Educational Activity of Arabic Calligraphy in the Algerian School: Difficulties and Solutions

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Abstract

Arabic calligraphy represents a fundamental educational activity within the Arabic language curriculum and constitutes a cornerstone of linguistic, cognitive, and aesthetic development in primary education. Effective calligraphy instruction requires a competent, perceptive, and pedagogically trained teacher capable of guiding learners toward mastery of this art and enabling them to benefit from it across other language skills, particularly reading and written expression. Beyond its instructional function, Arabic calligraphy embodies profound cultural, spiritual, and civilizational dimensions, as it has accompanied Arab-Islamic civilization throughout history and remains enduring through the continuity of the Islamic message. This study aims to highlight the importance of teaching Arabic calligraphy to primary school pupils, with particular emphasis on learners in the first and second grades. It examines the current reality of calligraphy instruction in Algerian primary schools and analyzes the main difficulties encountered by both teachers and learners in the teaching–learning process. The study also explores the pedagogical consequences of neglecting calligraphy on learners' cognitive achievement and overall academic performance. Finally, the paper proposes a set of practical and pedagogical recommendations intended to improve handwriting quality among primary school students and restore calligraphy to its rightful position within the educational process.

Introduction

Calligraphy constitutes one of the most fundamental human skills and a defining characteristic through which human beings are distinguished from other creatures. From an Islamic and civilizational perspective, writing is not merely a mechanical act but a divine gift that enables communication, knowledge transmission, and intellectual continuity. Allah Almighty honored humanity with the ability to write, as reflected in the Qur'anic emphasis on the pen as a symbol of knowledge and civilization. Beyond its functional role, calligraphy is also recognized as a refined artistic practice that cultivates aesthetic taste, nurtures creativity, and develops precision and discipline.

Despite its significance, Arabic calligraphy has gradually lost its central position within contemporary educational practice, particularly at the primary level. Many pupils today underestimate the importance of handwriting, perceiving efforts to improve it as a waste of time and unnecessary exertion. As a result, the current generation of learners is

increasingly characterized by weak handwriting skills, poor letter formation, and a lack of clarity and aesthetic coherence in written expression. This decline has serious pedagogical consequences, as illegible writing negatively affects students' academic performance, comprehension, and self-confidence.

In light of this educational challenge, the present study seeks to address the issue of teaching Arabic calligraphy in Algerian primary schools. The research stems from the conviction that calligraphy is not a marginal subject but a core educational skill that directly influences learners' cognitive, psychological, and moral development. Accordingly, this study is structured around the following research questions:

- What is the importance of teaching Arabic calligraphy to primary school students?
- What is the current reality of teaching calligraphy in Algerian primary education?
- What difficulties do teachers and pupils encounter in the teaching and learning of calligraphy?
- What pedagogical approaches can be adopted to improve students' handwriting skills?

The Concept of Calligraphy

Arabic calligraphy has been defined by classical and modern scholars as both an expressive tool and an artistic discipline. Ibn Khaldūn, in *Al-Muqaddimah*, describes calligraphy as:

"A noble craft through which a person is distinguished from others, by which purposes are fulfilled. It consists of drawn forms and lettered symbols that indicate spoken words and convey what is within the soul" (Ibn Khaldūn, 1967, p. 747).

This definition highlights the dual nature of calligraphy as a functional system of signs and a refined cultural practice. Similarly, Ali Sami Al-Hallaq defines calligraphy as:

"Drawn shapes and written symbols that represent spoken sounds and express meanings residing within the human self"
(Al-Hallaq, 2010, p. 255).

From these definitions, calligraphy may be understood as an essential medium of written expression aimed at transferring ideas, meanings, and emotions from the writer to the reader. In the Arabic-Islamic tradition, calligraphy transcended its communicative function to become one of the most distinguished fine arts. Arabic script adorned mosques, palaces, manuscripts, mausoleums, and museums, reflecting a harmonious fusion of spirituality, geometry, and linguistic beauty. Through the flexibility and richness of the Arabic language, calligraphers were able to produce masterpieces that embodied both artistic excellence and cultural identity (Shehata, 2012; Achour & Al-Maqdadi, 2005).

The Importance of Teaching Arabic Calligraphy

There is broad scholarly consensus that teaching calligraphy at an early age plays a decisive role in the learner's overall educational development. Calligraphy instruction positively influences academic achievement, reading proficiency, and written expression across all school subjects. Its importance may be summarized as follows:

Clear and well-formed handwriting facilitates reading, enabling the learner to convey ideas accurately and coherently.

The beauty and clarity of handwriting provide psychological satisfaction to the writer and enhance the reader's comprehension.

Legible handwriting saves time and effort, contributing to the development of fluent reading and writing skills.

Arabic calligraphy represents a refined artistic heritage that cultivates aesthetic sensitivity, creativity, and cultural appreciation.

Calligraphy serves as an effective medium for instilling moral and ethical values, especially when writing materials are drawn from the Qur'an, Prophetic traditions, poetry, and Arab-Islamic heritage.

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Through handwriting practice, the child acquires essential behavioral traits such as cleanliness, organization, patience, accuracy, self-discipline, and sustained attention.

Proper handwriting training encourages correct posture and sitting habits, thereby contributing to the physical well-being and spinal health of learners (Al-Baja, 2005; Soman, 2010; Al-Hallaq, 2010).

Objectives of Teaching Calligraphy at the Primary Level

The teaching of calligraphy at the primary stage aims to achieve a set of interrelated objectives that can be classified into educational, developmental, and practical goals.

Educational Objectives

Enhancing reading skills, as handwriting and reading are integrally connected, particularly during early literacy development.

Training pupils to write clearly and legibly, ensuring accurate differentiation between letters and words.

Developing reasonable writing speed without compromising accuracy and clarity (Ibrahim, n.d.; Shehata, 2012).

Developmental Objectives

Developing fine motor control and flexibility of hand and finger movements.

Encouraging cleanliness, order, and respect for learning tools and the classroom environment.

Cultivating patience, attentiveness, and perseverance through sustained writing practice.

Satisfying the child's natural inclination toward imitation by providing high-quality writing models (Achour & Al-Maqdadi, 2005; Al-Baja, 2005).

Practical and Aesthetic Objectives

Enabling pupils to write quickly and clearly while maintaining accuracy in letter formation and spacing.

Developing artistic and cognitive abilities such as aesthetic perception, visual discrimination, concentration, and attention to detail.

Refining talents and emotional sensitivity while fostering psychological satisfaction and inner balance.

Strengthening fine muscles, particularly those of the fingers and hand, which are essential for precise writing and coordination
(Soman, 2010; Al-Hallaq, 2010).

Reasons for Students' Weakness in Arabic Calligraphy

Recent educational observations indicate that Arabic calligraphy has progressively lost its pedagogical value, both within society at large and within educational institutions in particular. This marginalization has resulted in a noticeable decline in students' handwriting proficiency. The main causes of this weakness may be summarized as follows:

First, calligraphy instruction is often assigned to teachers who lack adequate professional competence and specialized training in handwriting pedagogy. In many cases, teachers themselves demonstrate weak calligraphic skills, which directly affects learners, as handwriting is primarily acquired through imitation and modeling. As educational theory suggests, one cannot transmit what one does not possess (Al-Hallaq, 2010).

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Second, some teachers neglect calligraphy lessons altogether, treating them as secondary or insignificant. In practice, calligraphy periods are sometimes replaced with other activities under the pretext of curriculum overload or exam preparation, thereby depriving students of systematic handwriting practice.

Third, teachers of non-language subjects frequently consider calligraphy to be outside their responsibility, despite the fact that handwriting quality affects students' performance across all disciplines. This fragmented perception weakens the integrative role of calligraphy in the educational process.

Fourth, the reduction of instructional time allocated to calligraphy within weekly schedules—often limiting it to the first year of primary education—prevents the progressive development of handwriting skills across successive grades.

Fifth, the absence of formal assessment marks for calligraphy in examinations has led pupils to disregard it, as learners tend to prioritize subjects that directly affect their academic results.

Sixth, the lack of standardized, objective evaluation criteria for handwriting quality leaves assessment largely dependent on teachers' subjective judgment, undermining fairness and consistency (Shehata et al., 2012).

Seventh, insufficient consideration of individual differences among learners—such as motor development, learning pace, and cognitive readiness—results in inadequate guidance and follow-up during handwriting practice.

Finally, classroom overcrowding in many primary schools significantly limits teachers' ability to provide individualized supervision, real-time correction, and continuous pedagogical support (Achour & Al-Maqdadi, 2005).

Problems of Arabic Calligraphy and Difficulties in Teaching It

Arabic calligraphy presents multiple linguistic and structural challenges that complicate its teaching, particularly at the primary level. Among the most prominent difficulties are the following:

Diacritics and Vowelization (Form)

Short vowel markers (ḥarakāt) represent a major source of confusion for young learners. A single unvowelized word may carry multiple meanings depending on its diacritics, which poses comprehension and writing challenges, especially when words are presented outside contextual frameworks (Ibrahim, n.d.).

Orthographic Rules

Arabic spelling does not always correspond directly to pronunciation. Certain letters are pronounced but not written, such as the *alif layyinah* in some demonstrative nouns, while others are written but not pronounced, such as the *wāw* in *ʿAmr*. Additionally, complex spelling variations—such as the *alif* in past verbs conjugated with plural pronouns—create further difficulty. The abundance of exceptions within Arabic orthography intensifies the challenge for primary school pupils (Soman, 2010).

Variability of Letter Forms

Many Arabic letters assume different shapes depending on their position within a word (initial, medial, final, or isolated). Letters such as *ʿayn, jīm*, and *ghayn* may appear in four distinct forms, often confusing learners and causing hesitation during writing.

Dotted and Undotted Letters

Distinguishing between dotted and undotted letters constitutes another difficulty, especially when letters differ only by the number or placement of dots. This visual similarity complicates early handwriting acquisition.

Grammatical Inflection (Iʿrāb)

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Changes in word endings due to grammatical inflection introduce additional complexity. Expression may occur through vowel changes, consonantal markers, or deletion, which further burdens the learner's cognitive processing during writing.

Qur'anic Orthography

The divergence between standard Arabic spelling and Qur'anic (ʿUthmānī) script—particularly in matters of omission, addition, elongation, and pause—creates confusion for students exposed to Qur'anic texts in parallel with school textbooks (Al-Baja, 2005).

Proposals to Improve and Promote Arabic Calligraphy

- Educational specialists propose several measures to enhance handwriting instruction and restore its pedagogical value:
- Teaching calligraphy as an independent subject with increased instructional time and structured assessment.
- Assigning calligraphy instruction exclusively to qualified teachers who have received specialized training under professional calligraphers.
- Ensuring continuous reinforcement of handwriting standards across all subjects, not limited to calligraphy classes alone.
- Encouraging talented students through incentives, awards, and exhibitions that showcase their work.
- Organizing workshops, seminars, and professional development programs for teachers in collaboration with expert calligraphers.
- Providing adequate instructional materials, tools, and visual aids for both teachers and learners (Shehata et al., 2012).
- To further promote calligraphy, the following practical measures are recommended:
- Separating calligraphy assessment from general Arabic language examinations and allocating a meaningful proportion of marks.
- Increasing weekly instructional hours to allow individualized guidance and practice.
- Subjecting teacher candidates to handwriting proficiency tests during recruitment.
- Assigning supervision and evaluation to specialized inspectors with intensified pedagogical guidance visits.
- Providing teachers with standardized instructional manuals developed by experts.
- Organizing inter-school calligraphy competitions with formal recognition of outstanding achievements.

Quality Standards of Arabic Calligraphy

Al-Qalqashandī classified Arabic calligraphy quality into two principal categories: **good formation** and **good posture**.

Good Formation

This criterion refers to the accurate shaping of letters, which depends on several indicators:

- **Proportion:** giving each letter its correct curvature, straightness, and balance.
- **Completion:** maintaining appropriate length, thickness, and precision.
- **Elevation and Extension:** respecting the vertical and horizontal dimensions of letters.
- **Pen Control:** proper utilization of pen pressure to achieve clarity and consistency.
- **Fluency:** smooth hand movement without hesitation or tremor.

Good Posture

This relates to the spatial organization of writing and includes:

Spacing: balanced distribution of letters and words without excessive gaps.

Alignment: maintaining consistency along the writing line, accounting for ascenders and descenders.

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Margin Awareness: respecting margins and visual balance across the page.

Educational researchers further emphasize three overarching criteria for handwriting quality: **clarity, beauty, and speed** (Al-Hallaq, 2010).

Clarity involves correct letter formation, accurate dot placement, and proportional dimensions.

Beauty depends on order, harmony, consistency, and aesthetic balance.

Speed refers to fluent, continuous writing appropriate to the learner's age and experience, developed through sustained practice.

Conclusion

Arabic calligraphy constitutes a pivotal milestone in the child's academic, cognitive, and practical development. Contrary to the widespread misconception held by some educators, calligraphy is not a simple or marginal classroom activity; rather, it is among the most demanding components of Arabic language instruction. This complexity stems from the fact that the learner simultaneously practices a wide range of interrelated skills, including fine motor coordination, visual perception, linguistic accuracy, aesthetic judgment, patience, and sustained attention.

Within this educational context, the teacher's role extends far beyond mere instruction. The teacher acts as a guide, mentor, companion, and evaluator, providing continuous support, correction, and encouragement. Teaching calligraphy requires exceptional patience, careful observation, and sustained pedagogical effort, as learners differ in their motor abilities, learning pace, and readiness. Although the process is demanding and often exhausting, the educational value of calligraphy instruction becomes evident when teachers witness the tangible outcomes of their efforts—manifested in students' improved handwriting, growing confidence, and emerging creativity.

Ultimately, investing in the teaching of Arabic calligraphy yields long-term educational benefits. It enhances learners' academic performance, reinforces their linguistic competence, nurtures aesthetic sensibility, and contributes to their psychological balance and moral discipline. Therefore, restoring calligraphy to its rightful place within primary education is an essential step toward improving the overall quality of learning and preserving a core element of Arab-Islamic cultural identity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, the following pedagogical recommendations are proposed for educators, curriculum designers, and educational stakeholders in general, and for primary school teachers in particular:

1. **Model-Based Practice**
   Learners should begin handwriting practice by carefully imitating the model presented by the teacher, preferably starting from the bottom of the page upward. This approach allows the model to remain constantly within the learner's visual field, reducing distraction and enhancing accurate imitation.

2. **Accuracy of Instructional Models**
   Teachers must ensure that all written models provided to students are accurate, well-formed, and aesthetically balanced, as pupils primarily acquire handwriting skills through imitation.

3. **Writing Tools and Materials**
   Attention should be given to the safety, quality, and appropriateness of writing tools used by learners, including pens, pencils, paper, and notebooks, as these significantly affect handwriting quality.

4. **Use of Ruled and Planned Boards**
   The systematic use of ruled or lined blackboards during instruction helps students grasp letter proportions, alignment, and spacing more effectively.

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5. **Importance of the Introductory Stage**
The preparatory phase—particularly during the first and second years of primary education—is crucial. Teachers should dedicate this period to establishing foundational principles of handwriting, such as correct posture, pen grip, letter formation, and spatial organization.

6. **Gradual Progression and Individual Support**
Instruction should progress from simple to complex tasks, taking into account individual differences among learners and providing continuous guidance and corrective feedback.

7. **Integration Across Subjects**
Handwriting standards should be reinforced across all school subjects, not confined solely to calligraphy lessons, in order to consolidate skills through consistent practice.

8. **Continuous Professional Development**
Teachers should be encouraged to participate in training workshops and professional development programs led by specialists in Arabic calligraphy and handwriting pedagogy.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with recognized academic and ethical standards. The research is theoretical and analytical in nature and does not involve experimentation on human subjects. All sources used in this study were properly acknowledged, and intellectual property rights were respected. The author adhered to principles of academic integrity, transparency, and objectivity throughout the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study.

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