



The Relationship Between Reading Interest and Academic Essay Writing Ability of Arabic Language Education Students in Cairo, Egypt

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ABSTRACT

This correlational study examines the relationship between reading interest and academic essay writing ability among Arabic language education undergraduate students at universities in Cairo, Egypt. As academic writing proficiency constitutes a critical competency for university success and professional development, understanding factors influencing writing ability becomes essential for educational improvement. Reading interest—encompassing frequency, breadth, and motivation for reading—has been theorized to support writing development through exposure to linguistic structures, rhetorical patterns, vocabulary enrichment, and content knowledge accumulation. Employing quantitative methodology, this research surveyed 280 Arabic language education students from three Cairo universities using validated reading interest inventories and assessed their academic essay writing through standardized rubrics evaluating organization, argumentation, language proficiency, and content development. Statistical analyses including Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and path analysis revealed significant positive relationships between reading interest dimensions and writing ability ($r = .62$, $p < .001$), with reading breadth and critical reading engagement emerging as strongest predictors explaining 47% of writing ability variance. Genre-specific reading patterns showed

differential impacts, with academic and literary reading demonstrating stronger associations with essay quality than popular or social media reading. Findings support integrated literacy approaches emphasizing extensive reading programs, diverse text exposure, and explicit connections between reading and writing instruction in Arabic language teacher education, informing curriculum development and pedagogical practices fostering advanced literacy competencies.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing proficiency represents a fundamental competency for university students across disciplines, serving as primary means through which students demonstrate learning, engage with disciplinary knowledge, develop critical thinking, and participate in scholarly discourse communities (Ramadhanti et al., 2021). For students preparing to become Arabic language teachers, advanced writing abilities prove doubly essential—first, as university students navigating academic requirements including research papers, essay examinations, and thesis writing, and second, as future educators who will model and teach writing to their own students. However, Arabic language education programs in Egypt and across the Arab world frequently report that students struggle with academic writing, producing essays characterized by weak organization, limited argumentation, insufficient development, and linguistic errors that impede communication and undermine academic success (Abdel Latif, 2019).

Multiple factors potentially influence academic writing development, including explicit writing instruction quality, language proficiency levels, prior educational experiences, cognitive and metacognitive strategies, and literacy practices including reading habits and interests (Muhsyanur, 2014, 2019). Among these, reading has received particular scholarly attention as foundational literacy skill supporting writing development through complex, multifaceted relationships. Krashen's (2004) Input Hypothesis and subsequent Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) research posits that extensive reading provides linguistic input essential for language acquisition, including writing ability development, as readers unconsciously absorb grammatical structures, vocabulary, discourse patterns, and content knowledge subsequently available for writing production. However, the relationship between reading and writing proves more complex than simple input-output models suggest, involving motivation, engagement quality, reading material types, and metacognitive processes connecting reading experiences to writing performance.

Cairo, as Egypt's capital and primary educational center, hosts major universities including Cairo University, Ain Shams University, and Al-Azhar University attracting diverse student populations pursuing Arabic language education degrees. These institutions prepare future Arabic teachers for primary, secondary, and higher education contexts throughout Egypt and internationally, making the quality of students' Arabic literacy competencies—including writing proficiency—consequential not only for individual academic success but for Arabic

language instruction quality across educational systems. Understanding factors influencing writing development in this population, particularly potentially modifiable factors like reading habits and interests, can inform curriculum improvements, pedagogical innovations, and support programs enhancing student outcomes.

Reading interest—defined as individuals' motivation, preference, and voluntary engagement with reading activities—encompasses multiple dimensions including reading frequency (how often individuals read), reading breadth (diversity of genres and text types encountered), reading depth (level of engagement and comprehension effort), and intrinsic motivation (reading for enjoyment and personal interest versus external requirements) (Muhsyanur, 2019). According to Guthrie and Wigfield (2000), reading interest significantly predicts reading comprehension and literacy development beyond ability measures alone, as interested readers engage more extensively, persistently, and deeply with texts, thereby accumulating greater linguistic and content knowledge. In writing contexts, Berninger and Winn (2006) propose that reading experiences provide writers with implicit and explicit models of effective writing, exposing them to organizational patterns, argumentative strategies, stylistic choices, and genre conventions subsequently influencing their own writing production (Muhsyanur, 2020).

However, the reading-writing relationship's nature and strength may vary across linguistic and cultural contexts. Arabic, as Semitic language with distinctive morphological, syntactic, and rhetorical characteristics, presents specific challenges and opportunities for literacy development. Arabic academic writing traditionally emphasizes elaborate rhetorical patterns, formulaic expressions, and intertextuality with classical texts—conventions potentially acquired through extensive reading in academic and literary Arabic registers (Al-Khatib, 2001). Additionally, diglossia—the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) for formal written communication and various Arabic dialects for oral communication—creates unique literacy learning conditions where written language acquisition depends heavily on formal instruction and reading exposure rather than natural oral language development, potentially strengthening reading's role in writing development compared to non-diglossic languages.

Contemporary reading practices among Arab university students raise concerns about declining engagement with traditional extended texts. Research indicates that Arab youth increasingly favor digital, brief, and entertainment-oriented reading over academic and literary materials, with many students reporting limited voluntary reading beyond required coursework (Kaylani, 1996). Social media, digital communication, and audiovisual entertainment increasingly compete for students' attention and leisure time, potentially reducing extensive reading engagement that historically supported literacy development. Understanding current reading patterns among Arabic language education students and their relationships to writing proficiency can inform interventions addressing these

challenges through curriculum design, reading promotion programs, and pedagogical approaches explicitly linking reading and writing development.

The present study addresses these considerations by systematically examining relationships between reading interest dimensions and academic essay writing ability among Arabic language education students in Cairo universities. Research questions guiding this investigation include: What relationships exist between overall reading interest and academic essay writing ability? How do specific reading interest dimensions (frequency, breadth, depth, intrinsic motivation) differentially predict writing quality? Do reading patterns involving specific genres or text types show stronger associations with writing ability than others? What are the mechanisms through which reading interest influences writing development? Answering these questions contributes empirical evidence regarding reading-writing connections in Arabic academic contexts while informing educational practices supporting advanced literacy development in Arabic language teacher education.

METHODE

This correlational study employed quantitative methodology to examine relationships between reading interest and academic essay writing ability among Arabic language education students. Participants comprised 280 undergraduate students (ages 19-23; 168 female, 112 male) enrolled in Arabic language education programs at three major universities in Cairo: Cairo University (n=105), Ain Shams University (n=98), and Al-Azhar University (n=77). These institutions were selected to represent diverse educational orientations—state secular universities (Cairo, Ain Shams) and Islamic religious university (Al-Azhar)—ensuring participant diversity. Students represented all undergraduate years (first year: n=82, second year: n=76, third year: n=68, fourth year: n=54) to capture developmental patterns. Participation was voluntary without grade implications, achieving 73% response rate from eligible students. Demographic surveys confirmed participants' diversity regarding geographic origins (Cairo residents: 42%, other governorates: 58%), prior educational backgrounds (public schools: 71%, private schools: 18%, Azhari schools: 11%), and family educational levels (parents with university degrees: 38%, secondary or below: 62%).

Reading interest was measured using an adapted Arabic Reading Interest Inventory (ARII) comprising 45 items across five subscales assessed on 5-point Likert scales: (a) reading frequency—self-reported time spent reading various materials weekly; (b) reading breadth—diversity of genres read including academic texts, literary works, religious texts, news/current affairs, and popular materials; (c) reading depth—comprehension strategies, critical engagement, and reflection during reading; (d) intrinsic motivation—reading for enjoyment, curiosity, and personal interest; and (e) genre-specific reading patterns—frequency of engaging with specific text types. The instrument, adapted from Western reading motivation instruments and validated for Arabic contexts, demonstrated strong reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha =$

.88 overall; subscale α ranging .79-.92). Academic essay writing ability was assessed through standardized essay tasks requiring students to compose 800-1000 word argumentative essays on assigned topics relevant to educational issues within 90-minute time limits. Three parallel essay prompts of equivalent difficulty were randomly distributed to control for topic effects. Essays were evaluated by three trained raters using analytic rubrics adapted from TOEFL writing assessment frameworks and modified for Arabic academic writing conventions, assessing six dimensions on 6-point scales: (a) organization and structure, (b) thesis development and argumentation, (c) content quality and support, (d) language accuracy (morphology, syntax), (e) vocabulary range and precision, and (f) rhetorical effectiveness. Inter-rater reliability achieved acceptable levels (intraclass correlation = .84). Composite writing scores represented averaged ratings across dimensions and raters. Additional data included students' cumulative grade point averages (GPAs) and scores on Arabic language proficiency tests administered by their institutions, serving as control variables (Mulyana et al., 2021).

Data analysis employed SPSS version 28 for statistical procedures including descriptive statistics characterizing reading interest and writing ability distributions, Pearson product-moment correlations examining bivariate relationships between reading variables and writing scores, hierarchical multiple regression testing unique contributions of reading dimensions while controlling for GPA and language proficiency, and path analysis using AMOS software exploring potential mediating mechanisms (e.g., vocabulary knowledge, content knowledge) through which reading interest influences writing. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$ with Bonferroni corrections applied for multiple comparisons. Assumptions for regression and correlation analyses (normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, multicollinearity) were tested and confirmed acceptable. Missing data (less than 4% across variables) were addressed through listwise deletion given low percentage and randomness verification.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Patterns of Reading Interest and Writing Ability

Descriptive analysis revealed concerning patterns in reading interest among Arabic language education students, with mean overall reading interest score of 3.24 (SD=0.87) on 5-point scale indicating moderate levels—neither strongly engaged nor completely disengaged but reflecting substantial room for improvement. Examining subscale patterns revealed notable variations: intrinsic reading motivation showed lowest means (M=2.89, SD=1.02), suggesting many students read primarily for academic requirements rather than personal enjoyment or interest. Reading frequency averaged 3.41 (SD=0.94), translating to approximately 4-6 hours weekly of voluntary reading beyond required coursework—modest levels considering these students are preparing to become language teachers. Reading breadth demonstrated moderate diversity (M=3.18, SD=0.78), with students reporting exposure to multiple genres but often concentrating on limited text types rather than exploring widely.

Genre-specific analysis revealed that students most frequently engaged with religious texts (M=4.12) and social media content (M=3.98), followed by news/current affairs (M=3.34), academic texts beyond requirements (M=3.01), literary works (M=2.78), and popular entertainment materials (M=2.65). The prominence of religious reading likely reflects cultural and educational contexts in Egypt where religious literacy holds significant social value, while social media's high frequency aligns with global youth trends. However, the relatively lower engagement with academic and literary texts proves concerning for students preparing to teach Arabic, as these genres provide richest models for formal academic writing. Qualitative survey comments revealed that many students perceived academic reading as difficult and time-consuming, literary classics as archaic and inaccessible, while finding social media and brief digital texts more immediately engaging and less cognitively demanding – patterns reflecting broader challenges in promoting sustained engagement with complex texts.

Academic essay writing ability showed wider variability (M=3.78, SD=1.12 on 6-point scale), with approximately 31% of students scoring in proficient range (5-6), 48% in developing range (3-4), and 21% in limited range (1-2). Dimension-specific analysis revealed that students performed relatively better in language accuracy (M=4.01) and basic organization (M=3.92) compared to argumentation quality (M=3.45), content development (M=3.58), and rhetorical effectiveness (M=3.51). This pattern suggests that while students possess foundational Arabic language competencies and can produce structurally coherent essays, they struggle with advanced writing demands including developing sophisticated arguments, providing sufficient evidence and elaboration, and employing effective rhetorical strategies for academic persuasion. Rater comments frequently noted essays characterized by general statements lacking specific support, weak logical connections between ideas, and limited engagement with counterarguments – deficiencies potentially reflecting insufficient exposure to model texts through reading.

Interestingly, writing ability varied significantly across demographic variables. Students from private educational backgrounds scored significantly higher (M=4.23) than public school graduates (M=3.64; $t(247)=4.12$, $p<.001$), likely reflecting resource and instructional quality differences. Fourth-year students outperformed first-year students (M=4.18 vs. M=3.41; $F(3,276)=8.67$, $p<.001$), indicating developmental progression but also suggesting that many students enter university with limited writing proficiency requiring extensive development. However, no significant gender differences emerged ($t(278)=1.34$, $p=.18$), contrasting with some previous research showing female advantages in literacy tasks. Geographic origin showed no significant effects, suggesting that Cairo residency versus provincial backgrounds did not substantially influence writing development – possibly because all students experienced similar university instruction regardless of origins.

Correlational Relationships and Predictive Models

Correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between reading interest and academic essay writing ability, supporting hypothesized connections between these literacy competencies. Overall reading interest correlated substantially with total writing scores ($r=.62, p<.001$), representing large effect size and indicating that students reporting higher reading interest, frequency, breadth, and motivation tended to produce significantly stronger academic essays. This relationship persisted when controlling for GPA (partial $r=.54, p<.001$) and language proficiency scores (partial $r=.51, p<.001$), suggesting reading interest contributes to writing ability beyond general academic achievement or language knowledge—though notably, the relationship's strength decreased when controls were applied, indicating some shared variance with these factors.

Table 1 presents detailed correlation matrix showing relationships between specific reading interest dimensions and writing ability components, revealing differential patterns worthy of careful interpretation. Reading breadth—diversity of genres and text types encountered—demonstrated strongest correlations with writing quality ($r=.68, p<.001$), particularly with argumentation ($r=.71$) and content development ($r=.69$). This pattern suggests that exposure to varied texts provides writers with diverse conceptual frameworks, argument structures, evidence types, and rhetorical approaches potentially incorporated into their own writing. Reading depth and critical engagement also correlated strongly with writing ability ($r=.59$), supporting theories emphasizing active, reflective reading as more beneficial for writing development than passive reading. Intrinsic reading motivation showed moderate correlations ($r=.48$), indicating that while motivation matters, what students read and how they read may prove more consequential than why they read.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix: Reading Interest Dimensions and Academic Essay Writing Components

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Reading frequency	–									
2. Reading breadth	.71**	–								
3. Reading depth	.64**	.69**	–							
4. Intrinsic motivation	.58**	.52**	.61**	–						
5. Academic reading	.67**	.73**	.68**	.49**	–					
6. Organization	.51**	.58**	.54**	.42**	.59**	–				
7. Argumentation	.59**	.71**	.63**	.46**	.68**	.74**	–			
8. Content development	.56**	.69**	.61**	.48**	.66**	.68**	.79**	–		
9. Language accuracy	.43**	.48**	.51**	.39**	.47**	.62**	.58**	.61**	–	
10. Total writing score	.57**	.68**	.59**	.48**	.64**	.86**	.91**	.89**	.78**	–

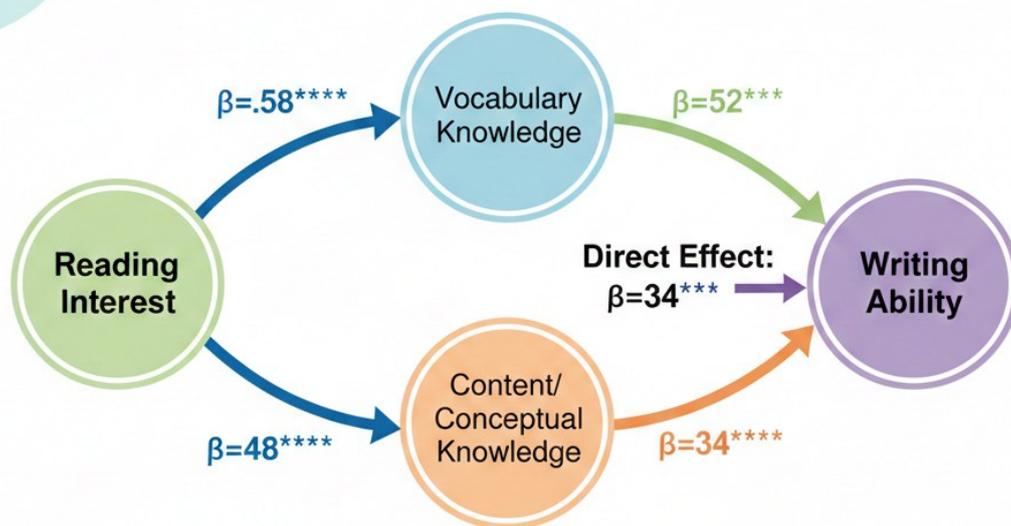
Note. $N=280$. $**p<.001$. All correlations significant at $p<.001$ level after Bonferroni correction.

Genre-specific reading patterns showed differential relationships with writing quality. Academic text reading demonstrated strongest associations with essay scores ($r=.64$), followed by literary reading ($r=.52$) and news/current affairs ($r=.47$). Conversely, social media reading showed weak, non-significant correlations with writing ability ($r=.12$, $p=.08$), while entertainment reading demonstrated small negative correlations ($r=-.18$, $p=.04$), suggesting that heavy emphasis on these brief, informal text types may not support—and might actually detract from—academic writing development. Religious text reading showed moderate positive correlations ($r=.39$), potentially reflecting that classical religious texts in Arabic employ formal, rhetorically sophisticated language providing useful models, though their conventional, formulaic nature may limit transferability to critical academic writing demands.

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis examined unique contributions of reading interest dimensions while controlling for relevant covariates. The final model explained 52% of writing ability variance ($R^2=.52$, $F(8,271)=36.89$, $p<.001$), representing substantial predictive power. After controlling for GPA ($\beta=.28$, $p<.001$) and language proficiency ($\beta=.24$, $p<.001$) in Step 1 ($R^2=.31$), adding reading variables in Step 2 contributed additional 21% variance ($\Delta R^2=.21$, $p<.001$). Among reading predictors, breadth emerged as strongest unique predictor ($\beta=.38$, $p<.001$), followed by depth ($\beta=.25$, $p<.01$) and academic text reading frequency ($\beta=.21$, $p<.01$). Interestingly, general reading frequency and intrinsic motivation showed non-significant unique effects when other variables were controlled, suggesting their bivariate correlations reflected shared variance with breadth and depth rather than independent contributions. These findings indicate that diverse, engaged reading—particularly of academic texts—matters more for writing development than sheer reading volume or motivation alone.

Figure 1 presents path analysis model examining potential mediating mechanisms through which reading interest influences writing ability. The model tested whether reading interest affects writing directly or indirectly through vocabulary knowledge and content/conceptual knowledge—theoretical mechanisms proposed in literacy research. Results revealed that reading interest demonstrated both direct effects on writing ($\beta=.34$, $p<.001$) and significant indirect effects through vocabulary (indirect effect=.18, 95% CI[.12, .24]) and content knowledge (indirect effect=.15, 95% CI[.09, .22]). This pattern supports multiple-mechanism theoretical models where reading contributes to writing through various pathways: directly providing models of effective writing structures and strategies; indirectly through vocabulary expansion enabling more precise, sophisticated expression; and indirectly through conceptual knowledge enrichment providing content for argumentation and development.

Path Analysis Model: Reading Interest, Mediating Mechanisms and Writing Ability



Model Fit Indices

$\chi^2(12) = 24.67, p = .016$
 CFI = .97 TLI = .95
 RMSEA, .06 [03, .09]
 SRMR = .04

Indirect Effects

Via Vocabulary: $.18^{****}$ [.12] .24]
 Via Content Knowledge:
 Total Effect: $.67^{****}$

*** $p < .0001$. Standardized coefficients shown. Control variables (GPA, language proficiency) included but not displayed for clarity.

Figure 1. Path Analysis Model: Reading Interest, Mediating Mechanisms, and Writing Ability

Standardized coefficients shown. Control variables (GPA, language proficiency) included but not displayed for clarity.

Educational Implications and Reading-Writing Connections

The substantial relationships between reading interest and writing ability documented in this study carry important implications for Arabic language education pedagogy and curriculum design, suggesting that fostering extensive, diverse, engaged reading should constitute central component of writing instruction rather than separate, parallel literacy strand. These findings challenge instructional approaches treating reading and writing as discrete skills developed through independent activities, instead supporting integrated literacy frameworks

emphasizing explicit connections and mutual reinforcement between reading and writing practices (Tierney & Shanahan, 1991).

The particularly strong relationship between reading breadth and writing quality suggests that effective writing development requires exposure to diverse text types providing varied models of organizational patterns, argument structures, evidence types, rhetorical strategies, and stylistic choices. Students encountering only textbooks or single-genre reading develop limited repertoires of writing approaches, potentially explaining why many participants' essays, while grammatically acceptable, lacked sophistication in argumentation and rhetorical effectiveness. Arabic language education programs should intentionally design reading experiences exposing students to varied genres including academic research articles modeling scholarly argumentation, literary essays demonstrating stylistic sophistication, opinion pieces illustrating persuasive techniques, and classical texts exemplifying Arabic rhetorical traditions. Curriculum structures often separate literary, linguistic, and rhetorical studies into discrete courses; integrated approaches connecting reading across these domains to writing development may prove more effective.

The finding that reading depth and critical engagement predict writing ability as strongly as frequency challenges quantity-focused approaches to reading promotion, suggesting that how students read matters as much as how much they read. Simply assigning extensive reading without supporting active, critical engagement may produce limited writing benefits. Effective reading-for-writing development requires metacognitive awareness of textual features, explicit attention to authors' rhetorical choices, analysis of argument structures and evidence use, and conscious reflection on how observed strategies might apply to students' own writing. Arabic language instructors should incorporate explicit "reading like a writer" approaches where students analyze texts not only for content comprehension but for rhetorical analysis, examining how authors organize ideas, develop arguments, employ evidence, craft introductions and conclusions, and create coherence—then explicitly connecting these observations to students' writing tasks.

However, the weak or negative relationships between social media/entertainment reading and academic writing ability raise important questions about reading quality and transfer. While literacy scholars debate whether any reading benefits literacy development through general practice effects, these findings suggest that predominantly engaging with brief, informal, entertainment-oriented texts may not support—and excessive engagement might even impede—academic writing development. This pattern possibly reflects several mechanisms: these text types provide limited exposure to complex syntax, sophisticated vocabulary, extended argument structures, and formal registers characterizing academic writing; heavy social media engagement potentially reinforces informal writing habits interfering with academic register production; and time spent on entertainment reading necessarily reduces time available for more academically beneficial reading. These findings suggest that reading promotion efforts should

emphasize not just increasing reading volume generally but specifically fostering engagement with complex, formal, academically oriented texts.

The mediating role of vocabulary and content knowledge documented in path analysis provides insight into mechanisms connecting reading and writing while suggesting additional instructional approaches. Vocabulary interventions—including explicit teaching of academic vocabulary, attention to word usage during reading, and vocabulary strategy instruction—may enhance reading's transfer to writing by ensuring students consciously notice and retain new lexical resources for later use. Similarly, content knowledge development through reading across subject areas provides conceptual resources enriching argumentative writing—students with deeper knowledge bases can develop more sophisticated arguments, provide more specific evidence, and engage more thoroughly with complex issues. Arabic language education programs might productively integrate content area reading into language courses, having students read about educational, social, or political issues relevant to their future teaching careers, thereby simultaneously building content knowledge and language proficiency supporting writing development.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates robust positive relationships between reading interest dimensions—particularly reading breadth, critical engagement, and academic text exposure—and academic essay writing ability among Arabic language education students in Cairo, with reading interest explaining substantial writing ability variance beyond general achievement and language proficiency through direct modeling effects and indirect vocabulary and content knowledge development. Arabic language education programs should prioritize extensive reading initiatives emphasizing diverse, academically oriented texts; implement integrated literacy curricula explicitly connecting reading analysis to writing development through "reading like a writer" approaches; provide instruction in critical, engaged reading strategies supporting active text processing; reduce emphasis on brief, entertainment-oriented reading in favor of complex, formal texts modeling academic discourse; incorporate vocabulary and content knowledge development as bridges between reading and writing; and assess students' reading breadth and engagement as literacy development indicators alongside writing performance.

Teacher education should prepare Arabic language educators to facilitate reading-writing connections through modeling textual analysis, designing integrated literacy tasks, and fostering classroom cultures valuing extensive reading. Educational researchers should investigate longitudinal reading-writing relationships, examine specific instructional approaches for maximizing reading's transfer to writing, explore genre-specific effects across diverse Arabic text types, and extend investigation to additional Arabic-speaking contexts examining how educational systems, cultural factors, and linguistic variations influence reading-writing connections. Universities should provide robust library resources, reading promotion programs, and curricular time for extensive reading currently competing

with content coverage pressures. Ultimately, developing advanced Arabic writing proficiency essential for teacher education students requires systematic, sustained engagement with diverse, challenging texts positioned as foundational rather than supplementary component of literacy instruction.

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