

The Influence of Pesantren Educational Background on Arabic Language Competence of Students in Islamic Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

In the historical context of Arabic language development in Indonesia, the initiation of Arabic education took place in informal settings, notably in Islamic boarding schools (*pondok pesantren*). As time progressed, the prominence of Arabic language integration into formal education became more evident, spanning from elementary to tertiary levels. Arabic language learning involves four key language skills: listening (*maharah istima'*), speaking (*maharah kalam*), reading (*maharah qiro'ah*), and writing (*maharah kitabah*). Educationally, Arabic language proficiency is influenced by diverse factors, encompassing students' prior educational backgrounds. Field observations reveal that not all Arabic Education majors in Islamic higher education institutions originate from Islamic boarding schools, leading to variations in language competency levels. Consequently, this study focuses on assessing the impact of pesantren educational backgrounds on the Arabic language competence of students at IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang, utilizing a qualitative descriptive research method. Findings indicate that students with pesantren backgrounds exhibit superior grammatical understanding of Arabic, while those without pesantren backgrounds excel in general linguistic and learning theories. However, both groups encounter challenges in mastering spoken Arabic (*maharah kalam*).

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Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in human life, serving as a communication tool to convey ideas, emotions, and thoughts, essential for social beings who depend on each other (Ali;

2014; Hamdan, 2019). Thus, the primary function of language is as a communication tool fulfilling human needs in social interactions.

Arabic, used in daily communication by Arabs, is also the language of Islam employed in its holy book, the Qur'an (Calafato & Tang, 2019; ElHawari, 2020; Zafirah et al., 2023). In education and linguistics, the study of Arabic emphasizes competency in grammatical structure, specifically in Arabic syntax (*Nahwu*) and morphology (*Sharf*) (Aliyah, 2018; Febriyanti et al., 2021; Hamidah & Marsiah, 2020; Marsiah et al., 2021). To keep pace with technological and linguistic advancements, effective Arabic language learning methods are crucial, as Arabic is now an international language used in various countries.

In modern times, Arabic language education has expanded widely in Indonesia through both formal and non-formal institutions teaching Arabic. It has become an academically studied foreign language in predominantly Muslim countries and Western universities, incorporated into area studies, cross-cultural studies, and Islamic studies (Munip, 2019). In Indonesia, Arabic has been taught in various educational institutions, both formal and non-formal, ranging from primary and secondary levels to universities and Islamic boarding schools (Ahmadi et al., 2018).

Third-semester students majoring in Arabic Education at IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang have diverse educational backgrounds, including those who attended pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) during secondary school, are still enrolled, or have no pesantren education experience. These variations lead to differences in Arabic language competency levels among students. Research suggests that educational backgrounds influence students' interest and performance in Arabic (Rokim & Setiawan, 2022). Additionally, educational backgrounds impact the learning strategies used in Arabic studies at the university level (Wahdah & Wulandari, 2017). Pesantren education backgrounds are found to affect motivation in learning Arabic due to the intense use of the language in pesantren (Zafirah et al., 2023). Ningtias adds that students' educational backgrounds significantly influence Arabic language course outcomes (Ningtias, 2023).

Despite various studies, none have examined the Arabic language competency of students with different educational backgrounds. Therefore, the author aims to delve deeper into the influence of pesantren educational backgrounds on Arabic language competency among students at IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang.

Method

Research Design

The approach utilized in this research is a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach involves conducting research oriented towards natural phenomena (Prastowo, 2016). Due to

this orientation, the research is naturalistic in nature, fundamental, and involves an inherent natural quality that cannot be conducted in a laboratory but requires direct involvement in the field.

Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

This study adopts a field research design, aiming to address practical issues within the university environment. In this context, the author directly observes the research subjects (engages in fieldwork) by conducting interviews, observations, and documentation with third-semester students majoring in Arabic Education at IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang, who have backgrounds from pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) and non-pesantren. This approach is employed to obtain relevant information and data about the issues under investigation. The research findings are subsequently analyzed following the steps of qualitative research analysis outlined by Miles and Huberman: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data regarding the respondents' backgrounds can be found in Table 1.

Table 1.
Respondents' Educational Background Data

No.	Name	Semester	Islamic Boarding School	Non-Islamic Boarding School
1	Rizal	III		√
2	Islamiyah	III	√	
3	Al-Aliyun	III	√	
4	Ramadhani	III		√

Result and Discussion

Arabic Language Learning Orientation

Language is a fundamental component used in communication between individuals. According to its definition, language is a sound system consisting of arbitrary symbols used by an individual or a group of people to exchange thoughts (Tamaji, 2020). Language itself is a series of symbols and sounds originating from humans, serving as a tool for interaction and communication, thereby conveying feelings and thoughts to others. Thus, the role of language is significant in human life as a means of communication. Arabic, in particular, holds specific characteristics compared to other languages, evident in the lives of Muslims.

Arabic is the language chosen by Allah SWT to convey His revelations, manifested as the holy book for Muslims, the Quran, which is used by Muslims to understand Islam. In the Arabic language, there is also extensive scholarly discourse, including literature, rules, and

various fields of knowledge. Additionally, Arabic features a beautiful and admirable linguistic style that is equally captivating to study and learn (Hamid, 2022).

Arabic is the language selected by Allah to convey the teachings of Islam. It is beyond doubt that Arabic and its related sciences, including Islamic knowledge, hold a significant position as the language for the limbs of the human body. It is not incorrect to state that Arabic is the heart of the human body, as the most elevated language of Islam through which the Quran was revealed, as stated by Allah in Surah Yusuf, verse 2.

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ (٢)

“Indeed, We have sent it down (the holy book) in the form of the Qur'an in Arabic, so that you may understand” (Q.S Yusuf: 2) (Kementerian Agama RI, 2018).

The Arabic language is inseparable from the Islamic community. The Quran, the holy book of Islam, was revealed in Arabic to Prophet Muhammad SAW, a native Arab. This fact adds a distinct value to the Arabic language. Furthermore, the Hadith, the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, who himself was an Arab, is legitimized as a fundamental source of Islamic law. Undoubtedly, this positions the Arabic language as something particularly special in the hearts of the Muslim community (Muis, 2020). One of the greatest goals and motivations for Muslims to learn Arabic is the desire to understand the content of the Quran and Hadith, making Arabic and Islam like two inseparable sides of a coin.

Competence in the Arabic language can be categorized into two aspects: language elements and language skills. Language elements consist of phonology (*ashwat*), orthography (*kitab al huruf*), morphology (*al-shorf*), syntax (*al-nahwu*), and vocabulary (*al-mufrodat*) (Nalole, 2018). Meanwhile, language skills in Arabic comprise four skills: listening skills (*maharatul istima'*), speaking skills (*maharatul kalam*), reading skills (*maharatul qiroah*), and writing skills (*maharatul kitabah*) (Ainiy et al., 2022). To master these four Arabic language skills effectively, every student needs to learn Arabic from the basic level to facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the language.

Arabic Language Competency of Students from Islamic Boarding School Background

Indonesian society receives support from non-formal institutions in participating in the teaching and learning process as part of the national education system (Yusuf & Suardi, 2015). Pesantren, a non-formal educational institution, has evolved in its teaching methods to adapt to the modern era. *Pesantren* is characterized by unique features, such as no age limitations for learning, the mosque as the center of educational activities, knowledge derived from ancient books (*kutubtuuros*), the central role of *kyai* (teacher) figure, students or *santri* residing in dormitories, and maintaining a traditional learning system (Maskur & Anto, 2018).

The applied learning system in educational activities should align with the objectives and materials taught to facilitate the learning process. Learning is a planned series of educational activities. Based on interviews with students with *pesantren* backgrounds, learning in the *pesantren* environment is still suboptimal for foreign language learning, especially Arabic. This is influenced by factors such as an unsupportive environment and the absence of a designated language day, as applied in some modern *pesantren* (Al-Aliyun, Interview, 22 November 2023). This feedback is noteworthy for traditional *pesantren*, as the implementation of a language day has proven to enhance foreign language skills, particularly speaking proficiency (Irvansyah et al., 2022).

According to the interviews, several motivations drive *pesantren* students to pursue a major in Arabic Education at the university level. Some of these motivations include the fact that Arabic is the language of the Quran and considered the language of heaven. Enrolling in the Arabic language education department brings immense pleasure (Islamiyah, interview, 22 November 2023). Another motivation is to acquire a broader and more diverse vocabulary or *mufrodat* in each learning session (Al-Aliyun, Interview, 22 November 2023). This is undeniable as, in the millennial era, Arabic is the language with the most extensive vocabulary and is one of the top ten most spoken languages globally (Asrori, 2019).

Arabic Language Competency for Students from Non-Islamic Boarding School Backgrounds

Based on the interview results, students who do not come from *pesantren* face several challenges in learning Arabic at the university level. These difficulties include differences in learning methods, mastering speaking skills as professors begin using Arabic in teaching alongside Indonesian, understanding Arabic grammar, and Arabic writing skills, especially the *Pegon* writing system (Rizal, interview, 22 November 2023). This is because non-*pesantren* background students mostly graduate from general schools such as high schools and vocational schools and are newly introduced to the Arabic writing system, while *Pegon* writing is a characteristic of classical Arabic books studied in *pesantren* (Munip, 2019).

Motivations for *non-pesantren* students to study Arabic at the university level are relatively similar. Almost all *non-pesantren* students major in Arabic Education because they want to delve deeper into the interpretation of the Quran and various books with detailed knowledge of *nahwu sharaf*. Additionally, learning Arabic provides not only worldly knowledge but also preparation for the afterlife, as Arabic is used as a tool to study Islamic religious sciences such as *fiqh*, *tauhid*, and *akhlak* found in the Quran (Ramadhani, interview, 21 November 2023). This reinforces the theory that religious orientation is the main goal for the majority of Muslims in studying Arabic (Rahman & Kumalasari, 2020).

n the context of advancing knowledge, Arabic is considered an important language in the millennial era and is regarded as an international language. According to linguistic experts, Arabic is a language with high standards, as evidenced by its relevance in the use of Islamic scriptures to this day (Linur, 2022). The ability to articulate thoughts clearly and effectively in a foreign language is a fundamental skill that aligns with the goals of language instructors, as speaking serves as a means to communicate with others.

The Influence of Islamic Boarding School Educational Background on Students' Arabic Language Competence

The language proficiency of each student varies, as one's proficiency in understanding a language does not guarantee proficiency in practicing it, and vice versa. Some individuals may not be proficient in using a language but excel in understanding it theoretically (Khoiruman, 2021). Fundamentally, students' proficiency in learning Arabic correctly involves mastering all four language skills, but gaining proficiency in language skills, both understanding and practicing, requires considerable time and a strong desire to develop high competence.

Based on interviews and observations, the researcher found that the Arabic language competencies of students from pesantren and non-pesantren backgrounds have differences and similarities. Students with pesantren backgrounds are slightly more adept at mastering the instrumental sciences (*nahwu and shorof*) as understanding these sciences takes time, and pesantren students have studied grammatical Arabic (*nahwu and sharaf*) for years compared to *non-pesantren* students who only encounter these sciences in college. Proficiency in instrumental sciences also affects Arabic writing skills because *nahwu* and *sharaf* are the fundamental knowledge in Arabic writing skills (*maharah kitabah*) (Wijaya & Muharromah, 2018). It is not surprising that students facing difficulties in grammar and vocabulary also struggle with mastering writing skills (Nor et al., 2012).

Additionally, observations show that students from non-pesantren backgrounds excel in general subjects such as linguistic studies and pedagogical sciences. This is because students have equal opportunities to learn these sciences at the university level. It is also influenced by the varying abilities and motivations of each student in learning Arabic, as well as the support provided by facilities and infrastructure on campus.

The Arabic language competencies of students from pesantren and non-pesantren backgrounds also share a common difficulty in mastering speaking skills (*maharatul kalam*). This is evident from observations and interviews with third-semester students majoring in Arabic education, both from pesantren and non-pesantren backgrounds, who still struggle with spoken interactions, both inside and outside the classroom. Several factors influence students' speaking abilities, including the learning environment, learning experiences, low interest and motivation in language learning, the lack of Arabic-speaking practice, and suboptimal learning

management (Yusri et al., 2011). In Indonesia, Arabic language learning is often emphasized in non-verbal skills, especially in pesantren, resulting in students being proficient in reading and writing but less skilled in oral communication, considering that language, originally, is a means of communication (Sunarko, 2018).

Speaking skills (*maharatul kalam*) are part of the skills learned by language learners, especially in Arabic. Some consider speaking skills as a fundamental part of Arabic language learning that encourages learners to express themselves in Arabic according to their knowledge. *Maharah kalam* (speaking skills) is the ability to convey oral messages to others. In using the language orally, several practical factors influence pronunciation, intonation, word choice, sentence structure, conversation systematics, conversation content, conversation initiation and closure, as well as performance. There are various methods to enhance students' speaking competence, such as through extracurricular activities, Arabic language arts, Arabic debates, and using interactive learning media (Bahrudin et al., 2021).

The research also found that the competence of non-pesantren students in learning together with pesantren students is still lacking in mastering writing using the Pegon script. Pegon writing is an Arabic script written without diacritics, usually used by santri in Islamic boarding schools. It has its uniqueness and difficulties as it combines Arabic script with local letters not found in Arabic, such as C (ج), E (اِي), Ga (ك). Moreover, students still often use non-formal language in class, such as regional languages. The use of regional languages by pesantren and non-pesantren students is influenced by family and pesantren environments that do not strongly support the use of national and official Arabic languages. The language environment is a crucial factor supporting students' language competence (Insani et al., 2021).

Conclusion

From the research findings, it can be concluded that the educational background of pesantren significantly influences the Arabic language competence of students at IAI Sunan Kalijogo Malang. This influence results in differences and similarities regarding the competencies mastered by students. The educational factors within *pesantren*, including the intensity of Arabic language instruction in a religious context, positively contribute to students' skills in reading, writing, and Arabic grammar, although there is still room for improvement in spoken language proficiency (*maharah kalam*) learning.

For non-pesantren students, factors during the learning process with pesantren students are still lacking in mastering writing using the Pegon script and often using non-national languages. Nevertheless, various efforts and alternative methods can be applied to enhance the Arabic language proficiency of students from different backgrounds. Based on the research results, the author suggests the need for in-depth studies regarding effective Arabic

language teaching methods and strategies to be applied to students with diverse educational backgrounds.

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