

Improving Maharah Kitabah Through Differentiated Learning in Madrasah Tsanawiyah

Biqi Asshafah Zain

biqizain@isimupacitan.ac.id

Muhammad Rizal Shalahuddin

rizalshalahudin@isimupacitan.ac.id

M. Khusnul Hamdani

khusnulhamdani9@gmail.com

Institut Studi Islam Muhammadiyah Pacitan

ABSTRACT

Writing skill (*maharah kitabah*) is one of the most challenging aspects of Arabic language learning for students at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* (MTs) level. Many students experience difficulty structuring sentences, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and developing coherent written texts, partly because classroom instruction often remains uniform and teacher-centered. This study aims to examine the implementation of differentiated learning as a strategy to improve students' *maharah kitabah* in Arabic language learning at MTsN Pacitan. This study employed a qualitative descriptive design involving one Arabic teacher and 28 eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observation, interviews, and writing assessments, and were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that differentiated learning was implemented through variation in learning content, process, and writing tasks according to students' readiness levels. The results show that this approach improved students' writing competence in terms of vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, and coherence, while also increasing their motivation, confidence, and classroom participation. The contribution of this study lies in demonstrating that differentiated learning provides a practical and pedagogically sound framework for addressing learner diversity in Arabic writing instruction within MTs contexts. It also strengthens theoretical support for learner-centered and scaffolded approaches in second language writing pedagogy. Practically, the findings suggest that Arabic language teachers at MTs can apply differentiated learning by adjusting writing tasks, instructional support, and learning materials according to students' readiness levels to enhance writing achievement more effectively.

Keywords: Differentiated Learning; *Maharah kitabah*; Arabic Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

Arabic language learning has an essential position in *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* (MTs), particularly as a medium to understand classical Islamic texts and engage in broader

religious and academic communication. One of the core competencies in Arabic language learning is *Maharah kitabah* (writing skill), which requires students not only to master vocabulary and grammar but also to express ideas, arguments, and reflections in a coherent written form. Despite its importance, the development of *Maharah kitabah* in many MTs contexts remains limited, partly because existing instructional practices do not adequately accommodate differences in students' readiness, background knowledge, and learning styles (Ibrahim, 2022; Ahmad, 2021).

Arabic language instruction at MTs commonly emphasizes teacher-centered approaches, grammatical drills, and translation-based activities that assume students learn at a relatively uniform pace. In reality, MTs classrooms are highly heterogeneous. Some students enter with prior exposure to Arabic through *pesantren* education, while others begin with minimal foundation. Differences are also evident in motivation, cognitive development, and preferred learning modalities. When instruction remains uniform, these differences are insufficiently addressed, leading to unequal learning opportunities and uneven development of writing competence (Nugroho, 2020; Sunan, 2023).

Another important consideration is the affective dimension of Arabic writing instruction. Writing activities often require students to express ideas independently in a language with structures and conventions that differ significantly from Indonesian. Without supportive instructional design, students may perceive writing tasks as overly demanding and become reluctant to participate actively. Research in second language writing emphasizes that effective instruction should address both cognitive and emotional aspects of learning by creating supportive and meaningful learning environments (Hyland, 2019; Al-Fadhli, 2021).

In recent years, Differentiated Learning has been introduced as a pedagogical approach designed to address learner diversity. Differentiated Learning is grounded in the principle that instruction should adjust content, process, and learning products according to students' readiness, interest, and learning profile (Tomlinson, 2014). This approach allows teachers to design varied tasks, flexible grouping, and tiered support so each learner receives instruction appropriate to their developmental stage. In the context of Arabic writing, differentiation may involve adjusting writing complexity, providing structured scaffolding for developing learners, and offering extended writing opportunities for more advanced students.

The potential of Differentiated Learning has been supported in broader language education research, which shows that learner-centered approaches enhance engagement, confidence, and linguistic competence (Hall, 2018; Borg, 2020). However, its application in Arabic language instruction, particularly at the MTs level in Indonesia, remains limited and underexplored. Existing studies tend to focus on grammar instruction or speaking skills, while relatively little attention has been given to writing development through differentiated approaches. Moreover, few studies provide detailed descriptions of how differentiation can be systematically implemented in Arabic writing classrooms. This gap highlights the

need for empirical research that examines differentiation not only as a theoretical concept but also as a practical instructional model in MTs settings.

MTsN Pacitan provides a relevant context for conducting such research because its students come from diverse socio-educational backgrounds, and Arabic remains a compulsory subject. Teachers are expected to ensure that all students achieve minimum writing competence despite significant variation in readiness levels. Differentiated Learning offers a potential framework for addressing this diversity through flexible instructional design, although its classroom implementation requires careful planning and evaluation.

In line with these considerations, this study examines the implementation of Differentiated Learning as a strategy to improve the *Maharah kitabah* of MTs students in Arabic language learning at MTsN Pacitan. This research aims to describe the learning design applied by teachers, analyze the forms of differentiation implemented in writing instruction, and identify the contribution of this learning model to the improvement of students' Arabic writing competence. The novelty of this study lies in its specific focus on the application of differentiated learning to develop *Maharah kitabah* in MTs classrooms an area that has received limited empirical attention as well as in its detailed examination of how differentiation in content, process, and writing products can be systematically implemented to address learner diversity in Arabic writing instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Previous Related Studies

Research on Arabic language education at the *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* (MTs) level has shown that writing skill (*Maharah kitabah*) remains one of the most challenging competencies for students to master. Several previous studies have explored approaches that may enhance students' writing proficiency in Arabic. First, Ahmad (2021) conducted a study on the difficulties faced by MTs students in Arabic writing classes. The findings revealed that students struggled not only with grammar and vocabulary selection, but also with generating and organizing ideas into coherent paragraphs. The study concluded that teacher-centered instruction and uniform task design contributed to students' limited engagement and low confidence in writing. Ahmad emphasized the need for learning models that recognize individual differences and provide structured support according to students' levels of readiness.

Second, Ibrahim (2022) examined the implementation of communicative and student-centered learning strategies in Arabic instruction at an Islamic junior high school. The research found that when teachers provided flexible writing activities, varied task complexity, and supportive feedback, students became more motivated and demonstrated improvement in written expression. However, Ibrahim also noted that teachers rarely applied systematic differentiation, meaning that learning adjustments were still incidental rather than planned. The study recommended

further exploration of pedagogical frameworks that deliberately accommodate learner diversity.

Third, Hall (2018) investigated differentiated instruction in second language classrooms more broadly. The study demonstrated that differentiation implemented through varied content, process, and learning products led to higher student engagement and improved language outcomes. Learners felt more supported because instruction was aligned with their readiness levels and learning preferences. Although this study did not focus specifically on Arabic writing, its findings provide strong theoretical support for the relevance of Differentiated Learning in foreign language teaching contexts.

In addition to these works, Al-Fadhli (2021) found that learner-centered pedagogy helped reduce writing anxiety among Arabic learners by giving them opportunities to complete writing tasks at manageable levels of difficulty. Meanwhile, Borg (2020) highlighted that teachers' awareness of learner diversity plays a crucial role in determining the success of differentiated instruction. Taken together, these studies indicate that Differentiated Learning has significant potential to strengthen *Maharah kitabah*, yet empirical research specifically situated in MTs contexts particularly in Indonesia remains limited. Therefore, further investigation is needed to understand how Differentiated Learning may practically enhance Arabic writing instruction in real classroom environments such as MTsN Pacitan.

Differentiated Learning

Differentiated Learning is a pedagogical framework that responds to variations in students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. According to Tomlinson (2014), differentiation involves purposeful modification of learning content, instructional processes, learning products, and classroom environments while maintaining the same essential learning objectives for all students. The central assumption is that students do not learn in identical ways or at the same pace, and therefore instruction should be flexible rather than uniform.

Differentiation can be implemented through several dimensions. First, content differentiation refers to adjustments in material complexity or format according to student readiness. Second, process differentiation involves variation in how students engage with learning activities, such as the use of scaffolding, group work, or guided practice. Third, product differentiation allows students to demonstrate learning through varied outputs based on ability and preference. Finally, differentiation of learning environment concerns classroom structures that promote inclusion, support, and learner autonomy (Tomlinson, 2014).

In language learning, differentiated instruction aligns closely with learner-centered theories, emphasizing interaction, meaningful practice, and individualized support. Studies show that students who encounter tasks at appropriate difficulty levels experience greater motivation and confidence (Hall, 2018; Borg, 2020). Differentiation also supports equitable learning outcomes by ensuring that

advanced learners remain challenged while lower-level learners receive additional guidance.

***Maharah kitabah* (Writing Skill)**

Maharah kitabah is a productive language skill involving the ability to express thoughts, opinions, and information in written Arabic. Hyland (2019) explains that writing requires integration of linguistic knowledge, cognitive processing, and discourse organization. In Arabic, students must additionally master script direction, morphological patterns, and syntactic structures distinct from Indonesian, making writing more complex than receptive skills. Writing development generally progresses from controlled writing to guided writing and ultimately to free expression. Learners benefit from scaffolding that gradually decreases as competence increases. Feedback also plays an essential role, not only in correcting errors but in encouraging reflection and confidence (Hyland, 2019). At the MTs level, students commonly face several obstacles in *Maharah kitabah*, including limited vocabulary, difficulty in applying correct grammar, and anxiety toward writing tasks (Ahmad, 2021; Ibrahim, 2022). These challenges are compounded when instruction remains uniform and does not accommodate learner diversity.

Relationship Between Differentiated Learning and *Maharah kitabah*

Differentiated Learning provides a theoretical basis for addressing the diverse needs of students in writing instruction. By adjusting task difficulty, instructional support, and expected writing output, teachers can ensure that every student participates meaningfully in writing activities. Lower-level learners may receive structured sentence frames or guided writing exercises, while advanced learners may complete extended composition tasks. This alignment supports gradual development of writing ability and reduces learning anxiety (Tomlinson, 2014; Hyland, 2019). Thus, Differentiated Learning is theoretically positioned as an effective strategy to improve *Maharah kitabah*, particularly in heterogeneous classrooms such as MTsN Pacitan. This study therefore builds upon existing research by examining how Differentiated Learning is practically implemented in Arabic language instruction and how it contributes to students' writing development.

METHOD

Design and Samples

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore the implementation of differentiated learning in improving students' *maharah kitabah* in Arabic language learning at MTsN Pacitan. The research focused on classroom processes, teacher strategies, and students' experiences during writing instruction. The participants consisted of one Arabic language teacher and 28 eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in Arabic learning. The use of purposive sampling allowed the researcher to select participants who best represented the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell,

2014). The study was conducted over one academic semester during regular Arabic language classes.

Instrument and Procedure

Data were collected using three primary instruments: classroom observation sheets, interview guides, and writing assessment rubrics. The observation instrument was designed to document instructional activities related to differentiated learning, including variation in learning content, process, and writing tasks. The observation sheet consisted of 15 indicators covering teacher strategies, student engagement, grouping, scaffolding, and classroom interactions. Its function was to provide systematic records of instructional implementation. The interview guide was used to collect in-depth information from the teacher and selected students regarding their perceptions, learning challenges, and responses to differentiated instruction. The guide contained 12 open-ended questions for the teacher and 10 questions for students. Meanwhile, the writing assessment rubric was used to evaluate students' *maharah kitabah* development across four components: vocabulary use, grammatical accuracy, coherence, and task completion. Each component consisted of 5 rating items on a 1–5 scale, allowing detailed performance analysis (Hyland, 2019). The research procedure began with preliminary observation to understand the learning context. This was followed by systematic observation of differentiated learning implementation over six instructional meetings. Afterward, interviews were conducted to triangulate findings and deepen interpretation. Students' writing samples produced during instruction were also collected as supporting data.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic approach. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and writing samples were coded to identify recurring patterns related to differentiation strategies and writing development. The analysis involved three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, conducted iteratively throughout the research process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Triangulation among instruments was applied to enhance credibility, while reflective analysis ensured consistency between interpretations and data. The findings were then interpreted in relation to existing literature on differentiated learning and second language writing (Tomlinson, 2014; Hyland, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of Differentiated Learning in Arabic Writing Classes

Classroom observations at MTsN Pacitan show that differentiated learning was implemented by varying writing tasks according to students' readiness levels. Students were grouped based on diagnostic writing results: lower-readiness students completed guided tasks using vocabulary lists and sentence frames, while higher-readiness students worked on more independent compositions. For example, some students used prompts such as “يوم كل ... إلى أذهب أنا”، whereas others wrote

short paragraphs without structural support. Teacher feedback was provided through regular monitoring and brief individual guidance during writing activities. These observations indicate that differentiation was applied in a structured but flexible way, allowing students to work on writing tasks suited to their level while maintaining common learning objectives.

Improvement of Students' *Maharah kitabah*

Analysis of writing samples across six meetings shows improvement in sentence structure, vocabulary use, and coherence. Early samples from lower-readiness students included incomplete or incorrectly ordered sentences such as “في مدرسة أنا” “صباح”, which later developed into clearer constructions such as “في المدرسة إلى أذهب أنا” “الصباح”. Higher-readiness students demonstrated increased use of connected sentences and simple conjunctions. Interview data indicate that students felt more confident in completing writing tasks. Several students reported that vocabulary support helped them begin writing, while group work made it easier to identify and correct mistakes. These responses suggest that structured support contributed to gradual improvement in writing performance.

Increased Student Engagement and Participation

Observation data show increased participation during differentiated activities. Students were more involved in drafting and revising texts, and group discussions became more active. Some students who were initially hesitant began contributing words and short sentences during collaborative tasks before attempting individual writing. Interview responses indicate that students appreciated working at their own level and pace. Observations also showed that students compared their sentences with peers and discussed corrections, suggesting greater engagement in the writing process. Overall, differentiated learning was associated with more active participation and collaborative classroom interaction.

The findings suggest that differentiated learning functions not merely as a set of varied activities but as a systematic response to the structural diversity present in Arabic language classrooms. Rather than treating differences in readiness as obstacles, differentiation reframes heterogeneity as a basis for instructional planning. The use of readiness-based grouping and scaffolded writing tasks indicates that learning diversity can be managed through intentional pedagogical design instead of remedial separation. This finding supports previous research by Ahmad (2021) and Ibrahim (2022), which reported that uniform instruction often fails to address variation in student readiness. However, while earlier studies primarily identified learner diversity as a challenge, this study demonstrates how differentiation can be operationalized in classroom practice to respond to that diversity. This extends previous findings by providing concrete evidence that adaptive instruction can be systematically implemented in Arabic writing classes.

Tomlinson's (2014) principle that differentiation maintains shared learning goals while varying instructional pathways was reflected in how students worked toward

similar writing outcomes through different levels of support. Similar results were reported by Hall (2018), who found that differentiated instruction promotes equitable access to learning by aligning task difficulty with student readiness. The supportive classroom environment and flexible grouping structures observed in this study are also consistent with Borg (2020), who emphasized that learner-centered language classrooms rely on interaction and collaboration. From a socio-constructivist perspective, interaction within mixed-ability groups appears to function as a mediating process through which students gradually internalize writing skills, a process also highlighted in second language writing research (Hyland, 2019).

The improvement in students' *maharah kitabah* can be interpreted as evidence that writing development is closely linked to the availability of appropriate scaffolding. Differentiated learning appears to translate the abstract concept of scaffolding into concrete instructional practices by aligning task complexity with learner readiness. Instead of confronting uniform writing demands, students progressed through staged levels of difficulty that allowed them to consolidate foundational skills before attempting more complex expression. This finding is consistent with Hyland (2019), who argued that writing competence develops through guided practice and gradual expansion of linguistic resources.

Similar improvements in language performance have been reported in differentiated language classrooms. Hall (2018) found that differentiated tasks support incremental skill development by providing achievable learning steps, while Al-Fadhli (2021) observed that scaffolded instruction improves both grammatical accuracy and text organization in second language writing. The present study supports these conclusions in the specific context of Arabic writing, where learners must simultaneously manage vocabulary, grammar, and script. Unlike previous studies that focused primarily on general language skills, this study highlights how differentiated instruction can specifically support the development of *maharah kitabah*. The findings indicate that when instructional demands are calibrated to student readiness, writing tasks become opportunities for development rather than sources of difficulty.

The psychological effects observed in this study indicate that differentiated learning influences not only cognitive development but also learners' perceptions of their own abilities. When students experience tasks as attainable, they are more willing to engage and persist in writing activities. This finding is consistent with Hall (2018), who reported that differentiated instruction enhances motivation by allowing students to experience success at appropriate levels of difficulty. Similarly, Hyland (2019) emphasized that supportive writing environments help learners develop confidence and positive attitudes toward writing.

By reducing direct comparison among students and emphasizing individual progress, differentiated instruction appears to shift the classroom climate from performance-oriented to development-oriented learning. In contrast, Ahmad (2021) found that traditional grammar-focused instruction often increases anxiety because

students become overly concerned with correctness. The present study suggests that differentiation can mitigate this effect by framing writing as a process of development rather than evaluation. This shift may explain why students became more willing to take risks in expressing ideas in Arabic. The teacher's facilitative role further reinforced this environment by positioning feedback as guidance rather than judgment, which aligns with Al-Fadhli's (2021) findings on supportive feedback in language learning.

These findings indicate that differentiated learning can be understood as a practical framework for implementing learner-centered pedagogy in Arabic language classrooms. The results imply that responsiveness to learner variation is not an additional component of instruction but a central condition for effective teaching. This supports Borg (2020), who argued that learner-centered language teaching requires instructional flexibility and responsiveness to student needs. Differentiation integrates assessment, instruction, and feedback into a continuous cycle that supports progressive skill development, which is also consistent with Tomlinson's (2014) model of differentiated instruction.

For teachers in contexts such as MTsN Pacitan, differentiation demonstrates that instructional flexibility can coexist with shared curricular goals. Similar conclusions were drawn by Ibrahim (2022), who suggested that adaptive teaching strategies are necessary in heterogeneous classrooms, although practical models were rarely described. This study extends previous work by illustrating how differentiation can be applied specifically in Arabic writing instruction. More broadly, the study positions differentiated learning as a pedagogical bridge between theoretical principles of learner-centered education and the practical realities of Arabic language instruction in MTs classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that differentiated learning is an effective strategy for supporting the development of *maharah kitabah* in Arabic language learning at MTsN Pacitan. By adapting instruction to students' readiness levels, differentiated learning provides a practical way to address learner diversity and support more inclusive writing instruction. This study reinforces the importance of learner-centered pedagogy and appropriate scaffolding in second language writing development. Differentiated learning not only supports writing improvement but also fosters more positive learning experiences in Arabic classrooms. Future research may expand on these findings by examining longer-term implementation or applying differentiation to other Arabic language skills.

REFERENCES

- Ahmad, R. (2021). Challenges in developing Arabic writing skills among madrasah students. *Journal of Arabic Language Education*, 5(2), 115–129.

- Al-Fadhli, S. (2021). Reducing writing anxiety through learner-centered pedagogy in Arabic as a foreign language classrooms. *Journal of Language and Education*, 10(3), 45–59. <https://doi.org/10.32601/jle.2021.10.3.4>
- Borg, S. (2020). *Teacher cognition and language education: Research and practice*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.)*. Sage.
- Hall, T. (2018). Differentiated instruction in second language learning: A review of classroom practices. *Language Teaching Research*, 22(3), 317–332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168817718572>
- Hyland, K. (2019). *Second language writing (3rd ed.)*. Cambridge University Press.
- Ibrahim, M. (2022). Implementation of student-centered strategies in Arabic language learning at Islamic junior high schools. *Indonesian Journal of Arabic Language Teaching*, 7(1), 33–48.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook (3rd ed.)*. Sage.
- Nugroho, A. (2020). Teaching Arabic writing skills in Indonesian Islamic schools: Issues and challenges. *Journal of Islamic Education Studies*, 8(1), 75–90.
- Sunan, H. (2023). Grammar-focused instruction and its effect on Arabic writing competence of MTs students. *Arabiyya: Journal of Arabic Studies*, 15(1), 89–104.
- Tomlinson, C. A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom: Responding to the needs of all learners (2nd ed.)*. ASCD.