

## ARABIC LANGUAGE LEARNING IN A MULTICULTURAL CONTEXT AT PESANTREN

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### ABSTRACT

Arabic language education in Indonesia faces the challenge of being perceived as mono-cultural and narrowly religious, often excluding broader multicultural contexts. This study explores Arabic language learning in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) across culturally diverse regions in Indonesia to identify how multicultural values are integrated into the curriculum. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research was conducted in six provinces: West Java, Central Java, East Java, Lombok, Bali, and Sulawesi. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and surveys involving 50 Arabic teachers and 300 students in pesantren institutions. The findings reveal that Arabic learning in pesantren reflects four key dimensions of multicultural integration: cultural, social, intellectual, and spiritual. These dimensions shape learners' engagement with Arabic not only as a religious language but also as a medium for intercultural dialogue and identity negotiation. Additionally, regional cultural influences significantly affect teaching strategies and learners' motivations. The research highlights the potential of pesantren to serve as transformative spaces for multicultural Islamic education, bridging religious values with local cultural diversity. This study underscores the importance of recontextualizing Arabic instruction within Indonesia's multicultural society, promoting inclusivity while maintaining pesantren's core religious missions in the evolving landscape of education in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0.

**Keywords:** Arabic Language Learning, Pesantren, Multicultural Education, Phenomenological Study

### INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, the need for multicultural understanding has become more critical than ever. The global movement towards multicultural education emphasizes the necessity for educational systems to embrace cultural diversity, ensuring equitable academic opportunities for all students regardless of their linguistic, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds (Banks, 1989; Setyono & Widodo, 2019). Language, as a key component of culture, serves not only as a communication tool but also as a medium for cultural identity and religious expression. In multilingual and multicultural societies worldwide, effective language education is pivotal in fostering intercultural dialogue, reducing prejudice, and supporting peaceful co-existence. As nations grapple with the complexities of cultural pluralism, the integration of multicultural perspectives into language learning emerges as a global educational imperative.

Indonesia, known for its rich cultural and linguistic diversity, is a prime example of a multicultural society. It is home to hundreds of ethnic groups, each with its own traditions and local languages, actively used in daily communication (Barnouw, 1946; Hoon, 2017; Tjipto & Bernardo, 2019; Jayadi et al., 2022). This diversity is reflected in its language classification system: regional languages, the national language (Bahasa Indonesia), and foreign languages such as English and Arabic (Dardjowidjojo, 1998). Despite this complexity, Bahasa Indonesia serves as a unifying medium among citizens from different language backgrounds (Abduh & Rosmaladewi, 2019). Embedded within this linguistic landscape is the multicultural ethos of

Indonesian society (Raihani, 2017), where language becomes not only a tool for communication but also a representation of cultural co-existence.

Arabic, as a foreign language, holds a distinct position in the educational systems of many countries beyond the Arab world. In Europe and the United States, Arabic is taught in both supplementary and formal education institutions, albeit with varied exposure and challenges. Soliman and Khalil (2022) highlight the growth of Arabic teaching from schools to universities, while Morkus (2018) explores the linguistic challenges faced by Arabic learners due to negative pragmatic transfers from their native languages. Other studies note the minimal pre-university exposure to Arabic in the U.S., impacting students' proficiency and, consequently, international understanding and diplomacy. These global studies underscore the challenges and importance of teaching Arabic as a foreign language, yet there remains limited research focusing on how Arabic is taught within multicultural, religious-based educational settings like Indonesia's pesantren.

While international research has shed light on Arabic as a foreign language, particularly in Western contexts, there is a gap in exploring how Arabic is integrated into culturally rich and religiously rooted institutions such as Indonesian pesantren (Islamic boarding schools). Unlike secular institutions, pesantren intertwines Arabic language learning with religious and cultural instruction, creating a unique educational environment. Existing studies have not sufficiently examined how multiculturalism influences Arabic language instruction in such settings, nor how globalization and technological advancements, such as the Industrial Revolution 4.0, affect language pedagogy in Islamic education. This study offers a novel perspective by investigating Arabic language learning within the multicultural and religious framework of Indonesian pesantren, especially in the context of modern educational demands.

This phenomenological study explores the dynamics of Arabic language learning as a foreign language in pesantren institutions across Indonesia. It focuses on how multicultural values are embedded in the teaching and learning processes amid the challenges and opportunities of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. Specifically, the study seeks to identify the pedagogical approaches, cultural interactions, and institutional factors that shape Arabic learning in pesantren. By doing so, it contributes to a broader understanding of language education in multicultural and religious contexts and offers insights that are relevant not only to Indonesia but also to global efforts in developing inclusive and culturally responsive language education.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach, utilizing instrumental case studies to explore Arabic language learning within Indonesia's multicultural context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Filipović, 2019). The interpretive nature of qualitative research enabled an in-depth examination of how multicultural-based learning activities unfold amid Indonesia's diverse society, with a particular focus on the perceptions of the Pesantren academic community. The study frames these learning activities through the lens of the Revolution 4.0 paradigm, offering insights into the evolving relationship between language and multiculturalism in Indonesia. This dynamic interaction highlights how diverse linguistic and cultural identities coexist and shape language learning practices, especially Arabic education in settings like Pesantren. Language is viewed both as a communication tool and a symbol of cultural identity, reflecting the nation's rich ethnic and religious diversity. These paradigms are further contextualized within contemporary societal changes, including the impact of technological advancements.

The study involved 350 participants, including 300 students and 50 teachers, drawn equally from six culturally diverse regions of Indonesia—West Java, Central Java, East Java,

Bali, Lombok, and Sulawesi—to ensure balanced regional representation. Among the teachers, 45 hold university degrees in Arabic programs, while 5 have degrees in non-Arabic fields, reflecting diverse academic backgrounds relevant to the focus on Arabic language learning within multicultural settings. Data were collected using a survey questionnaire based on indicator constructs and a psychometric scale to capture user perceptions. These survey results were complemented by in-depth, structured interviews with academic participants to reveal natural learning phenomena and gain comprehensive insights. The interview process, recognized as a valuable tool in field studies (Qu & Dumay, 2011), involved identifying key variables, developing statement items, and organizing questions accordingly. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, while questionnaires were distributed online via Google Forms, with all procedures agreed upon by researchers and participants prior to data collection. Interview data were systematically documented to support further analysis and classification.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the study on Arabic language learning in Indonesian pesantren, focusing on students' and teachers' perceptions, instructional practices, and the challenges they face. It also explores the integration of socio-cultural and multicultural values in the learning process. The results are organized under key themes that align with the research objectives and reflect the experiences and perspectives of the participants.

### Students' Perceptions of Pesantren and Arabic Learning

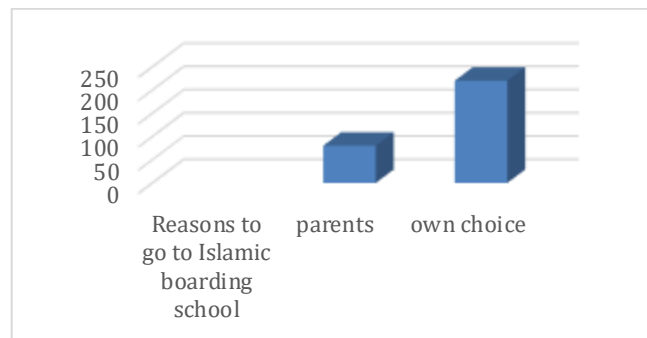


Figure 1. Reasons for entering pesantren

As illustrated in Figure 1, the majority of students (73.3%) indicated that their decision to enrol in the boarding school was self-initiated, whereas 26.7% reported that the choice was made by their parents.

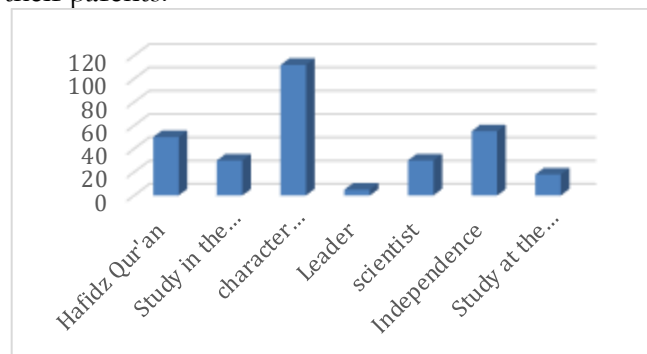


Figure 2. The purpose of studying at Pesantren

As shown in Figure 2, students expressed diverse motivations for studying at the pesantren. Approximately 16.6% aimed to become *hafidz* (memorizers of the Qur'an), while 10% aspired to pursue higher education in Middle Eastern universities. A significant portion, 37.3%, prioritized character development. Additionally, 1.6% sought to enhance their leadership abilities, 10% intended to become Muslim scientists, 18.3% aimed to cultivate independence, and 6% aspired to gain admission to top-tier universities in Indonesia.

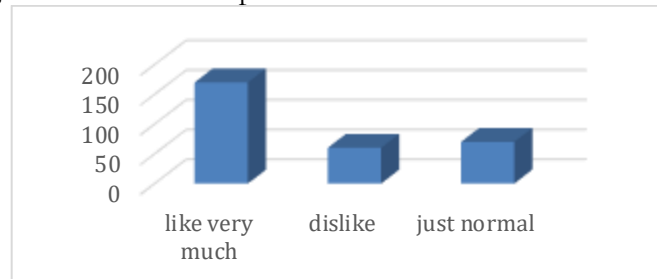


Figure 3. Interest in learning Arabic

Figure 3 recorded that 56.6% of students liked Arabic very much, 20% did not like Arabic, and 23.3% felt they were used to Arabic.

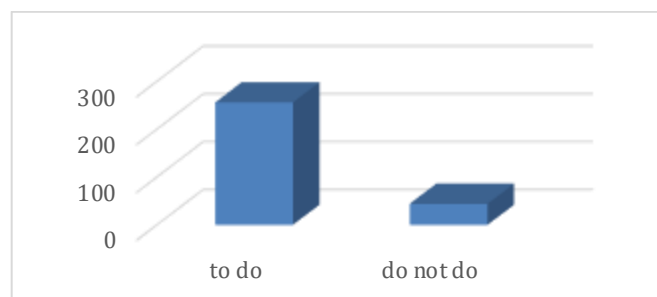


Figure 4. Arabic learning activities outside the classroom

The data from Figure 4 portrayed that 85.3% of students carried out Arabic language support activities outside the classroom, and 14.6% did not carry out Arabic language support activities outside the classroom.

The survey results reveal that most students (73.3%) chose to enrol in the pesantren themselves, while 26.7% did so based on their parents' decision. Their reasons for studying at the pesantren are diverse, with a focus on character building (37.3%), becoming *hafidz* of the Quran (16.6%), and gaining independence (18.3%). Other motivations include aspirations to study at Middle Eastern universities (10%), develop leadership skills (1.6%), become Muslim scientists (10%), and enter top Indonesian universities (6%). Regarding Arabic learning, over half of the students (56.6%) expressed a strong liking for the language, 20% did not like it, and 23.3% felt accustomed to it. Moreover, a significant majority (85.3%) participated in Arabic learning activities outside the classroom, indicating active engagement beyond formal lessons.

### Arabic Language Teacher's Qualification and Proficiency

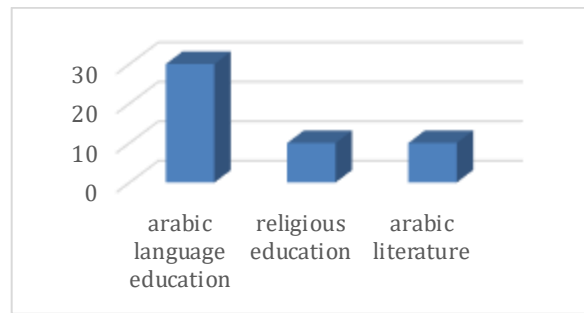


Figure 5. Teacher Education Background

As shown in Figure 5, Arabic language teachers are not all pure graduates of the Arabic language with bachelor's or master's degrees. Among them: 30 out of 50 teachers are graduates of Arabic Language Education, 10 of them are graduates of religious programs, and 10 others are graduates of Arabic literature

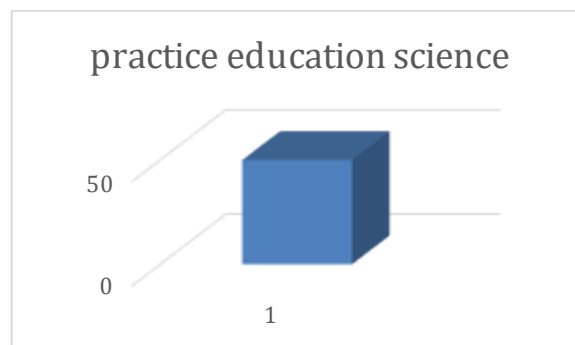


Figure 6. Motivation to teach Arabic.

Figure 6 shows that Arabic teachers choose to teach Arabic 100% to practice science

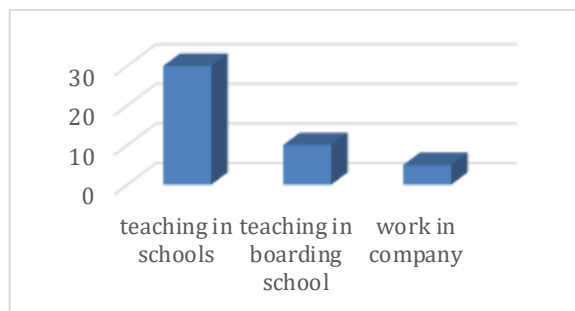


Figure 7. Teaching experience

Figure 7 indicates that 30 teachers have accumulated more than one year of direct teaching experience in formal educational institutions. Of these, 15 are actively teaching in pesantren, while 5 are currently working in corporate settings.

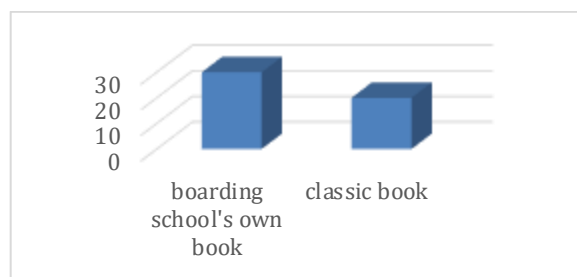


Figure 8. Textbooks used

As presented in Figure 8, 30 teachers utilize textbooks developed by their respective Islamic boarding schools, while 20 teachers rely on classical texts or reference materials originating from the Middle East.

The background of Arabic language teachers shows a diverse educational profile: out of 50 teachers, 30 graduated from Arabic Language Education programs, while 10 completed religious studies and another 10 specialized in Arabic literature. All teachers expressed that their primary motivation for teaching Arabic is to practice and share their knowledge of the language. In terms of experience, 30 teachers have been teaching in schools for over a year, 15 work specifically in Islamic boarding schools, and five are employed in companies. Regarding instructional materials, 30 teachers rely on textbooks developed by the boarding schools, whereas 20 use Middle Eastern references or classical books.

### The paradigm of Arabic Learning at Pesantren

Arabic holds a central place as the key to understanding Middle Eastern culture, literature, and heritage. It is the language of Islam, through which the Qur'an was revealed, giving it profound religious and cultural significance. Many Arabs, particularly Muslims, consider Arabic to be a superior language among the world's languages, while non-Arab Muslims often regard it as a unique and miraculous linguistic privilege, paralleling the divine miracle status of the Qur'an itself. However, Arabic is not a unified language; it consists of multiple varieties, including local colloquialisms and Standard Arabic, which closely resemble the classical form (Al-Osaimi & Wedell, 2012).

In the context of Pesantren, Arabic is studied not only as a linguistic subject but also as an integral part of religious education. The learning process in Pesantren communities involves social interaction, where sociolinguistic competence—understanding language varieties, styles, and registers for different communicative purposes—is essential for effective communication and cultural transmission (Nassif & Al Masaeed, 2020). This sociolinguistic perspective reflects the broader heritage and influence of boarding school education. For example, previous studies have shown that boarding schools can help integrate minority groups into mainstream culture, although historical factors, such as parental consent for attendance, may affect student experiences and outcomes (Gregg, 2018). This underscores why student and parental reasons for enrolling in Pesantren were important indicators examined in this study.

Research on pesantren's role in supporting student development has gained attention worldwide. For instance, empirical studies in the UK have explored how selective dormitories affect student achievements, adding to the understanding of boarding education's impact in different cultural contexts (Foliano et al., 2019). In Indonesia, the COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges to Pesantren education as the shift to online learning was difficult to implement effectively. Although some Pesantren have modernized their facilities, remote learning remained largely inadequate, forcing many students to stay home without direct engagement in their traditional learning environment (Muazza et al., 2018; Hanafi et al., 2021). This situation

highlights the need for new approaches that consider both the unique cultural habits and the learning needs of Pesantren students (Emeling, 1993).

Finally, Arabic language education itself faces specific challenges due to the linguistic diversity within the Arabic-speaking world. The Middle East region features a wide variety of spoken dialects that differ significantly from the formal or classical Arabic used in literature and religious texts (Rakhlin et al., 2019). These differences complicate language assessment and learning, especially in boarding schools where the choice of dialect and register is critical. Moreover, the phonological, morphological, and lexical distinctions among dialects often hinder mutual understanding, even among native speakers (Abdelwahab et al., 2021). As a result, teaching Arabic in Pesantren requires careful consideration of both classical Arabic (*Fusha*) and more general spoken varieties to meet educational and religious goals effectively.

### Social Dimension and Culture of Pesantren in Indonesia

The present study also revealed important findings related to the socio-cultural dimensions experienced by students in pesantren. Table 1 outlines the key dimensions and indicators that reflect these aspects of pesantren life.

Table 1. Social Dimensions of Pesantren Culture

Dimension	Indicator
Social	adapting or adjusting to the demands of the role of the social environment
Culture	cultural and ethical values influence judgment
intellectual	ability to use their brain and thinking ability
Spiritual	an attempt to maintain harmony or harmony with the outside world, struggle to respond or gain strength when faced with emotional stress, physical illness, or death

These dimensions highlight the holistic environment provided by pesantren, where students are nurtured intellectually, socially, culturally, and spiritually. The emphasis on adapting to social roles, upholding ethical values, critical thinking, and spiritual resilience demonstrates the comprehensive approach of pesantren education in shaping well-rounded individuals.

In the social dimension, particularly concerning the need for students to adapt to the roles required by their social environment, teachers reported several ongoing challenges in Arabic language instruction. A teacher from a pesantren in Sulawesi highlighted that Arabic learning is frequently hindered by various obstacles. These include the diverse academic backgrounds of students, low motivation levels due to the perception that Arabic is inferior to English, and difficulties in sustaining Arabic language immersion (*bi'ah*) due to a shortage of supervisors to manage daily activities in Arabic (UF, personal communication, October 21, 2021). Similarly, a teacher from Central Java noted that Arabic instructors not only deliver material but also engage directly in students' everyday lives, observing their behaviour and instilling character values through consistent interaction (UR, personal communication, October 21, 2021). These insights reveal how both teachers and students are crucial actors in the bidirectional process of social adaptation within the pesantren environment.

The cultural dimension is marked by how values and ethics influence decision-making and behaviour. As Thompson et al. (1990), Meader et al. (2006), and Halik and Verweij (2018) explain, cultural perspectives shape perceptions of right and wrong, fairness, and appropriate responses to social issues. In the context of pesantren, such cultural filters can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts but also present an opportunity for character development grounded in Islamic ethical principles. Meanwhile, the intellectual dimension is reflected in

students’ ability to think critically and engage cognitively with their environment. Comparable practices in Turkey’s Regional Islamic Boarding Schools (RBS) demonstrate how boarding schools in rural areas, despite limited socioeconomic resources, can offer state-supported intellectual development for students. As noted by Altun and Bekta (2010), the centralized location and cost-efficiency of RBS make them a practical solution for delivering education in geographically dispersed communities.

In the spiritual domain, students are encouraged to cultivate resilience and maintain harmony with the world around them, particularly during moments of emotional or physical hardship. This aligns with the broader pedagogical goals of multicultural education, which aims to foster academic success, equity, and social growth by addressing systemic injustice and affirming diverse identities (Mahiri, 2017). The pesantren framework, therefore, not only aims to educate students religiously and intellectually but also nurtures them spiritually and socially. This multifaceted educational approach positions pesantren as vital institutions for developing holistic individuals capable of navigating diverse challenges with ethical and cultural sensitivity.

### Multicultural Dimension of Pesantren and Arabic Learning

The findings related to the multicultural dimensions in pesantren highlight how diversity is embedded within teaching practices, curriculum design, and the overall school culture. Table 2 outlines the specific dimensions and indicators that represent these multicultural aspects.

Table 2. Multicultural Dimension	
Dimension	Indicator
Content Integration	The extent to which teachers use examples and content from different cultures and groups to illustrate key concepts, principles, generalizations, and theories in their topic area regarding a particular discipline.
The Knowledge Construction Process	The extent to which teachers help students understand, examine, and determine how implicit cultural assumptions, frames of reference, views, and biases in the discipline influence how knowledge is constructed within it.
Prejudice Reduction	Characteristics of students’ social attitudes and how they can be modified by teaching methods and materials
An Equity Pedagogy	When teachers change their teaching in ways that facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, and socio-class groups
An Empowering School Culture & Social Structure	Classification and labeling practices, sports participation, imbalances in achievement, and cross-ethnic and racial staff and all-student interactions are among the components of school culture that should be examined to create a school culture that empowers students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups.

These dimensions collectively reflect the pesantren’s commitment to nurturing an inclusive and respectful educational environment. By integrating multicultural content, encouraging critical engagement with knowledge, reducing prejudice, promoting equitable teaching, and fostering an empowering school culture, pesantren strives to prepare students to thrive in a diverse society while upholding Islamic values.

Interviews with Arabic teachers from pesantren in Sulawesi, Java, Lombok, and Bali revealed key challenges in instruction, including frequent teacher rotations, students’ focus on



*tahfidz*, limited qualified staff, and rigid curriculum guidelines. To address these issues, schools have implemented various strategies such as recruiting alumni, conducting *ta'lim lafziyah* sessions after Fajr prayer, sending teachers for training in the Middle East, introducing classroom placements, enhancing digital learning tools, and coordinating with parents to support character development (UT, UB, UM, UF, interviews, October 21–22, 2021–2022). One East Java teacher noted the integration of the national curriculum with Islamic values, emphasizing balanced emotional, intellectual, and spiritual growth. Others highlighted the need for more flexible, pesantren-specific curricula and emphasized the role of structured dormitory routines and moral guidance in fostering discipline and ethical conduct among students.

These findings align with broader multicultural education theories, which emphasize the teacher's role in bridging the cultural divide between mainstream academic expectations and diverse student backgrounds. According to Jenks et al. (2001), remedial strategies should account for learning style differences, community connections, and language proficiency gaps. Teachers in pesantren embody this role by integrating Arabic language instruction with Islamic character formation, helping students adapt to institutional norms while preserving their cultural identities. The launch of Indonesia's character education policy in 2010 merely formalized what pesantren had long practiced—education that combines intellectual, physical, and spiritual growth through a close partnership between schools, families, and communities (Wekke, 2008).

Arabic language learning in Indonesian pesantren is shaped by both multicultural and religious values, integrating local cultural contexts—such as those in Sulawesi, West Java, and Lombok—into instruction to enhance students' cultural and linguistic awareness. This aligns with Banks' (1989) multicultural education framework and is supported by findings from Jayadi et al. (2022) and Raihani (2012, 2017), who emphasize the increasing role of multiculturalism in Islamic education (Thaha et al., 2024). Comparative insights from Malaysia affirm Arabic's role in religious and cultural identity, with Anis et al. (2018) noting that Arabic phonological features are embedded in Malay-Muslim culture. Similarly, the immersive environment of pesantren in Indonesia promotes a performance-based model of Arabic learning (Foliano et al., 2019; Wekke, 2015). However, challenges persist due to the gap between written and spoken Arabic forms, highlighting the need for culturally grounded pedagogical systems beyond curriculum and staffing alone (Rakhlin & Grigorenko, 2019; Salim et al., 2024).

Socio-cultural and religious influences play a central role in how pesantren integrate both spiritual and cognitive goals into Arabic education. Wekke and Lubis (2008) stress the importance of adopting a multicultural approach to promote equality in Indonesia's diverse educational landscape, while Latif and Hafid (2021) highlight how pesantren already serve as microcosms of Indonesia's pluralistic society. Rather than posing challenges, this diversity becomes a pedagogical strength. Hoon (2017) notes that religious multiculturalism encourages the blending of ethnic and religious identities to foster co-existence, a vision also supported by Parker (2014), who views religious education as a vehicle for peacebuilding in Indonesia. Arabic language instruction in pesantren becomes more than linguistic training—it is a platform for character formation, spiritual development, and cultural integration. This is further reflected in how pesantren adapted during the pandemic, showing resilience through leadership and the implementation of online learning (Hanafi et al., 2021; Ritonga et al., 2024). As Wells (2011) explains, socio-cultural learning is grounded in interaction and contextual experience, which aligns well with the pesantren tradition of immersive, value-laden education.

The sociolinguistic complexity of Arabic learning in pesantren adds another layer of depth to this discussion. Students must navigate between Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and various dialects, requiring an approach that embraces diglossia and multidialectal realities (Abdelwahab et al., 2021; Nassif & Al Masaeed, 2020). Soliman and Khalil (2022) emphasize that community-based Arabic learning, such as that in pesantren, must adopt

culturally responsive strategies that resonate with students' daily lives. This aligns with Dardjowidjojo's (1998) assertion that national language policy in Indonesia must balance unity and diversity. Furthermore, communication strategies in pesantren reflect an intentional cultural shaping process—teachers strategically guide student behavior and communication to foster excellence and discipline (Hastasari et al., 2016; Hastasari et al., 2022). Kennedy (1942) and Lukens-Bull (2010) both affirm that Indonesian Islamic schools, including pesantren, are sites where culture, religion, and education are intricately woven. Oepen and Karcher (1988) also document the pesantren's impact on community development, emphasizing its culturally rooted model. As Nordström (2008) argues, environmental and multicultural education are too interconnected to be treated separately—similarly, Arabic learning in pesantren is inseparable from its socio-cultural and moral context. As shown in this study and echoed by Saul and Saul (2001), multicultural activities—when embedded in language learning—can foster both academic and character development. Thus, Arabic education in pesantren must remain adaptive, inclusive, and grounded in Indonesia's rich cultural heritage (Awaluddin et al., 2025).

## CONCLUSION

Multicultural dimensions in Arabic language education encompass several key elements: content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure. In the context of pesantren across Sulawesi, West Java, Central Java, East Java, Lombok, and Bali, teachers incorporate diverse cultural content and perspectives to illustrate essential concepts and principles in Arabic instruction. This approach not only contextualizes learning within students' cultural realities but also enhances their engagement with the material. Through such multicultural pedagogical practices, students are guided to critically understand how cultural assumptions, frames of reference, and biases shape the construction of knowledge. This fosters the development of student personalities that integrate both cognitive and spiritual dimensions. Specifically, Arabic learning in pesantren settings contributes to character formation rooted in Islamic values while also accommodating the diverse cultural backgrounds of students from various regions in Indonesia. This dual emphasis strengthens both linguistic competence and moral development within a culturally responsive educational framework.

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