

# Characteristics of Sundanese Arabic PEGON Script and the Level of Comprehension of Santri in the Book *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* at Al-Fatah Pesantren, Temboro Branch, Gentuma Raya, North Gorontalo

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## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the characteristics of Sundanese Arabic PEGON script and the level of students' (santri) comprehension of the book *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* at Pesantren Al-Fatah Temboro, Gentuma Raya Branch, North Gorontalo. A descriptive quantitative approach was employed through a survey of 150 respondents using a 1–5 Likert-scale questionnaire. Descriptive statistical analysis shows that graphemic–orthographic mastery falls into the “good” category ( $M = 78.4$ ), as does literal–inferential text comprehension ( $M = 80.5$ ). However, challenges still arise in the areas of phonetics, vocabulary, and cognitive load when reading long paragraphs. The findings indicate a transitional gap between graphemic skills and discourse literacy, in which text comprehension improves when learning employs instructional sequencing and supporting media such as annotations and glossaries. The implications of this study point to the development of a micro PEGON curriculum, tiered assessment instruments, and the integration of digital media to strengthen Sundanese PEGON literacy within the pesantren environment.

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## Introduction

The preservation of Sundanese Arabic PEGON writing at Pesantren Al-Fatah Temboro, Gentuma Raya Branch, North Gorontalo, occupies a strategic position within the dynamics of contemporary religious education. PEGON script, a variant of the Arabic script adapted to local phonological and orthographic systems, has long been used as a medium for the transmission of knowledge in pesantren settings, particularly to mediate students' understanding of the *kitab kuning* that serves as a primary reference text in instruction ([1]. The interweaving of script, language, and local cultural context shows that PEGON is not merely a “writing tool,” but a literacy practice that binds knowledge, identity, and local Islamic traditions. [2] Therefore, the continuity of PEGON is not only a matter of cultural conservation but also a pedagogical prerequisite to ensure that Islamic values and knowledge can be transmitted across generations.[3].

Within the pesantren curriculum landscape, the book *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* is one of the key texts at the basic level of instruction. This text presents an introduction to the principles of fiqh and structures learning-related ethics and morality that are relevant to students' lives, so it is often used as a foundation for shaping reasoning and academic *adab* in *diniyah* classes. [4]. Its presence within the PEGON literacy ecosystem makes access to understanding more natural for Sundanese-speaking students: glosses, *ta'liq* (marginal notes), and

indications of sentence structure are often presented in PEGON to bridge technical Arabic terminology with the students' linguistic experience. [5]. In other words, the ability to read Sundanese PEGON is not an auxiliary skill, but a core competence that influences the quality of internalization of the book's content.

Nevertheless, there is a pressing issue related to the low mastery of PEGON phonology and orthography among beginner santri. The diversity of students' educational backgrounds, with some having had no exposure to PEGON before entering the pesantren, creates a literacy gap that leads to difficulties in reading, marking sentence structure, and even misinterpreting key terms. [6]. This gap has a direct impact on the learning process: the pace of comprehension slows down, dependence on oral translation increases, and learning autonomy declines. If left unaddressed, this problem has the potential to reduce the quality of learning outcomes, especially in basic *matan* texts that require accurate reading. [7]

This condition signals the need for a more holistic approach within pesantren institutions. The preservation of PEGON cannot be limited to manuscript documentation; it must be accompanied by systematic pedagogical design: needs mapping (PEGON literacy diagnostics), the development of teaching devices (modules on Sundanese-specific grapheme phoneme correspondences, spelling lists, minimal-pair drills, item banks), as well as tiered evaluations to assess accuracy, fluency, and comprehension of text content. [8] At the same time, the integration of technology, such as interactive worksheets, a web-based PEGON corpus for word frequency and collocation, and collaborative annotation on excerpts of *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn*, can increase motivation, accelerate feedback, and personalize interventions according to students' profiles of difficulty. [9] Such innovations are in line with the demands of twenty-first-century learning without severing the scholarly tradition of the pesantren.

From a cultural perspective, PEGON is a written heritage that affirms the religious and linguistic identity of Sundanese society. [10] Efforts toward its preservation and development are therefore a collective responsibility: *kiai* and *asatidz* as designers of the micro curriculum, *santri* as literacy practitioners, and the wider community as a supporting ecosystem. Institutional investment in PEGON literacy yields a dual impact, namely safeguarding the continuity of local intellectual traditions and strengthening the cultural self-confidence of *santri* in accessing the scientific treasury of Islam. [11]

## Method

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employs a quantitative approach with a descriptive design to map the characteristics of Sundanese Arabic PEGON writing and the level of students' comprehension of the book *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* at Pesantren Al-Fatah Temboro, Gentuma Raya Branch, North Gorontalo [12]. The quantitative approach was chosen because it enables the researcher to collect numerical data that can describe the phenomenon in a systematic, objective, and scientifically accountable manner [13]. The descriptive design was selected on the consideration that this study does not aim to test hypotheses, but rather to explain the tendencies and distribution of students' ability to comprehend PEGON texts in a factual way [14].

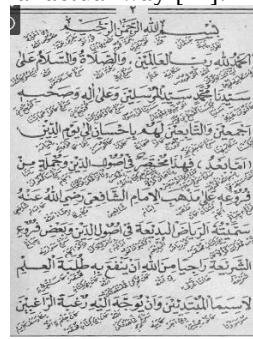


Image 1. Sample *bidāyah al-Thālibīn*

### 2.2. Population and Sample

The population of this study encompasses all intermediate-level santri who are currently studying the book *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* at Pesantren Al-Fatah Temboro, Gentuma Raya Branch, North Gorontalo. The sample was taken using a stratified random sampling technique, taking into account variations in students' characteristics based on level of education, length of study, and formal educational background. [15] The total number of respondents is 150 santri from five pesantren that have an active PEGON curriculum.

### 2.3. Research Variables and Operational Definitions

Table 1. Research Variables and Operational Definitions

Type of Variable	Name of Variable	Operational Indicators	Scale
X	Graphemic Orthographic Mastery of Sundanese PEGON	Ability to recognize Sundanese PEGON letters, accuracy in reading PEGON words/phrases, and accuracy in writing/taking dictation in PEGON.	Likert 1-5
X <sub>2</sub>	Comprehension of the <i>Bidāyah al-Thālibīn</i> Text	Understanding of literal meaning, understanding of basic fiqh vocabulary, and inferential comprehension of PEGON texts.	Likert 1-5
X <sub>3</sub>	Perceptions of the Challenges in Learning Sundanese PEGON	Level of phonetic difficulty (distinguishing sounds/letters), vocabulary difficulty, and cognitive load when reading PEGON.	Likert 1-5

All variables in this study were measured using a 1–5 Likert scale, ranging from “very low” to “very high.” The construction of the variables was based on the characteristics of graphemic–orthographic abilities in Sundanese PEGON, comprehension of the *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* text, and students’ perceptions of the challenges in learning PEGON as described in the literature on Sundanese PEGON [16].

### 2.4. Research Instrument

The questionnaire instrument in this study was designed to measure three main dimensions, namely understanding of Sundanese PEGON graphemes and spelling, the ability to comprehend PEGON texts, and students’ perceptions of the difficulties in learning PEGON. Each questionnaire item was constructed based on these three dimensions so that it could represent the profile of students’ abilities and the challenges they experience in PEGON learning. The instrument was then validated through expert judgment by three experts in philology and Arabic language education. It was pilot-tested on a limited scale to obtain evidence of reliability, resulting in a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of  $\alpha = 0.82$ , which indicates a good level of internal consistency.[17]

### 2.5. Data Collection Techniques.

Data collection was carried out through a survey using a structured questionnaire, which was distributed directly to the santri at the pesantren that served as the research site.[18] Before implementation, the researcher coordinated with the pesantren authorities to obtain permission, determine the schedule for administering the questionnaire, and ensure that the research activities did not disrupt the teaching and learning process [19]. During implementation, the researcher provided a brief explanation regarding the purpose of the study, the procedure for filling out the questionnaire, and the response scale used. The respondents were then asked to complete the questionnaire independently within the allotted time [20].

After the questionnaires were collected, the researcher checked the completeness of the responses, assigned codes to each sheet to ensure the confidentiality of respondents’ identities, and tabulated all data into numerical form as the basis for descriptive statistical analysis.[21]

### 2.6. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics with the aid of SPSS 26. The analysis included calculating frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations to describe the distribution and tendencies of the data. The results were then interpreted to generate practical recommendations for improving PEGON learning strategies in the pesantren context.[22]

### 2.7. Research Ethics

This study was also carried out with careful attention to research ethics, which included providing informed consent to the students through an explanation of the aims and procedures of the study as well as their right to refuse participation, obtaining formal approval from the leaders of the five pesantren in which the research was conducted, safeguarding the confidentiality and anonymity of respondents by replacing personal identities with codes, and scheduling the implementation so as not to disrupt pesantren activities while respecting local norms and traditions. [23].

## Results and Discussions

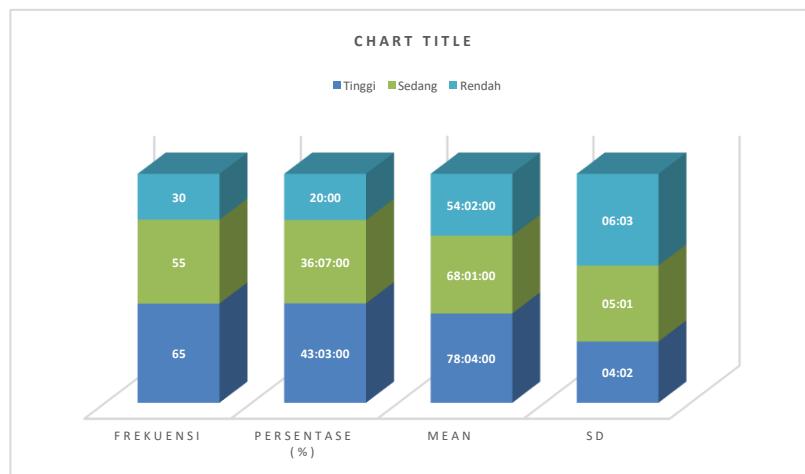
### 3.1. Description of Research Data

This section presents a general overview of the research data obtained through the structured questionnaire administered to the santri respondents. The data comprise three main components, namely the level of graphemic-orthographic mastery of Sundanese Pegon, students' level of comprehension of the *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* text, and students' perceptions of the challenges they experience in learning Pegon. Together, these components provide an integrated profile of Pegon literacy that links technical decoding skills, text comprehension, and subjective learning experiences within the pesantren context.

To facilitate a clear and systematic interpretation, the data are presented in the form of frequency distribution tables, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. Frequency and percentage values describe how students are distributed across each response category on the Likert scale, while mean scores indicate the general tendency of mastery or perceived difficulty for each variable and sub-indicator. Standard deviations are used to show the degree of variability among respondents, which helps identify whether the observed patterns are relatively homogeneous or marked by substantial disparities in ability and perception. These descriptive statistics serve as the empirical basis for the subsequent subsections, where each component is examined in more detail to reveal specific strengths, weaknesses, and implications for the design of Pegon learning strategies in the pesantren.

Table 2. Distribution of the Level of Graphemic-Orthographic Mastery of Sundanese Pegon

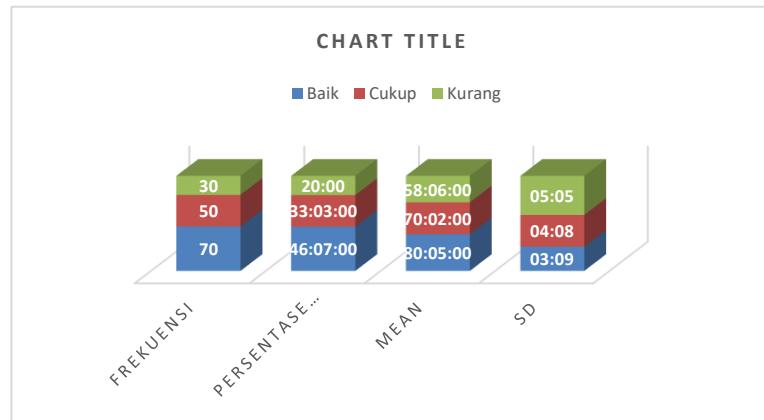
Category	Frequency	Percentage(%)	Mean	SD
High	65	43.3	78.4	4.2
Moderate	55	36.7	68.1	5.1
Low	30	20.0	54.2	6.3



Note: The mean score ( $M = 78.4$ ;  $SD = 4.2$ ) indicates that graphemic and orthographic abilities fall into the "good" category.

(Table 3. Distribution of the Level of Comprehension of the Book *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn*)

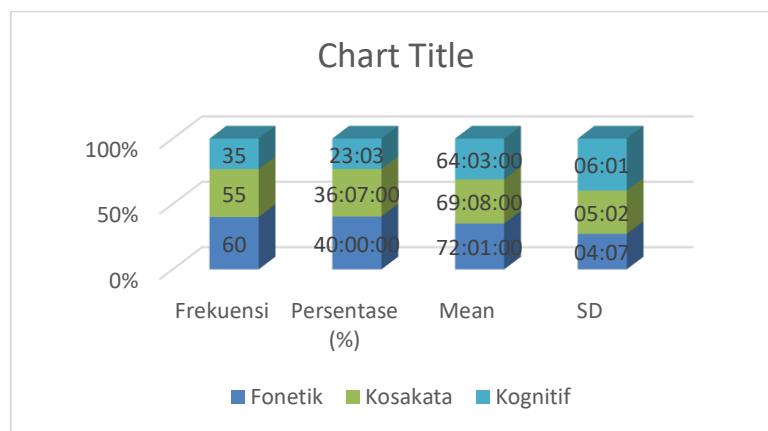
Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Mean	SD
High	70	46.7	80.5	3.9
Moderate	50	33.3	70.2	4.8
Low	30	20.0	58.6	5.5



**Note:** The mean score ( $M = 80.5$ ;  $SD = 3.9$ ) indicates a relatively strong tendency in literal and inferential abilities. **comprehension**

Table 4. Students' Perceptions of the Challenges in Learning Sundanese Pego

Aspect	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Mean	SD
Phonetic	60	40.0	72.1	4.7
Vocabulary	55	36.7	69.8	5.2
Cognitive	35	23.3	64.3	6.1



**Note:** Phonetic and vocabulary aspects were most frequently reported as challenges, followed by the cognitive demands of reading long paragraphs.

### 3.2. Validity and Reliability Tests

The research instrument was validated through expert judgment involving three specialists in philology and Arabic language education to ensure the alignment between the constructs measured, the indicators used, and the clarity of each item. This content validity process was carried out to guarantee that the instrument adequately represents the concepts of graphemic and orthographic mastery of Sundanese Pegan, comprehension of the *Bidāyah al-Thālibin* text, and perceptions of the challenges in learning Pegan. [24].

After the validation process was completed, the instrument was pilot tested on a group of students outside the main sample in order to obtain evidence of internal consistency. Reliability testing was conducted using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficient, and the results showed a value of  $\alpha = 0.82$ , indicating that the instrument has a good level of reliability. Thus, the instrument was declared feasible for use in the data collection phase of this study.

### 3.3. Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

This study did not employ multiple linear regression analysis because the research design is quantitative descriptive, focusing on presenting data profiles rather than testing causal relationships among variables. The three research variables, namely graphemic-orthographic mastery of Sundanese Pegon, comprehension of the *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* text, and perceptions of the challenges in learning Pegon, were not analyzed within a predictive framework but were instead presented through descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. Accordingly, regression analysis was not applied in this study, as it is not aligned with the aims, design, or structure of the data collected.[25]

### 3.4. Interpretation of Results

The findings of this study indicate that a combination of graphemic, linguistic, and reading experience factors influences students' ability to comprehend Sundanese Pegon texts. Graphemic-orthographic mastery, which falls into the good category, suggests that most students can recognize Pegon letter forms and their modified variants, although some still experience difficulties with letters that have similar shapes. Comprehension of the *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* text is also in the good category, with a tendency for students to be stronger in literal comprehension than in inferential comprehension, particularly among those with longer experience in reading Pegon texts.

At the same time, students' perceptions reveal that phonetic and vocabulary aspects remain the main challenges, especially in distinguishing Pegon letter sounds and understanding technical Arabic terms that appear in legal (fiqh) texts. Syntactic challenges are also evident in longer passages that require integrated skills in processing meaning at the discourse level. These findings suggest that the development of Sundanese Pegon reading skills cannot be limited to grapheme mastery alone, but must also be supported by context- and discourse-based learning approaches so that students can construct a deeper understanding of textual meaning [26].

### 3.5. Critical Discussion

The findings of this study show that the ability to read Sundanese Pegon is not determined solely by graphemic mastery, but is also shaped by linguistic and pedagogical factors that operate simultaneously. Good letter recognition does not always correspond directly to text comprehension, which underscores that Pegon instruction requires an approach oriented toward discourse and meaning, rather than merely drilling students in grapheme recognition. This phenomenon is consistent with previous research that emphasizes Pegon literacy as a multilayered skill encompassing phonetic ability, vocabulary, syntax, and interpretation. [27]

The phonetic and lexical challenges experienced by students reaffirm that traditional Pegon teaching that focuses on memorizing letter forms is less effective in building deep text comprehension. [28]. In addition, variation in inferential abilities among students indicates that lecture-based teaching methods have not yet provided sufficient space for active and dialogic meaning-making processes. [29]. Therefore, the results of this study highlight the need for pedagogical innovations that integrate multiliteracies, technology, and discourse comprehension strategies so that Pegon instruction can respond more comprehensively to students' literacy needs. [30] .

### 3.6. Practical Implications

The results of this study indicate the need for Sundanese Pegon instruction that not only focuses on graphemic mastery but also strengthens phonetic, vocabulary, and discourse comprehension aspects. The integration of a multiliteracy approach that combines text, audio, and visualization is expected to help students overcome difficulties in reading and understanding Pegon texts. A gradually structured micro curriculum for Pegon, together with the use of interactive digital media, can enhance student engagement and reinforce their interpretive abilities.[31] Thus, pedagogical innovation becomes essential to ensure that Sundanese Pegon learning in pesantren contexts is more effective and educationally relevant.

### 3.7. Limitations and Future Research Agenda

This study is limited to pesantren in the North Gorontalo region. It employs a descriptive quantitative design, so the findings cannot yet be generalized to pesantren in other areas that have different social characteristics and scholarly traditions. Future research may use correlational designs or structural modeling approaches, such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), to examine more deeply the relationships between graphemic-orthographic mastery of Pegon, text comprehension, and perceptions of learning challenges. In addition, expanding the sample to other regions such as Banten, Central Java, Madura, or Lombok, which have

distinct traditions of PEGON usage, would make it possible to test the consistency of the findings across more diverse cultural contexts. [32]

## Conclusions

### 4.1. Main Conclusions

Based on the quantitative descriptive analysis, the use of Sundanese PEGON script in teaching the book *Bidāyah al-Thālibīn* shows a consistent relationship with the level of graphemic orthographic mastery and text comprehension, which, in general, fall into the good category. Students who are more frequently engaged in PEGON reading activities tend to display higher accuracy in recognizing letters, applying spelling conventions, and understanding the literal meaning of the text (Restiani et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the findings also reveal challenges related to phonetic aspects, technical vocabulary, and the ability to process long and complex paragraphs, indicating that PEGON literacy at the discourse level has not yet developed evenly [33].

In addition, more interactive and contextual learning patterns provide stronger support for students' comprehension compared to methods that focus only on letter decoding. This means that the effectiveness of PEGON instruction depends on how teachers integrate grapheme recognition with explanations of meaning and religious context.[34] Overall, this study confirms that Sundanese PEGON remains a relevant and potentially powerful pedagogical medium for transmitting classical Islamic knowledge, and that when multilayered instructional approaches support it, PEGON can function as a bridge linking the Islamic scholarly heritage with students' literacy needs in the contemporary Sundanese linguistic context.[35]

### 4.2. Theoretical Synthesis

Sundanese PEGON script functions as a bridge between Islamic values and the local cultural context, allowing the educational process to take place through a medium that is symbolically and linguistically close to students' identities.[36] The use of PEGON enables the integration of religious texts with literacy practices that grow out of local scholarly traditions, so that learning is oriented not only toward technical reading skills but also toward the development of understanding and religious character rooted in cultural wisdom.[37]

From the perspective of Islamic education, PEGON can be understood as an instrument that facilitates the internalization of values through a familiar language while at the same time preserving the continuity of a knowledge tradition transmitted from generation to generation. Thus, PEGON script is not merely a philological object, but carries significant epistemological and pedagogical functions within the contemporary pesantren education system.[38].

### 4.3. Research Implications

#### 1. Theoretical Implications

This study affirms that Sundanese PEGON script can be positioned as a conceptual model of local literacy in Islamic education, in which graphemic skills and text comprehension serve as the basis for forming religious competence that is aligned with students' cultural context. The use of PEGON demonstrates that integrating classical scholarly traditions with local language remains relevant in constructing value-based learning and in interpreting religious texts.

#### 2. Practical Implications

Pesantren are encouraged to develop a staged PEGON curriculum that progresses from graphemic mastery to discourse comprehension as part of a strategy to strengthen students' religious literacy. Teachers and instructors need to enhance their PEGON literacy competence through contextual and interactive teaching methods so that the process of understanding the text becomes more communicative, meaningful, and supportive of character formation.

#### 3. Policy Implications

Government institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs and regional education offices can promote PEGON literacy training for pesantren educators and support the research, preservation, and digitization of Sundanese PEGON manuscripts. These efforts can strengthen Islamic education based on local wisdom and ensure the continuity of PEGON literacy as part of the intellectual heritage of the Indonesian archipelago.

### 4.4. Limitations

This study employs a descriptive quantitative design, so the relationships among variables are presented only at the level of general tendencies and do not yet explore causal mechanisms in depth. The geographical

scope of the research is also limited to pesantren in the North Gorontalo region, which means that generalizing the findings to pesantren in other areas must be done with caution. Future studies are recommended to use correlational designs or structural modeling approaches, such as Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), to examine latent relationships between graphemic orthographic mastery, text comprehension, and perceptions of learning challenges, as well as to broaden the geographical context by comparing Pegon usage practices in other regions, such as Banten, Central Java, Madura, or Lombok.

#### 4.5. Recommendations

##### 1. For Pesantren

Pesantren are advised to position Arab Sundanese Pegon literacy as a compulsory additional subject, oriented toward strengthening character education and deepening religious understanding through classical texts.

##### 2. For Islamic Educational Institutions

Islamic educational institutions need to organize intensive training for teachers on Pegon-based teaching methods and their integration with character education curricula, so that the learning process becomes more effective, contextual, and meaningful for students.

##### 3. For Future Researchers

Future researchers are encouraged to develop digital or application-based Pegon literacy measurement models in order to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of character education on an ongoing basis across various pesantren contexts.

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