

Grade-Level Diagnostic Assessment of Character Dimensions among Rural Elementary Students in Arabic Language Education

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a diagnostic analysis of elementary students' character traits across grade levels in rural Arabic language learning contexts. Using a mixed-method approach, data were collected from 51 students in grades 3–6 and 2 Arabic language teachers across three rural districts. The diagnostic assessment measured four key character dimensions—cognitive, socio-emotional, moral-spiritual, and ethical-cultural to identify developmental patterns and pedagogical needs. Quantitative results revealed significant grade-level differences in cognitive and socio-emotional domains, with older students demonstrating higher metacognitive awareness and emotional regulation. However, moral-spiritual and ethical-cultural dimensions remained consistently strong across all levels, reflecting the enduring influence of community and religious values in rural education. Qualitative findings from teacher interviews supported these results, emphasizing that students' moral and cultural stability often outpaces their cognitive growth. The study contributes to character-based Arabic pedagogy by proposing a grade-sensitive diagnostic model that integrates moral, emotional, and intellectual development. Implications include the need for differentiated instruction, diagnostic-informed feedback, and culturally grounded character education strategies in Arabic language learning.

Keywords: Arabic Language Learning; Character Education; Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Traits; Diagnostic Assessment; Grade-Level Differences; Rural Elementary Students.

INTRODUCTION

Character development has increasingly become a central conversation in twenty-first-century education, especially in language learning settings where the goal is not only to build linguistic skills but also to nurture moral sensitivity and socio-emotional maturity. In Southeast Asian contexts, including Indonesia, Arabic language instruction is often understood as more than an academic subject; it is intertwined with cultural identity, religious literacy, and everyday moral practice (Rahmasari et al., 2025). Because of this, Arabic classrooms carry a dual responsibility: helping students understand language structures while also shaping their character. (Hal et al., 2023) Yet, despite this meaningful expectation, there is still little empirical work that connects character traits with Arabic learning outcomes, particularly in rural schools where cultural and spiritual values strongly influence how children learn and interact (Zakiyah, 2024).

Rural learners, in particular, represent a unique group. Their learning experiences are shaped not only by the limited availability of textbooks, technology, and trained teachers, but also by the close-knit community life that surrounds them (Kumar, 2024). These students may not have access to the same instructional resources as their urban peers, but they often develop strong moral awareness, cooperative social habits, and deep cultural loyalty from their daily interactions within the community (Hal et al., 2022). Traits such as mutual respect, humility, and a sense of responsibility—values commonly cultivated in rural societies—can significantly support the process of language learning when teachers recognize and intentionally nurture them.

To truly understand these complex learner traits, educators need more than traditional tests. Standardized exams tend to measure only what students know at a surface level and rarely capture the emotional, moral, or cultural dimensions that shape how they learn (Prawinugraha & Yulawati, 2024). A diagnostic approach offers a more complete picture. By examining not only what students have mastered but also how they think, how they regulate their emotions, and how they respond to challenges, diagnostic assessment helps teachers adapt their instruction more thoughtfully (Darling-hammond et al., 2020). Such assessments can reveal, for example, whether a student struggles not because of linguistic

difficulty but because of low confidence, limited vocabulary exposure, or difficulty managing frustration (Prasetyo et al., 2025). In rural classrooms, where learning environments are strongly influenced by community norms and spiritual practices, this kind of nuanced examination becomes especially important (Ng & Yunus, 2021).

However, research in Arabic language pedagogy has not yet fully caught up with this holistic perspective. Much of the existing literature remains focused on grammar rules, vocabulary lists, and communicative abilities (Firdausiyah & Jannah, 2025). These are of course essential skills, but they do not tell the full story of how young learners actually grow. Language learning is always connected to personal attributes such as perseverance, emotional regulation, cooperation, and moral awareness (Audina et al., 2023). traits that may have even greater influence in a subject like Arabic, where cultural and spiritual values are closely tied to linguistic expression (Semarang et al., 2021).

Another gap in the literature lies in understanding how these character traits shift as children grow older. Students in Grades 4, 5, and 6 experience significant cognitive and emotional development, which in turn affects their motivation, autonomy, and classroom behavior (Kuhn et al., 2021). For instance, older learners may show greater self-control or a deeper sense of responsibility, yet they may also face more academic pressure that affects their confidence. These developmental changes should be reflected in classroom assessments, but many existing evaluation tools treat all students in the same way regardless of their grade level. As a result, the rich diversity of learners' moral-spiritual and ethical-cultural orientations especially visible in rural contexts often goes unnoticed (Dawi et al., 2021).

Addressing these gaps, the present study applies a diagnostic profiling approach to examine how elementary students' character traits evolve across grade levels in rural Arabic language learning. By focusing on four interconnected dimensions cognitive, socio-emotional, moral-spiritual, and ethical-cultural the study seeks to paint a more complete picture of the learner as a whole person, not just a recipient of instruction. The integration of quantitative diagnostic scores with qualitative insights gathered from teachers helps reveal how these traits appear in real classroom interactions (Malik et al., 2021). Teachers' long-term familiarity with students provides valuable context: they can identify patterns of cooperation, observe how students respond to correction, and notice subtle changes in students' emotional maturity. This integration of perspectives strengthens the study's validity and ensures that the results are grounded in authentic classroom realities (Pendidikan et al., n.d.).

Through this approach, the study does more than simply report numbers. It explores stories how a student's cognitive readiness might relate to their willingness to participate in discussions, how moral-spiritual values influence classroom discipline, or how cultural pride may increase motivation to excel in Arabic. These insights help explain not only where students stand developmentally, but also why they behave and learn in particular ways. Understanding this "why" is crucial for designing meaningful, responsive teaching strategies.

Theoretically, the study contributes to the broader field of Arabic language education by proposing a diagnostic framework that acknowledges developmental differences and recognizes character as an essential component of learning (Anwar et al., 2024) Rather than treating character traits as separate from academic achievement, the framework integrates them into the learning process, reflecting a more holistic view of what success in language education should look like. It echoes global educational movements advocating for the integration of ethical, emotional, and cognitive competencies in classrooms that prioritize human development alongside academic mastery.

Practically, the study offers concrete insights for teachers and policymakers working in rural settings. Many rural schools operate with limited resources, making it difficult to apply standardized urban-focused teaching models (Moibat et al., 2025). Diagnostic profiling enables teachers to understand the strengths their students bring with them such as empathy, cooperation, or spiritual motivation—and use these strengths as foundations for language learning. It also helps identify specific challenges that may require additional support, such as difficulties with vocabulary retention or low confidence in oral expression.

Ultimately, this study argues that Arabic language learning should be approached not merely as the acquisition of linguistic skills but as a meaningful journey that nurtures cognitive discipline, emotional resilience, moral integrity, and cultural belonging (Alam et al., 2022). When viewed through this lens, the Arabic classroom becomes a space where students grow intellectually and personally, grounded in the realities of their rural environment and empowered by the character values that shape their daily lives.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods design integrating quantitative diagnostic assessment and qualitative inquiry (Sulaikho & Munir, 2023). To examine students' character dimensions across Grades 4, 5, and 6. A validated 30-item diagnostic instrument measuring cognitive, socio-emotional, moral-spiritual, and ethical-cultural domains was administered to 51 rural students (Luzuriaga et al., 2021). Teacher ratings, self-assessments, interviews, and classroom observations were included to support triangulation (Anwar et al., 2024). Purposive sampling was used to represent typical rural, religiously oriented communities with limited resources (Rodiyana & Puspitasari, 2021). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistics (Sulaikho et al., 2022) (Botelho et al., 2022). Ethical procedures followed standard guidelines involving informed consent, voluntariness, and confidentiality safeguards. (Hasbullah et al., 2025)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The diagnostic analysis revealed a clear and consistent pattern among rural elementary students in Grades 4, 5, and 6. Students demonstrated particularly strong performance in the moral-spiritual and ethical-cultural dimensions, with qualities such as honesty, religious awareness, respect, and cooperation appearing highly internalized. These traits reflect the strong communal, faith-based ethos that shapes daily life and schooling in rural settings, where moral expectations are reinforced through routine social and religious practices.

In contrast, the cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions showed more varied levels of development. Skills involving reasoning, linguistic strategies, emotional regulation, and metacognitive awareness differed noticeably across grade levels, suggesting that while students possess a stable moral foundation, their cognitive readiness requires deliberate and sustained instructional support. Teachers may therefore need to provide more structured scaffolding to help students strengthen academic thinking, reflective skills, and independent learning strategies.

This overall pattern aligns with the insights of Lickona³ and Han⁴, who observe that educational environments with strong religious influence often prioritize moral conduct over cognitive autonomy when pedagogical support is limited. These findings highlight the importance of balancing character formation with cognitive development so that rural learners can grow holistically both as ethically grounded individuals and capable, independent thinkers.

RESULT

The diagnostic assessment conducted in this study provides an important empirical lens through which the character development of rural elementary students can be understood in greater depth. By examining four key dimensions—cognitive, socio-emotional, moral-spiritual, and ethical-cultural—the analysis uncovers distinctive patterns that reflect both developmental progressions and socio-cultural influences shaping students' character formation. The descriptive data presented in Table 1, complemented by the percentage distribution depicted in Figure 1, reveal nuanced differences across grade levels, specifically between Grades 4, 5, and 6. These grade-level variations, while sometimes subtle, offer meaningful insights into how character-related competencies evolve as students mature and engage with diverse learning experiences.

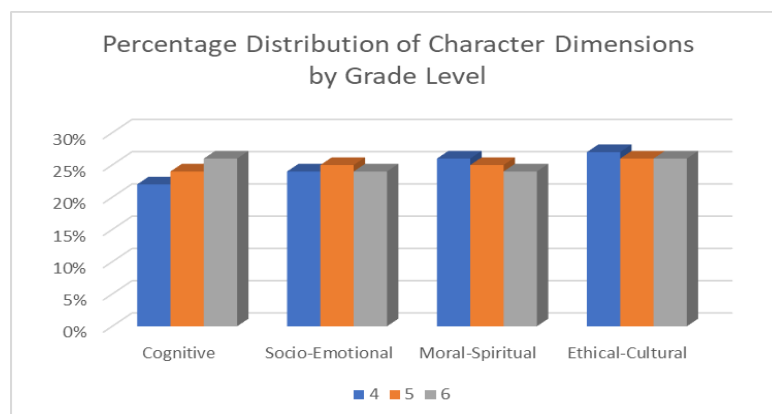


Figure 1. Percentage Distribution of Character Dimensions by Grade Level

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage distribution of the four character dimensions across the three grade levels. The visual trend demonstrates that character development does not progress uniformly across dimensions; rather, each domain exhibits its own trajectory, shaped by cognitive maturation, social interactions, cultural reinforcement, and academic exposure. This multidimensional variability underscores the importance of assessing character through a diagnostic model rather than relying solely on holistic or domain-agnostic approaches, which often obscure the complexity of developmental trajectories.

Among the four dimensions, the cognitive domain shows the most distinct upward developmental trend. Students' cognitive performance increases steadily from 22% in Grade 4 to 24% in Grade 5 and ultimately to 26% in Grade 6. This progression, although incremental, signifies a meaningful enhancement in cognitive competencies such as metacognitive awareness, logical reasoning, analytical processing, and sustained task engagement.

This improvement aligns with established developmental theories suggesting that upper elementary years are a critical period for the growth of executive functioning and self-regulatory abilities. As students advance through grade levels, they are increasingly required to manage multi-step tasks, assess their own learning processes, and engage in reflective thinking. Moreover, instructional practices in higher grades typically emphasize problem-solving, independent inquiry, and structured academic routines all of which contribute to the strengthening of cognitive responsibility.

The gradual rise in cognitive performance also reflects the cumulative nature of academic exposure. Each year, students are introduced to more complex linguistic structures in Arabic learning, more abstract moral scenarios, and more demanding academic assessments. Such experiences encourage students to engage in higher-order thinking and to internalize learning strategies that support their academic progression. Thus, the upward trend in cognitive development is both expected and theoretically supported, indicating that students are steadily gaining the intellectual tools necessary for responsible decision-making and reflective learning.

Unlike the cognitive domain, the socio-emotional dimension exhibits a more complex developmental trajectory. The data show that socio-emotional competence rises from 23% in Grade 4 to a peak of 25% in Grade 5, followed by a slight decline to 24% in Grade 6. This fluctuation offers important insights into how emotional awareness, peer interaction, and interpersonal communication evolve during late childhood. The peak in Grade 5 may reflect a period in which students experience heightened social engagement. At this age, peer relationships often become more central to students' daily experiences, and collaborative activities in school settings—such as group assignments, cooperative learning tasks, or extracurricular involvement tend to strengthen social awareness and interpersonal skills. Students at this stage typically display enhanced empathy, communication abilities, and conflict-resolution strategies, all of which contribute to the elevated socio-emotional scores.

However, the slight decline observed in Grade 6 warrants interpretation. One plausible explanation is the shifting academic emphasis that occurs as students approach the transition to secondary education. In many educational contexts, Grade 6 marks a preparatory stage characterized by more rigorous academic expectations, standardized testing, and a stronger focus on cognitive performance. This shift may inadvertently reduce opportunities for socially interactive learning or diminish students' socio-emotional expression as they prioritize academic achievement. Additionally, developmental psychology suggests that early adolescence is often accompanied by increased self-consciousness, emotional fluctuations, and social comparison, which may momentarily impact socio-emotional stability. Although the decline is modest, it indicates that socio-emotional development is sensitive to contextual and developmental pressures. This finding highlights the need for balanced instructional practices that nurture emotional competencies alongside academic responsibilities, especially in upper elementary grades.

The moral-spiritual dimension demonstrates remarkable consistency across all grade levels, ranging between 24% and 26%. Notably, Grade 4 displays the highest concentration of moral-spiritual traits at 26%, suggesting that moral values are established strongly at an early age and remain relatively stable as students progress through their schooling years. This domain encompasses values such as honesty, sincerity, humility, gratitude, and spiritual awareness—attributes that are deeply embedded within the cultural and religious context of rural communities. In many rural Islamic educational settings, moral teachings are integrated into both formal instruction and daily routines. Practices such as collective prayer, Quranic recitation, respectful interaction with elders, and adherence to communal norms reinforce spiritual and ethical values from an early age. The robustness of this domain across grades indicates that

moral-spiritual development is less influenced by academic pressures and more grounded in familial, cultural, and religious practices that remain constant throughout childhood.

The stability of the moral-spiritual scores also reflects the cultural importance of moral character as a foundational aspect of identity formation. Students in rural settings often internalize moral teachings through experiential learning—observing exemplary behavior from family members, participating in community rituals, and engaging in school-based religious activities. Consequently, moral-spiritual traits become deeply rooted and demonstrate resilience across developmental stages.

Similar to the moral-spiritual domain, the ethical-cultural dimension also remains consistently high, ranging from 25% to 27%, with the highest score observed in Grade 4. This dimension reflects culturally grounded values such as mutual cooperation, respect for traditions, communal responsibility, and adherence to social norms. The strong performance in this domain can be attributed to the communal nature of rural life, where children are continuously exposed to collective activities such as gotong royong (community cooperation), traditional greetings, shared celebrations, and culturally embedded etiquette. These interactions cultivate a deep sense of belonging and social duty, which remains stable as students progress through higher grade levels. The slight decrease in Grades 5 and 6 does not indicate a decline in ethical-cultural values but rather a natural balancing as cognitive and socio-emotional competencies begin to develop more prominently. In Grade 4, younger students may rely more heavily on external reinforcement of ethical behavior, demonstrating strong compliance with cultural expectations. As they mature, students begin to negotiate personal identity with cultural norms, leading to a more balanced but still strong ethical-cultural profile.

Interpreting Cross-Grade Developmental Shifts

The combined trends across all four dimensions reveal a compelling developmental pattern. Younger learners (Grade 4) exhibit a high dominance of moral and ethical traits, reflecting early character formation shaped by family and community practices. As students progress to Grades 5 and 6, cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions gradually increase, creating a more balanced character profile. This progression suggests that moral and ethical foundations serve as anchor points in early development, upon which cognitive and socio-emotional competencies expand with age. It also supports contemporary models of character education that emphasize the interdependence of moral grounding and cognitive engagement. In rural Arabic learning contexts, children's early exposure to moral-spiritual and ethical-cultural values shapes their worldview, enabling them to later integrate higher-order thinking, emotional awareness, and interpersonal skills.

Table 2 Examined The Interrelationships Among The Four Character Dimensions To Identify Their Degree Of Integration.

No	Correlation Pair	r-value	Interpretation
1.	Cognitive – Socio-Emotional	0.68	Moderate positive correlation
2.	Cognitive – Moral-Spiritual	0.54	Moderate correlation
3.	Cognitive – Ethical-Cultural	0.49	Low to moderate correlation
4.	Socio-Emotional – Moral-Spiritual	0.63	Moderate correlation
5.	Socio-Emotional – Ethical-Cultural	0.59	Moderate correlation
6.	Moral-Spiritual – Ethical-Cultural	0.84	Strong correlation

The strongest relationship identified in this study emerged between the moral-spiritual and ethical-cultural dimensions ($r = 0.84$), revealing how closely intertwined these two domains are in both concept and daily practice. In rural Arabic language learning contexts, moral values such as honesty, sincerity, humility, and respect are not simply taught as abstract principles; rather, they are lived through culturally embedded routines. Collective worship, for instance, serves as a space where religious devotion intersects with social unity. Daily greetings, cooperative cleaning of schoolyards, or helping peers who struggle academically all reflect cultural habits that are deeply moral in nature. Because these practices are so interconnected, it is unsurprising that the two dimensions consistently reinforce each other, forming what teachers often describe as the “moral backbone” of rural learners. This strong correlation suggests that for rural students, moral insight and cultural expression function as a unified character system rather than two separate constructs.

The study also found a moderate yet meaningful correlation between the cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions ($r = 0.68$). This pattern implies that as students strengthen their ability to focus, reason, and solve problems, they also become better at managing emotions, cooperating with peers, and responding calmly to challenges. Socio-cognitive theory supports this pattern (Tahzeeb et al., 2024),

proposing that self-regulation, emotional stability, and cognitive growth evolve together as learners set goals, monitor their progress, and reflect on their actions. In rural Arabic language classrooms, this dynamic is particularly visible in activities such as group recitation, peer tutoring, or joint translation tasks, where cognitive processes naturally overlap with emotional and social behaviors. Students who think more clearly tend to communicate more respectfully, while those who regulate emotions well are more willing to persist with difficult linguistic tasks.

Cross-dimensional relationships further illustrate how character traits operate as an integrated ecosystem. Students with strong moral-spiritual foundations often demonstrate ethical consistency, social harmony, and cooperative behavior, in line with prior findings in character education research (Jurnal et al., 2024). This interconnectedness suggests that character development is holistic: growth in one area can support or even catalyze growth in others. For example, a student who has developed moral discipline may find it easier to sustain attention during lessons, while one who cultivates empathy is more likely to engage in collaborative cognitive tasks. These insights point to the need for educational approaches that recognize character traits not as isolated competencies but as mutually reinforcing capacities.

Qualitative insights from teachers provided depth and context to the quantitative patterns. Observations and interviews revealed that Grade 4 students generally displayed strong moral sincerity, spiritual enthusiasm, and excitement toward learning activities that involved storytelling or value-based discussions. However, many still needed structured guidance to maintain focus, organize their learning tasks, and apply cognitive strategies effectively. Teachers described these younger students as “morally bright but cognitively scattered,” indicating that their hearts were ready even when their academic skills were still developing.

Grade 5 students showed noticeable improvement in self-regulation, emotional management, and peer cooperation. Teachers often attributed these gains to increasing social maturity as students became more engaged in group learning and more aware of peer expectations. This grade level also marked a transitional phase where students became more capable of balancing emotional expression with academic responsibilities. Teachers observed that they responded better to feedback, negotiated conflicts more calmly, and demonstrated greater ownership of their learning.

By Grade 6, students exhibited a higher level of responsibility, emotional composure, and independence. They were more likely to complete tasks without being prompted and could set personal learning goals, especially in Arabic reading and vocabulary retention. However, some teachers noted that Grade 6 students were occasionally less expressive when engaging in moral reflection, possibly because academic pressure led them to focus more on performance outcomes than on value-based reasoning. This shift reflects a developmental tension: growing academic ambition sometimes dampens spontaneous moral expression, even though moral values remain deeply internalized.

Teachers consistently highlighted the positive influence of the rural sociocultural environment. Close family relationships, community interdependence, and deeply rooted traditions of respect and humility create a natural “moral ecosystem” that nurtures character formation. Yet, teachers also expressed concerns about the limited cognitive stimulation provided by traditional Arabic teaching methods, which rely heavily on rote memorization. Without varied instructional strategies—such as inquiry-based learning, guided reflection, or collaborative reasoning—students’ cognitive skills may grow more slowly than their moral and emotional capacities.

These insights emphasize the importance of diagnostic-informed instruction. Teachers need to align cognitive activities with students’ moral strengths and emotional readiness. For example, value-based stories can be used to trigger higher-order thinking, or cooperative tasks can be designed to activate problem-solving skills while reinforcing social harmony. Integrating students’ existing moral grounding into cognitive tasks creates learning experiences that feel authentic, culturally responsive, and developmentally aligned.

Discussion

Overall, the study’s findings reveal a unique developmental pattern of character formation among rural students in Grades 4–6 participating in Arabic language education. Their character growth is firmly rooted in moral and cultural integrity, shaped by strong social values and religious practices that permeate everyday life. At the same time, the uneven development of cognitive skills highlights a challenge that distinguishes rural learners from their urban counterparts. Whereas urban students may have greater cognitive exposure through technology, tutoring, and diverse learning materials, rural students benefit from deeper moral contextualization but may lack the cognitive scaffolding necessary for balanced development.

By mapping grade-level trajectories, this study deepens understanding of how age, developmental stage, and sociocultural environment interact to shape character dimensions in Arabic learning. Younger learners display strong moral and ethical dominance, reflecting the early internalization of rural values. As students grow older, cognitive and socio-emotional competencies gradually rise to form a more balanced character profile. This developmental shift aligns with theories suggesting that moral grounding often precedes cognitive sophistication in value-driven educational settings.

Pedagogically, the study supports the use of a grade-sensitive diagnostic approach. Instructional strategies should be tailored not only to academic ability but also to character maturity. In lower grades, moral narratives, illustrated stories, and culturally familiar scenarios can enhance both emotional literacy and spiritual reflection. In higher grades, reflective discussions, ethical problem-solving, and language-based reasoning tasks can deepen cognitive engagement while maintaining moral roots. Such approaches bridge the gap between moral formation and linguistic cognition, transforming character education from an implicit background element into an explicit pedagogical framework.

Theoretically, this study reinforces the idea that character-based language education must be multidimensional, context-responsive, and diagnostically grounded. It challenges narrow models that measure success solely through academic performance and instead advocates for a holistic pedagogy that sees students as moral, emotional, social, and cultural beings. By offering insights grounded in rural Indonesia, the study contributes to global conversations on whole-child development in Arabic language education, emphasizing that character grows best where moral meaning, cultural identity, and cognitive scaffolding work hand in hand.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a comprehensive diagnostic portrait of rural elementary students' character traits across different grade levels within Arabic language learning contexts. By employing a mixed-method diagnostic framework encompassing four core dimensions cognitive, socio-emotional, moral-spiritual, and ethical-cultural the research reveals distinctive developmental patterns that reflect the intersection between rural culture, character education, and language pedagogy.

Findings indicate that while moral-spiritual and ethical-cultural dimensions are consistently strong across all grades, cognitive and socio-emotional growth show more variability, increasing significantly with grade level. This pattern highlights that in rural contexts, moral and cultural values are deeply internalized from an early age, forming the foundation for later cognitive and emotional development. Qualitative insights from teachers further emphasized that moral sincerity and community-based ethics are the primary educational strengths of rural learners, although these traits are not always translated into reflective and strategic language learning behaviors.

Overall, the study establishes that character formation in Arabic language education is not a byproduct of instruction but its very core a multidimensional process integrating intellect, emotion, morality, and culture. The validated diagnostic model introduced in this study provides a practical and theoretical tool for educators to assess, interpret, and enhance students' holistic readiness for language learning. It advances current discourse by positioning diagnostic character assessment as a critical bridge between cognitive skill development and moral education, particularly in under-resourced rural environments.

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