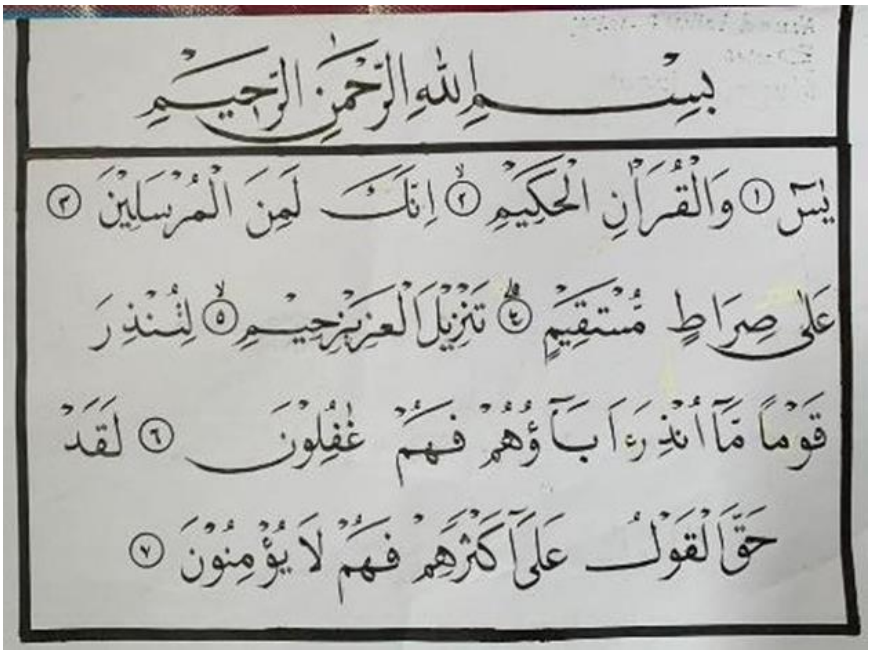


Figure 1. Representative Naskh writing sample analysed in the study

Intermediate Pattern

The intermediate sample was readable and showed a functional understanding of basic Naskh forms. Dots were generally placed in recognisable positions, and most individual letters could be identified without difficulty. Nevertheless, performance was inconsistent across connected forms. Certain letters were positioned too high or were

joined at angles that disturbed proportional balance. Spacing varied within and between words, while ink marks and visible corrections reduced visual cleanliness. This pattern suggests that the learner had moved beyond simple imitation but had not yet automatised the rules. The central need at this level is focused correction: learners require practice on specific letter families, connection points, and spacing rather than undirected repetition.

Basic Pattern

The basic sample showed persistent difficulty across several dimensions. Dot size and placement varied, some individual letters lacked stable proportions, and connections appeared hesitant or disjointed. Pen pressure was inconsistent, producing uneven strokes, and spacing between letters and words did not yet create a stable visual rhythm. Although parts of the text remained recognisable, readability depended heavily on contextual expectation. Observation suggested that learners at this level were still coordinating basic letter knowledge with motor control. They therefore need explicit modelling, tracing or guided copying, short practice sequences, and immediate corrective feedback before being asked to produce extended compositions.

Factors Associated with Variation

The findings indicate that proficiency variation emerged through the interaction of internal and external conditions. Internally, interest and motivation affected students' willingness to repeat demanding exercises and respond to correction. Persistence was particularly important because small improvements in proportion and stroke control required repeated attempts. Externally, teacher modelling, talaqqi-based guidance, corrective feedback, access to appropriate pens and paper, practice time, and opportunities for additional instruction supported development. Students with practice opportunities beyond formal lessons could consolidate corrections more frequently, whereas students limited to classroom time had fewer opportunities to stabilise motor patterns.

Discussion

The three proficiency patterns support the view that calligraphy is a form of writing competence that combines cognitive knowledge, psychomotor control, and aesthetic judgement. The difference between levels was not simply whether a learner could reproduce an Arabic word. It concerned the consistency with which formal knowledge was embodied in movement and spatial organisation. This interpretation

aligns with Hasanah and Triastuti (Hasanah & Triastuti, 2024), who position calligraphy within maharah al-kitabah, and extends it by showing which visible dimensions distinguish developing levels of Naskh performance.

The advanced pattern illustrates the cumulative effect of deliberate practice. Repetition was productive when accompanied by models, correction, and attention to specific errors. This finding is consistent with (M. Taufik et al., 2024) and (Mario Bagus Sanjaya et al., 2024), who report that calligraphy practice can strengthen interest and Arabic writing skills. The present findings add an important qualification: practice volume alone is insufficient. Students progress when repetition is criterion-directed—for example, when they compare dot size, baseline, connections, and spacing against a reference and revise accordingly.

The intermediate pattern is pedagogically significant because it reveals a transition from recognisable writing to rule-governed calligraphy. Learners at this stage often appear competent at first glance because the text is readable. Close analysis, however, exposes unstable connections, proportion, and composition. This helps explain why a single holistic judgement such as ‘good’ or ‘poor’ provides limited instructional value. A dimension-based assessment gives teachers a more diagnostic basis for feedback and helps students identify what to practise next.

The basic pattern demonstrates the need for differentiated scaffolding. Assigning the same extended Qur’anic passage to all learners may overload students who have not stabilised individual forms and connections. A progression from isolated letters to letter families, short connected units, words, and sentences is more consistent with the observed difficulties. Teacher demonstration and talaqqi remain valuable because they make the direction, sequence, angle, and pressure of strokes visible. This interpretation resonates with (Insani & Anam, 2023) and (Wulandari & Sihombing, 2023), who emphasise guidance and structured learning systems in calligraphy education.

The findings also clarify how internal and external factors interact. Motivation cannot be treated as an isolated personal trait because classroom conditions can strengthen or weaken it. Visible progress, actionable feedback, access to suitable tools, displays of student work, and achievable practice targets may sustain engagement. Conversely, insufficient practice time and limited facilities restrict even motivated learners. The study therefore avoids explaining proficiency as natural talent and instead frames it as a

developmental outcome shaped by opportunities to practise and the quality of instructional support.

This study contributes a context-sensitive analytic framework for Qur'anic academy settings. Earlier work has often focused on calligraphy's cultural heritage or general educational value (Mukarom et al., 2025). By integrating product evidence with participant accounts, the present study connects cultural aims to observable learning outcomes. The five dimensions can support formative assessment: teachers can record which dimension is stable, which is emerging, and which requires intensive guidance. Such documentation would make progress visible without reducing calligraphy to a single numerical score.

Several limitations define the scope of interpretation. The study was conducted in one academy and used a qualitative sample, so the proficiency patterns should not be treated as population estimates. The categories were based on researcher interpretation rather than scores from multiple independent expert raters. The study also did not follow students longitudinally or test the effects of a specific intervention. Future research should validate an analytic rubric with qualified calligraphers, report inter-rater agreement, examine changes across repeated samples, and compare instructional models across institutions.

Conclusion

This study sought to describe students' Naskh proficiency and explain the factors associated with variation at the Al-Haramain Qur'an Academy. Regarding the first objective, the analysis identified three proficiency patterns. Advanced writing showed relatively consistent dots, letter forms, connections, proportions, spacing, and composition. Intermediate writing remained readable and reflected partial rule application but displayed recurring instability in connections, spacing, and stroke control. Basic writing showed difficulties across several dimensions, particularly proportionality, dot consistency, connection fluency, and overall composition.

Regarding the second objective, variation was associated with the interaction of interest, motivation, persistence, and practice intensity with teacher modelling, talaqqi-based guidance, corrective feedback, facilities, and opportunities for additional practice.

The findings do not establish causal effects, but they show that stronger products were linked to sustained, guided, and criterion-focused practice rather than to talent alone.

The principal implication is that calligraphy instruction should use transparent, dimension-based formative assessment and differentiated practice. Teachers should diagnose performance across dot placement, letter formation, connections, proportion and spacing, and stroke fluency and composition; provide feedback tied to those dimensions; and retain sequential work samples to document progress. In this way, Khat Araby can be maintained not only as Islamic cultural heritage but also as a disciplined process for developing Arabic writing, patience, precision, and aesthetic awareness.

Declaration Of Ai And Ai Assisted Technologies In The Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used OpenAI ChatGPT to support English-language editing, structural refinement, and clarity of expression. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors. The authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, interpretation, and final content of the manuscript.

Author Contribution Statement

Mohamad Danuarta Ibrahim contributed to the conceptualization, research design, data collection, data analysis, and preparation of the initial manuscript. Ratni Bt. Hj. Bahri contributed to methodological guidance, supervision, interpretation of the findings, and critical revision of the manuscript. Suharia Sarif contributed to the literature review, interpretation of the findings, and manuscript review and editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participating students. Anonymized data may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to applicable ethical and institutional requirements.

Declaration Of Interests

The authors declare that they have no financial, personal, professional, or other competing interests related to this study.

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