



## Students' ability to understand morphological inflection in arabic texts (Analytical qualitative study at Jabal An-Nur Private Islamic High School, North Aceh)

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### ABSTRACT

Mastery of *sharaf* (morphology) is an important basis for understanding Arabic texts, as it enables learners to identify word patterns, recognize word roots, and accurately interpret morphological changes. This study examines students' ability to apply morphological rules when reading Arabic texts at the Jabal An-Nur Islamic Private High School, North Aceh. Using a descriptive qualitative method, data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and diagnostic questionnaires given to 50 twelfth-grade students who were selected by purposive sampling based on specific criteria from a population of 543 students. The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis through the stages of data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing and verification. To ensure data credibility, source and technique triangulation were used. The findings show persistent weaknesses in students' morphological competence, especially in recognizing *fi'il mu'tal*, distinguishing verb patterns, and producing correct *masdar*. The questionnaire results showed that only 49% of students could correctly apply morphological rules in contextual texts. Further interview data highlighted confusion in processing empty and defective verbs. This study concludes that the lack of practical application and limited integration of morphology in reading activities contribute to these difficulties. This study recommends the implementation of contextual exercises, explicit pattern recognition training, and the use of more authentic Arabic texts to strengthen students' morphological awareness.



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## INTRODUCTION

The study of *sharaf* (Arabic morphology) occupies a central position within Arabic linguistic sciences and serves as a foundational component for accurate reading and comprehension of Arabic texts. Mastery of morphology enables learners to identify root letters, decode derivative patterns, distinguish between morphological categories (e.g., hollow, defective, augmented), and understand semantic nuances resulting from vowelization.

At Jabal An-Nur Institute, classroom observations reveal that many students struggle significantly with morphological analysis: they fail to identify root letters correctly, misrecognize derived patterns, and confuse categories such as *ajwaf* (hollow), *naqis* (defective), and *al-af'āl al-mazīdah* (augmented). These challenges lead to misinterpretation of word meanings, difficulty in detecting verb structures, and inaccuracies in vocalization during reading.

Empirical data from related institutions support the prevalence of these challenges. For instance, a study at IAIN Kerinci found that lecturers predominantly rely on lectures and rote memorization, rather than promoting analytic morphological reasoning; this method does not align with the more applied or interactive objectives of *sharaf* instruction (Ainil Khuryati, Duski Samad, Yasmadi, 2024). Moreover, research in Indonesian pesantren contexts reports that *sharaf* teaching often remains passive, limiting students' engagement with morphological structure (Habib, 2025).

In addition, the current curriculum at the institute includes a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic subjects *nahw*, *sharaf*, literature, logic, and Islamic sciences but students' *sharaf* competence remains below expectations. Interviews and classroom diagnostics suggest that teachers emphasize rote rules memorization more than applied morphological analysis, which weakens students' ability to connect theoretical knowledge to real text comprehension.

The difficulties observed at Jabal An-Nur mirror broader theoretical claims in the field of Arabic linguistics: morphological awareness is essential for lexical access, syntactic parsing, and semantic interpretation (Akzam & Zubaidah, 2024). Without strong morphological competence, learners struggle to engage with the internal structure of words, which hinders fluency and comprehension (Arifin et al., 2022).

In contemporary pedagogy, scholars emphasize that effective *sharaf* instruction should not merely transmit rules, but integrate morphological theory with communicative and text-based practice. This aligns with recent proposals in Arabic language education for integrated learning strategies, which suggest embedding *sharaf* within broader curricular and cognitive frameworks (Riyan Nuryadin, Nurul Irfan, 2024).

While previous studies have examined methods of *sharaf* instruction or focused on error analysis, significant research gaps remain. Empirically, there is still a lack of context-specific data addressing *sharaf* learning difficulties among Indonesian students in *pesantren* or Islamic institute settings, particularly with regard to derived verb forms and complex morphological patterns. From a theoretical perspective, existing research has not sufficiently integrated morphological theory with the actual challenges students encounter during reading activities and vocalization, resulting in a disconnect between abstract grammatical knowledge and its practical application. Moreover, although several studies have explored innovative instructional strategies—such as those informed by cognitive theory or cooperative learning—there is limited research that proposes a comprehensive and contextually grounded pedagogical model encompassing diagnostic assessment, formative feedback, and scaffolded learning processes.

This study offers novelty by diagnosing students' real-time morphological errors during reading activities, examining teachers' current instructional practices in teaching *sharaf*, and formulating pedagogical implications that are specifically tailored to the context of Islamic institutes. Guided by an ideal vision of effective *sharaf* instruction, the study aims to analyze students' difficulties in identifying and interpreting inflected word forms in Arabic texts, describe recurring morphological errors—particularly those related to derived verb patterns and verb classifications—examine teachers' instructional approaches as implemented in classroom practice, and connect morphological theory with real classroom challenges in order to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and authentic language use. Ultimately, the study seeks to propose pedagogical implications for improving *sharaf* instruction, including the implementation of scaffolded, text-based learning, diagnostic feedback mechanisms, and integrative teaching models that are responsive to students' actual learning needs.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to portray students' morphological competence as it naturally appears in classroom interaction. This approach is commonly used to document linguistic behavior without manipulating variables (Hidayah, 2020).

The population consists of 543 students of MA Jabal An-Nur (grades X–XII). The sample includes 50 twelfth-grade students selected through total sampling, assuming they have completed all morphology materials and represent the expected final competence level (Jenny X. Montaña-González, 2017).

Three data collection techniques were employed in this study. Classroom observation was conducted to examine students' application of morphological knowledge, particularly in relation to root recognition, conjugation accuracy, and the identification of derived forms. In addition, semi-structured interviews were carried out with two Arabic teachers and ten students to explore perceived learning difficulties and instructional strategies in *sharaf* instruction (Riyan Nuryadin, Nurul Irfan, 2024).

Furthermore, a diagnostic questionnaire consisting of 20 items was administered to assess students' ability to recognize roots, identify morphological patterns, and conjugate both *fi 'l ṣaḥīḥ* and *fi 'l mu 'tal*, with responses measured using a five-point scale.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis for observations and interviews, and descriptive tabulation (percentages and mean scores) for questionnaire data (Sugiyono, 2017). Methodological triangulation was applied to ensure validity by comparing results from the three instruments (Qomaruddin & Sa'diyah, 2024).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Students' Morphological Errors

Findings from diagnostic tests, classroom observations, and student written exercises demonstrate recurring and systematic patterns of morphological errors. These errors signal fundamental weaknesses in students' understanding of *sharaf*, particularly in the areas of verb conjugation, pattern recognition, and form derivation.

#### 1. Errors in Verb Conjugation (*Taṣrīf*)

The most frequent errors occurred in conjugating basic verb forms. Several students misread *kataba* as *yaktibu* instead of the correct *yaktubu*, indicating confusion between the vowel-change paradigms *fa'ala-yaf'ulu* and *fa'ila-yaf'alu*. This type of error reflects limited mastery of vowel alternation rules and suggests that students rely on guesswork rather than systematic recognition of paradigms. Previous studies likewise report that learners often confuse paradigmatic vowel changes due to insufficient exposure to varied conjugation patterns (Nurbaiti, 2024).

Furthermore, hollow verbs (*al-af'āl al-ajwaf*) presented significant challenges. Forms such as *qāma* (q-w-m) were frequently categorized as *fi 'il ṣaḥīḥ*, and their conjugations were handled without applying the established rules for hollow verbs. Students commonly formed erroneous derivatives such as *yaquwumu* instead of *yaqūmu*. This misclassification reveals a conceptual misunderstanding regarding trilateral weak roots and the morphological consequences of medial weak letters, which aligns with recent findings on learners' difficulty with weak verb morphology (Ibnu Hajar & Abdul Qohar, 2024).

#### 2. Errors in Recognizing Morphological Patterns (*Awzān*)

Students also experienced difficulty distinguishing among common pattern groups. Incorrect pattern identification affected their ability to infer meaning from unfamiliar words. For instance, passive forms (*maf'ūl*) were occasionally misclassified as intensive or causative patterns (*taf'īl*). This confusion demonstrates inadequate pattern recognition, a skill widely acknowledged as crucial to Arabic word comprehension (Basid et al., 2025).

#### 3. Inaccurate Derivation of *Maṣdar* and Noun Forms

Errors in deriving *maṣdar* and noun forms were common. For example, students frequently derived *istaghfara* as *ghufrān* rather than the correct *istighfār*. Such errors indicate that students often neglect the structural influence of extra letters (*ziyādah*) in derived forms. A similar pattern was observed in international studies showing that learners often fail to internalize the systematic relationship between verb forms and their corresponding nouns (Dosi & Gavriilidou, 2020).

#### 4. Difficulty Distinguishing Between *Mujarrad* and *Mazīd* Forms

Another recurring challenge was differentiating between *mujarrad* (basic) and *mazīd* (augmented) verb forms. Many students assumed that *ta'allama* was a purely trilateral verb, ignoring the presence of prefixation or infixation. This error suggests that morphological analysis is not yet an automatic process for students. The absence of a structural analytic mindset has been reported in recent morphological competency studies (Basid et al., 2025).

Taken together, the findings indicate that students' difficulties in Arabic morphology stem from limited pattern recognition skills and insufficient exposure to authentic, morphologically rich texts.

Although learners demonstrate partial conceptual understanding of morphological rules, they struggle to proceduralize this knowledge when analyzing verbs in real reading contexts. The recurring errors observed in weak verb forms reflect not only gaps in rule application but also perceptual and analytical limitations that hinder accurate morphological identification.

This pattern is consistent with recent studies on Arabic morphological acquisition, which indicate that learners often attain only surface-level mastery of morphological rules without developing the ability to apply them flexibly in contextualized tasks. Previous research demonstrates that morphological competence requires sustained engagement with meaningful textual input rather than reliance on isolated drills, and further emphasizes that instruction centered on memorization tends to result in limited morphological transfer. The findings of the present study reinforce this body of literature by showing that insufficient integration of morphological instruction into reading activities contributes to students' persistent difficulties in accurately interpreting verb patterns during authentic text processing (Shahbari-Kassem et al., 2025).

### Questionnaire Findings

The diagnostic questionnaire, completed by the 50 twelfth-grade students, provided quantitative insight into the depth of their morphological competence.

**Table 1. Students' Morphological Competence Based on Diagnostic Questionnaire Results**

Indicator	Percentage	Score (0–5)	Category
General understanding of <i>Sharaf</i>	72%	3.2	Moderate
Ability to identify roots	68%	3.4	Good
Conjugation of <i>sahīh</i> and <i>mu'tal</i> verbs	55%	2.9	Moderate
Applying rules in texts	49%	2.6	Low
Overall score	64%	—	Moderate

The lowest performance was observed in applying morphological rules within authentic texts (49%, categorized as low). This finding aligns with recent studies showing that students face greater difficulty in applying morphological knowledge in contextualized reading than in recalling isolated rules. Learners are often able to reproduce morphological patterns in decontextualized tasks but struggle to interpret inflected forms in authentic texts (Hussain, 2022). Similar findings indicate that limited text-based morphological instruction weakens the transfer of rule knowledge to real reading contexts (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). These studies confirm that the main challenge in Arabic morphology learning lies in practical application rather than theoretical mastery.

The relatively higher performance in root identification (68%) suggests that students have some foundational understanding of morphological decomposition but cannot extend it reliably to conjugation or pattern recognition in reading contexts.

### Interview Findings

Semi-structured interviews with Arabic teachers and selected students further illuminated the nature and causes of the errors identified.

#### 1. Teachers' Perspectives

Teachers consistently reported that although students were generally familiar with basic *awzān*, they often experienced confusion when analyzing *fi'il mu'tal* categories, particularly *ajwaf* and *nāqis*. One teacher explained that, “students can usually mention the patterns correctly in isolation, but once they encounter them in a reading text, they hesitate and misidentify the verb form” (T1). Another teacher noted that, “when verbs undergo vowel changes, students become uncertain and tend to guess rather than analyze the pattern” (T2). A third teacher emphasized that, “many learners memorize *tasrif* tables well for examinations, but this memorization does not help them when they have to interpret verbs in

*sentences*” (T3). These responses indicate that the ability to recall paradigmatic forms does not necessarily translate into effective morphological analysis in authentic contexts.

Teachers further highlighted that current *sharaf* instruction places strong emphasis on rule explanation and repetitive drills, while engagement with textual materials remains limited. As one interviewee stated, “*most of the lesson time is spent explaining rules on the board and drilling patterns, while reading activities are often treated as supplementary*” (T1). Another teacher added that, “*students rarely analyze fi’il mu’tal directly from texts, so they lack confidence when encountering such forms independently*” (T4). A similar concern was raised by a teacher who remarked that, “*without regular exposure to real texts, students depend too much on memorization and struggle to apply rules flexibly*” (T2). Collectively, these interview excerpts suggest that instruction dominated by rule-based teaching and drills may limit students’ opportunities to develop contextualized morphological awareness. This finding aligns with recent research indicating that memorization-oriented instruction without sufficient application leads to weak morphological transfer (Allothman & Als Salman, 2020).

## 2. Students’ Perspectives

Students expressed difficulties that closely mirrored the challenges identified by teachers. Several students reported that although they were able to conjugate *fi’l ṣaḥīḥ* accurately during drills, they often “forgot the pattern” when encountering weak verbs in actual texts. One student stated, “*when the verb is like qāla or bā’a, I know it is different, but I suddenly forget the pattern and hesitate*” (S1). Another student similarly explained, “*in exercises I can answer correctly, but when reading, weak verbs confuse me and I am not sure how to analyze them*” (S2). These responses indicate that students’ morphological knowledge remains fragile when transferred from controlled practice to authentic reading situations.

Other students emphasized that while they could grasp the general meaning of a text, they lacked confidence in identifying roots and derived patterns, which limited deeper comprehension. As one student admitted, “*I usually understand the overall meaning, but I cannot identify the root or the pattern, so I am not confident about my analysis*” (S3). Another student noted that “*without knowing the root, it is difficult to understand how the word is formed and what it really means*” (S4). A similar concern was voiced by a student who remarked, “*I read the text, but I avoid analyzing the verbs because I am afraid of making mistakes*” (S5). These testimonies suggest that students often rely on surface-level comprehension while avoiding deeper morphological analysis.

Overall, the student interview data confirm that learners’ knowledge of Arabic morphology is largely declarative rather than procedural. Although students can recall rules and conjugation patterns in isolation, they struggle to apply this knowledge in real reading contexts. This finding echoes psycholinguistic research indicating that Arabic learners require sustained and repeated exposure to morphological forms in meaningful contexts in order to develop automatic morphological processing skills (Dosi & Gavriilidou, 2020). Together, these interview excerpts strengthen the qualitative evidence that current *sharaf* instruction has not yet fully supported the transition from rule memorization to functional morphological competence.

Overall, the interview data from both teachers and students reveal a convergent pattern that highlights a persistent gap between rule memorization and contextual application of Arabic morphology. From the teachers’ perspective, students’ difficulties in analyzing *fi’il mu’tal*, particularly *ajwaf* and *nāqiṣ* forms, were attributed to the predominance of rule-based instruction and paradigm memorization, with limited engagement in authentic text analysis. In contrast, students articulated this challenge as hesitation, loss of pattern recognition, and lack of confidence when encountering weak verbs in reading contexts. The alignment between these two perspectives suggests that the problem is not merely individual learner deficiency but reflects a systemic issue within current *sharaf* instructional practices.

These findings are consistent with recent studies indicating that declarative morphological knowledge does not automatically develop into the procedural competence required for real-time language processing. Previous research argues that instruction oriented toward memorization, when not accompanied by sufficient contextual application, results in weak morphological transfer. Likewise,

psycholinguistic studies emphasize that sustained exposure to morphological forms within meaningful contexts is essential for the development of automatic morphological processing. The present study corroborates these findings by providing qualitative evidence that students who are able to accurately recall conjugation patterns in isolation often struggle to apply them during authentic text interpretation (Bratlie et al., 2022).

The main contribution of this study lies in its integration of teachers' and students' voices to illuminate how this theory–practice gap manifests in classroom realities. While earlier research has largely focused on instructional effectiveness at a macro level, the present findings offer micro-level insights into learners' cognitive and affective experiences when dealing with *fi'il mu'tal*. By foregrounding these lived experiences, this study extends existing literature on Arabic morphology acquisition and underscores the need for instructional approaches that balance formal rule instruction with sustained, text-based morphological analysis.

## Discussion

The analysis reveals a significant discrepancy between students' theoretical knowledge of morphology and their ability to apply that knowledge to authentic reading tasks.

The findings of this study indicate that a major difficulty in *sharaf* learning lies in the gap between students' declarative knowledge and their procedural ability to process Arabic texts. Although many students are able to memorize conjugation tables and morphological rules, this knowledge often remains disconnected from real-time text comprehension and reading performance. This finding supports earlier studies in Arabic language pedagogy, which argue that traditional instructional models tend to overemphasize rote memorization at the expense of meaningful language use, resulting in limited transfer of grammatical knowledge to authentic reading contexts (Budiman, 2017). Consequently, students may know the rules in theory but struggle to apply them when encountering inflected or derived forms in actual texts.

Classroom observation further reveals that *sharaf* instruction in MA Jabal An-Nur relies predominantly on lecture-based explanations and mechanical drills, with minimal integration of authentic or contextualized texts. From the perspective of applied linguistics, such decontextualized instruction weakens morphological awareness and limits long-term retention, as learners are not exposed to forms in meaningful discourse (Akzam & Zubaidah, 2024). Without sufficient opportunities to engage with naturally occurring morphological patterns, students experience difficulty recognizing and interpreting inflected forms during reading activities. This instructional limitation is compounded by students' restricted exposure to morphologically rich texts, particularly those containing complex verb categories and augmented patterns. Similar findings have been reported in both Arabic first-language and second-language contexts, where limited textual input constrains learners' ability to generalize morphological rules to unfamiliar linguistic environments (Aldjanabi et al., 2021).

Another contributing factor identified in this study is the limited development of students' metalinguistic awareness. Students are rarely encouraged to verbalize their analytical processes or reflect on how morphological forms are constructed and interpreted. In addition, teacher feedback tends to focus primarily on the correctness of answers rather than on the reasoning strategies underlying morphological analysis. Previous research suggests that such feedback practices restrict opportunities for cognitive engagement and deeper grammatical understanding, as learners are not guided to internalize analytical procedures (Abdussalam et al., 2021). Interviews with teachers also reveal instructional inconsistency in presenting morphological concepts, with varying emphases on charts, rule memorization, or repetition. This lack of coherence may further contribute to student confusion and hinder the transfer of morphological knowledge across contexts.

Despite these challenges, the findings offer clear pedagogical implications for improving *sharaf* instruction. Morphology instruction should be more closely integrated with reading comprehension activities rather than treated as an isolated component of language learning. Students need to encounter morphological patterns within meaningful written discourse to strengthen form–meaning connections. Emphasizing structured pattern recognition activities can also enhance students' analytical skills by training them to identify, compare, and contrast morphological forms systematically. Moreover,

increasing the use of authentic texts drawn from classical, modern standard, and contemporary Arabic sources can enrich students' exposure to diverse morphological structures. The incorporation of digital visualization tools, such as interactive morphology applications or teacher-designed digital charts, may further support learners in visualizing structural relationships among roots, patterns, and affixes. Finally, scaffolded instruction that progresses gradually from recognition to guided analysis and independent text interpretation, accompanied by feedback that targets reasoning processes rather than final answers alone, can foster deeper morphological awareness and more effective learning outcomes.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to one institution in North Aceh, which may restrict generalizability. Second, the study emphasized qualitative observation and self-reported data, which may not capture all dimensions of morphological proficiency. Future research could extend the scope of this study by conducting comparative multi-institutional investigations across Islamic boarding schools and general schools to identify contextual similarities and differences in *sharaf* learning. Longitudinal research designs are also recommended to trace students' morphological development over several semesters and to examine how instructional practices influence learning trajectories over time. In addition, future studies may explore digital-assisted instructional interventions by examining the impact of mobile applications and visual tools on students' morphological awareness and reading performance. Finally, experimental research comparing traditional *sharaf* instruction with more integrated, text-based instructional models would provide stronger empirical evidence regarding the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches.

### CONCLUSION

The study demonstrates that students' ability to comprehend inflected words in Arabic remains limited, particularly in the areas of *fi'il mu'tal* analysis, pattern recognition, *maṣdar* derivation, and distinguishing between *mujarrad* and *mazīd* forms. Although the questionnaire results show a moderate overall score of 64 percent, only 49 percent of students were able to apply morphological rules effectively when working with authentic texts. This indicates a substantial gap between theoretical understanding and practical application. The findings further reveal that current instructional practices emphasize rule memorization and theoretical exposition rather than contextualized and analytical use of morphology, contributing to continued difficulties in transferring knowledge to reading comprehension tasks.

The implications of these findings point to the need for a pedagogical shift in the teaching of *sharaf*. Teachers should integrate morphology into reading and writing activities so that students encounter and analyze morphological structures within meaningful contexts. Exposure to authentic texts is essential for strengthening the application of morphological rules, while digital visualization tools may support learners in recognizing patterns more intuitively. Instruction should encourage analytical thinking by comparing *ṣaḥīḥ* and *mu'tal* verb forms, guiding students to understand how patterns operate rather than relying solely on memorization. Explicit reinforcement of pattern recognition and repeated engagement with morphologically rich materials will help bridge the gap between theory and practice. Strengthening the connection between *sharaf* and reading comprehension is therefore crucial for enhancing students' overall linguistic proficiency and supporting long-term mastery of Arabic morphology.

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