

ARABIC LEARNING STRATEGIES IN PESANTREN-BASED UNIVERSITIES (OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES AT PERSADA UAD)

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Abstract

This study aims to determine the Arabic learning strategy in Pesantren-based universities focused on the Pesantren Kiai Haji Ahmad Dahlan (Persada) at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan (UAD), then analyze the opportunities and challenges. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with documentation, interviews, and observations. The main data sources in the study consist of: 1) Observation notes of language activities at Persada, 2) Documentation in the form of pretest and posttest results, 3) Results of interviews with students, supervisors, and heads of language departments, while secondary data sources include books, articles, or documents related to language development in Islamic boarding schools at universities. The results of this study: As a university-based Islamic boarding school, Persada UAD implements a policy of converting Arabic language learning into a mandatory AIK competency certification course for all UAD students. This presents several opportunities, including motivation with a humanistic approach, a massive scholarship program to the Middle East, and the development of research in various fields from the Middle East. Furthermore, challenges faced include differences in basic Arabic language knowledge, the students' busy schedules, and the differing interests of students majoring in various fields. These challenges need to be addressed through program improvements by Persada UAD management.

Keywords: *Arabic Learning Strategies, Persada UAD, Language's Opportunities, Language's Challenge*

Introduction

Mastery of language, both strengthened mother tongues and additional foreign languages, constitutes a foundational cognitive asset for young people, directly supporting higher-order thinking, literacy development, and academic achievement. Contemporary meta-analyses and empirical reviews indicate measurable associations between bilingual or sustained language learning and improvements in executive functions (such as attentional control and task-switching),¹ as well as gains in memory and metalinguistic awareness that transfer to broader school learning. Accordingly, graduate-level curriculum design and education policy should prioritize systematic language instruction as an

¹ Cassandra J. Lowe and others, 'The Bilingual Advantage in Children's Executive Functioning Is Not Related to Language Status: A Meta-Analytic Review', *APS Association for Psychology Science*, 32.7 (2021), p. 1115.

evidence-based lever for improving academic outcomes and fostering cognitive resilience among youth.²

Economic, digital, and opportunity-related imperatives: In the context of globalization and rapidly evolving digital economies, linguistic competence is an instrumental enabler of access, to international scholarship, cross-border employment, and digital knowledge ecosystems, thereby shaping life-course opportunities for younger cohorts.³ Evidence from studies on digital language pedagogy and Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) demonstrates that technology-mediated language programs can increase motivation, personalize learning paths, and accelerate practical communicative skills, which amplifies employability and entrepreneurship potential for digitally native youth. Thus, policy and institutional investment in scalable, technology-enhanced language learning platforms represent a strategic priority for human-capital development.⁴ Consequently, a robust language policy for youth must reconcile demands for global communicative competence with targeted measures to sustain minority and regional languages as part of a pluralistic educational mission.⁵

Learning Arabic offers youth distinctive cognitive and scholastic advantages while also enabling direct access to primary religious, historical, and cultural texts. Beyond the general benefits of multilingualism for executive function and metalinguistic awareness, Arabic, both Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and relevant regional varieties, provides young learners with literacy tools to engage authentically with a vast written tradition (religious scriptures, classical literature, and contemporary scholarship) that is otherwise accessible only through translation.⁶ For students in Muslim-majority or Muslim-minority settings, competence in Arabic strengthens critical religious literacy and

² Blanka Klimova and Marcel Pikhart, 'Cognitive Gain in Digital Foreign Language Learning', *Brain Sciences*, 13.7 (2023), p. 1074.

³ Hasan Alisoy and Zarifa Sadig, 'Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL): Revolutionizing Language Education', *Luminis Applied Science and Engineering*, 1.1 (2024), p. 60.

⁴ Prima Hariyanto, Achril Zalmansyah, and Joni Endardi, 'Language Maintenance and Identity: A Case of Bangka Malay', *International Journal of Society, Culture, and Language IJSCSL*, 11.2 (2023), p. 60.

⁵ I-Chung Ke, *Globalization and English Education in Taiwan: Curriculum, Perceptions, and Pedagogies*, 1st edn (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).

⁶ Mona A. Alshishry, 'Heritage Language Maintenance Among Immigrant Youth: Factors Influencing Proficiency and Identity', *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 15.2 (2024), p. 500.

deepens interpretive capacities, thereby supporting more informed personal belief formation and community participation.⁷

In the globalized digital era, Arabic proficiency expands educational and employment pathways—ranging from regional academic collaboration and diplomacy to media, translation, and technology sectors—while also enabling participation in Arabic-language digital knowledge ecosystems.⁸ Contemporary research shows that technology-mediated approaches (interactive multimedia and mobile-assisted language learning) can substantially increase motivation and accessibility for young learners, making large-scale, cost-effective language initiatives feasible.⁹ Moreover, deliberate investment in Arabic learning for youth plays a crucial role in heritage language maintenance and intergenerational cultural transmission: policies that pair modern pedagogies with community-based programs help sustain regional varieties and minority Arabic dialects from erosion, thus preserving linguistic diversity while equipping youth for global engagement.¹⁰

Pesantren-based higher education represents a distinctive hybrid model that seeks to reconcile the devotional, character-forming aims of Pesantren with the disciplinary knowledge, research orientation, and credentialing functions of universities.¹¹ Proponents argue that embedding pesantren epistemologies within formal higher-education structures strengthens moral formation, community engagement, and the integrative transmission of Islamic sciences alongside modern curricula—offering an educational rationale that privileges contextualized knowledge production and ethical leadership in Muslim societies. Empirical studies and institutional reviews also highlight recurring structural challenges—such as differing governance logics, research capacity gaps, and accreditation

⁷ Johanne Paradis and others, *The Role of Age of Arrival and Language Environment Factors in Arabic Heritage Language Development: A Longitudinal Study*, Cambridge University Press, 2025.

⁸ Syarifah, 'Interactive Multimedia-Based Arabic Language Learning: A Systematic Literature Review', *Journal Sustainable*, 7.2 (2024), p. 247.

⁹ Mohamad Idhan, Sitti Hasnah, and Putri Ayu Agustina, 'Arabic Learning Strategy in a Pesantren: Local Cultural Integration Perspective', *Al Hayat Journal of Islamic Education*, 8.4 (2024), p. 1274.

¹⁰ Sayidah Alfa Nafilah and others, 'Arabic Language Learning Methods In The Digital Era', *Ijaz Arabi*, 7.1 (2024), p. 280.

¹¹ Abdu Alifah, Syamsul Ma'arif, and I Made Sumertajaya, 'Research in Pesantren-Based Higher Education: Exploring The Factors Improving Lecture's Research Performace', *Al Ishlah Jurnal Pendidikan*, 14.2 (2022), p. 2589.

alignment—that must be addressed if pesantren-based universities are to deliver both religious formation and recognized academic outcomes.¹²

From a policy and practice perspective, successful incorporation of pesantren into higher education demands deliberate strategies: curricular integration that balances classical Islamic curricula with contemporary sciences, investment in faculty development and research infrastructure, and the adoption of hybrid pedagogies (including digital and community-based learning) to increase accessibility and relevance for 21st-century learners.¹³ Recent case studies and conference proceedings document promising innovations—internationalization initiatives, eco-pesantren programs, and digital curriculum projects—that point to viable pathways for modernization without eroding religious identity; yet scaling such innovations depends on sustained institutional partnerships, regulatory support, and quality-assurance mechanisms attuned to pesantren epistemic values.¹⁴

This study aims to determine the Arabic learning strategy in Pesantren-based universities focused on the Pesantren Kiai Haji Ahmad Dahlan (Persada) at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan (UAD), then analyze the opportunities and challenges. Due to the high level of attention paid to Arabic language learning in Islamic boarding school-based universities, this research is considered important and needs to be followed up.

Method

This research is qualitative and presented descriptively. The researcher provides a comprehensive overview of the Arabic language learning process at the Pesantren KH Ahmad Dahlan (Persada) Universitas Ahmad Dahlan, then conducts an in-depth analysis, and concludes with an overview of opportunities and challenges.

Qualitative research is a scientific approach that focuses on a deep understanding of social phenomena by exploring the meanings, experiences, and perspectives of individuals or groups. This approach emphasizes the natural context, so data is collected

¹² AI Prastowo, T Suharto, and SA Widodo, 'Harmonizing Knowledge Integration: Insights from Amin Abdullah and Nidhal Guessom in Pesantren-Based Higher Education', *Al Ishlah Jurnal Pendidikan*, 15.3 (2022), p. 3109.

¹³ Mursal, 'Integrasi Pendidikan Tinggi Dan Pesantren Dalam Penguatan Konsep Ekonomi Islam', *Jurnal Al-Mizan: Jurnal Hukum Islam Dan Ekonomi Syariah*, 11.1 (2024), p. 181.

¹⁴ Hakim Ratih, Widia Winata, and Ahmad Suryadi, 'Internationalizing Pesantren Higher Education by Bilingual Teaching', in *International Conference on Pesantren and Islamic Studies*, 2024, p. 10.

through techniques such as in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis to capture dynamics that cannot be measured numerically. The primary goal of qualitative research is to produce a holistic and descriptive picture, allowing researchers to interpret social reality as understood by the research subjects. Through an inductive analysis process, qualitative research findings often generate new concepts, patterns, or theories relevant to the research context. This approach is highly useful for uncovering hidden meanings, understanding human behavior, and explaining complex social processes.¹⁵

Result and Discussion

The Pesantren KH Ahmad Dahlan (Persada) at Universitas Ahmad Dahlan is a scientific and character development institution that serves as a forum for developing progressive Muhammadiyah student cadres imbued with Islamic values. This Islamic boarding school not only provides housing (dormitories) for students, but also organizes various religious learning programs, leadership training, Islamic studies, and community service activities designed to strengthen the faith, intellectual intelligence, and social skills of its students. The existence of Persada UAD reflects the vision of Islamic education that focuses not only on the academic aspects of the campus but also the formation of Islamic, disciplined, independent, high-achieving, and modest individuals in everyday life.

This Islamic boarding school has grown rapidly in recent years, with Persada locations now spread across Yogyakarta, such as Campus IV Bantul and Campus II B Umbulharjo, demonstrating the growing interest of students in combining academic studies with spiritual and character development. Furthermore, Persada UAD actively organizes various activities, such as leadership training, Islamic thought seminars, and the *Haflah Akhirussanah* (final gathering) which celebrates the achievements of students in various competitions, both regionally, nationally, and internationally. These activities strengthen the role of Islamic boarding schools for students as spaces for holistic self-development that balance knowledge and religious values.¹⁶

¹⁵ Anjaludin and Arizqi Ihsan Pratama, 'Integration of Pesantren Curriculum with Digital Technology: Challenges and Opportunities in Islamic Education', in *International Conference on Pesantren2* (Jakarta, 2025), p. 1.

¹⁶ Profil Persada UAD', 2025 <<https://persada.uad.ac.id/tentangpersada/>>.

Activities at the KH Ahmad Dahlan Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren KH Ahmad Dahlan UAD) are designed to develop students who excel in spirituality, intellect, and character. Each student participates in routine development programs such as tahsin and tahfiz Al-Qur'an, study of tafsir and hadith, Islamic halaqah, and in-depth study of Al-Islam and Muhammadiyah. In addition, there are religious mentoring, habituation of congregational worship, sermons after prayers, and evenings of faith and piety (mabit) aimed at strengthening religious awareness as well as moral sensitivity. These activities are the hallmark of Persada UAD as a student boarding school oriented towards spiritual development and the formation of a strong Islamic character.

In addition to religious activities, Persada UAD also organizes various self-development and leadership programs as a form of progressive cadre formation. Students participate in leadership training, Muhammadiyah ideology seminars, writing and research workshops, and social activities such as community service and community outreach. The Islamic boarding school also frequently holds academic competitions, Islamic arts and cultural activities, internal student exchanges, and the final haflah (final gathering) as a culmination of appreciation for students' achievements. Through these various activities, Persada UAD serves not only as a place to live but also as a comprehensive development ecosystem that integrates campus scholarship with Islamic and societal values.

Arabic Learning at The Persada UAD

Arabic language learning at Persada is not taught solely based on needs, but in order to increase learning motivation, the Persada Management collaborated with the Rector of Universitas Ahmad Dahlan until the issuance of the *Surat Keputusan Rektor* number 334 of 2024. This decree contains the conversion of courses taught at Persada with courses required by the study program.

One of the certification courses converted is Arabic Language. This motivates students to learn Arabic. Not only does it prepare them for the future, but Arabic language grades at Persada can also be used to fulfill their study program's graduation requirements.

As an Islamic boarding school, Persada UAD places great emphasis on the language development of its students. To optimize its language programs, Persada has established a special division to manage these programs: the Language Division. This division is chaired by a lecturer who is responsible for designing, implementing, and

evaluating language activities. The division chair has seven members, who are responsible for carrying out daily language activities.

In one academic year which is divided into two semesters, the Language Division designs several programs to improve students' abilities in Arabic and English.

Academic Programs

Arabic language learning at Persada is implemented based on the UAD rector's policy regarding conversion. As stated in the decree, the conversion is from Arabic language courses and *Muhadatsah* activities to an Arabic language certification course, which is mandatory for all UAD students.

Non-Persada students are required to take two elective certification courses, including Arabic. This offers a distinct advantage for Persada students: simply passing the Arabic course at Persada and participating in the *Muhadatsah* (religious study program) automatically earns a grade in Arabic in their study program.

Arabic language classes at Persada are held from 6:00 PM (after Maghrib) to 8:00 PM. They are held in the Faculty of Medicine classroom or the Amphitheater, in accordance with UAD's academic program standards. Lecturers are qualified UAD lecturers, with a minimum of a master's degree and competence in teaching Arabic.

For optimal learning, the Arabic language class is divided into two classes: Class A, for students with a background in Arabic, and Class B, for students with minimal Arabic knowledge. This allows the material in Classes A and B to be tailored to the students' abilities.

Non-Academic Programs

In addition to classroom activities, Arabic language learning activities are also conducted in the dormitory. Activities to improve Arabic language skills are divided into two categories: routine and non-routine.

Routine activities to improve Arabic include providing Arabic vocabulary (*ilqa mufradat*) every morning, Arabic conversation (*muhadatsah*) on Saturday mornings, and Arabic speeches (*muhadlarah*) on Monday nights. Non-routine activities include training for presenters, speeches, sermons, and religious lectures, Arabic Day, pre- and post-exams,

a language competition to commemorate Persada's anniversary, providing vocabulary books, and TOEFL training.

Additionally, to provide a foundation for vocabulary development, Persada UAD has compiled a book called Arabic and English Learning, compiled internally by Persada UAD and published by UAD Press. This book serves as the primary guide for students in conveying everyday vocabulary, allowing Arabic vocabulary development to be measured and evaluated based on it.

Increased Motivation

To measure the Arabic language skills of Persada students, the management conducted tests before and after the Arabic language learning process. In the 2024-2025 academic year, Persada management tested 244 students using a Google form system. They tested 15 basic Arabic questions, assessing conversational knowledge and basic vocabulary. The test resulted in an average score of 55.47 out of a maximum of 95 points, with a median of 55/95 and a range of 5-95 points.

These results indicate that the educational backgrounds of Persada students are highly diverse. Some have a strong Arabic language background, while others have minimal Arabic language background. However, when viewed from the distribution of grades, it appears that students with a strong Arabic language background outnumber those with a poor one.

Based on the pre-learning test results, in addition to academic and non-academic programs, the management emphasized increasing motivation through a humanistic approach. Adult students cannot experience forced language learning; a more humanistic and humane approach, along with a needs assessment, is needed to ensure they learn Arabic with a sense of calling.

To accommodate this need, the management held several motivational activities, delivered by the Head of the Language Division. One topic discussed the relevance of learning Arabic to increasing devotion in prayer. Arabic is part of Islam, is prescribed for use in prayer, and one way to increase devotion in prayer is to understand Arabic.

Opportunities and Challenges

In the Arabic language learning process at Persada UAD, there are several opportunities that can optimize and maximize results, so that course conversion can be maximized, among these opportunities are: 1. Humanism-based motivation; 2. Massive scholarships; 3. Strengthening research.

Humanistic Arabic learning is a learning process that focuses on students as whole human beings, not simply as recipients of material. This approach emphasizes respect for students' differences in abilities, backgrounds, and learning experiences, and fosters a warm, dialogical, and empathetic classroom atmosphere. In humanistic Arabic learning, language is taught not only as a system of rules (*nahwu-sharaf*), but also as a means of communication, self-expression, and the understanding of life's values. The teacher acts as a facilitator, providing space for active participation, encouraging intrinsic motivation, and fostering self-confidence, so that students feel safe to try, make mistakes, and develop naturally in mastering Arabic.

In Arabic language learning at Persada, the management massively convey to the students that Arabic is a language that increases devotion in worship, a language that makes it easier to get a job, a language that is currently being studied a lot because of globalization.

Furthermore, the massive number of scholarships to Middle Eastern countries, such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, which require Arabic language skills, presents a unique opportunity for Persada UAD students. In particular, recent scholarship opportunities have expanded beyond religious fields to include medicine, pharmacy, engineering, and other general fields. Therefore, knowledge and awareness of these scholarship opportunities can be a valuable asset for students, motivating them to learn Arabic.

Another opportunity lies in strengthening research. Research in various fields is, of course, predominantly discussed in English. However, as a second international language, a significant amount of research in Arabic covers a wide range of fields. Progress in Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the energy and medical fields, is noteworthy.

Based on the explanation above, it appears that the opportunities to improve motivation and the quality of Arabic language learning appear promising and attractive,

especially from the aspect of humanism-based motivation, the massive number of scholarships to the Middle East, and research opportunities to the Middle East.

Besides opportunities, there are certainly challenges in improving or developing the learning process. The challenges in learning Arabic at Persada UAD include: 1. Differences in Arabic language background; 2. Busy schedules; 3. Differences in interests.

A significant challenge preventing the Arabic language curriculum at Persada from being fully implemented is the disparity in the students' basic Arabic language backgrounds. Some students admit to having never studied Arabic before, and even struggling to read the hijaiyah letters. However, some students, who are Islamic boarding school graduates, already have a strong foundation in Arabic. This forces the Persada UAD management to adjust the material for both beginner and advanced students. However, because non-academic activities are still combined, further evaluation is needed to ensure that students without a basic Arabic language background do not struggle with the learning process.

Furthermore, the busy schedule of Persada students also presents a challenge in the Arabic language learning process. A Persada student, who is also a first or second semester student at Ahmad Dahlan University, has a fairly busy class schedule of approximately 20 credits. University classes end around 5 p.m., followed by the need to immediately prepare for Maghrib prayers, followed by Persada lectures. This can certainly make students lose focus. Furthermore, the busy schedule of Persada UAD, which includes courses other than Arabic, sacred footprints, Quran memorization, Quran recitation, and various training sessions, also impacts the Arabic language learning process. The Persada management needs the right strategy to manage this.

The final challenge is the differing interests among UAD's Persada students. Students majoring in Indonesian or English literature naturally want to focus on their chosen language. It's not easy for someone who has chosen one language to study and then is asked to learn another language that they might not be interested in.

The three challenges in the form of differences in basic Arabic language skills, busy activities, and differences in the interests of the students, are certainly challenges that must be answered by the Persada UAD management, so that Arabic language learning can continue to be carried out under existing conditions.

Conclusion

As a university-based Islamic boarding school, Persada UAD implements a policy of converting Arabic language learning into a mandatory AIK competency certification course for all UAD students. This presents several opportunities, including motivation with a humanistic approach, a massive scholarship program to the Middle East, and the development of research in various fields from the Middle East. Furthermore, challenges faced include differences in basic Arabic language knowledge, the students' busy schedules, and the differing interests of students majoring in various fields. These challenges need to be addressed through program improvements by Persada UAD management.

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