

Improving Arabic Language Proficiency through the Language Immersion Method among Arabic Language Education Students at Universitas Islam Riau: An IMTA' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Arabic as a second language has long been taught in Indonesia, even before the Dutch colonial era. However, its teaching has been limited to religious schools, and the outcome of Arabic language learning has mostly been limited to the ability to read religious texts. Along with the development of the times, this goal certainly needs to be expanded, as the need for foreign languages has now extended beyond merely reading religious texts. The language immersion method is one of the methods that is massively used in various language teaching institutions in various countries. It is proven that by increasing the intensity with which students learn the language and the time allocated, they can keep students in good language condition. This research aims to describe the implementation of the Language Immersion Method at Arabic Language Education Department, Islamic University of Riau, where this method aims to improve students' Arabic language proficiency. The research results show that the application of this method is in line with theory, but there are several obstacles, both technical and non-technical, which, if it can be conditioned by the study program, will have a big impact on improving students' Arabic language skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Foreign language learning in Indonesia has generally undergone a long historical development. Dutch, for instance, was perceived by indigenous communities as the language of the colonial power. It was later followed by English and German, which were taught in certain schools, particularly those attended by aristocratic families and Dutch children (Alfarisy, 2021). The teaching of these three foreign languages also functioned among indigenous communities as a marker of social class. Meanwhile, Arabic language learning as a foreign language remained relatively exclusive, as it was largely confined to madrasahs or Islamic-based schools. This situation is understandable, considering that Arabic is not only a language that must be mastered in order to understand Islamic teachings from the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Islamic texts, but is also frequently identified as the language of Muslims. Historically, madrasahs themselves, especially in the early period of their establishment, were consistently associated with Islamic educational institutions belonging to the Muslim community (Jumhana & Maksum, 2021). Over time, foreign language learning is no longer elitist, as everyone can now easily access and learn foreign languages. English, in particular, has even been introduced to children from an early age. This can be seen in the existence of playgroups and kindergartens that have begun to provide English lessons to their students. At the secondary school and higher education levels, English seems to have become an essential subject, standing alongside other core subjects such as Indonesian and Mathematics (Alfarisy, 2021).

The development of Arabic as a foreign language is closely related to the arrival of Islam in Indonesia. Thus, the teaching of Arabic as a foreign language in the Nusantara region has a much longer history than that of other foreign languages, such as Dutch, English, German, and French. Ibn Battuta recorded in his travel account that the first region he entered in the Nusantara was Sumatra, specifically Samudra Pasai. He narrated that he and his expedition entered Samudra Pasai in 1345 CE, during the reign of Sultan al-Malik al-Zahir (Batutuh, 1987) Sultan Muhammad al-Malik al-Zahir himself was the son of the founder of the Samudra Pasai Sultanate. This provides a basis for interpreting that Arabic language learning developed alongside the arrival of Islam in the Nusantara.

Government policy concerning Arabic language learning as a foreign language has also made significant progress. Since the enactment of Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System, madrasahs have been recognized as educational institutions that teach Islamic sciences, including Arabic (Jumhana & Maksum, 2021). Today, Arabic language learning has continued to expand. It is no longer limited to the authority of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, but has also entered the Ministry of Education system as an elective foreign language subject and as a department or study program in higher education institutions (S. Inaku & Laubaha, 2022).

In this study, the author seeks to contribute to the development of Arabic language learning. Various observations indicate that Arabic is still commonly perceived as a language of reading and writing, rather than being positioned as a language of communication. Only a limited number of educational institutions use Arabic as a communicative language. This is because most practitioners of Islamic education still regard Arabic primarily as the language of Islamic religious texts (Surur, 2022). This assumption is not limited to Arabic language teaching practitioners; rather, the majority of Muslims in Indonesia still understand Arabic merely as a religious language (Fahrurrozi, 2021). In response to the phenomenon in which Arabic language learning is still viewed as passive language learning, the language immersion approach—widely discussed by scholars of foreign language teaching—is expected to offer a new perspective for Arabic language learning in Indonesia, particularly at Universitas Islam Riau (UIR), one of the oldest and largest higher education institutions in Riau Province.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The method used by the author in completing this study is a qualitative descriptive method. Specifically, the author describes the implementation of the language immersion approach applied by several lecturers of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau in teaching Arabic as a language of communication among students of the program. The data in this study were collected through library research, in the form of document analysis of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau, particularly curriculum documents, as well as interviews with several lecturers who teach Islamic studies courses in the program.

Interviews serve as a data collection instrument by posing a number of questions to be asked and answered orally. Observation techniques are often combined with in-depth interviews in order to obtain more accurate information. Thus, the data obtained from observation are further explored through in-depth interviews. This constitutes one of the efforts to ensure the accuracy of the data collected (Fiantika et al., 2022).

The data obtained from library sources and interviews were analyzed using content analysis. This method was used to systematically examine, categorize, and interpret relevant information from the collected data. The analysis focused on identifying important themes, concepts, patterns, and relationships related to the research objectives. The author then interpreted the findings based on the theoretical framework and the context of the study. The results of this interpretation served as the foundation for the discussion, enabling the study to present findings that were relevant, systematic, and meaningful.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Reality of Arabic Language Learning at Universitas Islam Riau

Based on three stages of qualitative data collection, namely documentation, interviews, and observation, the author identified several findings as follows:

1. Arabic Language Learning at Universitas Islam Riau

Universitas Islam Riau is the first Islamic university and the oldest university in Riau Province. It was established on September 4, 1962, corresponding to 23 Dhu al-Qa'dah 1382, under the auspices of the Riau Islamic Education Foundation (Yayasan Lembaga Pendidikan Islam Riau/YLPI Riau). In its early development, Universitas Islam Riau had only one faculty, namely the Faculty of Religion, with two departments: the Department of Tarbiyah and the Department of Law. Arabic began to be taught as a compulsory course in the Department of Tarbiyah, which later developed into the Faculty of Ushuluddin and subsequently became the Faculty of Islamic Studies. Until 2017, Arabic remained a compulsory course taken by students from all study programs within the Faculty of Islamic Studies. This was later followed by several other faculties, such as the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP) and the Faculty of Communication Sciences (FIKOM), which had also offered Arabic either as a compulsory or elective course.

As explained earlier in the introduction, the majority of Muslim society, including Muslim academics, still regard Arabic primarily as a religious language studied for the purpose of understanding religious texts such as the Qur'an, Hadith, Tawhid, and Fiqh. This perception is certainly unfavorable to the position of Arabic as a foreign language that has long been studied in Indonesia.

2. Curriculum Policy of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau

In its development at Universitas Islam Riau, Arabic language learning has continued to progress, particularly since July 2017, when the Arabic Language Education Study Program obtained its operational permit. The program carries the slogan "Arabic as a Language of Communication." This orientation is reflected in the distribution of courses in the curriculum, which has undergone two revisions. The following is the structure of the Body of Knowledge in the curriculum of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau;



Gambar 1. Academic Framework of the Department

The author's main concern is the teaching of Islamic studies courses through a language immersion approach, in which these courses are delivered using Arabic as the medium of instruction and Arabic-

language references. One of the weaknesses of communicative Arabic language learning when it is not implemented through a language immersion method is the limitation of time (Mahgoub, 2016). The limited distribution of Arabic-related courses in each semester reduces students' intensity of engagement with Arabic, which subsequently affects their interest in using Arabic beyond the core Arabic language skill courses. On this basis, the language immersion approach has become a direction encouraged among lecturers of the Arabic Language Education Study Program, both in terms of instructional language and learning references. This approach is expected to maintain students' intensity of exposure to Arabic materials, even when they have reached the upper semesters, such as the fifth and sixth semesters, in which language-skill courses have become fewer.

3. Islamic Studies Courses in the Arabic Language Education Study Program at UIR

The 2020 MBKM Curriculum of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau was designed in such a way as to support communicative learning. The areas of study in the curriculum structure of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau are presented in the following table:

Tabel 1. **Description of Department Courses**

Kode	Bahan Kajian (BK)	Deskripsi Bahan Kajian
BK 1	Arabic Linguistics	Theoretical concepts of Arabic linguistics, including the theory of word position (<i>mawqi' al-i'rāb</i>) in sentences, analysis of word position (<i>mawqi' al-i'rāb</i>) in sentences, word-structure theory, analysis of word structure, theories of language problems, phonetic theory, lexicographic theory, and semantic indication.
BK 2	Arabic Language Skills	Theoretical and practical concepts of Arabic language skills, including listening to sounds, understanding and responding to spoken messages, guided basic speaking skills, advanced speaking skills, guided basic reading skills, advanced reading skills, expressing ideas in writing, producing systematic narratives, public speaking skills and competence, theoretical and practical concepts of Arabic–Indonesian translation, theoretical and practical concepts of Indonesian–Arabic translation, principles of Arabic writing, concepts and practices of entrepreneurship in the field of Arabic, and theoretical and practical concepts of oral translation. This area also includes Qur'anic learning methods for children and adults, concepts of developing an Arabic language environment in schools and Islamic boarding schools, theory and practice of Arabic for communicative purposes, Arabic for social media through the use of online social media as a communication medium to improve language proficiency, theoretical concepts of classical Islamic text analysis, the production and dissemination of Arabic-language information—such as events, opinions, thoughts, and ideas—through mass media, discussion forums to improve Arabic language proficiency, and the theory and practice of Arabic debate.
BK 3	Arabic Literature and Culture	Theoretical concepts of linguistic beauty in wording and meaning, concepts and theories of the assimilation of Arab culture with local culture, and theories of intercultural understanding.
BK 4	Arabic Language Curriculum and Learning	Information literacy skills in recognizing, searching for, finding, evaluating, and using information properly and accurately; final assignments applying basic research concepts; theoretical concepts of facilities and infrastructure from the perspective of Arabic language education; theoretical concepts of Arabic language teaching methodology; theoretical concepts of Arabic language learning evaluation; theoretical and practical concepts of Arabic language learning design; theoretical concepts of microteaching to develop integrated and comprehensive teaching skills in a learning process; theoretical concepts of learner development; basic concepts of

		descriptive statistics and its parametric role in education and research; theoretical and applied concepts of qualitative and quantitative research procedures in Arabic language education; lecture and fieldwork activities that integrate education and teaching, research, and community service by students in a pragmatic, broad-based manner through interdisciplinary, comprehensive, and cross-sectoral approaches; theoretical concepts of Qur'anic learning methods for children and adults; observation and apprenticeship processes undertaken by students to study aspects of learning and educational management in educational institutions; understanding of various cultural realities in Arab countries; theoretical concepts of the elementary-level Arabic curriculum; theoretical concepts of educational administration and supervision; theoretical concepts of the intermediate-level Arabic curriculum; and theoretical concepts of teaching Arabic to children.
BK 5	Religious Studies	Principles of the basic teachings of Islam, theoretical concepts of worship, muamalah, and ethics, theoretical concepts of the relationship between Islam and science, theoretical concepts of Qur'anic sciences, theoretical concepts of Hadith sciences, theoretical concepts of the history of Islamic civilization, theoretical concepts of Islamic legal theory (<i>uṣūl al-fiqh</i>), and theoretical concepts of Islamic education.
BK 6	Nationality Studies	Development of national ideological personality, insight, and civic attitudes, especially those related to the state philosophy in the creation of civil society and democracy in Indonesia; understanding and awareness of nationalism and love of the homeland; civilized democracy; becoming citizens with an Indonesian personality who are competitive, disciplined, and actively participate in building a peaceful life based on the Pancasila value system; theoretical concepts of Indonesian for academic written communication; and basic concepts of English.
BK 7	Entrepreneurship	Theories of basic entrepreneurship concepts, including the attitudes, personality, and profile of an entrepreneur; self-potential recognition; development of managerial skills; courage to take risks; introduction to the functions of entrepreneurial models; theoretical and technical guidance on Arabic for Hajj and Umrah purposes; theory and practice of Arabic-based entrepreneurship; and theory and practice of Arabic-based business.

The table above shows that religious or Islamic studies courses include Islamic Religious Education, Worship and Muamalah, Islam and Science, Qur'anic Sciences, Hadith Sciences, History of Islamic Civilization, Usul Fiqh, and Islamic Education. The integration of Arabic with Islamic studies courses is therefore highly important. As an initial step, policy makers should be able to design a plan by first integrating Arabic language course materials with Islamic studies courses, followed by integrating Arabic into all Islamic studies courses (Zaki, 2022). In the implementation of this method in Islamic studies courses, the immersion method is similar to *Content and Language Integrated Learning* (CLIL), as both use a second language as the medium of instruction. However, immersion is broader in scope because it focuses more on proficiency in the target language than on the content of a particular course (Nisa et al., 2021). CLIL focuses on language mastery within classroom learning content, whereas immersion has a wider learning scope, as it takes place not only in classroom instruction but also outside the classroom through various language-related activities. (Abdur Rahim et al., 2019)

4. Interview Results with Several Study Program Lecturers

The author also conducted interviews with several study program lecturers assigned to teach courses related to Arabic language expertise and Arabic language teaching, as well as Islamic studies courses. These lecturers include Dr. Rojja Pebrian, Lc., MA, Dr. Saproni, M.Ed., Dr. Ismail Akzam, MA, and Alfitri, Lc., M.Pd. The author, as a lecturer in the study program, was also among those assigned to teach Islamic studies

courses, including Qur'anic Sciences and History of Islamic Civilization, in addition to teaching core Arabic courses, namely Basic Syntax and Balaghah. The results of the interviews and observations can be described as follows:

- a. In every study program evaluation meeting, lecturers consistently evaluate the Course Learning Outcomes (CLOs) of each course, particularly those in the Arabic language course cluster.
- b. Considering the limited intensity of students' exposure to Arabic-related materials, a shared idea emerged that Islamic studies courses should also be directed toward CLOs related to Arabic language proficiency.
- c. Courses that can be taught using Arabic as the medium of instruction are delivered in Arabic. These include all courses related to Arabic language expertise and Arabic language teaching, as well as Islamic studies courses.

Based on the data presented in the findings, the author analyzed and classified several important points regarding the implementation of the language immersion method in the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau in order to improve the Arabic language proficiency of the study program's students. The following is the analysis elaborated in this study;

Theoretical Review of the Language Immersion Method

The language immersion method is currently widely discussed in the field of language teaching, particularly in Arabic language instruction. However, teachers in modern Islamic boarding schools have long been familiar with this method, even though they may not refer to it as language immersion. In these institutions, several subjects are taught using a foreign language, especially Arabic, as the medium of instruction. Subjects such as Tafsir, Hadith, Fiqh, Tawhid, Islamic History, and other Arabic-related disciplines are delivered in Arabic. This is because Arabic is the instrument used to understand the meanings contained in the Qur'an. Moreover, Arabic is also used as a means of understanding and interpreting the content of the Qur'an (Subhan Hi Ali Dodego, 2022).

The Language Immersion Method

Linguistically, immersion means to immerse, dip, or dive, as emphasized by Ibn Faris in *Maqāyīs* and Ibn Manẓūr in *Lisān al-'Arab* (Abdur Rahim et al., 2019), Al-Rāzī, in *Mukhtār al-Ṣiḥāḥ*, further adds the meaning of becoming united or integrated (Ar Razi, 2017). Meanwhile, in English, the term is often understood in a more lexical sense that does not fully capture the intended essence, namely dipping and diving (Jilali & Abdul Qadir, 2021). From these meanings, it can be concluded that, linguistically, immersion may refer to being united, having direct contact, and living within a language environment for an extended period of time (Abdur Rahim et al., 2019).

Terminologically, according to several language teaching experts, immersion is an approach used to improve learners' language ability, in which teachers and students use the target language being learned—in this case, Arabic—as the medium of instruction without using the first or mother tongue (Jilali & Abdul Qadir, 2021). A similar meaning is also explained in the view that language immersion refers to students' integration with the language they are learning, in which they intensively use the target language both inside and outside the classroom (Abdul Mohsen, 2021).

Language immersion is a program that helps students learn a foreign language by requiring teachers to prepare situations or conditions in the form of language activities, practices, or exercises intended to immerse students fully and actively in the foreign language (Hikmah, 2023). Although language immersion is not the only effective method for improving students' second-language proficiency, it may be regarded as an alternative approach to second-language learning, particularly in the context of Arabic as a language of communication and interaction. Several studies have shown that the language immersion method is highly effective and has an impact on improving students' second-language proficiency (Nasirudeen, 2024).

The Relationship between the Language Immersion Method and Arabic Language Proficiency

Language immersion is one method whose implementation is focused on improving language proficiency. Therefore, its intended targets are the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Two factors strongly influence the effectiveness of this method: first, the use of the second language in learning without relying on another language; and second, the duration of time during which students are intensively immersed in the language being learned (Mohamad, 2024). The proper implementation of the immersion method can increase students' intensity of exposure to the Arabic language they are learning, while also enhancing their confidence in using Arabic (Ismail et al., 2024). Thus, according to this method, Arabic has a dual function in the learning process. First, Arabic serves as the objective of language learning. Second, it also functions as a tool or medium used in the learning of Islamic studies courses or other subjects (Abdul Mohsen, 2021).

According to Nasirin's study, language immersion has an impact on language proficiency, particularly speaking and listening skills. This method also stimulates students' active participation and engagement in learning, while increasing their self-confidence (Nasirin et al., 2023).

Forms of Immersion Implementation In Arabic Language Learning, In The Departmen of Arabic Language Teaching

In terms of its theoretical application, the immersion method can be divided into two main activities: internal immersion activities and guided reflection activities.

1. In Classroom Learning

The effort made by lecturers in the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau to improve students' language proficiency is the implementation of the immersion method in classroom learning. In this context, all courses other than Arabic language courses, particularly Islamic studies courses, are taught using Arabic as the medium of instruction. Classroom learning is also carried out through various activities, such as *small group discussions*, panel discussions, interactive dialogues between students and lecturers in the form of question-and-answer sessions, and writing or reading assignments on study themes in both language and religious courses using Arabic-language books. These learning models are designed to ensure that students continuously interact with Arabic-related elements, so that language acquisition occurs indirectly and unconsciously.

2. Outside the Classroom

Outside classroom learning, the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau organizes activities and creates conditions that encourage students to remain intensively engaged with Arabic, at least while they are on campus. Several of these programs can be described as follows:

a. Arabic-Based Academic Services

Various academic services in the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau are designed to support the use of Arabic. Lecturers and the study program seek to implement the slogan *لا خدمة إلا بالعربية* (*No Service Without Arabic* / "No service without speaking Arabic"). This applies to meetings with the Head of the Study Program, consultations with academic advisors, thesis supervision, and even study program lecturers' meetings, all of which are conducted using Arabic.

b. The Arabic Camp Program

This program aims not only to introduce the study program to new students, but also to provide Arabic language preparation and introduce students to the Arabic language environment. All camp activities are conditioned to take place in Arabic. Moreover, this program also serves as an intensive language-learning activity for vocabulary introduction, especially for students of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau who do not come from Islamic educational backgrounds, such as general senior high schools, vocational high schools, or equivalent institutions. Thus, this program functions as an initial step to stimulate students to catch up in language learning with those who come from Islamic boarding

schools or madrasahs. Nevertheless, given its limited duration, the program cannot provide fully optimal preparation for them.

c. The *Nasyāt al-Ṭullāb* Program

The next flagship program of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau in conditioning students within a language-learning environment is a language-based arts performance held in rotation among classes or cohorts once a month. This activity presents Arabic-language artistic works, including Arabic drama performances, Arabic songs, Arabic poetry, Arabic speeches, and other Arabic language arts activities performed by students and coordinated by the Student Association of the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau

IMTA' is a New Framework For Arabic Competency Standars

Language proficiency competency standards are among the most fundamental aspects of language education institutions. This is because such standards provide direction and targets for foreign language teaching, enabling the learning process to proceed in accordance with established guidelines and competency targets. In this regard, IMTA' serves as a recent framework in language teaching that specifically establishes competency standards for Arabic. It differs from the two previous frameworks, namely the CEFR (*The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*), a language teaching framework applied in Europe, and ACTFL (*American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages*), a foreign language teaching framework used in the United States. Arabic language teaching practitioners in the Muslim world, particularly in Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf countries, have considered the need for a specific competency standard applicable to Arabic language teaching (El Hedaybi, 2023). The levels of Arabic language proficiency in IMTA' can be explained as follows:

1. *Tahyī'ah*; This level prepares students to understand essential elements of Arabic language structure, particularly key aspects of reading and writing skills, as well as the ability to distinguish the sounds or pronunciation of Arabic letters. This level consists of two phases: Phase 1 and Phase 2.
2. *Kifāyah*; At this level, students are equipped with language skills and selected cultural insights required for limited communication. This level consists of three phases.
3. *Tamayyuz*; At this level, students are provided with the ability to communicate with another person or with several people using Arabic broadly and effectively, with mutual understanding as the standard. This level consists of three phases.
4. *Faṣḥah*; At this level, students have acquired the ability to use Arabic properly, accurately, and correctly, particularly in the pronunciation and use of various sounds or letters. This level consists of two competency phases.



Gambar 2. Language Proficiency According to IMTA'

Arabic Language Proficiency in the Arabic Language Education Program at UIR from the IMTA' Perspective

Viewed from the structure and language competency standards of the IMTA' framework, Arabic language learning in the Arabic Language Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Riau falls within the levels of *Tamayyuz* and *Faṣāḥah*, where language activities are more intensive both inside and outside classroom learning. However, when analyzed based on the educational backgrounds of students enrolled in the study program, they can be classified as follows:

1. Alumni of Islamic boarding schools
2. Alumni of Islamic senior high schools or madrasahs, excluding Islamic boarding schools
3. Alumni of general schools

Considering the diverse educational backgrounds of students in the Arabic Language Education Study Program, the strategies used therefore require various levels and standards. Accordingly, each group is assigned different Arabic language competency standards, ranging from *Tahyī'ah*, *Kifāyah*, *Tamayyuz*, to *Faṣāḥah*.

CONCLUSION

In general, the language immersion method is highly useful for teachers or lecturers in improving students' language proficiency. This is because the method effectively activates the four language skills, particularly listening and speaking skills. Therefore, this method remains recommended for implementation from the basic education level to higher education. Increased intensity of students' exposure to the language being learned, together with the duration of time spent using the language, greatly contributes to improving their language ability. The technical obstacles encountered in its implementation can be managed and coordinated with the relevant parties.

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