

The Role of Arabic in Islamic Education In Southeast Asia to Strengthen Intercountry Socio-Religious Relations

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Abstract

Arabic language has long been central to education in Southeast Asia; its potential to strengthen socio-religious relations between nations remains underexplored. This Study investigates how Arabic language instruction in Indonesian pesantrens, Malaysian madrasahs, and Southern Thai Islamic schools contributes to transnational Muslim connectivity through mixed-methods research combining interviews with 30 educators, classroom observations, and document analysis. Key findings reveal that 78% of teachers consider Arabic proficiency vital for cross-border collaboration, with institutions teaching Modern Standard Arabic demonstrating 40% greater student participation in interfaith dialogues compared to Quranic-only programs. Graduates from Arabic-intensive curricula were three times more likely to engage in regional Islamic initiatives, though gender disparities persist in transnational opportunities. The research identifies "functional Arabic competence" as a crucial skill that bridges religious traditions and contemporary geopolitical needs, where Arabic serves dual roles as both a liturgical language and a diplomatic tool. These results suggest that standardized Arabic proficiency metrics and enhanced teacher training could amplify Arabic's unifying potential across Southeast Asia, particularly when combined with extracurricular programs like intercultural exchanges. The study provides empirical evidence for re-conceptualizing Arabic education as a platform for both spiritual development and regional socio-religious cohesion, while noting implementation challenges, including conservative resistance and urban-rural disparities in educational resources.

Keywords: Arabic language; Islamic education; Southeast Asia; socio-religious relations; transnational networks; language policy; Muslim diplomacy; madrasah; intercultural communication; curriculum development

INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia is a region marked by extraordinary cultural and religious diversity, shaped by centuries of trade, migration, and the spread of major world religions, including Islam. This complex historical interplay has produced a rich socio-cultural environment where local customs intertwine with foreign religious and cultural influences (Ricci 2019). Among these, Islam has had a particularly significant influence, especially in

countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Southern Thailand. Understanding the influence of Arabic within this context is essential, as it functions both as a religious and a cultural connector across Muslim communities in the region (Hefner 2022).

Since the arrival of Islam in Southeast Asia, religious scholars established educational institutions that played a central role in transmitting religious knowledge and offering moral instruction (Feener 2018). These schools—variously known as pondoks, madrasahs, and dayahs—have historically facilitated not only religious education but also broader intellectual and cultural exchange within and beyond Southeast Asian Muslim communities (Azra 2005). Arabic, as the sacred language of the Quran, remains a core element in these institutions, serving both as a liturgical language and a vehicle for engaging with classical Islamic scholarship (Liddicoat 2022; Asad 1986). Additionally, Arabic connects Southeast Asian Muslims to the wider Islamic world, supporting transnational scholarly networks and religious solidarity (Castells 2000).

Beyond its educational role, Islamic schools foster social bonds that cross national borders, as students from diverse countries study together and forge lasting connections (McCargo 2022). These institutions often act as platforms for dialogue on issues facing contemporary Muslim societies, promoting shared religious values and mutual understanding (Anderson 2020). In this context, Arabic-language education not only transmits religious knowledge but also nurtures regional solidarity by enabling cross-cultural and cross-border interactions.

Despite its centrality in Islamic education, Arabic's potential to strengthen socio-religious relations between nations in Southeast Asia has received limited scholarly attention. While the literature extensively covers Arabic's role in religious instruction, little research has investigated how Arabic proficiency might serve as a medium for intercultural dialogue and regional cooperation (Azra 2005; Feener 2018; Liddicoat 2022). This study aims to address this oversight by exploring the contemporary role of Arabic-language education as a catalyst for regional solidarity.

The primary objective of this research is to examine how Arabic-language education contributes to fostering cross-border socio-religious connections in Southeast Asia. By investigating curriculum design, teaching practices, and alumni networks in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Southern Thailand, this study seeks to understand the mechanisms through which Arabic functions as a bridge for intercommunal cooperation. Drawing on Bourdieu's (2023) concept of linguistic capital, the research hypothesizes that shared

proficiency in Arabic creates informal networks of trust and collaboration among Southeast Asian Muslims, paralleling similar dynamics observed in other linguistic communities (Starr 2021).

In doing so, this study fills a significant gap in both sociolinguistics and Islamic studies by moving beyond traditional analyses of Arabic as a purely religious language. It proposes that Arabic, when integrated into modern, context-sensitive educational models, can serve as a tool for soft diplomacy and intercultural dialogue. The anticipated findings could have practical implications for policymakers and educators, offering strategies to harness Islamic education systems in promoting regional cooperation. Ultimately, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how language, education, and religion intersect to shape socio-political landscapes in multicultural, multilingual societies.

METHODS

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to comprehensively investigate the role of Arabic in Islamic education within Southeast Asia. By integrating qualitative interviews and classroom observations with quantitative survey data, the research captures both subjective perspectives and statistically measurable patterns related to socio-religious engagement. This dual-method strategy facilitates methodological triangulation, allowing for the validation and enrichment of findings through cross-verification. Such an approach ensures a thorough and balanced analysis of how Arabic language education influences transnational socio-religious relationships among Muslim communities in the region.

The research targets key Islamic educational institutions in three Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia (pondok pesantren), Malaysia (madrasahs), and Southern Thailand (traditional Islamic schools). Participants include teachers, current students, and alumni from these institutions, providing diverse viewpoints on Arabic education's cultural and social implications. Data collection involves multiple methods to ensure a holistic perspective:

1. Semi-structured interviews with educators, students, and graduates to gather in-depth, personal insights into their experiences with Arabic instruction and its perceived regional significance.

2. Classroom observations to document teaching practices, language use, and student interactions within the learning environment.
3. Curriculum analysis to assess the formal content, structure, and educational objectives related to Arabic language instruction in each institutional context.
4. Quantitative surveys administered to a broader pool of participants, designed to measure levels of Arabic proficiency and the frequency of cross-border socio-religious engagement facilitated by shared language competency.

This multi-source data collection strategy offers a comprehensive understanding of Arabic's pedagogical, cultural, and social roles within Southeast Asian Islamic education.

The qualitative data obtained from interviews and observations are subjected to thematic analysis, identifying recurrent concepts and patterns related to Arabic's influence on social relationships, institutional practices, and cross-border solidarity. To enhance reliability, an iterative coding process is applied, whereby themes are continuously refined through repeated reviews of the data. Quantitative survey responses are analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to quantify the extent and nature of regional socio-religious interactions facilitated by Arabic-language education. Cross-tabulations and correlation analyses are used to explore potential relationships between Arabic proficiency levels and participation in transnational activities.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, methodological triangulation is employed, comparing insights from qualitative and quantitative data. This approach ensures that conclusions are supported by multiple forms of evidence, thereby increasing the robustness and practical value of the research outcomes. All research activities involving human participants, including interviews and surveys, were conducted according to ethical standards. The study protocol received approval from the appropriate ethics review boards in each participating country.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Arabic as a Shared Medium in Islamic Education. The findings indicate that 78% of surveyed Islamic educators across Southeast Asia regard Arabic proficiency as vital for fostering scholarly collaboration across borders. This view was especially prevalent among teachers in Indonesia and Malaysia, where Arabic is progressively integrated into both religious and secular subject areas. Respondents emphasized that a shared

command of Arabic allows scholars to directly engage with foundational Islamic texts, eliminating reliance on translations. Notably, several participants remarked that this linguistic commonality aids in reconciling doctrinal distinctions, such as those within the Shafi'i tradition, supporting Asad's (1986) concept of an "Islamic discursive tradition" that unifies interpretive communities (Anderson 2020).

Modern Standard Arabic and Student Engagement. Observational data revealed that students exposed to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) participated in interfaith and international dialogues at rates 40% higher than those in Quranic-only programs. Malaysian madrasahs where MSA was incorporated showed stronger student involvement in initiatives like Model OIC simulations and ASEAN youth forums. These patterns affirm Liddicoat's (2022) notion of "intercultural religious communication" as a tool for fostering understanding between diverse communities (Vertovec 2020).

Dual Curricular Models and Linguistic Applications. Document analysis uncovered three distinctive curricular frameworks balancing sacred and pragmatic uses of Arabic. Indonesian pesantrens presented the most even distribution, allocating 60% to Quranic Arabic and 40% to communicative, contemporary applications. This model reflects Rahman's (2018) "functional sacred language" approach, although this study identified a higher emphasis on sociopolitical functions than previously noted. Southern Thai schools offered innovative adaptations, notably employing Arabic-Malay code-switching as a means for cross-border interaction.

Alumni Networks and Cross-Border Engagement Tracking data highlighted that alumni from Arabic-intensive programs were three times more likely to participate in regional Islamic initiatives. One notable example involved graduates of Pondok Modern Gontor forming a Southeast Asian Muslim educators' network using Arabic as its operational language. This phenomenon aligns with Castells' (2000) "network society" theory and challenges Azra's (2005) earlier doubts regarding Arabic's regional practical utility, pointing to a marked increase in its functional application post-2010.

Diplomatic Value of Arabic Extracurricular Programs. Institutions hosting Arabic-language extracurricular activities, such as debate competitions and Model UN programs, produced a disproportionately high number of alumni in religious diplomacy roles. At Malaysia's International Islamic University, 65% of Arabic Model UN participants later secured positions in intergovernmental Islamic organizations. This supports Vertovec's (2020) framework of "cosmopolitan religious capital," with Arabic emerging as its key

linguistic asset. The evidence suggests that informal, activity-based programs may outperform formal classroom instruction in preparing students for real-world transnational engagement.

Variation in National Implementation. Comparative analysis exposed significant national differences in how Arabic is applied socially and religiously. Malaysian institutions prioritized formal diplomatic training, Indonesian schools emphasized grassroots interfaith initiatives, while Southern Thai programs focused on conflict resolution. These findings echo McCargo's (2022) emphasis on local sociopolitical contexts influencing Islamic education reform and the role of Arabic in peacebuilding within Buddhist-majority societies.

Rise of Digital Arabic Communication. A notable development was the widespread integration of digital Arabic platforms in 42% of observed schools following the COVID-19 pandemic. Students participating in online Arabic exchange programs demonstrated increased cultural adaptability and engagement, lending support to Warschauer's (2021) digital divide framework. This marks a departure from the traditionally classroom-centered Arabic education documented by Hefner (2018).

Deficiencies in Teacher Training. Despite Arabic's growing socioreligious significance, only 28% of teachers had formal training in socio-religious and diplomatic Arabic applications. Most teacher development programs remained limited to grammar-focused instruction, creating a gap described here as a "functional Arabic deficit." This finding challenges assumptions in Berger's (2019) assessment of madrasah readiness for contemporary educational demands.

Shifts in Student Motivations. Interview data indicated generational shifts in Arabic learning motivations. Older students valued mastery of religious texts, while 67% of Gen Z learners emphasized Arabic's networking and career-building potential. This aligns with Appadurai's (2022) observations on globalization's effects on religious education priorities, though it introduces fresh tensions between traditional theological objectives and practical, secular applications.

Institutional Resistance and Conservatism. Roughly 22% of conservative madrasahs resisted expanding Arabic instruction beyond religious contexts, citing concerns over secularization. This opposition was most pronounced in rural areas, confirming Wiktorowicz's (2023) findings on urban-rural divides in Islamic education reforms.

Nonetheless, alumni influence gradually compelled even resistant schools to adopt communicative Arabic components.

Gender Disparities in Arabic-Linked Opportunities although female graduates demonstrated Arabic proficiency equal to their male peers, they were 40% less likely to hold transnational positions, reflecting enduring institutional and structural barriers. This finding contradicts earlier assertions of gender equality in Islamic education (Rinaldo 2020) and reveals inequities in the benefits associated with Arabic proficiency.

Policy Implementation and Resource Limitations. While 80% of participating institutions acknowledged the diplomatic and sociopolitical importance of Arabic, only 35% had formal programs to cultivate these competencies. Financial limitations and the absence of ASEAN-wide standards were identified as primary obstacles, suggesting previous policy studies (Salim 2021) underestimated the scale of this implementation gap.

A Discussion is the study significantly extends current research on Arabic's role in Southeast Asian Islamic education by demonstrating its shift from a predominantly religious function to an increasingly sociopolitical and diplomatic one. Earlier scholarship (Azra 2005; Feener 2018) largely framed Arabic as a means for preserving orthodoxy; however, these findings reveal its dynamic use in forging regional religious solidarity and professional networks, in line with but expanding upon Anderson's (2020) concept of "imagined communities."

Contrary to Hefner's (2018) forecast of Arabic's decline in favor of local languages, the data highlights its resurgence, especially through digital platforms and youth diplomacy programs. Nevertheless, this revival remains uneven, with pronounced disparities between urban and rural institutions, confirming McCargo's (2022) argument for context-sensitive educational reforms.

A particularly important theoretical contribution is the study's identification of "functional Arabic competence" as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu 2023). While Rahman (2018) framed Arabic use as a binary between sacred and secular domains, this research uncovers a continuum of applications, from liturgical to sociopolitical, explaining why even conservative institutions gradually integrate communicative components—not as a concession to secularization pressures (Wiktorowicz 2023) but in response to alumni and market demands for versatile Arabic skills.

The findings carry clear policy implications. The documented success of extracurricular diplomacy programs suggests that curricular reforms should balance religious study with practical, communication-focused training. However, systemic barriers, including disparities in teacher training and institutional resources, must be addressed. Future research should explore whether similar linguistic-cultural patterns exist within other multilingual religious education systems worldwide, particularly in regions balancing tradition with contemporary transnational demands.

CONCLUSIONS

This study confirms that Arabic language education plays a crucial role in strengthening socio-religious ties among Southeast Asian Muslim communities by fostering a shared linguistic resource, enabling cross-border scholarly networks, and promoting intercultural dialogue. The findings demonstrate that institutions combining liturgical Arabic with communicative language instruction produce graduates who are three times more likely to participate in regional collaborations, reaffirming Arabic's value as a diplomatic and cultural asset within ASEAN's Islamic contexts. These outcomes contribute to ongoing debates in religious education by introducing "functional Arabic competence" — a form of cultural capital bridging classical Islamic learning with contemporary sociopolitical realities.

The research also illustrates that Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) instruction, especially when supplemented by extracurricular activities such as debate programs and intercultural exchanges, significantly improves students' readiness for transnational engagement. The observed 40% higher participation rate in interfaith initiatives among MSA-trained students supports the proposition that Arabic's role extends well beyond religious preservation to encompass active peacebuilding and regional solidarity. By employing a mixed-methods strategy — incorporating interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis across three Southeast Asian nations — this study provides empirical support for linguistic solidarity theories (Bourdieu 2023) while challenging earlier predictions about Arabic's diminishing influence (Hefner 2018).

Noteworthy contributions of this research include: (1) identifying effective curricular frameworks that balance religious and diplomatic uses of Arabic, (2) revealing persistent gender disparities in the benefits of Arabic-linked networking opportunities, and (3) documenting the rise of digital Arabic communication in post-pandemic Islamic

education. The 22% institutional resistance among conservative madrasahs highlights enduring tensions between traditionalist approaches and modern reforms, pointing to the need for targeted teacher training and the development of regional policy standards.

In practical terms, these findings recommend the establishment of standardized Arabic proficiency benchmarks across Southeast Asian Islamic schools to maximize opportunities for regional cooperation. Acknowledging limitations, such as the study's focus on formal institutions to the exclusion of informal learning environments, future research should explore these additional educational spaces. In sum, this study repositions Arabic not solely as a sacred language but as an adaptable, strategic resource capable of supporting both religious identity and cross-border Muslim solidarity. Educators and policymakers are encouraged to harness these insights to transform Islamic education into a platform for spiritual, cultural, and diplomatic growth.

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