

An Exploration in Identifying the Characteristics of Arabic Letters (Sifat al-Huruf) on the Surah al-Fatihah

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Abstract

The Quran revealed in Arabic and reflecting the linguistic style of Makkah's community, is constructed from Hijaiyyah letters. However, challenges in mastering proper Quranic letter pronunciation persist, with surveys reporting that up to 70% of study centers in Malaysia have such issues. This study focuses on Surah al-Fatihah, employing content analysis to examine the characteristics of Quranic Arabic letters. The findings reveal ten distinct traits: Istifal, Hams, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Takrir, Bainiyyah, Rakhawah, Ghunnah, Itbaq, and Istitalah. These insights aim to strengthen the community's knowledge and enhance the accurate recitation of Quranic letters as taught by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Keywords: weakness of mastery; the letters of the Quran; Surah al-Fatihah; 10 consonants

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1.0 Introduction

The Qur'an, the Word of Allah SWT, was revealed to Prophet Muhammad SAW through the Archangel Gabriel (Jibril) AS over nearly 23 years, starting with the first revelation in the Cave of Hira' and concluding with the final verses. This gradual process served as both a test and a comprehensive guide, providing clear instructions for the Muslim ummah on living and serving as a source of law in various aspects of life. Comprising 30 Juz' and containing Surahs of varying lengths, the Qur'an addressed specific circumstances during the Prophet's time while offering universal teachings and laws relevant to all times and peoples. The gradual revelation ensured the Muslim community could deeply understand and gradually implement Allah's guidance, preparing them to accept divine laws in stages. This timeless nature highlights the Qur'an's purpose as an eternal guide for humanity, transcending temporal, and cultural boundaries. Delivered by Gabriel AS with utmost precision, the Qur'an remains perfect and unaltered, fulfilling its role as the ultimate source of guidance for a righteous and balanced life.

According to al-Zarqani (2022), the gradual revelation of the Qur'an reflects the wisdom of Allah SWT, who wished for humanity to absorb His guidance more effectively through repeated and incremental revelations. In this way, the Muslim ummah would not only be able to memorize and study the verses of the Qur'an but also internalize and apply its teachings in their daily lives.

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Teaching and learning related to the letters of the Quran have become the main topic in the syllabus of adult tajweed classes of various levels conducted in al-Quran study centers in Malaysia from the past to the present (Sholeh, 2024). However, the weakness in mastering the pronunciation of the letters of the Quran among adult students who participate in the study classes is still seen as continuing. This is proven through a preliminary survey by researchers at three adult Quran study centers in Malaysia, namely the Tartil Center in Kulim, Kedah, the al-Husary Academy in Kangar, Perlis, and the Darul Qurra' Quran Study Center in Bertam, Penang. The summary of information obtained from the owners of the study centres shows that on average almost 70% of the students in their places fail to pronounce the letters of the Quran accurately. The interview results found that this issue also involved students who had been studying the theory and method of pronunciation of the letters of the Quran for a long time.

The issue of mastery in Arabic pronunciation is a significant challenge, particularly for individuals who are not native speakers of the language, such as in Malaysia, where Arabic is not considered a second language (Zarima, 2018). This lack of proficiency is primarily attributed to various factors, including the influence of the local language, as well as the absence of certain Arabic sounds in the Malay language. Malay consonants do not correspond to some of the distinctive letters in Arabic, which results in difficulties in pronunciation (Kamarulzaman, 2000).

One of the primary factors contributing to this issue is the dialect of the Malay language itself. This is evident in the absence of specific Arabic phonemes, such as the letters (ح) and (ه), which are not present in Malay consonants (Sholeh, 2024 & Amiruldin, 2008). The phonetic structure of the Malay language does not accommodate these Arabic sounds, leading to mispronunciations and a lack of mastery in reciting Arabic correctly. As a result, individuals may struggle to pronounce Arabic words as intended, affecting both their understanding and the accuracy of their recitation.

The dialectal differences in Malay further exacerbate this issue, as regional accents may influence the pronunciation of certain Arabic sounds. This highlights the complexity of mastering Arabic pronunciation for non-native speakers, as the sound system of their first language (in this case, Malay) does not always align with the phonetic requirements of Arabic. Thus, the challenge of mastering Arabic pronunciation in Malaysia is deeply rooted in the interaction between the phonological systems of the two languages, necessitating focused efforts and techniques to overcome these linguistic barriers.

Accurate pronunciation in Quranic recitation is essential, particularly for individuals unfamiliar with proper articulation, as errors in pronouncing Arabic letters can significantly alter meanings. For example, confusing the consonants (ق) and (ك) in words like qalbun (heart) and kalbun (dog) leads to entirely different interpretations (Zarima, 2018). Correct pronunciation of the Hijaiyyah letters ensures the precise transmission of the Quran's message (Afifah, 2012) and is a religious obligation in Islam. This aspect of recitation reflects the importance of linguistic precision in conveying the divine message and upholding the integrity of the Quranic text (al-Mirsafi, n.d.; Sholeh, 2024).

Correct pronunciation is essential to preserving the authenticity and integrity of Quranic recitation. It requires guidance from qualified instructors with expertise in Quranic recitation (Leong, 2012). This emphasis on precise articulation is reflected in the actions of Prophet Muhammad PBUH, who appointed four companions known for their expertise in Quranic recitation as teachers (al-Bukhari, 2024). Recognizing the importance of accurate pronunciation, this study focuses on analyzing Quranic letters in Surah al-Fatihah, building on previous research centered on this chapter. The findings, presented in tables with concise descriptions, aim to help the community recognize and understand the correct pronunciation of Arabic consonants in Surah al-Fatihah. The study also seeks to expand its scope to cover all 30 Juzs of the Quran. By doing so, it aspires to provide valuable insights and practical guidance to enhance the community's knowledge and understanding of Quranic recitation, as prescribed by the Prophet Muhammad PBUH.

The primary objective of this study is to identify and present data about the consonantal letters of the Quran found in Surah al-Fatihah. Subsequently, this study will provide a comprehensive analysis of the data, guided by the principles and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH.

2.0 Literature Review

The study of Arabic phonetics, particularly within the context of Quranic recitation, is grounded in a rich tradition of linguistic and theological scholarship. The precise pronunciation of Quranic letters, known as Sifat al-Huruf, is a critical aspect of Tajweed, the science of Quranic recitation. Scholars like al-Zarqani (2022) emphasized the importance of gradual revelation in fostering the Muslim community's ability to internalize and apply Quranic teachings, including the mastery of its phonetic elements. This foundational understanding underscores the significance of phonetics in ensuring the accurate transmission of Quranic meanings.

2.1 Challenges in Mastery of Quranic Letters

Numerous studies have identified persistent challenges in the accurate pronunciation of Arabic letters among non-native speakers. Zarima (2018) attributes these difficulties to phonetic differences between Arabic and local languages, such as Malay, which lacks certain Arabic sounds, including (ح) and (ه). Kamarulzaman (2000) and Amiruldin (2008) further noted that regional dialects in Malaysia exacerbate pronunciation errors, underscoring the interaction between phonological systems and linguistic barriers.

2.2 Educational Interventions in Quranic Phonetics

Teaching and learning Quranic pronunciation have been a longstanding focus in Malaysia's adult Tajweed classes, as highlighted by Sholeh (2024). However, studies reveal that up to 70% of adult learners in Quranic study centers struggle with proper articulation, even after prolonged exposure to theory and practice. This indicates a need for more effective pedagogical methods, supported by detailed linguistic analysis of Quranic letters.

2.3 The Significance of Sifat al-Huruf

The characteristics of Quranic letters, including Istifal, Hams, and Ghunnah, are not only linguistic markers but also religious obligations in the recitation of the Quran. Mispronunciations, such as confusing ق (qaf) and ك (kaf), can significantly alter meanings (Zarima, 2018). Scholars like Afifah (2012) and al-Mirsafi (n.d.) have emphasized that mastering these characteristics is essential for preserving the authenticity of Quranic recitation.

2.4 Prior Studies on Surah al-Fatihah

Research on Surah al-Fatihah has explored its linguistic and theological significance, with scholars like al-Khazin (2023) and Sonhadji (2017) highlighting its centrality in Islamic prayer and its role as "The Essence of the Quran." Building on this foundation, recent studies have sought to dissect its phonetic structure, categorizing letters based on shared attributes like Rakhawah and Bainiyyah to facilitate more accurate recitation (Suwaid, 2021).

This study contributes to the existing literature by focusing specifically on the phonetic characteristics of Surah al-Fatihah. Through content analysis, it aims to provide a systematic categorization of Quranic consonants, offering practical insights to enhance the accuracy of Quranic recitation for learners and educators alike.

3.0 Methodology

The study utilized content analysis as the primary methodology to examine the phonetic and articulatory characteristics of Arabic letters (Sifat al-Huruf) in Surah al-Fatihah. Content analysis involves a systematic approach to identifying, categorizing, and interpreting textual elements, making it particularly effective for exploring the linguistic attributes of Quranic verses. By focusing on the consonantal traits in Surah al-Fatihah, such as Istifal, Hams, and Ghunnah, this method allows for an in-depth understanding of the phonetic patterns embedded in the text. The analysis was conducted by isolating specific verses, identifying the Arabic consonants, and classifying their phonetic attributes. The findings were then organized into tables for clarity and ease of interpretation.

The choice of content analysis is justified for several reasons. First, it offers a structured framework for systematically examining the characteristics of Arabic letters, ensuring thorough and accurate data collection. This approach is particularly suitable for Quranic studies, as it facilitates a detailed understanding of phonetic traits unique to the Hijaiyyah letters. Second, it aligns with the educational objectives of the study, addressing the challenges of Quranic recitation in non-Arabic-speaking communities. By providing a clear categorization of phonetic attributes, the methodology directly supports efforts to improve the accuracy of Quranic pronunciation among learners.

Furthermore, content analysis generates quantifiable insights, allowing researchers to measure and analyze the distribution of phonetic traits across Surah al-Fatihah. This data-driven approach enhances the practical applicability of the findings for educators and students. Ultimately, the use of content analysis bridges theoretical linguistics with religious education, offering valuable tools for mastering Quranic recitation and ensuring its accurate transmission as taught by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

4.0 Findings and Discussions

Surah al-Fatihah is a chapter revealed in Makkah, although some scholars propose that it may have been revealed in Madinah. This Surah comprises seven verses, 27 words, and 140 letters. It is the first chapter of the Quran to be revealed in its entirety and is classified as al-Makkiyyah. The name al-Fatihah, meaning "The Opening," reflects its role as the introduction and prelude to the Quran. It is also known as Umm al-Quran or Umm al-Kitab, translating to "The Mother of the Quran" or "The Essence of the Book," due to its encapsulation of the core message and content of the Quran. Furthermore, it is referred to as al-Sab' al-Mathani, meaning "The Seven Oft-Repeated Verses," because these verses are recited repeatedly in every prayer (al-Khazin, 2023; Sonhadji, 2017).

In this study, the researcher analyzes the consonants present in Surah al-Fatihah, categorizing them based on shared attributes, such as Hams and Rakhawah, as well as distinct characteristics like Takrir (Suwaid, 2021). However, the focus is specifically on the most prominent consonants to facilitate a clearer understanding and proper recitation of Surah al-Fatihah by the public. The analysis of the consonantal attributes and their corresponding consonants is presented in Tables 1 and 2 below.

Table 1: Analysis of The Characteristics of Arabic Letters and Consonants Found in Surah al-Fatihah

Code	Text of the Quran	Letters	Consonants
S1	بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ	Ba', Sin, Mim, Lam, Ha', Ra', Ha', Nun	Istifal, Hams, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Takrir, Bainiyyah, Rakhawah, Ghunnah
S2	الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ	Hamzah, Lam, Ha', Mim, Lam, Ha', Ra', Ba', 'Ain, Nun	Istifal, Inhiraf, Ghunnah, Bainiyyah, Isti'la'
S3	الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ	Hamzah, Ra', Ha', Mim, Nun	Istifal, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Takrir, Bainiyyah, Rakhawah, Ghunnah
S4	مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ	Mim, Lam, Kaf, Ya', Dal, Nun	Istifal, Bainiyyah, Ghunnah
S5	إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ	Hamzah, Ya', Kaf, Nun, 'Ain, Waw, Sin, Ta'	Istifal, Raghawah, Bainiyyah, Hams, Ghunnah
S6	اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ	Hamzah, Ha', Dal, Nun, Sad, Ra', Ta', Lam, Sin, Ta', Mim	Istifal, Rakhawah, Hams, Itbaq, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Bainiyyah, Ghunnah

S7	صِرْطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ	Ṣad, Ra', Ṭa', Lam, Dhal, Nun, Hamzah, 'Ain, Mim, Ta', Ha'	Itbaq, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Bainiyyah, Istifal, Ghunnah
S8	غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ	Ghayn, Ra', Lam, Mim, Ḍad, Ba', 'Ain, Ha', Waw, Nun	Isti'la', Istifal, Inhiraf, Bainiyyah, Rakhawah, Itbaq, Ghunnah, Istiṭalah

(Source: Surah al-Fatihah, 1: 1-7)

Table 1 above presents an analysis of the verses in Surah al-Fatihah, organized into Codes S1 to S8, where each code identifies specific Quranic letters and their corresponding consonantal attributes. For instance, Code S1 comprises the letters Ba', Sin, Mim, Lam, Ha', Ra', Ḥa', and Nun, which are associated with consonants such as Istifal, Hams, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Takrir, Bainiyyah, Rakhawah, and Ghunnah. Similarly, Code S2 includes Hamzah, Lam, Ḥa', Mim, Lam, Ha', Ra', Ba', 'Ain, and Nun, linked to Istifal, Inhiraf, Ghunnah, Bainiyyah, and Isti'la'. Further, Code S3 consists of Hamzah, Ra', Ḥa', Mim, and Nun, with consonants like Istifal, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Takrir, Bainiyyah, Rakhawah, and Ghunnah. Code S4 encompasses Mim, Lam, Kaf, Ya', Dal, and Nun, associated with Istifal, Bainiyyah, and Ghunnah. Code S5 identifies Hamzah, Ya', Kaf, Nun, 'Ain, Waw, Sin, and Ta', connected to Istifal, Rakhawah, Bainiyyah, Hams, and Ghunnah.

Code S6 covers Hamzah, Ha', Dal, Nun, Ṣad, Ra', Ṭa', Lam, Sin, Ta', and Mim, tied to Istifal, Rakhawah, Hams, Itbaq, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Bainiyyah, and Ghunnah. Meanwhile, Code S7 includes Ṣad, Ra', Ṭa', Lam, Dhal, Nun, Hamzah, 'Ain, Mim, Ta', and Ha', with consonants such as Itbaq, Isti'la', Inhiraf, Bainiyyah, Istifal, and Ghunnah. Finally, Code S8 comprises Ghayn, Ra', Lam, Mim, Ḍad, Ba', 'Ain, Ha', Waw, and Nun, along with consonants like Isti'la', Istifal, Inhiraf, Bainiyyah, Rakhawah, Itbaq, Ghunnah, and Istiṭalah. This structured analysis underscores a systematic approach to examining the phonetic attributes and characteristics of Quranic letters in Surah al-Fatihah.

Table 2: Details of the Characteristics of Arabic Letters and Consonants Found in Surah al-Fatihah

Code	Consonants	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	Total	Percent (%)
K1	Istifal	7	9	6	6	11	4	8	9	60	43
K2	Hams	2	0	0	0	1	3	0	0	6	4
K3	Isti'la'	2	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	7	5
K4	Inhiraf	2	3	0	0	0	1	1	2	9	7
K5	Takrir	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2
K6	Bainiyyah	3	5	1	1	2	2	4	4	22	16
K7	Rakhawah	3	0	0	1	3	3	1	3	14	10
K8	Ghunnah	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	2	11	8
K9	Itbaq	0	0	0	0	0	2	2	1	5	4
K10	Istiṭalah	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0.7
Total		22	20	8	9	18	17	20	24	138	-
Percent (%)		16	14.4	5.7	6.5	13	12	14.4	17	-	100

(Source: Surah al-Fatihah, 1: 1-7)

Referring to Table 2, the findings reveal the frequency of consonants in the verses of Surah al-Fatihah based on their categorization. Consonants under Code S1 are found 22 times, accounting for 16% of the occurrences, while Code S2 appears 20 times or 14.4%. Code S3 is observed eight times (5.7%), and Code S4 occurs nine times (6.5%). Meanwhile, Code S5 is recorded 18 times (13%), followed by Code S6 with 17 occurrences (12%), Code S7 with 20 instances (14.4%), and finally, Code S8 with the highest count of 24 occurrences, making up 17%.

The overall analysis of consonantal attributes across all codes (S1 to S8) identifies Inhiraf (Code K1) as the most frequent, appearing 60 times or 43%. This is followed by Bainiyyah (Code K6) with 22 occurrences (16%) and Rakhawah (Code K7) with 14 occurrences (10%). Ghunnah (Code K8) is detected 11 times (8%), and Isti'la' (Code K3) appears seven times (5%). Both Hams (Code K2) and Itbaq (Code K9) are observed six and five times, respectively, accounting for 4% each. Inhiraf (Code K4) appears nine times (7%), while Takrir (Code K5) is less frequent with three occurrences (2%). Lastly, Istiṭalah (Code K10) is the least frequent, appearing only once (0.7%).

These findings highlight the systematic distribution and prominence of consonantal attributes within the categorized verses of Surah al-Fatihah, offering valuable insights into their phonetic structure.

5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study was limited to the analysis of consonantal characteristics in Surah al-Fatihah, focusing only on ten phonetic traits. While the findings provide valuable insights, the scope does not encompass other Surahs or the complete Quran. Additionally, the methodology primarily relied on content analysis, which may benefit from being supplemented by experimental approaches, such as phonetic acoustics or oral recitation studies. The study also did not extensively address regional or individual variations in pronunciation, which could influence the findings.

The study successfully identified and categorized the characteristics of Arabic letters in Surah al-Fatihah, emphasizing traits like Istifal, Hams, and Bainiyyah. These findings underscore the importance of accurate pronunciation in Quranic recitation and provide a framework for understanding phonetic challenges faced by non-native speakers. The research highlights the need for targeted educational interventions to improve Tajweed instruction and ensure proper articulation of Quranic letters.

To address the challenges identified, Quranic education programs should integrate phonetic training with practical recitation exercises. Training modules should emphasize the distinct phonetic traits of Arabic letters and provide learners with real-time feedback. Collaboration with linguistic experts could also enhance teaching methodologies.

Future research should expand the scope to include other Surahs and explore the influence of dialectal variations on Quranic recitation. Comparative studies across diverse linguistic backgrounds could provide a broader understanding of phonetic challenges. Incorporating technological tools, such as speech analysis software, may also refine phonetic studies and teaching practices.

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