



From Language to Religious Understanding: Arabic Learning as a Medium for Islamic Literacy in Indonesian Higher Education

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Submitted: 13 Juni 2026 Accepted: 27 September 2026 Published: 29 September 2026

Abstract

Arabic language learning in Islamic universities is often placed as language learning oriented towards mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and the four language skills. This article aims to analyze and formulate the position of Arabic language learning as a medium for the development of Islamic literacy in Indonesian universities through a multidisciplinary approach. The research uses an integrative literature study method by examining relevant scientific articles on Arabic language learning, Islamic studies, religious literacy, Islamic literacy, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), and Islamic higher education. The analysis was carried out thematically by identifying concepts, relationships between concepts, pedagogical practices, and their implications for the development of Arabic language learning. The results of the study show that Arabic language learning has the strategic potential to be developed from language learning to religious understanding through three main transformations: first, the shift from language learning to Islamic text-based language learning; second, the integration of linguistic competence with textual, contextual, and critical literacy; and third, the development of learning that connects Arabic with The Qur'an, hadith, jurisprudence, creed, Islamic history, and Islamic intellectual treasures. This integrative approach allows students not only to be able to read and translate Arabic texts, but also to analyze the meaning, context, argumentation, and relevance of Islamic values in contemporary life.

Keywords: Arabic; Islamic literacy; text-based learning; Multidisciplinary approach.



INTRODUCTION

This Arabic has a strategic position in the development of Islamic studies because it is the main medium for most of the primary sources of Islam, especially the Qur'an, hadith, books of tafsir, jurisprudence, creed, history, and various intellectual works of scholars. In the context of Islamic higher education, Arabic language proficiency should not be understood only as the ability to communicate in a foreign language, but also as an academic ability that allows students to access, understand, evaluate, and dialogue Islamic sources. Research on Arabic language learning in universities shows that Arabic language learning still faces various problems, including learning orientation, methods, media, student competence, and the relationship of the material with students' academic and Islamic needs (Arifin et al., 2024).

This issue becomes even more important when Arabic is taught to students in study programs that are directly related to Islamic Studies. In this context, students not only need linguistic skills, but also the ability to understand Islamic texts in their entirety. Students who are able to recognize the grammatical structure of a text are not necessarily able to understand the social context, religious arguments, authors' goals, and normative implications contained in the text. In other words, language competence and Islamic literacy competence are two competencies that are interrelated but not identical.

Studies on *religious literacy* show that religious literacy cannot be reduced to the ability to read religious information. Religious literacy includes the ability to navigate a realm of religious knowledge, understand its concepts, ask critical questions, and understand how religious knowledge is formed and used in certain social contexts (Hannam et al., 2020). This perspective is relevant for Islamic higher education because students need to

have the ability to understand religious teachings while placing them in the context of academic, social, cultural, and community life.

In the Indonesian context, the need for religious literacy is increasingly important. The development of digital technology has caused students to obtain religious information from various sources with varying degrees of validity. This condition creates new challenges for Islamic universities. It is not enough for students to have the ability to obtain religious information, but also need to have the ability to evaluate sources, understand the context, compare opinions, and build conclusions based on accountable sources. Research on religious literacy problems in Indonesia shows that religious literacy is related to people's ability to understand religion more comprehensively in the midst of Indonesia's social complexity (Suyanto et al., 2024).

In such situations, learning Arabic can play a more strategic role. So far, learning Arabic in universities has often been separated from learning Islamic Studies. Arabic courses focus on *nahwu*, *sharaf*, mufradat, reading, listening, speaking, and writing, while Islamic material is provided through other courses. This separation is administratively justifiable, but epistemologically it can lead to fragmentation of knowledge. Students learn Arabic without always understanding what it is used for in Islamic studies, while they study Islamic science without always having adequate language skills to access Arabic sources directly.

One approach that can bridge this problem is *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL). CLIL essentially places language and content as two components that are learned integratively. Dalton-Puffer (2011) explains that the main character of CLIL lies in its dual focus on language and content.

This approach allows language to be learned through a substantive context, rather than as a stand-alone linguistic system.

In the Indonesian context, a study of the implementation of CLIL shows that the approach has been used to develop teaching materials, improve content understanding, develop language skills, and improve learning attitudes. Its success is also influenced by the competence of educators, cooperation between language teachers and content teachers, and student motivation (Khoiriyah, 2021).

In learning Arabic, the integrative approach can be developed by using Islamic texts as a learning resource. Sarip (2019) research, for example, shows that CLIL in learning Arabic can utilize materials from the Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, and *Islamic tsaqafah*. The model was developed to connect language learning with Islamic content and show the potential to improve Arabic language skills.

Other studies have also shown that Arabic-intensive programs have an important position in Islamic higher education. Arabic is even positioned as one of the icons of Islamic universities because it has an academic and religious function that at the same time supports students' access to Islamic sources (Warnis et al., 2019).

Based on this description, there is a need to develop an Arabic language learning paradigm that does not stop at *language proficiency*, but moves towards *religious understanding*. This shift does not mean eliminating the purpose of linguistics, but rather expanding the function of Arabic as an instrument to understand Islamic knowledge more deeply.

This article aims to: (1) analyze the relationship between Arabic language learning and Islamic literacy; (2) identify pedagogical principles that can be used to integrate Arabic and Islamic Studies; and (3) formulate a

conceptual model of Arabic language learning based on Islamic texts that is relevant to Indonesian higher education.

METHOD

This study uses an *integrative literature review approach*. This approach was chosen because the purpose of the research is not to measure the effectiveness of a treatment in a certain group of students, but to synthesize the concepts and results of previous research to build a conceptual framework regarding learning Arabic as a medium of Islamic literacy.

The source of research data is in the form of scientific journal articles that are relevant to four main fields, namely: (1) Arabic language learning in higher education; (2) education and Islamic Studies; (3) religious literacy and Islamic literacy; and (4) an integrative learning approach, especially CLIL. The literature used is prioritized from scientific journals that have DOIs and are published by publishers or searchable academic journals.

Literature search was directed to keywords such as *Arabic language learning*, *Arabic learning in higher education*, *Arabic language and Islamic studies*, *Islamic literacy*, *religious literacy*, *Islamic higher education*, *content and language integrated learning*, and *Arabic text-based learning*. The relevant literature was then analyzed based on the theme, research objectives, educational context, key concepts, findings, and implications for Arabic language learning.

Data analysis uses thematic analysis. The analysis stage includes: (1) identification of key themes; (2) grouping of literature by theme; (3) comparison of concepts and research results; (4) identification of the relationship between Arabic and Islamic literacy; and (5) the preparation of conceptual synthesis. The use of thematic analysis is in accordance with the

principle that qualitative data from various sources can be organized through the process of pattern recognition, thematic grouping, and interpretation of interthematic relationships (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this study, "Islamic literacy" is broadly understood as the ability to access, understand, analyze, evaluate, and contextualize Islamic knowledge sourced from Islamic texts, intellectual traditions, and social discourse. With this definition, Islamic literacy is not only related to the ability to read Arabic texts, but also to the ability to build a critical, contextual, and responsible understanding of religion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Paradigm Shift: From Language Learning to Religious Understanding

The results of the literature synthesis show that Arabic language learning in Islamic higher education needs to undergo an orientation expansion. Arabic is not enough to be positioned as an object of learning, but also as an instrument for acquiring knowledge.

Conventionally, learning Arabic can be described through relationships:

Language to Vocabulary to Grammar to Language Skills with Communicative Competencies

This model is especially important for learning a language as a foreign language. However, in the context of Islamic universities, there is an additional need:

Language to Text to Meaning to Context to Analysis to Understanding of Islam

Thus, the purpose of learning is not only in the form of the ability to use Arabic, but also the ability to use the language to understand Islamic knowledge.

This shift has pedagogical consequences. When students learn *nahwu*, for example, learning does not have to stop at the analysis of artificial sentence structures. The structure can be analyzed through Qur'anic verses, hadiths, fiqh texts, tafsir, Islamic history, or scientific articles in Arabic. Similarly, vocabulary learning can be directed at conceptual vocabulary that appears in Islamic discourse, such as العدالة (*al-'adālah*), الحرية (*al-ḥurriyyah*), الرحمة (*al-rahmah*), المقاصد (*al-maqāṣid*), التسامح (*al-tasāmuḥ*), and الاعتدال (*al-i'tidāl*).

In this way, students learn the form of language as well as the Islamic concepts it contains.

This kind of approach is in line with CTIL's character of integrating language and content learning. The literature shows that integrative learning allows language to be used as a medium to learn substantive content so that learning becomes more contextual (Dalton-Puffer, 2011).

Arabic as a Gateway to Islamic Knowledge

Arabic can be seen as a *gateway to Islamic knowledge*, which is the entrance to the treasures of Islamic knowledge. This position is especially important because translations cannot always represent all the nuances of the meaning of the source language.

In learning Islamic texts, students need to be directed to realize that translation is an interpretive process. A single Arabic word can have a wide field of meaning and its meaning is greatly influenced by the context. Therefore, the ability to understand the source language provides academic advantages for students in studying Islamic texts.

The position of Arabic as the entrance to Islamic knowledge is also reflected in Islamic higher education. Warnis et al. (2019) show the importance of Arabic language intensive programs in building the competence of Islamic university students. The development of Arabic language competencies is not only related to language skills in general, but also supports the academic identity of Islamic universities.

Thus, learning Arabic can be directed at three functions at once:

1. linguistic function, namely building language competence;
2. academic function, namely providing access to sources of knowledge;
3. epistemological function, which is to help students understand how Islamic knowledge is built through texts and intellectual traditions.

These three functions make Arabic have a strategic position in the development of Islamic Studies.

Integration of Islamic Texts in Arabic Language Learning

The results of the study show that the integration of Islamic texts is one of the concrete strategies to connect Arabic learning with Islamic literacy.

The text used does not always have to be normative text. The material can be developed in several levels:

Level	Text Type	Learning Focus
Basics	Short verses and simple hadith	Vocabulary and structure
Intermediate	Texts of morality, jurisprudence, history	Reading and understanding meaning

Next	Tafsir, hadith lectures, turats books	Linguistic and contextual analysis
Academic	Islamic Studies scholarly articles in Arabic	Academic literacy and critical thinking

At the basic level, Islamic texts can be used to build simple vocabulary and structures. At the intermediate level, students can be directed to understand the main ideas, the relationships between sentences, and the context. At an advanced level, texts can be used for grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and discourse analysis. Meanwhile, at the academic level, students can read scientific articles in Arabic and compare them with Indonesian or English sources.

The model avoids learning Arabic from two extremes. The first extreme is language learning that is too formal and out of context. The second extreme is the learning of religious texts that are too oriented to understanding the content but ignoring the linguistic aspect.

The integration of the two results in learning that has two targets: language competence and religious literacy.

Sarip (2019) research shows that the use of Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, and *Islamic tsaqafah* materials in CLIL's strategy for learning Arabic can be an alternative to integrating Islamic language and content.

From Reading Texts to Critical Islamic Literacy

Islamic literacy must not stop at the ability to read Arabic texts. Students need to be directed towards critical Islamic literacy.

In this context there are at least five levels of ability:

Level 1 – Textual Literacy

Students are able to read Arabic texts, recognize vocabulary, structure, and key ideas.

Level 2 – Comprehension Literacy

Students are able to explain the meaning of the text using their own language.

Level 3 – Contextual Literacy

Students are able to understand the historical, social, and intellectual context of the text.

Level 4 – Critical Literacy

Students are able to compare interpretations, evaluate arguments, and identify differences in perspectives.

Level 5 – Transformative Literacy

Students are able to connect the values and ideas in the text with contemporary life problems.

The model is in line with the development of the concept of *religious literacy*. Hannam et al. (2020) emphasize that literacy is not solely related to the ability to master information, but also the ability to navigate a realm of knowledge and ask critical questions about how it is formed.

Thus, Arabic Language Education students are not enough to be given the task of "translate the following text". The task can be developed into:

"Read the text, identify the structure of the language, explain the meaning, identify the context, compare it with other sources, and then explain its relevance to contemporary issues."

The change in instruction pedagogically is very significant because it changes learning activities from *translation exercises* to *meaning-making activities*.

Integration of Arabic with Islamic Studies Disciplines

The multidisciplinary approach allows Arabic language learning to be integrated with the various branches of Islamic Studies.

a. Arabic and the Qur'an

Students can learn grammatical structure, vocabulary, semantics, and language styles through Qur'anic verses. However, the use of verses must be accompanied by academic prudence and not make language learning an interpretation that has no methodological basis.

b. Arabic and Hadith

Hadith can be used to develop reading skills, understand language structures, and recognize religious terms. Students can also be introduced to the differences between hadith texts, syarah, and interpretation of scholars.

c. Arabic Language and Fiqh

Fiqh texts allow students to learn Islamic legal terms as well as argumentation structures. For example, students can identify terms such as *المكروه، المحرم، المندوب، الواجب* and understand their use in texts.

d. Arabic Language and Islamic History

Historical texts allow students to understand the relationship between language, culture, and historical context. Learning is not only aimed at translating texts, but also understanding how an event is represented through language.

e. Arabic Language and Faith

Faith texts can be used to introduce complex conceptual terms. Students are trained to understand definitions, classifications, arguments, and relationships between concepts.

f. Arabic Language and Islamic Thought

At an advanced level, the articles and works of contemporary Muslim thinkers can be used as learning materials. Students can compare classical and contemporary discourses and see changes in the use of Islamic terms. This integration makes learning Arabic multidisciplinary. Language is no longer a "supporting course", but an epistemic instrument in Islamic Studies.

Arabic Language and Strengthening Religious Literacy in Higher Education

The urgency of religious literacy is getting stronger in the context of Indonesian universities. Students live in an information environment that allows various religious views to circulate quickly. Without good literacy skills, students have the potential to receive religious information in a fragmentary manner.

Research by Ali et al. (2021) on *interreligious literacy* in Islamic universities in Indonesia shows that literacy can be developed as an approach to deal with the problem of radicalism and socio-religious relations. This shows that religious literacy in higher education has a broader social dimension than just academic ability.

In this context, learning Arabic can contribute by introducing students to primary and secondary sources of Islam. However, access to resources does not automatically result in a correct understanding. Therefore, language learning must be accompanied by the ability to criticize sources, understand context, and skills to compare perspectives. In other words, Arabic proficiency is not limited to Islamic literacy, but Arabic proficiency and textual competence as well as contextual analysis and critical thinking will produce stronger Islamic literacy. Thus, the conceptual formula is one of the main findings of this article.

Arabic Learning for Islamic Literacy Conceptual Model

Based on the synthesis of the literature, this article proposes the Arabic Learning for Islamic Literacy (ALIL) model which consists of five components, namely:

1. Linguistic Competence

In this case, students develop mufradat, nahwu, Sharaf, phonology, reading, listening, speaking and writing.

2. Islamic Textual Engagement

Language is learned through Qur'anic texts, hadiths, fiqh, tafsir, creed, history, Islamic thought and scientific articles.

3. Meaning Construction

Students do not just translate, but build meaning through context analysis, semantic analysis, structural analysis, identification of ideas and interpretation.

4. Critical Religious Literacy

Students evaluate sources, compare interpretations, analyze arguments, identify contexts and dialogue between perspectives.

5. Religious Understanding and Application

The final stage is the ability to connect knowledge with life from the aspects of ethics, tolerance, moderation, justice, social responsibility and contemporary problems.

The model can be formulated:

Arabic Competence to Textual Engagement to Meaning Construction to Critical Islamic Literacy to Religious Understanding

This model is compatible with the principles of integrative learning because language and content are not treated as two separate components.

The literature on CLIL shows that such integration allows language learning to take place through meaningful content (Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2013).

Pedagogical Implications for Arabic Language Education

The implementation of the model requires changes in several aspects of learning.

First, the development of teaching materials. Arabic teaching materials should include authentic and multi-level Islamic texts. Lecturers can choose texts based on the student's level of language proficiency and the complexity of the content.

Second, changes in the form of learning activities. Activities are not only in the form of: translating, memorizing mufradat, identifying isim, fi'il, and harf.

Furthermore, activities can be developed into *close reading*, *text analysis*, discussion, presentation, text comparison and *critical response* as well as small research projects.

Third, changes in evaluation. The assessment needs to measure two dimensions at once with indicators, namely:

Dimensions	Indicator
Language competence	vocabulary, structure, reading, listening, speaking, writing
Islamic literacy	Concept Understanding, Context Analysis, Source Criticism, Argumentation, Relevance

Fourth, cross-disciplinary collaboration. Learning development can involve Arabic Language Education lecturers with lecturers of Al-Qur'an-Hadith, Fiqh, Faith, Islamic History, or Islamic Studies. This collaboration is

important because content-based language teaching requires language competence as well as an understanding of the content. The CLIL study in Indonesia also shows the importance of improving educator competence and cooperation between language teachers and content teachers (Khoiriyah, 2021).

Fifth, the use of technology. Digital technology can expand students' access to Arabic texts, audio, videos, digital dictionaries, language corpuses, and scientific articles. Recent studies on *technology-enhanced CLIL* show that the integration of technology in language and content learning is an important direction in the development of integrative learning (Hu et al., 2025).

In the context of learning Arabic, technology can be used to provide texts of different levels of difficulty, comprehension exercises, vocabulary annotations, listening activities, and resource-based discussions.

Implementation Challenges

Although it has great potential, learning Arabic as a medium of Islamic literacy faces several challenges.

First, the heterogeneity of students' language skills. Islamic college students come from different educational backgrounds. Some have studied Arabic in Islamic boarding schools or madrasas, while others have limited basic skills.

Second, the competence of lecturers. Arabic lecturers need to have pedagogical skills and an understanding of the Islamic content used. On the other hand, Islamic Studies lecturers also need an awareness of linguistic aspects so that texts are not understood separately from the structure and context of the language.

Third, the limitation of teaching materials. Not all Arabic teaching materials are designed to integrate language competence with Islamic literacy.

Fourth, the risk of reducing religious texts. The text of the Qur'an, hadith, or the work of scholars cannot be treated only as grammatical training material. The text has theological, historical, and epistemological dimensions that must be considered.

Fifth, the burden of the curriculum. The integration of language and content requires good planning so that learning does not become too extensive but loses depth.

Therefore, integration does not mean including as much Islamic material as possible in Arabic classes. Integration means choosing relevant content to achieve both linguistic goals and literacy goals.

Multidisciplinary Positions in Islamic Studies

The main contribution of this article lies in the effort to bring together three domains, namely Arabic Language Education – Islamic Studies – Religious Literacy. These three fields have often been studied separately. Arabic Language Education focuses on language and pedagogy. Islamic Studies focuses on the study of Islam. Meanwhile, religious literacy focuses on the ability to understand and navigate religious knowledge. This article shows that Arabic can be an epistemological bridge between the three.

In this perspective, learning Arabic not only produces students who "can speak Arabic", but students who are able to use Arabic to:

access to Islamic resources, understand the concept of Islam, read the text critically, compare perspectives, connect text with context, building a responsible religious understanding.

This idea is relevant to the direction of the development of Islamic higher education which increasingly requires cross-disciplinary skills. Research on the transformation of Arabic language learning in Islamic universities also shows the importance of innovation, technological integration, and strengthening the learning environment so that Arabic learning is not fragmented (Wahyuni et al., 2026).

Thus, learning Arabic can contribute directly to the Islamic Studies agenda, not only as a language course, but as an infrastructure for Islamic scientific literacy.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions The learning of Arabic in Islamic universities has a much broader potential than the development of linguistic competence. Arabic can be placed as a medium for building Islamic literacy because it provides access to primary and secondary sources in the Islamic intellectual tradition.

The results of the literature study show that the transformation of Arabic language learning towards Islamic literacy can be carried out through three main shifts. First, language learning needs to move from form learning to text- and content-based learning. Second, language competence needs to be integrated with the ability to understand, analyze, and evaluate Islamic texts. Third, learning needs to be directed from textual understanding to contextual and critical religious understanding.

The *Content and Language Integrated Learning* approach can be one of the pedagogical foundations to realize this integration. In the context of Arabic Language Education, the principles of CLIL can be developed into an *Arabic Learning for Islamic Literacy* model, which consists of linguistic

competence, involvement with Islamic texts, construction of meaning, critical Islamic literacy, and applicable religious understanding.

With this model, the success of learning Arabic is not only measured by students' ability to memorize vocabulary or analyze sentence structure, but also by their ability to use Arabic to understand Islamic knowledge in a deep, critical, contextual, and responsible manner.

The implications for Islamic universities are the need to reconstruct teaching materials, learning strategies, evaluation systems, and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Arabic language learning needs to be placed as an integral part of the Islamic Studies ecosystem. Thus, Arabic can function as a *gateway to Islamic knowledge* as well as a medium to build a generation of students who have language competence, Islamic literacy, critical thinking skills, and religious understanding that are relevant to the challenges of contemporary society.

The next research can test the *Arabic Learning for Islamic Literacy* model empirically through experimental, *mixed methods*, or *design-based research* on Islamic university students in Indonesia. The development of an instrument for measuring Islamic literacy based on Arabic language skills is also an important research agenda so that the relationship between *Arabic proficiency* and *Islamic literacy* can be tested in a more measurable manner.

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