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Bridging Assessment and Proficiency: Developing Speaking Skill Test Instruments for Arabic Learners

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the practice of evaluating Arabic speaking skills (maharah kalam) at MTs Pondok Pesantren Darul Ulum Indragiri and identify the need for developing evaluation instruments that are performative-based, standardized, and appropriate for the pesantren context. This study used a mixed methods approach with quantitative survey techniques on 40 students and in-depth qualitative interviews with Arabic teachers. The findings show that the form of evaluation used is still dominated by direct question and answer, while only a small proportion of teachers (35%) use written rubrics. Most teachers conduct assessments intuitively and have not received specialized training in oral assessment design. On the other hand, students expressed feeling more confident after taking the exam, but also faced obstacles such as time constraints and unclear instructions. The mismatch between the communicative learning approach and the evaluation methods used indicates the need for systemic intervention in curriculum design and assessment. This research contributes theoretically in strengthening the concepts of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the context of oral evaluation in pesantren-based institutions. Practically, this study provides an empirical basis for the development of task-based, authentic, and digital interactive kalam test instruments that can be applied more widely in Arabic language education.

Keywords: *Kalam, Pesantren Curriculum, Second Language Acquisition, Task-based Assessment*

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji praktik penilaian keterampilan berbicara bahasa Arab (maharah kalam) di MTs Pondok Pesantren Darul Ulum Indragiri dan mengidentifikasi kebutuhan pengembangan instrumen evaluasi yang berbasis performatif, terstandar, dan sesuai dengan konteks pesantren. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan metode campuran dengan teknik survei kuantitatif terhadap 40 siswa dan wawancara kualitatif mendalam dengan guru bahasa Arab. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa bentuk evaluasi yang digunakan masih didominasi oleh tanya jawab langsung, sementara hanya sebagian kecil guru (35%) yang menggunakan rubrik tertulis. Sebagian besar guru melakukan penilaian secara intuitif dan belum mendapatkan pelatihan khusus dalam desain penilaian lisan. Di

sisi lain, siswa menyatakan merasa lebih percaya diri setelah mengikuti ujian, tetapi juga menghadapi kendala seperti keterbatasan waktu dan instruksi yang tidak jelas. Ketidaksesuaian antara pendekatan pembelajaran komunikatif dan metode evaluasi yang digunakan menunjukkan perlunya intervensi sistemik dalam desain dan penilaian kurikulum. Penelitian ini berkontribusi secara teoritis dalam memperkuat konsep Akuisisi Bahasa Kedua dan Pengajaran Bahasa Komunikatif dalam konteks evaluasi lisan di lembaga berbasis pesantren. Secara praktis, penelitian ini memberikan dasar empiris untuk pengembangan instrumen tes kalam interaktif berbasis tugas, autentik, dan digital yang dapat diterapkan lebih luas dalam pendidikan bahasa Arab.
***Kata Kunci**: Kalam, Kurikulum Pesantren, Akuisisi Bahasa Kedua, Penilaian Berbasis Tugas*

INTRODUCTION

Arabic language learning in Islamic educational environments such as the Islamic Junior High School (MTs) at the Darul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Indragiri plays a crucial role, not only as a foreign language but also as a primary means of understanding religious teachings, developing an Islamic identity, and accessing classical and modern religious literature[1]. Of the four language skills, speaking (*maharah kalam*) is one of the most crucial. This skill significantly supports students not only in academic contexts but also in daily religious practices, such as delivering religious speeches, discussing in *halaqah* (Islamic boarding school) circles, or communicating in Islamic boarding school activities. However, the reality on the ground shows that many educational institutions, such as MTs, still predominantly use memorization-based learning approaches and grammatical rules, which do not provide enough space for the development of students fluency and speaking skills[2].

This situation is also reflected in assessment practices. Speaking tests in madrasas are generally administered orally directly between teachers and students without the use of a structured rubric. Assessments are often based on teacher intuition, without clear guidelines, resulting in subjective and inconsistent results. Furthermore, the absence of national standards governing the evaluation of speaking skills, as in the National Examination (UAMBN), means each madrasah has its own

[1] Amin Ali and M Amin, "The Role of Arabic Language in Islamic Pedagogy in Southeast Asia. Journal of Islamic Studies and Education," *Journal of Islamic Studies and Education* 5, no. 1 (2022): 15–29.

[2] Ahmad Muradi, "Pendekatan Komunikatif Dalam Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab," *Arabiyat: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab Dan Kebahasaaraban* 1, no. 1 (2014): 85–100, https://doi.org/10.15408/a.v1i1.1129 Jurnal UIN Jakarta +2 ResearchGate +2 Jurnal UIN Jakarta +2.

assessment method[3]. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that many Arabic language teachers have not received formal training in developing performance-based evaluation instruments. Teachers limited understanding of performative assessment methods leads to low validity and reliability of evaluation results, as well as minimal meaningful feedback for students[4].

Various studies have recommended communicative and performance-based approaches as solutions to improve students' speaking skills. Techniques such as muhadhoroh, role-playing, and task-based learning have proven effective in building students' confidence and fluency in speaking[5]. This approach aligns with sociocultural-based language acquisition theory, which emphasizes the importance of meaningful interaction in the learning process. Research also shows that students find it easier to construct sentences when they are in a linguistically supportive environment and have mastery of functional grammar such as nahwu and shorof[6].

In addition to pedagogical approaches, the use of digital media is also gaining increasing attention in Arabic language learning. Various interactive applications such as Educaplay, hand puppets, and audio-visual content have been shown to increase student motivation and participation in speaking practice[7]. These findings align with multimedia learning theory, which states that combining visual, auditory, and kinesthetic elements can improve student absorption and retention[8]. Even in the context of early childhood, digital media has been shown to aid vocabulary mastery and speaking confidence[9]. However, the success of implementing this technology depends heavily on the technical readiness of students and teachers in Islamic

[3] Widiya Yul et al., "Penilaian Keterampilan Berbicara Bahasa Arab: Sebuah Studi Kritis Untuk Implementasi Ujian Akhir Di Indonesia," *Izdihar: Jurnal Pengajaran Bahasa Arab, Linguistik, Dan Sastra* 5, no. 2 (2022): 151–66, https://doi.org/10.22219/jiz.v5i2.22294.

[4] Hayo Reinders, "Pelatihan Guru Dalam Asesmen Bahasa: Kesenjangan Dan Kebutuhan," *Language Assessment Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2021): 322-339.

[5] Muhammad Azhar et al., "Arabic Language Learning with Communicative Method and Factors Affecting Student's Speaking Ability," *Takuana: Jurnal Pendidikan, Sains, Dan Humaniora* 1, no. 2 (2022): 92–101, https://doi.org/10.56113/takuana.v1i2.33.

[6] M. Rachmawati and F Liza, "Cultural Competence in Arabic Speaking: An Educational Analysis," *Alsuniyat: Jurnal Penelitian Bahasa, Sastra, Dan Budaya Arab* 6, no. 2 (2022): 231–45.

[7] Nurdin Hidayah and S. Sujono, "Peran Media Digital Dalam Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab. J," *Jurnal Al-Ta'dib* 12, no. 1 (2019): 73–88, https://doi.org/10.31332/atdb.v12i1.1234.

[8] Richard E Mayer, *Multimedia Learning*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2020), https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108859028.

[9] Rolando Gultom et al., "Language Acquisition in Early Childhood Development," *Early Childhood Education Journal* 10, no. 3 (2022): 221–30.

boarding schools (pesantren), which are still in the early stages of digitalization[10]. On the other hand, performance-based evaluation has also been proven to be a more valid alternative for assessing speaking skills. Assessment through real-life tasks such as spontaneous presentations or unscripted dialogues not only reflects language skills more authentically but also boosts students self-confidence[11]. This student-centered assessment method provides more meaningful formative feedback than conventional oral exams[12]. Although evidence has demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach, its adoption in madrasah and Islamic boarding schools remains limited due to limited resources, teacher training, and institutional support.

Although teaching strategies and the use of technology in Arabic speaking skills learning have been extensively researched, attention to how these skills are assessed remains limited, particularly in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). Most studies focus on teaching methods, rather than the evaluation instruments used. Few studies have in-depth examined how teachers design and implement speaking assessments, nor have students perceived the fairness, clarity, and effectiveness of these assessments. Furthermore, there is a mismatch between the communicative approach taught and the traditional evaluation methods, which hinder the achievement of overall learning objectives.

Another gap is the lack of assessment instruments specifically designed for the Islamic boarding school context, both in terms of pedagogical approach and social and cultural realities. Current evaluation tools are often general in nature and do not consider the unique characteristics of Islamic boarding school education. This raises an urgent need to develop standardized, performance-based, and contextually relevant speaking assessment instruments for effective use in the Islamic education system.

Based on the description, this study aims to investigate the types, effectiveness, and perceptions of the use of speaking skills assessment instruments in

[10] Mustapha Qureshi et al., "Scale for Measuring Arabic Speaking Skills in Early Children's Education," *Journal International of Lingua and Technology* 1, no. 2 (2022): 114–30, https://doi.org/10.55849/jiltech.v1i2.81.

[11] A Fauzi and S Rahmawati, "Evaluation of Speaking Competence in Arabic Language Learning: A Performance Assessment Approach. International Journal of Arabic Studies," *International Journal of Arabic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2025): 12–22, https://doi.org/10.55849/ijas.v2i1.73.

[12] Budi Sanjaya and Wahyu Hidayat, "Student Speaking Skill Assessment: Techniques and Results," *International Journal of Evaluation and Research in Education (IJERE)* 11, no. 4 (2022): 1741–48, https://doi.org/10.11591/ijere.v11i4.22782.

Arabic language learning at MTs Pondok Pesantren Darul Ulum Indragiri, in order to answer the need for standardized performance-based speaking test tools that are appropriate to the Islamic boarding school context.

METHOD

This research uses a mixed methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative techniques to obtain a comprehensive picture of the practices and perceptions of speaking skill assessment instruments in Arabic language learning at MTs Pondok Pesantren Darul Ulum Indragiri. This research was conducted in the even semester of the 2023/2024 academic year, with the research location in one of the Islamic boarding school-based madrasah tsanawiyah in Indragiri Hulu Regency, Riau. The research subjects involved 40 students and 5 Arabic teachers. Students were randomly selected from classes VIII and IX to fill in the questionnaire, while teachers were purposively selected based on their active involvement in the design and implementation of speaking tests in the madrasah. The interviewed teachers had a minimum educational background of S1 and teaching experience between 3 to 15 years.

The instruments used in this study include student questionnaires, semi-structured interview guides for teachers, observation sheets of assessment implementation, and assessment documents in the form of rubrics and score records. The student questionnaire consisted of closed and open-ended questions to obtain data on the type of test taken, perceptions of the clarity of instructions, student readiness, and the benefits of the test on self-confidence. Interviews with teachers aimed to explore their understanding of the use of rubrics, obstacles to speaking assessment, and madrasah readiness in developing performance-based instruments. Observations were made during the implementation of oral exams and muhadhoroh activities, while documents were analyzed to see the existence and form of rubrics used. Prior to data collection, participants were given an explanation and asked to sign an informed consent form. This study also guarantees the confidentiality of respondents' identities and adheres to the ethical principles of educational research.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (percentage) to determine the proportion of students and teachers in the aspects studied, such as the use of rubrics and the types of assessments conducted. Qualitative analysis was

conducted through a thematic analysis approach to the results of interviews and observations. The stages of thematic analysis consisted of open coding the interview transcripts, grouping the codes into categories, and drawing themes for interpretation. For example, categories such as "lack of training," "intuitive assessment," and "time constraints" were analyzed as themes about structural barriers in oral assessment. Triangulation was done by comparing the results of questionnaires, interviews, observations, and documents to increase the validity of the findings. The characteristics of the respondents were also explained as part of the context of the analysis.

DISCUSSION

This study reveals that the assessment of speaking skills at MTs Pondok Pesantren Darul Ulum Indragiri is still not done uniformly and systematically. The two main forms of evaluation used are direct question and answer between teachers and students (62.5%) and speaking practices such as muhadhoroh (30%). In fact, 7.5% of students stated that they did not know the form of the test they had taken, indicating an information vacuum or uneven implementation of assessment. This condition is exacerbated by the fact that only 35% of teachers use written rubrics as assessment tools, while the other 65% of teachers assess based on intuition or personal experience. The absence of standardized instruments in the assessment of speaking skills can cause the evaluation results to be subjective and not reflect the competence of students as a whole[13].

On the learner side, the survey results showed that 50% of students experienced confusion about the instructions in the oral assessment and 45% felt that the answer time was too short. However, 55% of students reported feeling more confident after taking the speaking test. This indicates that the speaking assessment has the potential to be a means of increasing students' courage and spontaneity, especially when the teacher creates a supportive atmosphere. As one student stated, "I am more courageous to speak Arabic if the teacher is patient and gives opportunities." This is in line with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis theory which emphasizes that affective factors such as a sense of security, motivation, and self-

[13] Muhamad Fuad Hasim et al., "The Use of the Istinbathiyah Method in Learning the Ma'ani (Balaghah) Using Mutasyabihat Fi al-Alfadz Verses," *Arabiyat: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab Dan Kebahasaaraban* 11, no. 2 (2024): 259–76, https://doi.org/10.15408/a.v11i2.42469.

confidence are very influential on the success of language acquisition. This finding is also reinforced by the research of Luthfiah et al. which showed that contextualized speaking practice through daily conversations and media such as SIM TV at Sekolah Indonesia Makkah contributed to improving students' fluency and confidence[14].

Assessments conducted without rubrics or clear procedures hinder the achievement of learning objectives. One teacher even stated, “We assess using our feelings because we don't have a definite reference.” In the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, oral assessment should be contextual and interaction-based, not just reproduction of language structures. Sulaiman[15] support this by stating that communicative evaluation provides a more real and applicable picture of language skills, compared to rote tests.

Before going into further analysis, Table 1 is presented below which summarizes the main quantitative findings obtained from the student and teacher survey results. The presentation of this table is intended to show more concrete proportions of the forms of assessment, students' perceptions of their implementation, and evaluation practices carried out by teachers. This table is important to map out the most pressing areas for improvement, especially regarding the use of rubrics, clarity of instructions, and the need for teacher training.

The survey results from teachers and students about the Arabic speaking skills test tool are shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. Percentage of Main Research Findings

No	Aspect Is Being Considered	Percentage (%)
1	Students take part in a speaking exam that consists of questions and answers.	62.5%
2	Based on muhadhoroh is given to the students	30%
3	The instructor makes use of a documented evaluation guide.	35%
4	The teacher administers the evaluation in a subjective manner.	65%
5	The test instructions are unclear to the students.	50%
6	Students believe they have insufficient time to respond	45%
7	Students' confidence is increased by the test.	55%

[14] Nur Aini Luthfiah et al., “Eksplorasi Budaya Pembelajaran Bahasa Arab Di Sekolah Indonesia Makkah,” *Arabiyat: Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab Dan Kebahasaaraban* 12, no. 1 (2025): 314–32, https://doi.org/10.15408/a.v12i1.35213.

[15] Afifah Quraishah et al., “Al Ghazali’s Dialogue: A Case-Based & Critical Thinking Communicative Language Teaching Approach.,” *Journal of Positive School Psychology* 6, no. 5 (2022), https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Surinder-Kaur-6/publication/373071495_Al-Ghazali's_Dialogue_A_Case-Based_Critical_Thinking_Communicative_Language_Teaching_Approach/links/64d66ba078e40b48bd3e7644/Al-Ghazalis-Dialogue-A-Case-Based-Critical-Thinking-Communicative-Language-Teaching-Approach.pdf.

8	Teachers concur that design and assessment training is essential	100%

The table above shows that most teachers have not used rubrics, while students face instructional constraints in tests. This situation demands an assessment design that is more representative of students' real performance. In the context of Bachman[16] communicative competence, assessment should include linguistic, sociolinguistic and strategic dimensions so that the results are valid and support the learning process.

At this point, explorative and performative approaches such as the Istinbathiyah method become very relevant. Hasim et al.[17] state that "the Istinbathiyah method is able to provide stimulation to students, so that it can produce good learning outcomes" because it encourages active involvement in understanding and using language. Oral evaluations designed with this approach are able to explore students' abilities in a functional and applicative manner.

Furthermore, task-based approaches such as Total Physical Response (TPR) have also been shown to be effective in improving students' language recall and response. Siregar & Rangkuti explain that "the TPR method makes it easier for students to understand and remember vocabulary through body movements that are directly linked to oral instructions, resulting in an increase in speaking ability"[18]. This means that assessments need to adopt strategies that not only measure verbal ability, but also support multisensory engagement.

The direct implication of this finding is the need to reorganize the Arabic curriculum in MTs. Evaluation of speaking skills should not be placed as a mere supplement, but be a major part of the learning outcomes. Evaluations such as role plays, presentations, discussions, and oral media projects can be integrated into

[16] Ronet D. Bachman and Russell K. Schutt, *The Practice of Research in Criminology and Criminal Justice* (Sage Publications, 2019), https://books.google.com/books?hl=id&lr=&id=YRh7DwAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT4&dq=bachman+schutt&ots=kz3FRDxuFA&sig=YxU-kgNLtuKrRG957-kgDjbqMd8.

[17] Muhamad Fuad Hasim et al., "The Use of the Istinbathiyah Method in Learning the Ma'ani (Balaghah) Using Mutasyabihat Fi al-Alfadz Verses.," *Arabiyat: Journal of Arabic Education & Arabic Studies/Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab Dan Kebahasaaraban* 11, no. 2 (2024), https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&profile=ehost&scope=site&authtype=crawler&jrnl=2356153X&AN=182766031&h=vGc8uleorJ7kyEgeUKRLxgl7rOPZid1AJKk0bIAXODfYOODiWGLyGJpmhYKiys%2BVPVbRQG0mr%2Fc15M8y02tadQ%3D%3D&crl=c.

[18] Eveline Siregar and Lusi Rangkuti, "Penerapan Metode Total Physical Response (TPR) Dalam Pembelajaran Keterampilan Berbicara Bahasa Arab.," *Jurnal Pendidikan Bahasa Arab* 5, no. 1 (2021): 50–66, https://doi.org/10.21043/jpba.v5i1.11179.

routine learning. Assessments should also include rubrics aligned with the CEFR descriptors, which provide performance indicators such as fluency, coherence, and interactive communication.

Finally, madrasahs need to provide regular training for teachers in assessment design, rubric development, and utilization of modern assessment media. With this ecosystem, the evaluation of speaking skills will be more meaningful, valid, and support the goals of communicative Arabic education in the context of pesantren.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the assessment tools used for evaluating Arabic speaking skills at MTs Pondok Pesantren Darul Ulum Indragiri remain limited in standardization and objectivity. While oral evaluations such as muhadhoroh and direct interviews are commonly practiced, the absence of structured rubrics and formal training among teachers results in evaluations that are often subjective and inconsistent. Although some students reported increased confidence after taking the speaking test, issues such as unclear instructions, limited response time, and a lack of assessment literacy among teachers hinder the effectiveness of the current evaluation process.

Therefore, the development of structured, performance-based speaking assessment instruments that align with communicative learning objectives is essential. These tools should incorporate clear rubrics and support authentic, task-based evaluation methods. In parallel, madrasahs must provide regular training programs for Arabic language teachers, not only in test design but also in assessment interpretation and feedback provision, to ensure validity and fairness in speaking skill assessments.

However, this study has several limitations. It focused on a single madrasah within the pesantren context, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The sample size, particularly for the qualitative interviews, was also relatively small. Additionally, the study did not include a comparative analysis between schools with and without structured assessment systems. Future research is encouraged to conduct broader, multi-site investigations, explore the integration of interactive digital rubrics in speaking assessments, and conduct experimental trials to examine

the impact of structured performance assessments on student learning outcomes across various pesantren-based educational institutions.

This research contributes to the field of Arabic language education by highlighting the gap between communicative teaching and speaking assessment practices in Islamic schools. It provides empirical evidence supporting the need for performance-based, contextualized evaluation instruments in pesantren settings. The findings can serve as a foundation for policymakers, curriculum developers, and educators to redesign Arabic language evaluation systems that are more authentic, student-centered, and aligned with modern pedagogical frameworks.

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