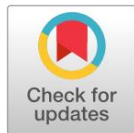








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Narrative Engagement in Problem-Based Learning: Enhancing Students' Mahārah Qirā'ah through Contextual Meaning-Making

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ABSTRACT

Background. Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah) are crucial in language acquisition, but traditional teacher-centered instruction at Madrasah Tsanawiyah often leads to passive engagement and limited contextual comprehension.

Purpose. This study investigates the impact of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model on students' Mahārah Qirā'ah, focusing on the narrative engagement and meaning-making processes that influence learning outcomes.

Method. A mixed-method explanatory sequential design was employed. The quantitative component used a quasi-experimental pre-test and post-test with 20 Madrasah Tsanawiyah students, analyzed using descriptive statistics and a paired sample t-test. The qualitative component involved semi-structured interviews with six purposively selected students, analyzed thematically.

Results. Quantitative results showed a significant improvement in Mahārah Qirā'ah, with mean scores rising from 59.5 to 92.5 ($p < 0.05$). Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: a shift from passive decoding to active meaning construction, the role of collaborative group discussions in comprehension, and linguistic barriers as differentiating factors.

Conclusion. The findings suggest that PBL's effectiveness is enhanced through narrative engagement, as students construct meaning via reading, discussion, and interpretation. These results position PBL as an effective, contextually responsive approach for Arabic language education. Educators are encouraged to incorporate vocabulary scaffolding to promote equitable participation.

KEYWORDS

Mahārah Qirā'ah, Mixed-Method, Narrative Engagement, Problem-Based Learning

INTRODUCTION

Arabic occupies a highly strategic position for learners and scholars worldwide, particularly as a gateway

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to comprehensively understanding Islamic teachings, exploring the rich heritage of classical and modern Arabic literature, and accessing scholarly contributions across various fields of knowledge. Mastery of Arabic enables students to engage directly with primary Islamic sources and Arabic intellectual works that embody profound cultural, historical, and philosophical values. Therefore, Arabic language education plays a crucial role in providing access to a vast and sustainable intellectual and cultural heritage (Pamessangi, 2019). Nevertheless, despite its importance, Arabic language education continues to face numerous challenges that may hinder learning effectiveness, including curriculum misalignment, limited learning resources and media, and difficulties in optimally developing Arabic language skills (Nasri & Mulyohadi, 2023).

Within Arabic language learning, reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah) constitute a fundamental competency with a strategic role in supporting the mastery of other language skills. The significance of reading skills is reflected in their proportion, which accounts for approximately 40% of overall language skills, making Mahārah Qirā'ah a crucial foundation for comprehensive language learning (Alterkawi, 2023). This skill not only requires the ability to recognize vocabulary and understand Arabic grammatical structures but also involves complex cognitive processes such as comprehending textual meaning, identifying main ideas, and interpreting the author's message contextually. In line with this view, Hasan Syahatah conceptualizes reading as a mental activity involving various cognitive abilities to capture and construct meaning from texts, indicating that reading is not merely mechanical but analytical and interpretative in nature (Habibah et al., 2020). Consequently, the development of Mahārah Qirā'ah in Arabic language instruction should be oriented toward enhancing meaning comprehension and students' thinking abilities rather than focusing solely on symbol recognition and literal translation.

However, based on interviews with Arabic language teachers at the research site, instruction in Mahārah Qirā'ah remains predominantly reliant on conventional, teacher-centered methods. Conventional methods, particularly lecturing, are understood as instructional interactions that emphasize oral explanation and material delivery by the teacher to students (Guo et al., 2024; Jafar, 2021). This method is considered practical and flexible, requiring minimal preparation and limited instructional tools. Sugiyono (2013) explains that in the lecture method, teachers play a dominant role in delivering content, while students function primarily as recipients of information, although instructional aids may occasionally be used. Nonetheless, teacher dominance in Mahārah Qirā'ah instruction often results in learning activities that emphasize vocabulary memorization and literal text translation, leading to passive student participation and limited engagement in comprehending textual meaning. This condition suggests that conventional instructional methods have not fully supported the development of critical thinking skills and deep textual comprehension in Mahārah Qirā'ah learning.

Beyond the cognitive dimension, recent perspectives in language education emphasize the importance of narrative engagement in reading instruction, that is, the extent to which students personally connect with texts, construct meaning through their own experiences, and develop a sense of reading identity (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Narrative engagement positions reading not merely as a skill to be measured, but as a lived experience in which learners negotiate meaning, relate textual content to personal contexts, and develop deeper interpretive capacities. This dimension is particularly relevant in Arabic reading instruction, where students often struggle not only with linguistic structures but also with finding personal relevance in the texts they encounter (Qomariyah et al., 2021). Therefore, effective Arabic reading instruction should address both the cognitive and narrative dimensions of comprehension.

Given the dominance of conventional methods and the resulting passivity of students in Mahārah Qirā'ah instruction, there is a need to implement alternative instructional models that foster active engagement and deeper comprehension of textual meaning (Hasibuan et al., 2023). One instructional model considered relevant to these needs is Problem-Based Learning (PBL). This model positions problems as the starting point of learning and emphasizes student-centered instruction, encouraging learners to seek information, engage in collaborative discussions, and discover solutions through individual and group thinking processes (Kamil et al., 2019; Muhartini et al., 2023). Problem-Based Learning is grounded in constructivist principles that emphasize contextual and collaborative learning, metacognitive development, and problem-solving skills. Through ill-structured or open-ended problems, students are trained to construct meaningful understanding and develop higher-order thinking skills (Yu & Zin, 2023). In the context of Mahārah Qirā'ah learning, this approach enables students to analyze problems embedded within reading texts, transforming reading into a contextual and meaningful activity while fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills through real-world problem contexts (Guo et al., 2024).

Previous studies have examined the effectiveness of PBL in improving Arabic reading skills. Fikri et al. (2023) demonstrated that PBL significantly improves Mahārah Qirā'ah through active student engagement in problem-oriented text comprehension. Similarly, Qomariyah et al. (2021) highlighted the role of self-regulated learning in shaping Arabic reading ability, suggesting that learner autonomy and strategic engagement are key factors in reading development. However, these studies have predominantly focused on quantitative outcomes, measuring score improvements, without sufficiently exploring the qualitative, narrative dimensions of how students experience and construct meaning during PBL-based reading instruction. Furthermore, research applying PBL to Mahārah Qirā'ah at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level using a mixed-method approach that integrates both quantitative measurement and narrative inquiry remains limited. This gap underscores the need for a study that not only measures the effect of PBL on reading achievement but also captures the lived learning experiences and meaning-making processes of students throughout the instructional process.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the effect of the Problem-Based Learning model on students' Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah) at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level, while simultaneously exploring students' narrative engagement and meaning-making experiences through a mixed-method approach. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how PBL enhances Arabic reading instruction, both in terms of measurable outcomes and the lived experiences of learners.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effect of Problem-Based Learning (PBL) on students' Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah). The quantitative strand was designed to measure the magnitude of improvement in reading skills, while the qualitative strand was incorporated to explore students' learning experiences, meaning-making processes, and narrative engagement during PBL implementation. This integration follows an explanatory sequential design, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed first, followed by qualitative data collection aimed at explaining and contextualizing the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2022). The quantitative approach was selected to objectively and measurably identify and assess the effect of the treatment applied to the investigated learning problem (Sugiyono, 2013).

While the qualitative approach was employed to capture the narrative dimensions of students' reading experiences that quantitative measures alone cannot fully reveal.

The quantitative component employed a quasi-experimental one-group pre-test and post-test design, allowing the researcher to analyze differences in students' learning outcomes before and after the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning model within an existing classroom setting. The study involved 20 Madrasah Tsanawiyah (MTs) students as research participants. The instructional material focused on the theme Al-Hiwāyāt (Hobbies), presented in the form of a single Arabic reading text adjusted to the students' proficiency level. To measure reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah), the researcher employed a test instrument consisting of ten items: five multiple-choice questions and five short-answer questions based on the reading text. The items were designed to assess various aspects of reading skills, including vocabulary comprehension (mufradāt), identification of main ideas, understanding of contextual and explicit or implicit information, and overall interpretation of textual meaning. The tests were administered as both pre-tests and post-tests to obtain an overview of students' initial abilities and subsequent changes in reading skills following the implementation of Problem-Based Learning. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to depict students' reading ability profiles and inferential statistics in the form of a paired sample t-test to determine the effect of the Problem-Based Learning model on students' Arabic reading skills.

To ensure that the test instrument comprehensively measured Mahārah Qirā'ah, the researcher developed item indicators aligned with learning objectives and Arabic reading skill components. These indicators served as the basis for constructing pre-test and post-test items derived from the Al-Hiwāyāt reading text. Content validity of the test instrument was established through expert judgment conducted by a lecturer specializing in Arabic language education, who evaluated the alignment between the test items and the Mahārah Qirā'ah indicators. The expert confirmed that all ten items were valid and appropriate for the participants' proficiency level and learning objectives. The test indicators are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Indicators of the Reading Skills (*Mahārah Qirā'ah*) Test Instrument

No	Reading skill indicator	Aspect of <i>maharah qira'ah</i>	Item format
1	Identifying general information in the text	Text comprehension	Multiple choice
2	Determining the time or frequency of characters' activities	Explicit information comprehension	Multiple choice
3	Identifying detailed information based on the text	detail comprehension	Multiple choice
4	Identifying characters' intentions or requests	Context comprehension	Multiple choice
5	Determining characters' attitudes toward activities	Meaning comprehension	Multiple choice
6	Stating factual information directly from the text	Detail comprehension	Short answer
7	Explaining characters' emotional responses	Context comprehension	Short answer
8	Identifying quantitative information in the text	Detail comprehension	Short answer
9	Drawing conclusions from events in the text	Text comprehension	Short answer
10	Identifying the main idea or topic of the text	Main idea comprehension	Short answer

The qualitative component was designed to complement and deepen the quantitative findings by capturing the narrative dimensions of students' learning experiences. Following the post-test, six students were purposively selected for semi-structured interviews based on their degree of score improvement: two students with high improvement, two with moderate improvement, and two with low improvement. This purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure variation in perspectives and to enable a more nuanced understanding of how different learners experienced and constructed meaning through PBL (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview lasted approximately 10–15 minutes and was conducted individually. The interviews explored students' personal engagement with the reading text, their strategies for constructing meaning, their experience of collaborative discussion, and their reflections on the differences between PBL and conventional instruction. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the procedures outlined by (Braun & Clarke, 2006), involving familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, and defining and naming themes.

Previous studies indicate that Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah) are influenced by interrelated cognitive and pedagogical factors. Qomariyah et al. (2021) found a significant positive relationship between Self-Regulated Learning and Arabic reading skills among university students, with a correlation coefficient of 0.357, suggesting that reading ability is shaped not only by linguistic mastery but also by learner autonomy, strategic regulation, and critical thinking. Conversely, Khikmah (2019) identified various challenges in reading Arabic texts among madrasah students, including pronunciation difficulties, vowel length issues, low comprehension of meaning and context, and the dominance of lecture-based methods that reduce students' interest and participation. These findings highlight the need for more participatory and contextual learning approaches. In line with this need, Fikri et al. (2023) demonstrated that Problem-Based Learning significantly improves Arabic reading skills through active student engagement in problem-oriented text comprehension. Based on these findings, this study positions Problem-Based Learning as a relevant instructional approach to addressing Mahārah Qirā'ah challenges while fostering learner autonomy in the context of Arabic language instruction at Madrasah Tsanawiyah.

Theoretically, this study is grounded in constructivist theory, which posits that knowledge is actively constructed by learners through direct engagement in learning experiences and social interaction (Luthfiyani et al, 2025). Problem-Based Learning aligns with this perspective by positioning students as the primary agents of learning who independently construct understanding through contextual problem analysis, group discussion, and self-directed learning. Kilroy (2004) emphasizes that PBL encourages learners to restructure prior knowledge, develop analytical thinking skills, and enhance learning motivation through realistic and meaningful problem-solving. Similarly, Wood (2003) argues that PBL focuses not only on problem resolution but also on deep understanding, self-directed learning, and the development of higher-order thinking skills through discussion and reflection. In Arabic language learning, particularly Mahārah Qirā'ah, reading skills require deep comprehension of meaning, context, and content. Therefore, PBL is considered a relevant and promising approach for enhancing Arabic reading skills by encouraging active text interpretation, contextual problem linkage, and critical, meaningful knowledge construction (Sunariyanti et al., 2025).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Students' Arabic Reading Skills Before and After PBL Implementation

This section presents the results of the pre-test and post-test on students' Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah) before and after the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning (PBL) model, followed by qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews that illuminate the experiential and narrative dimensions underlying the quantitative results.

Pre-test Results

The pre-test was conducted to determine students' initial Arabic reading abilities prior to the implementation of the instructional treatment. The descriptive statistics of the pre-test results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of Pre-test Results

Statistic	Value
N	20
Minimum score	30
Maximum score	80
Mean	59.5
Standard deviation	16.58

Post-test Results

After the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning model, a post-test was administered to measure students' learning outcomes. The descriptive statistics of the post-test results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Post-test Results

Statistic	Value
N	20
Minimum score	60
Maximum score	100
Mean	92.5
Standard deviation	12.20

The pre-test results of Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah) indicate that students' initial abilities were at a moderate level with relatively high variability. The mean pre-test score of 59.5, accompanied by a standard deviation of 16.58, suggests a considerable disparity in reading abilities among students prior to the implementation of the instructional treatment. This condition reflects that some students had not yet been able to comprehend Arabic texts optimally, whether in terms of vocabulary mastery, identification of main ideas, or understanding of reading context. These findings reinforce the results of Khikmah (2019), who revealed that madrasah students continue to face various challenges in reading Arabic texts, both linguistically and in terms of meaning comprehension, particularly when instruction is still dominated by conventional, teacher-centered approaches. Therefore, the low initial achievement observed in this study can be understood as a consequence of the limitations of instructional models that have not sufficiently encouraged active student engagement.

In contrast, the post-test results demonstrate a very significant improvement following the implementation of PBL. The mean post-test score increased to 92.5 with a lower standard deviation of 12.20, indicating that students' reading abilities became more evenly distributed after the intervention. This finding is consistent with the results reported by Primadoniaty (2020), who found that the effects of PBL were clearly evident through significant differences between pre-test and post-test results, with post-test scores being higher after problem-based instruction was applied.

This suggests that PBL not only improves learning outcomes quantitatively but also contributes to reducing disparities in students' reading abilities through active engagement in contextual text comprehension.

The Improvement in Students' Reading Skills

This section presents the improvement in students' Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah) as reflected in the comparison between pre-test and post-test results, as well as the pedagogical explanation underlying the observed changes following the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning model.

The comparison of the mean scores from the pre-test and post-test aims to examine changes in students' learning outcomes after the instructional treatment. The comparison results are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test results

Test	Mean	Min.	Max.
Pre-test	59.5	30	80
Post-test	92.5	60	100

Based on Table 4, the mean post-test score (92.5) is substantially higher than the mean pre-test score (59.5). In addition, the minimum score increased from 30 in the pre-test to 60 in the post-test, while the maximum score rose from 80 to 100. This comparison clearly indicates an improvement in students' Arabic reading learning outcomes following the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning model.

The improvement in students' reading skills following the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning model can be attributed to the characteristics of PBL, which position students as active subjects in the learning process. In PBL, students do not merely read texts mechanically; rather, they analyze the content of readings through presented problems, discuss textual meanings, and relate information from the text to relevant contexts. This finding aligns with the constructivist learning paradigm, which emphasizes that knowledge is constructed through active processes of discovery and problem solving (Wahyuni et al., 2026).

The specific effectiveness of PBL in the context of Arabic reading instruction can be explained through several interconnected mechanisms. First, Arabic reading, particularly at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level, demands not only phonological decoding but deep semantic processing, including comprehension of vocabulary in context, inference of implicit meaning, and interpretation of culturally embedded content (Alterkawi, 2023). Conventional, teacher-centered methods address these demands through direct explanation and translation, which positions students as passive receivers of meaning rather than active constructors. PBL, by contrast, presents students with problems embedded within reading texts, compelling them to engage in active inference, collaborative negotiation of meaning, and self-directed vocabulary resolution, cognitive processes that are directly aligned with the demands of Mahārah Qirā'ah (Guo et al., 2024). Second, PBL creates what Yew & Goh (2016) describe as a "constructive, self-directed, collaborative and contextual" learning experience, in which students activate prior knowledge, engage in peer learning through small-group discussion, and consolidate understanding through reflection. In Arabic reading instruction, this process is particularly powerful because it replaces the passive receipt of translation with active co-construction of textual meaning, a shift that fundamentally changes the learner's relationship with the Arabic text.

The substantial increase in mean scores further indicates that reading instruction becomes more meaningful when students are actively involved in problem-solving activities. This

strengthens the findings of Guo et al. (2024), whose systematic review of PBL in EFL contexts confirmed that PBL has a positive effect on students' academic performance, active learning, and cognitive engagement. Moreover, the improvement in Mahārah Qirā'ah observed in this study also confirms the view of Qomariyah et al. (2021), who argued that Arabic reading ability is not solely determined by mastery of vocabulary and linguistic structures, but also by the ability to comprehend main ideas, contextual meaning, and textual content comprehensively.

The primary distinction between this study and previous research lies in the use of contextual problems as an entry point for text comprehension, enabling students to move beyond passive learning, as reported by Khikmah (2019), toward actively constructing textual meaning through discussion and problem analysis. Therefore, the observed improvement is not merely reflected in numerical score increases, but also in the transformation of the learning process from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered, problem-oriented engagement

Statistical Test Results on the Effect of the Problem-Based Learning Model

A paired-sample t-test was employed to examine whether there was a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores following the implementation of the instructional treatment. The results of the paired-sample t-test are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Paired sample t-test Results

Test	t-value	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Remark
Pretest - Posttest	13.08	19	0.00	Significant

The statistical analysis yielded a calculated t-value of 13.08 with 19 degrees of freedom and a significance value (Sig. 2-tailed) of 0.000. Since the significance value is lower than 0.05, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference between students' pre-test and post-test scores in Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah). Therefore, the improvement observed after the implementation of the Problem-Based Learning model is not incidental but represents a measurable effect of the instructional intervention.

These findings reinforce the results of Fikri et al. (2023), who concluded that PBL is statistically effective in improving Arabic reading skills due to its student-centered nature and emphasis on real-world problem solving. From a theoretical perspective, the results are also consistent with Rodiyah (2022), who emphasized that PBL directs students to think critically through problem-solving stages grounded in scientific methods, thereby orienting learning not only toward outcomes but also toward cognitive processes.

To understand how and why this improvement occurred, it is necessary to examine the cognitive mechanisms activated by PBL in the context of Mahārah Qirā'ah. Drawing on the framework proposed by Yew & Goh (2016), PBL triggers a three-phase cognitive shift in learners. In the first phase, students encounter an ill-structured problem embedded in the reading text, which activates a state of productive cognitive dissonance, a condition in which existing knowledge is insufficient to resolve the presented problem, compelling students to engage in active information-seeking and meaning-making. In the context of Arabic reading, this manifests as students moving from passive word-by-word decoding to active inferential processing, wherein they draw on contextual clues, prior vocabulary knowledge, and peer input to construct textual meaning. In the second phase, collaborative group discussion mediates the resolution of this cognitive dissonance through social knowledge construction, consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, in which learning occurs through interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (Luthfiyani et al, 2025). In the third phase, students consolidate their understanding through reflection and self-assessment, reinforcing the meanings they have constructed and strengthening long-term retention

of vocabulary and comprehension strategies. This three-phase cognitive shift, from dissonance to collaborative resolution to reflective consolidation, constitutes the core mechanism through which PBL enhances Mahārah Qirā'ah. It explains not only why scores improve, but how the process of improvement occurs at the cognitive level: students develop inferential reading strategies, expand their contextual vocabulary acquisition, and internalize a more autonomous, meaning-oriented approach to Arabic text comprehension. This mechanism is further supported by Yu & Zin (2023), whose systematic review demonstrated that PBL adaptations consistently promote higher-order thinking by creating active learning environments through collaborative activities that foster both cognitive and metacognitive skills development.

The contribution and novelty of this study lie in its empirical examination of the effect of PBL on Mahārah Qirā'ah within the context of Madrasah Tsanawiyah using a mixed-method approach integrating quantitative measurement and qualitative narrative inquiry, an area that has not been extensively explored in previous research (Fikri et al., 2023; Khikmah, 2019). Consequently, this study not only strengthens existing findings but also broadens the application of PBL in Arabic reading instruction at the secondary education level by revealing the experiential mechanisms that underlie measurable score improvements.

From a pedagogical perspective, these statistically significant findings imply that the effectiveness of PBL in improving Mahārah Qirā'ah is closely linked to how teachers facilitate the learning process. The implementation of PBL requires teachers to design contextual problems aligned with the reading texts, guide structured discussions, and provide appropriate scaffolding to support students' comprehension of vocabulary, main ideas, and textual context. Rather than functioning as the primary source of information, teachers act as facilitators who encourage inquiry, critical thinking, and collaborative meaning-making (Afriza et al., 2025; Syukran et al., 2025). These findings are also supported by Khalik (2026), who reported that the implementation of innovative instructional strategies significantly improves students' Arabic language competence while simultaneously promoting active student engagement in the learning process. Therefore, the successful improvement observed in this study suggests that careful instructional planning and active classroom facilitation are essential components in maximizing the impact of PBL on students' Arabic reading development.

Qualitative Findings: Students' Narrative Engagement in PBL

To complement and deepen the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six purposively selected students representing three categories of score improvement: high, moderate, and low. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed three interconnected themes that illuminate the narrative and experiential dimensions of students' engagement with Mahārah Qirā'ah through Problem-Based Learning.

Theme 1: Active Agency Shift, From Passive Reception to Active Meaning Construction

Across all three categories, students consistently reported a shift in their role from passive recipients of teacher explanations to active constructors of textual meaning. However, the depth and quality of this shift differed notably across categories. Students with high improvement described a more autonomous and strategic engagement with the text. Student A reported approaching the text by first reading it holistically to grasp its general meaning before attempting vocabulary identification, reflecting a top-down reading strategy consistent with deep comprehension: *"I tried to guess the meaning from the surrounding sentences first. If I still didn't understand, I looked at the dictionary or asked a group member."* Student B similarly described a deliberate shift in reading orientation: *"Now I try to understand the content of the text first before translating everything."*

Students with moderate improvement also reported increased active engagement, though their strategies remained more word-by-word and dependent on prior vocabulary knowledge. Student C described: *"I tried to read slowly first and look for words I remembered from previous lessons."* While the shift toward independence was present, it was less pronounced compared to high-improvement students.

Students with low improvement acknowledged the shift in learning mode but expressed greater difficulty adapting to independent comprehension. Student E reflected: *"I tried to read first before asking, but sometimes it was still difficult to understand on my own."* Student F similarly noted: *"I still need time to adjust to this way of learning."* These responses suggest that while PBL initiated an agency shift across all learners, students with limited prior vocabulary found it more challenging to sustain independent meaning-making without external support. This finding aligns with Qomariyah et al. (2021), who argued that Arabic reading ability is shaped not only by linguistic mastery but also by learner autonomy and strategic self-regulation.

Theme 2: Collaborative Meaning-Making Through Group Discussion

A second prominent theme was the role of group discussion as a mediating mechanism for textual comprehension. All six students reported engaging in collaborative discussion; however, the nature and depth of this collaboration varied across categories. Students with high improvement described discussions as opportunities to access multiple interpretive perspectives. Student A explained: *"Each person tried to explain the part they understood. From there, I could get different explanations and it became easier to understand the content."* Student B noted: *"Sometimes a friend understands one part and explains it to others. From there I could see how to understand the text from a different perspective."* This pattern reflects Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, in which peer interaction enables learners to achieve understanding within the Zone of Proximal Development, reaching comprehension that would be difficult to attain individually (Luthfiyani et al, 2025).

Students with moderate improvement reported discussion as primarily helpful for clarifying word meanings, with less evidence of deeper interpretive exchange. Student D noted: *"Friends helped explain the meaning of difficult words or sentences."* Students with low improvement reported similar patterns, with group discussion serving mainly as a source of vocabulary assistance rather than deeper meaning negotiation. These differences suggest that the quality of collaborative meaning-making, not merely its presence, is a key determinant of comprehension depth, a finding consistent with Kilroy (2004), who emphasizes that PBL's effectiveness lies in the depth of discussion and reflection it generates.

Theme 3: Persistent Linguistic Barriers as a Differentiating Factor

A third theme that emerged was the persistence of linguistic barriers, particularly unfamiliar vocabulary and complex sentence structures, across all categories. However, the ways in which students responded to these barriers differed meaningfully. Students with high improvement demonstrated greater resilience and strategic flexibility, employing contextual inference as a primary strategy before resorting to external resources. Students with low improvement tended to rely more immediately on peer assistance or teacher explanation, reflecting a lower threshold for independent problem-solving. Student E noted: *"I usually directly asked a friend or waited for the teacher's explanation."* This pattern suggests that the effectiveness of PBL in improving Mahārah Qirā'ah is closely linked to students' pre-existing linguistic repertoire and their capacity for autonomous vocabulary inference, echoing Khikmah (2019), who identified vocabulary challenges and dependence on teacher-centered methods as persistent obstacles in Arabic reading instruction.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

The quantitative results demonstrate a statistically significant improvement in student Mahārah Qirā'ah following PBL implementation, with a mean score increase from 59.5 to 92.5 and a t-value of 13.08 ($p = 0.000$). The qualitative findings provide a nuanced explanation of the mechanisms underlying this improvement. Three interrelated processes appear to drive the observed gains: a shift from passive to active meaning construction, the facilitation of collaborative comprehension through group discussion, and the development of strategic responses to linguistic barriers.

Crucially, the qualitative data also reveal why score improvements were not uniform across all students. Students who achieved the highest gains were those who most fully engaged with PBL's core mechanisms, autonomous text interpretation, strategic inference, and multi-perspectival discussion. This finding strengthens the argument of Wood (2003), who posits that PBL's impact is maximized when students engage not only in problem resolution but in deep understanding and self-directed learning.

From a theoretical perspective, this study extends constructivist accounts of reading instruction by demonstrating that narrative engagement functions as a mediating variable between PBL implementation and Mahārah Qirā'ah outcomes. Previous constructivist studies have primarily focused on the cognitive dimension of meaning-making, how learners process and organize information (Kilroy, 2004; Luthfiyani et al, 2025). This study contributes an additional layer: the narrative dimension, wherein reading comprehension is shaped not only by cognitive strategy use but by the degree to which students personally connect with texts and construct meaning through lived experience. This finding aligns with and extends the narrative inquiry framework proposed by Barkhuizen et al. (2014), applying it empirically to the specific context of Arabic reading instruction at the secondary level, a context that has been underexplored in narrative-oriented language learning research.

Positioned within the broader global literature on PBL and language learning, this study contributes to a growing international body of evidence demonstrating PBL's effectiveness across diverse linguistic and cultural educational contexts. Guo et al. (2024), in a systematic review of 27 studies across EFL contexts worldwide, confirmed that PBL consistently improves academic performance, active learning, and cognitive engagement in language classrooms. Similarly, Yu & Zin (2023) demonstrated across multiple international contexts that PBL adaptations promote higher-order thinking through collaborative, problem-oriented engagement. The present study extends these global findings into the context of Arabic as a foreign/religious language in Indonesian Islamic secondary education, a context with distinct linguistic challenges (non-Latin script, classical register, morphological complexity) and cultural-religious dimensions that make the application of PBL uniquely significant. By demonstrating that PBL's core mechanisms, active agency, collaborative meaning-making, and strategic problem-solving, are effective even within this culturally and linguistically distinct context, this study strengthens the generalizability of PBL as a globally applicable instructional model while simultaneously highlighting the importance of culturally responsive scaffolding in its implementation.

From a narrative perspective, the qualitative data further reveal that PBL transformed reading from a mechanical, translation-focused activity into a meaning-making experience. Students across all categories described a qualitative shift in how they related to the text, moving from word-by-word decoding toward holistic comprehension and contextual interpretation. This transformation reflects the narrative engagement dimension highlighted in this study's theoretical framework, wherein reading is understood not merely as a skill to be measured but as a lived experience

through which learners construct personal meaning (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). The varying degrees of this transformation across categories suggest that narrative engagement in Arabic reading is a developmental process, one that is fostered by PBL but requires sustained practice and adequate vocabulary support to fully materialize.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that Problem-Based Learning constitutes an effective and pedagogically meaningful approach to developing Arabic reading skills (Mahārah Qirā'ah) at the Madrasah Tsanawiyah level, not only in terms of measurable achievement gains, but more fundamentally in the quality of students' engagement with textual meaning. What distinguishes this study from prior quantitative investigations is its demonstration that the effectiveness of PBL is mediated by narrative engagement: the degree to which students actively construct personal meaning through reading, collaborative discussion, and contextual interpretation. This finding repositions PBL not merely as an instructional technique that raises test scores, but as a transformative learning experience that shifts students from passive decoders of Arabic text toward active meaning-makers, a shift that is both cognitively and pedagogically significant. For Arabic language educators at the secondary level, this implies that maximizing the impact of PBL requires deliberate attention to vocabulary scaffolding alongside problem design, ensuring that linguistic barriers do not prevent students from participating fully in the meaning-making process. Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence that effective Arabic reading instruction must address not only the linguistic but also the experiential dimensions of comprehension, an insight with broad relevance for curriculum design and classroom practice in Islamic education contexts.

DECLARATION OF AI AND AI ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Claude and ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist with language editing, sentence paraphrasing, and improving the clarity of academic writing. The content of the manuscript, including the data analysis and interpretation of the research findings, was conducted entirely by the author. After using this tool, the author carefully reviewed and edited the manuscript as necessary and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION

Author 1: Conceptualization; Methodology; Investigation; Data curation; Formal analysis; Writing, original draft.

Author 2: Investigation; Data collection; Validation; Writing, review and editing.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation; Validation.

Author 4: Methodology; Formal analysis; Writing, review and editing.

Author 5: Supervision; Validation; Writing, review and editing.

Author 6: Resources; Visualization; Supervision; Writing, review and editing.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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