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Evaluating the Perceived Effectiveness of Arabic-for-Fiqh-and-Judiciary Course Content in Developing Academic and Professional Language Competencies in the Age of Generative Artificial Intelligence: An Empirical Study at Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali, Brunei Darussalam

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Abstract

This study evaluated the effectiveness of Arabic language instructional content in developing discipline-specific language competencies among students in the Department of Fiqh and Judiciary, Faculty of Shariah, Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), Brunei Darussalam. It was grounded in the importance of Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP) in addressing the academic and professional needs of students specialising in Shariah-related disciplines. A quantitative evaluative design was employed to assess the effectiveness of the instructional content and the extent to which it addressed learners' discipline-specific linguistic needs. The study population comprised 43 first-year students, of whom 29 participated in the study, representing 67.5% of the total population. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire developed based on the literature on ASP, language needs analysis, and academic language competencies. The data were subsequently analysed using appropriate descriptive statistical techniques. The findings revealed that students perceived the course content as highly effective in developing their discipline-specific language competencies, with an overall effectiveness score of 77.8%. The alignment of the content with specialised Shariah-related topics received the highest rating (80.6%), followed by practical activities and academic writing (80.0%), academic speaking (79.3%), and academic listening (77.9%). The findings further indicated that the content successfully addressed students' academic and professional needs while appropriately incorporating Islamic and Arab cultural dimensions. Nevertheless, the results identified areas requiring further improvement, particularly specialised reading skills and the sequencing and difficulty levels of the instructional materials, to better accommodate individual differences among learners. The study recommends developing ASP content through a competency-based and needs-driven approach, strengthening analytical and inferential reading activities, and expanding the integration of contemporary educational technologies. These measures may contribute to improving the quality and relevance of Arabic language programmes in Islamic higher education institutions.

Keywords: Arabic for Specific Purposes; discipline-specific language competencies; Fiqh and Judiciary; Arabic language education; needs analysis; Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali; Brunei Darussalam.

1. Introduction

Arabic for Specific Purposes (ASP) falls within the broader field of language education for academic and professional purposes. This pedagogical orientation is premised on the principle that language instruction should not be divorced from learners' actual needs or from the disciplinary and epistemic contexts in which the target language is used. Hutchinson and Waters maintain that the essence of language teaching for specific purposes lies not merely in teaching a particular variety of language, but in designing instruction around learners' needs and their reasons for learning the language. Accordingly, needs analysis constitutes a fundamental basis for the development of specialised language courses (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, pp. 53–63). Similarly, Dudley-Evans and St John emphasise that language programmes for specific purposes are principally defined by their relationship to particular academic and professional disciplines and by the communicative tasks that learners are expected to perform in authentic contexts (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, pp. 4–5, 121–145).

From this perspective, Arabic language instruction for students in the Department of Fiqh and Judiciary, Faculty of Shariah, Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), Brunei Darussalam, should not be confined to general language instruction centred on decontextualised grammar and vocabulary. Rather, it should adopt a functional, discipline-specific orientation that integrates language learning with the study of Islamic jurisprudential texts, Islamic legal theory, and legal discourse, while simultaneously developing the skills required for academic research, critical analysis, and juridical inference. As Hyland argues, effective language instruction is situated within learners' disciplinary discourse communities and responds to the distinctive patterns of discourse, writing, and communication that characterise their fields of study (Hyland, 2006, pp. 9–28). Swales likewise underscores that an understanding of discourse communities and their associated genres is fundamental to specialised academic language instruction, since every discipline generates its own linguistic conventions, rhetorical practices, textual genres, and modes of knowledge construction (Swales, 1990, pp. 21–32, 58–67).

2. Theoretical Framework and Review of Related Literature

The present study is grounded in the premise that the effectiveness of Arabic-for-Specific-Purposes course content at the Faculty of Shariah, Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), should be assessed in terms of its capacity to develop the discipline-specific language competencies required by students of Fiqh and Judiciary. These competencies encompass, in particular, analytical reading of Shariah texts, academic listening, scholarly oral communication, and research-oriented writing. The curriculum-design literature provides substantial support for this orientation. Nation and Macalister contend that curriculum development should begin with an analysis of the learning environment, learner needs, and relevant pedagogical principles before decisions are made regarding content, learning activities, and assessment procedures (Nation & Macalister, 2010, pp. 24–39). Brown likewise explains that needs analysis in language-for-specific-purposes programmes should not be confined to learners' expressed preferences; rather, it must also identify the competencies they objectively require to perform effectively in their academic and professional contexts (Brown, 2016, pp. 13–32).

From a skills-based perspective, specialised reading constitutes a fundamental component of language education for students of Shariah-related disciplines. Comprehending texts in fiqh and uṣūl al-fiqh requires learners to analyse complex arguments, establish relationships among ideas, draw well-founded inferences, and distinguish between the general linguistic meanings of terms and their specialised technical meanings. Grabe emphasises that second-language reading is a complex cognitive process that extends far beyond word recognition to encompass meaning construction, textual interpretation, and the critical analysis of discourse within its academic context (Grabe, 2009, pp. 5–17, 203–230). Specialised academic writing, in turn, enables students to produce knowledge in the Shariah disciplines and formulate coherent scholarly arguments. This understanding is consistent with Hyland's conceptualisation of writing as a socially situated and discursively constructed practice shaped by disciplinary conventions and academic communities (Hyland, 2019, pp. 18–45). Weigle further maintains that the assessment of academic writing should consider communicative purpose, intended audience, textual organisation, and quality of argumentation rather than focusing exclusively on formal linguistic accuracy (Weigle, 2002, pp. 14–39).

Communicative competence within Shariah-related academic contexts also requires the systematic development of academic listening and speaking. Students must be able to comprehend lectures, scholarly presentations, and jurisprudential discussions, while also acquiring the ability to present, explain, and critically discuss Shariah issues in Arabic. Vandergrift and Goh demonstrate that academic listening is a cognitively demanding skill requiring strategic instruction, metacognitive awareness, and sustained practice rather than incidental exposure to spoken input (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012, pp. 3–22). Academic speaking, meanwhile, is closely associated with the broader construct of communicative competence, which encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also sociocultural appropriateness, discourse competence, strategic communication, and the functional use of language in context (Canale & Swain, 1980, pp. 1–47).

On the basis of this theoretical framework, the present study evaluates the effectiveness of Arabic language instructional content in developing discipline-specific language competencies among students of Fiqh and Judiciary at UNISSA. The four language skills constitute interrelated evaluative domains, while needs analysis, disciplinary relevance, and authentic language use provide the principal criteria for assessing the content. As reported in the findings, the effectiveness indicators ranged from 70.3% to 80.6%, with an overall mean score of approximately 77.8%. These results indicate a comparatively high degree of alignment between the instructional content and students' academic and disciplinary needs. Nevertheless, they also reveal a continuing need to strengthen analytical reading, accommodate individual differences among learners, and promote greater integration of the four language skills within authentic Shariah-related academic contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a quantitative evaluative research design, which was considered appropriate for systematically assessing educational programmes and course content and determining the extent to which they achieve their intended learning objectives through quantitative evidence. This design is widely used in contemporary educational research to evaluate the quality and relevance of instructional content and its responsiveness to learners' academic and professional needs (Cohen et al., 2018, pp. 334–356; Creswell & Creswell, 2018, pp. 145–170).

More specifically, the study evaluated the effectiveness of Arabic language instructional content in developing discipline-specific language competencies among students of Fiqh and Judiciary at Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA), Brunei Darussalam. The study was informed by the theoretical premise that the effectiveness of Arabic-for-Specific-Purposes programmes depends substantially on the alignment of course content with learners' authentic linguistic needs and on its capacity to develop the academic and professional skills required within their respective disciplinary contexts (Basturkmen, 2010, pp. 17–35; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, pp. 53–63).

3.2 Population and Sample

The study population comprised all 43 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the Department of Fiqh and Judiciary, Faculty of Shariah, at UNISSA. Of this population, 29 students participated in the study, representing 67.4% of the target population. This level of participation provided substantial coverage of the population and enabled the collection of data suitable for the purposes of a descriptive evaluative investigation (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019, pp. 285–290).

3.3 Research Instrument

Data were collected using a standardised questionnaire developed with reference to established scholarship on Arabic for Specific Purposes, language needs analysis, and communicative and academic competencies. The questionnaire covered key dimensions of the instructional content and assessed students' perceptions of its contribution to the development of the discipline-specific language competencies required in their field of study (Hyland, 2006, pp. 9–28; Nation & Macalister, 2010, pp. 24–39).

3.4 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical procedures, including frequencies, percentages, and weighted means. These procedures were employed to determine the perceived level of effectiveness of the instructional content and to interpret participants' response patterns systematically and accurately. The analysis was intended to generate empirically grounded indicators that could inform the further development of Arabic-for-Specific-Purposes programmes in Islamic higher education institutions (Ary et al., 2019, pp. 428–445; Fraenkel et al., 2019, pp. 382–401).

4. Results and Discussion

The findings revealed a high level of perceived effectiveness of the Arabic-for-Specific-Purposes course content in developing discipline-specific language competencies among students of Fiqh and Judiciary at Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA). The quantitative indicators ranged from 70.3% to 80.6%, with an overall mean score of 77.8%. These results suggest a strong degree of alignment between the linguistic content of the course and the students' academic and prospective professional needs. This finding is consistent with the literature, which maintains that the success of language-for-specific-purposes programmes depends primarily on the extent to which their content corresponds to the requirements of learners' disciplinary contexts (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998, pp. 121–145; Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, pp. 53–63).

Approximately four-fifths of the participants perceived the course content as reflecting the academic language needs of Shariah students. This provides a strong indication that the needs-analysis process underpinning the course design was generally successful. Needs analysis represents a central foundation of language-for-specific-purposes curriculum development because it enables course designers to identify the linguistic tasks, communicative practices, and academic competencies required within a particular discipline (Brown, 2016, pp. 13–32; Long, 2005, pp. 1–16). The favourable result may be attributed to the inclusion of vocabulary, technical terminology, and texts directly related to fiqh and the judiciary, thereby narrowing the gap between general academic Arabic and the specialised language employed in Shariah studies.

The findings also indicated a high degree of alignment between the course content and the professional requirements associated with teaching and Shariah-related scholarly research. This suggests that the course extends beyond the achievement of immediate learning outcomes and contributes to preparing students for participation in their future professional communities. Hyland argues that effective academic language instruction should be organised around the authentic discursive practices of the disciplinary community to which learners belong (Hyland, 2006, pp. 16–28; Hyland, 2019, pp. 18–45). Accordingly, the integration of discipline-specific texts, terminology, and communicative tasks may enable students to use Arabic more effectively in future academic and professional settings.

One of the most noteworthy findings was that the alignment of the course content with specialised Shariah-related topics received the highest rating among all evaluated indicators, at 80.6%. This result reflects the course's success in achieving disciplinary authenticity, a key criterion in evaluating the quality of language-for-specific-purposes programmes. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that content closely connected to learners' disciplinary contexts can enhance motivation, increase perceived relevance, and facilitate the transfer of learning to authentic academic and professional situations (Basturkmen, 2010, pp. 17–35; Belcher, 2009, pp. 1–20).

Participants also reported a high level of satisfaction with the organisation of the content and the structure of its instructional units. This may be explained by the course's attention to systematic progression and coherent sequencing, both of which constitute fundamental principles of contemporary curriculum design (Nation & Macalister, 2010, pp. 24–39; Richards, 2017, pp. 27–54). Well-organised content facilitates the cumulative construction of knowledge and strengthens learners' ability to establish meaningful connections between linguistic concepts and their applications in Shariah-related contexts.

The practical activities and exercises likewise received high ratings, indicating that students perceived performance-based learning practices as effective. This finding is consistent with the principles of task-based language teaching, which posit that language acquisition is enhanced when learners use the target language to complete authentic and meaningful tasks (Ellis, 2017, pp. 3–28; Nunan, 2004, pp. 1–18). The result further suggests that the course has moved beyond a knowledge-transmission model towards a competency-based approach in which students actively apply their linguistic knowledge to discipline-specific communicative tasks.

Despite the generally positive findings, specialised reading received the lowest rating among the assessed language-skill domains, although it remained within the positive range. This result is strategically important because reading constitutes the principal means through which students access primary and secondary sources of knowledge in the Shariah disciplines. Grabe maintains that advanced academic reading requires higher-order cognitive processes, including analysis, inference, critical evaluation, and interpretation—competencies that do not develop automatically through superficial engagement with texts (Grabe, 2009, pp. 203–230; Grabe & Stoller, 2020, pp. 45–72). The finding therefore underscores the need to incorporate a wider range of analytical texts and to intensify activities requiring inference, interpretation, argument mapping, and critical engagement with jurisprudential discourse.

The dimension relating to content difficulty and progression also received a comparatively lower rating than the other dimensions. This finding may reflect individual differences in students' levels of Arabic language proficiency and their readiness to engage with specialised materials. It can be interpreted in light of Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, which emphasises the importance of matching learning materials to learners' developmental levels and providing appropriate scaffolding to facilitate progression towards increasingly complex tasks (Vygotsky, 1978, pp. 84–91). The systematic application of differentiated instruction—through graded texts, tiered activities, flexible support, and varied levels of task complexity—could therefore enhance the future effectiveness and accessibility of the course content.

With regard to the cultural dimension, the results confirmed that the course content incorporated Islamic and Arab cultural perspectives to a high degree. This finding is consistent with scholarship emphasising that language and culture constitute an integrated system and that language instruction detached from its cultural context may restrict learning effectiveness and weaken learners' communicative competence (Byram, 1997, pp. 34–56; Hinkel, 2011, pp. 137–159). The integration of Islamic and Arab cultural content is particularly relevant to students of Fiqh and Judiciary because it enables them to interpret specialised terminology and discourse within their appropriate intellectual, historical, and sociocultural contexts.

Academic listening, speaking, and writing all received high ratings, reflecting the course's successful adoption of a relatively balanced communicative orientation. These findings support the theory of communicative competence, according to which language proficiency extends beyond grammatical knowledge to include the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in authentic academic and professional situations

(Bachman & Palmer, 2010, pp. 20–46; Canale & Swain, 1980, pp. 1–47). The positive results across these skills suggest that the course provides students with meaningful opportunities to comprehend academic discourse, participate in jurisprudential discussions, present Shariah-related issues, and produce discipline-appropriate written texts.

The favourable result for academic writing is of particular importance because writing is directly associated with university achievement and scholarly knowledge production. Academic writing is widely regarded as one of the most complex language competencies, as it requires the simultaneous integration of linguistic knowledge, disciplinary conventions, rhetorical organisation, argumentation, and research methodology (Hyland, 2019, pp. 85–120; Weigle, 2002, pp. 14–39). The high rating obtained for this domain therefore indicates that the course content is contributing positively to students' preparation for Shariah-related academic research and scholarly writing.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that students perceived the Arabic-for-Specific-Purposes course content as highly effective in developing the discipline-specific language competencies required in Fiqh and Judiciary. The course achieved a meaningful balance among academic, professional, cultural, and language-skill dimensions. The results also lend support to the theoretical principles underpinning language-for-specific-purposes programmes, particularly needs-based curriculum design, disciplinary relevance, authentic language use, and competency-based learning. Nevertheless, the findings highlight the continuing need to strengthen analytical reading, expand differentiated learning pathways, and intensify activities that cultivate critical thinking, interpretation, and juridical inference. Addressing these areas would support the continued development of the course and enhance its responsiveness to the rapidly evolving intellectual and professional demands of Fiqh, Judiciary, and the wider field of Shariah studies.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Principal Findings

The findings indicated that students perceived the Arabic-for-Specific-Purposes course content as highly effective in developing the discipline-specific language competencies required by Fiqh and Judiciary students at Universiti Islam Sultan Sharif Ali (UNISSA). The overall mean score across the evaluated indicators was 77.8%, reflecting a strong degree of alignment between the course content and the learners' academic and prospective professional needs.

The alignment of the content with specialised Shariah-related topics received the highest rating, at 80.6%. This finding demonstrates the course's success in providing linguistic content that is closely related to fiqh, uṣūl al-fiqh, and the wider Shariah disciplines. Practical activities and academic writing each received a rating of 80.0%, while academic speaking and academic listening achieved ratings of 79.3% and 77.9%, respectively. These results point to the course's capacity to support both productive and receptive language skills within discipline-specific Shariah contexts.

The findings further showed that the course content addressed students' academic and professional needs at a rate of 77.9% and incorporated Islamic and Arab cultural dimensions at a rate of 77.2%. By contrast, specialised reading received the lowest rating, at 70.3%, while the suitability of the content's difficulty level and progression was rated at 75.1%. Although both indicators remained within the positive range, these findings reveal areas requiring further development, particularly in accommodating individual differences among learners and strengthening analytical and inferential reading competencies.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the course has succeeded to a considerable extent in implementing the principal foundations of Arabic for Specific Purposes, particularly needs-based curriculum design, disciplinary relevance, authentic language use, and alignment with learners' academic and professional contexts. Nevertheless, because the study was conducted with 29 first-year students at a single institution and relied primarily on questionnaire responses, the findings should be interpreted within their specific institutional context, and broader generalisations should be made with appropriate caution.

5.2 Recommendations

In light of these findings, the study recommends the systematic redevelopment of the Arabic-for-Specific-Purposes course through a contemporary competency- and needs-based framework that responds to the evolving disciplinary requirements of Fiqh and Judiciary students. Particular attention should be given to integrating the four language skills within authentic Shariah-related academic and professional contexts rather than teaching each skill in isolation.

Given the comparatively lower rating for specialised reading, the course should incorporate a broader range of analytical and inferential reading activities based on texts from fiqh and uṣūl al-fiqh. Such activities should

progressively develop students' abilities to identify arguments, interpret specialised terminology, establish relationships among legal concepts, evaluate evidence, and draw well-founded juridical inferences.

The study also recommends adopting differentiated instruction by providing learning materials and activities at varying levels of linguistic and cognitive complexity. Graded texts, tiered tasks, flexible scaffolding, and additional support materials could help accommodate individual differences in students' language proficiency, educational backgrounds, and learning needs.

The integration of digital technologies and interactive audiovisual resources should likewise be expanded to support academic listening and speaking. Course content should be linked to authentic tasks that simulate professional situations, including teaching Shariah subjects, presenting scholarly research, participating in jurisprudential discussions, interpreting legal texts, and engaging in Shariah judicial practice.

Furthermore, the course should be reviewed periodically in accordance with updated analyses of students' linguistic and academic needs and the evolving requirements of Shariah-related professional sectors. Faculty members, Arabic-language specialists, curriculum experts, and scholars of Fiqh and Judiciary should be actively involved in the content-development and review processes to ensure both linguistic quality and disciplinary authenticity.

Finally, future research should be extended to multiple universities across the Muslim world to compare the effectiveness of Arabic-for-Specific-Purposes programmes in different educational and sociolinguistic contexts. Subsequent studies should also combine questionnaire data with objective language-performance assessments, classroom observations, interviews, and analyses of students' written and oral work. Such research could contribute to the development of a comprehensive, evidence-based reference framework for discipline-specific Arabic language education in higher education institutions.

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