

The Role of Islamic Boarding Schools in Instilling the Basis of Arabic as the Foundation of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia

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Abstract

Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren) play a strategic role in the development of Islamic Education (PAI) in Indonesia, particularly by establishing Arabic language proficiency as a foundation for Islamic literacy. Arabic is not merely treated as a linguistic subject; it is positioned as an epistemological prerequisite for accessing primary sources of Islamic teachings, such as the Qur'an, hadith, and classical texts. This article aims to synthesize narratively the findings of research related to the role of Islamic boarding schools in instilling Arabic proficiency as the basis for Islamic Education in Indonesia. This study employs a Narrative Literature Review (NLR) approach, examining literature sourced from the SCOPUS, GARUDA, and Google Scholar databases. The literature was selected purposively based on its relevance to the context of pesantren, Arabic language learning, and its connection to PAI comprehension. The analysis is conducted through narrative synthesis to identify patterns in findings, learning mechanisms, and the epistemological implications of Arabic within pesantren education. The review reveals that pesantren consistently position Arabic as the epistemological foundation of PAI through the mastery of syntax and morphology (nahwu and sharaf), the habituation of reading classical texts (kitab kuning), the creation of an Arabic-language environment (bi'ah lughawiyah), and the integration of Arabic into the curriculum and religious activities. Proficiency in foundational Arabic demonstrably has a direct implication on the quality of students' religious understanding, the formation of religious character, and their intellectual readiness for advanced Islamic studies. This article concludes that strengthening Islamic Education in pesantren is inseparable from reinforcing Arabic language proficiency as both a foundational discipline and the primary medium of religious learning. These findings carry significant implications for the development of policy and practice in pesantren education and open avenues for further research concerning the relationship between Arabic proficiency and PAI outcomes across various pesantren models.

Keywords: Islamic boarding schools; Arabic Language; Islamic Education

Abstract

Pondok pesantren memiliki peran strategis dalam pengembangan Pendidikan Agama Islam (PAI) di Indonesia, terutama melalui penanaman dasar bahasa Arab sebagai fondasi pemahaman keislaman. Bahasa Arab tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai mata pelajaran linguistik, tetapi diposisikan sebagai prasyarat epistemologis untuk mengakses sumber-sumber primer ajaran Islam, seperti Al-Qur'an, hadis, dan kitab-kitab klasik. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mensintesis secara naratif temuan-temuan penelitian terkait peran pondok pesantren dalam menanamkan dasar bahasa Arab sebagai fondasi Pendidikan Agama Islam di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan Narrative Literature Review (NLR) dengan menelaah literatur yang diperoleh dari basis data SCOPUS, GARUDA, dan Google Scholar. Literatur dipilih secara purposif berdasarkan relevansinya dengan konteks pesantren, pembelajaran bahasa Arab, dan keterkaitannya dengan pemahaman PAI. Analisis dilakukan melalui sintesis naratif untuk mengidentifikasi pola temuan, mekanisme pembelajaran, dan implikasi epistemologis bahasa Arab dalam pendidikan pesantren. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pesantren secara konsisten menempatkan bahasa Arab sebagai fondasi epistemologis PAI melalui penguasaan nahwu dan sharaf, pembiasaan membaca kitab kuning,

penciptaan bi'ah lughawiyah, serta integrasi bahasa Arab dalam kurikulum dan aktivitas keagamaan. Penguasaan dasar bahasa Arab terbukti berimplikasi langsung terhadap kualitas pemahaman keagamaan santri, pembentukan karakter religius, dan kesiapan intelektual untuk studi keislaman lanjutan. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa penguatan Pendidikan Agama Islam di pesantren tidak dapat dilepaskan dari penguatan dasar bahasa Arab sebagai ilmu alat dan medium utama pembelajaran agama. Temuan ini memiliki implikasi penting bagi pengembangan kebijakan dan praktik pendidikan pesantren, serta membuka ruang bagi penelitian lanjutan terkait relasi bahasa Arab dan capaian PAI di berbagai model pesantren.

Kata Kunci: Pondok Pesantren; Bahasa Arab; Pendidikan Agama Islam

INTRODUCTION

Islamic boarding schools are Islamic educational institutions that have a central role in the formation and transmission of Islamic science in Indonesia. In the tradition of Islamic boarding schools, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is not understood simply as teaching religious subjects, but as a process of *tafaqquh fi al-din* that requires a deep understanding of the sources of Islamic teachings (Muin, 2018). The process inherently requires mastery of the Arabic language, given that the Qur'an, hadith, and the majority of classical Islamic literature are composed in Arabic (Wasil, 2024; Rahmawati et al., 2022).

Various pesantren based studies in Indonesia show that Arabic is positioned not as a linguistic subject alone, but as a tool science that has an epistemological function in religious education. Basic mastery of Arabic, especially *nahwu*, *sharaf*, *qirā'ah*, and other language skills, is the main prerequisite for students to read, understand, and interpret Islamic texts correctly (Harahap, 2021; Reonaldi et al., 2023; Muin, 2018). Without an adequate foundation in Arabic, PAI learning has the potential to shift to understanding that is partial, dependent on translation, or even at risk of causing misinterpretation (Wasil, 2024).

The empirical literature shows that Islamic boarding schools instill the foundation of the Arabic language through systemic and layered mechanisms. Arabic learning does not only take place in formal classrooms, but is also integrated into *madrasah diniyah*, yellow book recitation, dormitory activities, and various language programs that form *bi'ah lughawiyah* (Rahmawati et al., 2022; Salim et al., 2021; Mahbub & Tauhidiah, 2022). This language environment allows students to interact intensively with Arabic, so that Arabic functions as a medium of religious learning as well as a means of internalizing Islamic values (Udzma, 2025; Ulum et al., 2022).

A number of field studies also confirm that basic Arabic language mastery has direct implications for the quality of PAI learning. Students who have good Arabic language skills are proven to be better able to understand the Qur'an, hadiths, and the yellow book, as well as show

accuracy in reading texts without harakat and doing i'rāb (Harahap, 2021; Reonaldi et al., 2023). In fact, in certain contexts, Arabic is used as the language of instruction for religious subjects such as fiqh, tafsir, and hadith, so that Arabic functions as the operational foundation of PAI in Islamic boarding schools (Makruf, 2016; Rahmawati et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, academic studies of Islamic boarding schools and Islamic religious education often place Arabic separately from the main discourse of PAI. Some studies discuss Arabic in terms of learning methods, strategies, or policies, while other studies highlight PAI from the institutional, curriculum, or management aspects of pesantren (Ridho, 2018; Nasir & Maisah, 2022). This condition causes the role of Arabic as the epistemological foundation of PAI in pesantren has not always been presented in its entirety and synthetically in a single narrative framework.

Therefore, a study is needed that compiles and synthesizes research findings narratively to show how Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia instill the foundation of the Arabic language and how the Arabic language functions as the foundation of Islamic Religious Education. The Narrative Literature Review (NLR) was chosen in this study because it allows researchers to integrate various empirical and conceptual evidence in a descriptive-analytical manner, trace patterns of findings, and explain the relationship between Arabic language learning and the success of PAI in the pesantren environment without being bound by systematic or meta-analytical procedures.

Thus, this article aims to examine narratively the role of Islamic boarding schools in instilling the basis of the Arabic language as the foundation of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia, with an emphasis on the learning mechanism, language environment, and its epistemological implications for students' understanding of Islam.

METHODS

This study uses the Narrative Literature Review (NLR) approach to examine and synthesize research results relevant to the topic of the role of Islamic boarding schools in instilling the basis of Arabic as the foundation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) in Indonesia. The NLR approach was chosen because the main purpose of this study is not to systematically map the literature, quantify effects, or conduct methodological evaluations based on risk of bias, but to develop a coherent and meaningful scientific narrative regarding the patterns of findings, educational mechanisms, and conceptual relationships between Arabic language learning and PAI in the pesantren environment (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green et al., 2006).

The Narrative Literature Review allows researchers to integrate diverse research findings descriptively and interpretively, emphasizing the understanding of context, the interconnectedness between findings, and the construction of complete scientific meaning (Green et al., 2006). In

contrast to systematic review which requires standard procedures and exhaustive replication of search steps, NLR is selective and flexible, as long as the literature selection process and synthesis flow are explained in a transparent and rational manner (Ferrari, 2015; Grant & Booth, 2009). Therefore, this approach is considered the most suitable for studying the topic of pesantren education that is loaded with social, cultural, and epistemological contexts.

The literature search in this study was carried out through several academic databases with different but complementary objectives. SCOPUS is used to collect reputable scientific articles that have high academic quality and have gone through a strict quality assurance process, while GARUDA (Garba Reference Digital) is used to obtain research articles that focus on the Indonesian context, especially empirical research based on Islamic boarding schools that are widely published in national journals. In addition, Google Scholar is used selectively to find relevant literature that is not indexed in SCOPUS or GARUDA, but has a substantive contribution to the topic of the study. The literature reviewed includes publications in the period 2016–2025, which were chosen to represent the contemporary dynamics of pesantren studies and Arabic language learning in the context of Islamic Religious Education in Indonesia. This search strategy that utilizes more than one database is in line with the character of the Narrative Literature Review which prioritizes substantive relevance and depth of context, rather than mere numerical completeness (Ferrari, 2015; Snyder, 2019).

| Database | Intended Use |
|-----------------|---|
| SCOPUS | Capture internationally reputable articles related to Islamic education and language learning |
| GARUDA | Access empirical research based on Indonesian Islamic boarding schools |
| Google Scholar | Complement relevant literature that is not indexed in SCOPUS and GARUDA |

Table 1. Literature Search Databases and Focus

The articles obtained were then selected based on the suitability of the theme with the focus of the research, namely the relationship between Arabic language learning, Islamic boarding schools, and Islamic Religious Education. The literature selection in the NLR is not intended to cover all available publications, but rather to select the most relevant studies in explaining the phenomenon being studied and establishing a coherent course of argument (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green et al., 2006). Therefore, the selection process is carried out purposively by considering the research context, the focus of the findings, and the conceptual contribution of each article to the understanding of the role of Arabic in pesantren education.

Data analysis is carried out through narrative synthesis, namely by reading each article in depth to identify the focus of the research, the main findings, and its implications for the understanding of Islamic Religious Education. The findings were then arranged thematically and narratively to build a complete picture of how Islamic boarding schools instilled the basis of the Arabic language and how Arabic functioned as the epistemological foundation of PAI. This approach emphasizes the integration of ideas and meanings across studies, rather than quantitative comparisons of research results, thus aligning with the main goal of the Narrative Literature Review in developing conceptual and contextual understanding (Grant & Booth, 2009; Snyder, 2019).

RESULT

Arabic as the Epistemological Foundation of Islamic Religious Education in Islamic Boarding Schools

The literature consistently reviewed shows that Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia place Arabic as the epistemological foundation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), not just as a supporting subject. Arabic is positioned as the main prerequisite for accessing primary sources of Islamic teachings, namely the Qur'an, hadith, and classical Islamic books, so that basic mastery of Arabic determines the quality of students' religious understanding (Wasil, 2024; Muin, 2018; Rahmawati et al., 2022). In this context, Arabic functions as a science tool that allows students to understand the meaning of Islamic texts directly without full dependence on translation, which is often limited and interpretive (Harahap, 2021).

A number of empirical studies based on pesantren confirm that without basic mastery of Arabic, PAI learning tends to be superficial and procedural. Students who have not mastered nahwu and sharaf experience serious difficulties in reading Arabic texts without harakat, understanding sentence structure, and doing i'rab correctly, which ultimately affects the accuracy of religious understanding (Harahap, 2021; Reonaldi et al., 2023). These findings show that Arabic does not only function as a pedagogical tool, but as an epistemic basis that determines the validity of Islamic understanding in Islamic boarding schools.

Nahwu and Sharaf as the Core of the Cultivation of Arabic Language Policy

Literature findings show that the basic cultivation of Arabic in Islamic boarding schools is almost always centered on mastering the knowledge of nahwu and sharaf. These two disciplines are positioned as the main foundation for students before they delve into other Islamic sciences such as fiqh, tafsir, and hadith (Muin, 2018; Harahap, 2021). Learning nahwu and sharaf is carried out in stages, starting from the introduction of basic rules to their application in reading the yellow book and complex religious texts (Ulum et al., 2022).

Comparative research shows that both qiyasiyyah and istiqra'iyah methods in learning nahwu are equally effective in improving the ability to read Arabic texts, albeit with a different pedagogical approach (Harahap, 2021). In addition, the role of Arabic teachers has proven to be very significant in instilling an understanding of basic nahwu through method innovation, structured exercises, and the integration of language skills, so that students not only memorize the rules, but are able to use them applicatively in understanding Islamic texts (Reonaldi et al., 2023).

Bi'ah Lughawiyyah as a Key Mechanism of Arabic Internality

The empirical literature confirms that the success of basic Arabic language cultivation in Islamic boarding schools is not only determined by formal learning in the classroom, but is highly dependent on the creation of bi'ah lughawiyyah or the language environment. Islamic boarding schools that systemically build an Arabic-speaking environment, through the use of Arabic in classrooms, dormitories, daily activities, and language programs, show stronger results in student language mastery (Rahmawati et al., 2022; Salim et al., 2021).

This language environment is realized through various structured programs, such as the provision of daily mufradat, muhādatsah, muhāḍarah, language discipline, and the use of Arabic visual media. The findings show that bi'ah lughawiyyah functions as an epistemological bridge between language learning and the deepening of religious knowledge, because Arabic is not only studied, but used as a medium of thinking and interacting in the context of Islam (Mahbub & Tauhidiah, 2022; Rahmawati et al., 2022). Thus, Arabic is part of the scientific habitus of Islamic boarding schools, not just academic competence.

Integration of Arabic in Curriculum and Religious Activities

Another finding that stands out in the literature is the direct integration of Arabic in the curriculum and religious activities of Islamic boarding schools. Some Islamic boarding schools use Arabic as the language of instruction in religious subjects such as fiqh, tafsir, and hadith, so that Arabic serves as the operational foundation of PAI (Makruf, 2016; Rahmawati et al., 2022). This integration reinforces the position of Arabic as the primary medium of religious learning, rather than as a stand-alone discipline.

In addition, Arabic learning is also integrated with non-academic activities such as book recitation, muhadharah, and dormitory coaching, which expands the space for Arabic internalization beyond the formal classroom (Udzma, 2025; Ulum et al., 2022). This integrative pattern shows that pesantren view Arabic as an inherent part of a holistic and sustainable religious education system.

Integration of Arabic in Curriculum and Religious Activities

The literature reviewed also shows that the basic mastery of Arabic has broad implications for the understanding and formation of Islamic character of students. Students who master Arabic are not only better able to understand religious texts, but also show intellectual readiness to continue higher Islamic studies and build a scientific identity as prospective Muslim scholars and scholars (Wasil, 2024; Muin, 2018).

Several studies show that Arabic contributes to increased religious motivation, including in the core activities of pesantren such as memorizing the Qur'an, because students are more familiar with the meaning of pronouncements and the structure of the language of revelation (Fuadah et al., 2024). In addition to the cognitive aspect, learning Arabic in pesantren is also associated with the formation of religious character, discipline, and scientific ethos, which is the main goal of Islamic Religious Education in the pesantren tradition (Udzma, 2025; Akmaliah et al., 2021).

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study show that the role of Islamic boarding schools in instilling the basis of the Arabic language cannot be understood separately from the epistemological structure of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) that lives in the tradition of Islamic boarding schools. Arabic is not only present as an object of linguistic learning, but as an epistemic prerequisite that determines how Islamic knowledge is understood, produced, and inherited. This position explains why in almost all pesantren-based literature, mastery of Arabic is always placed at the initial and fundamental stage in the process of religious education (Muin, 2018; Wasil, 2024).

This discussion confirms that Arabic functions as a tool science in an epistemological sense, not merely pedagogical. When students master nahwu, sharaf, and Arabic text reading skills, they not only acquire technical reading skills, but also gain epistemic authority to interact directly with Islamic teaching sources. These findings strengthen the argument that the quality of PAI in pesantren is largely determined by the strength of the Arabic language foundation that is instilled from an early age (Harahap, 2021; Reonaldi et al., 2023). Thus, Arabic is a determinant of the validity of religious understanding, not just a means of communication.

The learning of nahwu and sharaf which is the core of basic Arabic language cultivation shows that pesantren adopt a structural approach oriented towards understanding the meaning of the text, not just language fluency. The various learning methods used, both qiyasiyyah and istiqra'iyah, have the same goal, namely to equip students with the ability to read Arabic texts independently and accurately (Harahap, 2021). This shows that pesantren is not stuck in a debate

about methods, but rather emphasizes the epistemological purpose of learning Arabic as an entrance to PAI sciences.

The discussion of findings also shows that the success of the cultivation of Arabic in Islamic boarding schools is highly dependent on the creation of *bi'ah lughawiyyah*. A lively and systemic language environment serves as an internalization mechanism that accelerates language acquisition and makes it part of the scientific habitus of students (Rahmawati et al., 2022; Salim et al., 2021). In this context, Arabic is not only learned, but used as a medium for thinking, discussing, and living daily religious life. This pattern shows the superiority of pesantren over non-pesantren educational institutions in making Arabic a living practice, not just classroom material (Mahbub & Tauhidiah, 2022; Ridho, 2018).

The integration of Arabic in the curriculum and religious activities of the pesantren further strengthens its position as the foundation of PAI. When Arabic is used as the language of instruction in *fiqh*, *tafsir*, and *hadith* subjects, it no longer stands as a separate discipline, but rather becomes the main medium of transmission of religious knowledge (Makruf, 2016; Rahmawati et al., 2022). This integration shows that pesantren practices a holistic model of religious education, where Arabic, religious science, and character formation run simultaneously and reinforce each other.

In terms of implications, basic mastery of Arabic has been proven to have an impact not only on the cognitive aspects of students, but also on the formation of scientific identity and religiosity. Students who master Arabic show a higher readiness to continue their further Islamic studies, understand the *Qur'an* and *hadith* more deeply, and carry out the role of a cadre of Muslim scholars or intellectuals (Muin, 2018; Wasil, 2024). In fact, in certain contexts, Arabic also contributes to increasing the religious motivation of students, including in memorizing the *Qur'an*, because understanding the language helps internalize the meaning of revelation (Fuadah et al., 2024).

Overall, this discussion shows that Islamic boarding schools play a strategic role in maintaining the continuity of the epistemology of Islamic Religious Education through the basic cultivation of Arabic. Arabic is not only a learning tool, but also a foundation that supports the entire scientific building of PAI. Therefore, any effort to strengthen PAI in Islamic boarding schools, whether through curriculum policies, pedagogical innovations, or institutional reforms, needs to place Arabic as the main base, not as an additional component that can be negotiated (Udzma, 2025; Ulum et al., 2022; Akmaliah et al., 2021).

CONCLUSION

Based on the narrative synthesis of the literature studied, this study concludes that Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia have a very central role in instilling the basis of the Arabic language as the foundation of Islamic Religious Education (PAI). Arabic is not positioned as a linguistic subject alone, but as an epistemological prerequisite that determines the quality of students' understanding of Islamic sources, including the Qur'an, hadith, and Islamic classical books. The findings show that the basic cultivation of Arabic in Islamic boarding schools is carried out systemically and in layers, by placing the mastery of *nahwu* and *sharaf* as the core of language learning. Mastery of this tool has proven to be the key to the ability of students to read Arabic texts without *harakat*, understand the structure of meaning, and interpret religious texts more accurately. Thus, Arabic serves as an epistemic foundation that supports the entire PAI learning process in Islamic boarding schools. In addition to formal learning, the success of Arabic cultivation is also highly determined by the creation of a lively and planned *bi'ah lughawiyyah*. The language environment built through classroom activities, dormitories, and language programs has been proven to accelerate the internalization of Arabic and make it part of the scientific habitus of students. The integration of Arabic in religious curricula and activities, including its use as the language of instruction in *fiqh*, *tafsir*, and *hadith* subjects, shows that *pesantren* are developing a holistic and sustainable model of PAI.

The findings of this NLR have important policy implications for the development of Islamic Religious Education in Islamic boarding schools and educational institutions more broadly. First, the strengthening of PAI in Islamic boarding schools cannot be separated from the strengthening of the basic Arabic language, so that the policy of the Islamic boarding school curriculum, both independent and integrated with the formal education system, needs to explicitly place Arabic as the main foundation, not as an additional subject. Second, the development of *pesantren*-based PAI needs to be supported by policies that encourage the creation of *bi'ah lughawiyyah* systemically, including through strengthening the role of Arabic teachers, dormitory language programs, and the integration of Arabic in daily religious activities. In addition, these findings indicate that efforts to reform or modernize Islamic boarding schools—including the integration of the national curriculum—need to be carried out without shifting the epistemological position of the Arabic language. On the contrary, Arabic needs to be maintained and strengthened as a scientific basis so that the quality of PAI understanding is maintained and not reduced to normative learning that depends on translation alone. As a Narrative Literature Review-based research, this article opens up space for more in-depth and specific follow-up research. Further research is suggested to empirically explore the causal relationship between basic Arabic language mastery and PAI learning outcomes in various types of Islamic boarding schools (*salafi*, *khalafi*, and modern Islamic boarding schools). In addition, a cross-regional and cross-model comparative study of *pesantren* is also needed to see the variation of Arabic language cultivation strategies and their impact on the quality of religious understanding of students.

Future research can also further examine the contemporary challenges of Arabic language learning in Islamic boarding schools, including limited teacher resources, curriculum adaptation, and technology integration, without obscuring the epistemological function of Arabic as a tool science. Thus, the future research agenda is expected not only to enrich academic studies on Islamic boarding schools and the Arabic language, but also to make a real contribution to the development

of Islamic religious education policies and practices that are firmly rooted in Islamic scientific traditions.

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