

Multicultural Coexistence: Students' Perception of Arabic Culture and Learning in Islamic Boarding Schools

Fawaidur Ramdhani¹, Abdul Hakim², Ibrahim Alwe³

¹Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Miftahul Ulum Bangkalan, Indonesia, ²University of Malaya, Malaysia, ³National University of Singapore, Singapore

Email correspondence: fawaidurramdhani@stitmuba.ac.id

Abstract

This article explores students' perceptions of Arabic cultural elements in teaching Arabic in Islamic boarding schools. Using a qualitative approach, this study investigates how students view the importance of Arabic cultural values in the learning process and its broader implications for multicultural understanding. Data was collected through interviews and questionnaires distributed to 35 respondents in 16 Islamic boarding schools in the East Java region. These findings reveal that students generally recognize the importance of incorporating elements of Arabic culture into the language learning process, as it helps in understanding the Arabic language and its cultural nuances. Some aspects of Arabic culture are considered by students to be an integral part of Islamic teachings, influencing distinctive practices in their clothing and physical appearance. Apart from this unique phenomenon, the students, who live in a multicultural society, choose to integrate their daily lives with other communities, foster harmony, and embrace the multicultural diversity that exists in Indonesia. This research provides valuable insights into the intersection of language learning, cultural values, and multicultural coexistence in the context of Islamic boarding school education.

Keywords

Perception of students, Arabic, culture

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia serves as an example of a multicultural education model, which embraces students from various regions, without discriminating based on their social, economic, or ethnic background. The curriculum adopted by these institutions is deliberately designed to incorporate multicultural-based teaching principles, as shown by various studies (Aly, 2015; Suhartini, 2016; Wekke, 2015; Wekke & Lubis, 2016; Yusuf & Wekke, 2015). Currently, the application of multicultural values in Islamic boarding schools does not seem to face significant challenges and is widely accepted as an integral component of a dynamic multicultural educational process.

However, the concept of multiculturalism is far from easy. A number of studies have shown that in certain societies, multiculturalism is considered a threat to established cultures (Stratton & Ang, 1994). In the Western context, for example, the government's recognition of minority rights is seen by the majority of Western society as a risky policy. Many believe that recognizing minority rights has the potential to pose a serious threat to democratic life in the West. Conservative groups, for example, have accused the presence of Muslim immigrants in Western countries as a real threat to their way of life (Lappin,

2007). As a result, perceptions of multiculturalism can vary significantly from one society to another (Brewer et al., 2013; van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012).

In Indonesia, Islamic boarding schools are characterized by their diversity and characteristics. As mentioned earlier, this study explores cultural harmonization as an expression of multicultural education both in traditional and modern Islamic boarding schools. These institutions have long embraced the fundamental cultural values of Indonesian society since the beginning. However, as Islamic boarding schools have undergone growth and development, their cultural relations have evolved, more in tune with Middle Eastern Arab countries. These relationships include material-financial aspects, as well as religious, ideological, and cultural understanding. Not a few Islamic boarding schools try to foster cultural relations between students by integrating external cultural values, especially from the Arabic context, to form new identities and mindsets. There are also some Islamic boarding schools that tend to adapt to local values (Fealy & White 2008).

Arabic language teaching programs in Islamic boarding schools play an important role in shaping a new cultural identity for students. Despite the stagnation and perceived shortcomings in Arabic teaching methods in Indonesia (Delami, 2007), Arabic language programs in Islamic boarding schools have attracted considerable attention, especially among millennials. Even a number of Islamic boarding schools offer free Arabic courses, which target new high school graduates. The program is carefully structured with a duration of one to two years. In addition, several Islamic boarding schools actively assist in obtaining scholarships for further study in Arabic-speaking countries, namely the Middle East.

Given the phenomenon of Arabic language learning found in Islamic boarding schools, there is a need to explore more deeply the relationship between Arabic language teaching and multiculturalism, with a focus on instilling cultural values among students. This search aims to explore how external values, especially those adopted during Arabic language learning, become internalized in the daily lives of students. Students who bring various cultural values from their respective regions are faced with new values while undergoing Arabic language education activities.

Previous studies have highlighted the important role of language in shaping a nation's identity. Throughout the history of the world, examples of emerging new states or attempts to break away from existing governments have often revolved around a shared linguistic identity among groups fighting for independence (Rahman, 2002). In addition, research has shown that, in a multicultural society, the need to acquire a foreign language or a second language depends on government policies and the prevailing conditions in a country (Mallozzi & Malloy, 2007). An example is Japan, where, despite incorporating English into the basic curriculum since 2011, the practical need for English proficiency among the Japanese population remains limited (Shimizu & Bradley, 2014).

In general, several studies on multiculturalism in Islamic boarding schools generally conclude that Islamic boarding schools have embraced multicultural principles that are reflected in curriculum design (Akmaliah & Ratnasih, 2017; Susanti, 2015). For this reason, this study aims to observe how the expression of multicultural education in Islamic boarding schools is through the perception of the students who undergo it.

METHOD

To achieve the objectives of this study, qualitative methods are used to produce an easy-to-read picture of the research (Oun & Bach, 2014). A phenomenological approach based on the researcher's experience and involvement with the object under investigation is carried out (Desjarlais & Jason, 2011). The purpose of this approach is to emphasize the emic aspect more than aesthetics; that is, the available data is expected to produce a comprehensive picture of the object being studied. Two techniques: interviews and questionnaires were applied to collect data on students' cognitive awareness regarding their motivation and belief in the language they learned (Kalaja et al., 2015).

To explore information related to cultural aspects related to Arabic language teaching in Islamic boarding schools, this study uses a questionnaire in the form of a Google Form which is distributed through WhatsApp groups. Using Google Forms, the researcher obtained 35 respondents from 16 Islamic boarding schools spread across East Java. In terms of age, respondents ranged between 15 and 20 years old. In addition to questionnaires, interviews are conducted with key people who can contribute substantial information to the data collection process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Nusantara Muslim Identity and Arabic Language

Historically, since the arrival of Islam to the archipelago, Arabic has become a religious language used in various religious rites. In the historical context of language use in the archipelago, Indian Muslim languages were once used. However, it was later replaced by Malay as the lingua franca language in the archipelago. In the 16th-18th centuries AD, Portuguese became an important language for the commercial and cultural fields among the ethnic population of the archipelago. However, since the 17th century AD, the Dutch took over the important role of the Portuguese, and slowly English became an important international language in the archipelago, especially after independence (Edzard et al., 2011). Meanwhile, Arabic cannot be a second language after Malay or Indonesian, although modernist Muslims have tried to make such efforts a reality.

From the 17th century onwards, several Muslim scholars of the archipelago productively wrote their works in Arabic and Malay. These scholars include Syam al-Din al-Sumatrani, Nur al-Din al-Raniri, Abd al-Rauf al-Singkili, and Muhammad Yusuf al-Makassari. These Arabic-language works show the urgency of the Arabic language in Islamic scientific discourse since the early 17th century AD. Data from the catalog of the National Museum in Jakarta shows that there are more than a thousand Arabic manuscripts, including fifteen manuscripts in the form of poetry and more than a hundred manuscripts in the form of the Qur'an and other important collections (Edzard et al., 2011).

However, according to Kaptein, Islamic scholars, especially orientalist, do not pay much attention to the works of Arabic-speaking scholars from the archipelago. That's because these Arabic-language works are still considered less interesting to study compared to those produced by scholars from other parts of the Muslim World (especially the Arab World). The gap in the study of Arabic works written by Nusantara scholars has led to a lack of studies that comprehensively map the relationship between Islamic studies in Indonesia in general and the development of the Arabic language. Therefore, the Arabic language in the early Muslim

scholars of the archipelago was very important. This is shown by the close relationship between the Muslim Islands and the main cities of Islamic education, namely Makkah, Medina, and Cairo. Second, there is a significant role of Hadromi Arabic in maintaining the use of Arabic until the 20th century AD (Kaptein, 2017).

The urgency of the Arabic language among Muslims in Indonesia was also expressed firmly by Indonesian Muslim scholars such as the founding figure of NU, KH. Hasyim Asya'ari advocated mastering the Arabic language for anyone who wants to learn Islamic sources, namely the Qur'an and Hadith. In addition, K.H Ahmad Dahlan, the founder of Muhammadiyah, also has the same view on the urgency of the Arabic language. This is evidenced by several collections of books from Arab reformers that were deliberately brought by K.H. Ahmad Dahlan to spread the ideas of reform that were taking place in the Middle East. Even neo-modernist figures such as Nur Kholis Madjid also emphasized the importance of Arabic for the spiritual life of Muslims. However, the use of Arabic in worship rituals must also be accompanied by efforts to understand its meaning (Kaptein, 2017).

In the context of subsequent developments, the hard efforts of Indonesian Muslim scholars to write grammatical works or Arabic dictionaries only occurred in the 1930s. The first Arabic book written in Indonesian was Mahmud Yunus' work *Belajar Arabic*, published in the 1930s. Meanwhile, *Munjid* is still the main reference for educated people in the dictionary. Furthermore, the main work of the dictionary with a thickness of 1701 pages was born and written by Ahmad Warson Maunawwir with the title of his famous dictionary, *al-Munawwir: Arabic-Indonesian Dictionary* (Edzard et al., 2011).

Apart from the urgency of Arabic in intellectual thought and discourse, the public also appreciatively appreciates the Arabic language. This is shown by the increasing number of names given to newborns with Arabic or hybrid real names (Javanese + Arabic or Arabic + Javanese) (Kuipers & Askuri 2017). The use of Arabic names among certain well-known religious or entertainment figures has also triggered an increase in the use of Arabic words. One of the popular Arabic names is Fahri, which became very popular to name babies because this name is the main character in the wonderful novel *Verses of Love*.

In Indonesia, the development and interest in learning Arabic is still relatively high even though it is lower than English. This can be proven by the continued emergence of Arabic language education, both formal and non-formal. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic has also triggered the birth of various online Arabic courses. In addition, the competition between Arabic and English in Indonesia is not very striking compared to other Asian Muslim countries. In Brunei, for example, the tendency of young people to use English is very high and shifts the use of Malay among the younger generation. The emergence of Islamic novels such as *Ayat-Ayat Cinta* and *Negeri 5 Menara* deliberately exposed some vocabulary and even Arabic phrases used in dialogue in the story. This also shows that the Arabic language among millennials in Indonesia is becoming more familiar (Zulkifli et al., 2020).

Regarding its use, Arabic in Indonesia has two categories. First, classical Arabic is used in religious books called the Yellow Book (*Kitab Kuning*). Classical Arabic tends to be easier to understand because it uses familiar religious vocabulary such as *fiqh*, morals, Sufism, and others. Second, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is Arabic taught in schools, modern Islamic boarding schools, or universities. MSA is used in both conversations and textbooks. However, in their daily use, some Islamic boarding schools have unique Arabic dialects

based on the region. Some of them use a mixing code between Arabic and local languages (Lesmana, 2019).

Cultural Issues of Arabic Language Teaching in Islamic Boarding Schools

This section discusses students' perceptions of cultural content in learning Arabic. The questions formulated are directed at issues that have so far been attached to the general doctrine of Islamic boarding schools. In particular, the questionnaire given to the respondents contained elements of questions that led to 1) motivation to learn Arabic, 2) perception of the urgency of Arabic culture in learning Arabic, 3) perception of the possibility of applying Arabic culture in the Indonesian context, 4) perception of the most advantageous Arab country for learning purposes, 5) perception of Arabic and Islamic textbook sources, 6) perception of clothing, 7) perception of the comparison of conditions between Arab countries and Indonesia, and 8) perception of maintaining Indonesian cultural diversity. The eight constructions compiled a questionnaire. The results of each will be explained below.

1. Motivation for Learning Arabic among Students

Motivation is an important element of a person's educational success. Motivation will be the main driver during the educational process that a person goes through. In this context, the questionnaire provides respondents with a choice of answers consisting of reasons or motivations for understanding religion, further study, and other motivations, namely business or work. From the questionnaire distributed to 35 respondents, 25 chose religious motivation, 6 chose motivation for further study, and 4 decided on other motivations.

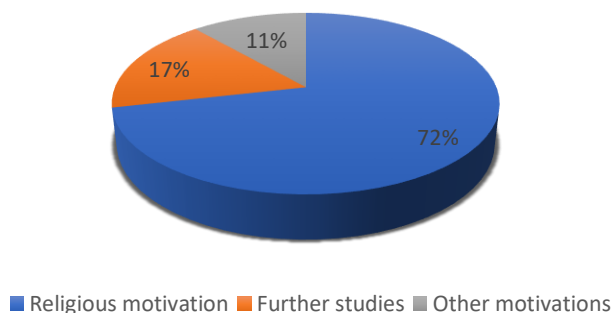


Figure 1. Motivation for Learning Arabic

Figure 1 shows that, in general, respondents chose religious motivation as the main reason for students to learn Arabic. Respondents determined their motivation to learn Arabic in order to understand Islam. This shows that Arabic is still considered a religious language. An illustration of this has also been found in various previous studies that religious motivation is still a strong reason why a student is interested in learning Arabic. Research conducted on students at Madrasah Aliyah throughout the Bangka Belitung Islands showed that of all the questions answered by students, questions related to religious motivation and understanding of the Qur'an showed the highest score compared to other questions (Syarifah & Sumar, 2019). In terms of the learning environment in

Islamic boarding schools, religious motivation is also still the main factor chosen by students (Rahman, 2018).

In integrative theory, one of the successes of students in learning foreign languages is the motivation to understand cultural aspects, including religion, that exist in the language they learn (Nailufar, 2018). In addition, in Asian societies such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, religious motivation in learning Arabic is a factor that cannot be ignored (Al Shlowiy, 2019).

2. Student's Perception of Arabic Cultural Aspects

Culture is one of the elements inherent in language because language reflects the culture of the community. In some cases, cultural issues become sensitive in teaching a foreign language. In Arabic language teaching, there are some criticisms and objections to the cultural content in Arabic language teaching textbooks. This objection is caused by the assessment that the culture carried out tends to lead to a certain cultural discourse.

Based on a questionnaire given to 35 respondents about the urgency of cultural introduction in Arabic language teaching, 21 respondents stated the importance of introducing Arabic culture. A total of 9 students said it was substantial, while the remaining said it was not important.

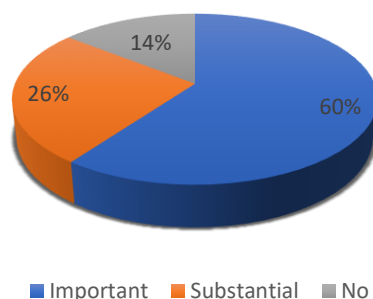


Figure 2. Perception of Arabic Culture in Arabic Language Teaching

Based on Figure 2, the students generally agreed that culture is an important part that needs to be introduced in learning Arabic. It goes without saying that communication and cultural exchange are essential and inevitable in a global society. Therefore, understanding culture as an inherent element of language is essential for learning. Even so, there are quite basic things in the context of the Arabic language, namely, that culture is inherent in the religious traditions of the Arabs. Thus, understanding the cultural context more specifically needs to be emphasized. At this level, the researcher then shared the following questionnaire regarding the issue of Arabic clothing, especially *jalabiyyah*, whether it is part of Arab culture or Islamic sharia. Based on the questionnaire given, 22 people considered *jalabiyyah* clothing to be part of sharia, 10 respondents saw that *jalabiyyah* was not sharia because it was only a cultural product, and 3 respondents indicated that they did not know what *jalabiyyah* meant.

Furthermore, the researcher submitted a questionnaire about the need and opportunity to practice Arabic culture in real life in the Indonesian context. The results of the questionnaire showed that 17 people considered it possible to practice Arabic culture

in Indonesian society. Meanwhile, 12 people answered “yes,” and 6 people said there was no need to practice Arabic culture in Indonesian society.

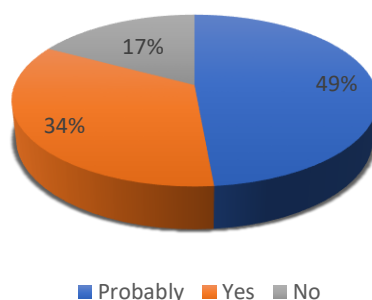


Figure 3. Perception of Arabic Cultural Practices in Everyday Life

Figure 3 gives the impression that student sees it as possible or even mandatory to practice Arabic culture in the context of Muslims in Indonesia. These findings illustrate that students have a shallow understanding of culture. Culture, for them, is seen as an integral part of religion. In this case, since Islam originated in Arab society, according to them, the culture found in the Arab community also needs to be adopted.

Furthermore, the researcher tried to find out the expectations and choices of students if they wanted to continue their studies in Arab countries. The questionnaire presented leads to the will of the favorite countries to be further analyzed, namely Egypt, Yemen, and other Arab countries, and in particular, provides a choice of answers for Egypt. This question is built on the assumption that respondents' choices towards a particular country reflect their expectations and beliefs. Based on a questionnaire distributed to 35 respondents, 16 people chose Yemen, 14 people chose Egypt, and 5 people chose other Arab countries.

In the following questionnaire, the researcher tried to ask whether Arabic reference books should come from Arab countries or perhaps from other countries. Of the 35 respondents, 19 voted that the answers to the reference books could come from any country, and 16 people voted that the answers to study textbooks should come from Egypt and Yemen. Three people chose the answer for reference books from other Arab countries. Meanwhile, in the last questionnaire, the researcher explored the understanding and perception of students towards efforts to maintain the plurality and diversity of Indonesian culture. Based on a questionnaire given to 35 respondents, 28 people agreed to maintain cultural diversity, 5 people voted against it, and 2 people voted not to know.

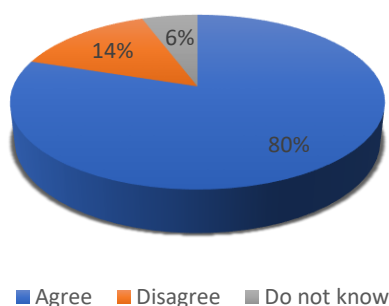


Figure 4. Perception of Maintaining Indonesian Cultural Diversity

Figure 4 shows that most respondents strongly agree with maintaining cultural diversity in Indonesia. These findings further emphasize that although they tended to admire certain cultures in previous questionnaires, this admiration was carried within the framework of multiculturalism. This is evidenced by the fact that most Islamic boarding schools integrate their own curriculum (some Middle Eastern-oriented) with the Indonesian national curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study explores students' perceptions of Arabic cultural elements in teaching Arabic in Islamic boarding schools in East Java. The study specifically examines how students perceive the cultural values associated with learning Arabic and the broader implications for their understanding of multicultural issues. In general, students believe that Arabic culture should be incorporated into the process of teaching Arabic, although some may blur the distinction between cultural practices and religious doctrines. For example, a small percentage of them may consider clothes such as *jalabiyyah* to be part of shari'a. Regardless of their overall orientation, the students show a commitment to embracing and preserving the diversity of Indonesian culture. Cultural contestation among students is evident in their dress and use of Arabic vocabulary, serving not only as a means of communication but also as a distinct identity that reflects their ideology. Importantly, this typical approach to multiculturalism does not isolate them socially; Instead, they show the ability to adapt to modern trends through various religious activities.

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